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Liberia Ex-Leader Faces War-Crimes Court

By HANS NICHOLS and [LYDIA POLGREEN](#)

FREETOWN, Sierra Leone, April 3 — In his first appearance before an international tribunal that has indicted him on 11 counts of war crimes, Charles G. Taylor, the former Liberian president, pleaded not guilty on Monday after refusing to recognize the court's jurisdiction and accusing it of trying to meddle in the region's affairs.

"I think this is an attempt to divide and rule the people of Liberia and Sierra Leone, and so most definitely I am not guilty," Mr. Taylor said. Security was tight at the hearing, before the Special Court for Sierra Leone, a United Nations-backed tribunal.

"I did not and could not have committed these acts against the sister republic of Sierra Leone," said Mr. Taylor, who was arrested last Wednesday while trying to flee Nigeria and then sent here to face the longstanding charges.

Dressed in a double-breasted blue suit, a white shirt with cufflinks and a red tie, Mr. Taylor seemed defiant and at times even upbeat, blowing a kiss to members of his family seated in the packed courtroom and flashing a smile. During the proceeding he stared down the chief judge, Richard Lussick of Samoa, forcing him to ask three times if Mr. Taylor understood the charges against him.

Mr. Taylor eventually said he did, and then argued that because he was "Liberia's 21st president," the court held no jurisdiction over him.

Mr. Taylor betrayed no emotion as the nine-page indictment was read to him, detailing the charges, from terrorizing Sierra Leone's civilian population, to sexual violence and the recruitment of child soldiers.

The core of the case against Mr. Taylor is that he aided rebels who plunged Sierra Leone, one of Africa's richest countries at its independence in 1961, into 10 years of chaos and killing as they sought control of lucrative diamond fields.

The war, which ended in 2002, left 50,000 dead and thousands maimed as both rebels and a pro-government militia used torture, rape and amputations to terrorize civilians. Mr. Taylor joins nine other people indicted; their trials are under way.

Fears that Mr. Taylor's presence in Sierra Leone, where the last of 17,500 United Nations peacekeepers left three months ago, could destabilize the entire region has led the court to request transfer of the trial to a courtroom at The Hague.

The international community seems eager to honor the request by Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Liberia's new president, that Mr. Taylor be removed from the region. A draft resolution is being circulated at the Security Council to authorize the move and, assuming approval from the United Nations and the Dutch, the transfer would be a matter of logistics.

But with the court's principal defender, Vincent O. Nmehielle of Nigeria, serving as his counsel, Mr. Taylor indicated that he would fight any move to transfer the trial to The Hague, insisting that he could receive a fair trial only in Sierra Leone.

Even some of Mr. Taylor's former allies have suggested that his presence in Sierra Leone could have a destabilizing effect.

Jonathan Kposowa, the secretary general of the political wing of the Revolutionary United Front, a group once allied with Mr. Taylor, said in an interview that "the distances are short" between Liberia and Sierra Leone, and that Mr. Taylor was still a popular man in some pockets in Liberia.

Indicted in absentia in 2003, Mr. Taylor was then offered asylum in Nigeria under a peace accord to end Liberia's 14 years of a war that had claimed 250,000 lives and left the country little more than a shell.

Mr. Taylor is believed to have stolen tens of millions of dollars in his years as a warlord and president of Liberia, but is saying he is indigent in order to receive free legal assistance.

Mr. Taylor's appearance capped a dramatic nine days that began with Nigeria's announcement on March 25 that it would honor the request made by Ms. Johnson Sirleaf to hand him over to international authorities.

But Mr. Taylor fled his plush villa in Calabar, and recriminations flew across the Atlantic, with some critics accusing the Nigerian president, Olusegun Obasanjo, of facilitating Mr. Taylor's escape.

K. A. Paul, the Indian-born evangelist who is Mr. Taylor's spiritual adviser, said that Mr. Taylor had told him in a telephone conversation from his jail cell here that he had tried to flee Nigeria because Nigerian state security agents told him to leave, and that he was escorted to a spot in northeastern Nigeria near the border with Cameroon by government officials.

"They took him and they drove for so many hours," Mr. Paul said in a telephone interview.

"Around 4:30 or 5 in the morning they told him to go and they left him." Mr. Taylor was arrested by border officials in Nigeria around 5 a.m. last Wednesday.

The Nigerian government denied the accusation, with Femi Fani-Kayode, a government spokesman, telling The Associated Press that Mr. Paul's account was a "far-fetched figment of his jaundiced imagination."

Hans Nichols reported from Freetown for this article, and Lydia Polgreen from Dakar, Senegal.