



Photo by Carolyn Cole. Bullet casings carpet the street 06 August 2003 in Monrovia near the new bridge, one of the two areas where the heaviest fighting between rebel and government soldiers occurred

LIBERIA

THE END OF IMPUNITY?

The trial of once Africa's most notorious warlord and former head of state, Charles Taylor, will resonate on a continent where dictators continue to rule with impunity. OLGA YOLDI writes.

In many parts of Africa, despots with blood on their hands do not usually find themselves facing an international court of law. However such is the case for former Liberian president Charles Taylor, who was captured at the Nigerian-Cameroon border last March, while trying to flee Nigeria where he had lived in exile.

He is being tried by a UN-backed court, for crimes committed during the Sierra Leone conflict. Taylor has pled not guilty to 11 counts of war crimes and crimes against humanity -charges that only scratch the surface of the atrocities he engineered. Taylor's crimes include the inciting of wars in four neighbouring West African countries, the enslavement, systematic rape and dismemberment of thousands of civilians, collaboration with Al Qaeda, and the use of drugged children as foot soldiers and cannon fodder.

In his first court appearance, Taylor went on the attack saying he did not recognise the court's jurisdiction, claiming that the entire procedure was an attempt to divide and rule the people of Liberia and Sierra Leone.

For years Nigeria resisted handing Taylor over to the special court, saying it only would give him to an elected Liberian government. When the newly elected democratic president, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, took office this year, she made a request for Taylor to be tried by the special court. He is the first African former head of state to face such charges. ▶

The court's chief prosecutor Desmond de Silva said: "A precedent has been set. Those who commit atrocities and violate international law will be held accountable. No matter how rich and powerful or feared people may be, no one is above the law."

Taylor is an Americo Liberian, a descendant from freed slaves who founded Liberia in 1847. They are a small minority that has historically dominated the intellectual and ruling class in the country.

Liberia was not colonised by Europeans. It was conceived by the American Colonisation Society, an organization of white clergymen, freed slaves and abolitionists, set up in 1822 to establish a mechanism for ridding the United States of slaves. The society believed that the immigration of blacks to Africa was the answer to the problem of slavery, as well as to what it felt was "the incompatibility of the races". Many of the returned slaves were missionaries, some were entrepreneurs and others were seeking a better life.

Liberia was proclaimed Africa's first independent republic in 1847. Its government was modelled after that of the US. The new ruling class of settlers took control of the coastal areas ignoring the indigenous tribes in the interior. Their motto was "The love of liberty brought us here". But the years of settler rule were characterised by exploitation of the majority indigenous people.

A pattern of oppression and mismanagement started with William Tubman, who ruled the country from 1944 to 1971. He rarely ventured inland, did little for the indigenous Liberians, and established an extensive secret police network. "He laid the foundations for what was to become an autocracy rooted in weak institutions and contempt for the rule of law," journalist Bill Berkeley wrote in the *Atlantic Monthly*.

During Tubman's tenure Liberia became the main US ally in Black Africa. The US built the Voice of America relay station in Liberia, for broadcasts throughout sub-Saharan Africa, and the Omega navigation tower, for directing shipping up and down the Atlantic coast. Liberia became the main transfer point for intelligence gathered in Africa during the cold

war, US military planes were granted landing and refuelling rights at Liberia's Robertsfield airport, built by the US.

Liberia's economy became linked to US interests. America's Firestone Tyre was the largest single employer for much of the century and the US Rubber Company operated the world's largest rubber plantation. Both developed links with the main political institution, the True Whig Party. By 1950, Firestone was responsible for a quarter of Liberia's tax revenue.

Tubman's successor William Tolbert followed the same policy but was described as being less savvy than Tubman. In 1979 he raised the price of rice, the Liberian staple food. Discontent was growing among indigenous Liberians. Demonstrators took to the streets. Tolbert ordered the police to open fire. More than forty people were killed.

The struggle for power

The agent of change was the army. In 1980 Samuel Doe, an unknown, semi-literate 28-year-old sergeant and his collaborators entered Liberia's executive mansion, killed Tolbert and disembowelled him. Doe took over the government.

Since none of the coup members had much administrative experience outside the lower ranks of the army, they co-opted former members of the Americo-Liberian elite.

Doe, a member of the Krahn tribe, called himself the liberator of the indigenous people. He promised equitable distribution of wealth, an end to the oppressive domination of the Americo-Liberian elite, and the return to civilian rule. But his promises were not kept and he soon became a greedy and brutal tyrant, contributing little to the advancement of Liberia.

In 1985 Doe stole the election. A month later a coup attempt was suppressed with ruthless violence by the army. "Doe's signature of innovation was to the armed forces of Liberia, stacking the officer corps and key units with Krahn," writes Berkeley. "During his regime Krahn soldiers responded to repeated protests, plots and failed coups by murdering, raping and pillaging on a huge scale. After a failed

coup, Krahn soldiers rounded up hundreds of Gios and Manos presumed to have supported the coup attempt."

The Reagan administration in the US not only turned a blind eye to the atrocities, but contributed half a million dollars in economic and military aid to Doe's regime. Yet even those who had predicted all-out civil war could hardly have imagined the depths to which Liberia would finally descend in 1990.

War and barbarism

Charles Taylor had been a vocal student leader in the 1970s and an opponent of the Tolbert regime. In 1980 he had just returned from the US, where he had studied economics, and began working for Doe as head of the government's purchasing agency, a position that controlled much of Liberia's budget. But he fled the country in 1983, after he was charged with embezzlement, and was jailed in Massachusetts while awaiting extradition. He was accused of stealing US\$900,000, by negotiating bogus contracts with his own front company in New Jersey. He escaped by sawing through the bars of his prison cell. Just who actually helped Taylor escape from prison and from the US, is something of a mystery.

He reappeared transformed into a guerrilla leader in Ivory Coast in 1989, after having been trained at a camp in Libya.

It was in Ivory Coast that Taylor assembled a group of 150 fighters, some he had met in Libya, others were disaffected Liberians. With money and arms from Libya and the political and financial backing of Burkina Faso and Ivory Coast, he crossed the border into Liberia in December 1989. Calling for a bloody revolution against neo-colonialism, Taylor and his guerrilla army, the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) launched a war against Doe's despotic regime.

Since everyone wanted to get rid of Doe, Taylor's war was initially very popular, particularly among Gio and Mano exiles who volunteered to join him to fight against Doe's Krahn army. Taylor recalled "we didn't even have to act". People came to us and said. "Give me a gun. How can I kill the man who killed my mother?" Doe responded with a counter-insur-

gency force, attacking and murdering Gio and Mano tribes in Nimba County. Taylor also turned to child soldiers whom he "socialised" into a new tribe with himself as chief.

"Within months Taylor's small guerrilla army had snowballed into a marauding force of thousands, mostly illiterate, barely trained, but heavily armed, seeking liberty, vengeance and booty," Berkeley wrote. Not only the Krahn suffered, but also anyone suspected of having collaborated with Doe.

From 1989 to 1996, Taylor wrecked havoc in West Africa. In an orgy of looting, killing and destruction, Taylor's NPFL toppled Doe's government, 200,000 people lost their lives, and more than a million Liberians were displaced. Gradually much of the country was bombed, burned and looted into ruins.

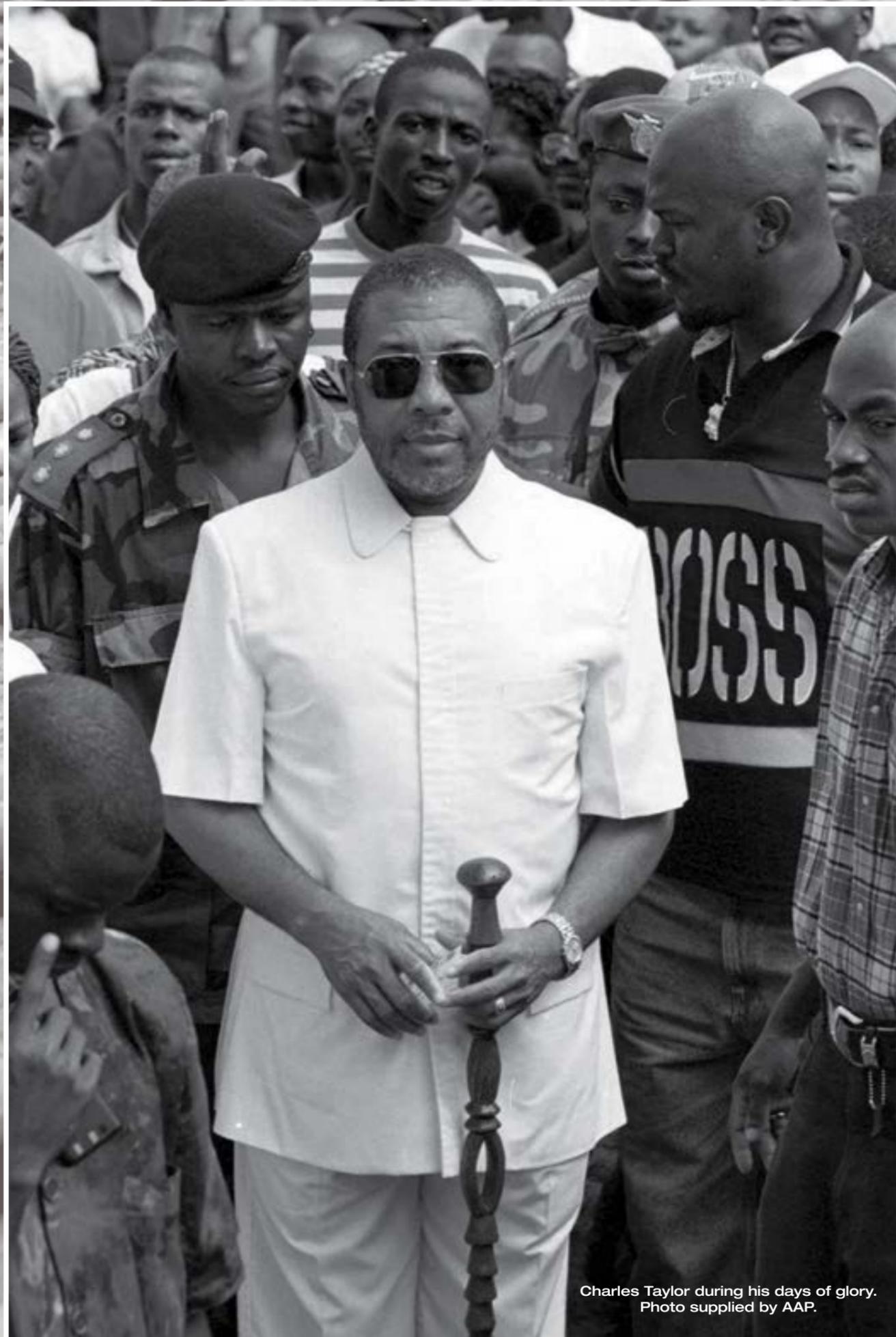
Soon Taylor and his NPFL controlled most of the country, except for the capital, Monrovia, which was controlled by an interim government, backed by the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG), installed by Liberia's West African neighbours to restore order, but the civil war raged on for

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years. Clashes between NPFL and ECOMOG troops and a rival militia known as ULIMO, continued unabated.

In 1991, the battle for Monrovia degenerated into slaughter. Water stopped running, electricity was cut off and food ran out. "NPFL rebels, high on marijuana and disguised in dresses and women's wigs, looted from the stores," journalist Lee Anderson wrote. "We fight to loot" was their motto and they shot people indiscriminately. People fought on many sides of the conflict for whoever could pay them, often turning on their previous allies. Peace agreements and ceasefires came and went. It looked as if the conflict was unresolvable.

Human-rights abuses were perpetrated by all sides. Systematic rape, arbitrary arrests, killings, disappearances and other abuses were widespread. ▶



Charles Taylor during his days of glory.
Photo supplied by AAP.

Check points, often manned by child soldiers, were the source of thousands of harrowing experiences and became for many Liberians a traumatic memory of the war. A journalist from the *New Democrat Review* wrote: “Those who had encounters with check points cannot forget the menace, the lingering thought of brutal death. At check points, loved ones were shot or maimed for life. There, one may live, depending on your tribe, religion or politics, or even your looks. If you were unlucky to meet an old rival in command death was imminent. There anything could happen. You could be shot because of a gold ring or a pair of shoes that the person ‘in power’ wanted.”

By April 1996, factional fighting by the country’s warlords had destroyed any sense of normalcy and civil society. In 1997, the Economic Community of West African States, (ECOWAS) attempted to restore order, disarm militias and arrange elections.

When Taylor won the elections Liberians expected peace. He had people so terrified they had voted for him. A memorable slogan during that election campaign was: “he killed my ma, he killed my pa, but I will vote for him anyway.”

But Taylor’s years as president continued to be marked by violence. The pattern of pillage and plunder continued. He became a rich man while Liberia became poorer. Unemployment and illiteracy stood above 75 per cent and little investment was made in the country’s infrastructure.

“Taylor, who wanted no competition, surrounded himself with weak administrators,” journalist Rene Wadlow wrote. And since he shared no money or power with other factions, insurgencies based on tribal loyalty soon broke out. Clashes between the Liberian armed forces and the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) became more and more frequent. Soon LURD controlled much of the country and precipitated Taylor’s fall from power. In 2003, under international pressure to quit and surrounded by rebel forces, he stepped down. A peace agreement ended 14 years of civil war. A transitional government assumed control under Gyude Bryant, who steered the country towards elections in 2005.

Taylor left for a comfortable exile in

Nigeria. But, according to the *New York Times*, he left Liberia the world’s poorest nation.

A story of terror and greed

“Like Menes Zenawi of Ethiopia, Museveni of Uganda, Taylor belongs to a new breed of freedom fighters who did not do any better than their predecessors,” writes Aie Zi Guo, an African political commentator, based in Canada. “They replaced nation-

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alism with ethnicism. Religious tolerance was replaced with sectarian violence. Human rights were grossly violated. Poverty, disease, malnutrition and illiteracy became the sole identity of Africa. Africa’s resources were squandered in unimaginable proportions. Gun culture ruled over reason and logic. Once again Africa and Africans were colonised. This time not by foreign invaders but by indigenous elite guerrilla leaders who usurped power all in the name of democracy.”

The current head of state in Liberia, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf supported Taylor when he first planned to oust Doe but backed away when Taylor began killing. “It was clear that Taylor’s aim was to put himself in power, not challenge the status quo,” she said. Sirleaf, defined the principle features of Taylor’s leadership to be “corruption, misappropriation, ostentation, oversized security and self aggrandisement”. She believed Taylor wanted to rape the state.

Taylor did rape the state. “Liberia under Charles Taylor was essentially a functioning criminal enterprise,” writes journalist Douglas Farah, a former West African bureau chief for the *Washington Post*. A US diplomat told the *New Yorker* magazine that Taylor had his own dual fiscal system the official one and a private system based on profits from illegal extraction of timber, gold and diamonds.

According to a recent report of the Inter-▶

national Coalition of Justice (ICJ), \$685 million passed through Taylor's hands during his six and a half years in office. Most of his wealth was used to sponsor his wars. By importing an abundant flow of weapons from a wide array of international dealers, he supported conflicts that eventually spread to four other West African countries: Ivory Coast, Guinea, Sierra Leone and Burkina Faso. Taylor made it a priority to control the lucrative alluvial diamond fields of Sierra Leone.

In 1999, he faced broad international condemnation for supporting the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in Sierra Leone, a rebel group and proxy army whose capacity was strengthened by Taylor. The rebels launched "Operation No Living Thing" a rampage that left a trail of death and destruction across much of Sierra Leone.

The RUF gained international notoriety for those crimes, as well as for their signature atrocity of hacking off the arms, legs and ears of civilians. The RUF gained control of

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Douglas Farah

the Kono Diamond fields, the richest in the country. According to the ICJ report, Taylor managed to control their illegal diamond trade, keeping as much as ninety per cent of the profit.

Taylor's main revenue source apart from diamonds was timber. "He allowed a growing array of predatory loggers access to Liberia's forests, allowing the clear cutting of parts of West Africa's few significant forest reserves," the report says.

Taylor hosted a variety of international criminal syndicates and terrorist organizations, ranging from Israeli, Lebanese, Russian and Ukrainian organised crime groups, to Al Qaeda and Hezbollah. According to Farah, Al Qaeda had a permanent team in Liberia since 2000. These groups, as well as other businesses seeking to enter the diamond and timber business, were obliged to pay Taylor directly in cash.

But he did not stop there. He also generated annual extra budgetary income in advance tax schemes on the state monopolies for importation of petroleum products and other commodities.

Weapons were one of Taylor's largest expenditures. "Arms were not only used to support proxy armies in Sierra Leone, Guinea and Ivory Coast, but also to keep other militias in check, terrorise his political opponents and, towards the end of his presidency, he paid for mercenary forces to fight rebels seeking to ouster him," the report says.

A UN Security Council resolution imposed a general and complete embargo on all deliveries of weapons and military equipment to Liberia. However Taylor maintained unimpeded access to international markets throughout his presidency.

Attempts to reduce weapons were futile. In order to ensure the unrestricted flow of arms to West Africa, Taylor paid higher prices to those willing to break international sanctions.

"Charles Taylor was able to exploit the enormous cracks in the global system that should control weapons shipments. He was an astute businessman, a shrewd warmaker and a savvy politician," the report says. "The scope of his byzantine business arrangements combined with his capacity to work global networks allowed him to evade scrutiny and punishment for years."

The good news is that he has not escaped justice. The grotesque nature of the wars he financed for 14 years, the unspeakable acts of violence he encouraged and rewarded, the profound suffering that he inflicted on thousands of Liberians and Sierra Leoneans - the cripples, the homeless, the amputees, the disfigured, the orphans, the widowed, the injured and the dead are all documented and will be used as evidence. Soldiers and peacekeepers gave their lives to contain him.

Quest for justice

The legacy of colonialism and the cold war have been blamed for the perpetuation of despotic rule in Africa. During the cold war, these dictators were US allies against the allies of Soviet and Libyan backed regimes.

Independence for most of the nations came more than 50 years ago and the cold war is history. Nevertheless the regimes have survived until now because of their sheer ruthlessness.

Hopefully Taylor's trial will cause some discomfort to those African dictators who have slaughtered their citizens with impunity: from Idi Amin, whose murderous rule in Uganda gave way to a comfortable exile in Saudi Arabia, and Haile Megistu, whose communist rule in Ethiopia killed more than one million people and who is now enjoying a comfortable life in Zimbabwe to Chad's Hisssein Habre, who is also enjoying a comfortable existence in Senegal.

Hopefully the trial will be a wake-up call to rouge leaders who still maintain their grip on power to the detriment of their own nations: Omar Bongo of Gabon who has been in power since the 1970s, Teodoro Obiang Nguema of Equatorial Guinea who has pillaged his country since 1979 and Paul Biya who has been ruling Cameroon for 24 years. Chad's dictator Idriss Deby, Robert Mugabe from Zimbabwe and others who have been unchecked for decades. Despite the suffering they inflict and the threat to progress they represent, they have escaped international attention and condemnation.

Why is it that the deplorable abuses in Africa are all but ignored by the international community? According to Farah it is because of historic racism and a belief that the West has no strategic interests there. "Traditional racism has played a huge role in shaping African history," he says. "However I think that is combined with indifference to the outside world. Also in the isolationism of this era, Africa is always at the bottom of everyone's list ... the Bush administration's embrace of a moral imperative to bring democracy to the world does not include them." Farah argues that these despots continue to be not only a danger to the countries they control, but to the stability of the region as a whole. The question is whether the world cares enough to help end the misery.

The world did care enough to bring Taylor to trial. Publicity about his atrocities did play a role, but it was his terrorist ties that made him a big enough risk to bring him to justice. "Taylor fell where others have not because he picked a fight with the international community. And still it took years to bring him to justice, as

he benefited from the indifference of world leaders obsessed with other threats," Farah writes.

The persistent work of the UN-backed special court for Sierra Leone and many other human-rights groups, which lobbied governments incessantly, also contributed to his indictment and arrest.

There is a fear however that the trial may disturb Liberia's fragile peace since Taylor still has many followers and powerful friends in the new government. The new president Ellen Johnson Sirleaf has recommended Taylor be tried in a European court.

While some argue that the transfer would prevent conflict, others believe that it would rob Africans of the experience of seeing

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real justice being administered to their most powerful tormentor.

"Such transfer would defeat a principal purpose behind the establishment of the special court in Sierra Leone namely, to teach Africans, firsthand and in their own countries, the fundamentals of justice and to drive home the democratic principle that no one is above the law," former US Ambassador to Liberia, John E Leigh, said. "The special court has the potential to help raise West Africa's standards for accountability, transparency, fairness and the humane treatment of defendants. In countries where might makes right, demonstrating the proper administration of justice can be an unbeatable nation-building tool".

No final decisions have been made as yet. Wherever it takes place, the trial will contribute to restoring confidence in the state, end the culture of impunity and it may mark a new era, in which disputes are resolved peacefully by judges rather than armies. But most importantly, it will provide an opportunity for both Sierra Leone and Liberia to examine the past and move forward towards a more viable future.