

# Standing By as a Brutal Warlord Plots His Return

By Douglas Farah  
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On Oct. 11 Liberia, a tiny, brutalized country on the West African coast, will hold historic elections that few in the world will be watching and that only a handful of policymakers in Washington will monitor. And that indifference is a serious mistake for the United States.

Liberia's elections and the future of the government they produce will have an enormous impact on the fragile stability of a region stretching from Sierra Leone to Nigeria, which accounts for more than 10 percent of U.S. petroleum imports. In addition, instability in West Africa -- home to several failed and failing states with large, radicalizing Muslim populations -- could create conditions favorable to establishing terrorist havens. The danger is already evident. In recent years the region, particularly Liberia, has harbored al Qaeda operatives, senior Hezbollah financiers and a plethora of transnational criminal organizations.

The elections themselves, taking place under the protection of a 15,000-person United Nations peacekeeping mission, will likely be relatively honest and free of violence. But which of the 22 presidential candidates ultimately wins the vote matters less than the fate of someone who is not on the ballot at all -- former Liberian warlord Charles Taylor. Since being forced from the presidency in 2003, Taylor has lived in luxurious exile in Nigeria, even though a U.N.-backed court indicted him on 17 counts of crimes against humanity and Interpol has issued a warrant for his arrest. He occupies a large compound, donated by the Nigerian government, on one of the nicest beaches in the country. And he enjoys the company of his family and his own entourage of well-armed guards and aides.

Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo granted Taylor asylum at the request of the United States, Britain and the African Union, on the condition that Taylor not meddle in Liberian politics or finance criminal activity from exile. Yet the U.N.-backed Special Court on Sierra Leone as well as U.S. and European intelligence agencies have concluded that the former Liberian leader has repeatedly and flagrantly violated both those conditions -- without consequence.

Taylor remains one of the single largest threats to Liberia and the region. His Nigerian hosts allow him to remain in regular telephone and fax contact with supporters in Liberia. And thanks to unlimited access to visitors, he carries on financial transactions through couriers who conceal his role while tending to his stake in a major cell phone company in Liberia. They also help funnel millions of dollars that Taylor looted from the Liberian people into the purchase of weapons and the financing of militias so that he might intimidate, kill and bribe his way back to power. If he succeeds, the stage will be set for a regional conflagration. He has plunged the region into chaos before and stands ready to do so again.

While Taylor remains at large, immune from the rule of law, Liberians cannot have truly free and fair elections. Obasanjo has promised to turn Taylor over to the newly elected government of Liberia, but that government is virtually guaranteed to be weak and struggling. No matter who is president, he or she will be unable to stand up to Taylor. After all, Taylor was elected president

in 1997 after leading a prolonged civil war characterized by the systematic use of rape, the recruitment of children to fight in his infamous "Small Boy Units" and the mutilation of the civilian population. His support then was based on fear that he would wreak even greater havoc on Liberia again if he lost. People chanted in the street, "He killed my ma, he killed my pa, I'm going to vote for him." He will count on the same style of intimidation to force any new Liberian government -- and some regional leaders -- to continue to protect him.

Obasanjo should turn Taylor over to international authorities, because the Liberian's crimes are international in nature as well. The U.N.-backed Special Court, which indicted Taylor for crimes against humanity, has given members of Congress in the United States detailed reports about Taylor's activities. The court's report, as well as eyewitnesses I have interviewed, and banking and telephone records I have seen, indicate that while he was president Taylor sold diamonds to al Qaeda, Hezbollah and Russian organized crime. His illicit arms-buying ventures ranged from Bulgaria to Bosnia to Iran. His efforts at mischief-making continue even now. In January, he allegedly orchestrated an attempt to assassinate the president of Guinea, according to Special Court investigators and the Guinean government. U.N. and nongovernmental investigators have also alleged that he has continued making payments to brutal armed militias operating in regional no-man's lands on the borders of Liberia and Ivory Coast, Guinea and Sierra Leone, all countries with festering conflicts that could easily be fanned into full-scale war again.

To maintain the militia threat against the region, Taylor still funds and commands the loyalty of some of the most notorious butchers of his regime, including James "Cucu" Dennis and Adolphus Dolo, aka General Peanut Butter. (Other Liberian commanders have colorful aliases such as General Butt Naked or General Dragon Master.) Time is on Taylor's side, and that is one reason why he is spending money to support up to half the candidates in the election, according to Special Court for Sierra Leone officials and independent observers. All he has to do is buy a year of protection from extradition. The mandate of the Special Court is scheduled to expire in 2006. If it is no longer sitting, Taylor will be in the position of having been indicted by a court that no longer exists. He will be free.

Despite the stakes, the Bush administration, like others before it, is giving Africa short shrift when it comes to acting on high-minded rhetoric and promises of support for democracy, freedom and respect for law. The administration has promised to let freedom ring throughout the world and has used massive human rights violations as a justification for invading a foreign country. Yet it has expended little effort to ensure that another man responsible for the murder and mutilation of tens of thousands of people in his country stand trial. This double standard is not lost on democracy activists and human rights workers -- and dictators -- in sub-Saharan Africa.

The Bush administration has sent inconsistent messages to Nigerian President Obasanjo on the importance of putting Taylor on trial. Despite the recent public acknowledgement by West African heads of state that Taylor has violated the terms of his asylum, and ample evidence to that effect, the United States has been unable or unwilling to leverage the growing fear of Taylor's return into meaningful action.

While the State Department has pressured Nigeria to turn Taylor over to the court, envoys from the National Security Council to Obasanjo have consistently undercut that message, according to both U.S. and Nigerian officials privy to talks between the two countries. One reason may be Taylor's relationship with the U.S. intelligence community in the mid-1990s. During that time, when Libyan leader Moammar Gaddafi was viewed as the primary terrorist threat to the United States, Taylor was a regular visitor to Tripoli and to Gaddafi's tent in the desert. However embarrassing the U.S. relationship with Taylor may be, it was defensible in light of the intelligence he provided. But in light of his subsequent actions and atrocities, whatever debt we owed him has long been paid off.

The message that the United States sends to a continent plagued by despots, rampant corruption, and actual and potential terrorist havens, is of crucial importance. A sense of impunity has fostered the violence and corruption that have kept West Africa in a state of warfare, strife and desperate poverty for decades. No head of state there has ever been held accountable for his crimes and abuses. Missing the opportunity to hold Taylor responsible will only reinforce that vicious cycle of crime without punishment. Taylor's return will make it less likely that millions of people will be able to freely choose their leaders, enjoy the protection of their government rather than have it prey upon them, and have a shot at living above the poverty line.

The Special Court did historic and heroic work in bringing an indictment against a sitting head of state and documenting his ties to al Qaeda. The Liberian people endured hardship and violence to get rid of Taylor. Some regional leaders have, at tremendous personal risk, publicly called for Taylor's trial. There is a strong bipartisan will in Congress to work with the Bush administration to press Nigeria to extradite Taylor to the court in Sierra Leone. What's missing is a firm commitment by the administration.

If the United States wants to make a significant difference in this part of the world, then it must throw its weight behind bringing Taylor to trial. This will show that the United States is on the side of justice rather than convenience, that what we say about democracy and justice is more than mere talk. U.S. security interests are at stake. So are the lives and well-being of millions of people who desperately want to escape the cycle of violence and destruction that Taylor and others like him have perpetrated for far too long.

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