

A TIME TO END CONTEMPT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

**Press conference statement by Pierre Sané,
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One year ago I was here in South Africa to talk about human rights protection in a society going through dramatic political and social changes.

This week, I have been here to talk about Nigeria and Zaire -- two countries in a human rights crisis.

You all know the crisis taking place in Zaire and the rest of the African Great Lakes region.

Nigeria's human rights crisis is on a different scale. But the situation there could deteriorate in the same way unless preventive action is taken. A crisis in Nigeria could have consequences as serious as those we are now witnessing in the Great Lakes.

This Sunday marks the first anniversary of the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa and his eight companions in Nigeria. This week, Amnesty International sections in Africa, Asia, Europe and the Americas have launched a worldwide campaign for Nigeria.

We are in South Africa to launch this campaign because the Nigerian government denied us visas, and because the South African people have a key role in improving the human rights situation in Nigeria.

We have met with various members of the Cabinet, African National Congress, religious communities and non-governmental organizations.

And while I have been encouraged by some discussions, there is still a lot to be done.

The Foreign Minister has told us that South Africa will not deviate from trying to put right the human rights situation in Nigeria. We welcome this commitment and have suggested ways in which South Africa's message will be heard.

We hope that the South African government's message will be a consistent and strong one. South Africa will shortly become a member of the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Commission and should use this position to continue to press for human rights in Nigeria.

The government should also continue to press the Organization of African Unity (OAU) and Commonwealth to bring about change.

We also welcome the recent public call by Deputy President Thabo Mbeki for the release of prisoners of conscience in Nigeria, and hope he will continue to do everything in his power to ensure that they are released.

Chief Gani Fawehinmi and Dr Beko Ransome-Kuti, Moshood Abiola, General Olusegun Obasanjo, Chris Anyanwu and Rebecca Ikpe among others are all in jail in appalling conditions -- denied visits by family, lawyers and doctors.

The Nigerian authorities clearly want us to forget about them. Perhaps they are hoping that they will quietly die in their cells, forgotten and alone.

We must not forget them. We must act now. Because if the world forgets and the pressure relents, others -- like the remaining Ogoni 19 -- face the same fate as Ken Saro-Wiwa.

Because when the world forgets, or ignores what is going on, then the danger is that all too soon a country descends into chaos and crisis.

Nigeria and Zaire -- at first glance, the connection between these two countries may not be obvious.

A closer look, however, reveals disturbing parallels in the way the world approaches human rights problems in Africa.

The two words which unfortunately best sum up the international community's attitude to human rights in Nigeria, the Great Lakes -- and much of Africa to date -- are failure and fatalism.

Today I want to challenge that attitude, and argue that the international community, of which Africa is and must remain an integral part, can and must change its approach to human rights in the continent.

It must act in a timely and effective way to prevent catastrophe.

Rwanda and Burundi, and now Zaire, are a case in point.

What we have seen recently in the Great Lakes is that the international community of governments has actually been responsible for fuelling the conflict, by either supplying arms directly to the warring factions or allowing illicit weapons shipments to the region.

These governments know very well the results of arms sales.

Whatever they say publicly, whatever promises and guarantees they claim to have, it is undeniably true that supplying weapons to these countries can only contribute to further human rights violations.

Our message to governments which supply these weapons is that, whoever pulls the trigger in South Kivu, ultimately the country which supplied the weapon or knowingly allowed its shipment, shares responsibility for the killing.

What lies behind the crisis in both Nigeria and the Great Lakes are implicit -- and erroneous -- assumptions made by influential governments.

The assumption that tribalism is pervasive and inevitable.

The assumption that African governments are irredeemably corrupt and undemocratic, and that contempt for human rights is part of the national character.

The assumption that these problems are insoluble and there is no point in getting embroiled.

As a result, when catastrophe does strike, the world deals with it in humanitarian terms alone and side-steps the fundamental issues.

The refugee crisis in Central Africa is again a case in point.

It is not a one-off, short-term flow of people fleeing a single repressive act, but a more fundamental crisis of human rights and governance.

But trouble has been brewing for years, and where has the international community of governments been?

In the end, I am left wondering whether the international community of governments really cares about human rights in Africa, or is it only concerned about being seen to respond to crises?

And this leads me to Nigeria.

One year ago there was a massive upsurge of international outrage and condemnation of the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa and his eight companions.

Despite the promises to hold the Nigerian government to account, since then, what has actually happened?

The situation remains as bad as ever. The international community is once again succumbing to a fatalistic attitude on human rights and broader political questions in Nigeria.

Some governments contend that by pressing for human rights improvements in Nigeria, there is a danger of destabilizing the whole of West Africa.

In reality, it is the Nigerian military government which is holding 100 million people to ransom. It is the government's actions which will be directly responsible for what may happen in Nigeria.

Surely the international community does not want to take the chance of Nigeria collapsing into chaos with all the implications for the rest of West Africa.

Amnesty International has put forward a ten-point program for human rights reform in Nigeria which we believe should be used as a yardstick to measure the government's commitment to returning the country to civilian rule.

Specifically, we call on the South African government and other governments to:

Support the work of human rights defenders in Nigeria; demand the release of all prisoners of conscience; press for the UN Special Rapporteurs on extrajudicial executions and the independence of the judiciary to be allowed into the country; and put Nigeria on the agenda of the OAU.

And the world must listen this time, now, before it is too late.

One year ago, Amnesty International published **THIS** document on the flow of weapons into the Great Lakes region, and the potential for further conflict as a result.

This week, the United Nations published a report which vindicates everything we have been saying.

And we can see what has happened in the meantime.

If the crisis in Nigeria is 10 minutes to midnight, then in Zaire the midnight hour has struck.

We know that there can be no long term peace without respect for human rights.

Now is the time for the international community to demonstrate that it is committed to long term protection of human rights, and not short term attempts to salve their conscience.

Long term protection means an end to impunity. This is the disease that is plaguing the continent.

Until such time as we stop rewarding the criminals responsible for crimes against humanity and war crimes and bring them to face a court of law we will not be able to bring a human rights order to Africa.

This Sunday, we are calling on South Africans and the world at large to remember how you felt a year ago when you heard Ken Saro-Wiwa had been hanged. How the world felt that something must be done in response to these atrocities.

And remember that nothing has changed in Nigeria.

The government declared yesterday that it will ruthlessly crackdown on demonstrations.

Amnesty's Nigerian Section and other local human rights organizations, such as the Civil Liberties Organisation and the Constitutional Rights Project, are planning peaceful vigils and religious commemorations to mark the date.

But the government is saying that Amnesty is planning to stir up trouble.

We say if you really want to identify those who have been bringing trouble to Nigeria, watch for those men in uniform wearing dark glasses who have confiscated the rights of 20% of the African population.

And remembering that harrowing hanging, all South Africans may want to join those who have said no.

Those who look beyond their borders. Those who are saying that without human rights in Nigeria there cannot be human rights in Africa. I mean the Nigeria Democracy Support Group and AI South Africa.

This Sunday I will be flying to Kigali to meet with the government of Rwanda to discuss ways of improving the human rights situation in the Great Lakes region..

I will also be meeting with ministers in Addis Ababa to discuss how to solve the crisis in the region.

And this Sunday, while remembering Ken Saro-Wiwa we must all pledge to work to ensure that Nigeria does not suffer a similar crisis.

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