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## Besieged Liberian

By SOMINI SENGUPTA

MONROVIA, Liberia, July 10 — "Politicians have to make choices in these circumstances," the British ambassador to the United Nations, Jeremy Greenstock, said in Ivory Coast last week.

The circumstances Ambassador Greenstock referred to concerned Charles Taylor, the besieged president of Liberia who has been indicted as a war criminal. Many who are eager to stop the killing in Liberia want his rapid departure from office, and there is concern that he may not leave unless he is assured that he will not be tried before a court in neighboring Sierra Leone for crimes against humanity.

President Bush, for example, has repeatedly called on Mr. Taylor to step down, but has not said whether he must stand trial.

The United Nations secretary general, Kofi Annan, welcomed Mr. Taylor's offer to step down, but likewise said nothing explicitly about his facing the tribunal, established last year to bring to justice to those who "bear the greatest responsibility" for a decade-long war in Sierra Leone.

"This is a subject that has divided everybody," said Abou Moussa, the secretary general's special representative for Liberia.

The question of the indictment is likely to haunt Mr. Bush's meeting with the Nigerian president, Olusegun Obasanjo, in Abuja, the Nigerian capital, on Friday. Mr. Obasanjo has offered Mr. Taylor "safe haven," but has not said whether that would include shielding him from prosecution.

One school of thought suggests that, for the sake of stability in Liberia, the prosecution of Mr. Taylor ought perhaps to be reconsidered. Another holds that this American-educated former guerrilla leader, who stands accused of murder, rape, abduction and a host of crimes against humanity in connection with the war in Sierra Leone, must at all costs be brought to justice.

"The precedent of removing an indictment against Taylor would be disastrous for years to come in encouraging impunity and making a mockery of attempts at establishing accountability for crimes against humanity throughout the world," said John Prendergast of the International Crisis Group, a research and advocacy organization, in Washington. "Every tin-pot dictator who is responsible for war crimes will be emboldened in the knowledge that he can sue for peace in this manner."

Just who will come to keep the peace in a post-Taylor Liberia remains uncertain. On Wednesday, a Security Council delegation that recently toured West Africa recommended a multinational

force of 5,000 troops to be led by a country outside West Africa. And the organization of West African countries announced plans to send 1,000 peacekeeping troops to Liberia in two weeks.

Today in Pretoria, South Africa, Secretary of State Colin L. Powell said a decision on whether to send American troops would be made within days.

The Special Court for Sierra Leone, as it is called, was established by the government of Sierra Leone and the United Nations, but is independent. Its judges are citizens of Sierra Leone and other countries.

The court unsealed a 17-count indictment against Mr. Taylor last month.

The indictment accuses Mr. Taylor of having financed and trained a rebel group, the Revolutionary United Front, as part of "a joint criminal enterprise" seeking control of the diamond wealth of Sierra Leone. The indictment also charges Mr. Taylor with responsibility for the atrocities committed by the rebels — murder, rape, enslavement, the use of child soldiers and looting — as "part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against the civilian population of Sierra Leone."

Mr. Taylor dismisses the indictment as baseless and politically motivated. His aides say they plan to go to court in The Hague to have the charges dropped. They reserve their rage for the prosecutor, an American named David M. Crane.

"He is a little white boy from somewhere in America who still believes in colonialism and thinks he can come in and try a sitting African president," Benoni W. Urey, a close adviser of Mr. Taylor, said recently.

Charles Mambu, the spokesman for the Civil Society Movement of Sierra Leone, said, "We don't look at it that way."

"In a case of democracy, a head of state should not be above the law," Mr. Mambu said in an interview from Freetown, Sierra Leone's capital. "We are looking forward to his being brought to Sierra Leone to face charges."

In recent days, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have issued statements urging Mr. Obasanjo not to shield an indicted war criminal from prosecution.

Mr. Obasanjo, during a visit here last Sunday, did not explicitly say that Mr. Taylor would be immune from prosecution in Nigeria, but he warned that he would not be "harassed" by any country or organization.

Nigerians offered a mixed verdict on Mr. Obasanjo's offer. "It is regrettable, it is condemnable, and it should be opposed by Nigerian people," said Femi Aborishade, general secretary of the National Conscience Party, an opposition group.

Others were less certain.

"As a member of the international community, we should respect international commitments and conventions," said Festus Okoye, chairman of the pro-democracy Transition Monitoring Group. "But if giving Charles Taylor an exit passage will save ordinary Liberians from disaster, from maiming, from all the problems of war, then it's worthwhile."

These are choices politicians must make, as Ambassador Greenstock noted. "But we hope," he added, "whatever choices are made in the region or anywhere else, impunity for those who commit gross abuses of human rights in any situation will not be allowed."

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