

Nigeria OKs Handover of Liberian Warlord

By MICHELLE FAUL, Associated Press Writer *2 hours, 12 minutes ago*

Nigeria said Saturday it is ready to hand over Liberian warlord Charles Taylor to be the first former African head of state tried for crimes against humanity, making a reluctant move that will be a strong warning for other warmongers on the continent.

Taylor is accused of starting a civil war in his homeland that brutalized tens of thousands of young boys and girls drafted as rebel fighters. He also is blamed for a savage war in neighboring Sierra Leone where rebels — including child fighters — terrorized victims by chopping off arms, legs, ears and lips.

An international tribunal indictment says Taylor is criminally responsible for the destruction of Liberia and Sierra Leone and for the murder, rape, maiming and mutilation of more than a half million Sierra Leoneans. An additional 2.5 million people were forced from their homes.

Each of the 17 charges he faces in the indictment carries a sentence life in prison.

Taylor is also accused of harboring al-Qaida suicide bombers who attacked U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998.

The former Liberian leader has been in exile in the southern Nigerian city of Calabar since being forced from power under a 2003 accord that ended a rebel assault on Liberia's capital. Nigeria had resisted extraditing him, arguing he was given refuge under the internationally brokered peace deal.

Many African leaders are leery of trying former presidents or dictators, apparently worrying they could be the next to be accused of human rights abuses or other crimes. Others fear a push to try toppled leaders would encourage those in power to more fiercely resist democratic change.

But in a statement, Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo said he had informed Liberia's president that "the government of Liberia is free to take former President Charles Taylor into its custody."

After her inauguration in January, Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf said a trial for Taylor was not a priority. But she made a formal request to Nigeria after an official visit to Washington, which is the source of aid needed to rebuild Liberia, Africa's first republic founded by freed American slaves in 1847.

There was speculation Taylor would be sent directly to the U.N. war crimes tribunal in Sierra Leone rather than be taken to Liberia, where there are worries his presence could destabilize the country trying to recover from 14 years of war.

Liberia's government had no immediate comment, and neither Taylor nor his spokesman could be reached for comment.

Taylor reportedly warned this week that Liberia would suffer if he was extradited. After meeting with the deposed leader in Nigeria, Indian evangelist Kilari Anand Paul quoted Taylor as saying: "There is no question in my mind that there will be chaos."

New York-based Human Rights Watch urged Nigerian officials to arrest Taylor, who escaped from a U.S. jail to become a rebel leader.

"Urgent steps need to be taken to tighten security around his Calabar villa, and to take Charles Taylor into custody immediately," said the organization's Richard Dicker.

In Liberia, security agents said they arrested at least two Taylor loyalists Saturday after getting reports that the former leader's supporters were engaged in "secret meetings" to ensure he does not stand trial.

David M. Crane, the American prosecutor who drew up Taylor's indictment, said his extradition would send a powerful message.

"Certainly African leaders, members of the good old boy network, are under notice that you cannot destroy your own citizens for your own personal gain and you don't go after women and children — don't rape women, don't turn children into monsters," Crane said.

He said a trial for Taylor would "crack the wall against impunity."

Taylor allegedly started the Sierra Leone war to get his fighters access to its rich diamond fields. In Liberia, he enriched himself from diamonds, timber and rubber.

"This was unique in history," Crane said. "It was criminals for their own criminal purposes using traditional methods of warfare for their own criminal gain which resulted in war crimes against humanity."

Nevertheless, the indictment alleges Taylor was a pawn in a bigger plot drawn up by Moammar Gaddafi, the Libyan leader who was indicted as a co-conspirator, to take over several African nations over 10 years. It says Taylor and other African rebels were trained, armed and equipped by Libyan special forces.

Taylor has denied allegations that he twice tried to assassinate President Lansana Conte of Guinea in revenge for Guinea's sponsoring the rebel group that was marching on Liberia's capital, Monrovia, when Taylor finally agreed to leave.

The case is loaded with implications for African presidents, who include coup leaders and others accused of human rights violations. It could set a precedent for those living in comfortable exile as well as sitting leaders, such as those in the Sudanese government that the United States accuses of genocide in the Darfur region.