

January 29, 2019

Harvard Activist Detained in South Sudan for Six Months ‘Could Be Put to Death,’ Lawyer Warns in Urgent Appeal to United Nations

By Chantal Da Silva

The United Nations has been asked to help free a Harvard graduate and prominent political activist detained by South Sudanese officials for more than half a year after criticizing the country's government on Twitter.

Calling on the U.N. to take action, international human rights lawyer Jared Genser has warned that Peter Biar Ajak "could be put to death" for crimes he did not commit if he remains in South Sudanese custody.

"I think that it's really important to bring to light the kind person that Peter really is," Genser told *Newsweek*. "He is an extraordinary soul and a man who is not only brilliant, but compassionate and charismatic and someone with the deepest commitment to bringing peace to South Sudan."

Yet, for more than six months, Ajak, a father of two young boys, has been left to languish in prison, despite having yet to be told why he was arrested in the first place.

The 35-year-old, who graduated from the Harvard Kennedy School in 2009 with a masters in public administration in international development and was working toward a Ph.D. at the University of Cambridge, at the time of his arrest, was detained by the country's National Security Service in Juba, South Sudan's capital, while boarding a plane to the city of Aweil in late July.

Ajak had been on his way to attend an event put together by the Red Army Foundation, an organization created by former child soldiers seeking to address social issues in South Sudan. However, family and friends told *Newsweek* they believe Ajak was initially targeted over tweets

he published criticizing South Sudan's government and calling on citizens to mobilize to "bring about peace."

In one such tweet, Ajak wrote: "We must stop thinking that the so-called leaders will bring peace [to] South Sudan. We, the great people of South Sudan, must organize ourselves to bring about the peace we deserve," according to his family.

Genser is now sounding the alarm that Ajak's life could be in peril after South Sudanese officials confirmed they are investigating him for serious crimes, including treason, "insurgency, banditry, sabotage" and "terrorism," despite the activist only having engaged "in what is clearly protected political speech and human rights advocacy."

"If charged and convicted of these crimes, he could be sentenced to death," Genser, who has previously represented Nobel Peace Prize Laureates Desmond Tutu and Aung San Suu Kyi, "warned in an urgent appeal for the United Nations Special Rapporteurs on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders and on Freedom of Opinion and Expression to take action.

"We respectfully request an urgent communication be sent by the Special Rapporteurs to the Government of South Sudan about Ajak's situation, emphasizing that peaceful political activism and speech cannot be criminalized or punished and that human rights defenders have the right to carry out their work without interference," the appeal states.

Genser told *Newsweek* that the U.N. has confirmed that it is reviewing his appeal. He said he also plans to submit a complaint to the U.N.'s Working Group On Arbitrary Detention, which will be asked to decide on whether South Sudan's detention of Ajak is "arbitrary or in violation of international law."

From there, the international human rights attorney said he hopes that international pressure on the South Sudanese government will help secure Ajak's release.

"I think we are likely to see a potential ratcheting up of pressure on his case," Genser said, adding that time is of the essence as concerns over Ajak's health condition grow.

In an interview with *Newsweek*, a close family member, who asked for their name to be withheld over fears of retribution, said that the political activist's health has already deteriorated significantly in the time he has been detained.

"He's lost so much weight, he really has just lost so much weight," the family member said. "He's not looking healthy at all. I'm worried. And the longer he stays, the worse he will become."

While the family member said Ajak had denied being subjected to any physical torture, he had described being forced to sleep on the floor for the majority of his time in custody and being given meager portions of food to subsist on.

"At this point, us family members are just desperate. We just want him out. We are trying everything that we can."

Ajak was born in South Sudan and first came to the U.S. in 2001 as one of the thousands of "Lost Boys" offered refuge in North America through resettlement programs.

Prince Boucher, a family friend of Ajak's, said he had thrived in the U.S. education system, receiving a master's degree from Harvard and later working toward a Ph.D. in philosophy at the University of Cambridge.

Boucher said Ajak had always been determined to return to South Sudan and use his growing influence to help change the political landscape in the country, where thousands of civilians have been killed in ethnic violence or as a result of perceived political alliances in the country's ongoing conflict.

As Human Rights Watch noted, South Sudan's government has "become increasingly intolerant and repressive, arbitrarily arresting politicians, members of civil society and journalists for extended periods, sometimes years."

"Lack of accountability for decades of violence during Sudan's long civil war continues to fuel the conflict," HRW says on its website, adding that "despite a fragile peace agreement in 2015, leaders on all sides have failed to reduce abuses by their forces and [to] hold them to account."

Holding South Sudan's leadership to account is exactly what Ajak has dedicated his life to doing, his family members and friends have said.

"He wants to create change," his family member said. "Peter came back [from South Sudan] with the same goal as many of us.... The one thing that has always stuck with us, and I'm sure with Peter, is the fact that we wanted to come back to our country and give as much as we can to make it a better place."

"He is not doing anything wrong in any way," the family member said. "He is doing his duty as a responsible citizen.... He has put himself at the front line for everybody else and said, 'No, we cannot just be quiet.'"

The family member said Ajak's loved ones have struggled to explain to his children, who are 6 and 2 years old, where their father is.

"The 2-year-old, especially in the last month, has just been calling out for his dad," they said. "He's becoming more aware. He's calling his name out a lot more than before."

So far, the family has been able to protect the boys from the knowledge that their father is being detained, fearing the effect the news will have on them. But if Ajak is not released soon, the family member said his children will eventually have to learn the truth.

"I knew it was going to be a long process to get him out, but I didn't realize it would reach six months," they said. "I know that the legal system in [South Sudan] is completely dead and that people are abusing power to the point that they can do whatever they feel like whenever they feel like, but I didn't think it would be this long....It's scary because you never know what this country is capable of."

Since Ajak's arrest, a number of U.S. Democratic senators, including Cory Booker, Chris Coons, Bob Menendez and Bob Casey have joined calls from human rights organizations, including Amnesty International, and colleges such as the U.K.'s Cambridge and Oxford universities, in demanding Ajak's release.

In a joint statement shared on Booker's website, the New Jersey senator and Coons, who are both members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said they were "deeply concerned" about Ajak's detention and the South Sudan government's "crackdown on government critics."

So far, however, Ajak's family says those calls have fallen on deaf ears. They have urged the international community to do more to help put pressure on South Sudan to release Ajak.

"What they are forgetting is that Peter's case is one in hundreds of thousands of other cases," one of Ajak's family members said. "If governments really care about human rights, then that should concern them."

This article has been updated with comments from international human rights lawyer Jared Genser.