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Sierra Leone: Action needed to end use of child combatants

"The abduction and forcible recruitment of children in Sierra Leone must be stopped and those responsible brought to justice", says Amnesty International in a report released today.

More than 5,000 children under the age of 18 have fought in Sierra Leone's internal armed conflict that began in 1991. They have been recruited by both the armed opposition and forces allied to the government. Most of the children fighting with rebel forces were abducted and forced to fight. Many have become perpetrators of human rights abuses themselves, killing and mutilating under the influence of drugs, alcohol or simply out of fear. A similar number of children, both boys and girls, have also been used by rebel forces to carry goods and cook. Girls have been raped and forced into sexual slavery.

"Childhood has been a casualty of this long and brutal conflict", said the human rights organization. "Former child combatants may not be able to regain their youth but they can reclaim their lives if concerted action is taken immediately."

Since 7 July 1999 when the government of Sierra Leone and the armed opposition Revolutionary United Front (RUF) signed a peace agreement in Lomé, Togo, efforts have been made by the United Nations (UN) and non-governmental organizations to disarm and demobilize child combatants. However, the political and security situation in Sierra Leone deteriorated in May 2000 and these programs have been suspended. The recruitment of children as combatants by both rebel forces and government-allied forces has continued.

Rebel RUF forces, which control parts of the north and east of the country, are reported to have forcibly recruited child combatants again in Kambia District and other areas in Northern Province. Previously disarmed and demobilized child combatants with the government-allied Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) have been re-enlisted. And there are reports that children continue to be recruited by the Civil Defence Forces (CDF), the government-allied civilian militia based on societies of traditional hunters, such as the *kamajors*, particularly in Bo and Moyamba Districts in Southern Province.

In March, June and July 2000 Amnesty International delegates in Sierra Leone obtained graphic testimonies from former child combatants with the RUF, AFRC and CDF. Many described how they were forced to drink alcohol and take drugs before combat. Some children have acknowledged that, often heavily drugged with cocaine, they were extremely brutal, as reports from the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) have also noted. For example Sayo (not his real name), now aged 14, who was abducted by AFRC forces in 1998 in Makali, Tonkili

District, told Amnesty International, *"When I go into the battle fields, I smoke enough. That's why I become unafraid of everything. When you refuse to take drugs, it's called technical sabotage and you are killed."*

The recruitment of children under the age of 15 as combatants is prohibited by both international human rights law and international humanitarian law. It violates the rights enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child of 1989 which was ratified by Sierra Leone in 1990.

Traffic in small arms and light weapons also facilitates and encourages the use of child combatants. Arms and ammunition reaching rebel forces inevitably fall into the hands of the children they have abducted and forcibly recruited. Amnesty International is calling for the cessation of all military assistance to rebel forces in Sierra Leone, including the provision of arms, ammunition, combatants and training. There must also be effective mechanisms to monitor the distribution of arms and ammunition to the government of Sierra Leone to ensure that these do not reach combatants under the age of 18. In particular, President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah must be held to his assurances that arms and ammunition supplied by the UK government will not be used by child soldiers, and he should ensure that the government forces cease recruiting and using child soldiers.

Amnesty International's report makes specific recommendations to all groups involved in the recruitment and use of child combatants in Sierra Leone and to the international community. These include a call for the immediate release of all children held by the RUF and a cessation of the recruitment and abuse of children by opposition forces. Child protection agencies and personnel supervising the process of disarmament, demobilization must be given unhindered access to children who continue to be held. Urgent action should be taken by the government of Sierra Leone to follow up on its repeated commitments to demobilize all combatants under the age of 18 and to raise the minimum age of recruitment to 18. The international community should also provide full and sustained support to help meet the social, psychological and material needs of demobilized child combatants.

Finally, all those responsible for these grave breaches of international human rights and humanitarian law, including the abduction and forcible recruitment of children, should be brought to justice. The international community must provide the necessary expertise and practical assistance for the independent special court for Sierra Leone to be established under UN Security Council Resolution 1315 (2000) of 14 August 2000, provided that it meets strict international standards for fair trial and excludes the possibility of the death penalty.

"Regardless of their current political position or allegiance, those who have forcibly abducted children and forced them to commit many of the worst atrocities in this horrendous conflict must be held to account," says Amnesty International.

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