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Contact:

Suzana Grego, Director of Communications

International Center for Transitional Justice

Tel: 917.438.9331 | E-mail: sgrego@ictj.org

Ghanaian Government Releases Truth Commission Report

NEW YORK, May 16, 2005—On April 22, 2005, the government of Ghana released the final report of the National Reconciliation Commission (NRC), appointed in May 2002 to investigate past human rights abuses in the country. The report recommends reparations for victims and institutional reforms, and exposes some of the causes for the collapse of democracy in Ghana.

Over the course of 18 months of hearings, the NRC heard testimonies from more than 2000 victims, selected from over 4000 written submissions. Some 79 perpetrators also testified. Victims reported a wide range of violations dating back to Ghana's independence in 1957, including abductions, beatings, detentions, execution-style killings, sexual abuse, torture, and seizure of property. The Commission offered the first opportunity for Ghanaians to publicly relate their experiences of abuse, uncover the truth about the past, and seek redress.

Although Ghana is today considered to be a comparatively peaceful and democratic country, its post-independence history has been marred by authoritarian and military rule, with accompanying human rights abuses. Violations intensified under the four military regimes that ruled Ghana intermittently for more than 22 of the 27 years between 1966 and 1993. The Commission was mandated to focus its investigation on human rights violations that took place between 1957 and 1993, particularly on the periods of military rule.

The NRC final report reflects the Commission's work as it unfolded, both in public and private, and reveals important aspects of Ghana's history that were formerly not known to the public. The report recommends modest but meaningful reparations that have the potential to make a significant difference in the lives of victims. It also proposes a range of institutional reforms in the security services, the judiciary and other sectors.

In addition, the NRC report exposes the complex interplay between various institutions that led to the disintegration of democracy in Ghana, addressing the roles of the armed forces, universities, political parties, the media, and other institutional actors. The report also considers the impact of socio-economic disparities and colonial policies on the rise of widespread human rights abuse in the country.

Ghana's Attorney General and Minister of Justice, J. Ayikoi Otoo, has publicly endorsed the report's recommendations. In a white paper released with the NRC report, the government committed to establishing a reparations fund before December 2005 to begin the process of compensating victims for their suffering. Significantly, the Attorney General also rendered an official "apology to all those who had been wronged."

When the Commission was inaugurated in May 2002, South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu sent a congratulatory letter in which he wrote that "Ghana is a beacon of hope for Africa — a country that is building on its great history to chart a course for an even greater future. It would have been tempting for such a country to sweep old issues under the carpet, embrace its prosperity and move on with eyes averted from the past. In this context, the brave decision to refuse the easy road, to grapple with the past in order to create a better future, already demonstrates the courage and insight of the Ghanaian people in recognizing that the past will come back to haunt you if you do not address it."

"The NRC's final report is an important contribution to Ghana's growth as a democracy and the Ghanaian government should look to implement the report's recommendations as soon as possible," said ICTJ President Juan E. Méndez. "Other nations will look to Ghana as an example of how a past marked by abuses can become a signpost for human rights in the future; how a new trust can be built up and, in so doing, forge a new democratic and just future for Ghana."

An electronic version of the NRC report is available on the web, from the government of Ghana at www.ghana.gov.gh, and from the ICTJ at www.ictj.org.

The ICTJ in Ghana

Senior Associate Vasuki Nesiah and Documentation Officer Eric Darko have assisted the NRC through various phases of its work. Together with the Centre for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana), the ICTJ drafted a briefing paper on reparations law and policy to help the Commission develop its own recommendations. The Center also conducted capacity-building workshops and provided technical assistance in a range of different areas.

Notably, the Center convened an ongoing workshop on managing truth commissions that involved the Executive Secretary of the NRC and other commissioners and staff members. This initiative formed part of the ICTJ's Transitional Justice Alliance, a program working to ensure that countries like Ghana can benefit from the accumulated, shared knowledge of other nations that have undergone similar experiences.

In the final phases of the Commission's work, the ICTJ advised the NRC on plans for the dissemination of its final report and archiving of records. This included the preparation of memos outlining best practices learned from comparative experience in these areas. The Center has also collected material documenting the NRC's work (including video documentation of its public hearings) and is studying the impact of the Commission to identify lessons to be learned.

Since the release of the Commission's final report, the ICTJ has assisted with NRC follow-up initiatives. The Center has conducted research on lessons to be learned from the NRC process, as well as a survey on victim perceptions of the NRC. In addition, the ICTJ has met with the Attorney General and civil society groups to work on advancing reparations and institutional reform.

Through all its efforts, the ICTJ has aimed to provide assistance that will help ensure that the NRC's work is responsive to victims' rights and needs, and will have an enduring impact.

About the ICTJ

The ICTJ assists countries pursuing accountability for past mass atrocity or human rights abuse. The Center works in societies emerging from repressive rule or armed conflict, as well as in established democracies where historical injustices or systemic abuse remain unresolved. It provides comparative information, legal and policy analysis, documentation, and strategic research to justice and truth-seeking institutions, nongovernmental organizations, governments, and others.

The ICTJ assists in the development of strategies for transitional justice comprising five key elements: prosecuting perpetrators, documenting violations through nonjudicial means such as truth commissions, reforming abusive institutions, providing reparations to victims, and advancing reconciliation. The Center is committed to building local capacity and generally strengthening the emerging field of transitional justice, and works closely with organizations and experts around the world to do so.

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