

August 11, 2003

Taylor Assails U.S. in Farewell Speech

Liberian Blames Bush for Political Demise, Calls Himself a 'Sacrificial Lamb'

By Karl Vick
Washington Post Foreign Service

MONROVIA, Liberia, Aug. 10 -- In what he billed a farewell address, Liberian President Charles Taylor tonight accused the United States of engineering his demise and challenged President Bush to spend "one, two, three billion" rebuilding the nation he is leaving a shambles.

"The solution for the problems of Liberia cannot be for the president of the United States to ask the president of Liberia to leave," Taylor said. "If that is the challenge, I challenge George Bush, with due respect Mr. President, please, you are a man of God, do something for our people."

In a televised address to a nation largely without electricity, Taylor called himself "a sacrificial lamb" and "whipping boy."

With a rebel army occupying a large portion of the capital, Taylor criticized Bush -- who has insisted on Taylor's departure as a condition for any substantial U.S. role in peacekeeping here -- the World Bank, the IMF and the United Nations, which imposed an arms embargo and travel ban on Taylor's government as punishment for fomenting a regional war in Western Africa that by some estimates has claimed a quarter-million lives.

Taylor, who was elected in 1997 after leading an insurgency of his own, still faces arrest on war crimes charges after being indicted by a U.N.-backed court in neighboring Sierra Leone, where he supported a brutal rebel force in a quest for diamond mines.

"These have been tough years," Taylor said, looking somber in a videotaped address from his home. "As I look at people dying, I must stop fighting. I could no longer see the blood of our people wasted.

"And I say to you, God willing, I'll be back."

Taylor has publicly accepted an offer of asylum in Nigeria, and today he gave every appearance of preparing to leave the country shortly after he officially hands over power to Vice President Moses Blah on Monday.

Several luxury cars were driven to the airport on Saturday for transport abroad, and Taylor's wife complained to reporters today about the hassles of packing.

South African President Thabo Mbeki made arrangements to arrive for Taylor's formal handover of power. His presence signals recognition and approval of a decision some African leaders have called "statesmanlike."

Meanwhile, members of the militias who brought Taylor to power besieged his residence asking for back pay, some threatening to loot the property after the president leaves. "We foresee problems," one official said.

Across the shattered capital, wary Liberians viewed Taylor's promised departure with a mix of hope and apprehension.

Many people here identify the man they elected in 1997 as the source of Liberia's problems, especially the civil war that has divided the capital between fighters loyal to Taylor and rebels intent on ousting him. More than 2,000 have been killed in the past two months, most of them civilians.

A cease-fire continues to hold. But some Liberians fear that security will deteriorate with the departure of Taylor, whom many fighters call "Pappay." Taylor refused to leave until an international peacekeeping force had arrived in Monrovia. While 2,300 U.S. Marines remain off the West Africa coast, many residents fear the approximately 800 Nigerians on hand for peacekeeping may not be enough to prevent further chaos.

"His leaving is not the problem," said Romina Saunders, 37, pausing opposite the shuttered Sweet Lips restaurant. "Who he's leaving behind is the problem."

"If the president can call in his boys together and tell them to leave the streets and leave their arms at the Executive Mansion, that would be fine with us," said Gracie Davies, 28.

Liberians have learned to fear the unpredictable, undisciplined and usually unpaid young men who carry guns for the government. Residents complain that gunmen enter homes at will and take what they want, especially on the fringes of the city. Women say rape is pandemic.

"Government people call you 'monkey,' pull you outside, then rape your woman in front of you," said Vafee Dolley, 36, who was interviewed in the northern portion of Monrovia occupied by the rebels of Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy, or LURD. "It happened to me."

The attack occurred in June, Dolley said, when Taylor's militias swept into neighborhoods after LURD had pulled back. With the men standing beside him nodding vigorously, Dolley said he feared similar reprisal if LURD pulls back again.

The rebels insist they will stay in place until Taylor leaves. They have refused to allow officials to set up a humanitarian corridor to Monrovia's crucial seaport, despite a personal appeal today by the Nigerian commander and U.S. ambassador -- the third appeal in as many days.

LURD also has refused to acknowledge the succession of Vice President Blah, scheduled for noon Monday. LURD and a second rebel group, which holds much of Liberia's south, are participating in a political conference in Ghana aimed at creating an interim government. Under the June peace agreement that called for Taylor's departure, the transitional government would be in place while peacekeepers establish security in advance of elections.

For their part, Taylor's fighters said they will behave after he leaves.

"I feel good," said a militia member called "Mad Willy," speaking between bites of stewed dog rib in a broth of chopped carrots. "It'll be all right."

"War is not good," said Fillah Tamba, also a militia fighter. "War put me behind today. I lose my father. I'm not in school."

"We are looking at the international community. If George Bush says 'no,' nobody can say 'yes' but God."

Some civilians believe the young men will end the fighting, calling the warnings of chaos that will follow Taylor's departure the fretting of government aides who fear the vengeance of people whose salaries they have pocketed.

"The Taylor people themselves are worried about their security," Habib Sheriff, a businessman, said in an interview that grew into a sidewalk political debate. "I personally believe when Taylor leaves, Liberians will live together as one people."

"The Taylor boys are Liberians and they have to live in Liberia," Sheriff continued. "And the people will have to forgive them and accept them."

Noel Bruce, who was standing nearby, said, "We have to transform those people."

"No," Sheriff replied. "We have to transform ourselves."