

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

PRESS RELEASE

AI Index: IOR 30/021/2004 (Public)
News Service No: 201
12 August 2004

African Union: Member states should urge Nigeria to surrender Charles Taylor to the Special Court on Sierra Leone

As Liberians observe the first anniversary of Charles Taylor's flight into exile, Amnesty International expresses its dismay at a recent decision of the African Union's (AU) Executive Council congratulating Nigeria for granting him asylum.

"The AU's decision is a betrayal of the tens of thousands of African victims of the worst possible crimes imaginable, committed during the conflict in Sierra Leone," the organization said in an open letter to permanent representatives of members states of the AU.

Charles Taylor has been indicted by the Special Court for Sierra Leone for "bearing the greatest responsibility" for crimes against humanity, war crimes and other serious violations of international law falling within the Special Court's jurisdiction and committed against African men, women and children. The crimes with which he is charged include killings, mutilations, rape and other forms of sexual violence, sexual slavery, conscription of children, abduction and forced labour perpetrated by Sierra Leone armed opposition forces with his active support as President of Liberia.

"The action by the Nigerian government in allowing Charles Taylor to enter Nigerian territory without threat of arrest and prosecution goes against the wish of the international community that impunity for crimes against humanity, war crimes and other grave crimes must come to an end," Amnesty International said. "It denies justice to tens of thousands of African victims of the worst possible crimes in the world and undermines the contribution of the Special Court towards achieving justice, reconciliation and sustained peace in Sierra Leone and the West Africa region."

"The decision not only shows contempt for African victims, it goes against the very values that led Africa to take the initiative to establish the Special Court and the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, as well as to play a decisive role in the establishment of the International Criminal Court."

By condoning and endorsing the action of the Government of Nigeria, the AU's Executive Council has acted contrary to the Constitutive Act of the AU which commits all member states to cooperate in promoting and ensuring respect for human rights, democratic culture, good governance and the rule of law.

Furthermore, the AU's decision violates international law which requires that those responsible for crimes against humanity, war crimes and other breaches of international law be brought to justice.

In its decision on 31 May 2004, the Special Court for Sierra Leone upheld the principles of international justice and the rule of law by ruling that Charles Taylor has no immunity from prosecution for crimes against humanity and war crimes. This decision reinforces the need to ensure that he faces the serious charges against him.

"All member states of the AU should repudiate publicly the AU's decision on Liberia, urge the Government of Nigeria to cooperate fully with the Special Court by arresting Charles Taylor and surrendering him to the Court," Amnesty International said.

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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>

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