

SPECIAL COURT FOR SIERRA LEONE
PRESS AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS OFFICE

PRESS CLIPPINGS

Enclosed are clippings of local and international press on the Special Court and related issues obtained by the Press and Public Affairs Office as of:

Monday, 21 November 2005

The press clips are produced Monday to Friday.
If you are aware of omissions or have any comments or suggestions please contact
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From Awareness Times Newspaper in Freetown

COMMENTARIES

BRINGING AN END TO IMPUNITY---Things falling apart for Charles Taylor (Article by a Sierra Leonean)

By Alpha Sesay, Esq.
Nov 18, 2005, 22:51



When the Nigerian Government granted asylum to former Liberian President Charles Taylor two years ago in agreement with other African leaders, many people thought that was an escape route from facing justice for the many atrocities he is accused of having committed in Liberia and Sierra Leone.

The Prosecutor of the Special Court for Sierra Leone had then just announced that Taylor had been indicted for war crimes and crimes against humanity committed against the people of Sierra Leone.

While many people saw such a step by Nigeria as a necessary evil to bring peace in the West African Sub-Region, human rights activists saw this as an affront to his numerous victims and a violation of international law standards against impunity.

Taylor went to Nigeria, peace returned to Liberia and Sierra Leone, widespread allegations that he is meddling with Liberian politics continue, Nigeria has refused to hand him over to the Special Court for trial, he has been living a luxurious life in his new home, but barely two years later, things have started falling apart for him.

On November 11 2005, the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 1638, which requires the UN Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) *"to apprehend and detain former President Taylor in the event of a return to Liberia and to transfer him or facilitate his transfer to Sierra Leone for prosecution before the Special Court for Sierra Leone"*. This is a significant statement by the world's most powerful body that Taylor would not be allowed to live in luxury while his victims continue to suffer in Sierra Leone; that he would not be allowed to play with thousands of dollars from proceeds of the diamonds he benefited from the war while the Government of Sierra Leone struggles to get money to make reparations to victims of the conflict; that people like Sam Hinga Norman, Issa Sesay and others will not be held in detention at the Special Court while the person who is the genesis of the conflict basks in comfort; and that the souls of his many victims will never rest until he is made to answer for his deeds. It is also significant that the UN resolution coincides with the arrest in Senegal of Hissene Habre, the former President of Chad to face justice in the Belgian Courts for allegedly executing and torturing thousands of people during his regime in the 1980s. We have seen numerous examples of past dictators who have enjoyed immunity for long but in the end are brought down by the claws of justice. We have seen that in the case of Slobodan Milosevic in the former Yugoslavia, in the case of Augusto Pinochet in Chile, quite recently in the case of Fujimori in Peru and if these are good examples that we should follow, then we are bound to see it in the case of Taylor soon.

Since his departure to Liberia, there have been lots of international pressures for Taylor to be brought to Justice. While human rights groups like Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have campaigned vigorously for his extradition, other foreign bodies have also added their voices to this call. In February 2005, the European Parliament passed a resolution which called on the European Union (EU) to take immediate action on bringing Taylor to face charges before the Special Court for Sierra Leone. Immediately after the just concluded elections in Liberia, the EU has again reiterated

that Taylor's non-appearance before the Special Court might have negative implications on the aid that Liberia would receive from the EU. In May this year, the US House of Representatives and Senate passed a resolution calling for Taylor's extradition to Sierra Leone. During her visit to Sierra Leone in July, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Louise Arbour made a similar call that Taylor must be made to face justice at the Special Court and during the same month of July, a communiqué from the Mano River Union called for a review of Taylor's asylum in Nigeria. A few weeks ago, a Federal High Court in Nigeria upheld a lawsuit by two Nigerian amputees, (who are victims of Taylor's war in Sierra Leone) to lift the asylum granted him by the Nigerian Government. There have also been cries for the African Union to make an official position on Taylor's extradition to Sierra Leone. With such mounting pressure, it is necessary for Nigeria, which incidentally happens to have a membership on the Special Court's Management Committee and whose national judge, up to quite recently was the President of the Special Court, to honour its obligations under international law and hand Taylor over for Trial. Nigeria is a state party to many treaties, such as the Geneva Conventions of 1949, the Convention Against Torture, the Statute of the International Criminal Court, etc, which make states morally obliged to bring perpetrators of human rights violations to face justice. Based on statements made by the UN Secretary General, the General Assembly and the Security Council, it has now become customary international law that perpetrators, irrespective of their status will not enjoy amnesty or immunity for such human rights violations.

On another level, the new government in Liberia must also show its commitment to holding people accountable for atrocities committed in the Mano River Region by facilitating Taylor's extradition to face justice. President Obasanjo has asserted that Taylor's asylum in Nigeria is temporary. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, president elect (yet to be made official) of Liberia has said that she would be consulting African Leaders on the issue but that they have no place for Taylor in Liberia. If that is the case, then the best place for him will be to go to the Special Court in Sierra Leone. This is the time for African leaders to come together and take a common position, which would send a message to the whole world, that there is no place to hide after committing mass atrocities against innocent civilians. This will set a precedent for rebel leaders and other heads of state that human rights must be respected beyond borders. Many participants at the Victims Commemoration Conference organized by the Special Court in Sierra Leone expressed the view that the best way to evaluate the success of the court is if it is able to bring Taylor to Justice. Many people and nations have made significant effort to earn peace for Liberia and Sierra Leone. What we can do now is to bring satisfaction to the many souls that Taylor's war massacred. A significant step in promoting peace, justice, reparations, satisfaction and non-repetition in that African Region is by bringing Taylor to face trial before the Special Court. There can be "no peace without justice".

**** The writer of this article is an LLM Candidate in International Human Rights Law at the Center for Civil and Human Rights, University of Notre Dame, Indiana, USA.***

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Sirleaf addresses Taylor war crimes issue

Monrovia - In her first public comments since the November 8 run-off election, Liberian president-elect Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf said Sunday the question of ex-president Charles Taylor appearing in a UN war crimes court could not be decided by Liberia alone.

"The African Union and the international community will have to be a part of such decision because they were part of the arrangement that saw Mr. Taylor leave for Nigeria," Johnson-Sirleaf said.

"Liberia as a founding member of the United Nations will work to reflect the position of the UN," she said.

Her comments were in apparent reaction to a recent statement by the European Union Observer mission asking the new government to send Taylor to the UN-backed war crimes court in Sierra Leone to answer to 17-count charges for war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Harvard-trained economist Johnson-Sirleaf, 67, is poised to become Liberia's and Africa's first elected female head of state after defeating former soccer star George Manneh Weah in two rounds of presidential elections. The inauguration is set for January.

Taylor, the former Liberian rebel leader turned president is said to have trained, armed and supported the defunct Sierra Leone rebel faction RUF which reportedly carried out heinous atrocities against innocent civilians.

Johnson-Sirleaf said that when inaugurated, her government will find a solution to the issue of Taylor, but added that any solution must satisfy the European Union, African Union, the international community and West African leaders who, she noted, have "played a major role in bringing peace to war battered Liberia".

In light of divergent opinions on former president Taylor's extradition to face war crimes charges, this issue appears to be one of the most daunting tasks facing the new government.

Other challenges she has to tackle include restoring Liberia's infrastructure which were devastated during 14 years of civil war. - Sapa-dpa

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Cocorioko website

http://www.cocorioko.com/news_leader

INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY MUST HELP LIBERIA DECIDE ON TAYLOR'S EXTRADITION TO SPECIAL COURT ---Ellen Johnson -Sirleaf

Monday November 21, 2005

Liberia 's President-Elect Mrs. Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf today asked the African Union (AU) , the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the international community to help Liberia make the decision to extradite former President Charles Taylor from Nigeria to face war crimes charges before the Special Court of Sierra Leone.

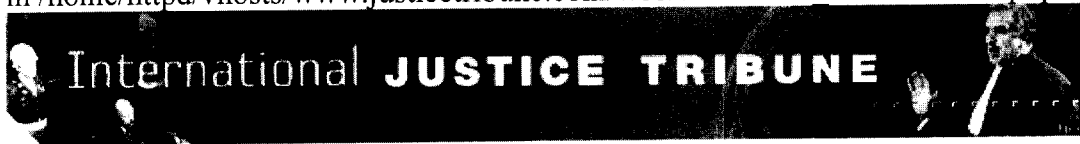
Mrs .Johnson-Sirleaf said that the two organizations were parties to the arrangement that led to Taylor being granted asylum by the Nigerian government. She said that the decision to extradite Taylor should not be left on Liberia's head alone.

Today's statement by Mrs.Johnson-Sirleaf came at the heels of rumors that some legislators in the newly-elected Liberian senate might push for Johnson-Sirleaf herself to be tried by the Special Court for aiding and abetting Taylor .The rumours were however regarded by some Liberians as foolish because in it was not possible , they argued, for sitting Presidents to face criminal prosecution .

Mrs. Sirleaf promised to give consideration to the Taylor issue when she assumes power .She said whatever decision was taken would seek to satisfy all the parties responsible for bringing peace to Liberia.

The Taylor issue will haunt the Sirleaf government .Already , the European Union (EU) has promised to withhold aid to Liberia if she did not send Taylor to Freetown to face charges that he financed and supported the rebel war in Sierra Leone.

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Africa Special Court for Sierra Leone : History


Security council asks for Charles Taylor's arrest

Article length : 0.2 page

21 November 2005

In a unanimously adopted resolution on November 11, the UN Security Council voted to add to the mandate of the UN mission in Liberia the "apprehension, detention and transfer [of Charles Taylor] to the Special Court of Sierra Leone, in the event of his return to Liberia." The former Liberian president has been living in exile in Nigeria since August 2003 and has been charged with crimes against humanity by the Freetown court. The Security Council noted that Abuja had granted asylum to Taylor "with broad international support," but that this support was only "temporary." In a press release, the prosecutor of the special tribunal stressed the significance of this resolution that was adopted following the free presidential elections held in Liberia under the supervision of the UN.

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UN special court prosecutor welcomes move to arrest Taylor

BO. SIERRA LEONE, November 18 -- The UN Special Court Prosecutor for Sierra Leone, Desmond de Silva, Friday reiterated support for the UN Security Council's move empowering the UN Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) to arrest the country's fugitive former leader Charles Taylor whenever he sets foot on Liberian soil.

UN Security Council Resolution (1638) passed unanimously on 11 November 2005, grants UNMIL the mandate to arrest Taylor, the Liberia's former president if he returns to his country from his Nigerian exile

Reacting to the resolution, de Silva noted: "The United Nations Security Council Resolution made two important points: Taylor's stay in Nigeria is temporary and was always intended to be so, and he should be in detention awaiting trial in Freetown."

"Nigeria played a leadership role in 2003 by removing Taylor from Liberia so that the war could come to an end. President Olusegun Obasanjo now needs to play an even greater regional leadership role by supporting the development of the rule of law and justice in the region by transferring Taylor to the Special Court to face justice immediately," de Silva added

Taylor was indicted on 3 March 2003 by the Sierra Leone court on a 17-count indictment for war crimes and crimes against humanity committed during the brutal decade-long conflict in Sierra Leone

However, he has evaded arrest since August 2003 due to his exile in Nigeria, where he was granted asylum


The charges against him include terrorizing the civilian population, unlawful killings, sexual violence, physical violence, forced conscription of child soldiers, abductions, forced labour, looting and burning, and attacks on UN peacekeeping personnel

The resolution followed previous European Parliament and U.S. Congress resolutions calling for the transfer of Taylor to the court

The fact that it was passed in the immediate aftermath of the successful parliamentary and presidential elections in Liberia is also significant, and highlights the importance of ensuring that the former head of state remains out of Liberia to allow the country to move toward stability under the leadership of a new democratically-elected president -- pana

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UNMIL Public Information Office Media Summary 19 Nov. 2005

[The media summaries and press clips do not necessarily represent the views of UNMIL.]

International Clips on Liberia**Liberia vote fraud hearings scuttled by legal wrangling**

By Lauren Gelfand

MONROVIA, Nov 18 (AFP) - Hearings into charges of vote fraud by Liberian presidential candidate George Weah bogged down on Friday even as his rival Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, poised to become Africa's first woman head of state, dismissed the claims as "bogus".

Documents and witnesses supporting Weah's contention that the November 8 run-off was rigged were to have been presented, but the proceedings were instead dominated by administrative wrangling by lawyers from the National Elections Commission and the football star's political party.

11/18/2005 14:10:30

U.S. slams Liberia transfer of govt jeeps to personal use

Monrovia (dpa) - The U.S. government on Friday expressed "shock and disappointment" over the decision by departing members of Liberia's transitional legislature to convert jeeps assigned them in the power-sharing legislature to their personal use.

The national transitional legislature passed a resolution earlier in the week, giving members the right to own the 76 Grand Cherokee Jeeps, estimated at 30,000 U.S. dollars each, despite a veto by transitional chairman Charles Gyude Bryant.

Local Media – RADIO VERITAS *(News monitored yesterday at 06:45 pm)***U.S. to Deny Lawmaker Visas for Illegal Possession of Public Property**

- In a statement issued yesterday to express its position on the possession of public property by transitional government officials, the U.S. Embassy warned that anyone who takes government properties illegally would forfeit United States visas.

(Also reported on ELBS Radio and Star Radio)

CDC Lawyers Want Elections Commission Hearing Officer Changed

- At the hearing yesterday on the run-off fraud complaint, lawyers of the Congress for Democratic Change (CDC) said they wanted the National Elections Commission (NEC) hearing officer Joseph Blidi to step aside. The team said that it was expedient for NEC Chairman Frances Johnson-Morris to preside as required under the Elections Law.

(Also reported on ELBS Radio and Star Radio)

UN Environment Program to Train Youths in Environmental Management

- The United Nations Environment Program will shortly hold a training workshop on environmental management guidance for IDP and refugee youths.

World Food Program Donates Motorbikes to Implementing Partners

- The World Food Program (WFP) yesterday presented motorbikes to 11 of its implementing partners to accelerate its school feeding program for more than 240,000 Liberian children, WFP Deputy Country Director Arbee Draghimagee said.

STAR RADIO *(Culled from website today at 09:00 am)*

CDC Standard Bearer Fails to Meet Traditional Leaders Due to Illness

- Speaking to Star Radio yesterday, Internal Affairs Minister Dan Morias said that the meeting between the National Council of Traditional Leaders and CDC standard bearer George Weah failed to take place because Mr. Weah was ill. He appealed to the traditional leaders to exercise patience saying peacemaking efforts were sometimes frustrating.

Students Want New Government to Prioritize Education

- In an interview with Star Radio, students of the Voinjama Multilateral High School in Lofa County appealed to the incoming government to prioritize education so that the lack of textbooks and other instructional materials would be corrected.

Human Rights Commission Supports the Prosecution of Former President Taylor

- Speaking yesterday when he received the act creating the Human Rights Commission, Atty. Dempster Brown assured Liberians that the commission would press for all those who allegedly committed crimes against humanity in the past to be prosecuted as a measure to curb the culture of impunity in Liberia.

Complete versions of the UNMIL International Press Clips, UNMIL Daily Liberian Radio Summary and UNMIL Liberian Newspapers Summary are posted each day on the UNMIL Bulletin Board. If you are unable to access the UNMIL Bulletin Board or would like further information on the content of the summaries, please contact Mr. Jeddi Armah at armahj@un.org.



UNMIL Public Information Office Media Summary 20 Nov 2005

[The media summaries and press clips do not necessarily represent the views of UNMIL.]

International Clips on Liberia

20/11/2005 07:57:59

Johnson-Sirleaf: Taylor war crimes issue an international matter

Monrovia (dpa)- In her first public comments since the November 8 run-off election, Liberian president-elect Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf said Sunday the question of ex-president Charles Taylor appearing in a U.N. war crimes court could not be decided by Liberia alone.

"The African Union and the international community will have to be a part of such decision because they were part of the arrangement that saw Mr. Taylor leave for Nigeria," Johnson-Sirleaf said. "Liberia as a founding member of the United Nations will work to reflect the position of the U.N.," she said.

First testimony in Liberia vote fraud case

MONROVIA, Nov 19 (AFP) - Liberia's National Elections Commission on Saturday heard the first witnesses into vote fraud allegations from trailing presidential candidate George Weah.

The Congress for Democratic Change party of the football icon claims the polls November 8 were rigged. Despite allegations on a massive scale, however, the CDC has been able to compile only a handful of evidence, based on objectionable tally sheets and some 39 ballots they say were pre-marked for Sirleaf and pre-stamped by the NEC.

Their presentation on Saturday -- the third day of what are ostensibly preliminary hearings -- was again flummoxed by a misunderstanding of electoral law and a distortion of scope, a packed hearing room heard along with NEC senior counsel Joseph Blidi, who is presiding the case.

Chicago Tribune 20 November 2005

Liberia verges on a new day; The apparent election of a female 'technocrat' might end a ruinous populism, experts say

By Laurie Goering, Tribune foreign correspondent

JOHANNESBURG - After a decade of civil war under brutal warlord Charles Taylor, **Liberia** is a ruined nation.

The capital has no running water, no sewerage system and no public electricity. Unemployment is 85 percent. The national debt is \$3.5 billion, 43 times the annual

budget. For the past two years, the country has essentially been run by 15,000 United Nations troops sent there to stop the bloodshed.

So when Liberians--most of them under the age of 24--went to the polls recently to elect a new president, they did a remarkable thing: They turned down flashy Liberian-born soccer star George Weah as their next leader and gave their votes to Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, a 67-year-old grandmother and former World Bank economist.

"When a technocrat wins over a populist, that's a sign people want the basics," said Emira Woods, a Liberian native who is co-director of Foreign Policy in Focus, a U.S.-based think tank. Johnson-Sirleaf's election, she said, is "definitely a step in the right direction."

The Philadelphia Inquirer 20 November 2005

Liberia's likely new president raises hope for Africa's women

By Shashank Bengali, Inquirer Foreign Staff

NAIROBI, Kenya - On a continent where women suffer in nearly every measure of health and welfare, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf's apparent election to the presidency of war-torn Liberia is raising hopes for a new era in African politics: the era of women.

"It's a breakthrough for African women," said Florence Butegwa, West Africa director for the United Nations Development Fund for Women. "We haven't had a role model in terms of political leadership at that highest level."

Johnson-Sirleaf would be Africa's first elected female president. Until now, political power on this vast and resource-rich continent has been wielded exclusively by men, whose legacy has been largely one of corruption, discrimination, despotism and war.

But today, women hold key government positions in South Africa, Kenya, Mozambique and Zimbabwe. They occupy roughly a quarter of the parliamentary seats in Uganda and Namibia and nearly half in Rwanda. Last year, Wangari Maathai, a Kenyan cabinet minister, won the Nobel Peace Prize for her work on the environment.

International Clips on West Africa

Nigeria steps up mediation in Cote d'Ivoire's conflict

ABUJA, Nov 19, 2005 (Xinhua via COMTEX) -- Nigeria has stepped up mediation to resolve the conflict in Cote d'Ivoire, according to a statement issued weekend by the Nigerian government.

The statement said the consultations are to seek a consensus in the appointment of a new prime minister to lead a new government of national reconciliation in Cote d'Ivoire. It added that the government "is expected to hold office until elections are held in October 2006."

As part of the efforts, Nigerian Foreign Minister Oluyemi Adeniji paid his third visit to Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire's capital, on Wednesday and Thursday.

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Opinion: war crimes in africa

By Fati Waziri

Posted to the Web: Friday, November 18, 2005

“In the prospect of an international criminal court lies the promise of universal justice. That is the simple and soaring hope of this vision. We are close to its realisation. We will do our part to see it through till the end. We ask you to do yours in our struggle to ensure that no ruler, no state, no junta and no army anywhere can abuse human rights with impunity. Only then will the innocents of distant wars and conflicts know that they, too, have rights, and that those who violate those rights will be punished.”

— Kofi Annan, United Nations Secretary – General

In the last 50 years, there have been many instances of crimes against humanity for which no individual have been held accountable. Over the last 10 years at least eighteen countries in Africa have been consumed by war, usually internal. Africans have suffered catastrophic war crimes and horrific human rights abuses. The 1994 Rwandan genocide took nearly a million lives. Sierra Leone suffered a war whose signature atrocity was forced amputations, with many child victims. Millions have died due to the civil strife in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo over the last several years. Civil war in Sudan between North and South has taken over two million lives.

More than two million people have been forced from their homes and at least 180,000 have died in the conflict between the government and Darfur rebels. The conflict began in early 2003, after a rebel group began attacking government targets, claiming that the region was being neglected by Khartoum. Despite the body of treaties, laws and conventions aimed at protecting civilians during times of war, civilians

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are more and more often the targeted by both state and non-state actors. The methods they employ include mass slaughter, the use of terror, ethnic cleansing, and forced migration. Wars on the Africa continent are increasingly fought by forced recruits, often children who are ripped away from their families and turned into killers.

In armed conflicts in Mozambique, Liberia, El Salvador and other countries, there has been tremendous loss of civilian lives, including horrifying numbers of unarmed women and children. Massacres of civilians continue in Algeria and the Great Lakes region of Africa.

If a storm can be described as perfect, then the war in the Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire) in the second half of the 1990s was the "perfect war". Precipitated by the 1994 genocide in Rwanda and the fall of the West's client kleptocrat, President Mobutu, and his rotten state, the war in DR Congo was dubbed Africa's First World War. It directly involved the armed forces of six neighboring states. It drew in factions and rebel groups from other African wars, the remnant armies of defunct neighboring regimes, and the usual crowd of international profiteers, would-be peacemakers and humanitarians. It was closely connected with armed conflicts in several neighboring countries, including those in Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda, Central African Republic, Congo Brazzaville, and Angola. According to one estimate published in 2003 the war may directly and indirectly have caused the deaths of over 4 million people in DR Congo since 1996. As has become increasingly common in Africa the victims were almost all civilians.

In the Horn of Africa, Somalia was still without a central government almost a decade after the fall of the last one (the Siad Barre regime which had been backed and armed alternately by both sides in the Cold War). The vacuum of state authority in Somalia left the country in a state of low level conflict and chronic economic weakness, on the one hand vulnerable to external interference and on the other a source of regional instability. To the north of Somalia, border skirmishes between Ethiopia and Eritrea developed into full scale war in 1999.

At the other end of the continent, in Angola, another war that had in an earlier phase been fomented by Cold War rivalry was still raging. Now deprived of their superpower sponsorship, but aided by international businesses which continued to buy the Angolans' oil and diamonds and sell them weapons, the leaders of both sides (MPLA government and UNITA rebels) were plundering the country to support their war efforts and to fill their foreign bank accounts. In a country fabulously rich in natural resources, including agriculture, the majority of the peasant population were living in desperate poverty, many of them living on food handouts from the international humanitarian relief system.

Conclusion

One of the primary objectives of the United Nations is securing universal respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms of individuals throughout the world. In this connection, few topics are of greater importance than the fight against impunity and the struggle for

peace and justice and human rights in conflict situations in today's world. The establishment of a permanent international criminal court (ICC) is seen as a decisive step forward. Even though there were various treaties in the 19th and 20th centuries on the laws of war, the 20th century was the bloodiest in history because most perpetrators of war crimes against humanity throughout history have gone unpunished. To combat war crimes in Africa, two key and indeed related components are urgently necessary - the first is ensuring accountability for serious human rights crimes, and the second is implementing preventive strategies to detect, stop and/or mitigate situations with the potential to develop into systematic war crimes.

Impunity for atrocities committed in the past sends the message that such crimes may be tolerated in the future. Impunity or a failure of accountability also characterizes the current situation of former Liberian president Charles Taylor, on exile in Nigeria. Despite having commanded troops who perpetrated war crimes in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea and Cote d'Ivoire, and despite having been indicted by the Special Court for Sierra Leone on 17 counts of war crimes and crimes against humanity, Charles Taylor is being shielded from justice by the Nigerian government. Perpetrators of war crimes should be prosecuted not celebrated. Only then will the foundation of democracy begin to take shape.

*Fati Waziri (legal&program officer), Human Rights Law Service (HURILAWs)

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The Boston Globe

November 17, 2005 Thursday

LIBERIA AT A CROSSROADS

BY MAKAU MUTUA

THE ELECTION last week of Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, the Harvard-educated former World Bank economist as president of Liberia, is a milestone. She will become the first woman African head of state and give her tormented country the only real opportunity in more than a generation to emerge from the ashes of a savage civil war. But these rays of hope will be extinguished if George Weah, her vanquished opponent, becomes bellicose and stokes violent conflict.

It is virtually impossible to imagine a place on Earth where life has been more hellish than Liberia. For almost three decades, Liberia has been in the grip of brutal dictatorships or ruthless warlords. Before then, a tiny authoritarian Americo-Liberian elite a political class descended from freed African-American slaves who founded the state in 1847 ruled with an iron hand. Until the end of the Cold War, the United States exacerbated these pathologies by supporting despotic Liberian regimes.

Liberia reached its nadir in 1980 when Samuel Doe overthrew the Americo-Liberian regime and introduced a reign of terror. In 1990, Doe was killed by rebel forces led by Charles Taylor and Prince Johnson, two equally ruthless warlords. Liberia remained lawless until 1997 when Taylor intimidated his compatriots into electing him president.

But rather than pursue peace and reconstruction, Taylor instigated coups and civil wars in neighboring states. He sold arms in exchange for diamonds to Sierra Leone rebels who cut off the limbs, ears, and noses of opponents. In 2003, Taylor was forced to resign but was granted refuge in Nigeria in spite of an indictment for war crimes by the UN Special Court for Sierra Leone. His forced departure paved the way for last week's elections.

The election of Johnson-Sirleaf notwithstanding, history will repeat itself unless the international community acts resolutely. Although Weah has lost the election to Johnson-Sirleaf 60 to 40 percent, the former has refused to concede defeat, charging fraud and other irregularities. International monitors have categorically stated that there is no evidence to bolster Weah's allegations of cheating or bias.

Weah's threat to the democratic process should not be taken lightly. Liberia has been down this path before. Easily the most famous Liberian, 38-year-old Weah is a former international soccer star who draws most of his support from dispossessed urban youth, former child soldiers, and scores of warlords. A product of the slums of Monrovia, the barely literate Weah's rags-to-riches story resonates with poor youth. In contrast, the 67-year-old Johnson-Sirleaf is from the privileged Americo-Liberian elite.

Even so, most Liberians seem to have voted for experience and technocratic competence over glamour. The belief is that Johnson-Sirleaf, with her connections and legitimacy in the world of global finance and capital, stands a better chance of leading Liberia to economic recovery and international demarginalization. The silver lining for Weah is that he has established himself as a powerful political force and the man likely to succeed Johnson-Sirleaf.

Liberia has not known a modern democracy. Weah can change that dismal history if he accepts the election results and joins a government of national unity or plays the role of a legitimate democratic opposition. What the country needs is not another warlord or a senseless conflict whose main victims are women and children but a massive reconstruction effort to build democratic institutions.

But Weah's support from unsavory characters, including Taylor's backers, should give everyone pause. There are indications that Taylor himself maintains an unhealthy interest in Liberian politics from exile. It is unlikely that Liberia will know peace until Taylor is held accountable for the atrocities he committed in office. Weah should join those democrats and reformers who have called for Nigeria to turn Taylor over to Sierra Leone's Special Court.

Unless Weah makes these commitments and openly renounces confrontation his backers are likely to revert to violence. Yet, it is his supporters who must be socialized and rehabilitated for this election to relaunch Liberia. The 15,000 UN peacekeeping forces cannot allow the situation to deteriorate. Nor should the UN and the international community permit thugs to reverse the freely expressed will of the Liberian people.

Finally, the United States must recognize its special responsibility to Liberia. The country was established by Americans and enjoyed an unusually close relationship with Washington until the end of the Cold War. Successive administrations treated Liberia like an unofficial vassal of the United States. That is why Washington bears some responsibility for Liberia's woes. US material, diplomatic, and logistical support is crucial if Liberia is to emerge from its long night of privation.

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Ex-Rwandan mayor admits genocide

A former mayor accused of helping to kill several thousand people during the 1994 Rwandan genocide, has changed his plea from not guilty to guilty.

Paul Bisengimana, the former mayor of Gikoro, changed his plea after prosecutors dropped 10 other charges.

He told a war crimes court that he was a witness to, and had participated in, the massacre of thousands of ethnic Tutsis seeking refuge in a church.

Some 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus were slaughtered in 100 days.

Mr Bisengimana had pleaded not guilty after he was arrested in Mali in 2001.

The International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda has convicted 22 people of genocide - another 26 are on trial and 18 are awaiting trial.

Story from BBC NEWS:

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