

Liberia: US puts a bounty on Charles Taylor's head

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In a provocative move the Bush administration has made available a \$2 million reward for the capture of ex-Liberian President Charles Taylor and for bringing him before the Special Court on war crimes that is being set up in Sierra Leone.

Taylor's regime is held responsible by the US for backing the brutal rebel forces in the Sierra Leone civil war that became notorious for hacking the limbs off the local population. Part of the special budget passed by Congress last week to pay for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the bounty was included under the section entitled "Emergencies in the diplomatic and consular service."

Whereas the Bush administration has already resorted to such gun-law measures for the capture of Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden, the difference with the case of Charles Taylor is that his whereabouts are well known. He is living in a Presidential Lodge in Nigeria, under the protection of the Nigerian government. The bounty is consequently an open invitation for criminal elements or mercenaries to seize Taylor in blatantly illegal defiance of the Nigerian authorities.

Taylor was escorted to Nigeria last August in a special plane by no less than four African presidents—Presidents Obasanjo of Nigeria, Kufuor of Ghana, Mbeki of South Africa and Chissano of Mozambique. His retirement into exile followed months of negotiations by the African leaders, who were intent on carrying out the wishes of the US administration to move Taylor out of Liberia as the precondition for a peace initiative in the 14-year-long civil war that has ravaged the country. At that time the Bush administration diplomatically avoided making the demand for Taylor to be seized to appear before the war crimes tribunal. And Taylor only left because he was promised protection in Nigeria by the African leaders.

The rationale behind the bounty has been made clear in a paper by the International Crisis Group (ICG), a think tank that advises western governments [1]. Establishing the Special Court for Sierra Leone is a central plank of US foreign policy. It is largely funded by the US and its chief prosecutor, David Crane, is an American supported by the Bush administration. The ICG points out that the US is backing the Special Court "in the expectation that a demonstration of how such an ad hoc tribunal can handle the gravest of war crimes and crimes against humanity will reduce the widely perceived need for the new International Criminal Court that the Bush administration strongly opposes."

In order to prevent the future prosecution of American politicians and military leaders for war crimes the US government has been pressing nations throughout the world to drop support for the International Criminal Court. [2] The ICG explain that the Sierra Leone court is being pushed to complete its work within three years, during which it will try less than 30 major participants in the civil war. However "in the eyes of many in Sierra Leone, it suffers from a crisis of legitimacy."

Unlike the United Nations tribunals for former Yugoslavia and Rwanda, it is based within the country where atrocities took place and is seen to be politically allied with the Sierra Leone government. In a further report the ICG point to the difficulties the British and Western powers have had in attempting to present a veneer of democratic rule in Sierra Leone. It points to "rampant corruption" in the country and refers to signs that "the old political ways are returning"—by which it means the corrupt and oppressive regime in Sierra Leone in the 1970s and 80s that led to the descent into civil war.

Virtually all the main indictees have either died or

been killed. Rebel leader Foday Sankoh died in jail, rebel military commander Sam (Mosquito) Bockarie was apparently killed to keep him quiet by Taylor's men in Liberia, and the leader of the 1997 military junta that sided with the rebels, Johnny Paul Koroma, fled to Liberia where he has also probably been killed. Hence the great importance to the US of getting Taylor—the only figure widely known internationally—to stand trial.

Nigeria's ruling elite are furious at the bounty announcement. In contrast to the usual reluctance to make any criticism of the US, Nigerian government spokespersons have been outspoken in their condemnation. Presidential spokesman Femi Fane Kayode told the BBC that the reward promoted lawless behaviour and "Such a venture violates not only international law but also all the norms of civilised behaviour." It was "a step back to the stone age" and "this is a little bit close to what many of us would describe as state-sponsored terrorism."

Taylor's spokesman pointed out, "It's an incitement to terrorism, because any bloke in Nigeria who is money hungry could take up that offer."

Another presidential representative told AFP, "Nigeria as a sovereign nation will not succumb to any act of intimidation from any quarter."

The Nigerian government has stepped up its security surrounding Taylor's home at Calabar in the southeast of Nigeria. According to the British *Observer* newspaper, an Anglo-American mercenary outfit, Northbridge Services Group Ltd., was quoted on a far-right US website in August offering to arrest Taylor for the sum of \$2 million.

The Special Court for Sierra Leone has no conceivable legal justification even for extradition proceedings to bring Taylor to trial, let alone seizing him from sovereign Nigerian territory. Unlike the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia based in The Hague, Holland, and the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, based in Arusha, Tanzania, the Sierra Leone Court does not have a mandate under Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter. Such a mandate requires UN member states to comply with its orders although even then, as with the US itself, a country can simply refuse to cooperate.

The UN's chief representative in Liberia, retired US air force general and appointee of the Bush

administration Jacques Paul Klein, welcomed the bounty. With the familiar "liberation" rhetoric, he declared that it was a signal to African people that "we will no longer let regional dictators and criminals brutalise you, murder you, exploit you, and steal the state treasury."

Nevertheless putting a bounty on Taylor's head will be viewed throughout Africa as one more example of US imperialist aggression. African leaders will not be slow to deduce that if Taylor can be made to stand trial when the US desires, then so can they if they fall out of favour.

The US administration made it clear that Liberia is low down the list of its priorities when after several months of deliberation a small peacekeeping force of 200 US marines entered Liberia's capital Monrovia for only two weeks in August. A UN force of 15,000 troops, mainly from West Africa, is supposed to be taking over the policing of the country by next year. At present only 4,500 UN troops are deployed and fighting has only stopped in the immediate vicinity of Monrovia. Much of the country is under the control of rebel militias, often made up of children forced or drugged to carry out looting and atrocities. There will be great reluctance to send more peacekeeping troops to a country widely seen as the US's responsibility.



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