

Liberia: International community must address widespread torture

"The first officer slapped me, kicked me and then I saw what looked like a gun butt coming. I could not tell what happened next...When I woke up in a dark room everything was gone...For thirteen days, I was raped by I do not know how many men." (BL, interviewed April 2001)

In a new report issued today, ahead of a United Nations Security Council debate on Liberia this month, Amnesty International describes the continued brutal repression and use of torture, including rape, being carried out by Liberian security forces.

"The security forces have targeted critics of the government, including students, journalists and human rights defenders, and used torture as a weapon of repression," the organization said.

"In the rare event that human rights violations are investigated by the authorities, the inquiries are a sham and suspects are seldom, if ever, brought to justice."

Amnesty International is urging the international community to continue to pressure the Liberian government to end the impunity and bring human rights violators to justice. Amnesty International is calling on the United Nations to deploy international human rights observers with a mandate to monitor and publicly report on the human rights situation.

In the new report on human rights violations in Liberia, Amnesty International focuses on torture and the lack of justice for the victims. In late March 2001 the Anti-Terrorist Unit (ATU) and Special Operation Division (SOD), special units of the Liberian security forces, stormed the University of Liberia campus to stop a peaceful rally. Dozens of students and professors were chased, hit with batons, kicked and flogged as they fled their classrooms to escape. At least 20 students were detained and several female students were reportedly raped while held incommunicado and without charge for weeks.

Despite appeals by local human rights defenders and Amnesty International for an impartial and independent commission of inquiry into the March incidents, none has been carried out and the Liberian government has failed to make any response to the allegations.

Cases of torture continue. In recent months, dozens of women fleeing insecure areas in northern Liberia have reported being tortured by the security forces, including by being repeatedly raped or gang-raped, and being threatened with death. Also alarming is the systematic torture used by the security forces to punish criminal suspects.

The Liberian government must demonstrate it has the political will to tackle torture by ending the impunity enjoyed by the security forces. The police, military and the judiciary should be trained in international human rights standards.

The international community also has a role to play in strengthening the structures for human rights protection and prevention in Liberia, for example by providing training and supporting an independent and effective Liberian Human Rights Commission. Amnesty International welcomes recent European Union moves to make funding for post-conflict reconstruction contingent on respect for human rights.

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