

July 7, 2003

Liberian Leader Announces That He Will Step Down

By SOMINI SENGUPTA

MONROVIA, Liberia, July 6 — Charles Taylor, the guerrilla leader who became president and was then indicted as a war criminal, announced today that he would leave his country and accept refuge in nearby Nigeria.

Mr. Taylor did not say when he would go, but he dangled his earlier promise to step aside once an international force arrived in this country to monitor a cease-fire deal between his forces and the rebels who have sought to topple him. Mr. Taylor has in recent days warned of potential bedlam if his sudden departure leaves a power vacuum.

This afternoon, standing at a lectern before his own portrait at the V.I.P. lounge of the airport on the outskirts of this ruined capital, Mr. Taylor let the man he called his "big brother," President Olusegun Obasanjo of Nigeria, do most of the talking. Mr. Obasanjo arrived this afternoon in his presidential jet, met with his besieged Liberian counterpart for roughly 90 minutes and declared that Mr. Taylor had accepted his offer of "a safe haven in Nigeria."

"Charles Taylor is not averse to making the sacrifice of exiting to give the country a chance at peace," Mr. Obasanjo said.

He did not explain whether his offer included immunity from prosecution for war crimes. Mr. Taylor has been accused of crimes against humanity and of providing support for a war in neighboring Sierra Leone.

But Mr. Obasanjo's parting words made plain that he would brook no criticism for accepting an indicted war criminal. "Nigeria will not be harassed by any organization, or by any country for showing this humanitarian gesture," Mr. Obasanjo said.

Mr. Taylor, who led a guerrilla insurgency beginning in 1989 and was ultimately elected president in 1997, has faced mounting pressure from inside and outside the country in recent weeks. Rebels pushed their way toward Monrovia, the capital, twice in the last month. The Special Court in Sierra Leone unsealed a 17-count indictment against him last month. Then, even as peace talks got under way in nearby Ghana, President Bush called for Mr. Taylor's swift exit.

In Washington, White House officials suggested today that Mr. Bush would not be satisfied until Mr. Taylor had followed through on the agreement and left the country. "As the president has said, Mr. Taylor needs to leave," said Jimmy Orr, a spokesman for the White House. "He needs to leave quickly so peace can be established."

Mr. Orr said today's developments had not led Mr. Bush to make a decision about sending a peacekeeping force to Liberia. He hinted that the president might not resolve the issue before leaving on his trip to Africa on Monday evening, given that the Pentagon had dispatched a team to Liberia to assess the situation here. The team is scheduled to arrive early Monday, American Embassy officials said.

"No decision has been made," Mr. Orr said. The president, he added, "will not be guided by any artificial deadline."

Senator John W. Warner, Republican of Virginia and the chairman of the Armed Forces Committee, said today on the NBC News program "Meet the Press" that Congress should take a vote before substantial forces were sent to the region.

Mr. Warner said that while it was a presidential decision, "I think Congress should be a partner and bear the responsibility of this very, very important decision."

The Bush administration, itself under pressure to sort out the mess in this country founded by Americans more than 150 years ago, has said it will consider sending American troops as part of a multinational force to restore security in Liberia.

Liberia was one of the United States' most reliable allies on the continent through the cold-war years.

In a diplomatic dance, Mr. Taylor today cast himself as acting in concert with Washington, praising President Bush for showing interest in Liberia and saying once again that he would welcome the presence of American troops. "There is a window of opportunity," he told reporters this afternoon. "We accept that window of opportunity and act hastily."

Mr. Taylor let his supporters speak for him as well. War veterans lined up on the airport tarmac with carefully stenciled banners. One read, "Drop the Indictment Against Our President." Another asked, "Upon the leaving of our president, what is our future?" A young man lifted his shirt for a cameraman to reveal a jagged scar along his torso, presumably a war wound suffered in Mr. Taylor's service. Men who had lost legs sat on the hot tarmac.

With reporters from all over the world milling around at the airport, the Liberian defense minister, Daniel Chea, called on the Special Court in Sierra Leone to scrap the indictment against his boss. "I don't want a suspension of the indictment," he said. "I want a removal of the indictment. It must be removed for the sake of peace."

Mr. Taylor's spokesman, Vaanii Paasewe, warned of trouble in the streets in the event of a hasty exit for Mr. Taylor. "The government of Liberia has already appealed to the United States to reconsider the immediacy of leaving," Mr. Paasewe said. "The sort of calm you see is really because most Liberians think President Taylor is their choice."

Today's dramatic tableau unfolded on the hot airport tarmac. Shortly after 3 p.m., wearing white from head to toe and carrying his signature carved wooden walking cane, Mr. Taylor paraded up a red carpet to greet the arriving Mr. Obasanjo. The Nigerian president, also in white, disembarked with a smile, accepted a live chicken and a plate of kola nuts from a pair of Liberian elders, and strolled slowly alongside Mr. Taylor down the red carpet. Mr. Obasanjo grinned and waved to the well-wishers who lined the red carpet. Mr. Taylor smiled very little.

Ninety minutes later, the two men emerged from their meeting and announced their agreement before a packed hall of reporters. "Liberia needs a lifeline right now to solve its problems," Mr. Obasanjo said. Mr. Taylor said, "I'd like to praise God."

Then, the two men walked back along the red carpet side by side and embraced. Mr. Obasanjo sprinted up the steps to his plane, turned around and waved with both arms. Mr. Taylor waved a white handkerchief.

As Mr. Taylor pulled out of the airport in his convoy of armored jeeps, a crowd of well-wishers, joined by the Liberian Army band, trailed behind with a boisterous version of a popular hymn. "My God will do it," they sang. "You will never understand it. It's a miracle, God."