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Harvard Activist Detained in South Sudan Charged with 'Insurgency, Sabotage' Despite UN Calls for His Immediate Release

By Chantal Da Silva

Peter Biar Ajak, a Harvard graduate and prominent political activist who has been detained by South Sudanese officials for nearly eight months, was charged with insurgency and sabotage, according to his lawyer.

In a statement sent to *Newsweek*, international human rights lawyer Jared Genser said Ajak, a father of two young boys who has been detained in South Sudan since July 28, had been handed "unequivocally false" charges from South Sudanese officials on Monday.

Genser said the charges had nothing to do with Ajak's initial arrest, for which South Sudanese officials have yet to provide an explanation.

Instead, the activist, who is a co-founder of the South Sudan Young Leaders Forum, which advocates for the resolution of conflict in South Sudan, has been charged over an October 2018 episode in which other detainees in the "Blue House," the headquarters of the country's National Security Service, where Ajak is being held, launched a "spontaneous armed protest to draw attention to rights violations in the prison."

Ajak, who 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, "was not involved in any way in the planning or execution of the protest," Genser said.

The human rights lawyer said that at one point during the protest, an armed detainee told Ajak to give an interview to Voice of America Radio, an order that Ajak complied with. "The story that was published afterwards noted that Ajak was 'unarmed and said he is hiding in a bunker along with other unarmed civilians'," Genser said.

Still, Genser said Ajak was one of several detainees being held responsible for the incident, with the Harvard graduate still having yet to face any charges connected with his original arrest.

Ajak, 35, graduated from the Harvard Kennedy School in 2009 with a masters in public administration in international development and had been working toward a Ph.D. at the University of Cambridge at the time of his arrest.

He was detained in July by South Sudan's National Security Service in Juba, South Sudan's capital, while boarding a plane to the city of Aweil to attend an event organized by the Red Army Foundation, an organization created by former child soldiers seeking to address social issues in South Sudan.

However, family and friends of the activist previously told *Newsweek* they believed Ajak had been targeted by South Sudan's government over tweets he published criticizing the country's leadership and calling on its citizens to mobilize "to bring about peace."

Earlier this month, in a statement released by the United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, a group of U.N. experts, including David Kaye, the U.N.'s Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, called on South Sudan authorities to "immediately free human rights defender" Ajak.

"We condemn in the strongest terms Mr. Ajak's continued detention and urge the South Sudanese authorities to release him immediately," the United Nations experts said.

"There is a clear trend in the use of national security and counter-terrorism legislation by States to criminalize free expression and the legitimate work of human rights defenders, in stark contradiction to their obligations under international human rights law," they said.

"States must refrain from using overly broad legislation to criminalize the legitimate right to freedom of expression," the experts said.