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African Union Tells Senegal to Try Ex-Dictator of Chad

By LYDIA POLGREEN

BANJUL, Gambia, July 2 — A court in Senegal must try the former dictator of Chad for human rights violations he is accused of committing during his eight-year rule, an African Union panel said Sunday.

Senegal's president, Abdoulaye Wade, said at the African Union summit meeting here that he would comply with the request.

The decision appeared to bring to a conclusion the winding search for a court to try Hissène Habré, the Chadian dictator who is accused of widespread atrocities from 1982, when he took power in a coup, to 1990, when he was deposed in a coup. An inquiry overseen by his successor, Idriss Déby, accuses him of killing 40,000 people and torturing 200,000 others in Chad. Mr. Habré has lived in Senegal since his ouster.

"This is a victory for human rights in Africa," said Ismaïl Hachim Abdallah, a victim of torture at the hands of Mr. Habré's government and one of the accusers in the case. "We hope to find justice at last."

Mr. Habré was first charged with human rights crimes in 2000 by a Senegalese court, but the court later ruled it did not have the authority to try him, which seemed to doom the case. Then in 2005 a Belgian court issued an arrest warrant for Mr. Habré under a law that allows Belgian courts to prosecute crimes against its citizens wherever they are committed.

But Senegal refused to extradite Mr. Habré to Belgium, instead asking the African Union to study the issue. A panel of legal experts was formed, and after much discussion, it issued a decision on Sunday that Mr. Habré should be tried in Senegal. It recommended that Senegal pass a law allowing its courts to have jurisdiction over the crimes Mr. Habré is accused of committing.

Reed Brody, a lawyer for Human Rights Watch who has worked to prosecute Mr. Habré, praised the decision, saying "the victims have waited 16 years to get to court." He added that Senegal should act quickly to begin the trial.

Mr. Wade had faced intense political pressure within Senegal not to extradite Mr. Habré, in large part because the idea of extraditing an African leader to be judged by a European court did not sit well, especially given the role European colonialism has played in fomenting Africa's troubles. Mr. Wade said a trial in Africa was more appropriate.

"Africans must be judged in Africa," Mr. Wade told reporters at the African Union summit meeting. "That is why I refused to extradite Hissène Habré to Belgium."

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