



# AFRICA'S MOST WANTED

Charles Taylor is an accused war criminal. A U.N.-backed court wants him. Washington is dithering

By Chitra Ragavan

In Washington last week, the White House suddenly found itself under pressure, even from some usually friendly Republicans, over its demurrals in helping to bring an indicted war criminal to justice. Former Liberian President Charles Taylor has been living the high life in Nigeria since 2003, when he was forced out of the Liberian capital of Monrovia as part of a U.S.-brokered deal—despite the fact that a special United Nations-backed court had indicted him as a war criminal. Now

Taylor is making trouble once again, the court says, meddling in the outcome of the upcoming Liberian elections and plotting to assassinate the president of Guinea.

So when Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo came calling at the White House last week, Republicans, Democrats, and some of the nation's major newspapers called on President Bush to demand that Nigeria turn Taylor over to the court. For the Bush administration, it was a delicate dance with a fragile ally; at the end of the day, there were vague commitments by Bush and Obasanjo to

work together to hold Taylor accountable. Behind the scenes, though, there was a lot more going on—in particular, a raging debate over the extent of al Qaeda's influence in West Africa and the question of whether U.S. law enforcement agencies are taking the issue seriously.

President Bush summoned Obasanjo to the Oval Office last Thursday, ostensibly to discuss bilateral issues—Nigeria is one of America's biggest sources of oil, and Obasanjo has taken what the *Washington Post* called “modest but praiseworthy” steps to fight corruption there. Taylor, however, was clearly the elephant in the room. He is believed to have been involved in stoking civil wars in Liberia, Guinea, Ivory Coast, and Sier-



Q. SAKAMAKI—REFLEX

ra Leone. In March 2003, the U.N.-backed body, the Special Court for Sierra Leone, indicted him for leading a civil war there in which his forces allegedly raped, dismembered, and killed tens of thousands of innocents in their bid to control the country's vast diamond mines. In August 2003, American officials helped broker a deal that allowed Taylor safe passage to Nigeria in order to stabilize the chaotic situation in Liberia. At the time, the officials vowed that the Liberian strongman would be brought to justice later. Obasanjo, however, has been reluctant to hand Taylor over to the U.N.-sponsored court without evidence of Taylor's continuing criminal behavior. A host of close observers, meanwhile—including many on Capitol

Hill—believe the Bush administration has not pushed Obasanjo hard enough.

Confronted with the administration's seeming ambivalence, the court's representatives recently decided to get tough. Over the past few weeks, they have reignited a debate over their controversial findings—which the Bush administration says are unsubstantiated—that Taylor has long had ties to members of al Qaeda, including nine of the men involved in the 1998 bombings of the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. The court has also charged that Taylor sold "conflict" or "blood" diamonds from his Sierra Leone mines to these men before and after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center, in exchange for cash and guns. Al Qaeda operatives were especially interested in converting their assets into diamonds, the court asserts,

intelligence official. Crane and White were initially uninterested in the al Qaeda connection, but eventually, they concluded, they couldn't ignore the links. "We ran smack-dab into al Qaeda's presence," Crane says, "almost within a month that we were operating in this area." The court now says it has found nearly two dozen witnesses who have identified about half the men on the FBI's list of most-wanted terrorists as having been in contact with Taylor. "I'm absolutely positive of this," says Crane. "I am not a sensationalist. I am just a prosecutor who is trying to put some bad people in jail, and I just found an association of these bad people with these international terrorists."

**Questions.** The FBI isn't buying it. "During the course of our yearlong investigation, we worked closely with the CIA and the entire international intelligence



KHALIL SENOSI—AP

**TROUBLE.** Taylor (left) attends a rally at a Monrovia, Liberia, stadium in 2003. Above, rescue workers evacuate victims following the 1998 bombing of the U.S. Embassy in Kenya.

because commodities like diamonds cannot be easily traced by law enforcement, unlike funds deposited in banks. The court's investigators contend that the FBI has dropped the ball on investigating these ties. "In my opinion, the FBI has no interest in pursuing al Qaeda in West Africa," says the U.N.-backed court's chief investigator, Alan White, a former police officer and senior Pentagon investigator. "They have discounted this from Day 1."

Taylor's alleged links to al Qaeda were first documented in 2001 by the *Washington Post's* Douglas Farah, who later expanded his reporting into a book, *Blood From Stones*. Farah briefed both White and the court's chief prosecutor, David Crane, a former senior Pentagon

community, and nobody could support White's position," says Dennis Lormel, former chief of the FBI's terrorist financing operations section. His agents submitted financial questions to al Qaeda detainees at the U.S. Naval Base in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, but Lormel says "we never got any inkling that al Qaeda was related to the diamonds."

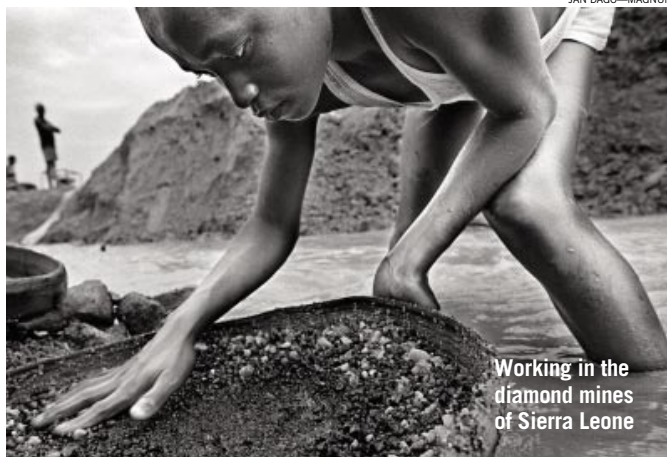
In its report last year, the 9/11 commission concurred, saying it found "no persuasive evidence that al Qaeda funded itself by trading in African conflict diamonds." The CIA declined to com-

ment. Juan Zarate, an assistant secretary at the Treasury Department who helped investigate the 1998 embassy bombings, says the government has carefully investigated White's findings but found little to support them. "It's not that we're afraid of the connections," he says. "There's no one hungrier than the U.S. to attack the issue."

**Back and forth.** The disagreements between the FBI and the court's investigators are sharp and specific. White says his sources identified Aafia Siddiqui, an alleged high-level al Qaeda female operative. Other sources, he said, told of Taylor's hosting al Qaeda members at his home in Congo Town, Liberia, and at the Hotel Boulevard in Monrovia, where they said satchels of diamonds were exchanged for cash and guns. The U.N.-backed court also obtained what it says is evidence that al Qaeda was buying Taylor's diamonds through a Belgian gemstone-smuggling operation called Asa Diam, which allegedly had ties to Hezbollah, and selling them at the diamond exchange in Antwerp, Belgium. The FBI's Lormel says the bureau identified the men who were purportedly al Qaeda diamond buyers as Senegalese smugglers. "They were basically bad guys," he says. "But they weren't al Qaeda operatives that we could identify." Lormel says Belgian police told him they have ruled out the possibility that Asa Diam had ties to al Qaeda's diamond-selling operation.

FBI Director Robert Mueller insisted that agents run down every lead, Lormel says, and the FBI sent two separate teams of agents to Sierra Leone. "We did interview a few people who say they saw al Qaeda operatives over there," Lormel says. "But they were not involved in diamond trafficking for al Qaeda on a major, wholesale level. They may have tried to dabble in it a little bit. Maybe that's where the confusion is."

Farah, the former *Washington Post*



Working in the diamond mines of Sierra Leone

## A DEADLY DEAL FOR DIAMONDS?

Investigators from a United Nations-backed special court say former Liberian President Charles Taylor sold diamonds from mines he controlled in Sierra Leone in exchange for cash and weapons, both before and after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks. The investigators say al Qaeda laundered the diamonds and used profits to fund terrorist activities. U.S. law enforcement and intelligence agencies dispute these findings.

**1** Diamonds from Taylor-controlled mines in Sierra Leone are sent to Liberia.

**2** Taylor sells diamonds to al Qaeda in exchange for cash and weapons.

**3** Al Qaeda launders most of the diamonds on the Antwerp, Belgium, diamond exchange.

**4** Taylor's diamonds are also sold to al Qaeda through a Belgian diamond-laundering operation called Asa Diam, with ties to Hezbollah. Payment of cash and weapons goes back to Taylor.



ROD LITTLE-USN&WR

reporter, says the FBI's investigative strategy may be partly to blame. "If you are a white FBI agent going to hotels and saying, 'Have you seen a terrorist?' what are they going to tell you?" Farah asks. Lormel counters that perhaps White and Farah heard only what they wanted to hear.

With both sides dug in, whom to believe? "It's as clear as mud," acknowledges Lormel. But the FBI and the U.N.-sponsored court appear to agree on at least one thing: West Africa, with its abundance of diamonds, could well be

the next crucible for jihad. "There's clearly an al Qaeda presence in the region," says Lormel. "The conflict diamonds—it's certainly an area of vulnerability."

Policing it, however, is difficult. "We descend on countries for a couple of months," says an FBI official, "then we're gone. We can't always be in a reactionary mode." That's about to change. Rep. Frank Wolf, a Virginia Republican who has long pushed the FBI to investigate White's findings, recently inserted \$2 million in a 2005 omnibus appropriations bill to set up an FBI office in Freetown, the capital of Sierra Leone. But, Wolf concedes, it's only just a start for the FBI. "They still don't have anybody in West Africa that understands the region," says Wolf.

The CIA's intelligence capabilities in West Africa languished after the Cold War, and especially after the September 11 attacks, when most of its intelligence assets were rerouted to the Middle East. "It's the sort of thing you don't pick up on a satellite. It requires human intelligence to get to the bottom of it," says Vance Serchuk of the American Enterprise Institute. "That's what we don't have."

Charles Taylor, meanwhile, appears to continue fomenting trouble in the region. "As late as three weeks ago," says the court's Crane, "we had him dealing with one of al Qaeda's key operatives and certainly the No. 1

guy in West Africa, Mustafa Mohamed Fadhil." Adds White, the investigator: "Charles Taylor hates the U.S. government, and he will do anything he can to bring harm to the U.S. Mark my words, the government is going to rue the day it didn't take this seriously." Ed Royce, a California Republican who chairs a House terrorism subcommittee, echoes those thoughts. "We all underestimate this thug, Charles Taylor," he says, "at our own peril." ●

With Julian E. Barnes