

0001 hrs gmt Wednesday 5 August 1992

£SOMALIA: @A HUMAN RIGHTS DISASTER

Amnesty International today appealed to all Somali political leaders for action to end the severe human rights abuses - including massacres of civilians - which have characterized the course of the civil wars raging in Somalia.

"Over the last 18 months there have been mass killings and other atrocities by various warring factions," said the human rights organization. "Civilians are being killed, raped and mutilated, with the victims systematically targeted on account of their clan origin. This horrendous pattern of gross human rights violations now threatens to go on for months or even years in a cycle of revenge killings."

Since the overthrow of President Siad Barre's 21-year government in January 1991, civil conflict has torn Somalia apart along with the collapse of the state and economy. Threatened in addition with drought and famine, the surviving population faces further massive loss of life.

During this horrific period it has been difficult for Amnesty International to obtain detailed and impartial accounts of human rights violations, but it is clear that gross abuses have been committed by opposing armed groups.

One survivor of a massacre of unarmed civilians by General Mohamed Farah Aidede's faction of the United Somali Congress (USC) in the south-western Gedo region in April 1992 told Amnesty International how he had seen people killed or tortured, women raped and babies cruelly murdered.

"Many people had fled before General Aidede's forces came. In Bulohawo, those remaining were mostly old men, women and children. Aidede's soldiers gathered everyone in the town centre and separated people by clan, marking out the members of the Darod clan. They killed the Darod men and raped the women. Those that tried to escape were shot or bayoneted. The bodies were burnt and the bones left lying there.

"I saw people with their tongues cut out or their arms or legs cut off, left to die. Women were gang-raped and bayoneted in the vagina. Pregnant women had their stomachs slit open."

In a new report Amnesty International is appealing to all Somali political leaders to stop the deliberate killings of civilians and prisoners and is urging them to make formal commitments to work for human rights for all Somalis irrespective of clan membership or political opinion, so that abuses can be ended as soon as possible and safeguards established on the basis of the rule of law.

EMBARGOED FOR 0001 HRS GMT WEDNESDAY 5 AUGUST 1992