

CHARLES TAYLOR'S TERROR TIES.

Ace of Diamonds

by Ryan Lizza

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Name the following despot: In 1991, he invaded a neighboring country, where his men committed wholesale looting and massive atrocities. In 1998, he personally met with a senior Al Qaeda operative now listed as one of the FBI's 25 "Most Wanted" terrorists. He is the single greatest threat to the stability of one of the most important oil-producing regions in the world. Saddam Hussein? No, Charles Taylor of Liberia.

If the Bush administration decides to send a peacekeeping force to Liberia, in other words, it will be safeguarding not only humanitarian concerns but national security ones as well. Yet, even as the Bush administration contemplates such a mission, it has failed to make this point, largely acceding to the conservative mantra that the United States has no strategic interests in the region.

They're wrong. Start with Al Qaeda. In September 1998, Abdullah Ahmed Abdullah, a top Al Qaeda operative, visited Liberia and met with Taylor and senior members of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), the vicious Taylor-controlled militia that invaded Sierra Leone in 1991 to take over the country's diamond mines. Abdullah trained Al Qaeda recruits in explosives in Afghanistan, participated in operations against Americans in Somalia, and helped plan the East African embassy bombings in 1998. The U.S. government currently offers a \$25 million reward for information leading to his arrest. And Abdullah's meeting with Taylor was no social visit. Rather it led to a relationship in which Al Qaeda bought large quantities of diamonds from the RUF in exchange for weapons and cash. The operation, which peaked in the months before September 11, 2001, is believed to have offered Al Qaeda a way to convert its assets into a form that could be moved across borders more easily. The Taylor-Al Qaeda relationship has been carefully documented by *The Washington Post's* Douglas Farah, by a yearlong European intelligence investigation, and, most recently, in a 100-page report the nongovernmental organization Global Witness released in April. Liberia's links to Al Qaeda, in other words, are far more well-documented than Iraq's. And, yet, they have never been cited by anyone in the Bush administration.

Then there's oil. Since 1989, when Taylor started Liberia's civil war, conflict has spread to neighboring Sierra Leone, Guinea, and Côte d'Ivoire. While all these states are west of the big oil-producing countries along the Gulf of Guinea--from which the United States projects it will receive some 20 percent of its oil imports in a few years--there are

plausible scenarios under which the chaos could spread further. Nobody would have predicted that Taylor's original 1989 Christmas Eve insurrection would one day engulf Côte d'Ivoire, long a rock of stability in West Africa, but now it has. And, as *The Economist* pointed out this week, "if Côte d'Ivoire were to go the way of Liberia, it would cripple" Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, bringing the conflict to the doorstep of Nigeria, the already precarious oil-rich hegemon of the region.

But the Bush administration's failure to articulate the stakes in Liberia is not its only mistake. The recent focus on whether the United States will send troops has obscured the more important question: whether Taylor, the first sitting head of state since Slobodan Milosevic to be indicted for war crimes, will escape prosecution. While President Bush has called for Taylor to leave the country, he has said little about bringing him to trial for his more than a decade of mass murder. But West Africa will not breathe easily until Taylor is tried, convicted, and imprisoned.

Since Taylor and the RUF launched their civil war in Sierra Leone in 1991 and became internationally famous for hacking the limbs off their victims and forcing drug-addled child-conscripts to murder their parents, the United States has pursued two very different approaches toward them--one of engagement, amnesty, and appeasement and one of pressure and even prosecution. In 1999, the Clinton administration, at the behest of the State Department's African Affairs bureaucrats and Jesse Jackson (who had become a personal friend of Taylor's in his role as Bill Clinton's envoy to Africa), helped negotiate the disastrous Lomé Accord, which gave the RUF full amnesty for its crimes and installed Foday Sankoh, the RUF's monstrous leader, as vice president of Sierra Leone. As one American official told **The New Republic** in 2000, "The message we sent with Lomé is that you can terrorize your way to power."

After the accord quickly fell apart (the RUF took hundreds of U.N. peacekeepers hostage, threatening to skin them alive), Britain sent troops into Sierra Leone to restore order and beat back the RUF. In the United States, the humiliated State Department diplomats behind Lomé were shoved aside by U.N. Ambassador Richard Holbrooke and other officials disgusted by Lomé's concessions. Holbrooke began referring to Taylor as "the Milosevic of Africa" and pushed successfully at the United Nations for the creation in August 2000 of the Special Court for Sierra Leone, a tribunal to prosecute those most responsible for the war's atrocities. In 2002, after strenuous lobbying by the United States, Kofi Annan appointed American David Crane as the court's prosecutor. Crane, the first American prosecutor of an international court since Nuremberg, is a former judge advocate general for the U.S. Army who has done stints at the Defense Intelligence Agency and, most recently, as the Pentagon's inspector general. His staff is made up mostly of former officials from the military and nonprofits--"people with a results-oriented approach, used to working with limited resources," as a former court official describes them. Which is lucky, because limited resources are exactly what they have. Crane arrived in Sierra Leone with no personnel, computers, or vehicles. Hot water is

rare. Much of the court staff has malaria, several court informers have been murdered, and Crane--who lives in a room above the court itself--faces constant death threats.

Despite all this, Crane has indicted twelve of West Africa's worst war criminals in eleven months and has done it at a fraction of the cost of other international tribunals. Nine of the war criminals were successfully arrested in Sierra Leone this year without incident. One of the three others, Sam Bockarie, was recently murdered in Liberia by Taylor. (Just to be sure, Taylor also killed Bockarie's wife and children.) Another is thought to be in Liberia, and some reports suggest he, too, was recently killed. The final indicted war criminal, whom Crane has identified as "one of the individuals bearing the greatest responsibility" for a decade of atrocities, is Taylor himself.

But, even as the Special Court began indicting the region's worst criminals, the engagement track at the State Department got new life. Many of the same bureaucrats who fashioned Lomé and opposed the Special Court remain in place in the Bush administration. And their new boss, Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Walter Kansteiner, has also taken a softer line. The Bush team did support a stringent sanctions regime against Taylor, but, as Liberia descended into another civil war over the last three years--this time with rebels threatening Taylor's own regime--the Bushies ratcheted down some of the pressure on Taylor, opting instead for negotiation. When asked by Senator Russ Feingold about Taylor's Al Qaeda ties in June 2002, for example, Kansteiner downplayed them. More recently, the African Affairs Bureau at the State Department has refused repeated bipartisan calls on the administration to release \$5 million to the Special Court for security and other needs. This pittance, which has already been appropriated, is sitting in State's coffers while Crane and his team's safety remain under constant threat. Finally, this year, Kansteiner's team at State, working closely with West Africa's regional organization, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), steered Taylor and the rebels toward June peace talks in Ghana, a setting that would once again afford Taylor the role of statesman and peacemaker. "A lot of people were saying this looks like Lomé part two," says a Senate Democratic aide. There was just one problem with the administration's shift toward engagement: Taylor was already an indicted war criminal.

Crane had indicted Taylor in March. And, although the indictment was sealed, it was possibly the worst-kept secret in African diplomacy. In unsealed documents, Taylor was repeatedly mentioned as a member of the joint criminal enterprise in the region; moreover, Crane himself talked regularly with members of Congress and the Bush administration, and court officials insist it is inconceivable that State didn't know of the indictment. Still, the administration proceeded with its plan for the U.S.-backed Ghana negotiations--that is, until Crane took matters into his own hands. Disgusted at the prospect of a war criminal who had already broken more than a dozen peace agreements becoming a party to peace talks, Crane unsealed his indictment as soon as he confirmed that Taylor had landed in Ghana, detonating the talks and sending Taylor scurrying back to Liberia before he could be arrested.

It was only after the pretense that Taylor was a man the United States could negotiate with was thus shattered that Bush began calling for him to step down. "One minute they are negotiating with him, and the next minute, it's 'he has to go,'" says the Senate aide. And, while this is certainly progress, the most important question remains not whether Bush will send troops to Liberia but whether he will insist Taylor be brought before the court. If Taylor slinks off into exile in Nigeria or elsewhere, he will undoubtedly return to Liberia once international attention moves elsewhere, to again foment the slaughter and chaos that have been his calling card for 15 years. Indeed, Taylor himself has already promised that any exile will only be temporary.

A coalition of congressional Republicans and Democrats has pressed Colin Powell to abandon the Kansteiner track and pursue prosecution. They have asked Powell to increase funding for the Special Court and warned the administration against a "soft landing" for Taylor. "I think Taylor must be tried and imprisoned," says Republican Representative Ed Royce, Chairman of the House Subcommittee on Africa. "He's spoken of a brief exile and a cooling-off period. That's unacceptable. There can't be peace in the region with him free. ... There are several hundred thousand human beings who lost their lives because of this individual." Royce is correct: Whether or not the United States sends troops to stabilize Liberia, our West Africa policy will be a failure unless we insist that Taylor go before the court. Let's hope President Bush comes to understand this as well.

RYAN LIZZA is an associate editor at TNR.