

Human Rights Watch

Torture, Former Combatants, Political Prisoners, Terror Suspects, & Terrorists

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Rebel attacks against civilians are spreading to the northern parts of Sierra Leone, Human Rights Watch warned today. The group said that government troops and ECOMOG, the West African peacekeeping forces, have so far been unwilling to intervene to protect civilians.

The rebel attacks, which had previously been centered around the western town of Port Loko, spread during November to two areas in Sierra Leone's Northern Province: Kambia (110 kilometers north of Freetown) and Kabala (200 km northeast of Freetown). The persistent rebel attacks in all three areas include rape, murder, abduction, torture and brutalization of the civilian population. The frequent ambushes along some northern highways have made them impassable for civilian traffic.

"The government seems to be bending over backwards to accommodate rebel leaders," said Peter Takirambudde. "It has simply ignored the rebel atrocities being committed against civilians. These are criminal acts, not political ones, and the government should at least be making an effort to stop them."

During the month of November, Human Rights Watch documented rebel attacks on some twenty villages and took testimony from scores of civilian victims. The majority of these attacks occurred during food raids in which rebel soldiers entered villages looking for foodstuffs, livestock and money. Several civilians were killed and many more were tortured and stabbed as rebel soldiers terrorized the civilians into telling them where their valuables and food were hidden. During most attacks civilians, usually women, were abducted and forced to carry looted goods and harvest rice. They were very often raped.

The attacks have forced thousands of civilians to flee their homes and led to the displacement of over 12,000, some 5000 of whom since late November crossed over into neighboring Guinea.

The ceasefire agreement signed on May 18 called on all parties to "maintain their present and respective positions... and refrain from any hostile or aggressive act which could undermine the peace process." Despite this, rebel groups have been moving in and out of government-held areas to commit atrocities against the civilian population.

There has been little response from Sierra Leone Army troops and ECOMOG to stop these atrocities and provide protection to the civilian population. Several of the ambushes and attacks documented by Human Rights Watch have been committed just miles away from government and ECOMOG checkpoints. In late November, members of the government's Civil Defense Forces captured some ten Revolutionary United Front (RUF) combatants who were harassing civilians in Nenekoro village, near Kabala. After receiving a complaint from RUF leader Foday Sankoh, the government ordered the prisoners released instead of initiating criminal proceedings against them.

Frequent ambushes of cars and mini-buses, including a November 17 attack on an aid agency's vehicle carrying malnourished children and their mothers near Port Loko, has effectively halted civilian traffic around this area. A young woman died and three others were wounded on November 27 when rebels opened fire on a mini-bus during an ambush just outside of Port Loko.

A peace accord signed in Lome, Togo called for rebels to lay down their arms in exchange for representation in the government, and included a controversial general amnesty for all crimes committed during the civil war. The implementation of the agreement has been marred by delays in all of the key areas, most importantly disarmament and the release by rebel forces of thousands of civilian abductees.

Testimonies from Civilian Victims of Recent Abuses

A 33-year-old woman from Petifu village, between Port Loko and Lunghi, was one of two women gang-raped by rebels during an attack

on Petifu village on November 16. The woman, who was 6 months pregnant at the time, described losing her baby after being raped by at least 15 rebels. She said:

"After harvesting our rice we were relaxing at sundown on the verandah when a group of about 30 rebels surprised us. They surrounded us and some of my friends got away. They screamed for food and money and then put a rope around me like a goat and pulled me into the bushes demanding that I tell them where the rice stores were. I told them we didn't have any and then 8 of them beat me and raped me right there in the bush. I begged them and said I was pregnant and they said that was obvious to them. Then they pulled me back to the village where the rest of them raped me all night long. I lost count after 15. The next morning they wanted me to carry rice and palm oil but I couldn't even walk. After they'd gone I started bleeding. I tried to get up but collapsed right in the middle of the village. And later that night I delivered my baby all alone. The labor was 3 hours and my baby lived for less than an hour."

An 18-year-old man from Kaseidugu, some 15 miles from Kabala, described being stabbed in the back during a night attack by some 20 rebels on November 17. His wife and 7-month-old son were abducted in the same raid, and a 50-year-old farmer was also killed.

"We were sleeping, but they stormed into the farmhouse and woke all of us up, demanding palm wine and food. I offered them something to eat but they demanded goats, chickens, and money. I told them I didn't have any. Four of them surrounded me and started cutting my arms with knives; They all took turns until one of them grabbed the knife and said, 'You're not doing it right.' Then he stabbed me deep into my back. My wife was screaming, 'They're carrying me away' as they dragged her and my baby son away. I've not seen them since."

A 15-year-old girl from Madina Bokobah village, near Fadugu, was abducted on November 2 with her four sisters, and forced by rebels to carry looted goods. She was held for two weeks and repeatedly raped before escaping to Kabala. She described her capture:

"On our way to the farm, we ran into more than 20 of them [the rebels]. They beat us and gave us palm oil, rice and peanuts they'd just looted from our village to carry. Four of my sisters had their children, all under a year old, on their backs. One of the rebels told them to put the kids on the ground so they could carry more. When my sisters refused the men pulled the babies off their backs and threw them into the bush. My sister Fati ran to pick up her child and they beat her seriously. She went back again and they took a knife and slashed her hand but she wouldn't give up so they finally let her take her 5-month-old. But the others left their kids in the bush. We carried our load for two days and when we reached the rebel base they let the others go. But since I was youngest and didn't have any children, they kept me for two weeks until I could escape. I cried to the big man commander but he said I was theirs now."

A 35-year-old trader described being raped and robbed of hundreds of dollars during an ambush on a public bus on November 19. At least one other woman was raped and several more were abducted during the attack, which took place some 70 miles north of Freetown but less than five miles from an ECOMOG checkpoint.

"The bus was packed full. We were on our way to Guinea to buy goods to sell in Freetown. I'd saved for months for this trip. We slowed for a pot hole south of Rogberi Junction, and scores of them jumped out of the bushes. Three had rocket-propelled grenade launchers [and their] faces were painted black, and so many with AK's, machetes and machine guns. They swarmed into the bus and started roughing us up: pulling, beating us, threatening to kill us if we didn't give them the money. There was confusion so I jumped and ran out the door, but two of them chased after me. 'I beg,' I said to them, but they told me, 'Tie down because we're going to slaughter you.' They beat me as they searched me for the money which I had well hidden. They stole all I had and then two of them raped me and cut my legs with a knife. They said they were going to abduct me but I begged them, especially because it is so near to the holy month of Ramadan."

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