

Accra, Ghana, July 21 (Infosplusgabon) – The families of more than 50 Ghanaian and other West African migrants killed in Gambia and Senegal 15 years ago have yet to learn the full truth and obtain justice concerning the massacre, 11 human rights organizations said on Tuesday.

Amid growing evidence that the murders were carried out by Gambian security force members acting on the orders of then-president Yahya Jammeh, the groups called for an international investigation of the massacre.

“A credible international investigation is needed if we’re ever going to get to the bottom of the 2005 massacre of West African migrants and create the conditions to bring those responsible to justice,” said Emeline Escafit, legal adviser at TRIAL International, one of the human rights organisations. “Until now, information has come out in dribs and drabs, year after year, from different sources.”

Human Rights Watch (HRW), another of the human rights advocates, noted in a statement on its website that on 22 July, 2005, Gambia security forces arrested the migrants, who were bound for Europe, after their boat landed in Gambia, on suspicion of involvement in a coup attempt.

Over the next 10 days, almost all the migrants, including about 44 Ghanaians, 9 Nigerians and 2 Togolese, and nationals of Cote d’Ivoire and Senegal, plus one Gambian, were killed in Gambia or taken across the border into Senegal and shot and their bodies dumped in wells.

“I have been fighting for 15 years for truth and for justice for my companions who were killed,” said Martin Kyere from Ghana, who jumped into the forest from a moving truck carrying other detained migrants who were killed shortly thereafter.

When Kyere returned to Ghana he began rallying the victims'. “African leaders say that migrants should be treated with dignity, but for us, honouring their memory means justice, not lies and cover-ups.”

The statement said while several Gambian soldiers have confessed to the murders and said they acted on Jammeh’s orders, the chain of events leading to the killings is unclear. There is still no information on exactly where migrants were buried in Senegal nor are all the victims’ identities known, including 8 of the 9 Nigerians. Gambia returned 6 bodies to Ghana in 2009, but the families question whether the bodies were those of the murdered migrants.

The human rights groups said that because the crimes took place across two countries, Gambia and Senegal, involve victims from six countries, and a primary suspect, Jammeh, now resides in Equatorial Guinea, an international investigation would be best placed to uncover all the facts.

They said that if neither Gambia nor another country like Ghana would conduct a transnational investigation, they should support an independent inquiry that could investigate in all the countries concerned.

Previous efforts to investigate the massacre have repeatedly been stymied or flawed, the human rights groups said. Following initial campaigning by Kyere and Ghanaian families and rights groups, Ghana attempted to investigate the killings in 2005 and 2006, but was blocked by the then-Jammeh government.

In 2008, the United Nations and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) formed a joint investigative team, which produced a report in April 2009.

The UN wrote that the report concluded that the Gambian government was not “directly or indirectly complicit” in the deaths and disappearances, blaming it on “rogue” elements in Gambia’s security services “acting on their own”.

The joint report has never been made public, however, despite repeated requests by the victims and by five UN human rights monitors. The Gambian and Ghanaian governments have said that they do not have copies.

The human rights groups said that even though the UN and ECOWAS had delayed the search for justice for 10 years by wrongly clearing Jammeh in 2009, the fall of Jammeh combined with the new revelations provide the opportunity to move forward.

“The UN and ECOWAS can make a real contribution now by releasing their report and working with Gambia, Ghana, and Senegal to uncover exactly how this crime was committed so that the victims can have justice at long last,” said Reed Brody, senior counsel at Human Rights Watch and an author of the 2018 report. “With Jammeh out of power, getting to the truth is just a matter of political will.”

Families of the Ghanaian victims have called for Ghana to investigate and prosecute those responsible for the killings under its laws against enforced disappearances.

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