

LIBERIA

Students Raped by Government Security Forces

“When I left class on Wednesday 21 March to get home, I was confronted by some officers, about eleven men hiding behind the flowers and the university fence... The first officer slapped me, kicked me and then I saw what looked like a gun butt coming... 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.”

“I was severely whipped, several lashes on my buttocks and then my back... I was starved for almost three days. I was made to sleep on the cold floor without bedding, and was faced with constant violent sexual harassments by some officers. Sometimes I would resist them, but this would only make them to be more vindictive and injurious.”

“I was severely flogged on my back at the break of every day and was threatened to be killed. The condition of the cell was very deplorable... I felt humiliated... I was also abused sexually several times. When I opposed them, they would become more violent... the commander stated that I was detained for supporting people who tried to undermine the government... I was released after fourteen days, owing to appeals made by human rights groups.”

“Over 15 girls were raped on the beach with me. After they did what they wanted to do to us, they decided to set us free... Because of the stigma associated with rape, most of us declined from raising any alarm because ours is a very small society.”

(Female students interviewed in April 2001)

On 21 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. At least 20 students were detained and several female students were reportedly raped while held incommunicado and without charge for weeks.

Background Information

University students have been on the front line scrutinizing their government's action and promoting and defending human rights. Since mid-May 2001 more than 15 university students have fled Liberia, fearing for their safety after the Minister of Justice publicly stated that “dissident collaborators” were operating from the campus.

Liberian security forces have denied all allegations that they tortured the students. Yet the Liberian authorities have not opened any investigations into the allegations and no one has been brought to justice. Nothing has been done by the Liberian authorities to prevent this from happening again. President Charles Taylor reportedly said that students could not be allowed to “take the law into their own hands and go against the authority of the university and bring chaos to the campus”.

The Liberian security forces frequently use torture against political prisoners and criminal suspects; those who criticize the government have been tortured in custody to intimidate and silence them. Civilians suspected of backing the armed incursion in the north have been tortured to force them to confess to backing “the rebels”. In recent months, dozens of women fleeing northern Liberia have reported being

tortured by the security forces, including being repeatedly raped or gang-raped, and being threatened with death.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Write to President Taylor, inform him that the behaviour of the security forces with regard to violence against women is unacceptable and urge him to make sure the events of March 2001 never happen again:

- by giving clear and public instructions to all government security forces that rape and sexual violence will not be tolerated and that those responsible will be brought to justice;
- by making sure that all allegations of violence against women by the security forces are promptly, thoroughly and impartially investigated;
- by bringing to justice in fair and prompt trials those suspected of being responsible for violence against women.

WRITE TO:

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