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Nicolas Bouvier Award 2007

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## The long fight to judge Hissène Habré

InfoSud



Reed Brody with victims of Hissène Habré in 2008

Photo: Victor Affaro

**Interview by Sylvain Savolainen Infosud** – Ever since (former Argentine President) Augusto Pinochet was charged in 1998, international justice has been riding high although there have been few other tangible successes. One them is the battle to bring former Chadian dictator Hissène Habré to trial. It is a battle that Reed Brody, the current spokesman of Human Rights Watch, is fighting along with torture victim Suleymane Guengueng and the association of Chadian victims.

On Sunday (March 9), the International Human Rights Film Festival (FIFDH) is devoting the evening to the issue of 'Crimes against Humanity' to be followed by a debate with the man described as the 'dictator hunter'.

### Mr. Brody, how is the trial of Hissène Habré proceeding?

Since Senegal agreed to try Hissène Habré, eighteen months ago, things have, dragged. The preparatory investigation by the judge has not even begun. We have however, provided the Senegalese authorities with all the information we have, including CD-Roms of thousands of documents from Hissène Habré's political police, so this is pretty solid proof.

### Where are you with regards to funding ?

Senegal has said it would provide the funding for the trial but that it counts on the international community to contribute. The EU has accepted this in principle, as has Switzerland and France. The Netherlands, Canada, the US are also committed. So the principle has been agreed. As for the African Union it has appointed a special envoy to accompany and to follow the trial. That said, the final budget has still not been fixed.

On our side, we are functioning with an annual budget of around 150,000 dollars and

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the contribution from the staff of Human Rights Watch. That amounts to a million dollars over the past 8 years.

**We see in Cambodia, that death is claiming both victims and the accused. Is this trial not coming too late?**

That is a concern of the victims. The fall of Hissène Habré, goes back 17 years. Since then many of the survivors and plaintiffs have died. In a country where life expectancy is 46, you can see what 17 years represents for those who have survived the crimes. There is no legal obstacle to the trial. There is no political obstacle. There is not a State that openly defends Hissène Habré. It is therefore important that justice is done before it is too late.

**What precedent can we hope to see from the trial of Hissène Habré?**

Above all a political precedent: it will reinforce the idea that you can stop cycles of violence, brutality and impunity. Current events in Chad are testimony to how important it is that leaders feel threatened by the judicial process. The big difference between the case of Hissène Habré, and other big international criminal trials today is that the campaign for justice has been led by civil society.

**In the documentary, you speak about extremely solid and documented proof. Such as what?**

These documents mostly come from prison authorities who have revealed torture. For example, you can read that 'following intense interrogation, the subject admitted this' or 'while forcing him to tell the truth, the subject died'. When crimes of this nature are committed there is always a need to justify ones actions to ones superiors. In fact it is a question of accountability and bureaucracy.

**There is a troubling sequence in the documentary. We see you in the documentary pose with the photo of Idris Déby, then President of Chad, who was head of the army under Hissène Habré before toppling him. You shake his hand very warmly and thank him warmly. Does your unrelenting pursuit of this matter involve such compromises to obtain results?**

We decided in 2001, after a first failure in the proceedings in Senegal, that we would turn to Idris Déby and current Senegalese President (Abdoulaye) Wade to persuade them that it was not in their interests to oppose the trial. That does not mean we absolve them. HRW has not spared Idris Déby. Look at my statements three weeks ago and those of HRW on the events in Chad. But we have been able to deal with Idris Déby. That meeting would probably not have taken place today. But in January 2007, even if the President of Chad was not a great democrat, he is not someone you need to avoid associating with.

**In your office you have an illustrated map of the world of dictators and torturers to investigate. Amongst them are Donald Rumsfeld and Henri Kissinger. You are an American and HRW is based in NewYork. Wouldn't it have been more logical for you to attack them instead?**

I am the author of a 2005 report entitled « United States : Getting away with torture ? » which brings an accusation against the ex-Secretary of State Donald Rumsfeld, the former director of the CIA Georges Tenet, Ricardo Sanchez and Major General Miller. This report demands that a criminal investigation be initiated against them. With HRW, we have supported legal proceedings filed against Mr. Rumsfeld. I think that this trial would be even more important than that of Hissène Habré. But we know how the world works, the trial of Donald Rumsfeld is difficult and it's deplorable. But this should not give rise to immobility. One must denounce the crimes of Hissène Habré as well as those of Guantanamo. That is what I am doing.

*Translated from French by Claire Doole*

On Sunday 9th March at 18.15 (Room CAC Langlois), the FIFDH film festival is showing the documentary, "The Dictator Hunter" by Klaartje Quirijns. Followed by "Uganda Rising" by Jesse James Miller and Peter McCormack at 20.15. These documentaries will be followed by a debate involving Reed Brody, spokesman for HRW, Betty Bigombe, former Ugandan Minister and negotiator with the Lords Resistance Army, Pierre Hazan, Researcher and writer. The debate will be moderated by Sylve Arsever from Le Temps newspaper.

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See FIFDH: <http://www.fifdh.org/>

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**Gabriel** **The long fight to judge Hissène Habré**  
Pinochet was Chilean.  
10 March 2008

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