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*From the Baltimore Sun*

## **World must ensure Liberia's Taylor faces justice**

By J. Peter Pham

March 29, 2006

The U.N.-backed Special Court for Sierra Leone unsealed an indictment nearly three years ago charging Liberian President Charles Taylor with 17 counts of war crimes, crimes against humanity and other serious violations of international humanitarian law during that country's civil war. But he's still a free man.

The indictment, handed down June 4, 2003, charges that Mr. Taylor "bears the greatest responsibility" for murder, rape, torture and the use of child soldiers during a West African conflict that killed or wounded an estimated 1.5 million people.

From the time he was forced from power in August 2003 until this week, the former warlord has lived in exile as a guest of Nigeria, whose president, Olusegun Obasanjo, has said that he would hand over Mr. Taylor only at the request of an elected Liberian head of state.

Now there is one: Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, who in November became the first woman elected president in Africa. This month, her government formally asked Nigeria to extradite Mr. Taylor to stand trial in Sierra Leone.

For those who have long campaigned to end the culture of impunity that is at the root of Africa's malaise, this turn of events is truly historic. But this is not the time to lose focus or momentum. Quick follow-up is needed to ensure that justice is served.

First, attention - and pressure - must be focused on Nigeria and Mr. Obasanjo, who was scheduled to meet President Bush at the White House today, to ensure that Mr. Taylor is apprehended before he can flee the country or plot further mischief (he was reported missing Tuesday from the villa where he has lived).

That Mr. Taylor is loose is Nigeria's fault, and it should be forced to bring him to justice.

Despite having promised to hand over Mr. Taylor if requested, Mr. Obasanjo initially responded to the extradition request by saying he would have to "put the request to other African leaders."

Then, after a more than three-week delay, the official Nigerian line became, "The government of Liberia is free to take former President Charles Taylor into its custody" if it would come and fetch him, knowing full well that Liberia does not have the means to do so. In the meantime, Nigeria ignored pleas from the chief prosecutor of the special court, Desmond de Silva, to take Mr. Taylor into custody.

Given Mr. Taylor's record of destabilizing an entire region - during his halcyon days, he started conflicts in four countries - and Nigeria's criminal negligence in allowing him to flee, it is incumbent upon the international community to quickly collaborate to capture him.

A U.N. Security Council resolution last year ordered the U.N. Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) to apprehend Mr. Taylor and transfer him to the special court should he attempt to return to Liberia. Now the council needs to invoke its Chapter VII powers to authorize UNMIL to hunt him down as a threat to the peace of the region wherever he is to be found and to compel cooperation.

If the United Nations won't do it, the United States should be prepared to act to safeguard Liberia and its interests in West Africa.

The United States and the international community need to ensure that the court has sufficient resources to finish what it has started once Mr. Taylor goes on trial. The tribunal has yet to secure the modest \$25 million that it needs to complete its mission.

Liberia still faces many challenges in the months and years ahead, but Ms. Johnson-Sirleaf has taken the first step toward a sustainable future for her country by acknowledging that truth, accountability and justice are essential commodities, not optional luxuries in a post-conflict reconstruction.

Now it is up to the United States and the international community to work together to ensure that Mr. Taylor's impunity is brought to a quick end and the rule of law is indeed vindicated.

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