

'Butcher of Liberia' found guilty of war crimes

At a special court at The Hague, former warlord Charles Taylor was convicted of atrocities committed during one of Africa's most savage civil wars. A dark chapter in history is ending at last.

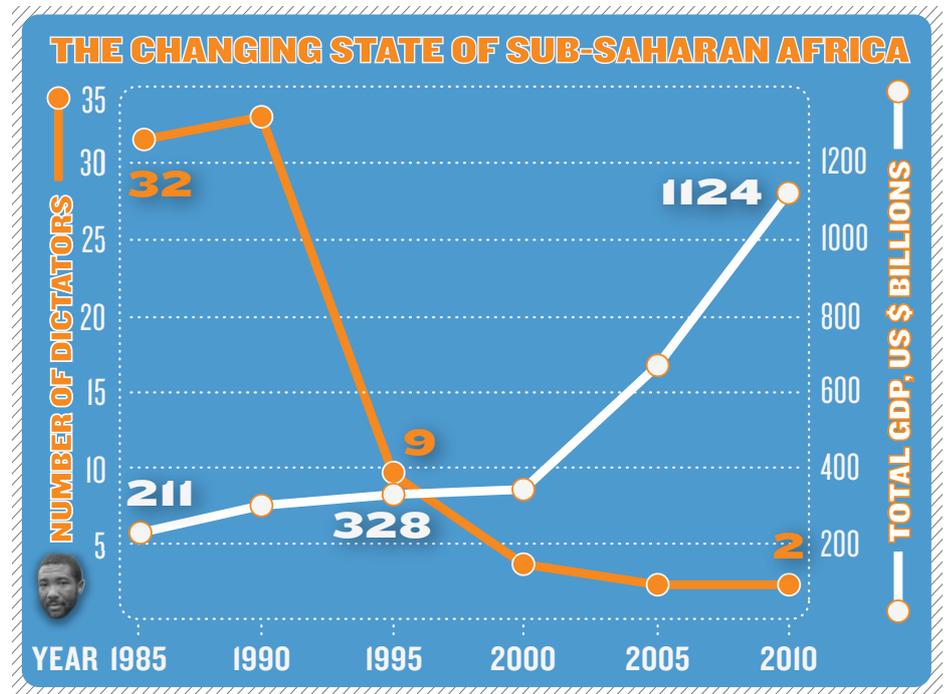


HISTORY & POLITICS
 BUSINESS & ECONOMICS

Edward Conteh remembers vividly the day he lost his arm. It was 1999; the civil war in Sierra Leone was at its height; for three days, he and his children had been hiding out, with no food and little water, trying to avoid the ferocious rebel soldiers of the RUF. Perhaps if Conteh had stayed hiding he would have been safe – but his children had to eat, so out he went.

He did not get far before he was caught. The rebels kicked him to the ground and held him down. Then, with five or six blows from a blunt axe, they hacked off his left hand at the wrist and left him bleeding in the dust. He was, they told him, one of the lucky ones.

But today, like thousands of others who suffered mutilation in the eleven year conflict, Conteh is celebrating. Far away in The Hague, a special international court has finally delivered its verdict on the man who Conteh blames for all



his country's suffering: Liberian warlord Charles Taylor has been found guilty, convicted of rape, murder, enslavement, the use of child soldiers, pillage and acts of terrorism.

Charismatic and well-educated, with a US college degree in economics, Charles Taylor was once a promising young activist, campaigning for greater democracy in his native Liberia. But when politics failed, he turned to violence, using funds from Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi to raise a rebel army.

After a long and bloody civil war, Taylor established himself as a dictator. His campaign slogan in the 1997 elections was: 'He killed my ma, he killed my pa, but I will vote for him.'

His reign in Liberia was brutal and violent. At the same time, Taylor backed the invasion of Sierra Leone by the RUF. Led by Taylor's friend Foday Sankoh, the RUF launched a campaign of rape,

murder and forced amputations. Taylor aided and abetted some of the worst crimes in recent African history. Now, at last, he will pay the price.

GOOD NEWS

Some Western readers will find the story of Taylor's life depressingly familiar. In the last year, news from Africa has been dominated by war in Ivory Coast, famine and chaos in Somalia and, most recently, the hunt for mass murderer Joseph Kony. It is this sort of coverage that causes some people still to see Africa as 'the Dark Continent'.

But long-time Africa-watchers say this impression is grossly unfair. The most important thing to note about the Charles Taylor conviction is that Taylor was among the last dictators on the continent. The real Africa, which so often goes unreported, is a place of economic growth, exciting social change and increasing political freedom.

Q & A

Q If Africa is getting richer, what does that mean for the rest of the world?

A It's good news, economically speaking. Peace and prosperity in Africa means easier access to the continent's huge reserves of natural resources. And as African consumers get richer, they will demand more imported

goods. The extra demand could deliver a much needed boost to the global economy.

Q And why has Africa had such a hard time so far?

A Africa was conquered and divided up by European empires during the 18th and 19th Centuries. Many African nations only came into existence when the colonial powers left in the 1950s and 60s. They were ethnically and religiously divided, and ill prepared

for the challenge of government. A series of rebellions, coups and civil wars caused chaos and misery across the continent.

SOME PEOPLE SAY...

'Today, Europe sends aid to Africa. In fifty years time, it will be the other way round!'

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

▶ 'Butcher of Liberia' found guilty of war crimes

WORD WATCH

Celebrating – By coincidence, today is also Independence Day in Sierra Leone.

The Hague – Home to the Dutch government, the city of The Hague is famous as the home of over 150 international organisations, including the International Criminal Court and the International Court of Justice. Charles

Taylor was tried in a special court backed by the UN.

Liberian – Liberia (pop. 3.8 million) is a small country in West Africa, situated on the coast between Sierra Leone and Ivory Coast. It was established during the 19th Century by ex-slaves from the USA – hence the name.

Muammar Gaddafi – Colonel Muammar Gaddafi was the ruler

of Libya from 1979 until he was overthrown last year, and killed by rebels. He was famous for supporting 'anti-colonialist' regimes in sub-Saharan Africa.

Joseph Kony – Joseph Kony is one of Africa's most notorious surviving warlords, operating in the remote border regions of Congo and Uganda. Earlier this year, a campaign video highlighting his record of atrocities went viral, provoking a surge of interest in his case. Ugandans complained that the video misrepresented their country.

YOU DECIDE

1. What does the future hold for Africa?
2. Why does more bad news seem to come out Africa than good news?

ACTIVITIES

1. As a class, make a word-cloud of terms people might associate with Africa. How accurate do you think these terms are?

2. Research and write a short good-news story about Africa.

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 **NOTES**

