



PRESS RELEASE(+)

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GAMBIA: WOMEN ACCUSE EX-PRESIDENT OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Yahya Jammeh reportedly forced young women to have sex with him. Some of them received a state salary and worked at the presidential palace as "protocol girls". They are now accusing the former president.

Three women have accused Gambia's former president, Yahya Jammeh, of rape and sexual assault while he was in office, Human Rights Watch and TRIAL International said today. Former Gambian officials said that presidential aides regularly pressured women to visit or work for Jammeh, who then sexually abused many of them.

Jammeh is currently in Equatorial Guinea, where he sought exile after losing the 2016 presidential election to Adama Barrow. A Gambian Truth, Reconciliation and Reparations Commission (TRRC) is documenting human rights violations committed during Jammeh's 22 years in power, including sexual violence allegations. The TRRC and the Gambian government should ensure that allegations of rape and sexual violence by Jammeh and other former top officials are fully investigated, and, if warranted, prosecuted.

"Yahya Jammeh treated Gambian women like his personal property," said Reed Brody, counsel at Human Rights Watch who led the investigation. "Rape and sexual assault are crimes, and Jammeh is not above the law."

Human Rights Watch and TRIAL International interviewed three women who accuse Jammeh of rape and sexual assault, and a fourth woman who said that Jammeh's aides confined her in an apparent set-up for sexual abuse. The organizations also interviewed eight former Gambian officials and several other witnesses. The officials, who said they have direct knowledge of the events, include two men who worked for the Protocol Department at State House (the presidential palace); four close protection officers for Jammeh or at State House; a woman who worked at State House; and a former National Intelligence Agency senior official. The officials and two of the women requested anonymity. Fatou Jallow (known as Toufah), who alleged that Jammeh raped her in 2015, asked that her name be disclosed because she wished to come forward publicly.

Those interviewed made detailed allegations against the former president, saying that he forced or coerced young women into having sex with him. Some were put on the state payroll and worked at State House as so-called "protocol girls." Former officials reported that Jammeh and his subordinates gave the women cash and gifts and promised them scholarships or other privileges – powerful tools in one of the poorest countries in the world. Witnesses said that both consensual and non-consensual sex took place at the president's residences.

Jammeh's rule was marked by widespread abuses, including forced disappearances, extrajudicial killings, sexual violence, torture and arbitrary detention. As president, Jammeh crafted a religious persona, preaching sermons and claiming to cure HIV and heal the sick. In March 2019, an official Gambian commission and the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, an investigative reporting platform, accused Jammeh of stealing up to US\$1 billion from state coffers.

TRIAL International is a non-governmental organization fighting impunity for international crimes and supporting victims in their quest for justice. TRIAL International takes an innovative approach to the law, paving the way to justice for survivors of unspeakable sufferings. The organization provides legal assistance, litigates cases, develops local capacity and pushes the human rights agenda forward.

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The three women who made the allegations against Jammeh described coercive, deceptive, and violent actions by Jammeh and his aides, and retaliation if the women refused his advances.

Toufah Jallow, then 18, was the 2014 winning “queen” of the main state-sponsored beauty pageant, which Jammeh lauded as “a means to empower girls.” Over six months, Jallow said, the president lavished her with a \$1,250 prize and other gifts, and had running water installed at her family’s house outside of Banjul. He offered her a position as a “protocol girl,” which she declined. He asked her to marry him, which she also refused. She said that after aides brought her to attend a pre-Ramadan Quran recital at State House, he locked her in a room and told her: “There’s no woman that I want that I cannot have.” She said that he then hit and taunted her, injected her with a liquid, and raped her. Days later, she fled to neighboring Senegal.

Jammeh also personally hired and then sexually harassed the “protocol girls.” Former officials and two women who worked as “protocol girls” said that, in addition to their state salary, Jammeh and his aides gave the women gifts, cash, and privileges if they had sex with Jammeh. Sometimes the women carried out official functions such as serving drinks, typing, and preparing meetings, but mostly they were on call to have sex with the president. The women accompanied him during his frequent long stays in his home village of Kanilai. Some travelled abroad with the president, were required to live near State House to be more accessible to Jammeh, were not allowed to leave without authorization, or were discouraged from having boyfriends. A former top aide to the president said that Jammeh “handpicked young women to satisfy his sexual fantasies.”

One such woman, “Anta,” said that Jammeh spotted her at an event. She said that government officials put her on the payroll in the protocol department in 2015, and Jammeh gave expensive gifts to her indigent parents. She said that she refused when Jammeh first demanded sex, but that he said he “was supporting my family and that he could end it anytime.” On another occasion when he called her in for sex, he told her that she should not talk to anyone about it or she “would face consequences.”

Another “protocol girl,” “Bintu,” said that in 2013 Jammeh offered her a scholarship to study in the United States. When she refused to have sex with him, Jammeh became angry and sent her away. She said Jammeh instructed his chief of protocol to bar her from going for her visa interview at the US Embassy and to terminate her contract at State House. He also rescinded his scholarship offer.

The three women and several officials identified Jimbee Jammeh, a female cousin of the president, as the person overseeing the “protocol girls” and the procurement of other women. The three women said she befriended them, phoned them, had them brought to State House, took them to Jammeh, and stayed with them and the president in his room before leaving them alone. Jimbee Jammeh went to Equatorial Guinea with Jammeh.

Jammeh’s exploitation of women was well known to those around him. Five former officials said that he ordered them and others to get the phone numbers of women he identified. They said they later saw some of these women leaving Jammeh’s house with money. Officials working with Jammeh said that he also had sex with women soldiers assigned to his close protection and other civil servants working under him.

Human Rights Watch and TRIAL International also interviewed a fourth woman, Fatoumatta Sandeng, then a well-known band singer, who did not have direct contact with Jammeh, but said that in 2015 aides confined her in what she suspected to be a set-up for sexual abuse. She is the daughter of a Gambian opposition leader, Solo Sandeng, whose murder in custody in 2016 would galvanize opposition to Jammeh. Sandeng said she was ordered to come alone to see him in his hometown of Kanilai, barred from leaving her hotel there for three days, and finally released.

Sandeng is now spokesperson for the “Campaign to Bring Yahya Jammeh and his Accomplices to Justice” (#Jammeh2Justice), which calls for prosecuting Jammeh and others who bear the greatest responsibility for his government’s crimes.

Gambia president Barrow has said that Gambia will await the report of the TRRC before pursuing Jammeh’s possible extradition from Equatorial Guinea. In addition, the government of Ghana is weighing re-opening its investigation into the July 2005 massacre in Gambia of approximately 56 migrants, including 44 Ghanaians, following a May 2018 report by Human Rights Watch and TRIAL International which revealed that the migrants were murdered by the “Junglers,” a death squad reporting to Jammeh.

The TRRC’s public hearings, widely followed in Gambia, have already produced multiple revelations, including allegations that Jammeh personally directed killings. The TRRC plans to schedule hearings on sexual violence, and has reached out to women to give statements “according to modalities that preserve their safety and dignity and protect them from stigmatization and retaliation.”

“These admirable women broke the culture of silence. It is now crucial that the TRRC and the government give them a path to redress and justice,” said Marion Volkmann-Brandau, lead project researcher for Human Rights Watch and TRIAL International. “It’s time for the ‘shame’ of rape to switch sides.”

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FATOU (TOUFAH) JALLOW Jallow was a star drama student and qualified for the “July 22” pageant (named after the date of Jammeh’s coup), which the Ministry of Education organized in December 2014. The pageant was held in front of a live audience, including government ministers, media, family, and friends, and was broadcast live on national TV. Jallow was crowned “queen.”

“There was no routine on how much [prize money] you would get,” Jallow said. “It depended on how the president felt.” Jallow said that shortly thereafter she got a call from Jimbee Jammeh, the president’s cousin, asking her to attend an event at State House. She tried to decline, but Jimbee insisted and ordered other staff to call Jallow’s family.

In her first meeting with Jammeh, together with other contestants, Jammeh “was very jovial, making jokes about tribes,” she said. “He said that the purpose of the competition was to empower us. He told us not to get married right away and become housewives. He said ‘I am going to know about it. I’m not going to be happy about it.’” She said Jimbee gave her and the runner-up 50,000 GMD (approximately \$1,250 in 2015). That was followed by an official meeting broadcast on state television with Jammeh and several ministers at which the contestants were all given money, a Mac computer and iPhones. Jallow later realized her movements could be tracked by the phone.

The women had to present a charitable project to the Ministry of Education for funding. Jallow’s was a community poverty alleviation project using drama. Jallow said Jimbee Jammeh repeatedly called her to finish up the project, then invited Jallow to State House to go over the project. “Jimbee did not tell me that I would meet the president,” Jallow said. Once there, she met Jammeh privately for the first time, together with Jimbee, and talked comfortably with Jammeh while Jimbee lounged nearby. After more than an hour, Jimbee “brought a box, with a gold chain inside. She said it was a gift ‘from us. You deserve more, you are really awesome.’”

Jallow said that one week later, Jimbee Jammeh visited her house. Jimbee reached Jammeh on the phone, who said: “Jimbee told me that you don’t have running water in your home.... I’m going to talk to Jimbee to settle that.” Soon thereafter, the state company installed running water. Jallow said that Jimbee Jammeh also bought the family expensive furniture.

The next time she met Jammeh privately, they had dinner with Jimbee Jammeh in his apartment. Jallow said that Jammeh told her she was beautiful and asked her if she ever thought of marriage. Jallow said she replied that she was only 18. She said he told her that there was nothing wrong with getting married to a man who supported her and asked if she had a boyfriend. She said she laughed and replied, “Are we supposed to talk about that?” He asked her who the boyfriend was, Jallow said, but she didn’t answer. She said he then told her, “You know I’m the president, I can find out anything,” and then he said, “I have a surprise for you,” which was that Jimbee would give her money for her project.

In the meantime, Jallow said, an aide brought her another 50,000 GMD, which Jammeh told her was “for the bother of coming and waiting here.” Then he told her, “Honestly I cannot drag this out any longer. I want to marry you.” Jallow said she responded, “Why? You are three times my age? You are my dad’s age. It’s not you, I’m just not ready.” Jammeh then said, “Maybe you are confused right now, but get back to me.” She then left.

Jallow reported that the next day, Jimbee Jammeh took her on a tour of villas, saying that the president was ready to give her a villa and a car. She said that Jimbee told her, “He told you something yesterday and when that becomes possible, that’s yours.” She said Jimbee then changed tone and said, “What is wrong with you? Who gets an opportunity like this?” After that, Jallow blocked Jimbee’s number, but worried that she was being followed.

Jallow said that in June 2015, Jimbee Jammeh told her that as queen, Jallow had to come to

State House for a religious ceremony marking the start of Ramadan. Jallow thought it would be with the other finalists, but Jimbee took her to a room where Jammeh soon appeared and later locked her in another room.

“He told me, ‘No woman has ever rejected me. And who do you think you are?’” Jallow said. “His face changed, his eyes were so red, different from the man before. He said, ‘No woman rejects me. You think you can get away with it?’” She said he then slapped her, and she fell on a chair: “He yelled at me, ‘This could have been nice, because I loved you but you decided to be this feminist girl to me.’” She said that she screamed, and he slapped her, told her to shut up, and then injected her in her arm with a needle.

She said she was reaching for the door when he warned, “If you make any move, I will kill you with my own hands.” He then pulled her dress off, she said, and said “Let’s see if you’re a virgin.” She said he rubbed his genitals in her face and touched them to arouse himself. She screamed that she was dying. “He said, ‘This does not kill, it’s fun.’” Jallow said he then held her hands down and raped her. She said she lost consciousness and when she woke up, Jammeh said, “Get out of here.” Jallow said that King Papa, an aide, told her as she was leaving: “He is the president, and we will do everything to protect him.”

Days later, Jallow fled to Senegal. After meeting with Amnesty International, Article 19, and various United Nations agencies, she obtained asylum in a third country, where she lives today.

« ANTA » said she was pressured at age 23 to become a “protocol girl” after Jammeh spotted her at an event. She said Jammeh promised her a scholarship, and gave her a new smartphone:

“One day, Jimbee [Jammeh] asked me to go with her inside the room where His Excellency was, so when we arrived, Jimbee’s other two sisters were there too. I was asked to sit beside him, when he started to rub my body. When I tried to stop him, he said to me remember that he was supporting my family and that he could end it any time. I kept quiet and later His Excellency gave us [the women] GMD 100,000 (\$2,500) to share among ourselves.

A few days later, Jimbee took me to the president’s room and said that we should massage him. He gave Jimbee his foot and gave me his hands. We massaged for a while and Jimbee left us alone in the room then he started undressing me and saying that he was in love with me that he will do anything for me and my family that I should not tell anyone because if I do I will face the consequences. I felt I had no choice. That day he slept with me without protection and this made me feel very uncomfortable.

One month later, Jimbee asked me to move to State House. I did not want to but Jimbee came with a guard to collect my things by force saying I will go whether I like it or not because it is the president’s decision so I can’t disobey. You did not have a life at State House. I was only allowed to go out with Jimbee or if the next day was a day off – and even then, I was only allowed to go and see my mother.

I was called in another time at night. Around 1 or 2 a.m. my phone rang and Jimbee told me to come immediately to State House as the president wanted to see me. When I arrived, Jimbee was waiting for me. At one point, Jammeh came in and told me to follow him. He took me into a bedroom and I had to sleep with him.“

« BINTU » said Jammeh sexually assaulted her when she was a 22-year-old “protocol girl”:

“He [Jammeh] offered me a job at State House to be a protocol officer. He told me that I could choose a school abroad and that he would pay the scholarship for it. I wanted to go to a school in the US.

Protocol girls would prepare meetings, when guests were there we would serve something to drink. It was only when big events (birthdays, celebrations) were planned that we were really working (typing letters and invitations). But most of the time we would not work much, people did not ask us to do much because we are the “president’s girls.”

Whenever the president would go to Kanilai, the protocol girls would go with him. Sometimes we would stay there up to a month.

[In Kanilai, at night Jammeh] would call all of us to his house. So, while we were all gathered in a sitting room, or on the veranda, Jimbee goes into his room and then calls one girl to come into his private apartment. The rest of us sat and waited. The girls called in were many [names women], sometimes girls join us we don’t even know them. All the girls knew that when one girl was called in it was for sex. Some wanted it. They felt honored or wanted the money. My fingers were always crossed that he would not call me in. Sometimes he would call everybody inside and we watch TV. That was nicer.

Some of the girls who were called in talked to me. “Anta,” for instance. She told me that she had been abused.

The president did not protect himself, so it was risky. I know that some girls got pregnant – I know of two at least. When that happened, they would get fired.

When he had an affair with a woman, he treated her like his property. Sometimes the woman would get a house and a car but had to come in for sex whenever he wanted. So many were fed up with that. When the affair was finished, he took everything back.

During one of the president’s nationwide tours, Sanna Jarju, the chief of protocol, told me to go and take a girl’s number and her name. He said because it was his classmate – I later understood that it was for the president. I later saw that girl in Kanilai.

During another tour, in Basse, Jammeh spotted a light skinned girl in the crowd. Jimbee approached her. The next morning, I saw her coming out of his house – with a big envelope. The president was giving money to Jimbee, she would take her share and give the rest to the girl.

He is smart, he is very nice to the girls, he takes his time, and then he makes his move.

It happened in Kanilai. We were all there. One evening, Jimbee called me and told me to come with her to the president’s private apartment. He asked me to undress. He told me that I was young and needed protection so he wanted to apply spiritual water on me. We went to the bathroom and I undressed. I remember that I said, “It’s okay, because you are like my father.” Jimbee was there.

The next day, the president called me in again. In his private apartment, he asked me to undress and then he wanted to do things that were inappropriate. He started to touch my body. I was too young for this. I started crying. The president got angry and Jimbee told him that I was crying because I was shy. But I said no, that it was not because I was shy, it was because it was not appropriate. He got mad and sent me out.


The next day I was told to leave. It was a Saturday. On Monday, I was supposed to go for my visa interview at the US embassy. I had been admitted at an American college and

Jammeh had promised me to pay for my scholarship. But Jammeh called Sanna Jarju and told him to tell me that I should not go. My contract at the State House was terminated and my scholarship was canceled.”

FATOUMATTA SANDENG Sandeng got a call from Jimbee Jammeh in 2015 telling her “you are needed by the president tomorrow.” She said that Jimbee insisted that Sandeng come alone and not bring the other band members or her manager, as she requested. She said that at first she refused, but then received a call from chief of protocol Sanna Jarju who said that it was an “order” and repeated that she had to come alone.

Sandeng was driven to Kanilai by the same man who drove Jallow, “Anta,” and “Bintu.” She said that over the next three days, Jimbee prevented her from leaving the Sindola Hotel in Kanilai while her meeting with Jammeh was postponed. On the fourth day, Jammeh had to attend a funeral, and Jimbee gave her 50,000 GMD (\$1,250) and allowed her to leave on the promise that she would come back. “Looking back, I was so lucky to get away and escape the fate of other women,” she said. |

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