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Charles Taylor conviction upheld: a major step against impunity in west Africa

The decision of the Special Court for Sierra Leone's Appeal Chamber to uphold the conviction of former Liberian President Charles Taylor sends a clear message to leaders across the world that no-one is immune from justice, Amnesty International said today.

"The Court's landmark ruling underlines that no-one is above the law. The conviction of those responsible for crimes committed during Sierra Leone's conflict has brought some measure of justice for the tens of thousands of victims," said Stephanie Barbour, head of Amnesty International's Centre for International Justice in The Hague.

"The conviction of Charles Taylor must pave the way for further prosecutions."

Taylor's sentence of 50 years was upheld by the Appeal Chamber as fair and reasonable in the totality of the circumstances.

The Special Court for Sierra Leone (SCSL) was established through an agreement between the United Nations and the state in 2002. Its remit was to prosecute crimes under international law committed in Sierra Leone since 30 November 1996.

It over-ruled amnesty provisions contained in the Lomé Peace Accord – the agreement which put an end to the armed conflict – which prevented prosecuting authorities in Sierra Leone from investigating the crimes.

It also brought the first convictions for conscripting child soldiers; designating attacks against peacekeepers as a war crime and forced marriage as a crime against humanity.

“The SCSL has made a significant contribution to the progressive development of international criminal law. However, under the amnesty provision, thousands of perpetrators of unlawful killings, rape and sexual violence, mutilations and the use of children in Sierra Leone’s armed conflict have continued to escape justice. Sierra Leone must do more to address impunity. The amnesty provision must be repealed and investigations should follow,” said Stephanie Barbour

Amnesty International is also calling on Sierra Leone to fully implement the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s recommendation for the reparation of the victims of the conflict.

“Further, extensive reparations for the victims of the conflict are long overdue. Reparations must become a reality for the tens of thousands, who suffered torture, rape, amputations, and other grave violations,” said Stephanie Barbour.

The verdict against Charles Taylor also stands as a reminder of the lack of justice for Taylor’s home country, Liberia.

Even though a former Liberia President has been held to account for crimes committed in Sierra Leone, the Liberian people have not seen justice as no one has been prosecuted for human rights violations and war crimes committed during the conflict in Liberia..

“Those suspected of criminal responsibility for the crimes committed during Liberia’s 14-year armed conflict must be brought to justice. All parties to the conflict committed war crimes and crimes against humanity, including murders, torture, rape and other crimes of sexual violence, abductions, and the recruitment and use of child soldiers,” said Stephanie Barbour

Liberia’s conflict lasted from 1989-1996 and 1999-2003. Charles Taylor was a former commander of one of the rebel factions and later was president of Liberia from 1997-2003.

The recommendation of the Liberian Truth and Reconciliation Commission (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 Special Court for Sierra Leone is the first international tribunal to complete its mandate. It will be succeeded by the Residual Special Court for Sierra Leone.

Background information:

On 26 April 2012 the Special Court's Trial Chamber II found Charles Taylor, guilty on 11 counts of participating in the planning of crimes, and of aiding and abetting crimes, committed by rebel forces in Sierra Leone. The Trial Chamber sentenced Mr. Taylor to 50 years imprisonment on 30 May 2012.

The Defence appealed arguing that the trial chamber had made systematic errors in the evaluation of evidence and in the application of law.

The Prosecution appealed on a number of grounds amongst which was that the trial chamber failed to find Taylor liable for ordering and instigating the commission of crimes and that he only received a single sentence of 50 years.

Note to editors: Stephanie Barbour, Head of Amnesty International's Centre for International Justice in The Hague attended the pronouncement of the appeal verdict at the Special Court sitting in The Hague, and it is available for interviews.