

The 2011 Right Livelihood Awards

Speech by

Jacqueline Moudeina

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Allow me to begin by sincerely thanking you for the distinguished honor that you are bestowing upon me through the “Right Livelihood Award”. This Award recognizes me specifically but, beyond that, rewards all the human rights defenders in the world, and particularly in Africa.

Rest assured that it is a deeply encouraging sign for us, the human rights defenders, and especially for us, the women, who fight on a daily basis, in very difficult conditions, sometimes at the risk of our own lives, in a world where power is generally held by men. This Award gives us the courage to continue our different struggles on a road fraught with pitfalls.

Fighting for victims is in my genes. I am a rebel who from an early age has been indignant in the face of abuse, and I cannot bear injustice. I have always felt this way and always will, as long as those who suffer injustice are ignored by their leaders and as long as justice is selective. Many have tried to prevent me from doing my work; many have tried to intimidate me, to psychologically and physically threaten me. But I have come to understand, as Alexis Voinov said in Albert Camus’ *The Just Assassins*, that “it is not enough to speak out against injustice. You have to dedicate your life to fighting it.” Until now, no one has managed to discourage me or get the better of me. I will continue my fight.

I will seize this occasion to tell you about one aspect of our struggle for human rights: the fight against impunity.

In the past twenty years, the international community has undeniably made major strides in the fight against impunity for the worst criminals. But in Africa, much remains to be done. On this continent, impunity is a cancer that, with its corollary disease corruption, has infected our body politic and prevents us from realizing our true potential. We, the members of civil society, are fighting against this cancer, from Tunis to Harare, from Dakar to Khartoum, and in other places like Abidjan, Tripoli, and N'Djamena.

And yet, this justice that I am speaking about is not a science in the making. It isn't a utopia. It is the most fundamental form of justice: criminal justice that allows victims to wash away the worst horrors, that gives back dignity to men who were tortured, and that gives back courage to women who have lost hope.

You only need to look at our struggle to bring to justice the former dictator of my country, Hissène Habré, to understand that today, in the twenty-first century, more than sixty years after the Nuremberg trials, it is sometimes easier to resort to oppression than to abide by the law, easier to commit violence than to deliver justice!

Habré ruled Chad from 1982 to 1990 until his overthrow and exile in Senegal. During his reign, atrocities were committed on a large scale, waves of ethnic cleansing crashed down on individual groups, and torture was institutionalized. In 1992, a national Commission of Inquiry estimated that his regime was responsible for the death of more than 40,000 people and the disappearance of thousands of individuals, leaving in its wake innumerable widows and orphans.

The victims of the Habré regime, whom I represent, have fought tirelessly for justice for twenty-one years. But to date their struggle remains unfinished. Before leaving power, Hissène Habré emptied out Chad's national coffers and has skillfully used these funds in Senegal to weave himself a powerful network of protection. And so, instead of allowing the victims' case to be heard, Senegal and the African Union have subjected them to what Archbishop Desmond Tutu and 117 organizations from twenty-five African countries rightly denounced as an "interminable political and legal soap opera". I would say even more: a true stations of the cross for the victims.

- In January 2000, we filed a complaint against Hissène Habré in Senegal where he now lives. One month later, the decision by a Senegalese judge to indict Habré gave us real hope.
- However, following political interference, denounced by the United Nations, the Senegalese courts declared that they lacked jurisdiction.
- The victims then turned toward Belgium, which offered them a path to justice. After a four-year investigation, a Belgian judge issued an international arrest warrant against Habré in 2005. The victims once again felt real hope that they might see Hissène Habré brought to justice for his alleged crimes.
- But once again, the victims were disappointed when Senegal refused to extradite Habré to Belgium.
- In May 2006, the UN Committee against Torture condemned Senegal for its failure to act and enjoined Senegal to prosecute or extradite the former Chadian dictator.
- In July 2006, the heads of state and government leaders of the African Union gave Senegal a mandate to prosecute Habré “in the name of Africa”. It was another step forward.
- But our renewed hope to see Habré tried was short-lived. For four years, Senegal conditioned the start of investigations on the up-front payment by the international community of all the costs of the trial. When the international community committed to such payment, President Abdoulaye Wade of Senegal suddenly refused to execute the mandate conferred by the African Union and, in June 2011, finally declared that Senegal would not prosecute Hissène Habré.
- Since then, Belgium, a country to which I express thanks on behalf of all the victims, has renewed its extradition request.
- But now, the African Union talks of sending Habré to Rwanda and starting everything all over again. What an outrage! What a loss of time, when the surviving victims are dying one after the other! More than a dozen victims have passed away this year alone. A request to transfer Habré to Rwanda would entail many more years of waiting, the time that it would take for Rwanda to create an adequate legislative

framework, to conduct an investigation, and to issue an extradition request, whereas a trial in Belgium could take place quickly.

This is yet another dilatory tactic by the African Union, and calls into question the institution's commitment to the fight against impunity. With a few exceptions, African leaders, who say that they want to free themselves of the tutelage of international tribunals and the extradition requests of Western countries, are revealing that they form nothing more than a club of heads of states ensuring their own impunity.

It is time for Senegal to grant victims the justice that they have demanded by extraditing Habré to Belgium where he can be tried. The victims cannot wait any longer. Psychologically and physically, they have suffered severe trauma that has taken a heavy toll over the years.

The Chadian government itself, last July, requested, and I quote, that the “option to extradite Habré to Belgium to face trial be given priority”. Why is President Wade denying us justice? Why is the African Union failing to listen to the victims? Why do Senegal and the African Union not support the position of Chad, the country most directly concerned by this case, which is to see Habré tried in Belgium?

I would like to seize this opportunity today to voice the victims' plea, and to call on Senegal to extradite Habré to Belgium, to enable them at last to obtain justice.

This case isn't just about one man, however, but rather it is about one of the most tyrannical regimes of the last century. This regime is usually identified with one man, Habré, but we have not forgotten about his accomplices, the executioners and torturers who carried out the former dictator's orders. These ex-agents of Habré's terrifying political police, known as the “Documentation and Security Directorate”, must also face justice before the Chadian courts and must be removed from public service. This was already one of the main recommendations of the National Commission of Inquiry in 1992.

Some of these accomplices continue to haunt us by taunting and threatening us in our daily lives. But we will not drop this fight. I myself was targeted in 2001 for my involvement in the

Habré case. During a peaceful march in favor of democracy, a police squad attempted to assassinate me with a grenade. Its commander was none other than a former torturer against whom the victims had initiated a judicial procedure in Chad.

This event illustrates the educational value of a trial: how could this former torturer still believe that a dictator's weapon is more powerful than a judge's gavel? Despite this attempted assassination, I have never relented, and I will continue my efforts until Habré and the other executioners are brought to justice.

The challenge of our struggle, above and beyond the trial of one individual, is that of national union for a lasting peace in my country. Today, the trial of Hissène Habré and his accomplices would allow the Chadian people to begin, at last, the reconstruction of their country. And it is only at the end of this process that the Chadian people will be able to truly come together and enjoy a rebirth.

In the struggle to end the impunity of some powerful leaders, justice has so far been an elusive dream. But this Award, which you bestow on me today, is a tribute to the thousands of victims, widows, and orphans.

And it is to these individuals that I dedicate this Award. We will not give up. This Award reaffirms that we are right and encourages us to continue our fight against impunity.

Thank you for your attention.