

**SPECIAL COURT FOR SIERRA LEONE
OUTREACH AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS OFFICE**



Cape Lighthouse

PRESS CLIPPINGS

Enclosed are clippings of local and international press on the Special Court and related issues obtained by the Outreach and Public Affairs Office

as at:

Thursday, 17 January 2013

Press clips are produced Monday through Friday.
Any omission, comment or suggestion, please contact
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Awoko

Thursday, 17 January 2013

Charles Taylor 'wants presidential pension'

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Liberian Senate Secretary Nanborloh Singbeh said the letter would be discussed by MPs next week.

The letter purportedly from Taylor says the withholding of his presidential pension is a "mammoth injustice".

Last May, a UN-backed court sentenced him to 50 years in prison on 11 counts of war crimes.

He became the first former head of state to be convicted on

such charges by an international court since the Nuremberg trials of Nazis after World War II.

Taylor, who is in jail at The Hague, is appealing against the judgement by the UN-backed Special Court for Sierra Leone.

It ruled that as Liberia's president, he aided and abetted Sierra Leone's rebels during the 1991-2002 civil war.

Family's needs

The BBC's Jonathan Paye-Layleh reports from the capital, Monrovia, that the signature on the letter very much looks like that of Taylor.

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Charles Taylor 'wants presidential pension'

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However, the letter contains some simple spelling errors, such as "principal" for principle, "cease" for seize and "giving" for given, he says.

This has raised questions about whether Taylor personally wrote the letter, our correspondent adds.

However, Taylor's brother-in-law Arthur Saye told our reporter that the ex-president did write the letter.

The letter also calls for the government to give accommodation and diplomatic passports to Taylor's wife Victoria and his two daughters.

"The fact is that I have not received my entitlement as set out under the law as a former president of Liberia since I resigned the office on August 11, 2003," the letter to the senate reads.

"May I, with respect, request in this formal manner the intervention of this august body in bringing an end to this mammoth injustice and cause my law annuities to be made available to me."

Taylor is also quoted in the letter as saying that he is entitled to consular access and diplomatic services at The Hague, but he has been "denied that right".

Our correspondent says Liberian law states that a former president who has "honourably retired to private life and who is not in any way gainfully employed by government" would receive a pension equal to half the salary of the incumbent president.

Taylor was forced into exile in Nigeria in 2003 after the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (Lurd) rebel movement laid siege to Monrovia.

His private villa on the outskirts of the city is in a poor state and his once prestigious mansion in his hometown of Arthington, some 40km (25 miles) west of Monrovia, is in ruins and covered by overgrown vegetation, our correspondent says.

The letter also told legislators of the "sacred and overriding" principle that

"justice must not only be done, but should manifestly and undoubtedly be seen to be done", our reporter adds.

The letter was read out during a plenary session of the upper house on Tuesday, and would be discussed by MPs next week, Mr Singbeh said.

Senator Lahai Lansanah, who is a member of the governing United Party (UP), said: "Taylor's request about retirement benefits should be given due consideration because he served this country as president."

Taylor was arrested in 2006, while trying to flee Nigeria.

He apparently feared that the Nigerian government would bow to pressure from the US to hand him over to the UN-backed court to stand trial.

The court was set up in 2002 to try those who bore the greatest responsibility for the war in Sierra Leone in which some 50,000 people were killed.

During the appeals process, Taylor will remain in The Hague.

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Charles Taylor has always maintained his innocence

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o 1989: Launches rebellion in Liberia

o 1991: RUF rebellion starts in Sierra Leone

o 1997: Elected president after a 1995 peace deal

o 1999: Liberia's Lurd rebels start an insurrection to oust Taylor

o June 2003: Arrest warrant issued; two months later he steps down and goes into exile to Nigeria

o March 2006: Arrested after a failed escape bid and sent to Sierra Leone

o June 2007: His trial opens - hosted in The Hague for security reasons

o April 2012: Convicted of aiding and abetting the commission of war crimes

o May 2012: Sentenced to 50 years in jail

o June 2012: His lawyers say he will appeal against his conviction

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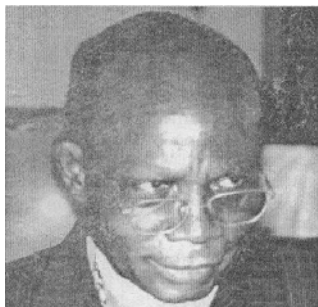
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TRC Castigates Gov't

By Arun Kamara

The former Chairman of the Truth and Reconciliation Council (TRC) Retired Bishop Joseph C. Humper has expressed disappointment over government's failure to implement recommendations of the Commission.

He said failure to implement the recommendations will make room for another war. The TRC Report, according to Bishop Humper, is one of the mechanisms for transitional justice that serves as a vehicle to prevent future conflict. The man of God said it took us

'sleepless' three and half years to compile the report. "Therefore any government coming to power should take it as number one priority and not to put it on shelf," he urged.

The ex-chairman has therefore called
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TRC Castigates Gov't

on the government raise funds to take the report to all parts of the country including chiefdoms, districts and provincial headquarter towns. He expressed dismay that that some government officials have not even seen the document.

Explaining his role at the TRC, he said he was charged with the responsibility of analyzing the report and the things that caused the war critically and objectively. He explained the types of rebels during the war days ranging from

those that were in towns giving instructions to those in the bush. He wished never again to be in position to head the TRC because of the things he used to see or hear which to him were traumatizing. He reiterated that the TRC report is a vehicle to bring peace if only its contents can be explained to the general populace on the things that caused the war and ways of preventing it reoccurrence. He however blamed the ruling government of failing to implement the report.

The New Dawn (Liberia)

Thursday, 17 January 2013

Taylor Considers Legal Option

Ex-President Charles Taylor has threatened to take the Government of Liberia to court if the Liberian Senate failed to amicably address his request for amenities, including financial benefits as a former Head of State.



An aide to the convicted ex-president told this paper Wednesday evening that two of his (Taylor) local lawyers are considering the legal option should the political negotiation fail. Charles Taylor's local legal team is being headed by Cllr. Lavala Supuwood and Cllr. Syrenius Cephas.

The Secretary-General of Taylor's National

Patriotic Party (NPP) Senator John Francis Whitefield told journalists here Wednesday that the legal defense consul of the former Liberian leader are currently in the country, considering legal action against the Government should the Upper House unsuccessfully address the concern.

Mr. Taylor had written a three-page communication to the Liberian Senate, dated 3 September 2012, requesting for benefits, including cash, diplomatic protection, and diplomatic passports for his family members as well as support staff.

The letter was read in Plenary on Tuesday, January 15, 2013, sparking serious uproar among members of the Senate, who have set next Tuesday to debate the matter.

However, speaking to Legislative reporters at the Capitol, the Grand Bassa County Senator indicated that the government's attitude to have denied Taylor and other past presidents their just benefits is unacceptable and harmful to those who are victims of the circumstances.

According to the communication sent to the Senate, the 51st Liberian Legislature enacted a law in 2003, which was subsequently signed by former President Taylor that "a former President of the Republic, who has honorably retired to private life, and who is not in any way gainfully employed by government, shall receive from government a pension equal to 50 percent of the salary of the incumbent President annually.

In addition, a former President shall be provided a personal staff and facilities for the remainder of his /her life. The amount allowed for this shall not be less than US\$25, 000," the communication read.

But Taylor notes: "Sadly, I am without notice as to why finance ministers of the Republic have failed and refused to comply with the law of the land as regards my annuities."

Senator Whitefield, who demanded this paper's reporter to refer to Taylor as President instead of former President Taylor during the interview, added that if the government likes it or not, his former boss has served in the highest post of the country and due courtesy should be accorded him.

Whitefield said he will stand tall both on the floor of plenary and within the corridors of the Capitol to defend rights and will provide justification that the government should do the right thing by giving the just benefits to all past leaders, not only Mr. Taylor.

Also speaking to the New Dawn on the issue, Maryland County Senator Dan Morais, current Chairperson on Foreign Relations said former President Taylor has some legitimate claims, and the Senate will duly made its position clear on the matter.

Senator Morais pointed out that there are constitutional provisions that support the argument of the former President, and as leaders they will follow the matter closely to make sure due diligence is observed.

‘Oversight’ or Injustice? Taylor Writes From Prison; Seeks Constitutional Benefits



“Sadly I am without notice as to why Finance Ministers of the Republic have failed and /or refused to comply with the law as it regards my immunities. The fact is that I have not received my humanities as set up under the laws as a former President of Liberia since I resigned the office on 11, August in 2003. We reasonable apprehend bias because some individuals that are covered under these acts are receiving immunities,” Taylor said in his letter.

Monrovia – Former Liberian President Charles Taylor, who was sentenced to a 50-year jail term last year by the Special Court for Sierra Leone sitting in The Hague for war crimes and crimes against humanity has for the first time written the Liberian senate to look into reasons why the Government of Liberia has not paid his benefits.

In his letter, President Taylor, Liberia’s 21st President (1997-2003) asked the legislative body to ensure that benefits and immunities due him as former President of the republic of Liberia as required by the Liberian constitution are paid.

President Taylor cited section 1.4 of the new judiciary law which calls for pension of fifty percent of the salary of an incumbent president to be given to a president who has honorably retired to private life and is not in any way gainfully employed. The law also calls for the provision of a personal staff and facilities office in the amount not less than US \$25,000.00 per year.

Said President Taylor: “Sadly I am without notice as to why Finance Ministers of the Republic have failed and /or refused to comply with the law as it regards my immunities.”

“The fact is that I have not received my humanities as set up under the laws as a former President of Liberia since I resigned the office on 11, August in 2003. We reasonable apprehend bias because some individuals that are covered under these acts are receiving immunities.”

President Taylor prayed the august body to ensure that he gets what is duly required by law.

“Honorable ladies and gentlemen, I post it that there is an overriding principle that ‘Justice must not only be done but must be seen to be done’ the action taken so far by government were an oversight I suggest reflect on the integrity and standing as it regards the appreciation of the rule of law and the far conduct of government,” he said.

The former Liberian leader who awaits appeal into his case argued that selecting application of any law of the republic is in itself a violation to the law and requested the intervention of the Senate to ensure that immunities lawfully due him be given.

Wants diplomatic passports

Former President Taylor also asked that as a citizen and Former President of the Republic of Liberia, he is entitled to counsel and diplomatic privileges and that members of his immediate family which include his wife and children be given diplomatic passports.

Former President Taylor resigned his post as President of the republic of Liberia in August 2003 as a result of international pressure calling for him to step down to peace could return to the country which was besieged by belligerent forces.

Resigned under pressure

Facing rebel attacks on the capital and American President George W. Bush's call for his departure, Taylor resigned on the precondition of international peacekeepers arriving in the country. Within hours, in August of 2003, the U.S. announced it would dispatch military experts to West Africa to gauge how to stabilize the region.

"The important thing here is for international peacekeepers to come to Liberia as quickly as possible to take charge of the situation if I am going to step down," Taylor told reporters outside the Executive mansion.

The former Liberian leader then embattled with rebel forces from two factions overrunning the city stepped down in a ceremony in Monrovia in which he acceded power to then Vice President Moses Blah and went into exile in the Nigerian state of Calaba. While in Nigeria the International Criminal Court issued an arrest warrant against Taylor for crimes he allegedly committed against the people of Sierra Leone.

President Taylor was arrested and brought back briefly to Liberia and subsequently turned over to United Nations Peacekeepers at the Roberts International Airport to face charges of initially 19 counts in Freetown, Sierra Leone. He was then transferred to The Hague following public outcry for his safety and stability of the region.

His investigation lasted over four years and was last year found guilty of 9 of the 11 counts and was sentenced to 50 years in prison.

Heated debate among lawmakers

The letter from the former President created a heated debate during the Senate's first session in their second sitting. The session which was presided over by the President of the Senate, Vice President Joseph Boakai, received the letter with several motions from senators including; Maryland Senator John Ballout, Lofa Senator Sumo Kupee, Grand Gedeh Senator Isaac Nyenabo and Montserrado Senator Joyce Musu Sumo for discussion and committee hearing but those motions were defeated until a fifth motion was filed by Senator Mobutu Nyenpan (Sinoe County) who called for the Former President's letter to be taken to committee room and be brought back in one week for discussion.

Senator John Whitfield (NPP-Grand Bassa) a former ally of the former President came in his defense promising that he will seek legal action against the government of President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf if it fails to give to Mr. Taylor his legal and constitutional immunities. The Grand Bassa lawmaker stressed

that claims made by the former President has legal basis and should be given due consideration by the sitting government.

Ironically, many say President Taylor, while serving as President did not implement the part of the constitution calling for immunities to be given former leaders so that the families of Former Presidents Samuel K Doe, and William R. Tolbert could benefit.

When contacted to react to the former President's claims so as to get an understanding of these claims made by the former president, Assistant Minister for Foreign Affairs Horatio Bobby Willie who served as spokes person for the finance ministry under Mr. Augustine Ngafuan who served as Finance minister during much of Sirleaf's first term said he is not aware of anything relating to the claims.

"I don't know, government is continuity, you can ask Finance," said Willie in a mobile phone conversation.

All efforts to get the Ministry of finance to respond proved futile as the Minister's phone rang without answer. All efforts to contact one of Mr. Taylor's strong supporters now senator of Bomi County Sando Johnson also did not materialize.

Heritage

Thursday, 17 January 2013

Lawmakers Debate Taylor's Demand for Benefits

The Plenary of the Liberian Senate is expected to hold a debate today, Thursday, January 17, 2013 on a formal communication addressed to it by former Liberian President Charles Ghankay Taylor. The plenary is the highest decision making body of the Liberian Senate. On Tuesday, 15 January 2013, the Senate, in its first session of its second sitting, placed on its agenda, the former Liberian leader's communication.

Mr. Taylor, in his communication, which was read on the floor of the Plenary of the Senate, is demanding from the current Government of Liberia (GoL) through the Legislature what he calls all benefits as 21st President of Liberia. Mr. Taylor wants the GoL to annually release unto him as a former head of state of Liberia, US\$25,000, since according to him, he honorably turned over office on 11 August 2003.

The former Liberian leader, who used legal reliance as the basis of his demand, quoted in his communication, Session 1.4 of the New Executive Law, Session 2.4 of the New Legislative Law and Session 13.4 of the New Judiciary Law respectively. He instructed his wife, Mrs. Victoria Taylor to make herself available to the Liberian government relative to further discussions regarding his presidential benefits.

"As a former President of Liberia, I resigned honorably, and I must get my just benefit as a former of Liberia," Mr. Taylor among other things added in his communication, a copy of which, is in possession of this as mandated by the laws of our country. Following the reading of the communication, the plenary of the Liberian Senate voted unanimously to debate Mr. Taylor's communication today.

Meanwhile, Mr. Taylor's demand for benefits has already generated huge public debate in Monrovia and across the country with some people supporting his demand, while other are opposing. Mr. Taylor stepped down as president of Liberia in a ceremony in Monrovia on Monday 11 August 2003, stating that "God willing, I will be back."

The former Liberian leader's resignation was in response to pressure from the United States, and advancing rebels troops then targeting the ousting of the former president. He sought refuge in Nigeria, from where he was later arrested and flown to The Hague to face the Special Court for Sierra Leone (SCSL) on 11-count charges of war crimes and crimes against humanity.

On 26 April 2012, the Special Court for Sierra Leone sitting In The Hague convicted the Liberian president Taylor of aiding and abetting rebels who committed war crimes during Sierra Leone's bloody civil war in the 1990s, and subsequently sentenced him for 50 years, a ruling Taylor's lawyers have since filed an appeal against.

The New Dawn

Wednesday, 16 January 2013

Survey on Sierra Leone and Liberia Out

An international survey conducted both in Sierra Leone and Liberia on the prosecution of people who bear greatest responsibility for war in the two countries has received overwhelming approval.

The findings, dubbed: “Making Justice Count, Assessing the Impact and Legacy of the Special Court for Sierra Leone in Sierra Leone and Liberia,” were established by the Special Court for Sierra Leone (SCSL) in league with Liberian NGOs Network (LINNK).

The survey was conducted immediately after the sentencing former President Charles Taylor, with the aim of getting an overall picture of the impact and legacy of the Court in Sierra Leone and Liberia.

But once the appeals filed in the Taylor case are resolved in September or October 2013, the Special Court will become the first of the ad hoc international criminal tribunals to close its doors. The survey aims to establish the impact of the court on Sierra Leone and Liberia through its judicial proceedings, its legacy work and its outreach programmes.

The findings, consisting of questionnaires incorporating open ended and closed questions, was administered to 2, 841 people across various districts and counties in Sierra Leone and Liberia in June and July 2012.

The respondents were chosen from various target groups, representing diverse walks of life, sexes and age groups, with particular emphasis on ensuring the inclusion of voices that are historically overlooked, including women, young people and persons with disabilities.

Statistics show that the number of surveys, in relation to the overall population of both countries is close to 8.5 million, which represents a margin of error of 1.84 and a confidence level of 95 percent.

With a margin of error of plus or minus 2 percent and a confidence level of 95 percent, if 60 percent of respondents replied ‘yes’, there is a 95 percent probability that between 58 percent and 62 percent of the whole would reply ‘yes’ to that question.

It stated that the question, ‘what does justice mean to you and the fact that 72.49 percent of people replied “Establishment of the truth” means that there is a 95 percent probability that between 70.65 percent and 74.33 percent of the overall population of Sierra Leone and Liberia would say justice means the establishment of truth.

As such, the authors are confident that the results of the survey are representative of the general feelings and perspective of the people of Sierra Leone and Liberia.

According to the survey results, the overall feeling towards the Special Court for Sierra Leone and the work it has carried out over the past 10 years is very positive.

The reports said among many things that it is safe to conclude that the SCSL has, on the whole, been successful in achieving what it set out to achieve, which according to the majority of the people in Sierra Leone and Liberia, is to carry out prosecution and to bring justice, peace and establish the rule of law.

The findings show that the people of both countries (Sierra Leone and Liberia) overwhelmingly felt that the SCSL had prosecuted those who bore the greatest responsibility for crimes, even if many people felt a

need for additional prosecution further down the chain of command, and had helped in contributing to restoration of the rule of law.

The research also shows that majority of the peoples in Sierra Leone and Liberia believes that the international tribunal has made positive contribution towards peace and the rule of law in their respective countries.

It said in both countries, more than 90 percent of overall respondents have heard of the Court, while around 60 percent of the people indicated they were interested in its work and nearly 50 percent having participated in outreach activities at some point over the 10 years of its existence, including listening to radio programs.

The Court said this is impressive results; especially considering that 10 years ago, the Court was still an idea coming to fruition in an international justice landscape that was much rudimentary than the landscape of today.

About challenges, the reports said there were number of challenges that the Special Court had to overcome to reach the achievements, with greater and lesser degrees of success, from which lessons for other courts and tribunals can be drawn.

It said the knowledge about the trial of Mr. Taylor was widespread across both countries and reactions to the judgment and sentencing were understandably mixed, particularly in Liberia.

The survey said many people in Liberia felt it was unfair for Taylor to be tried before the Special Court of Sierra Leone, or that it was not right that he was tried only for crimes in Sierra Leone, as opposed to crimes allegedly committed in Liberia.

The document noted that Liberia tends to see the SCSL as a Sierra Leone court, and the need for a Special Court for Liberia' was repeatedly highlighted; writes T.K.S.

Hirondelle News Agency

Wednesday, 16 January 2013

Mali: ICC Prosecutor Opens Mali War Crimes Investigation

International Criminal Court Prosecutor Fatou Bensouda today formally opened an investigation into alleged crimes committed in Mali since January 2012. According to an ICC statement, a preliminary investigation opened in July 2012 has determined there is reasonable basis to believe that numerous serious crimes have been committed, including murder, cruel treatment and torture, directing attacks against protected objects, summary executions and rape.

"At each stage during the conflict, different armed groups have caused havoc and human suffering through a range of alleged acts of extreme violence," said Bensouda. "I have determined that some of these deeds of brutality and destruction may constitute war crimes as defined by the Rome Statute."

Based on the information gathered to date, the investigation will focus on crimes committed in the three northern regions of Mali.

Following the referral of the Situation in Mali by the Malian State, the office of the Prosecutor may investigate and prosecute any crime within the ICC jurisdiction committed on the territory of Mali since January 2012, the statement said.

"Justice can play its part in supporting the joint efforts of the ECOWAS, the AU and the entire international community to stop the violence and restore peace to the region," said Bensouda. "Key regional and international organizations have acknowledged the need for justice as part of the resolution of the crisis in Mali."

FrontPage Africa

Tuesday, 15 January 2013

Reconciliation Commission: Peace Amb. Weah May Need to Rethink Secretariat Setup

THE RECENT announcement of the secretariat of the Reconciliation commission headed by football legend George Weah appears to be missing key segments of the society. Key among the omission is the fact that no member of the Muslim community; the civil society or youths have been included.

THE 11-MEMBER SECRETARIAT include Counselors Jallah Barbu, C. Alexander Zoe, Former Ministers of State and Information Joseph Saye Gaunnu and Emmanuel Bowier; Former Ministers of Education and Justice Evelyn Kandakai and Lafayette Koboi Johnson; Attorneys Yvette A Freeman and Vivian Neal; Former Chief of Protocol Emmett Kennedy, Isatu Gbegbe Norbiou and Wenwom Jones.

RECONCILIATION REMAINS first and foremost the most important challenge of Liberia's post-war recovery.

THE JURY IS still out on the success of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission set up in the aftermath of the civil war to among other things to promote national peace, security, unity and reconciliation by Investigating gross human rights violations and violations of international humanitarian law as well as abuses that occurred, including massacres, sexual violations, murder, extra-judicial killings and economic crimes, such as the exploitation of natural or public resources to perpetuate armed conflicts, during the period January 1979 to October 14, 2003.

THE COMMISSION was also tasked with determining whether these were isolated incidents or part of a systematic pattern; establishing the antecedents, circumstances factors and context of such violations and abuses; and determining those responsible for the commission of the violations and abuses and their motives as well as their impact on victims.

THE FINAL REPORT of the TRC contained major findings on: the root causes of the conflict, the impact of the conflict on women, children and the generality of the Liberian society; responsibility for the massive commission of Gross Human Rights Violations (GHRV), and violations of International Humanitarian Law (IHL), International Human Rights Law (IHRL) as well as Egregious Domestic

TODAY, the recommendations of that commission have not been implemented amid claims that the findings were bias and inconclusive.

MR. WEAH'S predecessor Nobel Laureate Leymah Gbowee stepped down last year criticizing her nobel-winning partner and long-time ally Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf for not doing enough to combat government corruption. In a statement on her resignation, Gbowee cited "differences in opinion on the pathway for national healing and reconciliation."

WHILE WE applaud Mr. Weah's willingness to set aside his differences and agree to work in the interest of peace, bolstered by his indication that the Secretariat's first approach would be to set-up peace and reconciliation centers at community, district and county levels throughout the country, we feel strongly that the secretariat's makeup is a bit too political and may have fallen short of including key segments of the society, notably, members of the clergy and particularly the Muslim community, the youths and civil society.

REP. SEKOU KANNEH(Unity Party, District #2, Montserrado County) has reportedly described the process as a failure since in fact it doesn't include a Muslim.

GEORGE WISNER, a former political adviser to President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf as asked Mr. Weah to decide whether or not he intends to head the commission full time or is still harboring political ambitions.

WHILE NO ONE can hold Mr. Weah responsible or fault him from his political interests, the issue of reconciliation requires his full attention and inclusion of all sectors of society.

IT WOULD be regrettable if yet another reconciliation report or recommendation is followed by claims and counter claims of unfairness, inconclusiveness or bias.

MR. WEAH'S commission must now ensure that all is done to erase any shades of doubts regarding its work so that it could be in a position to contribute positively to post-war Liberia's reconciliation drive and not find itself engulfed in similar controversy which dogged the TRC.

LIBERIA NEEDS its reconciliation drive to work. Mr. Weah can kick of the process by eliminating every

Human Rights Watch

Tuesday, 15 January 2013

Mali: Islamists Should Free Child Soldiers

‘Sending our Innocents to be Slaughtered,’ Witness Says

Islamist armed groups occupying northern Mali should immediately release all child soldiers within their ranks and end the military conscription and use of those under 18, Human Rights Watch said today. With France carrying out aerial bombardment since January 11, 2013, to block the Islamists from advancing farther south, Human Rights Watch also urged rebel groups to remove children immediately from training bases in or near Islamist military installations.

Witnesses interviewed by Human Rights Watch by phone since January 8 – when hostilities between the Islamist groups and Malian army intensified – described seeing many children, some as young as 12, taking active part in the fighting. Witnesses also said that children were staffing checkpoints in areas that have come under aerial bombardment by the French or are near active combat zones. The Islamic groups – Ansar Dine, the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), and Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) – have recruited, trained, and used several hundred children in their forces since occupying Northern Mali in April 2012.

“These Islamist groups have no business recruiting children into their ranks, much less putting them on the front line,” said Corinne Dufka, senior West Africa researcher at Human Rights Watch. “These groups seem to be willfully putting scores of children directly in harm’s way. Before the military campaign goes any further, the Islamists should release these children back to their families.”

Three witnesses from Konna described seeing numerous children among the ranks of the Islamists who took over and briefly held the town on January 10. Witnesses in Gao said that they saw children among the reinforcements which left Gao for Konna; mothers looking for their sons who had left Gao to fight; and children wounded during the fight for Konna arriving in Gao.

“The Islamists arrived in about 10 land cruisers,” one witness from Konna said. “After the fighting died down, we went to the entrance of town to see them. I was shocked to see about a dozen children among them, several were only 12 or 13 years old, all armed with big guns, and working alongside the big men.”

Other witnesses observed children inside pickup trucks as they left Gao to reinforce the Islamists as they fought to hold onto Konna. One older man told Human Rights Watch:

On Friday [January 11] at around 4 p.m., I saw six Toyota land cruisers full of fighters leaving for the battle in front of the HQ of the Islamic Police. There were children in two of these – around five in one truck and two in the other. These are our children – what do they know of war? These so-called Islamists are sending our innocents to be slaughtered in the name of Jihad...I ask you, what kind of Islam is this? Residents travelling in the Gao region in January described seeing children playing a major role in staffing checkpoints. A woman who travelled from Bamako to a small village near Gao on January 8 and 9 described seeing children working the checkpoints in the towns of Boré, Douentza, and Gao.

“There were so many children among MUJAO,” she said. “In Boré it was the children who came into our bus to ask for our papers and check our luggage. There was only one boy over 18 at this checkpoint. And in Douentza, there must have been 10 of them under the age of 18, the youngest was only about 11.”

A trader said he saw about 20 armed child combatants under 16 staffing the checkpoints leading in and out of the towns of Bourem and Ansongo, also in Gao region, on January 11.

The Islamists' use of children apparently began shortly after they seized control of the north in April and has continued steadily since then. Witnesses have observed the children staffing checkpoints, conducting foot patrols, riding around in patrol vehicles, guarding prisoners, and preparing food in numerous locations controlled by the groups. Children from both Mali and Niger have been recruited. The witnesses have described how within Mali, the Islamists have recruited substantial numbers of boys from small villages and hamlets, particularly those where residents have long practiced Wahhabism, a very conservative form of Islam.

In December, one witness described visiting six small training camps in the Gao region in which a total of several dozen children were being trained on how to use firearms and were undergoing physical fitness training. In several of these places, children were also observed studying the Koran. Some of these training centers were within or adjacent to Islamic military bases.

Three places within the town of Gao where witnesses have observed children being trained in recent months – in and around Camp Firhoun, the “jardin of Njawa”, and the Customs Building (Direction nationale des douanes) – were allegedly targeted for aerial bombardment by the French armed forces on January 12. It is not clear whether children were at the site during the bombing.

The Islamist armed groups, the French and Malian armed forces, and troops from ECOWAS countries should take all the necessary precautions to protect the lives of children, Human Rights Watch said.

Mali is a party to the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflicts, which bans the recruitment and use in hostilities of children under the age of 18 by non-state armed groups. Recruitment of children under age 15 into armed forces for their active use in armed conflict constitutes a war crime under the Rome Statute, which established the International Criminal Court. The prosecutor of the court, Fatou Bensouda, is currently considering whether to open an investigation into crimes committed in Mali after the Malian government referred the situation since January 2012 to the court in July.

“All armed groups should immediately release the child soldiers they recruited and help them to rejoin their families, Dufka said. “Islamist group leaders should know that recruitment and use of child soldiers is a war crime.”