

The Least Surprising Jailbreak Ever

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Editorial

Charles Taylor, the Liberian warlord and former president, has disappeared from his Nigerian haven, just days after President Olusegun Obasanjo agreed to turn him over to a war crimes tribunal. The disappearance is a diplomatic disaster for Mr. Obasanjo, who is scheduled to meet with President Bush today. We hope it doesn't turn into something worse for West Africa.

The conflicts linked to Mr. Taylor from 1989 to 2003 cost an estimated 500,000 lives and spawned a generation of child soldiers. He supported rebels in Sierra Leone and Ivory Coast who hacked off the limbs of civilians; he received diamonds in return, which he used to finance fighting in Liberia. Mr. Obasanjo did West Africa a favor in 2003 when he took in Mr. Taylor, ending Liberia's civil war.

For years, Nigeria had resisted the idea of handing over Mr. Taylor, saying it would give him only to an elected Liberian government. When Liberia's newly elected president, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, requested this month that Mr. Taylor be turned over to a war crimes tribunal in Sierra Leone, Nigeria replied that Liberia was free to take him.

Nigerian security forces let Mr. Taylor slip through their fingers on the same day that a State Department spokesman said it was Nigeria's responsibility to see that Mr. Taylor was arrested and sent to Sierra Leone.

It's hard to believe the Nigerians did much to stop him. A reporter with Agence France-Presse who recently visited Mr. Taylor at his plush villa in the southeastern city of Calabar saw no sign of any Nigerian security on the way in, and only one policeman on the way out.

Once, in an earlier incarnation, Mr. Taylor sawed his way out of a county jail in Boston and used a knotted sheet to climb to freedom. If ever there was a disappearance that could be predicted, this was it. Let's hope that Mr. Obasanjo's carelessness doesn't lead to a return of Taylor-style ethnic fighting in West Africa. That is something no one can afford — including the Nigerian president, whose country has had some sectarian and ethnic clashes of its own lately.