

Beat: Health

LIBERIA MUST PUT PEOPLE BEFORE PROFIT ACCORDING TO UN EXPERTS ON HUMAN RIGHTS

AND BUSINESS URGE

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USPA NEWS - Liberia, located in West Africa, suffered 15 years of conflict between 1989 and 2003, with two civil wars that left nearly 250,000 people dead. Authorities in Liberia, as well as businesses operating there, must prioritize people over profits and ensure a responsible corporate environment, UN-appointed human rights experts said on Friday in the capital, Monrovia. "The present climate of irresponsible business practices provides profit for companies but does little for people", members of the UN Working Group on Business and Human Rights said in a statement marking the conclusion of their first visit to the country. "A sustainable and stable peace calls for accountability, transparency, equality, social cohesion, the rule of law, and respect of human rights for all", they added. Source: United Nations

PRAISE AND ALARM

Liberia, located in West Africa, suffered 15 years of conflict between 1989 and 2003, with two civil wars that left nearly 250,000 people dead. The rights experts welcomed the Government's commitment to implement the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs), which define concrete steps on protection and respect, as well as remedies, should abuses occur. They also praised the development of a national action plan on business and human rights but were alarmed at the absence of State oversight in various parts of the country. "Facilitating foreign investment has superseded the implementation of responsible business practices", said Working Group Chair Fernanda Hopenhaym.

"Basic infrastructure and services were lacking, especially outside Monrovia. The general neglect of local communities in development planning is unacceptable".

RESPECT HUMAN RIGHTS

Ms. Hopenhaym said the Liberian Government needs to ensure domestic and foreign businesses demonstrate much greater respect for human rights.

"A critical element is transparency and meaningful participation of affected communities in decisions regarding business activity," she recommended.

During their 10-day visit, the experts met with representatives from the Government, businesses, workers unions, civil society organizations and local communities to discuss opportunities and challenges in implementing the UNGPs.

POLICIES FOR IMPLEMENTATION

Legal reforms, such as the 2018 Land Rights Act and the Decent Work Act of 2015, were welcomed but implementation was weak, they reported.

"The experience of Liberia shows the urgent need for a smart mix of policies, incentives and regulations to implement laws and promote a business culture that respects human rights," said Damilola Olawuyi, the other member of the Working Group who travelled there.

As human rights activists, trade unionists and community members were vulnerable to attacks and intimidation for speaking out against business-related human rights abuses, the UN experts called for the Government to take action.

"People who are seeking to hold businesses accountable need to be respected, taken seriously, and offered effective grievance mechanisms to have their cases heard and remediated", said Ms. Hopenhaym.

INITIAL FINDINGS

The experts will present their final report on the Liberia mission to the UN Human Rights Council in June.

Their initial findings reflect on issues such as the very limited employment opportunities in the country, the significant hold that a small number of large multinational corporations have on the economy, poor labour conditions across different sectors, and the multiple forms of harassment, abuse and violence faced by women and girls.

“Liberia should ensure that all government institutions dealing with business, and the judiciary, together with the Independent National Commission on Human Rights, have the necessary resources and training to provide effective oversight of corporate behaviour, and corporate accountability”, they said.

ABOUT UN EXPERTS

The Working Group consists of five human rights experts from across the globe.

Besides Ms. Hopenhaym and Mr. Olawuyi, the other members are Pichamon Yeophantong, Robert McCorquodale and Elżbieta Karska.

They were appointed by the UN Human Rights Council to promote dissemination and implementation of the UNGPs.

They serve in their individual capacity and are neither UN staff, nor are they paid for their work. Source: UN News

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