

Liberia's War and Peace process

A Historical Overview

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“Beyond the deprivations of war and displacement, the long-term destruction of Government infrastructure has left Liberians chronically unhealthy, under-nourished and poorly educated. Citizens struggle day-by-day and have little time or energy to attempt any meaningful form of citizen participation in the political life of the country. The brutality with which political opposition of any kind has been dealt in recent decades has made most citizens fearful of participating in the political process.”²

INTRODUCTION

On Christmas Eve 1989, a small group of armed dissidents led by a former government official named Charles Ghankay Taylor crossed into Liberia from neighbouring Côte d'Ivoire and, via the BBC, announced that the group wanted to overthrow President Samuel K Doe (a former master sergeant). The force of about 150 fighters advanced over the border from Côte d'Ivoire and attacked the town of Butuo, in Nimba County. The incursions quickly morphed into a devastating civil war in Liberia – Africa's oldest republic – which subsequently spawned no fewer than five armed factions and tens of thousands of combatants, almost completely destroyed the country's already very limited infrastructure, and killed an estimated 200,000 people in a country with a population of over two million.

At the time of the incursions there was a pervasive sense of bewilderment and gloomy anticipation among Liberians, who had been traumatised by violent upheavals and regime brutality for a long time. The 1980s was a decade of unprecedented political violence, beginning with the bloody coup that overthrew President William Tolbert and the long-reigning True Whig Party (TWP). The coup leaders, led by Doe, murdered Tolbert in his bedroom. They also gunned down 27 members

of his presidential guard. Later, after a show trial, they executed a dozen government officials on the beach. The coup effectively ended the self-serving and corrupt – not to say clannish – misrule of an Americo-Liberian oligarchy (descendants of former slaves from the American South who had established the Liberian state in 1822) that had reigned supreme for over a century and had reduced the indigenous population to near-subservience.

The coup did not signal any genuine popular or indigenous mobilisation. Amos Sawyer, Liberia's best-known intellectual, reflected that although the coup-makers "were all from indigenous ethnic backgrounds, only a few had lived and grown up in their communal areas and been socialised in indigenous values". As a result, "many of them partook of the subculture of the urban unemployed and reflected the characteristic suspicion and opportunism typical of that group ... Two impulses seemed to dominate [the coup-makers'] behaviour. The first was the impulse to rule in a brutal and tyrannical manner with the liberal use of the machine gun; the second was to satisfy personal greed by raids not only on the public treasury but, with the use of the gun, on people in the society."³

Doe, an inexperienced master sergeant when he took over the affairs of state, was deeply insecure; and Liberia in the 1980s was a place of morbid fear and sustained terror in an almost Kafka-esque way. Gun-toting soldiers roamed the streets of Monrovia, the seedy, often violent capital, and perceived political opponents were jailed or murdered. In 1985, under pressure from both within and outside the country, Doe organised elections, which the opposition alleged he had rigged. The elections, in a sense, would become almost as emblematic as the 1980 coup: blindly applauded by the US, Liberia's most important foreign backer, as genuine and acceptable, they convinced opponents of the regime that only a violent assault against it would free the nation of Doe's depredations.

Shortly after the elections, General Thomas Quiwonkpa, one of Doe's former aides who was said to have been the mastermind of the 1980 coup, led a group of ex-soldiers and dissidents in an attempted coup, which nearly succeeded. The coup was foiled largely by Doe's Israeli security advisers – the President was a loud and opportunistic supporter of the state of Israel.⁴ The aftermath was all too predictable. Doe, of the minority Krahn ethnic group, mobilised his largely Krahn army under the command of a fellow Krahn, the notoriously brutal General Charles Julu. After murdering and mutilating Quiwonkpa, who was captured after the abortive coup, Julu was sent to pacify Nimba County, ancestral

home of Quiwonkpa. The result has been well documented by Bill Berkeley in *Liberia: A promise betrayed*, a report prepared for the New York-based Lawyers Committee for Human Rights. Julu's army carried out brutalities unprecedented even in Doe's demented fiefdom, killing thousands of defenceless peasants, destroying homes, pillaging businesses and farms, and raping women.⁵

Memories of these atrocities were still fresh in the minds of Nimba residents when Taylor launched his incursions in 1989. The flamboyant and articulate Taylor astutely exploited the anti-Doe grievances to win recruits and other forms of support in the area in a manner that would plunge the country into a horrific state of pogroms and destruction. In broadcasts, particularly on the BBC, Taylor declared his war a 'continuation' of the failed Quiwonkpa coup, an unmistakable appeal to the ethnic Gio and Mano who dominated Nimba County and who were brutally massacred by Doe for allegedly supporting Quiwonkpa's abortive coup in 1985. In reaction, the hysterical Doe once again sent Charles Julu to deal with the situation in Nimba.

General Julu's forces could probably have had little difficulty containing Taylor's lightly armed guerrillas, but this was not the aim of his 'counter-insurgency' operations. He wanted to teach Nimba residents a hard lesson. It was a repeat of the 1985 massacres, only this time it was more intense. Julu's almost entirely Krahn soldiers killed and raped with reckless abandon, rounded up opposition figures and had them beheaded, their remains left unburied. The result, as Berkeley has informed us in a powerful book on contemporary warfare in Africa, "was exactly what Taylor might have hoped for. Gios and Manos by the thousands rushed to join up with Taylor's forces and he welcomed them." "As the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) came in," Taylor told me, "We didn't even have to act. People came to us and said, "Give me a gun. How can I kill the man who killed my mother?"⁶

HUMANITARIAN DISASTER AND ECOMOG INTERVENTION

The war quickly took on an ethnic character, with the Gio and Mano peoples rallying to Taylor's NPFL (though Taylor himself was a member of the Americo-Liberian elite) and the Krahn and Mandingo peoples rallying to Doe. Ethnic violence and massacres became widespread, and by the mid-1990s the war had killed tens of thousands, almost all of them civilians targeted largely because of their ethnicity. Doe's regime was on the verge of collapse, and the NPFL forces were investing the seaside

capital of Monrovia. By this time Taylor's NPFL had itself split into two, with the breakaway faction led by his former forces commander, Prince Yormie Johnson, who called his group the Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia (INPFL).

The conflict inevitably unleashed a humanitarian catastrophe on a massive scale. In the first year of the war as many as 700,000 Liberians fled the country, many of them to Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea and Sierra Leone. Tens of thousands more fled to Ghana and Nigeria. In the words of Amos Sawyer, the conflict was characterised by the "pervasiveness and intensity of looting, pillage, and plunder ... the lack of a stable and systematically organised structure of command and control among the armed bands, the criminal misuse of children, the employment of strategies of confidence artistry, the opportunistic use of a variety of cultural symbols, the orchestration of state anarchy".⁷ Warfare of this sort defies easy characterisation. It lacked an ideological motivation or direction, and was characterised by sordid opportunism. Sawyer rejects the term 'warlordism' as too limited to capture its essence, preferring to describe the mode of operation of Taylor's NPFL and the other factions as "constitutive of the behaviour of *gangsters who use terror* as their ultimate instruments of control". Sawyer's analysis of Taylor's insurgency cannot be stated better than as follows:

"Right from the start, Taylor's armed band consisted of individuals drawn from many West African countries. Several of his commanders were Sierra Leoneans, and Gambians. They and joined this group at the Libyan Mathabat where their training was sponsored by a Libyan government organisation ... Whatever discipline and revolutionary principles instilled by such training seemed to have been undermined by the NPFL's leadership's exhortation to 'capture what you can' and 'keep what you capture'. Thus, banditry was the ideology of the NPFL right from the start ... In the absence of political ideology, terror, use of drugs and opportunity for booty served to drive the group and underpin personal loyalty to its leader. Children were the most vulnerable victims of this form of brutal control. NPFL commanders became their surrogate uncles and the papay became their father. Far from seeking to establish a social order, educate or indoctrinate villagers and thereby win their support – behaviour typical of the guerrilla movements of the 1970s – the NPFL and its cohorts in plunder so terrorised local populations that they fled in the rainforest and to refugee camps in Sierra Leone, Guinea and Ivory Coast."⁸

By August 1990 there were officially 80,000 Liberian refugees in Sierra Leone, including the country's most politically active leaders, such as Doe's vice-president, Harry Moniba; there were thousands more in Ghana and Nigeria. The government of Sierra Leone announced that month that it was spending 80 million leones (about a million dollars) a month to maintain the refugees and to fund peace talks in Freetown.⁹ These talks initially involved the setting up, on 30 May 1990, of a five-member consultative group of mainly anglophone West African states – the committee comprised Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone, Gambia and Guinea – which was charged with the responsibility of maintaining peace and security in the region. The group, known as the Standing Mediation Committee (SMC), initiated talks between Doe's disintegrating government and the NPFL in Freetown in July 1990. The NPFL was represented by a blustering and flamboyant Tom Woewiyu, who announced at a press conference shortly after the initial meetings that his group would not accept any ceasefire proposition. Nor, he declared, would it accept any ECOWAS peacekeeping mission, a possibility he described as an 'invasion'.¹⁰ The talks, it seemed, were getting nowhere. But the West Africans leaders pressed on. On 6 August, leaders of the SMC convened in Banjul, Gambia, and for two days discussed plans to resolve the humanitarian disaster in Liberia. The SMC agreed on a peace plan which called for an immediate ceasefire in Liberia, the setting up of a ceasefire monitoring group known as ECOMOG, the formation of a broad-based interim government for Liberia, the appointment of a special representative of ECOWAS who was to work in closely with the ECOMOG commander, and ultimately free and fair elections in the country. This plan was approved by the Authority of ECOWAS Heads of State and Government on 25 August 1990. That same month ECOMOG was set up to stem the tide of the carnage in Monrovia and re-establish normative order. The NPFL condemned the move and vowed to resist any 'invasion force'.

At that time, the remnants of Doe's defeated but heavily equipped Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL) were trapped in the enclave around the presidential palace, where Doe and his remaining officials were holed up. A deadly battle for control was going on between these forces and Taylor's forces and between Taylor's forces and Johnson's.

In quick order, nearly 4,000 troops from five West African states were dispatched to Monrovia from their forward base in Freetown under the command of Ghanaian Lieutenant-General Arnold Quainoo. Sierra Leone's President Joseph Momoh seemed to have spoken for many of

the West African leaders when he defended the action as a disinterested and necessary humanitarian intervention:

“We view such an initiative as both timely and appropriate and we hope that all the warring factions in Liberia will see reason and agree with us ... Sierra Leone being one of the next door neighbours of Liberia is in a position to appreciate the seriousness of the Liberian situation as we are directly feeling the heat. The massive influx of refugees into our country with its attendant economic and social consequences is just one of the many grave responsibilities we are now called upon to shoulder ... it is our duty as leaders to re-affirm to the world and all those involved in the Liberian conflict that the ECOWAS is a genuine effort aimed at bringing peace and happiness to war torn Liberia.”¹¹

Despite these fine sentiments, controversy was guaranteed right from the start. The traditional conception of peacekeeping, which is steeped in the UN's long-past experiences (the deployment in the Sinai Peninsula in the 1950s, for example), emphasises agreement between warring states before peacekeepers are deployed. Unlike previous peacekeeping missions, ECOMOG intervened in the Liberian crisis before any ceasefire agreement and, indeed, against the expressed wishes of the country's most important warring faction, Taylor's NPFL. For this reason Taylor promised to attack the West African troops if they ventured into Liberia, a threat he carried out on the very first day that the troops landed in Monrovia, at a base provided by another, less powerful, factional army of the INPFL. Regional rivalries and differences, promoted mainly by France, a longstanding hegemonic rival of Nigeria in West Africa, complicated the mission. Of the francophone West African states, only Guinea (Conakry) contributed troops to ECOMOG initially. Outside perception of the force was also affected negatively, because almost all the leaders who were contributing troops (with the exception of tiny Gambia's President Dauda Jawara) were non-democratic military men who had seized power in coups or in controversial circumstances.

This controversial beginning ignited a debate among African scholars about the role and mandate of the interventionist force. Was it a bold attempt at peacekeeping, offering strong lessons in regional conflict management in a world in which the international community was progressively disengaging from Africa?¹² Or was it, as Sesay characterised it, an ill-conceived and regionally divisive intervention exercise by autocratic leaders with disastrous consequences for regional cohesion

and sustainable democracy?¹³ This debate reflected, in part, the mixed reviews that ECOMOG operations were earning.

Many West African militaries lacked capabilities – weapons, equipment, logistics, etc – for planning and conducting sustained campaigns outside their own countries. Only Nigeria had an air force and navy of any significance. In Liberia the quality of ECOMOG’s joint multinational military leadership was patchy. While some commanders, such as Nigerian General Joshua Dongonyaro, were astute and decisive, maintaining sustained pressure on the rampaging NPFL fighters, others, such as the force’s first commander, General Arnold Quainoo (Ghana), were perceived to be less aggressive. It was under Quainoo’s leadership that one of the faction leaders, Prince Yormie Johnson, captured the beleaguered Doe, and executed him along with 70 of his bodyguards.¹⁴ Looting was so common among the troops – with stolen cars and household furniture and other goods being routinely shipped to Nigeria and elsewhere – that Liberians corrupted the acronym ECOMOG to stand for ‘Every Car Or Moving Object Gone’. The force was also hampered by what Herb Howe has called “an incoherent logistical tail”.¹⁵ ECOMOG’s air power, for example, was so limited that by 1995 the only serviceable helicopter was used by the force commander as his personal taxi. Other logistical constraints have been listed by Aboagye in his excellent study of early ECOMOG titled *ECOMOG: A sub-regional experience in conflict resolution, management and peacekeeping in Liberia* (1999) to include the lack of maps (recalling Graham Greene’s famous journey through Liberia in the 1930s, which is recounted in *Journey without maps*), poor roads, old vehicles, inadequate supplies of fuel and food, not to mention an uncertain and often hostile political climate.

President Doe was captured on 9 September 1990 by Prince Yormie Johnson’s faction when he ventured, unannounced, to ECOMOG headquarters in Monrovia’s Freeport, in an area that had been secured by Johnson’s INPFL. According to Stephen Ellis, “ECOMOG’s peacekeepers looked on as Johnson’s men pushed Doe downstairs, bound him and drove off to Prince Johnson’s Caldwell Base, a few minutes drive away ... There he was stripped of his five-star general’s uniform and shown to a crowd of bystanders.” He was then tortured in the most brutal fashion and murdered. The torture and murder were filmed by a Palestinian correspondent of a Middle Eastern news agency who was only too eager to capture the graphic details of the humiliation and end of a president who had been an outspoken supporter of Israel against the Arab world.¹⁶

The event severely undermined the credibility of ECOMOG, because serious questions were asked as to why the peacekeepers did not act to save Doe, who was captured by Johnson while on a visit to their headquarters. Quainoo was promptly recalled and replaced by Nigerian General Joshua Dongonyaro, who proved to be a more effective and highly competent leader. However, contrary to initial expectations, the removal of Doe did not bring the factions closer to agreement; indeed, it compounded the crisis as the most powerful factional leader, Taylor, feeling robbed of the symbolic price of victory – the capture of the sitting president – through the machinations of ECOMOG, became even more bellicose and determined to fight to the finish. ECOMOG, however, was able to secure Monrovia sufficiently to install the interim government of national unity (IGNU) for Liberia, which had been elected under the auspices of ECOWAS in August 1990, in Banjul, Gambia. However, the interim government, which was headed by Amos Sawyer, a famed political scientist, was rejected by Taylor and was so beleaguered that it had to rely entirely on ECOMOG for protection. As a result, it could barely function, even in Monrovia.¹⁷

FAILED PEACE AGREEMENTS AND TAYLOR'S PRESIDENCY

There then followed a spate of agreements and accords between Taylor, ECOWAS and the interim government, all of them to be broken by Taylor. In November 1990, the Bamako Ceasefire Agreement was signed (in Mali), which effectively partitioned Liberia between Taylor's NPFL – or what he was now pleased to call the National Patriotic Reconstruction Assembly Government (NPRAG) of Greater Liberia – and Sawyer's Monrovia-based government. The agreement proved not to be worth the paper it was signed on, for shortly afterwards Taylor continued his assault on Monrovia.

On 1 November 1990 Taylor broadcast a threat on the BBC African Service to attack and destroy Freetown's international airport, arguing that by allowing its territory to be used as an operational base for ECOMOG, Sierra Leone had made itself a legitimate target. President Momoh responded by naively describing Taylor as "ungrateful". "Of all people," Momoh said, "Charles Taylor should appreciate the problems he has created for us here with his war in Liberia. We are overstressing our resources to care for his people, our social amenities have been over-tasked and even our economy dislodged. A man like that should not think of making such a statement." An 'army spokesman' then added his, more bellicose, voice

to his commander-in-chief's desperately uninspiring one: "Sierra Leone has a trained army, with World War II experience and success. We need not remind Charles Taylor of our performance at the Somalia Drive in Monrovia to make our point."¹⁸ In March 1991 attacks by armed groups from Liberia on parts of eastern and southern Sierra Leone led to serious fighting and bloodshed. The fighting escalated soon afterwards into a civil war in which a group calling itself the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), and led by an ageing former Sierra Leonean soldier who had hitherto been fighting in Taylor's NPFL, Foday Saybanah Sankoh, emerged from the initial fighters from Liberia who attacked the Sierra Leonean border areas. The group claimed it planned to overthrow Sierra Leone's President Momoh and his 'corrupt and despotic' one-party state.

Adding to the complication, in September 1991 another Liberian factional army emerged. The United Liberation Movement for Democracy in Liberia (ULIMO) was formed in Sierra Leone from the remnants of Doe's disintegrated army. Vowing to rid the country of Taylor and his rebels, the group that month launched attacks from eastern Sierra Leone against Taylor's 'Greater Liberia'. In October 1991 ECOWAS's mediation led to yet another accord, signed in Yamoussoukro, Côte d'Ivoire. It called for the encampment and disarmament of all factions in the country, to be followed by national elections.

But Taylor's forces and ULIMO continued fighting, and in October 1992 Taylor launched the highly destructive 'Operation Octopus' on Monrovia. The attacks were repulsed by ECOMOG after heavy fighting and destruction of lives and property, and the UN Security Council imposed an arms embargo on Taylor and the other factions. The Security Council also appointed a special envoy to Liberia. He was Trevor Gordon-Somers, a Jamaican diplomat. The Liberian conflict now began to get high-level UN attention, but Gordon-Somers' relationship with ECOMOG and the interim government was far from cordial.¹⁹

Through the mediation efforts of UN and ECOWAS, another accord was signed, this time in Cotonou, Benin, in July 1993. It called for the replacement of Sawyer's interim government with a Liberian national transitional government (LNTG), which would have three branches – legislative, executive and judiciary – and a five-member council of state, which would include all the factions in the conflict. The Cotonou Accord called for the expansion of ECOMOG to include contingents from other West African states – especially francophone states, some of which were openly supportive of Taylor – as well as from states outside West Africa. The accord scheduled presidential elections, in which all the factional leaders

and others would participate, to be held in February 1994. It finally called for an enhanced monitoring role for the UN, making provision for the deployment of 368 military observers – known as UNOMIL – who, along with ECOMOG, would oversee the implementation of the accord. The Cotonou Agreement stated that ECOMOG and UNOMIL “shall supervise and monitor the implementation of [the agreement]” and that the parties to the Liberian conflict “hereby expressly recognise the neutrality and authority of the ECOMOG and the UN Observer Mission in respect of the foregoing. Accordingly, the ECOMOG and UN Observers shall enjoy complete freedom of movement throughout Liberia.” ECOMOG was to monitor all “points of entry, including sea ports, airfields and roads” in Liberia, and the UN mission was to “monitor, verify and report on the implementation of the foregoing activities”, in effect to supervise ECOMOG – a point that greatly irked ECOMOG officers and which, in its overall effect, seemed to have been inserted merely to create conflict between the two groups.

Characteristically, Liberia's opportunistic factions tended to splinter whenever there was hope of a resolution of the crisis. In March 1994 ULIMO split into Krahn and Mandingo factions, namely ULIMO-J (headed by Roosevelt Johnson) and ULIMO-K (headed by Alhaji Kromah). It was in that same month that the new council of state was inaugurated, with a little-known lawyer, David Kpomakpor, as chairman, while Sawyer quietly exited the political scene. Violence continued, however, with the various factions fighting for dominance. In September 1994, the Akosombo Agreement was signed by leaders of the three main factions – NPFL, AFL, and ULIMO-K. It called for an immediate cessation of hostilities and a reconstituted council of state which would reflect a better balance of factional forces in the country. Disputes inevitably broke out over this latter point, and the agreement collapsed over matters of power sharing, with Taylor insisting that he should dominate any such arrangement. Three months later, in December, the Akosombo II Agreement was signed. The new agreement appeared to satisfy the various factions, and a ceasefire came into effect, along with a commitment to conduct elections in late 1995.

In early 1995, ECOWAS, now chaired by Nigeria's General Sani Abacha again brought all the factions together in Abuja. Here an agreement confirming the ceasefire was hammered out, and in September the council of state, which included leaders from the three major factions, was established, with Wilton Sankawulo, an ageing academic, as chairman. The Abuja Accord scheduled elections for August 1996,

and it provided for the comprehensive deployment of ECOMOG troops throughout Liberia to oversee a planned disarmament and reintegration process. In April 1996, barely four months before the scheduled elections, however, heavy fighting broke out in Monrovia between Taylor's troops and fighters loyal to Roosevelt Johnson. The fighting began after Taylor, in a characteristically rash move, announced that he was sending troops to arrest Johnson and have him detained. The intense fighting, which went on for over two months, left hundreds of people dead. Large parts of Monrovia were destroyed. As a result, another peace agreement, known as Abuja II, had to be signed. In accordance with its provisions, the council of state was reconstituted under the chairpersonship of Ruth Perry, Liberia's first woman head of state, in September 1996. It also provided for elections to be held in May 1997.

ECOMOG ordered the warring factions to dismantle their military wings, while it scheduled disarmament to be completed in January 1997. The process, however, was extremely flawed, and Taylor's faction remained virtually intact, while less powerful factions were encamped and disarmed. At the end of the disarmament process, a total of 28,819 fighters of the estimated 33,000 had been disarmed, and a paltry 13,167 small arms, 1,628,584 rounds of ammunition, six field guns and 4,145 bombs/explosive ordinance had been taken from all factions.

On 19 July 1997 Liberians went to the polls to elect a new government. Only 750,000, of an estimated population of over two million, were registered to vote. Taylor, the richest and still the most powerful man in the country, used his ill-acquired wealth to bribe voters – and his rebel-thugs (a large number of whom were not disarmed, such was the shabby way in which the process was conducted) to intimidate those he could not bribe. A large part of the country, probably 80% of it, was still controlled by Taylor's militias, and they staunchly prevented opposing candidates from campaigning in these areas. The elections were largely a farcical affair and the results were never really in doubt. Many voters, fearful that Taylor would return to war if he lost, decided to vote for him: one of the election slogans in favour of Taylor was: "He killed my ma, he killed my pa, but I'll vote for him." Taylor organised bus trips to refugee camps in Guinea, from where traumatised Liberian refugees and some Sierra Leoneans, bribed with food and the promise that the war would finally end if Taylor was elected, were bussed to Liberia to vote for him.²⁰

Taylor's chief challenger, at least in momentum, was Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, a prominent politician and long-time Liberian figure, who had

supported Taylor in the early stages of the war. Johnson-Sirleaf found herself simply out of her element. Her supporters were intimidated and she herself faced death threats. Taylor emerged the overwhelming winner.

Now both *de facto* and *de jure* leader of Liberia, Taylor did little to improve the conditions of the war-torn nation. Illiteracy and unemployment remained above 75% throughout his presidency. Moreover, even after being in office as president for five years, he continued to function in a foraging mode, operating the quintessential warlord economy and refusing to rebuild formal state institutions that were destroyed during the war he started, or destroying those still existing. In the words of a Human Rights Watch report in 2002,

“After five years in office, President Charles Taylor’s government continues to function without accountability, exacerbating the divisions and resentments fuelled by the war. Taylor has steadily consolidated and centralised power by rewarding loyalists and intimidating critics. State power is regularly misused by high-ranking officials to further the political objectives of the executive branch, to avoid accountability, and for personal enrichment. State institutions that could provide an independent check on the Taylor administration ... remain weak and cowed.”²¹

SECOND PHASE OF WAR: A CONTINUING QUEST FOR PEACE

In other words, Liberia’s transition from war to peace under Taylor’s leadership was a complete failure. In 2001 the country imploded into destructive factional fighting, mainly as a result of Taylor’s lack of commitment to reconciliation and state building.

Liberians distinguish two phases in the civil war. The first involved the fighting that started in 1989 and ended, after more than a dozen broken peace agreements, with the elections that brought Taylor to power in 1997. The second phase began in 2001, after the emergence of Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD), which was created from remnants of die-hard anti-Taylor factions. The core of LURD comprised ex-ULIMO fighters, many of whom were disarmed just before the elections. Finding Taylor’s misrule and predatory violence insufferable, however, ULIMO regrouped in the forest regions of Guinea (Conakry), bordering Liberia. Other Liberian dissidents joined them there, leading to the formation of LURD.²² Indeed, it could be said that the war never really ended with the elections of 1997, because pockets of fighting began soon afterwards, in 1998.

LURD received active support from Guinea (Conakry), which had repelled Taylor-supported armed incursions into the country's diamond-rich south-eastern forest regions in 2000. Then, in September 2002, widespread violence broke out in Côte d'Ivoire after a failed coup attempt, and three rebel factions emerged soon afterwards. Two of them, operating in western parts of the country bordering Liberia, comprised mainly ex-RUF and Liberian soldiers. In reaction, the Ivorian authorities armed and supported a faction of LURD called the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL). By July 2003 these rebel forces – LURD and MODEL – were besieging Monrovia.

On 18 August 2003, in Accra, the Liberian government signed a comprehensive peace agreement (CPA) with the rebels, political parties and civil society actors. The agreement, “gravely concerned about the ... civil war... [which has led] to loss of innumerable lives, wanton destruction of our infrastructure and properties, and massive displacement of our people”, announced an immediate cessation of hostilities and provided for the setting up of an interim coalition government – comprising LURD, MODEL, remnants of Taylor's government and civil society. Taylor relinquished power on 11 August and went into exile in Nigeria. A two-year national transitional government of Liberia (NTGL) was established under the presidency of businessman Gyude Bryant. The NTGL was to be responsible for administration of the country through the formal elections in October 2005.

Shortly after the agreement was signed, hundreds of Nigerian troops began to arrive in the country, first from the UN peace operation in Sierra Leone, as the vanguard of a larger ECOWAS force, to be followed by a massive UN intervention. War-weary Liberians gave an enthusiastic welcome to the Nigerians, even though some observers were cynical about the new, highly optimistic development. Britain's *Guardian* newspaper, for example, reported on the arrival of Nigerian troops in these searing words: “It is a measure of Liberia's desperation that foreign soldiers with a reputation for brutality at home should be so welcome, especially since Nigerians who were deployed in Monrovia in 1990 used that peacekeeping mission to loot, rape and take sides in the conflict.”²³ Such reporting was all the more unhelpful, given that American troops, whom many Liberians had hoped would lead the new peacekeeping efforts, appeared on the scene only briefly, and then disappeared. The 200 helicopter-borne marines were flown into Liberia on 14 August as part of what was described as a quick-reaction force, which would act as back-up to the West African troops and the UN force to be deployed

later. Shortly afterwards, however, complaining of a 'malaria outbreak' among the marines, the US authorities withdrew all of them,²⁴ leaving the security of a war-wrecked country again – if temporarily – in the hands of the ECOWAS force, which now stood at 3,566. The lead Nigerian contingents were joined later by troops from other ECOWAS member states, and the force was constituted as the ECOWAS Mission in Liberia, ECOMIL.

In September 2003 the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1509, establishing the UN Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) and calling for the deployment of 15,000 UN peacekeeping troops. The resolution commended "the rapid and professional deployment of the ECOWAS Mission in Liberia (ECOMIL forces)" and mandated UNMIL to "carry out voluntary disarmament and to collect and destroy weapons and ammunition as part of an organised DDR programme". UNMIL was also to "provide security at key government installations, in particular ports, airports, and other vital infrastructure", and "facilitate the provision of humanitarian assistance". Most importantly, UNMIL was mandated to "protect civilians under imminent threat of physical violence, within their capabilities". Finally, it was to "assist the transitional government, in conjunction with ECOWAS and other international partners, in preparing for national elections scheduled for no later than the end of 2005". UNMIL troops took over the mission from ECOMIL on 1 October 2003.

THE NATIONAL TRANSITIONAL GOVERNMENT OF LIBERIA

When it was finally put in place in Monrovia, at least on paper, the NTGL seemed to be an unwieldy coalition of former enemies. The Defence Minister, Daniel Chea, had held the same position under Taylor; the Economic Development Minister, J Laveli Supuwood, a University of Detroit-trained lawyer, was a former Taylor protégé who had loudly broken up with Taylor, becoming his enemy and joining LURD. MODEL members, technically enemies of both, held important ministerial positions as well, for example the foreign ministry. In fact, in 2004, when this author visited Liberia, there was little rancour among these former 'enemies'. The only real schism in the country appeared to be between the leaders of these factions, who held comfortable positions in Monrovia, and their impoverished and derelict combatants, desperate to disarm in order to earn the paltry sums handed out to them by UNMIL in exchange for weapons. The civil war, in other words, as Sawyer has

noted, was largely a mercenary and opportunistic enterprise, with no ideological and little ethnic basis.

Stated differently, Liberia's politics had not changed much since the English writer Graham Greene visited in the early 1930s and wrote a travel book describing a Byzantine configuration that confuses more than it enlightens. "Liberian politics were like a crap game played with loaded dice," Greene wrote. "There was a kind of unwritten law that the President could take two terms of office and then he had to let another man in to pick the spoils. It was a question of letting ... the newspapers was his; most important of all, he printed and distributed the ballot papers. When King returned in 1928 he had a majority over his opponent ... of 600,000, although the whole electoral role amounted to less than 15,000." When Greene encountered the President, "Africa, lovely, vivid and composed, slipped away, and one was left with ... an affable manner and rhetoric, lots of rhetoric ... 'Once elected, [the President said], and in charge of the machine ... why then, I'm boss of the whole show.'"²⁵

ANOTHER CHEQUERED DISARMAMENT PROCESS?

The disarmament, so clearly set out in the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) and the UN Security Council Resolution of September 2003, should have been easy since many of the Liberian militias had gone through such a process before, some of them twice – ahead of the 1997 elections, and during the Sierra Leone disarmament process, in which some of the current Liberian fighters were active. But over a year after UNMIL deployed, officials still did not have an accurate estimate of combatants to be disarmed. Before the start of disarmament in December 2003, UNMIL had estimated that 38,000 combatants were to be disarmed. The first attempted demobilisation that month, however, quickly turned into chaos after militias loyal to the Government of Liberia (GoL), desperate for the cash incentive to hand in their weapons – an initial \$150 per combatant to be followed by a second tranche of \$150 several months later – before Christmas, stormed Monrovia. At least eight people were killed in the ensuing violence. In the event, the UN paid the initial allowance to 12,000 militia fighters, but received only 8,000 weapons.²⁶

Disarmament restarted in April 2004, with the setting up of four cantonment sites where the various militias would hand in weapons. At that point the UN revised its estimates and calculated that 45,000 combatants would be disarmed. By mid-July, however, the UN had

taken weapons from 54,000, and many more were arriving daily. A UN official in Monrovia in July 2003 calmly explained how, after a two-hour long meeting with “forty-eight generals”, he was still unable to tell how many armed combatants remained to be disarmed. Forty-eight generals? “Yes, they are rebel generals, bush generals, and they are jealous of their ranks!” He was not fastidious, this bright, diligent bureaucrat; he was deadpan. That, in a way, sums up the pathos of the Liberian situation: the corrosive audacity of its militias, the sense of entitlement of a people, long traumatised by violence and depravation, now virtually steeped in neurosis.

At the start of the disarmament in April 2004, the author travelled with one of the UN teams to Gbarnga, once the headquarters of Taylor’s NPFL. It was conspicuous that a once fairly prosperous town, with abandoned gas stations and bullet-riddled villas to show for it, Gbarnga is now, after years of fighting, a sullen outpost, its residents sucked into a brooding, almost hermetical mode. A very long line of combatants had already formed by 10:00 am, waiting at the cantonment site to hand in old Kalashnikov (AK47) rifles in return for money. At first glance there was nothing in their stupefied red-eyed vacancies to indicate the vicious murderers they have been. Things were proceeding smoothly until suddenly a scrawny combatant with a bandana around his head jumped ahead of the queue, raised his old rifle and started shouting abuse at the UN officers, and threatening to “go to Sierra Leone, to Guinea, to Ivory Coast, and start fighting all over again”. The ambient volatility was palpable: at the end of 2004 peace still seemed to be elusive in Liberia.

CONCLUSION

The Security Council Resolution (1509) that set up UNMIL in 2003 called on the Secretary General to “provide regular updates, including a formal report every 90 days to the council, on the progress in the implementation of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, including the implementation of UNMIL’s mandate”. It called on the Security Council to remain “actively seized of” the Liberian peace process. This will undoubtedly be necessary well beyond October 2005, when elections are due.

Progress in the peace process, when measured in terms of the crucial disarmament process, has been patchy. At the end of October 2004, UNMIL had disarmed 95,000, and thousands were still arriving with light weapons, and some so-called ex-combatants with no weapons

whatsoever.²⁷ Tellingly, only 26,000 weapons have been collected from the 'disarmed' so far.²⁸ Whether the peace process is successful or not to a large extent will depend on how successful the disarmament process turns out to be. At the end of 2004 UNIL claimed to have disarmed over 100,000, and announced that disarmament was complete. But it was hard for even the most credulous to take this figure at face value.

Liberia at the end of 2004 was undoubtedly at a crossroads. After more than a decade of brutal, pointless warfare, the country was in a state of decrepitude. Poverty and despair permeated the society, and the educational system was in shambles. Towards the end of 2004, there was still no electricity or running water anywhere in the country. Many buildings in Monrovia, both private and public, had been vandalised or torched. Beyond Monrovia, conditions were infinitely worse. Simply rebuilding what was destroyed during the war will require an enormous investment of money and technical skills, two commodities that are acutely lacking in Liberia.

Liberia, in other words, will remain dependent on foreign assistance, even in such intimate areas as governance and security, for a very long time to come.

SOME LESSONS LEARNED

The Liberian conflict was the first major post-Cold War conflict in West Africa, and its ramifications for the region have been profound. Its most immediate impact was to amplify the still-inchoate notion of humanitarian intervention, that is, interventions meant primarily to protect civilians and not merely to save beleaguered governments.

When an assortment of West African states decided to intervene in Liberia in 1990 under ECOMOG, they pointed to the unfolding humanitarian catastrophe in the country, as well as invoking their "collective security" interests there. These justifications ultimately received an *ex post facto* ratification by the UN Security Council, but questions of its legality were important among the problems associated with ECOMOG.²⁹

Military interventions to protect civilians in war-racked or particularly oppressive and violence-prone situations – what is now known as humanitarian intervention – is only now gaining international legal salience, but it is still a controversial concept. When, exactly, would such an intervention be justified? When does it become imperative? When is it right?

Military intervention of any type can be controversial, and questions regarding sovereignty will be raised by one side or the other. In view of this in 2001 the Canadian government brought together a team of experts to produce a report on the “the responsibility to protect” ordinary people caught in conflict situations. Led by Gareth Evans and Mohamed Sahnoun, the commission set out to “reconcile two objectives: strengthen, not weaken, the sovereignty of states, and to improve the capacity of the international community to react decisively when states are either unable or unwilling to protect their own people”. The commission set a very high threshold for humanitarian intervention, which it noted should only be considered in the face of “large-scale loss of life, actual or apprehended, with genocidal intent or not, which is the product either of deliberate state action, or state neglect or inability to act, or a failed state situation”.³⁰

Clearly this threshold had been reached by late 1990 when ECOMOG intervened in Liberia. The conflict, however, continued for over a decade after this, and its character suggested that ECOMOG’s intervention may have helped prolong it. This is not a mere rhetorical aside. If an intervention that is intended to protect civilians caught in a conflict situation can be implicated in prolonging that conflict situation, in effect aggravating the suffering of the same people, this raises very serious questions about that intervention. Should it have been carried out? Should such an intervention force ever be entrusted with such a task again?

General Maxwell Khobe, a highly respected Nigerian officer who served with ECOMOG, noted in 2000 that ECOMOG “is a positive security development that requires some fine-tuning”. He wrote: “Given the growing number of conflicts on the African continent, ECOMOG is a reminder of the fact that the right tool for conflict resolution can be found from within the continent, if African countries are prepared to pool their resources.” Khobe listed some of the problems associated with the following:

- excessive control by home governments;
- language differences;
- lack of standardisation of equipment, arms and ammunition;
- different training standards, doctrine and staff procedures;
- poor sea and air-lift capabilities;
- absence of vital air-to-ground support assets, particularly ground attack helicopters;

- lack of logistic support for some contingents;
- inadequate resources to deal with humanitarian problems;
- poor co-ordination and liaison with international relief agencies; and
- the misrepresentation of force activities by mercenary organisations and the international mass media.³¹

These were certainly important constraints, and no doubt were crucial in ensuring the rather patchy record of a force that was so necessary at the time it was set, and that had such noble inspirations. The challenge is to overcome these problems, and move beyond them. West Africa is an excessively violence-prone region, and, at least in the short run, there will remain a need for a viable intervention force of the type that ECOMOG, with all its flaws, represented: a force made up of troops and civilian personnel from member states of ECOWAS. The point about civilian personnel is not thrown in casually. It is important. One of the problems with the ECOMOG operations was that they were dominated, and were perceived to be dominated, by soldiers. Its civilian component, where it existed, was highly muted. This unfortunate defect may well have contributed to some of the human rights violations that were committed by ECOMOG troops, and may have helped compound the already charged political atmosphere in which the force operated.

Interventions to protect civilians must primarily be seen as being controlled largely by civilians. This is one of the hard lessons of the ECOMOG operations in Liberia, and it stands alongside the logistical and other resource difficulties.

NOTES

- 1 Lansana Gberie was a senior research fellow at the Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre, Accra, Ghana.
- 2 *Liberia: Civil society's role in the political transition*, Prepared by the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, NDI, January 2004, p 13.
- 3 Amos Sawyer, *The emergence of autocracy in Liberia: Tragedy and challenge*, San Francisco, IGS, 1992, pp 293–294.
- 4 According to Aboagye, Israel's Mossad helped train Doe's Special Anti-Terrorist Unit (SATU) as the Presidential Guard "besides the construction of a modern Defence Ministry Complex". See Festus Aboagye, *ECOMOG: A sub-regional experience in conflict resolution, management and peacekeeping in Liberia*, SEDCO, Accra, 1999, p 25.
- 5 Bill Berkeley, *Liberia: A promise betrayed*, Lawyers Committee on Human Rights, New York, 1986.

- 6 Bill Berkeley, *The graves are not yet full: Race, tribe and power in the heart of Africa*, Basic Books, New York, 2001, p 48.
- 7 Amos Sawyer, Violent conflicts and governance challenges in West Africa: The case of the Mano River Basin area, Paper presented at a workshop in political theory and policy analysis, Indiana University, 2003; in author's possession.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Le. 80 million spent on war, *New Citizen* (Freetown), 11 August 1990.
- 10 See Aboagye, op cit, p 59.
- 11 *New Citizen*, 8 November 1990.
- 12 Margaret Vogt (ed), *The Liberian crisis and ECOMOG: A bold attempt at regional peacekeeping*, Gabumo Publishing, Lagos, 1992.
- 13 Max Ahmadu Sesay, Civil war and collective intervention in Liberia: A strange case of peacekeeping in West Africa, *Review of African Political Economy* 67, March 1996.
- 14 Barely three months after the force landed, the commander of the Sierra Leonean contingent, Lieutenant Colonel Modu Hanciles, was withdrawn for cowardice and dereliction of duty.
- 15 Herb Howe, Self-help African style: Nigerian intervention in Sierra Leone highlights new trends in African security, *Global Watch*, June 1998.
- 16 Stephen Ellis, *The mask of anarchy: The destruction of Liberia and the religious dimension of an African civil war*, Hurst, London, 1999, p 9.
- 17 One of the best accounts of the early years of ECOMOG's intervention, and indeed of the Liberian crisis itself, is Festus Aboagye's *ECOMOG: A subregional experience in conflict prevention, management and peacekeeping in Liberia*, SEDCO, Accra, 1999.
- 18 See Lansana Gberie, *A dirty war in West Africa: The RUF and the destruction of Sierra Leone*, Hurst, London, forthcoming.
- 19 There were times when the relationship between Gordon-Somers and the West African force was openly hostile. The two groups were mutually suspicious of each other, with ECOMOG officers believing that the UN envoy was partial towards Taylor. See James Jonah, The United Nations, in Adekeye Adebajo and Ismail Rashid (eds), *West Africa's security challenges: Building peace in a troubled region*, Lynne Rienner, London, 2004, pp 319–348.
- 20 Author's interviews with Liberian refugees in Guinea (Conakry) and with Commany Wesseh, a prominent Liberian civil society activist, Abidjan, 2001.
- 21 Human Rights Watch, *Back to the brink: War crimes by the Liberian government and rebels*, New York, 2002.
- 22 Author's interview with J Laveli Supuwood, a prominent LURD member, Abidjan, April 2001.
- 23 Rory Carroll, Here at last; cheering crowds greet peacekeepers in Liberia, *Guardian*, 7 August 2003.
- 24 See Brendal O'Neill, How to scare a US Marine, *Spectator*, 23 November 2003.
- 25 Graham Greene, *Journey without maps: A travel book*, William Heinemann, London, 1936, p 122.

- 26 See Lansana Gberie, *Diamonds with maps: Liberia, the UN, sanctions and the Kimberley Process*, Partnership Africa Canada, Ottawa, 2004.
- 27 Author's interview with UNMIL personnel, November 2004.
- 28 Mike Crawley, Fewer guns, but tensions persist in Liberia, *Christian Science Monitor*, 28 October 2004.
- 29 A good study of legal issues involved in the intervention is Ikechi Mgbeoji's *Collective insecurity: The Liberian crisis, unilateralism, & global order*, UBC Press, Vancouver, 2003.
- 30 See *The responsibility to protect*, Report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, Ottawa, December 2001.
- 31 Mitikishe Maxwell Khobe, The evolution and conduct of ECOMOG operations in West Africa, <http://www.iss.org.za/Pubs/Monographs/No44/ECOMOG.html> (14 November 2004).