



Former Liberian President's Lawyers Ask for Acquittal

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Attorneys for former Liberian president Charles Taylor want a U.N. tribunal to acquit their client of all charges relating to his alleged involvement in Sierra Leone's civil war. Mr. Taylor is facing charges of war crimes and crimes against humanity including murder, rape, enslavement, and conscription of child soldiers.

Mr. Taylor's counsel opened his defense asking judges to acquit the former Liberian leader because they say prosecutors have failed to prove their case against him.

While his lawyers concede that Mr. Taylor supplied arms and ammunition to rebels of the Revolutionary United Front, they say that support lasted only 18 months and ended long before the start of the Special Court's mandate to try offenses committed in Sierra Leone.



AFP Photo

Former Liberian President Charles Taylor sits in courtroom prior to hearing of witnesses in trial in The Hague, 08 Jan 2008

Defense lawyer Morris Anyah said that in order to convict his client, the court must find that he had direct intent, not recklessness or negligence, but the direct intent that his actions would lead to the commission of a crime.

"That means Mr. Taylor must know that there is a substantial likelihood that what he is saying - recognize the junta, take over Kanu - there is a substantial likelihood that that would be manifested," Anyah said. "It is not on us to prove the evidence of that. The prosecution has to make the link. They have to bring the evidence."

Anyah told the three-judge panel in The Hague that prosecutors have not done so.

"Your honors, if you examine closely the evidence that has been presented and you examine the appropriate legal elements, you will find the evidence lacking," Anyah said.

Anyah questioned the testimony of several prosecution witnesses, including one who alleged that Mr. Taylor told rebel leader Foday Sankoh to go to Ivory Coast for peace talks in 1998.

"There has been evidence in this case that Foday Sankoh was arrested in 1997 and the he remained in custody of the Nigerians until July 1998 when he was transferred to the custody of the Sierra Leoneans," Anyah said. "And so you have a witness coming before your honors and saying that in 1998 Charles Taylor directed Foday Sankoh to go to the Ivory Coast. But Foday Sankoh was in prison."

Anyah says there is no doubt that terrible crimes took place in Sierra Leone, but he says prosecutors have not shown any evidence linking Mr. Taylor to the planning, instigation,

execution, or aiding and abetting of those crimes.

The prosecution's 11-count indictment alleges the former Liberian rebel led the Revolutionary United Front across the border and acted as their effective leader for much of Sierra Leone's 10-year civil war.

In his opening statement in June of 2007, chief prosecutor Stephen Rapp said Mr. Taylor was part of a joint criminal enterprise to control Sierra Leone's diamond wealth and topple the government in Freetown.

"The witnesses that we will call and the document that we will present will prove that the accused is responsible for the development and execution of a plan that caused the death and destruction in Sierra Leone," Rapp said.

The Freetown session of the special court jointly established by the United Nations and the government of Sierra Leone reached its final verdict in February. It found the three most senior surviving members of the RUF group guilty of murder, sexual enslavement, and attacks against U.N. troops.

Mr. Taylor's trial was moved to The Hague because of fears that his supporters might disrupt proceedings held in neighboring Sierra Leone.

The prosecution rested its case in February after hearing from 91 witnesses in just over a year.

Prosecutors are scheduled to reply to the defense request for "Motion for Judgment of Acquittal" on Thursday. Judges are expected to rule on the matter several days later.

Defense lawyers say that if their motion is denied and the trial continues, Mr. Taylor will be their first witness.

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