Guinea: Refugees must not be forced to choose between death in Sierra Leone or death in Guinea.

Amnesty International today called for a vigorous international presence in Guinea to protect hundreds of thousands of Sierra Leonean and Liberian refugees and Guinean civilians caught in a vicious six-month old insurgency in Guinea.

In a statement issued at the end of an Amnesty International fact-finding mission to Guinea, the organization recommended that: "The present UN force in Sierra Leone, UNAMSIL, or the proposed ECOWAS intervention force in the border area, should be mandated immediately to provide support for such an initiative and ensure strong human rights monitoring. It is time to bring this West African human rights disaster to an end."

Sierra Leonean refugees had fled to Guinea to escape vicious fighting, marked by widespread killings, abduction, rape, and amputation. Until recently there has been safety in Guinea. Guineans generously took in close to 700,000 refugees who streamed across the border over the past decade. They lived and worked alongside each other. However, as the region's spiralling violence and human rights abuses spilled across borders, Guinea's President Lansana Conte declared in September 2000 that it was time for the refugees to go home, and the place of refuge has now become a virtual hell on earth.

Over the past six months, Sierra Leonean and Liberian refugees have fled from one camp to another and Guinean villagers from one village to another, in a desperate attempt to avoid the chaotic violence that has descended in south eastern Guinea. As they flee camps, the camps are burned, to prevent return.

The UN and aid agencies are working feverishly to establish new camps, further inland, hopefully beyond the reach of the cross-border raids. Most refugees express resentment and anger at the prospect of further transfers to other camps. They have had enough and want only to go home, even though they know the situation there is no better. "If I must die, at least let me die at home", many of them told Amnesty International delegates.

The mission found overwhelming evidence of violence from so many different directions and forms. One after another, camps have been emptied because of attacks or rumoured attacks. While fleeing, countless refugees have been killed or abducted by rebels. Others have disappeared after being abducted by Guinean soldiers, such as the nine refugees who disappeared after being arrested in Forecariah in September 2000. Checkpoints have sprung up everywhere, sometimes set-up by the Guinean military, sometimes the local population, where refugees are forced to pay money or turn over their supply of rice and cooking oil in order to pass.

Mabinte Bangura told Amnesty International that she fled Sierra Leone 3 years ago, after witnessing her husband being shot in the back by the RUF. Three weeks ago at Kilibenda, the RUF stopped her family and 20 others, who were fleeing an attack. Terrified, she watched as her fifteen year old daughter Salaymatu Bangura was taken away by the rebels, and her seventeen year old son Sorie Bangura was beaten almost senseless.
A 75 year-old-man told how five of his grandchildren, aged 10 to 35 years, were taken away by the RUF following the March 9th attack on Nongoa. A few days later, his son was arrested by the Guinean military after a villager accused him of being one of those very same rebels. His body was later found in Nongoa, with his throat and belly cut.

Alfred Kaloko, a 35 year-old farmer and refugee from Sierra Leone, and his two year-old son were shot in the back by uniformed men when they tried to flee the attack on the Katkama refugee camp in December 2000.

Meanwhile the Guinean army conducts sweeping arrests in the refugee camps when rumours mount of impending rebel incursions. Authorities often hold individuals bearing tattoos, an RUF trait. However, distinctions are frequently not made between such tattoos and common traditional marks and protective tattoos which are prevalent throughout the region.

The Amnesty International delegation visited Massakoundou Camp the day after a massive and seemingly arbitrary round-up of some 400 refugees. The detainees were held in appalling conditions in a local prison, and all but a handful appear to have been released within 48 hours. Amnesty International was told by local authorities that the round-ups did not constitute arrest and detention, but were simply part of a verification process.

Often forgotten in the midst of the refugee crisis is the plight of some 300,000 Guineans who have fled their homes. The once vibrant market town of Guéckédou lies in near total ruins following a frenzy of fighting there two months. Delegates were able to tour the city, to which only a handful of citizens have begun to return.

During visits to villages in and around Kissidougou and Guéckédou, as well as to Kolomba Camp, at the far end of the Parrot's Beak, where over 40,000 refugees have not received any food since November 2000, the delegates documented heart-wrenching cases of Guinean men, women and children who were killed, raped and abducted by Sierra Leonean rebels during an incursion far into Guinea in mid-December.

In Waltou Village Amnesty International heard one man describe how rebels took women, including his wife, and young girls, one as young as six or seven, into a building to be raped, while he was made to listen outside.

In Waltou Gbaran, Tamba Leno told the mission that his wife Sia Teukiano, thinking the rebels had left the village, returned home because she was worried that animals were disturbing the family's crops. But she was captured and her body, burned beyond recognition, was found later and could only be identified by virtue of a deformed finger.

In order to end the abuses and safeguard the physical integrity of these refugees, Amnesty International is "urging all parties to the conflicts in Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea to abide by international human rights standards and the principles of international humanitarian law. Other states and the international community as a whole, must use all opportunities to exert strong pressure on the governments and armed groups involved in the fighting".

There is a pressing need for more support if the basic needs of refugees and displaced Guineans are to be met. The international community must ensure that UN agencies, aid organizations and the Guinean government have adequate resources to provide the assistance that is required. And those agencies and organizations should not be prevented in any way from doing their work.
Amnesty further calls on:

- the international community to put in place a meaningful process of resettlement, including adequate resources, which provide refugees with safe haven elsewhere, to the extent that Guinea remains dangerous;
- the United Nations to immediately set up the Special Court on Sierra Leone to try those responsible for serious human rights crimes and, thus, end impunity.

**Background**

Parties to the conflict include Sierra Leone's Revolutionary United Front (RUF) based in both Sierra Leone and Liberia; the Guinea-based Liberian rebel group ULIMO-K; the Guinean army; Guinean Civil Defence Forces; traditional Kamajor fighters from Sierra Leone; an elusive armed Guinean opposition group, the Rassemblement des Forces Democratisques de Guinée; and bans of villagers who have, out of fear, begun to turn on their refugee neighbors.

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For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566

Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW web: http://www.amnesty.org