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For Immediate Release:

Taylor Trial: U.K. Removes a Key Obstacle

Court, Donors Must Make a Hague Trial Accessible to West Africans

(New York, June 15, 2006) – The British government's decision today to offer detention facilities for Charles Taylor if he is convicted removes the main obstacle to relocating the former Liberian president's trial to The Hague, Human Rights Watch said today.

On March 29, Taylor was surrendered to the Special Court for Sierra Leone, which has indicted him on charges of war crimes and crimes against humanity in the country's 11-year civil war. The U.N.-backed war crimes court immediately requested the relocation of Taylor's trial to The Hague, citing concerns about stability in West Africa if the trial is held at the court's headquarters in Sierra Leone's capital, Freetown.

The Netherlands agreed to host Taylor's trial in The Hague, but on the condition that he leaves the country after the judgment is delivered.

"The U.K. has taken a crucial step by offering Taylor a jail cell if convicted," said Richard Dicker, international justice director at Human Rights Watch. "Today's announcement ends many weeks of stalled negotiations over the relocation of Taylor's trial."

The Netherlands still requires a U.N. Security Council resolution to provide a legal basis for the relocation. It is expected that this will pass shortly and the relocation will move forward. In a trial of Taylor in The Hague, judges and staff from the Special Court will conduct the proceedings according to the court's statute and rules, while the International Criminal Court will lend its facilities for the trial.

Human Rights Watch cautioned, however, that the Special Court and its donors will need to redouble their efforts to make Taylor's trial accessible to the people of West Africa if it is relocated to the Netherlands.

"The Special Court's location in Sierra Leone and its robust outreach have helped make justice accessible to the people most affected by the crimes," said Dicker. "With Taylor headed to The Hague, the Special Court must provide outreach on his trial in Sierra Leone, and donors must provide the funding needed to make this happen."

Moving Taylor's trial outside Sierra Leone has serious disadvantages, Human Rights Watch said. The most significant is that locating Taylor's trial out of the country severely threatens to limit the accessibility of the trial to people in West Africa. However, legitimate and substantial concerns



over security may make the move necessary and appropriate.

“Victims of atrocities in Sierra Leone have long waited for Charles Taylor to face trial,” said Dicker. “Security concerns may well merit moving the trial to The Hague, but the Special Court needs to explain this more fully to the people of West Africa.”

Since it began operations in 2002, the Special Court has conducted various outreach and communications activities. The programs have included disseminating video and audio summaries of proceedings around the country, engaging local journalists and civil society on court developments, and targeting various sectors of the population for discussion on the Special Court. To make a trial of Taylor in The Hague accessible to Sierra Leoneans and West Africans, the Special Court should implement – and donors should fund – the following activities:

- Video and audio summaries of Taylor’s trial for dissemination throughout Sierra Leone;
- Live broadcasts of the trial at the court premises in Freetown; and
- Observation of the trial in The Hague by some representatives of Sierra Leone’s media, monitors, civil society, and other sectors of the country, such as paramount chiefs.

Donors including the United States, United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and Canada should also provide funding to cover other costs associated with holding Taylor’s trial in The Hague. These include logistical and technical costs. Funding must further be provided to ensure the Special Court can successfully complete the rest of its work in Freetown. This includes conducting fair and expedient trials where witnesses receive adequate protection and support, and outreach and communications activities are sufficient. Additional funding will be needed for necessary activities in the post-completion phase of the court’s operations, such as long-term witness protection.

Background

The Special Court for Sierra Leone was set up in 2002 to try those “bearing the greatest responsibility” for war crimes and crimes against humanity committed during Sierra Leone’s armed conflict. The crimes include killings, mutilations, rape and other forms of sexual violence, sexual slavery, the recruitment and use of child soldiers, abduction, and the use of forced labor by armed groups.

The Special Court has indicted Taylor for war crimes (murder, pillage, outrages upon personal dignity, cruel treatment, terrorizing civilians), crimes against humanity (murder, mutilation, rape, enslavement, sexual slavery) and other serious violations of international humanitarian law (use of child soldiers) in the course of Sierra Leone’s armed conflict. The indictment alleges that Taylor, as president of Liberia, provided training and financing to the main rebel group in Sierra Leone, the Revolutionary United Front (RUF). Taylor was allegedly the rebel group’s main backer, providing logistical and military support to the rebels and benefiting greatly from the diamonds extracted in rebel-held areas.

Initially forced to rely on voluntary contributions, the Special Court has faced constant financial shortfalls. The United Nations provided some financial assistance to the court, but this does not cover all of the court costs. Donors made additional pledges at a funding conference in late September 2005. However, these are insufficient to cover operations for 2006 and beyond.

Forthcoming reports

With the likely relocation of Taylor's trial to The Hague, Human Rights Watch will soon issue a briefing paper to the Special Court and its donors on the crucial importance of maintaining the accessibility of the Hague trial for the people of West Africa. The briefing paper will include a number of specific recommendations on how this can be achieved.