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Sierra Leone: Special Court renders final judgment in RUF case

Amnesty International said today's decision by the Special Court for Sierra Leone to uphold the convictions of three former senior leaders of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) is a positive step in the fight against impunity for the worst crimes committed during the country's eleven-year civil war.

The Appeals Chamber of the Special Court for Sierra Leone upheld, by a majority, the convictions of Issa Sesay, Morris Kallon and Augustine Gbao, former senior leaders of the main armed opposition group in Sierra Leone's conflict.

"The confirmation of the convictions of these former RUF leaders is a positive contribution in the fight against impunity not only in Sierra Leone but also in Africa," said Hugo Relva, Legal Adviser with Amnesty International's International Justice Project.

"However, we need to remember that these convictions are of only eight out of the possibly thousands of people responsible for war crimes and crimes against humanity in Sierra Leone during the armed conflict. Far more effort has to be made to bringing to justice others implicated in these terrible crimes."

Although the Appeals Chamber revised the sentences for some counts, the final judgment rendered today upheld the total terms of imprisonment for Issa Sesay, who will serve 52 years in prison, Morris Kallon, who will serve 40 years in prison and Augustine Gbao, who will spend 25 years in prison.

They were sentenced for their individual criminal responsibility for crimes against humanity and war crimes, including the use of child soldiers, forced marriage and attacks against United Nations peacekeepers.

"Many other perpetrators of vicious crimes – including murder, rape, sexual slavery and mutilation – remain free to this day, protected by amnesties," said Hugo Relva.

"This is utterly unacceptable and demonstrates the need for African states and others to exercise universal jurisdiction with regard to those who committed crimes under international law."

The judgment rendered today is the last that will be issued by the Appeals Chamber in Freetown. Proceedings against Charles Taylor, former Liberian president, for crimes against humanity and war crimes are being held in The Hague at the International Criminal Court premises.

"It is essential for Sierra Leone to take steps to ensure that the legacy of the Special Court at the national level is not one of continuing impunity. The government should lift the amnesties and enact legislation to make war crimes and crimes against humanity crimes under national law in Sierra Leone," said Hugo Relva.

Notes to editors:

- The Special Court for Sierra Leone was established in 2002 by an agreement between the United Nations and the Government of Sierra Leone to investigate and prosecute those “bearing the greatest responsibility” for crimes against humanity and war crimes committed during Sierra Leone’s civil war (1991-2002).
- In February 2008, the Appeals Chamber upheld the original sentences passed in the cases of Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) members Alex Tamba Brima (50 years’ imprisonment), Ibrahim Bazy Kamara (45 years’ imprisonment) and Santigie Borbor Kanu (45 years’ imprisonment).
- The case against Moinina Fofana and Allieu Kondewa, members of the Civil Defence Forces (CDF), concluded in May 2008. Doubling their original sentences, the Appeals Chamber sentenced them to 15 and 20 years’ imprisonment respectively.
- The 1999 Lomé Peace Agreement included a general amnesty provision for all acts undertaken in pursuit of the conflict in Sierra Leone. However, the general amnesty was not a bar to prosecution by the Special Court for Sierra Leone.