

# The Sanctions and the Future of Liberia



## Perspective

**June 25, 2001**

However symbolic it may appear, the current regime of sanctions imposed on the government of Mr. Charles Ghankay Taylor is an important step in bringing some sanity in Liberia and the sub-region. Far from a simple diplomatic nuisance, it signals an end to the impunity that Mr. Taylor, through his many schemes and personality changes, has enjoyed while committing the most heinous crimes in modern Liberia. The actions taken by the UN, at the urging of Britain and the United States must be applauded and strengthened.

---

Notwithstanding the great pain Liberia endured during the war that caused 250,000 deaths and more than a million refugees, the people gave him the benefit of the doubt when he promised to lay down his guns and be part of the solution. He was elected because, as General Victor Malu (the last ECOMOG Field Commander) put it, he was the "most presidential" in the lot. That remark by a General who had spent some 5 years trying to contain Mr. Taylor's follies was really conveying instructions from General Sanii Abacha. Chances were the two men, moved by greed and absolute power would somehow connect and they did. Their friendship opened a new deadly chapter of instability and war in the Mano River Union (MRU) basin. For the majority of Liberians, Taylor was elected so that he would leave us alone and be contended to be President.

Mr. Taylor proved himself to be a man of insatiable greed. The presidency of Liberia seems not to be enough for him. He wants it all. The seven years he spent in the bush seem to have created a void inside him. The quest for absolute power replaced the patriotism that brought many into his ranks. Once elected, he unleashed that greed. He surrounded himself with cronies and people bent on blindly obeying him, while he continues to charm the outsiders with his lies. With his immediate neighbors, he plays the same cunning game. He lied to Conteh and Kabbah, pretending to work with them on regional peace and stability while he worked to destabilize their countries. He trains and sends his army of child killers on Sierra Leone, turning that country into hell, just as he had threatened to do, a few years back, when President Momo refused to let him use Sierra Leone as a launching pad for his "revolution." The Liberian Government wants the international community to sanction Guinea, Sierra Leone and Britain for attacks on Liberia. This call would have some credibility if it were not for Mr. Taylor's track records and his unabashed support for the rebels of Sierra Leone and Guinean dissidents. The Liberian president must change, profoundly and not simply let his press clarions his virtues.

As the reality begins to set in (now that the sanctions regime is beginning to take its course), the government of Liberia has begun its own frantic search for ways to counter or undermine the UN sanctions recently imposed on it. When the UN released its list of 130 people comprising of senior government officials, foreign nationals, members of Taylor's inner circle, and businessmen, which the UN determined to be linked to fueling the crisis in

Sierra Leone, and were to be banned from traveling to UN member countries except on conditions of religious and humanitarian grounds, the Liberian government was stunned by the length and inclusiveness of the list. While it anticipated the travel ban to affect a few officials of government, it was surprised by how encompassing this list would turn out to be.

The Liberian government immediately reacted by calling for the suspension of the list, saying that it was "fraught with numerous inaccuracies," and that it has filed a protest letter with the Security Council requesting for a review of the list. Foreign Minister Monie Captan says the list is "extremely, unfairly punitive," and that he believes it appears to be drawn up on the basis of an "arbitrary submission to the UN Security Council Sanctions Committee on Liberia and not based on systematic criteria that took into consideration the relevant provisions of the resolution."

Why it acted coyly and with bravado to the diamond ban with Taylor thumping his chest and shouting that Liberia doesn't need Sierra Leone diamonds, and that Liberia is rich with diamonds which can be found on Duport Road (in Paynesville), the government now seemed more repulsed and subdued by the travel ban.

The travel ban which is designed to restrict the movement of government officials from traveling to other countries, is the simplest but more powerful amongst the sanctions regime, which also includes a ban on diamond and arms. No one wishes for their freedom of movement to be restricted or taken away. In the particular case of Liberian government officials, this is equivalent to a death knell. Their proclivities, combined with their insatiable urge and high appetite for traveling for myriad reasons, will now no longer be possible. Many who have sent their families abroad, especially in the United States, having business and other financial venture here as well, "visitation rights" would be severed. And many who have also used government "trips" to fleece the national treasury and enrich themselves, can now no longer do so or find reason to travel.

But as usual, while bemoaning the travel ban, the Liberian government is also finding ways to scuttle or undermine it. Monie Captan who says that the ban is "impairing Liberia's capacity to conduct its foreign policy," has also indicated that more than 100 Liberians included on the list plan to sue governments that suggested the restriction applied to them. It has also begun a paid public relations campaign to encourage critics to push for the removal of the names of certain individuals from the list. For example, a wealthy Lebanese businessman and Taylor's close associate, George Haddad, few weeks after Taylor was elected president, he granted exclusive rights to import rice into the country to Bridgeway Corporation, a company owned by George Haddad. Mr. Haddad, the sole distributor of rice, Liberia's staple food - is said to have pumped money into Taylor's 1997 election. Using his enormous influence and wealth, the Lebanese businessman wants his name removed from the list.

Abandoning its earlier argument that sanctions will affect "ordinary people," it is not hard to see who these Liberians are that the Liberian government is fighting for. All these desperate moves by the Liberian government and those affected by the list show that the

limited sanctions regime imposed on Liberia has begun to bite. We urge Liberians to become even more vigilant and push for the UN to develop an even more comprehensive list.