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Liberia: Time for Justice

Liberia's former president Charles Taylor, senior military officials and rebel forces were responsible for atrocious human rights violations, including rape and murder, during Liberia's 14-year civil war.

They still have not been held accountable for their crimes. The war, which ended in 2003, destroyed the country's infrastructure, killed about 250,000 people, displaced over a million people, and left an estimated half of Liberian women suffering from the consequences of sexual violence. A culture of impunity for rape lingered after the war. Newly elected President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf has the opportunity to change this culture of impunity by seeking justice for the many cases of sexual abuse, supporting the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and pressuring Nigeria to surrender former Liberian President Charles Taylor to the Special Court for Sierra Leone.

The civil war in Liberia was characterized by gender-based violence, forced abduction of women and girls to act as sex slaves for the fighting forces, and rapes. Large numbers of women who fought with the rebel groups experienced sexual abuse. In a 2004 survey, the United Nations Development Program determined that 60% to 70% of Liberian women had been subjected to some form of sexual violence during the war. During an assessment mission in November of 2003, Refugees International documented the impact and extent of this violence. A majority of the rapes were committed by armed combatants from both the rebel groups and the government. Further gender-based violence took place in the camps for internally displaced persons. Even after the end of the war in 2003, the number of rapes has continued to increase.

President Johnson-Sirleaf has stated that her primary concern is the daunting task of bringing peace and development to Liberia. Yet the women of Liberia also want

justice for the crimes they experienced. In December, Liberian legislators passed a tougher rape law, which came into effect the day after President Johnson-Sirleaf's inauguration. The legislation makes rape illegal for the first time in Liberia, where previously only gang rape was considered an offense. Punishment for rape under the new law is seven years to life imprisonment and accused rapists will not be granted bail.

President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf has shown strong political will to prosecute rapists and to break the cultural taboo of not speaking publicly about it. During her inauguration, she spoke about her personal understanding from experiencing attempted rape. Importantly, she has affirmed, "Nobody will abuse our girls and women and get away with it; any law on rape especially the rape bill just passed into law will be totally implemented under our government."

In February 2006, this new administration established a nine-member Truth and Reconciliation Commission whose mandate is to investigate abuses, including "sexual violations," committed during the period of January 1979 to October 2003. The commission must work with local women's organizations to bring forward cases of violence against women, but must also provide witnesses respect, protection and psychological support.

In 2003 the Special Court for Sierra Leone indicted Charles Taylor for war crimes, crimes against humanity and other crimes under international law. The crimes committed in Sierra Leone include killings, mutilations, rape and other forms of sexual violence, the recruitment and use of child

soldiers, abduction and forced labor organized by Revolutionary United Front rebels, which Taylor actively supported. Since 2003, Taylor has been granted asylum by Nigeria. The Special Court for Sierra Leone is prepared to try Taylor, the first African head of state to have crimes against humanity charges against him, but only for a limited time because of dwindling funding. Trying Taylor before the Special Court for Sierra Leone or Liberia's Truth and Reconciliation Commission would demonstrate that African leaders are accountable for their human rights abuses and might prevent Taylor from instigating further turmoil in the region.

President Johnson-Sirleaf has publicly recognized the importance of bringing Charles Taylor and other perpetrators to justice for the atrocities they committed. She has talked with President Olusegun Obasanjo of Nigeria about prosecution of Taylor, yet she has remarked that she sees this as "a secondary issue." However, building the rule of law and holding human rights abusers accountable needs to be a higher priority for Liberia. President Johnson-Sirleaf and the new government must balance development and reconciliation efforts with Liberians' demands for justice.

REFUGEES INTERNATIONAL RECOMMENDS:

- ❑ President Johnson-Sirleaf continue to endorse publicly the judicial system and the newly formed Truth and Reconciliation Commission and encourage them to try cases of sexual violence and support victims filing cases.
- ❑ President Johnson-Sirleaf continue to pressure President Olusegun Obasanjo of Nigeria to extradite Charles Taylor so he can be tried before the Special Court for Sierra Leone.
- ❑ U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice visit Liberia to focus attention on the problem of gender-based violence and lack of accountability, similar to her visit to Darfur, which succeeded in focusing attention on the abuse of women there.
- ❑ President Bush expand the Women's Justice and Empowerment Initiative (the \$55 million 3-year project to promote women's justice and empowerment) so it includes post-conflict nations, such as Liberia, in addition to the four nations presently targeted (Benin, Kenya, South Africa, and Zambia).

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