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Nigeria: No impunity for Charles Taylor

Amnesty International is repeating its call to the Nigerian government to arrest Charles Taylor, who has been indicted for crimes against humanity, war crimes and other serious violations of humanitarian law by the Special Court for Sierra Leone.

"After President Olusegun Obasanjo offered 'asylum' to Charles Taylor last month, we made it clear that this violated international law," Amnesty International said today after Charles Taylor's departure from Liberia.

The Nigerian government must arrest Charles Taylor and either surrender him to the Special Court or open an investigation with a view to determining whether to open criminal or extradition proceedings in Nigerian courts.

"Nigeria, instead of seeking to end the culture of impunity, is fostering it and in so doing perpetuating what has been a major contributing factor to years of conflict in West Africa," Amnesty International said. "Nigeria is also undermining the important contribution being made by the Special Court towards justice, reconciliation and sustained peace in Sierra Leone."

The indictment made public by the Special Court for Sierra Leone on 4 June 2003 accuses Charles Taylor of being among those who bear the greatest responsibility for war crimes and crimes against humanity during Sierra Leone's internal armed conflict. These crimes include widespread and systematic killings of civilians, deliberate amputation of limbs, rape and other forms of sexual violence, the use of child soldiers, abduction and forced labour.

International law requires that those who are suspected of having committed war crimes, crimes against humanity and other breaches of international law be investigated and, if there is sufficient admissible evidence, prosecuted.

"Each state which is a party to the Geneva Conventions - as is Nigeria - is under an obligation to bring to justice in its own courts those who have committed or ordered grave breaches of the Conventions, to extradite them to another country willing and able to do so or transfer them to an international criminal court," the organization said.

The Government of Nigeria is also bound by the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman and Degrading Treatment or Punishment. In addition, by ratifying the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, Nigeria has made a commitment to ending impunity for crimes under international law.

"No one, regardless of their status - including a head of state - has immunity for the most serious crimes under international law," Amnesty International added. "There can be no impunity for such crimes."

Amnesty International expressed its dismay to both President John Kufuor of Ghana after the authorities failed to arrest Charles Taylor while he was in Accra on 4 June and to President Obasanjo when he made his offer of "asylum" on 6 July. The organization has also called on other states in West Africa and elsewhere to fulfil their obligations under international law and cooperate fully with the Special Court for Sierra Leone.

The United Nations Secretary-General and Security Council have consistently expressed their support for the Special Court for Sierra Leone and called on all states to cooperate fully with it.

In addition, on 11 March 2003, at the inauguration of the judges of the International Criminal Court, the Secretary-General said: *"There are times when we are told that justice must be set aside in the interests of peace. It is true that justice can only be dispensed when peaceful order of society is secure. But we have come to understand that the reverse is also true: without justice, there can be no lasting peace."*

"We would expect the United Nations to reiterate this message to the Nigerian government," Amnesty International said.

There must also be accountability for war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by all parties to the internal armed conflict in Liberia. Thousands of civilians have been killed, women and girls have been raped, and children under the age of 18 have been forced to fight. These crimes have been committed with total impunity.

"The simple departure of Charles Taylor will not bring about a just and lasting peace to Liberia," Amnesty International said. "The Liberian people - who like their neighbours in Sierra Leone have suffered so terribly - must see those responsible for the crimes against them held accountable."

The UN Secretary-General and High Commissioner for Human Rights have repeatedly said that the perpetrators of such crimes in Liberia will be held individually accountable.

"There must be a full and independent investigation of the war crimes and crimes against humanity which have occurred during Liberia's conflict and those accused of being responsible must be brought to justice," Amnesty International concluded. "It is essential that those currently negotiating a peace agreement for Liberia fully address ending impunity for human rights abuses."

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