

A Warlord's Exile Divides His Hosts

Liberian Ex-President Charles Taylor Doing Business as Usual in Nigeria

By Craig Timberg
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CALABAR, Nigeria -- From all appearances, Charles Taylor's life in this tourist town in southeastern Nigeria has been an extended holiday. The exiled Liberian president sleeps in a rambling, red-roofed mansion, travels in a pair of Land Rovers with tinted-glass windows and buys food and electronic gadgetry in such abundance that residents complain he has caused inflation.

But international war crimes prosecutors, human rights groups and U.S. officials say that in the more than two years since he resigned -- vowing, "God willing, I will be back" -- Taylor has done anything but sit back and relax.

They describe him as a restless leader who has never stopped interfering in the affairs of Liberia's neighbors, never stopped profiting from illicit business relationships and, thanks to his vast wealth and easy access to cell phones, never stopped dominating politics in his home country 1,100 miles away.

There may be no closer observer than Taylor of Tuesday's historic elections in Liberia, the first since he was forced into exile in August 2003. The former warlord is bankrolling several candidates, according to reports by international investigators, and the result could strengthen his distant but tenacious grip on power -- or entrench a new leader demanding that Taylor be returned to face justice.

Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo has resisted international calls for Taylor's arrest but said he would honor a request for his return by a legitimately elected Liberian government. Taylor faces 17 counts of crimes against humanity in neighboring Sierra Leone.

"It's within the ability of the Liberian people to seize their destiny," said Rep. Ed Royce (R-Calif.), a former chairman of the House subcommittee on Africa, speaking by phone from Fullerton, Calif. "Unless he's brought to the bar of justice, eventually all of West Africa will be in jeopardy. And Nigeria won't be immune."

The international intrigue surrounding Taylor has brought some unease to Calabar, a city whose nearby waterfalls, mountains and gorilla communities attract many visitors, and to Nigeria's elected government.

Obasanjo and other officials said Taylor had stayed put and kept to himself. He lives in a heavily guarded guesthouse amid a complex of government buildings overlooking the wide, brown Calabar River. Obasanjo said he had seen no credible evidence that Taylor had broken his promise to stay out of the region's political affairs.

Calabar's mayor, Wiley Etim Okokon, said in an interview that Taylor had been nothing but a good, quiet guest.

"I've not seen him," Okokon said. "No trouble."

But others in Calabar said they often saw Taylor and heard about his activities. He is rumored to have become involved in business affairs, including the purchase of at least two residential properties. And there are persistent whispers that Taylor put his Nigerian military guards on his payroll so he could come and go, sometimes by plane, as he pleases.

"Calabar is generally a very hospitable environment," said Offiong E. Offiong, a chemistry professor at the University of Calabar. But, he added, residents "who have been following events in Liberia and other parts of the world . . . are not so comfortable. Let him go back to Liberia and face justice."

Taylor's free-spending habits have been fueled by accounts that were worth as much as \$210 million when he left Liberia, according to the nonprofit Coalition for International Justice, based in Washington.

Yet Taylor's largess has also won him sympathy here.

Although Calabar is an old city and a former colonial capital, it has struggled as government operations have moved to Lagos and Abuja, the capital. Calabar also lacks the enormous oil wealth that has given Port Harcourt, a much larger city several hours' drive west, the deceptive lure of easy money.

Bassey Ekpo Bassey IV, a newspaper publisher who is also a traditional ruler in Calabar, said Taylor had been welcomed by many here.

"His family is quite evident," Bassey said. "They obviously have some money to spend, and they are impacting the economy of the place."

But few said they expected Taylor, 57, to spend the rest of his days in Calabar.

He has made clear his plans to return to power in Liberia. And if he doesn't return by choice, pressure is growing on Obasanjo to turn him over to the U.N.-backed war-crimes court in Sierra Leone. Rebels supported by Taylor were notorious for hacking off the hands and feet of civilians in that neighboring country during an especially vicious war.

The 17-count indictment in Sierra Leone, charging Taylor with mass murder, rape and the extensive use of child soldiers, was unsealed in June 2003, two months before he resigned from the presidency under pressure and moved to Calabar. Since then, investigators at the court have continued to build a dossier on Taylor that includes allegations that he remains heavily involved in Liberian politics -- in violation of his asylum conditions in Nigeria -- and has also meddled in the politics of neighboring countries.

Alan White, the court's former chief investigator, said Taylor was behind two attempts this year to assassinate his rival, Guinea's President Lansana Conte, and has backed rebels in Ivory Coast against another rival, President Laurent Gbagbo.

"Obasanjo has absolutely no control over this guy," said White, a former Defense Department official, speaking by phone from Washington. White said Taylor was still treated "like a head of state down there."

That, at least, is something people here can see for themselves, whatever they think of Taylor.

"He lives like a Big Man," said Charles Eko, a human rights activist in Calabar, using a term for autocratic African leaders. "He's not living like a man who's on asylum."

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