



Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing

Establishing a War Crimes & Economic Crimes Court for Liberia

Monday, June 21, 2021

12:00 p.m. – 2:00 p.m.

Virtual via Cisco WebEx

Rep. Chris Smith (R-NJ)

Excerpt of Remarks

Today's hearing is on the compelling and long overdue need to establish an Extraordinary Criminal Tribunal for Liberia—an unmet need for justice in a country that suffered through two civil wars from 1989 through 2003, which has yet to achieve closure and accountability.

Lest we forget what those years were like, some quarter of a million Liberians lost their lives, plus more than a million people were displaced, during the reign of Charles Taylor, which also destabilized Sierra Leone.

A Comprehensive Peace Agreement, signed in Accra, Ghana, ended the civil war in 2003, and called for the establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission, or TRC. The TRC came into existence two years later, and in turn recommended that an Extraordinary Criminal Tribunal be set up to achieve accountability for the war crimes and atrocities that were committed during Charles Taylor's reign of terror.

To date, however, no such Tribunal has come into existence, despite legislation passed by the Liberian Congress requiring the implementation of the TRC's recommendation and pledges by politicians – including current President George Weah – to establish a court. Thus a fog continues to enshroud Liberia, and alleged war criminals walk the street and occupy high offices.

Today we have four distinguished witnesses including Jerome Verdier, the former Chairman of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission for Liberia and Dr. Alan White, the former Chief of Investigations for the UN backed Special Court for Sierra Leone.

In contrast, a Special Court for Sierra Leone – which convicted Charles Taylor for aiding and abetting war crimes and crimes against humanity in Sierra Leone – has helped that country heal the wounds of its past divisions.

As noted by a [2004 United Nations Report](#) on the rule of law and transitional justice: “[T]he consolidation of peace in the immediate post-conflict period, as well as the maintenance of peace in the long term, cannot be achieved unless the population is confident that redress for grievances can be obtained through legitimate structures for the peaceful settlement of disputes and the fair administration of justice.”

For our part, Congress passed a resolution in 2018 authored by Congressman Dan Donovan of New York, [H. Res. 1055](#), calling for the establishment of an Extraordinary Criminal Tribunal, and a [2017 hearing that I chaired in the Africa Subcommittee](#) addressed the Future of Democracy and Governance in Liberia.

Some might ask why we are focusing today on Liberia, a small country of roughly 5 million people, when there are such outstanding problems in other parts of Africa – first and foremost, Ethiopia and Nigeria.

The answer to that is twofold – first, because I believe attention shown by Congress can have a significant and positive impact in Liberia. Second, however, is because the United States owes a moral duty to the people of Liberia. Liberia is unique among all other countries of the world. There is no other country whose history is so intertwined with that of the United States, founded as it was by free American slaves.

As just last week Congress passed and the President signed a law establishing Juneteenth as a national holiday, we have had occasion to reflect upon the history of slavery and liberation. As part of that reflection, we should acknowledge that desire for liberty which inspired the establishment of the Liberian nation, yet which remains only partially fulfilled.

While ultimately Liberia’s fate lies in the hands of the Liberian people, today the Lantos Commission can provide a platform to elevate the question of justice and accountability for the Liberian people.

Thank you.