

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

AI Index: AFR 51/006/2005 (Public)
News Service No: 178
30 June 2005

Sierra Leone: African and international civil society groups in fourteen capitals call on African Union leadership to ensure Charles Taylor faces justice

African and international civil society groups are today launching a campaign urging the African Union (AU) Assembly to demonstrate its human rights commitment when it meets in Libya next week by ensuring that Charles Taylor faces justice for the crimes that he committed against African men, women and children.

"It is now time for the African Union to join ranks with other key nations and international bodies in calling for Charles Taylor to face trial for these serious crimes," said Kolawole Olaniyan, Africa Program Director at Amnesty International. "Taking a stand will not only bring justice to the countless victims of Charles Taylor and their families but also show that the AU is serious about combating the disastrous cycle of impunity in West Africa."

Charles Taylor, former President of Liberia, has been accused of 17 counts of war crimes and crimes against humanity against the people of Sierra Leone. These 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, which Taylor actively supported. In 2003, Charles Taylor sought refuge in Nigeria, where he currently resides.

A coalition of up to 300 African and international civil society groups, including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and Open Society Justice Initiative (OSJI), have sent a declaration to the AU demanding that Nigeria surrenders Charles Taylor to the Special Court for Sierra Leone. Press conferences are being held in fourteen countries throughout Africa today to ensure that this message is heard loud and clear.

The AU has publicly expressed commitment to protect and promote human rights in Africa and one of the fundamental objectives of the AU under its Constitutive Act of 2000 is "condemnation and rejection of impunity."

"The failure of the AU Assembly to publicly support the hand-over and trial of Charles Taylor before the Special Court would be inconsistent and incompatible with the organization's principles and objectives," said Kolawole Olaniyan. "The AU must discourage its members, including Nigeria, from shielding Taylor from prosecution before the Special Court."

"As long as Nigeria continues to shield Charles Taylor from trial, his victims will not receive justice and West Africa will continue to be insecure and unstable. As long as the AU Assembly fails to act, African

leaders must accept responsibility for this instability," said Chidi Odinkalu, Africa Director of the Open Society Justice Initiative.

"Ensuring that Taylor faces justice is key to maintaining peace and stability in the sub-region," said Richard Dicker, Director of the International Justice Program at Human Rights Watch. "President Obasanjo, as the chair of the African Union, must provide the necessary leadership to achieve this."

"Supporting the international and regional efforts to bring Charles Taylor to justice will show that the AU cares about the well being of Africans. It will also demonstrate that the AU is totally different from its predecessor, the Organization of African Unity (OAU), whose interest was to protect African presidents rather than the human rights of individuals," added Kolawole Olaniyan.

To arrange an interview, please contact:

Richard Dicker, Human Rights Watch -- tel: +1 212 216 1248 or mobile: +1 917 747 6731
Chidi Odinkalu, Open Society Justice Initiative -- tel: + 234 803 419 0668
Eliane Drakopoulos, Amnesty International -- tel: +44 (0)207 413 5564

Public Document

For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566
Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW. web: <http://www.amnesty.org>

For latest human rights news view <http://news.amnesty.org>