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Sierra Leone: UN rights chief should call for Taylor's surrender

During her visit to West Africa this week, the United Nations' top human rights official, Louise Arbour, should press for ex-Liberian President Charles Taylor's surrender to the U.N.-backed Special Court for Sierra Leone, the Campaign Against Impunity said today.

The U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, Louise Arbour, is currently on a 10-day visit to Cote d'Ivoire, Sierra Leone and Liberia to assess efforts to build effective systems of human rights protection in countries emerging from armed conflicts. Arbour is a former chief prosecutor for the International Criminal Tribunals for the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda.

The Campaign Against Impunity is a coalition made up of some 300 African and international civil society groups which was formed to urge Nigeria to surrender Charles Taylor to the Special Court for Sierra Leone.

"Bringing war criminals to justice is one of the best strategies for ensuring human rights protection today and in the future," said Sulaiman Jabati, the executive secretary of the Sierra Leonean Coalition for Justice and Accountability, one of the groups which is part of the Campaign. "As Africans, we are expecting leadership from the top U.N. human rights official and this means pressing for Charles Taylor's surrender."

Charles Taylor, former president of Liberia, has been accused of 17 counts of war crimes and crimes against humanity against the people of Sierra Leone. These crimes include killings, mutilations, rape and other forms of sexual violence, sexual slavery, the recruitment and use of child soldiers, abduction, and the use of forced labor by Sierra Leonean armed opposition groups, which Taylor actively supported. In 2003, while the Liberian capital Monrovia was under siege by rebels, Taylor was granted asylum in Nigeria, where he currently resides.

"Mrs. Arbour recently said there is a link between the pursuit of justice and the restoration of peace and order. The Sierra Leoneans and Liberians who are part of this coalition couldn't agree more," said Ezekiel Pajibo, director of the Center for Democratic Empowerment in Liberia, another group which is part of the Campaign. "Nigeria's refusal to surrender Charles Taylor to the Special Court stands squarely in our path to stability and the rule of law."

The Campaign has stressed that Nigeria's failure to surrender Taylor to the Special Court undermines not only attempts to confront impunity in West Africa, but also efforts by the international community to consolidate stability in the region. There are consistent reports of Taylor's interference in

Liberian politics, despite the terms of the agreement granting him asylum, which prohibits any such meddling.

U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan stated in his June 7 report on Liberia that "Charles Taylor is reportedly in regular contact with his former business, military and political associates in Liberia and is suspected of sponsoring a variety of presidential candidates with a view to ensuring that the next Liberian Government will include his sympathizers." Only days ago, Liberia's Transitional Minister of Justice demanded that Charles Taylor's exile deal be reviewed, stating that Charles Taylor's exile poses a threat to Liberia and the region due to the excessive meddling that continues to go on.

In advance of the African Union summit last week, the Campaign Against Impunity -- which includes Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the Open Society Justice Initiative -- held press conferences in 15 African cities to call for Charles Taylor's surrender to ensure justice and stability. In conjunction with the press conferences, the Campaign issued a declaration urging the African Union to take action on this issue.

The Campaign asserted that by calling for Taylor to be turned over to the Special Court, Arbour would be standing up on behalf of justice for the victims of war crimes committed in Sierra Leone. On March 14, Arbour told the U.N. Commission on Human Rights that justice "affirms society's solidarity with the victim, rather than the offender."

"While promoting human rights in West Africa, Arbour must use her voice to call for Taylor to be brought to justice," said Richard Dicker, director of Human Rights Watch's International Justice Program.

The Campaign Against Impunity urged Arbour to explicitly call for Nigeria to promptly surrender Charles Taylor to the Special Court to face trial. This trial must be in accordance with international law and standards guaranteeing the right to a fair trial, including the presumption of innocence. Without Taylor's surrender, justice for the horrific crimes committed during the Sierra Leone civil conflict cannot be realized and building effective systems for human rights cannot be achieved.

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