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Security Council Members

Your Excellency,

In light of the upcoming consultations on the renewal of Liberian sanctions, Human Rights Watch writes to inform members of the United Nations Security Council of the links between the deteriorating human rights situation in the West African sub-region and the conflict in Liberia. Human Rights Watch has been documenting the human rights situation in the sub-region for ten years and has recently concluded an extensive investigation into abuses by all sides in the Ivorian conflict.

Liberia continues to be a source of instability to its neighbors, but the focus has shifted away from its connection with the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in Sierra Leone, which was the source of the original sanctions regime. Human Rights Watch urges members of the Security Council to address the problem in Liberia from a regional perspective, recognizing the changed dynamics in the region and the role being played by various regional actors in supporting insurgency groups that have committed serious human rights abuses throughout the area.

Over the past few months, Liberia has returned to full-scale armed conflict. The main rebel group, the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD), operates from bases in Lofa county in Liberia and from Guinea, where it has that government's support. It has made significant military gains, launching attacks within ten kilometers of Monrovia. A second rebel group called the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL), which has recently split from the LURD and is reportedly receiving support from the Ivorian government, has also made territorial gains and captured Greenville in late April. It is estimated that up to 60 percent of Liberian territory is currently in the hands of the two rebel movements. Both the government of Liberia and Liberian rebel forces are responsible for violations of international humanitarian law amounting to war crimes and other serious human rights abuses. Tens of thousands of Liberians have been forcibly displaced and hundreds if not thousands of civilians have been killed, either deliberately or in crossfire. Recent human rights abuses committed by both sides include the forced recruitment of children in displaced and refugee camps, forced labor, assault, and sexual violence against civilians, as well as attacks on humanitarian workers. The inflow of arms in breach of the U.N. embargo contributes to such abuses.

The renewal of armed conflict in Liberia has undermined prospects for sustainable peace in the Mano River Union. As efforts continue to consolidate peace in Sierra Leone, hundreds of former fighters in Sierra Leone's civil war, both former rebel and government combatants, have crossed into Liberia to fight as mercenaries either for the Liberian government or for LURD. Many former fighters from the RUF, which received direct support from Charles Taylor for years, were integrated into the Liberian government forces and have been implicated in atrocities against Liberian civilians. Sierra Leonean fighters have been recruited as mercenaries for LURD and are also active in western Côte d'Ivoire. The proliferation of mercenaries and armed groups has made Liberia's borders with Sierra Leone, Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire unstable.

The government of Guinea continues to play a destabilizing role by providing considerable logistical and some military support to LURD rebels who operate from Guinean territory. It also has allowed LURD to use refugee camps in Guinea as a base from which to recruit.

Recent events in western Côte d'Ivoire demonstrate the dangerous trend towards regional destabilization. Since December 2002, western Côte d'Ivoire has become a lawless zone where both the government of Côte d'Ivoire and rebel groups have engaged in the recruitment of Liberian fighters. As described in our previous communication of April 14, 2003 on this subject, Liberian and Ivorian combatants from both sides are responsible for serious human rights abuses against civilians. There are a number of alarming trends, notably:

- The increasingly cross-border, ethnic character of the conflict in the west, which draws on tensions between the Ivorian Yacouba and Gueré communities, each of which has links to Liberian ethnic groups involved in the Liberian conflict. These tensions have been exacerbated by the recruitment of Liberian fighters.
- The recruitment of child soldiers from the Ivorian population and from among the Liberian refugees in Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea.
- The presence of civilian militias acting alongside or with the collaboration of Ivorian state security forces in the west, including in towns such as Duekoué and Guiglo.
- Significant areas where the security situation has prevented humanitarian assistance from being delivered to civilian populations.

In view of the Security Council's continued commitment to the protection of civilians and children in armed conflict as expressed in numerous resolutions, Human Rights Watch calls on the Security Council to take measures to address the crisis in the West African sub-region by passing a new resolution with the following elements:

- Maintain the arms embargo against the Liberian government and Liberian insurgent groups in light of their role in destabilizing the sub-region and endangering civilians.
- Promote measures to address the uncontrolled spread of weapons in the sub-region and continued embargo violations, such as through the strengthening of the ECOWAS small arms moratorium, the development of an international regime for authentication and verification of end-user certificates, and the prosecution of sanctions violators.
- Establish a new U.N. Panel of Experts with the mandate to document illicit weapons flows into the sub-region, and the financing and funding of abusive insurgent groups, especially by state actors. The panel should be charged with making recommendations to the Security Council on measures to reduce instability in the sub-region, including further extensions of the arms embargo.
- Condemn the regional governments, notably Guinea, Cote d'Ivoire, and Liberia, for their support to abusive insurgent groups.

- Mandate the placement of international military observers and human rights monitors along the Sierra Leonean/Guinean, Guinean/Liberian, and Ivorian/Liberian borders to monitor and investigate cross-border attacks.
- Call on all parties to respect international human rights and humanitarian law, particularly regarding treatment of civilians and other non-combatants, and to hold those members of their forces responsible for abuses accountable.

Human Rights Watch is ready to assist you with further information should you require it. Thank you for your kind consideration.

Sincerely,

Peter Takirambudde
Executive Director for Africa

Joanna Weschler
U.N. Representative