

Saving Liberia

Liberia has long been cruelly governed, but the past week has marked a crisis. Rebels have advanced to the outskirts of Monrovia, the capital. Tens of thousands of people have fled into the capital, but Monrovia is in chaos. Humanitarian workers warn that conditions could produce epidemics of cholera and other diseases.

What Liberia needs immediately is for a precarious cease-fire to hold. What it needs in the longer term is an end to warlordism — beginning with the capture of its president, Charles Taylor, an indicted war criminal, Africa's Slobodan Milosevic.

Neighboring nations, led by Ghana, expect the government and rebels to sign an agreement today calling for an interim government, new elections and the resignation of Mr. Taylor. If this occurs, Liberia will need an outside force to enforce the peace. Soldiers could arrive rapidly from the current United Nations mission in neighboring Sierra Leone, which now numbers 13,000 but is scheduled for reduction. But other troops must be new. Liberia was founded by freed American slaves. The United States has a special responsibility to help.

Nothing will change in Liberia, however, if warlords continue to run the nation. A crucial step toward changing the balance of power in Liberia came recently when a United Nations-backed war crimes tribunal in Sierra Leone revealed that in March it had indicted President Taylor. The court is attempting to do justice for the mass killings, mutilations and rapes that took place during a war that devastated the nation in the 1990's. Mr. Taylor plundered Sierra Leone's diamonds and Liberia's timber for personal profit. His coup attempt in Liberia in 1989 began a civil war that killed more than 150,000. He was elected president in 1997 after it became clear he would take power by force. He has repeatedly violated past promises of peace. Even if he did step down, he would likely return to the bush and mount another guerrilla war.

The best that can be said about the rebels, who now hold two-thirds of Liberia, is that they are not Charles Taylor. But their approach toward war — kidnapping boys as soldiers and women as sex slaves, extorting civilians — is no significant departure. The rebels' chief stated demand

has been Mr. Taylor's departure and new elections. Negotiators should hold them to their word and prohibit those responsible for atrocities from holding power or running for office.

The Sierra Leone prosecutor unsealed Mr. Taylor's indictment in the hopes that he would be arrested on a rare trip to Ghana for peace talks. But Ghana declined to seize him — a missed opportunity that may haunt West Africa for years to come. Mr. Taylor's indictment cannot and should not be traded away in any peace deal. His capture and trial are the only way to protect Liberia and its neighbors.

[Copyright 2003 The New York Times Company](#)