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Seeing a war criminal be punished for crimes

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This summer found three former heads of state in custody in international courts, and one, Charles Taylor, convicted of war crimes. In addition, the International Criminal Court sentenced Congolese warlord Thomas Lubanga to 14 years' imprisonment for turning young boys into killers. And finally, the trial of former Bosnian Serb general Ratko Mladic began at the tribunal created to try accused war criminals from the former Yugoslavia.

To understand these cases, and the struggle to create a global framework to hold leaders accountable for crimes against their own people, students from my international law class at Eckerd College traveled to The Hague, Netherlands, and were able to attend Taylor's sentencing hearing, where he was sentenced to 50 years in prison.

The students had just been seated in the front row of the public viewing gallery when Taylor waved and smiled at our group. The disconnect could not have been more stark. His wave was actually not to my students, but to some friends of his who were seated right behind us.

To start the proceedings, the judge reeled off a litany of accusations, including rape, torture and murder of women and children.

The hearing had a significant impact on the students. Here are some of their thoughts:

Chelsea Bliss: "I felt conflicted. There he was; this person I had heard so many horror stories about. I was shocked though. He looked normal. It was hard for me to believe that this old man was this horrific killer, when he looked like someone's sweet grandfather. He sat there happy, cheerful. He had no remorse. ... He waved up to me smiling. I felt sick. ... I didn't know how to react to him. I was crying and he sat there unemotional."

Chad Foreman: "What we witnessed was the culmination of a process that not

only brought about the end of impunity for heads of state, but also the deliverance of justice to the many victims and their families in Sierra Leone. And, as the Sierra Leoneans often say in this case, there can be no peace without justice."

Lee Staley: "Turn the clock back to the post World War II era of the Nuremberg Tribunals. The world has changed immensely, since the time of Nuremberg. But, the concept and practice of international justice remains powerful, successful, and necessary. The world reshapes itself with every passing moment, but the rule of law remains steadfast.

Kaitlyn Lantz: "Taylor's sentencing has strong potential to catalyze a new standard of justice. A precedent has been set for other nations to follow and for corrupt officials to fear. The accountability established will deter leaders from aiding violent groups, and encourage responsible reign over one's country."

Alex Simpson: "I feel a greater appreciation for the strength of international law and international justice. ... The precedent set by his conviction and sentencing is of priceless value to the future rule of law ... allowing that justice be provided for those peoples whose hopes were betrayed."

Danielle Grant: "It sends a powerful message to current and future heads of state, which will act as a deterrent for others considering committing human rights violations. The conviction has restored hope for the people of Sierra Leone and for myself as well."

Colton Thomas: "To personally witness the first head of state convicted and sentenced since the Nuremberg trials after WWII was truly a life changing experience."

Tony Leyh: "Oftentimes, international law is criticized for being weak and spineless due to its lack of enforcement mechanisms and lack of international consent. However, Charles Taylor's sentencing of 50 years serves as an apt repudiation of those criticisms. ... Personally, to witness this historic occasion

fosters an appreciation for humanity at large because it seems that a global citizenry is finally being established that respects the intrinsic value of the human being."

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