

August 7, 2003

Charles Taylor: No Deal

THE STAGE IS SET for Liberia's fast-fading president, former warlord Charles Taylor, to step down from office next Monday. U.N.-sanctioned West African peacekeepers are on the ground, a small team of U.S. Marines has landed in the battered and ruined capital of Monrovia and a truce, albeit a fragile one, is in place. Nigeria has extended an offer of asylum to Mr. Taylor, and despite objections from Nigerian journalists angered over the 1992 murder of two of their brethren by Taylor loyalists, President Olusegun Obasanjo's grant of safe passage still remains firm. But true to his reputation as one of the world's most untrustworthy despots, Mr. Taylor is giving signs of backing off his decision to depart on Monday for exile in Nigeria. Hanging over his head is a U.N. war crimes tribunal indictment. He may be balking in the hope that the international indictment will be lifted as a condition to his departure from Liberian soil. According to the Associated Press, Nigerian officials say Mr. Taylor hopes to leave Liberia several days later with flags flying, bands playing and his fans waving. If so, Mr. Taylor should be left hoping in vain. He must face the bar of justice for his role in the atrocities in neighboring Sierra Leone's decade-long civil war, and he must leave Liberia next week. Neither demand, he should understand, is negotiable.

Liberians are tired of war and after more than 10 years of brutal combat are also sick of Mr. Taylor. The country desperately needs much of everything: food, water, medicine, humanitarian assistance of all kinds. Liberians especially crave some semblance of security. Mr. Taylor stands between them and peace, stability and the cargoes of food stocks piled up at rebel-held ports. His continued presence, simply stated, will perpetuate the fighting that has mercifully been brought to a shaky halt.

Departure is the only decent option left open to Mr. Taylor. There is no dropping the war crimes indictment. "The warrant never goes away," said the top U.N. official for Liberia, Jacques Paul Klein. The court sitting in Sierra Leone will be there for a long time, he said. Charles Taylor's dwindling coterie of advisers must convince him that he is a broken leader without leverage, or he will really find out the hard way. And the Liberian people, as usual, will be the biggest losers of all.