Charles Taylor: The escape, the capture and the justice

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1. Bringing African dictators and warlords to justice

Ndung’u Wainaina notes that bringing Charles Taylor and other dictators to justice, other than its importance in establishing the rule of law and deterring future human rights violations, gives victims an opportunity to know the truth about the past and seek reparations for these violations.

2. The many lives of Charles Taylor

Kintu Nyago points out that it was largely US pressure that led to Taylor’s arrest. This, he argues, has enormous implications for Africa and its emerging governance institutions such as the African Union.

3. The Trial of Charles Taylor and the Fate of Africa

Stan Chu Ilo says that the fate and future of Africa will be determined by the extent that leaders are held accountable for their actions by Africans and the international community.

4. Charles Taylor, The Escape Artist

Prof. Vivian Seton says that every morning, Taylor should take care of the crippled by bathing them, feeding them, combing their hair and taking care of their personal hygiene as this is the only way he will experience what it is like to be maimed and crippled.

1. Bringing African dictators and warlords to justice

Ndung’u Wainaina

The arrest of Warlord Charles Taylor after his indictment was unsealed in June 2003 by the UN-backed Sierra Leone Special Court cast a bright hope on conflict ridden Africa. Africa has for a long time been dominated by leaders who have constantly and consistently been unleashing in a deliberate and indiscriminate manner terror with impunity to civilians. To address this phenomenon, the AU council of ministers endorsed a plan of action against impunity in 1996. Subsequently, African leaders made a commitment through a declaration in 2000 to condemn genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes in the continent and pledged to cooperate with relevant institutions in the continent and outside that are set up to prosecute perpetrators. However, the Charles Taylor’s case has exposed African leaders as lacking in a common approach in combating impunity and preserving emerging fragile peace and democracy on the continent.

Charles Taylor is accused of masterminding massive killings, amputations, mutilations, and sexual offences including sexual slavery and rape, recruitment of child soldiers and adductions. Across in central Africa, former US-backed Chad dictator Hussein Habre is facing trial in Belgium, whose anti-atrocity law allows its courts to hear cases from all over the world. Habre’s extradition to Belgium was a wake up call to dictators in Africa and elsewhere, warning them that if they commit atrocities they could also be brought to justice one day and not necessary in their respective countries.

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The arrest of Charles Taylor is a crucial action that will contribute significantly to securing peace, justice and accountability in Liberia and in its tormented neighbours where Taylor had established and sponsored an army empire of militia to terrorize and overthrow governments in West Africa in return for concessions to exploit diamonds and other natural resources. African leaders, the majority of whom have opted to keep quiet over the Taylor issue, need to recognize the essential role that justice plays in maintaining peace, political stability and promoting rule of law. Impunity does not serve the interests of African people whose lives have been ruined by either state or non-state actors.

An attempt to insulate or shield human rights violators flouts both international human rights law and humanitarian law and it is an affront to innumerable victims of these atrocities. Nobody is accusing African leaders that they are not doing much to address human rights violations in Africa, but they need to appreciate the existing gaps in the continent and work with the international community in dealing with complicated human rights abuses. The unwillingness to address the
problem of impunity is inconsistent and incompatible with the fundamental principles of the Constitutive Act of the African Union. Africa’s conflicts are caused by widespread impunity which takes the form of massive human rights atrocities, large scale pillage of public resources, illegal extraction and sale of primary resources and systematic discrimination on ethnic or religious grounds. This calls for strengthening of institutional commitments and capacity to monitor and address human rights violations continuously and to take proactive actions to intervene.

Bringing Charles Taylor and other dictators to justice, other than its importance in establishing the rule of law and deterring future human rights violations, gives victims an opportunity to know the truth about the past and seek reparations for these violations.

The leadership of various armed groups roaming in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Darfur in Sudan, Northern Uganda and Somalia need to take Charles Taylor’s lesson seriously. The arrest and transfer of Thomas Lubanga in the DRC to the International Criminal Court in The Hague, and the indictment of rebel leaders in Northern Uganda and Darfur to the same court has opened new chapter in pursuing justice for human rights violations. Prosecution of these people by the ICC would contribute substantively to restoring peace and stop the widespread systematic attacks against the civilians in the Great Lakes Region. Sustainable peace and democracy is not exclusive of justice.

The African Union needs to facilitate the consolidation of the gains obtaining from these latest actions on the justice front through implementing the resolutions of the Conference on Security, Stability, Development and Cooperation in Africa (CSSDCA) adopted in 2002. It is also imperative to redesign and strengthen the peace building and post conflict reconstruction mechanisms in Africa to include justice and accountability mechanisms. Since African leaders have at least shown political will to intervene and address the conflict crises, it is crucial for the international community, including the UN Security Council, to adopt strategies that create a conducive environment for positive engagement and partnership in handling Africa problems. Financial commitment is only one way but more significant is the development of institutions with capacity to intervene rapidly and curtail the escalation of impunity.

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2. The many lives of Charles Taylor

Kintu Nyago

The Charles Taylor saga raises more questions than answers. There is a need to appreciate at this stage that pressure to have Taylor apprehended overwhelmingly emerged from Washington, rather than from Monrovia, Abuja or the African Union (AU). This in turn points to the very fragility of most African countries while concurrently testing the very credibility of our continental and regional institutions, more specifically the AU and Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

Although Taylor and his state apparatus operated in a criminal manner, one needs to contextualize the pressure leading to his arrest, in order to fully appreciate the gravity of the issues surrounding that development. When three years ago Taylor and the lieutenants of his National Patriotic Party military politico outfit were besieged in Monrovia by the LURD rebels, they were ready to cause a blood bath rather than surrendering or for that matter fleeing into exile. For they were all to aware of the consequences of both, that is in light of Master Sergeant Doe’s violent death in addition to the issuing of the arrest warrant from the Sierra Leone based International Criminal Court (ICC).

It took the wise intervention of both the AU and ECOWAS to avert a massive loss of life in Monrovia. President Olusegun Obasanjo, then AU Chairman, in addition to President Thabo Mbeki of South Africa and President John Kuffor of Ghana, with AU backing, persuaded Taylor to peacefully relinquish power with the promise of amnesty for his supporters and a safe exile in Nigeria. Taylor complied, which in turn resulted into Liberia’s hitherto promising democratization effort that recently saw Ellen
Johnson Sirleaf elected and the Mano River Basin seeming to move towards a much deserved peace. This also was an illustration of the policy of African solutions to African problems.

Not for long however, for Washington, always too eager to criticize and impose its will, pressurized the Sirleaf-Johnson administration to demand Taylor’s extradition from Nigeria. To ensure compliance the US withheld its development assistance to war ravaged Liberia. Hence it became a contest between democracy and justice. This being so because while the democratically elected Sirleaf administration had opted through its mandate and wisdom to move on and reconcile, Washington on the other hand demanded immediate justice, through having Taylor arrested and tried.

Hence the honeymoon of the new Liberian government was rudely interrupted. This in a very fragile country where there is a chance of destabilization. For the much-anticipated national reconciliation has been undermined. For Taylor, who had won Liberia’s first democratic elections with a landslide, still has considerable support, both political and military. For instance, the current Speaker of the Liberian Parliament is a member of his party.

Regionally, Washington’s bullying tactics, (Obasanjo was also nearly denied access to the White House on his recent visit after it had been reported that the elusive Taylor had escaped), have fundamentally undermined the credibility of the AU and ECOWAS. How will these bodies successfully diffuse potential political catastrophes involving this or other African political elite? For after what has befallen Taylor, it would probably be only the most credulous to trust such conflict resolution mediations.

Regarding Taylor and Liberia, Washington is not spotless. In the mid 1980’s, Taylor escaped from an American jail, from where he fled to conduct military training in Libya and eventually launch a successful armed struggle in 1989 that overthrew the Doe regime. Some have actually pointed to US complicity in this escape.

On the other hand, the Liberian state, whose meaning refers to liberty, was created by the US in the mid 1880’s as an outpost for freed slaves. The irony is that subsequent American policy was characterized by neglect with interest only coinciding with the demand of US multinationals to smoothly extract huge profit margins from this poor country’s resourceful economy.

This background of neglect most probably explains how the freed slaves, the Americo-Liberians, soon adopted the attitudes of the former slave masters, leading to the marginalization of indigenous Liberians. Of the thirty or so presidents it has had, over 150 or so years, it’s only Doe who was an indigenous Liberian. Even the American educated Taylor and Sirlief Johnson are Americo-Liberians.

The context that led to Taylor’s rise to power was one of a country that was war ravaged without functioning institutions and a credible political class to mediate differences, which concurrently was rich in natural resources. Unless the world invests in the creation of viable political economic institutions in both Liberia and Sierra Leone, we are bound to see re-occurrences of desperado war lords such as the likes of Taylor and Sankoh in this region.

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3. The Trial of Charles Taylor and the Fate of Africa
Stan Chu Ilo

The capture and deposition of former Liberian president, Charles Taylor to the Special UN Court in Sierra Leone, marks a step forward in the long but tortuous road to national reconciliation in Liberia and Sierra Leone. His upcoming trial will no doubt bring closure to the worst page in the history of sub-Saharan Africa. In addition, it will help unearth the many untold tragedies and unanswered questions about the horrors of that era under Taylor. According to the UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan, Taylor's capture and trial will send "a powerful message to the region that impunity will not be allowed to stand, and would-be warlords will pay a price."
Charles Taylor represents the very antithesis of what a leader should be in traditional African thinking. He revolutionized guerrilla warfare in Africa as a means to gain political power. The war he led in Liberia caused the deaths of over 200,000 Liberians and the displacement of over 100,000 others. The war he supported and financed in Sierra Leone, led to the deaths of over 50,000 Sierra Leoneans and the displacement of over 400,000 others. His army, the National Patriotic Front of Liberia and the army of his Sierra Leonean protégé, Foday Sankoh, the Revolutionary United Front, gained most of their recruits from under-aged children, who were forced to kill their parents as a first test of valor.

These children were hooked on drugs and were forced to commit all kinds of atrocities, which were unheard of in the dark annals of our continent. The tale of a nine year old Liberian captures the intensity of Taylor's overflowing cup of horrors: "I saw 10-20 people shot, mostly old people who could not walk fast. They shot my uncle in the head and killed him. They made my father take his brains out and to throw them into some water nearby. Then they made my father undress and have an affair with a decaying body. They raped my cousin who was a little girl of nine years."

That a man who authorized and gloried in these horrors, should call himself 'a sacrificial lamb' is very unfortunate; that he should justify these atrocities as 'an act of God' is to insult the glorified African tradition of respect for life, a high premium on the sense of community and the realization of the fullness of life for one and all.

Taylor has been indicted with 17 counts of war crimes and crimes against humanity. His crimes include, among others, the systematic massacre and mutilation of tens of thousands of helpless civilians including children, women and the elderly; the hacking off of feet and hands of defenseless civilians with machetes and axes for comical relief or just for the inhuman passion of seeing blood flow. He also backed rebels in Sierra Leone under Sankoh, whose despicable crimes in the 'Operation No Living Thing', horrified the sensibilities of Africans and the international community.

Most of us who grew up in West Africa in those dark days, when Taylor and his henchmen reached the peak of evil, could not understand how any African could be so inhuman, so senseless and so brazen in the comprehension and execution of evil. Memories of those dark nights, of fellow West Africans who were disappearing every day, of thousands of Liberians and Sierra Leoneans who were roaming the streets of West Africa's major cities in search of a home, with wounded memories and fractured histories, still come into my consciousness.

As Taylor's trial begins, it is important that the international community supports the fledgling democratic experiment in Liberia, which could be threatened by Taylor's demobilized soldiers - the most effective guerrilla fighters in Africa. It is expedient that Taylor be tried in The Hague for security reasons. It also highlights the significance of his crimes: the abuse of the dignity and rights of any person in any part of the globe is an abuse of the dignity and rights of every person in every part of the globe. The whole world has become a kind of court for judging the actions and inaction of leaders in any part of the world.

Taylor still has some strong following in Liberia. He also has immense wealth and connection in Africa and Europe. He was able to run the illegal trade in diamonds from West Africa because he had the support of some African leaders, who allowed the use of their countries as conduits for diamond and illegal arms. The illegal purchase of weapons by Taylor was actively supported by business interests from some Western companies in France and Britain. These weapons were not manufactured in Africa; it is always the case that it takes some Western collaborators to make a monster out of some African dictators or to create a corrupt African leader. Whatever be the case, the truth is that the long arm of the law has now caught up with Taylor. In the end, justice does prevail.
The fate and future of Africa will be determined to the extent that the leaders of this potentially great continent are held accountable for their actions by Africans and the international community. This is the only way to put an end to the colossal wasting of the human and material resources of Mother Africa, by a self-serving political class.

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4. Charles Taylor, The Escape Artist
Prof. Vivian Seton

Charles Taylor can be compared to the escape artist Hudini. All through his life, Taylor has been able to extricate himself from difficult situations and come out victorious. He broke out of the county jail in Massachusetts and go on to become the President of Liberia. Now he is in custody again. Will he be able to escape this time?

(I have known Charles Taylor since he was a senior at Rick’s Institute in Liberia. We were once pen pals, but as these things go, the friendship fizzled out. In April, 1980, Taylor introduced me to 16 of the 17-member PRC (People’s Redemption Council who had staged the coup which killed President William R. Tolbert, Jr. and brought Samuel K. Doe to power) “as the most intelligent woman in Liberia”. Taylor is a very determined man and carries out what he says.

On Wednesday, March 22, 2006, Charles Minor, the Liberian Ambassador to the United States and I were the two studio guests on VOA’s (Voice of America, the American government’s external broadcasting television and radio system) “Straight Talk Africa” to discuss the importance of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf’s official visit to the United States. The host of the show, Shaka Ssali, asked me to address Taylor directly and plead with him to return the funds (3.2 billion dollars) he alleged stole from the Liberian people.

It occurred to me that capturing Charles Taylor and condemning him to death would be the easy way out. I then got in touch with Dr. K. A. Paul who I had met on August 13, 2003 when he was a call-in-guest on VOA’s “Straight Talk Africa.” (On that program, I had been invited to discuss the significance of Charles Taylor’s departure from Liberia and the future of the country). Dr. Paul, the President of Global Peace Initiatives, is the man being credited with having talked Taylor into going into exile. Taylor was sent to Port Harcourt, the capital of the State of Kalaba in Nigeria where he was captured last week, flown to Liberia and onward to Freetown, Sierra Leone for prosecution.

In my discussion with Dr. Paul, I was concerned that if Charles Taylor was sent to Freetown, he would be killed before the trial even began. The trial could cause disruption of the peace in the entire region. Instead, I proposed that he should be tried by the International Court of Justice in The Hague, The Netherlands. After his conviction, Charles Taylor should be sent to Freetown where he would have to do community service. He should be made to return the funds he stole from the Liberian treasury and those funds should be used to take care of the thousands who were deformed upon his orders and provide for the orphans whose parents had been killed.

Every morning, Taylor should take care of the crippled by bathing them, feeding them, combing their hair and taking care of their personal hygiene. This is the only way he will experience what it is like to be maimed and crippled.

On May 15, 2002, I was invited to be the Rapporteur at the Conference on Children and Youth in Armed Conflict held at the World Bank in Washington, D.C. The conference was organized to determine the effects the Special Court, which was being set up in Freetown, would have on the child soldiers who had participated in the Sierra Leonean disturbances. Since then, the Special Court has been bringing the various warlords and other participants in the Sierra Leonean unrest to justice. Charles Taylor is supposed to have financed that war in order to get diamonds and other precious stones from Sierra Leone, which he allegedly sold to terrorist organizations around the world.
The Bush administration asked Ellen Johnson Sirleaf to request Charles Taylor’s extradition from Nigeria. She sent a letter to the heads of state of the ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) to bring the Taylor matter to closure. General Olusegun Obasanjo, the Head of State of Nigeria, said he would turn Taylor over for prosecution. Thereupon, Charles Taylor left the villa, the former mansion of the Governor of Kalaba, and was caught near the Chadian border trying to leave Nigeria.

Taylor is now being sent to the International Court of Justice in The Hague. Will he be Hudini and escape again?

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**Article-Summary:**
Charles Taylor, the President of Liberia between 1997 and 2003, is in jail, awaiting trial on 11 counts of war crimes and crimes against humanity committed during the conflict in Sierra Leone. A decision to move his trial, taking place through the Special Court for Sierra Leone (SCSL), to The Hague in the Netherlands, because of fears over whether he can be kept securely in Sierra Leone has not been finalized because there is no agreement over which country will hold him once he is convicted....read more [6]