

Liberia: Taylor Casts a Long Shadow

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As Liberia went to the polls, exiled president Charles Taylor remained an unspoken force to be reckoned with.

Michael was nine when he saw his sister raped and killed. "Then they beat my mother and father in front of me and broke my father's hands," recalled the former child soldier.

But Michael - traumatised by these atrocities - went on to join the very militia that had committed them, and spent the next nine years fighting for the then president of Liberia, Charles Taylor.

It was a familiar story of the paradoxical hold that Taylor - part general, part politician and part mafia don, who trafficked diamonds and tropical timber - had over the people he terrorised. A popular cry heard at the public rallies he addressed was, "He kill my ma, he kill my pa, I vote for him!"

Some 1.4 million out of a population of 3.3 million Liberians went to the polls on October 11 for the first time since Taylor was elected in 1997, but the question of bringing the former leader to justice has been studiously avoided by every candidate.

Taylor went into exile in 2003 as part of a peace deal that ended fourteen years of civil war in Liberia and now lives comfortably in a mansion in Calabar, Nigeria.

Liberia, Africa's oldest independent republic founded by freed slaves from America in 1822, was torn apart by 1989-2003 conflict, in which child soldiers high on drugs wielded grenade-launchers and Kalashnikov rifles. An estimated quarter of a million people were killed, while a third of the population became refugees.

The country's infrastructure was ruined - like the rest of the country, the capital Monrovia is still without piped water and mains electricity - and neighbouring countries in West Africa were destabilised. Liberia's problems are colossal: it has a grinding debt burden of three billion US dollars, unemployment runs at more than 80 per cent and there is mass illiteracy.

Taylor's wife, his former son-in-law and one of his ex-generals are all running for government positions and the United Nations says it has credible evidence that the former president himself continues to interfere in Liberian politics in violation of his exile deal. He is believed to be funding several election candidates with some of the money he looted from the national treasury before going into exile.

The Americans tabled a motion at the UN in early October calling for Taylor's immediate arrest if he is ever found in Liberia.

In neighbouring Sierra Leone, a UN-backed special court has already indicted him on 17 charges of crimes against humanity and war crimes for his support for that country's rebel Revolutionary United Front, RUF, whose leaders are accused of killings, mutilation and sexual slavery.

The RUF fighters, who funded their operations by looting the country's diamond fields, became notorious for hacking limbs from civilians and forcing families to rape each other while jeering rebels looked on.

However, the court's mandate covers only Sierra Leone and not the civil war in Liberia.

The Liberian conflict began when Taylor invaded in 1989 to topple military dictator Samuel Doe, who was slowly mutilated before his final execution. There was a brief lull in the fighting when in 1997, terrified Liberians obediently voted the warlord into power as Liberia's new president, but the violence soon erupted again.

Despite the well-documented atrocities of which Taylor stands accused, there is a curious reluctance on the part of many Liberians to bring him to trial or even mention his name.

"You know how they [Taylor's hit squads] killed one man? Just took a stick and rammed it straight through him," said Jeanette Ebba-Davidson of the Association of Female Lawyers in Liberia. Her newly painted office is a stone's throw from the Executive Mansion, from where Taylor ruled for seven years, and the bullet-riddled National Assembly building.

"He has the people even today who will do those things for him," said Ebba-Davidson. "If he comes back here, everyone will feel in danger, because you don't know who is close to him or who will accept money from him to kill whoever he wants."

A report issued by the International Coalition for Justice this year concluded that Taylor still had 210 million US dollars in assets hidden away, equivalent to nearly three times the country's annual budget. In the meantime, ordinary Liberians struggle to survive in a country where there are only three paved roads and in which more than 100,000 demobilised former fighters roam the countryside.

A Truth and Justice Commission, based on the similar body pioneered in post-apartheid South Africa, is being set up with the authority to recommend that perpetrators of the worst human rights abuses be brought to justice. However, few expect to see their former president in the dock. The administrators setting the commission up are working on a limited budget of 100,000 dollars from a gutted public works building without electricity.

"Mr Taylor is a ruthless man with enormous resources," said one leading presidential candidate, who asked not to be named. "I am not an enemy of Mr Taylor - I am not going to be reckless."

Another candidate, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, has described Taylor as "a charismatic criminal, a deposed tyrant who wrecked the country".

Many believe that Taylor is simply biding his time until the mandate of the UN Special Court for Sierra Leone runs out at the end of the year.

Civil society groups say that Nigeria, which itself has a poor human rights record, is reluctant to hand him over because its leaders do not want to set a precedent for prosecuting African heads of state.

The Nigerians argue that they have no evidence that the terms of Taylor's asylum are being broken, and that bringing him to face prosecution could spark a return to violence.

"That sounds like blackmail to me," said Corinne Dufka, head of the West Africa division for Human Rights

Watch. “They said the same thing about Foday Sankoh [the head of the RUF in Sierra Leone], but when he was arrested there was no trouble.

“It is important to bring justice to Taylor’s victims and end the culture of impunity that fuels violence in West Africa.”

The scars of war go beyond the bullet holes in the buildings and the scrawled rebel graffiti that still decorate the bridges in Monrovia.

“Everyone in this country is either a victim or a perpetrator; often they are both. They give us drugs, grass, tablets, that make you kill a human being like a chicken,” recalled 18-year-old Comfort, who was abducted by Taylor’s militia with her older sister when she was a child. She wants Taylor brought before a court “because he do plenty thing in Liberia, spoil our heads, kill our parents”.

Augustus Toe, head of the country’s Catholic Peace and Justice Commission, commenting on Comfort’s remarks, said, “That’s why there should be a court in this country. There should be an operation above just a South African-style truth and reconciliation commission. Justice is as important as reconciliation. Where there is no justice there can never be peace.”

A new report by the Brussels-based International Crisis Group says it is absolutely vital for the whole West Africa region that Liberia’s elections and reconstruction go right. “Getting it wrong would probably seal the region’s fate for many years to come as the theatre of a nomadic war in which aimless and cruel young men roam from one country to another seeking the most lucrative sites to loot. The stakes are high,” said the report.

But with the Liberian justice system in tatters, with time and money running out for Sierra Leone’s special court, and with the Nigerians disinclined to hand Taylor over, it looks as though the former Liberian leader might join the ranks of other African dictators such as Uganda’s Idi Amin and Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire, who fled their war-torn countries to live in a luxurious exile.

Taylor may even be planning a comeback.

For one young man at least, the idea is welcome – Michael, one of many who campaigned on the slogan, “He kill my ma, he kill my pa, I vote for him.” The fact is that Taylor still commands love and respect from many of his former fighters, even those like Michael who lost family members to his forces.

As Michael sat under the bare bulb in a UNICEF school designed to rehabilitate former fighters, he smiled at the thought of the man he called Papay. “I want for the man [Taylor] to come back. I want for the man to be president. Plenty of people here who love Charles Taylor,” he said.

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