

INTERNATIONAL

Groups: Sierra Leone has huge rights abuses

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Special to Sentinel-Voice

WASHINGTON (IPS) — While the world continues to focus its attention on human rights abuses in Kosovo, a report by a major U.S. human rights group gives details of the horrific violations that took place thousands of miles to the south in Sierra Leone.

The Human Rights Watch report, "Getting Away with Murder, Mutilation, and Rape," provides chilling testimony by victims and eyewitnesses of last January's rebel offensive in Sierra Leone's capital city, Freetown.

Thousands of residents were killed or mutilated before West African peacekeeping forces pushed the rebels out of the city.

"The battle for Freetown and the ensuing three-week rebel occupation of the capital was characterized by the systematic and widespread perpetration of all classes of atrocities against the civilian population," according to the 57-page report by the New

York-based rights group.

They "marked the most intensive and concentrated period of human rights violation in Sierra Leone's eight-year civil war," the report said.

Based on interviews carried out by HRW staff in April, May, and June, the report was released as negotiations in Lome, Togo, on a peace deal between the government of President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah and the rebel Revolution United Front intensified with the arrival of diplomats from South Africa, Britain, and the United States.

Togolese Foreign Minister Joseph Koffigoh was acting as mediator in trying to reach agreement on how many ministries RUF will hold in a future coalition government and on the future role of the Nigerian-led West African peace-keeping force ECOMOG, which took back Freetown in fierce fighting six months ago.

The U.N. High Commissioner for Human

Rights, Mary Robinson, was also due in Freetown for her first visit to Sierra Leone last week to help bolster the peace process, which began with a cease-fire accord May 19, and promote human rights in the war-torn West African country.

In a letter sent to Robinson last week, HRW appealed to her to push for a settlement that safeguards the principle that gross abusers of human rights should not be treated with impunity.

HRW conceded that the country's weak judicial system and police force were incapable of assuring that all human rights violators in Sierra Leone would be brought to justice.

The letter said "it is necessary for the future peace of the country that those who have committed the worst atrocities, especially those in command positions, are not rewarded with general amnesties and uncritical inclusion in government structures that are supposed

to re-establish respect for human rights and the rule of law."

In the same letter, the group also called for the international community to give far greater attention and support to Sierra Leone than it has in the past, particularly in light of the priority it gave to Kosovo.

"The level of international response to human rights abuses in Kosovo stands in stark contrast to the way in which the appalling atrocities committed in Sierra Leone have largely been ignored," HRW told Robinson.

"Your visit to Sierra Leone offers an opportunity for the international community outside Africa to show that the human rights of all human beings are equally valuable."

A country of almost five million people, Sierra Leone has been engulfed in civil war for most of the last nine years. Estimates of the number of dead vary widely — from about 15,000 to 50,000, the estimate cited by HRW.

Zimbabwe vice president Nkomo dies at 82

HARARE, Zimbabwe (AP) — Vice President Joshua Nkomo, the father of Zimbabwe's fight for independence from white colonial rule, died early last week, the government said. He was 82.

State radio interrupted morning programs to play the national anthem and liberation songs, and broadcast a tribute by President Robert Mugabe.

Nkomo suffered from prostate cancer, and poor health forced him to largely withdraw from political life last year. Mugabe said Nkomo's health deteriorated sharply last Sunday.

"We grieve the loss of a father figure, a founder of our nation, this great man whose life was spent in struggle," Mugabe said. "The giant has fallen."

Thandiwe Nkomo, Nkomo's daughter, said he died around 1:30 a.m. at Harare's main hospital, the Zimbabwe Inter African News Agency said.

Nkomo was regarded by many as the guiding light of the nation's black nationalist movement, which fought a guerrilla war against white colonial rule for nearly three decades in the former British colony of Rhodesia.

But the traditional leader of the minority Ndebele tribe

failed to achieve his goal of becoming the first black leader when Rhodesia became independent Zimbabwe in 1980.

"The old lion," as supporters fondly called him, wept when Mugabe's Zimbabwe African National Union party swept to victory in the first democratic elections.

Mugabe, a longtime lieutenant of Nkomo in the nationalist movement, formed a coalition, appointing him in 1980 to the post of Home Affairs Minister in charge of police and internal security.

But the alliance was short-lived. In February 1982, Mugabe accused Nkomo of plotting a coup and fired him and three ministers of his Zimbabwe African People's Union party. Nkomo's passport was seized and he was restricted to his home city of Bulawayo in western Zimbabwe.

Fighters professing loyalty to Nkomo mounted an armed rebellion. Mugabe brutally crushed them with troops drawn mostly from his majority Shona tribe.

Nkomo denied direct links with the rebels, but fled into exile by crossing the Botswana border on foot and in disguise after government troops ransacked his home

and killed his driver.

"They were Mugabe's soldiers and they were sent to kill me," Nkomo later said. "I was no longer safe in my own country."

He returned to Zimbabwe to negotiate an end to the rebellion and in 1988 signed a peace accord with Mugabe. He rejoined the government as vice president.

Joshua Mqabuko Nyongolo Nkomo was born on June 19, 1917. As a young man, he worked as a truck driver and carpenter to raise money for his education in South Africa.

On returning to Rhodesia, Nkomo rose through the ranks of youth movements and labor unions to form and lead the African National Congress, the nation's first black nationalist political party, in 1952.

In 1957, the African National Youth League merged with Nkomo's ANC

and the new group, named the National Democratic Party, elected him president.

Colonial authorities banned the NDP five years later. Nkomo reformed it as ZAPU, which was also immediately banned.

But as Britain granted independence to its other African colonies in the early 1960s, rivalries in the nationalist movement erupted into violence. Nkomo, Mugabe and other black activist leaders were detained.

Rhodesian Prime Minister Ian Smith declared unilateral independence from Britain in 1965 to retain white rule. Nkomo and Mugabe were to remain in detention for 10 years. While guerrillas from the military wings of Nkomo's and Mugabe's parties intensified attacks in the countryside, they and most detained activists were released for peace talks with Smith in 1974.

WORLD BRIEFS

POOR RAINFALL TRIGGERS FOOD
CRISES IN SOMALIA, ETHIOPIA, KENYA

NAIROBI (IPS) — Millions of people in the Horn of Africa face a looming food crisis due to an unusually short rainy season in the first half of this year, which has produced "dangerously low water levels." The WFP said although late April brought adequate rains to Somalia, Ethiopia and Kenya, an extended dry spell, with only scattered rains in May and June, will sharply reduce livestock and crop production. "Alarming, all signs point to inevitable food shortages this year. We are facing a major hunger crisis affecting millions of people throughout the region," said Robin Wheeler, in charge of the WFP's regional Vulnerability Analysis Mapping. To avert the crisis, WFP said it has already approved a \$40.5 million emergency operation budget to feed nearly 1.2 million most affected people in Ethiopia.

TEN MILLION CONGOLESE CHILDREN
TO RECEIVE POLIO VACCINE

KINSHASA (IPS) — Ten million children will be vaccinated against polio beginning in August during the Democratic Republic of Congo's second national crusade against the crippling disease. "The DRC, following the example of other African countries, is finally coming into the age of the complete eradication of polio," Health Minister Dr. Mashako Mamba told IPS. "We can't let our country become the breeding ground for this virus." According to Mamba, the DRC is the last country on the continent to organize a nationwide campaign against polio. The new campaign will cost approximately \$13 million. A large chunk of it will be financed by outside sources, such as the World Health Organization and the United Nations Children's Fund. According to statistics from the Expanded Program for Vaccinations and the Fight Against Children's Communicable Diseases, around 10,000 Congolese children under five suffer from polio.


SIXTEEN MALAWI WOMEN
VOTED INTO PARLIAMENT

LILONGWE - (IPS) — History was made in Malawi's second multi-party general elections recently when 16 women, the highest number ever, won seats in Parliament. Malawians elected a new president and members of Parliament earlier this month in an election described as free and fair by rights groups and international observers, despite claims of irregularities by some opposition parties. According to the Electoral Commission, a total of 62 women entered the race for the tiny Southern African country's 193 parliamentary seats. "We have made some progress compared to the last Parliament, but we could have done better," says Reen Kachere, executive director of the Association of Progressive Women, a local rights group lobbying for increased women's participation in politics and decision-making.

NIGERIAN CABINET ENDS STANDOFF
AFTER MONTH-LONG DEADLOCK

ABUJA, Nigeria (AP) — A crippling standoff within Nigeria's ruling party ended last week when 46 Cabinet members chosen by the newly elected government took their posts. After the monthlong deadlock within the ruling party over President Olusegun Obasanjo's original choices for Cabinet, the appointments were inaugurated in a colorful ceremony attended by hundreds of foreign dignitaries and local residents in traditional dress. The political resolution coincided with the arrival of U.S. Deputy Commerce Secretary Robert Mallet, who praised the new president's reform efforts. Mallet is in Nigeria for three days of trade talks.

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