

Landmark trial against former Gambian Minister of Interior for crimes against humanity to start in Switzerland

(Geneva, 4 January 2024) – The trial of Ousman Sonko, former Gambian Minister of Interior, will open before the Swiss Federal Criminal Court on 8 January 2024 and last until 30 January. Ousman Sonko is accused of multiple counts of crimes against humanity, allegedly committed under the regime of former Gambian President Yahya Jammeh. TRIAL International filed the criminal complaint against Ousman Sonko in January 2017.

The Swiss prosecuting authorities have charged Mr. Sonko with a range of heinous acts: the killing of a political opponent in 2000; acts of sexual violence between 2000 and 2002, as well as in 2005; involvement in torture and illegal detention related to a coup plot in March 2006; and the murder of a politician in 2011. The Office of the Attorney General also accuses Ousman Sonko of having co-perpetrated deprivation of liberty and acts of torture of peaceful demonstrators in 2016, when he was Minister of the Interior. These acts have been qualified by the Swiss prosecutor as [crimes against humanity](#).

"*This trial is a significant moment in Swiss judicial history, being only [the second trial for crimes against humanity in the country](#). Ousman Sonko will also be the highest-ranking state official ever to be tried for international crimes under the principle of [universal jurisdiction in Europe](#)", said Leslie Haskell, President of TRIAL International. Under this principle, States have the possibility to prosecute the perpetrators of international crimes on their territory, regardless of where the crimes were committed or the nationality of the perpetrators and victims.*

TRIAL International is supporting nine plaintiffs who will travel all the way to Bellinzona to be heard by the court. Unfortunately, a tenth passed away in October 2023, due to lasting consequences of her mistreatment at the time. This trial shines a beacon of hope for victims of the atrocities committed during Jammeh's 1994-2016 reign of terror. On 30 November 2023 already, [a former member of a paramilitary unit known as "Junglers"](#), created by the former President, was sentenced by a German court to life imprisonment for crimes against humanity, in relation to two murders and an attempted murder. Another alleged member of the same death squad, [Michael Correa, is scheduled to stand trial in Denver, USA, in September 2024](#). He faces charges of torture and conspiracy to commit torture.

"*While the transitional justice process in The Gambia remains too slow, these trials in Germany and Switzerland are finally providing the closure that the victims have been waiting for too long now*", said one of the plaintiffs, whose identity remains hidden at this stage. Indeed, a possible recognition of Ousman Sonko's role in the abuses committed during Jammeh's dictatorship will not only contribute to reducing impunity for the violations that took place in The Gambia during Mr. Jammeh's regime, but may also spur domestic prosecutions, propelling the transitional justice process initiated in 2017.

The proceedings will be in German and open to the public and the media. However, there will be no interpretation provided other than when the defendant, the victims and English-speaking witnesses will take the stand. TRIAL International expresses regret over this decision, which will limit the ability of plaintiffs, journalists and the Gambian community to fully comprehend and report on the proceedings. Upholding the principle that "justice must not only be done but be seen to be done," TRIAL International advocates for meaningful access to such a historic trial for victims and the affected Gambian communities.