

Historic War Crimes Conference in Liberia Brings Justice a Big Step Closer

For the first time since the end of Liberia's bloody civil wars, representatives of government, UN, civil society, and diplomatic missions discuss steps forward in accountability for wartime atrocities

(Monrovia, Liberia) November 10, 2018 - Speaking to a packed room at Friday's historic conference: "Opportunities and Challenges for Truth and Justice in Liberia for Past Crimes," former Charles Taylor Prosecutor at the UN-backed Special Court for Sierra Leone, [Ambassador Stephen Rapp](#) , joined the growing call of Liberian civil society in urging the Government of Liberia to make justice for civil war atrocities a reality. Stressing that in order "to prevent atrocities in the future, holding persons responsible for past crimes accountable is important" the former US ambassador-at-large for global criminal justice warned that "if folks can escape punishment by threats, extortion, or intimidation, then there is no rule of law." Ambassador Rapp added that "without accountability, it will be very hard to build a country that this country deserves to be."

[The conference](#), organized by Liberia's Civil Society Human Rights Advocacy Platform and their chair Adama Dempster, comes at a moment when suspected perpetrators of some of the most horrific atrocities committed during Liberia's two civil wars [are being tried in cases in the United States and Europe](#) .

An estimated 150,000 to 250,000 Liberians died during the country's back-to-back civil wars between 1989 and 2003, during which tens of thousands more experienced rape, mutilation and torture. However, no individual has been prosecuted before a Liberian court. A growing demand for justice among survivors and human rights groups in Liberia, coupled with near daily media coverage on the issue, is mounting pressure on the administration of President George Weah to make clear a plan to establish a war crimes court. According to conference organizer Adama Dempster "Liberia remains haunted by lack of justice for civil war era crimes."

Addressing the gathering of Liberian and foreign government officials and civil society representatives, [Dr. Uchenna Emelonye](#) , country representative of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights counseled that "a postwar society that does not promote justice and accountability does not properly heal without scars." Adding his voice to the recommendations issued by the UN [Human Rights Committee in July](#) , Dr. Emelonye emphasized that it is "the position of the office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights that all actors, led by the government, must ensure accountability for past crimes." Although the Weah administration [pledged to make a public statement](#) on accountability for grave crimes committed during the country's two civil wars - no clear stance from the Office the

President has been made to date.

International groups at Friday's conference made clear that should President Weah's administration demonstrate a desire to prosecute civil war-era war crimes, the international community will provide its support.

After a near decade of silence on the question of domestic accountability, government representatives at yesterday's conference voiced clear support for justice for civil war-era atrocities. Speaking on behalf of the Ministry of Justice of Liberia, the Assistant Minister for Economic Affairs, Meo Debbah Beyan stated "this government has a huge appetite for justice and will not stop at anything to ensure justice is done," adding that, "the government is open" to the idea of prosecuting past crimes.

The Honorable Rustonlyn Dennis, Chair of the Liberian House Committee on Claims and Petitions, welcomed the conference as a "new phase for justice in Liberia." Representatives from the Independent National Human Rights Commission, the body tasked with implementing [Liberia's Truth and Reconciliation Commission](#)'s (TRC) recommendations, voiced similar support for war crimes prosecutions.

The call for justice has long been a Liberian-led and Liberian-owned effort, demonstrated by the support from civil society groups and representatives from all of Liberia's 15 counties who attended the conference to express their support for implementing the TRC recommendations on accountability and justice.

In its final report in 2009, Liberia's TRC recommended that an internationalized domestic criminal court be established to ensure justice for the worst crimes committed during the two civil wars. At Friday's conference, a quorum of TRC Commissioners came together to remind Liberians that a strong framework for justice already exists in the TRC's recommendations. Commenting at the end of Friday's conference, TRC Commissioner Massa Washington remarked that, "the culture of fear has been deeply entrenched, but there is a light at the end of the tunnel."

NOTES FOR THE EDITOR:

The conference was organized by Liberian NGOs the [Civil Society Human Rights Advocacy Platform of Liberia](#) and the [Global Justice and Research Project](#) (GJRP), in collaboration with international groups [the Advocates for Human Rights](#), [the Center for Justice and Accountability](#), [the Centre for Civil and Political Rights](#), [Civitas Maxima](#), and [Human Rights Watch](#).

For more information on civil society efforts for justice for Liberia, see:

- <http://coalitionforjusticeinliberia.org>
- <http://www.globaljustice-research.org/>
- <https://www.hrw.org/news/2009/12/10/justice-liberia>
- <https://www.civitas-maxima.org/en>
- <https://www.facebook.com/Quest4Liberia>
- <https://cja.org/where-we-work/liberia>
- https://www.theadvocatesforhumanrights.org/liberia_trc

For more information and to schedule media interviews, please contact:

- Adama Dempster, Civil Society Human Rights Advocacy Platform of Liberia: +231-7771-00101
- Hassan Bility, Global Research and Justice Project: +231-77-017-9752
- Jennifer Prestholdt, The Advocates for Human Rights: +1-612-709-2794 (mobile/WhatsApp) jprestholdt@advrights.org @JPrestholdt
- Nushin Sarkarati, Center for Justice and Accountability: +1-949-290-1368 (mobile/WhatsApp) nsarkarati@cja.org @NushinSarkarati
- Lisa-Marie Rudi (English, French), Civitas Maxima: +41-79-352-8460 (WhatsApp) or +231 88 876 4422; lisa.rudi@civitas-maxima.org @LisaMarieRudi
- Elise Keppler, Human Rights Watch (English, French): +1-917-687-8576 (mobile/WhatsApp); kepplee@hrw.org @EliseKeppler
- Dietlind Lerner, Center for Justice and Accountability, (English, French) +1-310-699-875 (mobile/WhatsApp) dlerner@cja.org @DietlindL