

Liberian Seeks Extradition of Predecessor for Atrocities Trial

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By [WARREN HOGE](#)

[UNITED NATIONS](#), March 17 — Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, the president of [Liberia](#), said Friday that she had asked Nigeria to extradite [Charles Taylor](#), the former Liberian president and guerrilla leader, to face war crimes charges in Sierra Leone.

Ms. Johnson Sirleaf told the Security Council that she had made a formal request to President [Olusegun Obasanjo](#) of Nigeria, where Mr. Taylor lives in exile.

Mr. Taylor claimed asylum in Nigeria in August 2003 as part of an internationally brokered peace settlement ending 14 years of civil war in Liberia. He was later indicted on 17 counts of war crimes and crimes against humanity by a United Nations-backed court in Sierra Leone.

Mr. Taylor, 58, a warlord-turned-president, rampaged through his own country and much of West Africa during the 1990's, unleashing ruthless campaigns of torture, rape and dismemberment.

Even from exile, he has maintained influence in Liberia, with thousands of young combatants still loyal to him, Ms. Johnson Sirleaf said, making her plea "courageous but risky."

"Please bear in mind that time is of the essence in this regard," she said at a news conference. "Liberia's peace is fragile. There are many loyalists in our country to Mr. Taylor, there are many business interests he has. Whatever decision is taken by the African leadership must ensure that the safety of the Liberian people and the stability of our nation is not undermined."

She said Mr. Obasanjo would consult African leaders because they had been signatories to the deal that sent Mr. Taylor into exile.

She said she also wanted to "ensure that in any proceedings, there is an environment that protects all, including the accused's, fundamental human rights."

She was not seeking Mr. Taylor's extradition to Liberia, she said, because he was not under indictment there. If he is sent to Liberia, peacekeepers there have been authorized by the Security Council to transfer him to Sierra Leone.

Mr. Obasanjo has been under pressure to act on Mr. Taylor but had said he would await a request from a democratically elected Liberian president. Ms. Johnson Sirleaf was elected in November and inaugurated on Jan. 16.

She complained that the international community should have acted sooner to help Liberia free itself from Mr. Taylor's influence.

"We inherited a problem, we are faced with serious pressure, we are a small country, we have no powers that others have, we have no security forces to protect our people and the safety of our nation, so we are caught in a situation that we have to take a major decision that should have been taken long before, giving us an opportunity to pursue our development agenda," she said.

Corinne Dufka, a senior researcher for Human Rights Watch in Dakar, Senegal, who has followed the Taylor case closely, hailed the move as an "enormous step toward advancing justice in West Africa," but she said she was troubled by Mr. Obasanjo's decision to seek the approval of other African leaders.

"Obasanjo must now play his own part in the fight against impunity in West Africa," she said.

Ms. Johnson Sirleaf, who served five years as an assistant secretary general with the United Nations Development Program, addressed a joint meeting of Congress on Wednesday and will see President Bush in the White House on Tuesday.

She used her appearance before the Council on Friday to thank the United Nations for helping Liberia end its debilitating conflicts and hold the election that put her in office.

The United Nations has a peacekeeping force in Liberia of 16,000 soldiers and police officers, and Ms. Johnson Sirleaf asked the Council to guarantee its continuance.

She was praised in speeches by many of the ambassadors, and her speech was greeted with applause, a rare occurrence in the chamber.

Lydia Polgreen contributed reporting from Dakar, Senegal, for this article.