

Press Release

Nigerian Ijaw group petitions Ramaphosa for the release of militant leader, Okah

A Nigerian organization representing the Ijaw people, the dominant ethnic nationality in the country's oil-rich Niger Delta, filed a petition to South African President Cyril Ramaphosa today, demanding the immediate release of jailed militant leader Henry Okah.

Okah, 60, is serving a 24-year jail sentence over two car bombings in Nigeria in 2010 claimed by the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), an armed group fighting for more local control of the region's resources and against environmental pollution from oil production.

The Ijaw Nation Forum, which represents people of the ethnic nationality in Nigeria and the diaspora, in its petition calls for the "prompt, unconditional, and safe release of our son, Henry Okah, who has been unjustly incarcerated in South Africa since the 2nd of October 2010." Okah, who was a South African resident before his imprisonment, is widely regarded as the leader of the armed group.

The petition's signatories include traditional rulers, community leaders, minority and environmental rights activists from the Niger Delta region. They include Alfred Diette-Spiff, the traditional ruler of Brass, where Nigeria has an oil export terminal, and a former governor of Rivers state, as well as Felix Tuodolo, a former president of the Ijaw Youths

Council, and individuals of Ijaw ethnic nationality both in Nigeria and abroad.

The Ijaw Nation Forum said Okah was wrongly arrested by South Africa's Directorate of Priority Crimes, also known as the Hawks, in 2010, leading inevitably to a flawed trial. "That was an original error because it was the responsibility of the South African branch of Interpol to effect such an arrest as prescribed by section 15(6) of the Protection of Constitutional Democracy Against Terrorist and Related Bombings Act No. 33 of 2004 (POCDATARA)." That is the law under which Okah was tried.

"The charges for which Mr. Okah is currently detained in a South African correctional facility pertain to events that unfolded due to social unrest and a protracted armed conflict, as defined by international humanitarian law, within Nigerian territory," the group noted in the petition. "It thus stands to reason that in the absence of any formal complaint from the Nigerian state, Mr Okah's arrest, trial and unlawful imprisonment constitute a hostile and unwarranted intervention by South Africa in an armed conflict in Nigeria."

"The armed conflict in the Niger Delta has at all times been a quest for self-determination, a manifestation of a people's collective will to resist oppression, aggression and subjugation by a collaboration of the Nigerian state and Western multinational corporations extracting petroleum riches from our land," the Ijaw Nation Forum said. "It should be noted that the armed militant groups in the Niger Delta that have been loyal to Okah have fought for the cause of the Izon (Ijaw)

Nation in particular and the entire populace of the region in general.”

The group accused the South African authorities of subjecting Okah in the past 15 years to “extreme psychological and physical torture which has left him with irreversible facial deformity and trauma.” They also allege that Okah was dispossessed of legitimately acquired property while his family was subjected to repeated abuse and harassment.

“We find it both ironic and egregious that an African National Congress government that is a product of an armed struggle against an oppressive regime is aligning itself with the suppression and repression of the oppressed people of the Niger Delta by an alliance of the Nigerian state and international corporations,” the group said in the petition.

“Consider, for a moment, how it would appear if the leader of Umkonto we Sizwe (ANC’s military wing) were arrested and tried in another African country for the actions of its fighters, in the service of apartheid and hold-mining interests.”

The Ijaw Nation Forum said while it abhors violence against the Nigerian state, it recognizes that people like Okah have legitimate and compelling reasons for fighting for their people’s freedom. “Consequently, we shall no longer remain passive observers while an individual who has dedicated the greater part of his life to championing justice for his people continues to be subjected to an even graver injustice,” the group said. “We, therefore, call for Okah’s immediate release.”

This press statement was released by the Ijaw Nation Forum. Founded in 1995, the group is dedicated to discourse and ideas to protect the common interest of the Ijaw and the Niger Delta. For further information contact the group by phone: +3348136718232, or email: webcrier@yahoo.com