

Charles Taylor Found Guilty of War Crimes in Sierra Leone



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This week, an international court found former Liberian president Charles Taylor guilty of war crimes in Sierra Leone.

Charles Taylor stood silently as Presiding Judge Richard Lussick read the judgment by a special United Nations court in The Hague.

RICHARD LUSSICK: "The trial chamber unanimously finds you guilty of aiding and abetting the commission of the following crimes pursuant to article 6.1 of the statute; planning the commission of the following crimes in the attacks on Kono and Makeni in December 1998, and in the invasion of and retreat from Freetown between December 1998 and February 1999 ..."

The reading of the judgment -- which included details of terrible crimes -- lasted two hours.

The judges found the sixty-four-year-old former president guilty of helping rebels from the Revolutionary United Front. The rebels killed tens of thousands of people and terrorized civilians during Sierra Leone's civil war. The war lasted from nineteen ninety-one to two thousand two. Crimes by the RUF included murder, rape, drafting of child soldiers and sexual slavery.

Judge Lussick said Charles Taylor was publicly involved in peace efforts while secretly financing the hostilities. The court said he received what are called blood diamonds, mined in eastern Sierra Leone. In return, he provided arms, ammunition, communications equipment and planning help to the rebels. But there was not enough proof that his influence amounted to effective command and control of the rebels.

Human Rights Watch spokeswoman Geraldine Mattioli-Zeitner said she was pleased with the ruling.

GERALDINE MATTIOLI-ZEITNER: "We think this is an historic moment. It's the first time a former head of state is prosecuted and judged for crimes against humanity and war crimes committed while he was in office."

The former Liberian leader has denied the charges and can appeal the judgment. Sentencing is set for May thirtieth. He faces a possible life sentence. He is expected to serve any prison term in Britain.

Charles Taylor was arrested in two thousand six -- three years after he was charged and resigned as president. The trial opened in two thousand seven. It was moved from Freetown, in Sierra Leone, to the Netherlands to avoid unrest.

The court heard evidence from ninety-four witnesses for the prosecution and twenty-one witnesses for the defense, including Taylor himself.

The case is expected to be the last major trial for the special court. It was established to try the most serious cases of war crimes during the conflict in Sierra Leone.

People in Sierra Leone welcomed the conviction of Charles Taylor. There were mixed emotions in his native Liberia, where he still has some support. Tamba Cole was among Liberians who welcomed the guilty verdict. He said Taylor has now set an example to other leaders in Africa and around the world. Such crimes will no longer be accepted by the international community, he said.

Charles Taylor is the first head of state to be found guilty by an international court in almost seventy years. The last time was in ninety forty-six, in the trials in Nuremberg, Germany, for war crimes during World War Two. Karl Doenitz --

who briefly led Nazi Germany after Adolf Hitler killed himself -- was found guilty of crimes against peace and war crimes. He spent ten years in prison.

And that's IN THE NEWS in VOA Special English. I'm Steve Ember.

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