

The Trial of Charles Taylor

Audio transcript

CHAPTER ONE

From 1989 to 1997 Charles Taylor, a man now being brought to trial, led a rebel group that sought to unseat Liberia's then-president. Taylor and his group took control of the country, and Taylor became the nation's president.

Over the next six years, Taylor gained international notoriety for brutal abuses of civilians perpetrated by his forces in Liberia.

His presidency was characterized by an intolerance of dissent, and harassment of the press and other political parties.

Elise Keppler, Counsel in the International Justice Program at Human Rights Watch went to Freetown, Sierra Leone, where the Special Court is based and was involved in Human Rights Watch's campaign to see Taylor surrender.

Elise Keppler:

I'm Elise Keppler, Council with the International Justice program at Human Rights Watch. I have been monitoring the work of the Special Court for Sierra Leone which will begin its trial of Charles Taylor on June 4th. Taylor is charged in connection with his role supporting the Revolutionary United Front, being associated with senior leaders of the Revolutionary United Front and the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council and as responsible for Liberian forces who fought in support of the Sierra Leonean rebels.

Following the conflict, which ended in 2002, there was a sense that there needed to be justice for the horrific abuses committed during the conflict. The national courts were in no position to deal with the crimes, given that they were devastated during the hostilities. As a result, the Special Court was created, and it has authority to prosecute war crimes, crimes against humanity, and other serious violations of international humanitarian law.

CHAPTER TWO

Emma Daly:

This is Emma Daly, the Press Director at Human Rights Watch. I'm with Richard Dicker who's the director of the International Justice Program. Richard, what's the importance of Charles Taylor being put in the dock for the crimes committed in the war in Sierra Leone?

Richard Dicker:

The significance of Charles Taylor's trial lies in the man's history and background. Over an extended period, not only in Liberia, not only in Sierra Leone, where these charges arose from, but across several other countries in West Africa, Charles Taylor has been associated with murder and mayhem.

The significance of this trial is to see an individual who many in that region and around the world never dared to dream could be held to account in a court of law for his crimes –

I think it sends the message that the days of impunity, even for those in the highest positions are winding down.

CHAPTER THREE

Forces under Taylor's command have been implicated in supporting and participating in armed conflicts, cross-border raids, and human rights abuses in neighboring countries, including Sierra Leone.

Victims have offered testimonies on the atrocities committed against them while Taylor was in power, and Human Rights Watch has released many of them in earlier reports.

Taylor now faces trial in the Special Court for Sierra Leone, but proceedings will be held in The Hague at the International Criminal Court – which is lending its facilities at this time to the Special Court. The court publicly indicted Taylor in June 2003 while he was still president. Taylor stepped down shortly thereafter; but was only apprehended in March 2006, at which time he was transferred to the Special Court. Taylor is indicted on 11 counts of war crimes, crimes against humanity, and other serious violations of international humanitarian law.

Elise Keppler:

The Special Court for Sierra was created by agreement between the United Nations and the Sierra Leone government.

I went to Freetown in 2004 and 2005 to assess the work of the Special Court for Sierra Leone. Notably, it indicted members of all warring factions in the Sierra Leone conflict.

The Special Court has several unique features in international justice and a mixed composition and it's often referred to as a hybrid tribunal. It includes Sierra Leonean and international judges and staff and also includes international and domestic offenses.

CHAPTER FOUR

Helen C. was a fish seller in Koidu. In May 1998 she saw the rebels kill approximately 50 people. They caught her and cut off her hand and forearm.

Victim testimony:

They captured me and said lie on the floor. I was reluctant. They cut me on the neck with a machete. I was cut by a small boy. They put my hand on a stone and cut me. They told me to go to Kabbah and tell them what happened. They left me there. They said they would go to the bush and kill anyone they found there. I walked eleven days to Forekonia. I left my belongings with my hand. I had to bury my own hand.

CHAPTER FIVE

Elise Keppler:

Given that it's had a difficult funding situation, the court to date has made tremendous strides in bringing justice for serious crimes committed in Sierra Leone. This is the court that set itself up relatively quickly with tight financial constraints.

Its funding has remained insecure and inadequate to complete operations. Human Rights Watch has consistently pressed for the court to receive adequate funding.

The court has an active outreach program, has an active witness protection program, a defense office, and two trial chambers which have been conducting trials of accused associated with the three warring factions in the conflict.

In addition to a fair trial, it will important that the proceedings are accessible to the people in West Africa. With regard to Taylor's trial, this will include bringing West African journalists and civil society to observe the proceedings in The Hague and report back, an important feature in making sure that people in West Africa know about what's happening.

CHAPTER SIX

Emma Daly:

In terms of the specific crimes that Taylor's accused of, what do you think his trial means for the victims?

Richard Dicker:

The importance to the victims I think can be best conveyed by recalling the scenes in Freetown, Sierra Leone at the end of March 2006.

The day that Taylor was transported by helicopter to the detention center at the special court in Sierra Leone – the rooftops were filled with people watching, people in the streets to witness something that they had longed to see; and that is, the individual who many many held most responsible for what had happened in Sierra Leone actually brought to trial before the Special Court.

It will be up to the judges of the court to try him fairly, to respect all his guarantees to due process – but nonetheless – there is a desire and expectation to see this individual held to account in a court of law.