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Taylor verdict sends message that no one is above the law

The conviction of Charles Taylor by the Special Court for Sierra Leone sends out a clear message to leaders the world over that no-one is immune from justice but while the verdict brings some satisfaction for his victims more must now be done, said Amnesty International.

"There is no doubt that today's verdict sends an important message to high-ranking state officials; no matter who you are or what position you hold, you will be brought to justice for crimes," said Brima Abdulai Sheriff, Director of Amnesty International Sierra Leone.

"This verdict can also be seen as a reminder for Taylor's home country Liberia that those responsible for the crimes committed during Liberia's conflict must be brought to justice."

Sheriff was speaking after he attended the televised pronouncement of the verdict at the seat of the court in Freetown with hundreds of Sierra Leoneans.

The Trial Chamber of the Special Court for Sierra Leone, sitting in The Hague because of security concerns, found Taylor guilty of 11 counts of crimes against humanity and war crimes committed in the West African country between 1996 and 2002.

Taylor will be sentenced soon in a separate hearing. The judgment can be appealed by the defence or the prosecution.

The presiding judge said the Prosecution had proved beyond a reasonable doubt that Taylor was responsible for planning crimes committed by the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) and the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) in Sierra Leone and aided and abetted these crimes taking place.

Victims still waiting for justice

While the conviction is a milestone, Amnesty International remains concerned that thousands of people who suffered atrocities during a decade of armed conflict are yet to see their perpetrators brought to justice.

Due to the Special Court's limited jurisdiction mandated only to investigate and prosecute those bearing the greatest responsibility for serious violations of international humanitarian law committed on the territory of Sierra Leone, only 12 individuals aside from Taylor were charged with crimes.

Three of them died and one suspect remains at large. Thousands of other suspects belonging to the RUF, AFRC and Civil Defence Forces (CDF) have not been brought to justice in the SCSL or national courts.

"While today's conviction brings some measure of justice to the people of Sierra Leone, Taylor and the others sentenced by the Special Court are just the tip of the iceberg," said Sheriff.

"Thousands of persons suspected of criminal responsibility for incidences of unlawful killings, rape and

sexual violence, mutilations and the use of children in Sierra Leone's armed conflict have never been investigated, much less prosecuted."

"Sadly, only a limited number of Sierra Leone's thousands of victims who bear the terrible scars of the conflict have received reparations, despite the Lomé Peace Accord and the clear recommendations by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)," said Sheriff.

"Reparations are integral to achieving justice for the victims and assisting them to rebuild their lives."

In 2004, the TRC's report made detailed recommendations for the provision of reparations to those who had suffered throughout the conflict. However, more needs to be done to ensure long-term sustainable plan is in place so that all victims receive full and extensive reparations.

One survivor of a double amputation to the arms told Amnesty International, "There are no plans to make reparations for victims. We have been asking them for years throughout the court proceedings to find ways and means to compensate us but victims are still languishing in the streets and begging for a living."

Amnesty International continues to call for the repeal of the amnesty provision in the 1999 Lomé Peace Accord and the enactment of legislation defining crimes against humanity and war crimes as crimes under Sierra Leone law. Until then, the thousands of alleged perpetrators not tried by the Special Court can never face trial in Sierra Leone.

In addition to repealing the amnesty law, the authorities of Sierra Leone must bring the country's criminal laws into line with international law and provide the domestic criminal justice system with the capacity to investigate and prosecute all crimes under international law in fair trials without the death penalty, and it should allow survivors to seek reparation directly against a convicted person.

Liberia: climate of impunity

Today's judgment against Taylor also served as a reminder of the legacy of crimes in the former head of state's native Liberia.

"The political and legal obstacles to bringing perpetrators in Sierra Leone to justice are only matched by the prevailing climate of impunity in Liberia," said Sheriff.

During the 14-year Liberian civil war that raged while Taylor was first the leader of one of the numerous armed opposition groups and later the President, all parties to the conflict committed war crimes and crimes against humanity, including murders along ethnic lines, as well as torture, rapes and other crimes of sexual violence, abductions, and recruitment and use child soldiers.

The recommendation of the Liberian TRC that a criminal tribunal be established to prosecute people identified as responsible for crimes under international law is yet to be implemented, as are most TRC recommendations on legal and other institutional reforms, accountability, and reparations.

"The lack of justice for the victims of the Liberian conflict is shocking. The government of Liberia must end the reign of impunity by enacting the necessary legislation and acting on its duty to investigate and prosecute alleged perpetrators."