

Liberia strife toll: Starvation, massacres, child soldiers, rape

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The Coalition for Justice in Liberia (CJL) symposium geared toward training staffers on how to unearth and report gross human rights abuses, including war related massacres taking place around the world, ended last week with participants pledging to work together to end a "culture of impunity" by perpetrators of genocides.

Most of the speakers at the ceremony vowed that war criminals living in the United States and Europe will eventually be booked no matter how long they run or evade justice.

The conference, held at the Brooklyn Center City Hall, brought together a group of hardcore international human rights activists, lawyers and representatives, some from the U.S. Department of Justice and the Department of Homeland Security and Naturalization. Liberian human rights journalists were also among the panelists at the forum.

Among the journalists were CIVITAS' director, Hassan Bility and former Associated Press correspondent James Kokulo Fasuekoi. Bility who presently runs CIVITAS, a human rights group based in Liberia, suffered severe torture at the hands of Charles Taylor's securities prior to the fall of Taylor's regime. Bility spoke about his ordeals in the former dictator's prison and the process which led to his released. Taylor had agreed to free Bility but only if he would agree to leave Liberia. Bility was later flown to Ghana, and then to the U.S. after the U.S. Embassy in Monrovia reached a compromise with the former warlord.

Journalist and author, Fasuekoi who covered the Liberian Civil War for more than a decade before escaping the country two years after Taylor became president, introduced a new dimension to the event.

He screened vivid photographic slides of child-soldiers, mass starvation, massacres, warlords and rebel commanders, which brought fresh memories of the war. Some of Fasuekoi's war images were so ghastly that some members of the audience had to turn away from the screen. Among panelists for were University of Liberia political science professor Alaric Tokpa and Tony Leewaye, a Minnesota based Liberian community organizer and social worker.

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During the conference, participants spoke of gross human rights abuses including genocides carried out in Liberia with a focus on people whose actions led to the carnage and mayhem that characterized the 14-year brutal war.

Other places where gross human rights violations have occurred in the past such as the East African country of Rwanda and Guatemala in South America were placed under the spotlight and U.S. human rights activists and lawyers attending the forum briefed the audience on the level of progress they have made so far in those countries in terms of prosecuting perpetrators of abuses and massacres via international justice systems.

During opening remarks, founder and interim president of the Coalition for Justice in Liberia, Lovetta Tugbeh, lamented on the plights of vulnerable women and children throughout Liberia.

Tugbeh told the audience, "Soldiers (rebels) forced men to rape their daughters in front of others, mothers were forced to have sex with their sons; sisters with brothers."

She urged the U.S. Department of Justice to work hand in hand with rights groups in and out of the U.S. in order to track down and subsequently prosecute "perpetrators of heinous crimes against humanity" and not allow them use the U.S. as a safe heaven.

Speaking further, Tugbeh assured the audience and victims of war that her new organization would not limit itself to the provision of rehabilitation and trauma counseling for raped and war victims, but would also strive make free medical services available to them.