

Gambian former Minister of Interior Ousman Sonko sentenced to 20 years in prison for crimes against humanity in historic Swiss trial

(Geneva, 15 May 2024) – Ousman Sonko, Gambian former Minister of Interior, was convicted today of crimes against humanity by the Swiss Federal Criminal Court (FCC). The FCC found him guilty of multiple crimes committed between 2000 and 2016, under the rule of Gambian ex-President Yahya Jammeh, and sentenced him to 20 years in prison. Mr. Sonko is the highest-ranking official ever convicted in Europe for international crimes under the principle of universal jurisdiction. His was also the second trial for crimes against humanity in Swiss judicial history.

In its verdict delivered today, the FCC found Ousman Sonko guilty of the killing of a perceived political opponent in 2000; of torture and illegal detention in connection with a coup plot in March 2006; of the killing of a politician in 2011 and of deprivations of liberty as well as acts of torture - including one killing - of peaceful demonstrators in 2016. The FCC further ordered Mr. Sonko to pay compensation to the plaintiffs, according to the prejudices suffered.

Ramzia Diab Ghanim, one of the ten plaintiffs in the case, comments today's verdict: *"This decision gives us the closure we had been waiting for long and shows that there is no hiding place for anyone who perpetrated international crimes in The Gambia, not even the highest-level individuals. However, I am disappointed that the Court failed to recognize that sexual violence is also an attack against us civilians."*

Despite this historic conviction, the Court abandoned all sexual offense charges related to 2000 onwards and 2006. Without judging that they did not take place, the Court considered that, in 2000 onwards, they were isolated from the context of attack directed against the civilian population and thus could not constitute crimes against humanity. The Court also found that electrical shocks imposed on the genitals should be not considered as sexual violence but as torture. TRIAL International regrets this decision and will continue to support the plaintiffs, should they decide to appeal these aspects.

Indeed, the parties may contest the judgment by lodging an appeal with the Court of Appeals of the FCC.

[Ousman Sonko](#) was arrested in Switzerland in January 2017, a day after [TRIAL International filed a criminal denunciation against him](#). Following an investigation that lasted over six years, [the Office of the Attorney General of Switzerland \(OAG\) indicted Mr. Sonko in April 2023](#). His trial took place in January and March 2024 before the FCC in Bellinzona.

The conviction was made possible thanks to Swiss law, which recognizes [universal jurisdiction](#) for certain serious crimes under international law, allowing for the prosecution of such crimes, regardless of where they were committed and of the nationality of either suspects or victims.

TRIAL International supported [nine plaintiffs who traveled to Switzerland in January 2024](#) to be heard by the court. As the trial was held in German, the organization has advocated strongly, but largely in vain, for the proceedings to be translated and made accessible to victims and the

Gambian population. TRIAL International also ensured the regular publication of [summaries of the hearings](#) throughout the proceedings.

“Today’s conviction sets a historic precedent in the fight against impunity worldwide”, stated Philip Grant, Director of TRIAL International. *“This verdict not only brings justice to the victims of these heinous crimes but also sends a strong signal to high-level perpetrators across the globe, including ministers: justice can catch up with you”,* he added.

This conviction is another step on the long road to justice for all victims of the atrocities committed during Jammeh's 1994-2016 reign of terror. It was the second trial based on the principle of universal jurisdiction for crimes committed in The Gambia. The first was the case of Bai L., [a former member of a paramilitary unit known as the “Junglers”](#), created by the former president. He was sentenced by a German court to life imprisonment for crimes against humanity in November 2023. Another alleged member of the same death squad, [Michael Correa, is scheduled to go on trial in the USA in September 2024](#). He is charged with torture and conspiracy to commit torture.

Recognizing Ousman Sonko’s role in the abuses committed during Jammeh’s dictatorship not only contributes to reducing impunity for the violations committed in The Gambia during Mr. Jammeh’s regime, but may also spur domestic prosecutions, propelling the transitional justice process initiated in 2017. In December 2021, the [final report of The Gambia’s Truth Reconciliation and Reparations Commission’s](#) concluded that Jammeh and 69 of his associates, including Ousman Sonko, had committed international crimes or grave human rights violations and called for their prosecution. The Gambian government published an implementation plan in May 2023. On 22-23 April 2024, the Gambian National Assembly thus passed a Special Prosecutor’s Office Bill and a Special Accountability Mechanism Bill. The Acts will have to be signed by the President before entering into force.

Link to PR of the FCC if already available.