

Liberia's Taylor Rules Out Early Departure

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By David Clarke

MONROVIA, Liberia (Reuters) - Liberian President Charles Taylor said Friday he would not quit before the end of his term next January and could still seek re-election, in defiant comments likely to sour hopes for peace in his country.

Taylor's words were his first public remarks since his government signed a cease-fire deal earlier this week with rebels who insist their archenemy must step down as soon as possible. Rebels accused Taylor of trying to derail the peace process.

"I intend to complete my tenure as president and turn over to the vice president. I reserve the right, my constitutional right, following the transition, to run for general elections if I decided to do so," Taylor said on his Kiss FM radio station.

The comments raised questions about Taylor's willingness to respect any decisions made at peace talks in Ghana, which are meant to pave the way toward an end to 14 years of almost nonstop war in West Africa's bloodiest battlefield.

"The conference in Accra is not a sovereign conference. It is a peace conference. It has its limitations," Taylor said.

The cease-fire deal set a 30-day deadline for talks on a comprehensive peace deal and a transition government without Taylor, but did not say when he should quit.

Taylor, who has been indicted by a U.N.-backed war crimes court for his role in neighboring Sierra Leone's savage civil war, said previously he was prepared to step aside at the end of his term next January if that would bring peace.

But he also wants the indictment against him lifted.

"Some people have misinterpreted that President Taylor is supposedly stepping down in 30 days," he said, adding that was just "a dream."

A mediator at the peace talks said Taylor's remarks meant negotiations now had to "start from scratch."

A spokesman for one of two rebel groups fighting to oust Taylor insisted the president would have to leave in 30 days.

"Mr. Taylor will go. This is the last opportunity Mr. Taylor has," Eugene Wilson, of the rebel group known as Model, said.

TAYLOR'S FATE KEY

Military sources in Liberia said Friday the main rebel faction was fighting Taylor's troops near Tubmanburg, 40 miles north of Monrovia, and also accused the rebels of launching an attack from Sierra Leone at the border town of Bo.

Wilson said rebels had been attacked in four places and that they had reported the clashes to the mediators.

Sporadic skirmishes since the cease-fire was reached Tuesday have underlined the fragility of the peace process.

Taylor said his government would remain in power until a transition period, which he suggested should start in January and last nine months with the vice president in charge.

He said rebels, who control about 60 percent of Liberia, could join his government before the transition period, which should lead to a presidential election.

Taylor's fate is seen as key to peace in Liberia, founded in the 19th century by freed American slaves. He won the presidential election in 1997 after a seven-year civil war in which 200,000 people died, but his foes soon took up arms again. (Additional reporting by Alphonso Toweh in Monrovia, Kwaku Sakyi-Addo and Anne Boher in Accra)