

Journalists face spying charges in Liberia

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Four journalists arrested in Monrovia, in the African state of Liberia, are in prison facing charges of spying. They had been filming and conducting interviews in Liberia for the last four weeks for British-based Channel 4 television.

Director David Barrie and cameraman Timothy Lambon are British. Another cameraman, Gugulakhe Radebe, is from South Africa and the fourth is Sorious Samoura, a Sierra Leonean filmmaker. Samoura is the producer of the documentary, "Cry Freetown", which featured the situation in Sierra Leone at the beginning of 1999 when the capital Freetown was under attack from the rebel Revolutionary United Front (RUF).

The journalists are accused of entering Liberia with "criminal design" and carrying out "interviews and filming in sensitive areas of the republic," which could result in up to 10 years in prison. Although lawyers have been appointed to defend the men, they were not allowed to be present in court when the charges were announced on Monday.

Liberia's deputy information minister Milton Teahjay told the BBC that the men were trying to implicate Liberia in diamond-smuggling and gun-running, and that they had been found conducting interviews with security personnel. Referring to the mounting pressure on Liberian President Charles Taylor from Britain and the United States to stop his support for the RUF in neighbouring Sierra Leone, Liberian Justice Minister Eddington Varmah stated that the videotape seized from the men was designed to "provide assistance to foreign powers in their ongoing diplomatic confrontation with Liberia."

Director of programmes for Channel 4 Tim Gardam said that the four were making a documentary on how an African country can "climb out of the cycle of civil violence and try to re-establish political and social structures". He said that this was discussed in detail with the Liberian authorities and that the team had

written permission to film.

President Taylor has received appeals from US special envoy to Africa, Rev Jesse Jackson, and former South African President Nelson Mandela to release the four men. Both argued for a diplomatic gesture in the face of the increasing Western isolation of Liberia.

The response from Britain was in keeping with the aggressive campaign the Labour government has been pursuing through the United Nations, demanding sanctions against Liberia over its trade in "conflict diamonds". Taylor's regime has been the main support of the RUF in Sierra Leone, trading diamonds extracted by the RUF for shipments of arms. Much of Liberia's income is from diamond sales, not only from Sierra Leone but also from the rebel Union for Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) forces fighting the government in Angola and from forces engaged in the war in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Demanding the immediate release of the journalists, Foreign Office Minister Peter Hain said of the arrests, "It brings the Liberian government into collision course not just with the United Nations, which it already is over sanctions busting and support for the rebel forces in Sierra Leone, but now also against the whole international climate, which favours press freedom."

Despite the official explanation by Gardam, it seems likely that Channel 4 were responding to the British government's recent criticisms of Liberia. Given the brutal nature of Taylor's autocratic rule and his personal enrichment at the expense of the rest of the population, it would hardly be difficult for a journalist to find damning evidence against his regime. But official denunciation of Taylor is a relatively new departure. Until the RUF resumed its war against the Sierra Leone government earlier this year, Britain was prepared to follow the United States in backing him as a strongman in the region, turning a blind eye to his diamond and arms operations. Few Western journalists were sent to

Liberia and it rarely featured in the media.

Taylor led one of the factions in an eight-year civil war in Liberia, in which West African ECOMOG troops, led by Nigeria and originally sent in with US and Western backing to resolve the conflict, ended up as one more faction in the war. All sides were involved in plundering and brutally suppressing the Liberian population. By 1996, the US decided to push for a settlement of the conflict and intervened through Nigeria to put Taylor, the leader of the biggest rebel faction, into power. After elections were imposed by the Nigerian military dictatorship, Taylor was established as president in 1998.

The British military intervention in Sierra Leone in May this year has resulted in a virtual recolonisation of the country, with British advisors running every aspect of the government, as well as organising and training pro-government militias against the Liberian-backed RUF. The UN peacekeeping force, in disarray after the RUF took hostages, was reorganised and expanded under pressure from Britain. By employing propaganda directed against RUF brutality such as amputations and the rape of civilians, Britain has sought to bring Sierra Leone's diamond fields back under its control.

In the US, there was initial reluctance to become involved in Sierra Leone, as well as divisions within the administration and with Britain over whether to continue support for Taylor. In the last month this was resolved, with US Under Secretary of State Thomas Pickering travelling to the Liberian capital Monrovia and demanding that Taylor cease supporting the RUF or face the consequences. Nigerian troops, financed by the US and trained by several hundred US soldiers, are to join the UN force in Sierra Leone.

Taylor's arrest of the journalists indicates that rather than lose his diamond income he will risk confrontation with the US and Britain, which could easily turn into a military conflict.



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