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Nigeria: Surrender Charles Taylor to Special Court for Sierra Leone

Two years after former Liberian President Charles Taylor fled Liberia for exile in Nigeria, Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo should no longer allow Taylor to escape prosecution for crimes against humanity and war crimes committed during Sierra Leone's civil war, the Campaign Against Impunity said today. Nigeria should immediately surrender Taylor to face trial at the Special Court for Sierra Leone.

The Campaign Against Impunity, a coalition made up of some 300 African and international civil society groups was formed to ensure Nigeria's surrender of Charles Taylor to the Special Court for Sierra Leone. Taylor has been accused of 17 counts of war crimes and crimes against humanity against the people of Sierra Leone by the Special Court. The 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.

Despite mounting international pressure from African countries, the United Nations, the European Union and the United States, Nigeria continues to resist surrendering indicted war criminal Charles Taylor to the Special Court for Sierra Leone. Most recently on 28 July the Mano River Union, which consists of Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea, issued a communiqué, which agreed to call for a review of Taylor's temporary stay in Nigeria.

"Nigeria is swimming against the tide of international justice," said Shina Loremikan, Director of the Committee for Defence of Human Rights (CDHR), a Nigerian organization that is part of the Campaign Against Impunity. "The international community is in agreement that Taylor must be surrendered to the Special Court for trial. It is high time that President Obasanjo did the right thing by turning Taylor over to be tried for his alleged crimes."

The campaign stressed that Taylor's trial must take place in accordance with international law and standards for fair trial, including the right to be presumed innocent until proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt.

Surrendering Taylor to the Special Court is crucial not only to ensure justice is done for crimes committed during the Sierra Leone conflict, but also to ensure stability in West Africa, the Campaign Against Impunity said. 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 and, more recently, the Mano River Union have expressed concern over Taylor's potential for fomenting instability in the region. The 28 July communiqué issued by the Mano River Union cited allegations of Taylor's involvement in an attack on the Guinean president,

gathering armed people in the forests of Liberia, and making telephone calls to Liberian officials. In his June 7 report on Liberia, the U.N. Secretary-General stated that Taylor is reportedly in regular contact with former business, military and political associates in Liberia and is suspected of supporting candidates in Liberia's October presidential election.

"On the second anniversary of Charles Taylor's flight to Nigeria, his continued impunity is undermining the rule of law in West Africa and putting civilians in the region at risk," said Richard Dicker, Director of the International Justice Program at Human Rights Watch, which is part of the campaign.

"African leaders owe it to their people to work vigorously with President Obasanjo to see that Taylor faces trial expeditiously," Kolawole Olaniyan, Africa Program Director at Amnesty International, which is also part of the campaign.

The first public call for Nigeria to surrender Taylor to face trial came from the European Parliament in February of this year in the form of a resolution. Later in May, the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate passed similar resolutions. During a visit to West Africa last month, the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights Louise Arbour called for Taylor to appear for trial at the Special Court for Sierra Leone and for African leaders to urge President Obasanjo to hand over Taylor.

The campaign called on members of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) to follow the example of the Mano River Union and speak out on the need for Taylor's surrender to the Special Court. SADC is holding its annual summit in Gaborone, Botswana in the coming days.

"The moment for Taylor's surrender to the Special Court is now," said Paul James Allen, a Sierra Leonean human rights activist involved in the campaign. "The indictment for Charles Taylor on war crimes and crimes against humanity must be honored. The victims in Sierra Leone who suffered grave crimes under international law should not be forced to wait any longer."

Partners in the Campaign Against Impunity in Nigeria and elsewhere in Africa held events today, including interfaith services in Lagos and Calabar (the city where Taylor now resides), to mark the second anniversary of Taylor's arrival in Nigeria with a call for his surrender.

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