

## **INTERVIEW-Taylor case a warning to world warlords-prosecutor**

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By Alistair Thomson

DAKAR, March 19 (Reuters) - Moves to try former Liberian President Charles Taylor for crimes against humanity in a Sierra Leone court are a warning to the world's warlords that they cannot escape justice, the court's chief prosecutor said.

Newly-elected Liberian President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf said on Friday she had asked Nigeria, where Taylor lives in exile, to consider handing him to a U.N.-backed Special Court in Freetown, which has indicted him for his part in Sierra Leone's 1991-2002 civil war.

"This does send out a message, in my mind, to all leaders and warlords and all people in positions of dominance: 'Be you ever so high, the law is always above you'," Desmond de Silva, chief prosecutor in Sierra Leone's Special Court, told Reuters.

"The world has moved in the last 10 or 15 years from impunity ... the world woke up to the fact that people simply had to be brought to justice," he said in a telephone interview.

Taylor is charged with supporting Sierra Leone rebels in return for diamonds in a war that cost 50,000 lives. The charges do not include his role in starting Liberia's own civil war, which killed 250,000 people and spread arms, violence and instability into nearby countries.

De Silva, a British state counsel, compared Taylor's case to that of Serbian ex-leader Slobodan Milosevic, who died a week ago, months before an expected verdict in his war crimes trial.

"With the departure of Milosevic, if Taylor's trial is taken to a conclusion he will be the very first head of state in history to have been indicted whilst he was in office and against whom a trial has been completed," de Silva said.

"In the world today, the three major war criminals who are wanted are Charles Taylor, Karadzic and Mladic," de Silva said, referring to Bosnian Serb suspects Radovan Karadzic and Ratko Mladic, who are still at large. As Milosevic was, they are charged with genocide and crimes against humanity.

### **"PRESIDENTIAL SUITE" FOR TAYLOR**

Johnson-Sirleaf said on Friday Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo had agreed to consult African leaders involved in Taylor's exile deal in 2003

about handing him to the court in Sierra Leone.

"We have no reason to believe that there not will be a satisfactory outcome to these negotiations," de Silva said.

"We will receive him when we receive him. We have quite a large cell, in fact our largest cell, waiting for him. It is casually known as the 'presidential suite'," de Silva said.

He said Taylor would get no special treatment, but said the detainees at the Special Court enjoyed excellent conditions.

"We have quite the only cells in the world where people on hunger strike actually put on weight," de Silva commented.

He said Taylor's trial might take roughly 12 months.

The U.N.-backed Special Court for Sierra Leone is now trying nine defendants for war crimes: three from a government militia, three from a former military junta and three from the rebel Revolutionary United Front (RUF).

The trials have proved politically sensitive and revived painful memories of a horrific war in which RUF rebels raped, killed and chopped off the hands, feet and ears of civilians.

Some in both Sierra Leone and Liberia fear bringing Taylor to trial could endanger the fragile stability established in both countries with the help of U.N. peacekeepers, especially as Taylor still enjoys significant support in Liberia.

"I can't see how the stability of Liberia is going to be upset if he's locked up in my detention centre. Nor do I see there's a threat to Sierra Leone if he's under lock and key. I think he's a much bigger threat where he is," de Silva said.

Several suspects, including RUF leader Foday Sakoh, died before being brought to trial, but de Silva played down the chances of this happening in the case of Taylor, who is 58.

"Of course he is not a very popular man in Sierra Leone. We have a very good contingent of Mongolian guards (from Liberia's U.N. peace force) who are quite impressive ... I am sure they will see off anyone who wants to do him harm," de Silva said.

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