



PRESS RELEASE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

THE GAMBIA: EX-PRESIDENT TIED TO THE KILLING OF 59 MIGRANTS

The session of the Truth, Reconciliation and Reparations Commission on the massacre of 59 migrants from eight West African countries has come to an end on 11 March 2021 in The Gambia. The testimonies that succeeded in recent weeks have revealed new elements, but also confirmed existing information, further strengthening the ties between former President [Yahya Jammeh](#) and these murders. Human Rights Watch and TRIAL International support the process to ensure that the former President – in exile in Equatorial Guinea since his departure from The Gambia in January 2017 – is held accountable.



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From February 24 to March 11, witnesses told the Gambian Truth, Reconciliation and Reparations Commission (TRRC) that the migrants from Congo, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Liberia, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo, who were bound for Europe, plus their Gambian contact, were held in the custody of Jammeh's top officials in the security services and that most were then murdered by the "Junglers," a notorious unit that took its orders directly from Jammeh.

"Well-placed witnesses have implicated Yahya Jammeh in killing citizens from nine West African countries," said [Reed Brody](#), counsel at Human Rights Watch. "All those countries should support a criminal investigation and, if warranted, the prosecution of Jammeh and others who bear the greatest responsibility for the massacre of the migrants and other serious crimes by his government."

THE COURSE OF EVENTS MADE CLEARER

During their 2018 investigation, TRIAL International and Human Rights Watch were able to gather a great deal of information on the massacre. Never before had this information been publicly exposed or told “in one go”. Here is what the two organizations identified as particularly significant.

The exact number of migrants killed is still unclear. Gibril Ngorr Secka, former director of operations at the NIA, presented the TRRC with a list of 51 migrants the police counted at one police station, including citizens of Ghana (39) Sierra Leone (3), Togo (2), Côte d'Ivoire (2), Senegal (2), Liberia (1), Nigeria (1), and Congo (1). In addition to the names presented in the first official list, the group also included other migrants, including [eight Nigerians](#) believed to have been arrested and killed.

Witnesses, including the former chief of defense staff and former senior officers of The Gambia's National Intelligence Agency (NIA), testified that then-police chief [Ousman Sonko – who is currently detained in Switzerland and under investigation for crimes against humanity](#) – informed Jammeh during a national ceremony that persons had been apprehended on a beach near Barra, across the river from the capital Banjul. After allegedly speaking with Jammeh for several minutes, Sonko instructed officers to ferry the migrants, who were suspected to be mercenaries, to Naval Headquarters in Banjul. Several witnesses said that it was clear that the men and two women were migrants and not mercenaries as they had no weapons or anything suspicious. All the Gambian security service chiefs – from the police, army, navy, NIA and National Guards – then converged on Naval Headquarters, as did several Junglers who beat and kicked the migrants and, one officer testified, “treated them like animals”. The migrants were then distributed to various detention centers around Banjul.

[See the graphic illustrating the basic facts of the massacre](#)

The exposed bodies of eight migrants were found the next morning, July 23, 2005, near “Ghanatown” in Brufut just outside Banjul. Pa Amady Jallow, then-crime management coordinator, testified that the bodies showed signs of bad beatings, their skulls broken in, blood and brains oozing out. Jallow said that when he reported this information to police chief Ousman Sonko, the latter was uninterested and three times hung up the phone on him before Sonko's deputy informed Jallow that he was being transferred to traffic duties with immediate effect. Jallow also said he was informed years later by another police officer that an additional nine Nigerians had been buried in a mass grave near where Jallow saw the exposed bodies. The TRRC has said that it intends to search that site.

THE PRESIDENT'S INVOLVEMENT CONFIRMED

In July 2019, three former Junglers [testified](#) before the truth commission that they and 12 other Junglers had carried out the killings of the remaining migrants on Jammeh's orders. One of the officers, Omar Jallow, recalled that the operation's leader told the men that “[the order from ... Jammeh is that they are all to be executed.](#)” Many accounts agree that the Junglers were under the direct control of the former president. As Alieu Jeng, a former Jungler, summarizes, “I don't think there has been anything which the team would do which has not been the order of Yaya Jammeh.”

Former Interior Minister Baboucarr Jatta confirmed this version of facts by accepting TRRC Lead Counsel Essa Faal's assertion that the killings were a “state-ordered execution by soldiers from the State House” and said that he believed the soldiers were acting under Jammeh's orders.

INVESTIGATIONS AT A STANDSTILL

Testimony at the TRRC also described the persistent efforts made to cover up the crime, especially in advance of a 2008 investigative mission by the United Nations and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) when the government appointed a “task force” that included several cabinet ministers to deal with the investigators.

[See the graphic illustrating the attempts to investigate the massacre](#)

Former Chief of Defense Staff Assan Sarr said that when the UN/ECOWAS investigation team came in 2008, he was told not to “jeopardize or tarnish the image of this country”. A police officer from Barra said that around December 2005, he had been told by Ousman Sonko to falsify the July 22, 2005 diary entry from the Barra police station where the migrants were initially arrested and that the diary entries were then completely re-written. Copies of the diary with the entry for July 22 removed were presented to the truth commission.

The TRRC testimony corroborates the findings of a [2018 report](#) by Human Rights Watch and TRIAL International, who interviewed 30 former Gambian officials. “*Now that the information we had gathered has been corroborated, it’s s all the more important for Jammeh to be called to face up to his responsibilities*”, said [Emeline Escafit](#) of TRIAL International. “*The time has now come to deliver justice for the victims and their families*”.

The recent testimony casts further doubt on the UN/ECOWAS report which was [said to have concluded](#) that the Gambian government was not “directly or indirectly complicit” in the deaths and enforced disappearances. It blamed “rogue” elements in The Gambia’s security services “acting on their own” for the massacre. The UN/ECOWAS report has never been made public, however, despite repeated requests by the [victims](#) and by [five UN human rights experts](#).

Victims who testified before the truth commission at the current session included [Martin Kyere](#) from Ghana, the sole known survivor of the killings along the border between The Gambia and Senegal, Adama Conteh, the widow of the Gambian victim Lamin Tunkara and [Kehinde Enagameh](#) of Nigeria, whose brother, Paul Omozemoje Enagameh, was among those killed according to a [Nigerian investigation](#).

The TRRC, which will deliver its report in July 2021 is [tasked](#) with the “identification and recommendation for prosecution of persons who bear the greatest responsibility for human rights violations and abuses.” The Gambian government then must decide how to respond to the recommendations. |

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