

South Sudan: UN experts strongly urge immediate release of human rights defender Peter Biar Ajak

GENEVA (6 March 2019) - South Sudan must immediately free human rights defender Peter Biar Ajak, who was arrested seven months ago and is allegedly under investigation for treason and other purportedly national security-based offences, say UN human rights experts*.

Mr. Ajak, who was arrested at Juba International Airport on 28 July 2018, could face the death penalty if he is convicted.

“We condemn in the strongest terms Mr. Ajak’s continued detention and urge the South Sudanese authorities to release him immediately,” the UN experts said.

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

Peter Biar Ajak, who is also a political commentator, is a co-founder of the South Sudan Young Leaders’ Forum (SSYLF), a coalition of more than 70 young people advocating for the resolution of the conflict. In the weeks leading up to his arrest, he had posted a number of Tweets criticising the ongoing violence and advocating change.

His detention has been beset with irregularities from the beginning. When taken into custody, he was not informed of the reasons for his arrest, nor was he permitted to meet legal representatives for some seven weeks. Mr. Ajak’s contact with his legal representatives and his family remains sparse. Sources say he is getting only one meal a day.

Mr. Ajak is also said to be under investigation for allegedly publishing false statements prejudicial to South Sudan under Section 75 of the Penal Code, which in itself provides for a sentence of up to 20 years in prison.

“States must refrain from using overly broad legislation to criminalise the legitimate right to freedom of expression. While criminal sanctions should never result from alleged defamation, the penalty provided under Section 75 is patently disproportionate and violates South Sudan’s international obligations,” the experts said.

ENDS

()The UN experts: **Mr. David Kaye** (USA), Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression; **Ms Fionnuala Ní Aoláin** (Ireland), Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism; **Mr. Seong-Phil Hong** (Republic of Korea), Chair-Rapporteur, Working Group on Arbitrary Detention; **Mr. Clément Nyaletsossi Voule** (Togo), Special Rapporteur on the rights to peaceful assembly and of association; **Mr. Michel Forst** (France), Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders.*

The Special Rapporteurs are part of what is known as the Special Procedures of the Human Rights Council. Special Procedures, the largest body of independent experts in the UN Human

Rights system, is the general name of the Council's independent fact-finding and monitoring mechanisms that address either specific country situations or thematic issues in all parts of the world. Special Procedures experts work on a voluntary basis; they are not UN staff and do not receive a salary for their work. They are independent from any government or organization and serve in their individual capacity.

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