

US force enters Liberia as former president goes into exile

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18 August 2003

Charles Taylor, Liberia's president since 1997 meekly travelled into exile on Monday August 11.

Surrounded by his close aides and his family, Taylor is living in the Presidential Lodge in Calabar, Cross River State, in the south east of Nigeria. He has been ordered by Nigerian President Obasanjo not to speak to the media and is protected by armed Nigerian police and operatives of the Nigerian State Security Service. Although he has been indicted for war crimes at the United Nations-backed Special Court in Sierra Leone, it appears that for now the Bush administration has accepted his retirement in Nigeria.

After Taylor's departure White House spokeswoman, Claire Buchan, said: "We believe that all parties held responsible for atrocities in Sierra Leone must be held accountable," referring to the former president's backing of rebel forces in the Sierra Leone civil war. But Nigeria's Foreign Affairs Minister Olu Adeniji denied the US had contacted them over the matter and told reporters, "Nigeria will not be harassed by anybody about the indictment, and that is final."

Having portrayed Taylor as at the centre of all the problems of West Africa in recent years, his exile was regarded by the West as a success. The Bush administration had made his removal central to its policy statements on the war-torn country. "Today's departure of Charles Taylor from Liberia is an important step toward a better future for the Liberian people," said President George W. Bush, whilst the *New York Times* editorial claimed, "prospects for an end to Liberia's blood-letting brightened considerably with President Charles Taylor's resignation and flight to Liberia."

Now that Taylor has gone and the first contingent of a West African ECOMIL peacekeeping force have arrived, the rebel Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) have stopped their advance on Monrovia, Liberia's capital. These were the preconditions finally laid down by the US before it would involve its troops. For weeks before the US State Department, concerned at the damage to US credibility by its refusal to intervene in the major

humanitarian disaster unfolding within Liberia, had been in dispute with the Pentagon, which had opposed any further deployment on top of Iraq and Afghanistan.

The US has now dispatched about 200 marines into Monrovia. Made up of 150 combat troops, a so-called "quick reaction force", as well as 50 logistics and other experts, the marines were brought by helicopter to the main airport from the three US naval vessels stationed off the coast for the last week. These will join the 100 or so US troops that are guarding the US embassy and liaising with the Nigerian peacekeepers. However, the remaining 2,300 marines on the three ships are not being deployed.

White House officials have stressed that no US troops are expected to take part in peacekeeping but are there solely as a back up for the West African forces. At a Pentagon press conference, Lawrence Di Rita, spokesman for Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, suggested that when further peacekeepers arrive the US quick-reaction force would move back to the Navy ships, with the qualification "that's subject to change, and as it develops they'll reassess that."

Whilst Washington have made clear they are opposed to anything more than limited US military involvement, the West African force will certainly be acting on behalf of US imperialism. All operations within Liberia are being directed from the US embassy. US commander General Thomas Turner flew into Monrovia to negotiate a ceasefire between government forces and the rebel LURD group. US Ambassador John Blaney presided over a ceremony at which Liberia's port was handed over to ECOMIL forces by LURD that had taken control of it in the last month's fighting. Blaney has also negotiated with the other rebel group, the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL), which was advancing towards Monrovia from the south. He announced that they had agreed to call a halt at the St. John River, several miles from Liberia's second city, Buchanan, which they control.

It now appears that the million or so people that have been trapped in Monrovia in appalling conditions for several weeks with little food and water will receive humanitarian

aid. Thousands of people looted the UN warehouses at the port as the rebels pulled out, but fresh supplies are expected to be shipped in with a UN World Food Programme vessel standing ready.

Whatever the immediate improvement for Monrovia's population, the idea that Taylor's departure signifies a step forward for the people of Liberia and the surrounding area of West Africa is totally false. Taylor was simply the most successful of several warlords and potential warlords that operate in the Liberia-Sierra Leone-Ivory Coast-Guinea region.

The US had sanctioned Taylor taking office in a rigged presidential election after he had emerged as the leader of the strongest faction in the 1990's civil war. His criminal record and guerrilla training in Libya, now routinely cited in the media, were well known at that time. Other warlords, with the same history of killings, torture and brutalising the population as Taylor, are to be found amongst the government forces left in Monrovia or leading the rebel LURD and MODEL.

Taylor has handed over power provisionally to his deputy, Moses Blah, a man closely associated with his operations for more than a decade. Peace negotiations are to continue in Ghana with representatives of the rebels as well as 18 political parties and 5 civil society organisations. The negotiations, which have continued for the last two months and made no progress, are supposed to be setting up a transitional government by mid-October.

Blah's forces only control Monrovia and some surrounding districts whereas LURD controls the north and centre of Liberia and MODEL the south and east. West African negotiators have put forward a plan for a government that will be nominally headed by civilian figures not linked to either the present government or the rebels. But the real power will reside in 10 of the 15 ministerial cabinet posts and bosses of the parastatal corporations that will be divided up between the warring factions.

The small West African peacekeeping force, even with the backing of US marines, will be unable to prevent fighting breaking out between the contending factions across the country. LURD and MODEL are based on different ethnic groups and are quite likely to fight between themselves as well as with the present government faction. It seems possible that the US is prepared to see an Afghanistan-style situation in which the country outside the capital is run by warlords with a colonial-style administration under US control in Monrovia.

MODEL is receiving support from the government side in the Ivory Coast conflict. Despite the presence of 4,000 French peacekeepers and establishment of a transitional government under the control of France, a recent UN report

noted the presence of "unofficial armed groups" opposed to the peace process, including "freelance Liberian elements which still maintain a presence in the western region". These forces are linked to MODEL and financed by sections of the ruling clique around Ivory Coast President Laurent Gbagbo.

It is notable that over the last months there has been little media investigation of either of the rebel groups. The recruitment and use of child soldiers, in many cases from refugee camps, by LURD and with support from the Guinean government has been well documented by organisations such as Human Rights Watch.

Taylor's departure, accompanied by the presidents of Ghana, South Africa and Mozambique, was covered in the international press with a mixture of apprehension—elevating him to a demonic figure that would still exert control over Liberia from exile—and ridicule, as he compared himself to Jesus Christ as a sacrificial lamb. But in his departing speech Taylor correctly pointed out that if he could be forced out of office by the US, so could any other African leader. Taylor accused the US of "using food and other things as a weapon against the Liberian people," and complained of the US backing for LURD.

It is no secret that Guinea was given the go ahead by the US to back the LURD forces and has supplied them with the arms necessary to challenge Taylor. Guinea played a key role as UN Security Council member during the Iraq war. In return, the recent UN investigative mission to West Africa led by British UN Ambassador Jeremy Greenstock made no criticism of Guinea's strong man President Lansana Conté. According to *Africa Confidential*, US troops have trained a force of 800 commandos in "border security" and the US has supplied Guinea with \$400,000 of communications equipment.



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