

## THE TRIAL OF CHARLES TAYLOR AND THE FATE OF AFRICA

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The capture and deposition of former Liberian president, Charles Taylor to the Special UN court in Sierra Leone, marks a step forward in the long but tortuous road to national reconciliation in Liberia and Sierra Leone. His upcoming trial will no doubt bring closure to the worst page in the history of sub-Saharan Africa. In addition, it will help unearth the many untold tragedies and unanswered questions about the horrors of that era under Taylor. According to the UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan, Taylor's capture and trial will send "a powerful message to the region that impunity will not be allowed to stand, and would-be warlords will pay a price."

Charles Taylor represents the very antithesis of what a leader should be in traditional African thinking. He revolutionized guerrilla warfare in Africa as a means to gain political power. The war he led in Liberia caused the deaths of over 200,000 Liberians and the displacement of over 100,000 others. The war he supported and financed in Sierra Leone, led to the deaths of over 50,000 Sierra Leoneans and the displacement of over 400,000 others. His army, the National Patriotic Front of Liberia and the army of his Sierra Leonean protégé, Foday Sankoh, the Revolutionary United Front, gained most of their recruits from under-aged children, who were forced to kill their parents as a first test of valor. These children were hooked on drugs and were forced to commit all kinds of atrocities, which were unheard of in the dark annals of our continent. The tale of a Liberian nine year old captures the intensity of Taylor's overflowing cup of horrors: "I saw 10-20 people shot, mostly old people who could not walk fast. They shot my uncle in the head and killed him. They made my father take his brains out and to throw them into some water nearby. Then they made my father undress and have an affair with a decaying body. They raped my cousin who was a little girl of nine years."

That a man who authorized and gloried in these horrors, should call himself 'a sacrificial lamb' is very unfortunate; that he should justify these atrocities as 'an act of God' is to insult the glorified African tradition of respect for life, a high premium on the sense of community and the realization of the fullness of life for one and all. Taylor has been indicted with 17 counts of war crimes and crimes against humanity. His crimes include among others the systematic massacre and mutilation of tens of thousands of helpless civilians including children, women and the elderly; the hacking off of feet and hands of defenseless civilians with machetes and axes for comical relief or just for the inhuman passion of seeing blood flow. He also backed rebels in Sierra Leone under Sankoh, whose despicable crimes in the 'Operation No Living Thing', horrified the sensibilities of Africans and the international community.

Most of us who grew up in West Africa in those dark days, when Taylor and his henchmen reached the peak of evil, could not understand how any African could be so inhuman, so senseless and so brazen in the comprehension and execution of evil. Memories of those dark nights, of fellow West Africans who were disappearing every day, of thousands of Liberians and Sierra Leoneans who were roaming the streets of West Africa's major cities in search of a home, with wounded memories and fractured histories still come into my consciousness. Taylor was the most destabilizing factor in the sub-region for most of the 90s as he promoted rebel movements in Sierra Leone and Guinea. Out of passion for the rich alluvial diamonds of Kono in Sierra Leone, whose annual export value was put at \$500 million, Taylor supported the rebellion of Sankoh, with whom he had military training in Libya. He used the ill-gotten wealth from diamond trade to fuel the war and caused untold hardship to the people of both Liberia and Sierra Leone.

As Taylor's trial sets to resume in The Hague, it is important that the international community supports the fledgling democratic experiment in Liberia, which could be threatened by Taylor's demobilizing soldiers-the most effective guerrilla fighters in Africa. Taylor still has some strong following in Liberia. He also has immense wealth and connection in Africa and Europe. He was able to run the illegal trade in diamond from West Africa because he had the support of some African leaders, who allowed the use of

their countries as conduits for diamond and illegal arms. The illegal purchase of weapons by Taylor was actively supported by business interests from some Western countries, because these weapons were not manufactured in Africa. Whatever be the case, the truth is that the long arm of the law has now caught up with Taylor. In the end, justice does prevail. The fate and future of Africa will be determined to the extent that the leaders of this potentially great continent are held accountable for their actions by Africans and the international community.