

LIBERIA: Dutchman on trial in Netherlands for West African war crimes

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MONROVIA, 4 May (IRIN) - Some Liberians say he is a war criminal, others that he was just trying to make a living. One thing is certain: Dutch national Guus Kouwenhoven, still widely known in Liberia as 'Gus', was on excellent terms with Charles Taylor until the warlord-turned-president quit power in 2003.

Kouwenhoven is currently being tried in the Dutch city of The Hague for war crimes and providing weapons to Taylor in violation of a United Nations ban on arms exports to Liberia.

Ironically, the 63-year-old timber merchant may be the only person brought to justice for his role in the Liberian civil war as the peace deal that ended 14 years of on-off fighting failed to set up a tribunal. He faces life imprisonment if convicted.

Earlier this week, the trial saw a former brother-in-law of Taylor, Cindor Reeves, testify that Kouwenhoven was involved in arms deals and in devising war strategies to fend off rebels besieging Taylor's men.

Reeves, disguised with a wig and make-up, said he was a middleman for arms shipments from Kouwenhoven's timber company to the plush Taylor residence in the capital Monrovia. But Kouwenhoven coolly stated he had never seen Reeves before in his life.

Although the trial is receiving scant attention in the Dutch and Liberian media, it is unique in that it is the first time western prosecutors are trying a national for breaking a UN embargo.

The accused, who has a penchant for silk ties and gold-rimmed sunglasses, was arrested at a train station in the Netherlands last year following an investigation by Dutch police into his alleged activities as an arms smuggler in war-torn Liberia from 1999 to 2003.

His arrest was hailed as "a major blow against western profiteers who enrich themselves on the suffering of Africans" by the prosecutor of the UN-backed Special Court for Sierra Leone, David Crane.

And environmental groups such as Green Advocates and the UK-based watchdog Global Witness said the case could mark "an important precedent" for international justice. Both non-governmental

organizations were instrumental in exposing the shady dealings of Kouwenhoven.

"The world has now transcended the era of impunity where predatory business entrepreneurs are awarded unrestricted permits to leech on the blood of innocent poor inhabitants in the name of profits," environmental lawyer Alfred Brownell of Green Advocates said earlier this year.

Now in its second week, the trial not only highlights the questionable role unscrupulous businessmen play in the world's conflict zones. It also underlines a nascent unwillingness of some western nations to turn a blind eye to sanction-breakers.

"Internationally, the Dutch government wants to give a clear signal that the Netherlands is not a safe haven for war criminals or torturers," said a spokeswoman for the prosecutor's office, Desiree Leppens, by telephone from The Hague.

The Netherlands began actively prosecuting international war criminals in 2003, partly as a result of the establishment of the International Criminal Court in The Hague. So far, courts have convicted two Afghans based in The Netherlands for war crimes and a Dutch national for supplying chemicals to Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein.

Born in September 1942, Kouwenhoven was raised in the port city of Rotterdam before heading to the Liberian capital Monrovia to import luxury cars and revamp a flashy five-star hotel at the edge of the city.

The hotel casino was a favorite drinking spot for cronies of then President Samuel Doe. "He tried to look legitimate by doing legitimate business, but he is criminal," a Liberian close to the case told IRIN on condition of anonymity.

But Kouwenhoven switched allegiances when then rebel leader Charles Taylor began to dominate the political scene and ultimately seized power in 1997 presidential elections.

"If you do business in Africa, you have no choice but to be on good terms with those in power," Kouwenhoven said in an interview with a Dutch weekly two years ago.

Taylor was infamous for recruiting child soldiers and unleashing them high on drugs on civilians. At least 200,000 Liberians were killed

during the civil war, and thousands of women and men were raped.

Kouwenhoven denies the allegations against him, saying he had no idea what was going on. But most Liberians say that was impossible. "You'd have had to have your head in the sand not to know what happened and what atrocious crimes were being committed," a western analyst told IRIN on condition of anonymity.

By 2000, the Dutchman headed several logging companies, including the largest timber firm in Liberia, the Oriental Timber Company (OTC), based in the port city of Buchanan.

Exploiting a territory the size of Belgium, OTC is accused of tapping into Liberia's vast natural forests to sponsor Taylor's war efforts.

Taylor traded diamonds to buy weapons and fuel war in neighboring Sierra Leone until a 1999 UN embargo on diamonds from Liberia and Sierra Leone threatened to deprive him of cash. He then shifted his attention to timber, once even referring to OTC as his 'pepper bush', a local term for gold mine.

Kouwenhoven was named and shamed when a UN team of experts reported that OTC provided logistical and financial support to Taylor. In 2001, the UN Security Council banned him from travelling.

Yet the port of Buchanan, overseen by Kouwenhoven, had already become a primary location for arms imports by sea, according to Global Witness. Witnesses told the court that Kouwenhoven helped ship truckloads of arms to Monrovia.

Kouwenhoven is also held responsible for managing an armed militia of 2,500 fighters who defended Taylor as rebel movements pounded Monrovia with mortar bombs.

His lawyer has tried to discredit most witnesses, saying they were paid by the Dutch police to come forward and testify. However, insiders close to the case say Kouwenhoven is likely to be convicted because his company left a 'huge' paper trail of arms deals.

And now Kouwenhoven's friend Taylor may also stand trial in The Netherlands to face the UN-backed Special Court which has indicted him for fomenting civil war in Sierra Leone. Taylor was arrested in March after three years of exile in Nigeria. The tribunal has requested the trial not be held in West Africa, but a country willing to hold Taylor after his conviction has yet to be found.

The verdict on Kouwenhoven is expected in June.

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