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The trial of Charles Taylor must be made relevant to Sierra Leoneans and Liberians

Today, in The Hague, the Special Court for Sierra Leone opens the trial of former Liberian President Charles Taylor, who is charged with committing crimes against humanity and war crimes in Sierra Leone, including killings, mutilations, rape and other forms of sexual violence, sexual slavery, the recruitment and use of child soldiers, abduction and the use of forced labour. It is the first time a former head of state or government has been prosecuted in an international criminal court for crimes committed in Africa against Africans.

It is vitally important that this landmark trial is communicated to victims of the crimes being prosecuted and more generally to the people of Sierra Leone where the crimes being prosecuted were committed against Sierra Leoneans and in Liberia where Charles Taylor served as president at the time the crimes took place.

However, in the days leading up to the opening of the trial, observers in Liberia and Sierra Leone have revealed that many people are unaware that the trial is about to start and do not understand the reasons for moving the trial from Freetown, where the Special Court has its premises, to The Hague.

The Special Court's greatest challenge will be to ensure the trial is accessible and known to the victims. With the trial taking place in The Hague it will be crucial that the day to day developments of the trial be communicated promptly and accurately through a range of media such as radio, television, local newspapers and community outreach programs.

The people of Sierra Leone and Liberia must observe the justice process. In particular they should be able to see that the trial is conducted fairly in accordance with international standards, respecting the presumption of innocence.

Amnesty International is concerned that following the government's decision to grant amnesties to the vast majority of persons who committed crimes during the conflict that many of the victims continue to suffer without justice and reparation.

By prosecuting a small number of cases, Amnesty International believes that, the Special Court can play an important role to deliver some level of justice to the people of Sierra Leone and to highlight the need to review the injustice imposed by the government by adopting an amnesty.

Through its judicial decisions, outreach work, its legacy strategy and in its advocacy it can send a crucial message that impunity for crimes under international law should not be tolerated and that justice should be achieved for the victims of these crimes -- so that justice is both done and seen to be done.

Background

Former president Charles Taylor, after three years in exile in Nigeria, was surrendered to the Special Court for Sierra Leone on 29 March 2006. Charles Taylor has been accused of 11 counts of war crimes and crimes against humanity against the people of Sierra Leone. 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 labour by Sierra Leonean armed opposition groups.

Following the surrender of Charles Taylor, the Special Court requested that -- for security reasons -- the trial be moved to the The Hague, The Netherlands.

On 31 May 2004 the Special Court ruled that Charles Taylor did not enjoy immunity from prosecution by virtue of his status as head of state at the time the crimes for which he is indicted were committed. This decision upheld the principles of international justice and the rule of law and was welcomed by Amnesty International.

To date, the Special Court has indicted 13 individuals under its mandate to prosecute those bearing the greatest responsibility for war crimes, crimes against humanity, other serious violations of international humanitarian law and certain crimes under Sierra Leone national law committed since 30 November 1996. Out of the 13, nine are in custody and trials have started for all of them. Three have died and one remains at large. However, to date in Liberia, after two decades of conflict, no one has been brought to justice for crimes committed there. In Sierra Leone, an amnesty law has provides impunity to thousands of other perpetrators who will not be prosecuted by the Special Court.

Although African prosecutors have investigated and prosecuted former African heads of state, including Mengistu Hailé Mariam and other members of the Derg (the collective head of state of Ethiopia), former Emperor Jean-Bédél Bokassa of the short-lived Central African Empire (now Central African Republic), the former President Moussa Traore of Mali and, soon, former President Hisseine Habré of Chad in Senegal, Charles Taylor is the first former African head of state to be prosecuted by an international criminal court. The highest ranking official convicted by the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda was former Prime Minister Jean Kambanda.