

Status of Liberia's Indicted Ex-President Is Unclear

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FREETOWN, Sierra Leone, March 27 — Confusion reigned Monday over the status of Charles G. Taylor, the onetime warlord who became president of [Liberia](#) and who is wanted for war crimes by an international court based here for atrocities affecting Sierra Leone during neighboring Liberia's civil war.

Liberia's current president, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, who had asked Nigeria on March 17 to extradite Mr. Taylor to face trial in Sierra Leone, told religious leaders in Monrovia, the capital, on Monday that Mr. Taylor should be moved directly to Sierra Leone.

"Taylor was indicted by a Sierra Leone court," Ms. Johnson Sirleaf said, according to Reuters. "Taylor should rather go to Sierra Leone than come to Liberia because he was not indicted by a Liberian court."

Mr. Taylor, with the backing of Libya and other powers, ignited a cycle of civil war in the 1990's that engulfed much of West Africa, killed more than 300,000 people and left millions homeless, raped and maimed. He faces 17 counts of war crimes for his role in fomenting a bloody civil war in Sierra Leone over control of the country's vast trove of diamonds, some of which Mr. Taylor sold to pay for his own rebellion in Liberia.

Nigeria's government had offered Mr. Taylor asylum after rebel forces threatened to remove him by force in 2003, ending Liberia's brutal, 14-year civil war. Nigeria has said Liberia is free to come and arrest Mr. Taylor; it has made no public move to detain him.

"Taylor is not a prisoner in Nigeria," Remi Oyo, spokeswoman for President [Olusegun Obasanjo](#), said Monday, according to Reuters. She added that Ms. Johnson Sirleaf "is free to come and take President Taylor into her custody."

A State Department spokesman, Sean McCormack, said at a briefing on Monday that the responsibility to secure Mr. Taylor lay with the Nigerian government.

"We have made clear, both in public and private, to the Nigerians that it is their responsibility to see that he is able to be conveyed and face justice," Mr. McCormack said. "So that would be the Nigerian government's responsibility."

Desmond de Silva, the chief prosecutor of the international court, said that arranging the transfer of Mr. Taylor to Sierra Leone, either directly from Nigeria or via Liberia, where [United Nations](#)

peacekeepers are authorized to arrest him, was bound to be a complex matter. But he insisted that Nigeria was bound to detain Mr. Taylor, even as the details of the transfer were worked out.

"They are in fact sitting on a warrant for his arrest," Mr. de Silva said. "Our view is that the moment the Nigerian government decided that Taylor was going to be handed over they must have understood that the Liberian authorities were going to turn him over to the special court. Therefore Taylor had every inducement to abscond at that stage."

Mr. Taylor's spokesman, Sylvester Paasewe, said Mr. Taylor had not left Calabar, Nigeria, where he has lived since leaving Liberia in 2003, Reuters reported.

But adding further confusion, K. A. Paul, an American evangelical Christian leader who has acted as a spiritual guide and spokesman for Mr. Taylor in the past, said he was seeking a new place of asylum for Mr. Taylor, and that Mr. Taylor had left his residence in Calabar.

"In the last 48 hours I cannot reach him," Mr. Paul said in an interview from Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, where he said he was seeking refuge for Mr. Taylor. "He is no longer in Calabar."