



For Immediate Release

Liberia: President Should Act on Rights Commission

Delays Are Impeding Efforts to Promote and Protect Human Rights

(Dakar, May 19, 2010) – President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia should demonstrate leadership in accelerating the establishment of the country’s Independent National Human Rights Commission, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International said in a joint letter to the president today.

The 2003 Accra Peace Agreement, which brought Liberia’s years of armed conflict to an end, called upon the Liberian government to create an Independent National Human Rights Commission, and in 2005, the Independent National Commission on Human Rights Act was passed into law. Yet five years on, the government and parliament still have not established a human rights commission in Liberia.

“The government’s failure to establish the Human Rights Commission has stymied progress in protecting human rights in Liberia,” said Corinne Dufka, senior West Africa researcher at Human Rights Watch. “An effective Human Rights Commission would help foster a culture of human rights in a country scarred by war, violence, and impunity.”

The Liberian government’s failure to establish the commission undermines Liberia’s postwar recovery, respect for human rights, and its anti-corruption agenda, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International said. While plans to establish the commission remain in limbo, the country has experienced ongoing violence and internecine conflict, striking deficiencies in judiciary, police, and corrections operations, vigilante justice, and high incidence of rape of women and girls. It is just such problems that the commission would be designed to address.

Establishment of the Human Rights Commission has met repeated roadblocks over the past five years. Most recently, in February 2010, the Liberian Senate rejected all proposed commissioners without offering any public explanation – and rejected them a second time in March, after the names were resubmitted in a last-ditch attempt to salvage the process. A new, reconstituted vetting committee, headed by the former head of Liberia’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Pearl Brown-Bull, was set up in April to select new candidates.

“The President needs to demonstrate leadership in pushing for the prompt establishment of a functioning independent and effective national human rights commission,” said Etelle Higonnet, West Africa researcher at Amnesty International. “It should be one of her top priorities.”

Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International called on the Liberian government to help ensure the success of the new committee by making public the official budget and time frame for vetting commissioners, involving civil society in the process and ensuring that the committee’s

work will be fully transparent. The groups further urged the Liberian Senate to consider the confirmation of nominated commissioners individually and not as a group.

“We are concerned that the selection process for commissioners is not adequately transparent with respect to process, time-frames, budgets, guidelines, or civil society consultation,” Higonnet said.

Under the Independent National Commission for Human Rights Act, the commission is mandated to monitor and report on human rights violations in Liberia, as well as to review and, where appropriate, act on the recommendations of Liberia’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, released in December 2009. Some of the recommendations, including the establishment of a hybrid international-national tribunal to prosecute individuals for serious crimes committed during the armed conflict, and the barring from public office of former supporters of the warring factions, have sparked considerable controversy.

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