



## **Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission**

# **Liberia: Next Steps Towards Accountability for War & Economic Crimes**

**Thursday, June 13, 2024**

**10:30 a.m. – 12:30 p.m.**

**Room 2360 Rayburn House Office Building**

### **As prepared for delivery**

Good morning.

The title of the hearing today is “Liberia: Next Steps Towards Accountability for War & Economic Crimes.”

The topic is timely.

Last month, on May 2, Liberian President Joseph Boakai signed an executive order to establish an Office of a War and Economic Crimes Court for Liberia.

The mandate of the Office is to “investigate, design and prescribe the methodology, mechanisms, and the processes for the establishment of a Special War Crimes Court,” as well as a National Anti-Corruption Court.

A war crimes court has been a long-standing demand of the victims and survivors of Liberia’s two civil wars. Between 1989 and 2003, as many as 250,000 Liberians are believed to have been killed, and a million displaced. Horrific atrocities were committed by all sides, including extrajudicial executions, torture, rape, forced labor and extortion.

The 2009 final report of Liberia’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission called for the creation of an extraordinary criminal tribunal to address these crimes. Unfortunately, the past two presidents dragged their feet.

So to see concrete progress now, 15 years later, is encouraging. This is good news, at a moment when there’s not a lot of that to go around.

Accountability in Liberia is an issue that has historically had strong bipartisan support. The Biden administration is already deeply engaged, led by Beth Van Schaack, our excellent ambassador for Global Criminal Justice. I was looking forward to receiving recommendations from our witnesses as to how Congress can best support what will surely be a groundbreaking initiative.

I have to say, because I just got the testimonies last night, and having read them, I think some of what the public might hear today, in my opinion, does not live up to the advertising.

There seems to be a clearly coordinated smear job, if you will. Several of the witnesses are going to attack certain human rights defenders and organizations by name. One will go further and attack the entire human rights movement, as well as Ambassador Van Schaack.

We have witnesses who will offer serious, grounded recommendations on the “next steps” we’re supposed to talk about, and I’m looking forward to that.

I think it’s worth reminding everyone that accountability requires due process. Presenting allegations that are not substantiated in a public forum in which those targeted have no voice – no opportunity to defend themselves – I think is the exact opposite of what human rights is about. I think those who engage in that kind of practice undercut our commitment to human rights.

So I want to be clear that some of what will be said today, I am going to take issue with, and I regret that.

Without objection, I move to submit for the record:

- a forthcoming statement from the State Department’s Office of Global Criminal Justice;
- an October 2021 press release from the U.S. Embassy in Liberia titled “Ambassador McCarthy Commends Hassan Bility, Global Justice Research Project;” and
- an August 2022 press release titled “U.S. Federal Court Awards Damages to Liberian Victims of Lutheran Church Massacre,” about a Pennsylvania court’s historic damages award to four survivors of one of the worst episodes of Liberia’s civil wars. The survivors were represented by the Center for Justice and Accountability with support from the Global Justice and Research Project.

And with that, I thank our witnesses for being here, and I yield back.