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War Criminals: Beware the Ides of March

By [Ayesha Kajee](#) | Friday, March 31, 2006

Mid-march 2006 was a particularly bad period for the world's war criminals. As Ayesha Kajee argues, improvements in the institutions of the multilateral justice system are providing an accountability mechanism against future war crimes. If recent trends continue, it may also compel despots and war criminals to beware the Ides of every month.

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In Julius Caesar's Rome, each month had an "Ides" — derived from the Latin "to divide" — which was usually the 13th or the 15th day of the month.

Invoking Charles Taylor's name among West

After Caesar's assassination on March 15th 44 B.C., the Ides of March came to be associated with ill luck, with Caesar's death attributed to his failure to heed

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Africans results in flashbacks of mass murder and rape.

an astrologer's warning to "Beware the Ides of March."

This year, several infamous tyrants might also have been well-advised to "Beware the Ides

of March."

Taylor's arrest

On or around the middle of the month, Liberian president Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf formally requested the extradition of ex-president Charles Taylor from Nigeria. Nigeria complied on March 29, 2006, following an escape bid by the notorious warlord and his subsequent arrest at the Nigeria-Cameroon border.

In Liberia, Taylor will be arrested by UN forces and transferred for trial to the UN-backed Special Court for Sierra Leone, which has indicted him for war crimes committed during Sierra Leone's decade-long civil war.

Dyilo's ICC appearance

Even as the noose was tightening around Mr. Taylor, the International Criminal Court (ICC) in Holland unsealed a warrant for the arrest of the Congolese militia leader Thomas Lubanga Dyilo on charges of war crimes — including the conscription of child-soldiers.

Less than a week later, Lubanga made history as the first suspect to appear before the still-young world court. The ICC declared that his warrant was "but the first in a series" designed to bring the perpetrators of the various conflicts in Africa's Great Lakes region to justice.

Meanwhile, Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic, standing trial for crimes against humanity at the International Criminal Tribunal for Yugoslavia, did not survive to greet the Ides of March. March 11, 2006 marked his death and, perhaps, his departure to a trial by a court higher than that presided over by humans.

Taylor's former son-in-law, Edwin Snowe, became Speaker of Liberia's parliament, the third most powerful portfolio in the land.

Fearful citizens

Though the Taylor extradition request and the arraignment of Lubanga seemingly represent progress by the international criminal justice system, the citizens

of Liberia, Sierra Leone and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) are fearful that these Ides of March may instead herald newfound calamity for them.

Their fears are not without justification given the brutalities they have endured — and the far-reaching webs of power that warlords such as Taylor and Lubanga wield.

Tragic human rights abuses

In addition to conscripting children, Lubanga's Union of Congolese Patriots (UPC) and its military wing have reportedly committed rape, mutilation, torture and murder. They have also been implicated in the 2005 killing of nine UN peacekeepers.

Taylor's extradition may represent progress by the international justice system — but the citizens of Liberia are still fearful that it may instead herald newfound calamity.

But Lubanga's forces comprise just one of several warring groups in this region. Latent ethnic conflicts may have been fomented — and deliberately sustained — by those wishing to exploit the DRC's abundant resources of gold and diamonds.

Among those who allegedly have Congolese blood on their hands are powerful individuals, transnational corporations and various governments.

Lubanga's forthcoming trial, while it may well have a deterrent effect on future troublemakers, is merely the opening act of a complex tragedy of human rights abuses.

Taylor's legacy

Among ordinary West Africans, from Abidjan to Monrovia and Freetown, invoking the name of Charles Taylor results in ashen faces and flashbacks to a hell-period of mass amputations, mass rapes and mass murder, known in Sierra Leone as "Operation No Living Thing."

Even though his asylum conditions in Nigeria theoretically barred him from political interference in Liberia, sophisticated telecommunications equipment and unrestricted visitor access meant that Taylor continued to influence events via financial and advisory channels.

Threats of war

His machinations have ensured that his former son-in-law, Edwin Snowe has become Speaker of Liberia's parliament, the third most powerful portfolio in the land.

Recent threats by his supporters to cause chaos and mayhem should Taylor be extradited to Sierra Leone are not taken lightly, for he is a peculiar mixture of the perennial comeback kid and African Houdini.

Responsible for innumerable atrocities after invading Liberia in 1989 and Sierra Leone's diamond fields in 1991, Taylor won the Liberian presidency in 1997 — with open threats to resume war if he lost. "He killed my ma, he killed my pa, I'll vote for him" was the mournful dirge chanted by Liberians prior to the '97 elections.

The ICC declared Lubanga's warrant "but the first in a series" to bring the perpetrators of the conflicts in Africa's Great Lakes region to justice.

A miraculous escape

Taylor 'miraculously' escaped from an American prison in the 1980s while awaiting extradition to Liberia for embezzlement. He made a similar attempt to slip away from Nigeria this week.

Since the Sierra Leone indictment in 2003, he has managed to evade trial by a series of diplomatic acrobatics, culminating in the 2003 African-brokered deal to accept asylum in Nigeria.

No proactive Nigeria

President Obasanjo's lukewarm statement that the Liberian government "is free to take former president Charles Taylor into its custody" had implied that Nigeria will not be proactive in this matter, prompting fears that Taylor could exit Nigeria in the interim.

Charles Taylor is a peculiar mixture of the perennial comeback kid and an African

As it turned out, those fears were vindicated. Sierra Leone prosecutor Desmond de Silva stated before the escape attempt, "the watching world will wish to see Taylor held in Nigerian detention to avoid the possibility of him using his

Houdini.

wealth and associates to slip away, with grave consequences for the stability of the region”.

In both West Africa and the Great Lakes region, it is the state actors in the region who need to take a principled stance, to ensure that the Ides of March do not usher in renewed conflicts.

Respecting sovereignty

Rwanda and Uganda must heed UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan’s call to “respect the DRC’s sovereignty”, something they have failed to do in the past.

The DRC government itself should imbibe some of Sirleaf’s courage in pursuing perpetrators of atrocities and Kinshasa should demonstrate non-partisanship in the run-up to the DRC’s first democratic elections later in 2006.

Requiring more than just words

West African states must now bolster Sirleaf by providing security support under the ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) banner, if necessary.

Governments in both regions should move beyond paying lip-service to commitments to democracy and ending impunity.

Nigeria, an architect of NEPAD — the New Economic Partnership for Africa’s Development — had a particular obligation to keep its promise to hand Taylor over to an elected Liberian government. Nigeria should also be congratulated on its speedy recapture of the fugitive, which has effectively stemmed criticism of Obasanjo’s seeming reluctance to take action on the matter.

Lubanga's forthcoming trial may well have a deterrent effect on future troublemakers — but it is merely the opening act of a complex tragedy of human rights abuses.

De Silva’s sentiment that the world wishes to see that war criminals face the consequences of their abuses, applies equally to tyrants lurking in every corner of the globe.

As the multilateral justice framework consolidates its institutions and gathers momentum, the world will hope to see war criminals and despots compelled to beware

the Ides of each successive month.

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