

Special Court for Sierra Leone
Press and Public Affairs Office

PRESS RELEASE

Freetown, Sierra Leone, 27 May 2003

Detainees Claim to be on Hunger Strike

Three people indicted by the Special Court for crimes against humanity claim to be on a hunger strike to protest their detentions. However, according to prison authorities two of the indictees, Augustine Gbao and Alex Tamba Brima, are eating normally while the third, Samuel Hinga Norman, is accepting packets of biscuits and taking in sustenance in the form of fruit juice.

"The health of the detainees is good," says Court doctor Donald Harding. "Norman's body weight has dropped in recent days but he weighs more now than he did after he was first arrested," said the doctor.

Norman was taken into the custody of the Court on March 10 2003 in the first wave of indictments. So far six of the eight indictees are in custody. One of them Foday Sankoh, who had been weakened by a stroke last August before he was transferred to the Court, is being held at a medical facility in Freetown. The other five detainees are at a temporarily detention facility in Bonthe, an island off the coast of Sierra Leone. They are to move to Freetown as soon as the Court's new detention centre has been completed.

Lawyers for Norman say that their client is being held at Bonthe in conditions that violate his human rights. The detention centre has been inspected by the International Committee for the Red Cross, the Human Rights section of the Sierra Leone UN peacekeeping force UNAMSIL and recently by the Human Rights Committee of the Sierra Leone Parliamentarians.

The Registrar Robin Vincent was critical of statements by Norman's lawyers. "Saying things about their client's detention that are exaggerated and untrue is not helpful," he said. One such statement claimed that Norman is being held in "mosquito infested caves which formerly held West African slaves" The detention centre in Bonthe is not a cave and was never used to hold slaves. The centre is also not mosquito infested and no detainee has fallen sick from malaria.

Such claims are ridiculous," said Vincent. "We cannot continue to waste our time responding to them in the media." Lawyers for detainees may file formal complaints to the Court. So far they have failed to do so.

Also in the statement, Norman's lawyers said that the detainees are in the joint custody of the Special Court and the government of Sierra Leone. Sole responsibility for those in the custody of the Court lies with the Court, which is an international organization independent of any Government.

#END

Produced by the
Press and Public Affairs Office
Special Court for Sierra Leone
Mobile: 232 76 655 237 Email: SCSL-pressoffice@un.org
Visit our website at www.sc-sl.org