

Robertson Defends Liberia's President

By Alan Cooperman
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Charles Taylor, the Liberian president who has been indicted by an international court for crimes against humanity, has few remaining supporters in the United States. But one prominent American who has stuck with the West African leader is religious broadcaster and Christian Coalition founder Pat Robertson.

In recent broadcasts of his cable TV show "The 700 Club," watched by an estimated 1 million households, Robertson has defended Taylor as a fellow Baptist and Liberia's "freely elected" leader. The "horrible bloodbath" taking place in Liberia, he has repeatedly said, is the fault of the State Department.

"So we're undermining a Christian, Baptist president to bring in Muslim rebels to take over the country. And how dare the president of the United States say to the duly elected president of another country, 'You've got to step down,' " Robertson said to his viewers on Monday.

What Robertson, 73, has not discussed in these broadcasts is his financial interest in Liberia. In an interview yesterday, he said he has "written off in my own mind" an \$8 million investment in a gold mining venture that he made four years ago under an agreement with Taylor's government.

Yet, he added: "Hope springs eternal. Once the dust has cleared on this thing, chances are there will be some investors from someplace who want to invest. If I could find some people to sell it to, I'd be more than delighted."

Other Baptist and evangelical Christian leaders said they do not share either Robertson's support for Taylor or his criticism of President Bush's call for the Liberian leader to go into exile. "I would say that Pat Robertson is way out on his own, in a leaking life raft, on this one," said Richard Land, head of the Southern Baptist Convention's public policy arm.

Allen Hertzke, a professor of political science at the University of Oklahoma and the author of a forthcoming book on evangelicals and human rights, said many religious conservatives "will be horrified" by Robertson's stance. "His comments really feed into the media critique of Christian conservatives, that they are not sophisticated, they don't care about others, all they care about are Christians around the world -- when in fact that is a caricature of the faith-based human rights movement," Hertzke said.

In his broadcasts, Robertson has portrayed the Liberian civil war as primarily a fight between Christians and Muslims. Serge Duss, director of public policy for the international Christian relief group World Vision, called that a gross oversimplification.

World Vision and other Christian organizations lobbied successfully this year for legislation banning the importation into the United States of diamonds from war-torn African countries. Taylor has been indicted by a United Nations-established tribunal for allegedly backing militias - funded largely by the sale of diamonds -- that raped and maimed civilians during the civil war in neighboring Sierra Leone.

Robertson said in a telephone call yesterday that the indictment "is nonsense and should be quashed."

"I have never met Taylor in my life. I don't know what he has done or hasn't done. I do know he was elected by the people, and he has maintained a relatively stable government in Liberia; and they observe the rule of law; they have a working legislature; they have courts. And though he may have certain dictatorial powers, so do most leaders in Africa," Robertson said.

Taylor seized power in Liberia by force in 1989 and was elected president in a 1997 vote that some observers charged was fraudulent. Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and other groups have condemned his human rights record.

Robertson agreed that Taylor has "become such a lightning rod at this point" that he should leave office, but in an orderly transition accompanied by the insertion of U.S. peacekeepers. "Frankly, the president's call for Taylor to step down immediately is not wise, because if Taylor leaves immediately, the country will descend into chaos," he said.

A staunch supporter of Bush, Robertson said he believes the president is getting bad advice from the State Department. In a "700 Club" broadcast June 26, he said the State Department "tried as hard as they can to destabilize Liberia and to bring about the very outcome we're seeing now."

"They had no endgame; they have no plan of what to do; they only wanted to destroy the sitting president and his government," he added. "Liberia has been a predominantly a Christian country. And the United States State Department is paving the way for the Muslims to take over Liberia."

Robertson said yesterday that his investment in the Liberian gold mining company Freedom Gold was intended to help pay for humanitarian and evangelical efforts in the country. One event he helped fund was a three-day rally, called Liberia for Jesus, in February 2002. Taylor declared a national holiday and, according to news reports on Robertson's Christian Broadcasting Network, prostrated himself on the stage, saying: "I am not your president. Jesus is!"

"There are people who say that's phony baloney, but I thought it was sincere," Robertson said. "He definitely has Christian sentiments, although you hear of all these rumors that he's done this or done that."