

Tribunal Indicts Liberia's Leader

Taylor Charged With War Crimes During Long Conflict in Sierra Leone

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Thursday, June 5, 2003; Page A22

A U.N.-backed war crimes court yesterday indicted Liberian President Charles Taylor on charges of crimes against humanity for his role in the 10-year civil war in Sierra Leone and issued an international warrant for his arrest.

Taylor, who has been involved in a series of wars throughout West Africa as a rebel leader and then as Liberia's elected president, was charged with "bearing the greatest responsibility for war crimes, crimes against humanity and serious violations of international law," said David Crane, an American who is chief prosecutor for the Special Court for Sierra Leone.

The indictment, the second ever issued against a sitting head of state, was announced as Taylor arrived in Accra, Ghana, for peace talks with Liberian rebels waging war against his government. No attempt was made to arrest him, however, and Taylor flew home on a Ghanaian government plane after the opening ceremony.

Sierra Leone's war, which killed tens of thousands, erupted in 1991 after Taylor helped to organize the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), a rebel movement that sought to topple the Sierra Leonean government and control the country's lucrative diamond fields. Already waging a rebellion in his native Liberia, the American-educated Taylor trained and armed the RUF, which gained international notoriety for hacking off the limbs of civilians, forcing children to become guerrillas and employing rape as a weapon of terror.

Taylor's support for the RUF continued after 1997, when the Liberian war ended and he was elected president. Taylor and his inner circle reaped hundreds of millions of dollars from the illicit trade in diamonds and other commodities, according to U.N. investigators, U.S. officials and intelligence reports, and two years ago the United Nations banned Taylor, his family and all senior government officials from international travel. His government also is under an international weapons embargo and cannot legally sell diamonds on the world market.

After the war in Sierra Leone ended in 2001 and the RUF disarmed, the special court was formed with a mandate to prosecute those deemed most responsible for the crimes committed during the conflict. Eleven others have already been indicted, and seven are in custody.

"My office was given an international mandate by the United Nations and the Republic of Sierra Leone to follow the evidence impartially wherever it leads," Crane said in a statement. "It led unequivocally to Taylor."

The indictment charges Taylor with directing a joint criminal conspiracy that included terrorizing the civilian population, unlawful killings, sexual and physical violence, the use of child soldiers, abductions, forced labor, looting, burning and the murder of U.N. peacekeepers. The only other active head of state to be indicted for war crimes by an international court was Slobodan Milosevic, who was president of Yugoslavia when a U.N. court charged him with crimes against humanity in May 1999.

Taylor's indictment was issued March 7 in Sierra Leone and held under seal until yesterday. Court officials said they had no way of arresting Taylor in Liberia, so they waited until he traveled to Ghana before unveiling the indictment.

Although officials in Ghana said yesterday that they had not received any request to arrest Taylor, Crane said the court and Interpol both had served the Ghanaian government with the warrant.

"Obviously this is an embarrassing incident, but as far as I am concerned, the focus should not be on our embarrassment," Ghanaian Foreign Minister Nana Akufo-Addo told reporters at the Accra airport as Taylor's flight departed. "I believe the action of the prosecutor in unsealing the indictment at this particular moment has not been helpful to the peace process."

The conference, attended by Presidents Thabo Mbeki of South Africa and Olusegun Obasanjo of Nigeria and several other African heads of state, is aimed at ending Liberia's latest civil war. More than half the country is under the control of rebels seeking to topple Taylor.

As a concession to the growing pressure on him, Taylor -- while not mentioning the indictment -- said he would consider immediately forming a government of national unity. He also hinted that he might be willing to step down at the end of his term early next year.

"If President Taylor removes himself for the Liberians, will that bring peace?" Taylor said at the ceremony, according to news services. "If so, I will remove myself."

News services reported that Liberia's capital, Monrovia, was gripped by panic when news of the indictment became public. Stores closed, parents rushed to pick up their children and Taylor's elite Anti-Terrorist Unit took to the streets. Reuters reported that Taylor called the state radio station to tell Liberians he was not under arrest and that he expected to return to Monrovia soon.

Court officials said they were eager to apprehend Taylor because he has systematically sought to eliminate crucial witnesses who could testify against him. At least four such potential witnesses have been killed, and several others have been placed in the court's witness protection program.

Last month, Taylor's forces killed Sam Bockarie, a rebel commander who was also under indictment by the special court. Bockarie, known as "Commander Mosquito," was one of Taylor's top field commanders in both Sierra Leone and Liberia. After killing Bockarie, Taylor's troops then executed his wife, his mother and at least three of his children, according to diplomatic sources and human rights groups.

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