

Liberia

Population 3.2 million

Life expectancy: 51 years

National capital: Monrovia

Independence: 26 July 1847



Abstract

The Liberian civil war, from 1989 to 1997, addressed ethnic, political and economic grievances. Ethnicity became a source of mobilization and a basis for factional alliances, together with the personality of the leaders. The complexity of the war stemmed from the fragmentation of factions in search of political power, leading to the control of the country's natural resources, especially timber and diamonds. The collapse of state structures led to the re-organization of political space with former warlords capturing power through democratic elections. The conflict escalated due to the intervention of foreign powers and spilled over into Sierra Leone. The ECOMOG played a leading role in disarmament and the monitoring of the final peace agreements, even though it also became involved in factional rivalries. The international community had to face a dual transition, to peace and to democracy, and finally, the election process in 1997 concentrated mainly on peaceful transition, transforming factions into political parties, whereas the democratic consolidation still remains incomplete. The prevailing unrest following the presidential elections reflects the failure to complete the transition process to peace: the destruction of arms in July 1999 opened a debate on the failed reintegration of ex-combatants into society and on the lack of genuine government commitment to democracy and good governance, leading to sanctions by international community. Especially the Liberian involvement in the Sierra Leonean war has constituted a major impediment for successful transition. Recent rebel attacks and hostage-taking in north-western Liberia reflect the importance of a regional settlement of border line conflicts and the complexity of political, economic and military ties in the sub-region. The Liberian situation should be closely monitored by the international community, that has a lot to learn from Liberian experience in order to improve the international ability to respond to the challenges of the post-conflict transition.

Liberia: From Bloody War to a Warlord State

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The civil war in Liberia, 1989-1997, was a long-term protracted conflict involving several internal and external actors. The Liberian conflict set up the model for the deployment of the ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) Military Observer Group (ECOMOG), leading the way to inter-African peacekeeping efforts. Despite the peace process leading to presidential elections in 1997, the Liberian situation challenges the conventional ideas of peace building through electoral process. Currently, genuine power sharing arrangements, needed for democratic consolidation, still remain incomplete. The underlying unrest has sporadically erupted into open violence, especially since August 1999 in northwestern Liberia, endangering the stability of the whole sub-region.

The foundation of Liberia dates back to the efforts of the American Colonization Society to resettle freed slaves in Africa in the 1820s. These “Americo-Liberians” never comprised more than five per cent of Liberia’s population, but gained national political control since independence in 1847 until the coup of 1980. Liberia is a particular case in Africa, because of its lack of a European colonial past¹ and its special historical relationship with the United States. In 1980, indigenous officers, led by Samuel Doe from the Krahn ethnic group, successfully toppled Americo-Liberian rule. Despite great expectations of indigenous populations, Doe’s rule began with the execution of leading officials and the “ethnicization” of the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL), making it essentially a Krahn presidential guard. In 1985 the AFL killed as many as 3000 Mano and Gio civilians following a coup attempt. (Howe 1997) Widespread corruption and the exile of Americo-Liberian elites brought economic chaos and deeper ethnic hostility, paving the way for civil war. (See Chronology.)

Agents

¹ It can be argued that the Americo-Liberian settlement constituted a foreign elite ruling over indigenous populations and undermined indigenous economic and social development until the policy of unification by President Tubman (1944-71) (Sawyer 1992).

Parties in the Liberian civil war are illustrated in Table 1:

Acronym	Name	Established	Represents	Affiliation	Support	Conflict with
AFL	Armed Forces of Liberia	Active in politics since the coup of 1980	Ethnicised during Doe's regime: the Krahn and Mandingo, estimated 9000 troops, currently "purged" in favor of Taylor	Collaborated with ULIMO, LPC	ECOMOG Nigeria, Sierra Leone	NPFL, INPFL
INPFL	Independent National Patriotic Front (Prince Y. Johnson)	Dissident faction of NPFL, 1990	Estimated 500 troops,	Collaborated with ECOMOG		NPFL, AFL (executed Doe in September 1990)
LPC	Liberia Peace Council (George Boley)	1993	Predominantly Krahn, estimated 4500 troops,	Proxy force of AFL, ULIMO	AFL	NPFL (murder, torture and looting in efforts to depopulate rural areas)
LDF	Lofa Defence Force (Francois Massaquoi)	1994	Lofa county, estimated 750 combatants,	Alleged links with NPFL	Across Guinea border	ULIMO-K
NPFL	National Patriotic Force of Liberia (Charles Taylor)	1989	Gio and Mano in Nimba county, some Americo-Liberian leaders, "capital" in Gbarnga, estimated max. 25000 combatants,		Libya, Côte d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso, (France)	AFL, ECOMOG, ULIMO
NPFL-CRC	National Patriotic Front of Liberia-Central Revolutionary Council (Sam Dokie, Tom Woewiyu)	1994	Breakaway group of NPFL, around Gbarnga and the North of Liberia			AFL, ECOMOG, ULIMO
ULIMO-K & J	United Liberation Movement of Liberia (ULIMO K: Alhaji Kromah) (ULIMO J: Roosevelt Johnson)	1991, broke into two wings in 1994	ULIMO K: moslem/mandingo-based, estimated 12 000 combatants; ULIMO J: Krahn, estimated 8000 combatants	ULIMO-K: some collaboration with NPFL, ULIMO-J: AFL,	ULIMO-K: Guinea ULIMO-J: Nigeria	NPFL
ECOMOG ²	ECOWAS Cease-fire Monitoring Group	Entered Liberia in 1990	Regional military force between 4-15,000	Collaborated with AFL,	Nigeria (finance, personnel,	Peace-keeping/peace-enforcement:

² It can be argued that ECOMOG lost its status of a regional peacekeeping force on several occasions between 1990-96 and allied with the AFL against the NPFL.

			combatants	INPFL	materials), Senegal, Uganda, Benin, Ghana, Tanzania, OAU, UN (US)	alleged partiality, looting and commercial adventurism, against NPFL,
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The main structure of antagonism in Liberia has traditionally been described as one between Americo-Liberians and the indigenous population (Osaghae 1996). However, since the coup of 1980, rivalries between indigenous groups in search of state power became the major source of conflict and competition (Weissman 1996). During the Americo-Liberian rule, political domination, economic exploitation and the lack of widespread education undermined the indigenous groups' accession to state resources that were gradually concentrated in the hands of a strong executive (Sawyer 1992). Doe's regime marked the domination of his ethnic group, the Krahn, in alliance with the Mandingo, and the persecution of rival ethnic groups, who were willing to revenge the repression by engaging in Charles Taylor's military effort to overthrow the government. Taylor could also count on the financial support of American-Liberian elites (Aning 1997).

After the war, the political space has been mainly structured by antagonism between President Taylor and his main rivals, Alhaji Kromah, from Mandingo-based Ulimo-K and Roosevelt Johnson, from Krahn-based Ulimo-J, both in exile, who have been accused of preparing for the destabilization of the regime. Another alliance between President Taylor and the Sierra Leonean rebel leaders (RUF) has resulted in Liberia's active involvement in the Sierra Leonean civil war and in the following peace process. It appears that the recent armed incursion of dissidents in the north-western (Lofa county³) Liberia stemmed from the disenchantment of Liberian fighters, recruited to Sierra Leone, being marginalized by the Lomé peace process (AFP, IRIN, PANA August 1999). President

³ The Lofa county has experienced internal ethnic strife and external attacks from the Guinea border, leading to the displacement of population, including thousands of Sierra Leonean refugees (IRIN, August 1999).

Taylor accused Guinea⁴ of providing a refuge to the rebels, but Guinea denied these allegations (STAR, 14 August, 1999).

Despite the appearance of an ethnic uprising, the civil war also reflected the profound crisis of the system of patronage allied to overseas business interests, failing to deliver economic benefits to local communities. The control of diamonds and other natural resources became the major source of competition. The system contributed to the establishment of local factional networks, based on coercion and violence as a way of life (Ellis 1998). Factions and alliances during the war were mainly organized according to ethnic boundaries, but certain ethnically based factions further split along the loyalties to the personality and public profile of leaders and the identity of their external alliances (Ellis 1998). Personalized alliances continue to play a crucial role in current developments in the sub-region.

External support for different parties further aggravated and extended the conflict. The US and Nigeria supported the Doe government, whereas the region's French-speaking countries, mainly Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire, and Libya disliked Doe's government (Howe, 1997) and supported Taylor's military assault. Moreover, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Standing Mediation Committee established a Military Observer Group (ECOMOG), to help to resolve the armed conflict. The intervention of sub-regional troops followed the re-examination of the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of states, which constituted one of the main principles underlying the Organization of African Unity (OAU). West African leaders were aware of the threat to regional security posed by the Liberian internal conflict. (Ero 1995; Howe 1997) Nigeria contributed at least 70 per cent of the ECOMOG troops, which became a source of contention among the ECOWAS member states, in particular the francophone states⁵ (Ero 1995). United Nations (UN) Security Council established the United Nations Observer Mission in Liberia (UNOMIL) in September 1993. The

⁴ Alhaji Kromah's supporters are mainly Mandingo, which is an important ethnic group also in Guinea. President Taylor has protested against the alleged training of Mandingo-rebels in Guinea.

⁵ In an attempt to reduce tension, Nigerian conceded the leadership of the force to Ghana to avoid any impression of domination of the ECOMOG operation (Ero 1995).

UNOMIL mandate concentrated on the review of the disarmament and demobilization of factions following the peace agreements.

The proposed solution to factional structure of antagonism was an attempted integration of the belligerents into a newly designed political framework. Consecutive peace agreements attempted to ensure factional representation in interim governments, but most peace agreements and cease-fires broke down, when new factions appeared and fighting resumed. International non-governmental organizations, such as International Alert and the Carter Center, played a crucial role in low-profile mediation efforts, thus promoting the dialogue between the conflicting parties. Finally, the peace process, together with the overwhelming electoral victory of former warlord Charles Taylor, aimed at some form of political pluralism as most factions were transformed into political parties in view of the presidential elections (Lyons 1998). Taylor made some conciliatory gestures towards his former rivals, but the regime's failure to meet the necessary political, economic and human rights requirements, set by the international donor community, has increased uncertainty on the future of democratic consolidation.

Motivation

Liberia's infrastructure was extremely poor especially outside Monrovia, largely because no colonial power had ever seriously invested in Liberia⁶ (Sawyer 1992). Despite the initial ethnic mobilization, the root causes of the conflict lay in the intricate process of economic, social and political disintegration and in the continuing insecurity dilemma (Aning 1997). The rationale for conflict escalation stemmed from the elites' struggles for political and economic power and for access to the resources of bilateral aid (Weissman 1996). The struggle for state power was motivated by the subsequent control of mineral resources, especially diamonds being a particularly important source of revenue. The use of coercion as a means to acquire wealth became a way of life and a source of identity

⁶ Despite the close relationship, the US government was reluctant to invest in Liberia, even though certain US-based companies, such as Firestone, significantly contributed to Liberian economic life. However, during the Cold War era, the US aid to Liberia was increased due to close military ties between the two countries (Kramer 1995).

(Weissman 1996) to different factions, mainly constituted of marginalized youth⁷. Large scale looting and pillage led to the destruction of the country's infrastructure. Finally, the peace process of 1996-97 was facilitated by the fact that the quantity of lootable goods declined, and the warlords realized that looting by force had become subject to diminishing returns, and that a new political dispensation might open up new economic possibilities (Ellis 1998).

The dispute was not only about the institutional political power, but also on the factional struggle for control of the country's rich natural resources. The state authority and legitimacy of Doe's regime had collapsed and supported only by foreign intervention, whereas the NPFL occupied all the major towns, Robertsfield International Airport and was at the gates of Monrovia by June 1990 (Lowenkopf 1995). Taylor managed to consolidate his power enough in his area to establish a rudimentary administrative system, combined with looting and coercion, with some basic infrastructure and social services and to arrange with foreign corporations the resumption of rubber, logging, and mining operations (Lowenkopf 1995). On the ground, the use of force opened fighters access to material resources.

Côte d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso supported Taylor for personal and political reasons and introduced Taylor to the Libyan regime, willing to support different subversive activities in West Africa. Nigeria, which provided the major support for Doe's regime, saw its intervention as an opportunity to establish its dominance in the sub-region. Also, Nigeria was concerned about the attacks on foreigners, especially Nigerians in Liberia⁸. (Ero 1995) Whatever their distaste for Samuel Doe, Sierra Leone and Guinea, for internal reasons⁹, maintained relatively friendly relations with his government. The US played a

⁷ Especially unpaid fighters developed a routine approach towards looting and towards various forms of trade to which their use of armed force gave them access (Ellis 1998).

⁸ Later Charles Taylor understood that he could not become Liberia's president without Nigeria's regional support and this led to the rapprochement with Nigerian leader Sani Abacha in 1995 (Ellis 1998).

⁹ Sierra Leone and Guinea were inundated with Liberian refugees, many of whom were Doe's allies. Also, many NPFL elements had been marauding into Sierra Leone, and Taylor was seen supporting an antijunta guerilla movement (Revolutionary United Front RUF). Guinea has its own substantial Mandingo population as well as a vestigial distrust of Côte d'Ivoire. (Lowenkopf 1995).

low-key role in Liberia, by supporting ECOWAS's dispatch of troops to Liberia¹⁰. It helped finance ECOMOG operations, was the largest donor of emergency aid, and pressed all players to reach a peaceful settlement. However, in the context of the end of Cold War (Kramer 1995), the US was unwilling to become deeply involved in the conflict (Lowenkopf 1995). France played a shadowy role in Liberia's crisis. France's objective may have been to support its allies Côte d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso and to protect its source of Liberian timber and minerals¹¹. The French were also aiming at reducing the US, and possibly Nigerian, influence in the region. Facing the armed incursion in north-western Liberia, the ECOWAS leaders have organized emergency meetings to discuss Liberian fighting and to explore possibilities to find sustainable solutions for the continued instability in the sub-region (IRIN, 26 August 1999).

Instruments

The conflicting parties received most of their material resources from international actors that were actively involved in the war. Charles Taylor used his diplomatic skills to raise funds and support for the NPFL and did not hesitate to eliminate internal enemies (Ellis 1998). Libya provided military and material assistance; Burkina Faso extended facilities for training, banking, armaments transfer and a detachment of troops to support Taylor's uprising. Côte d'Ivoire extended patronage in terms of political and diplomatic facilities, and facilitated the transportation of arms and the encampment of troops prior to the invasion (Aning 1997; Armon & Carl 1996). Until the imposition of the UN arms embargo and an ECOWAS trade ban in late 1992, Taylor had been exporting and receiving supplies through his neighbors' porous borders. At the same time, European and US-based businesses operated within Taylor's territory, taking out iron ore, rubber, timber, diamonds and gold, thus providing an estimated annual 75 million dollars in revenues for the NPFL's purchase of arms and supplies (Aning 1997; Lowenkopf 1995). The NPFL used modern means of communication, including direct connection to the BBC and other news agencies, to enhance its public image and international status (Ellis

¹⁰ The U.S. had a profound aversion to Taylor because of his Libyan connections and the massacre of some American citizens by the NPFL (Lowenkopf 1995).

¹¹ France was a leading importer of timber from Taylor's territory in 1991-92 (Lowenkopf 1995).

1998). Facing the dissident forces in Lofa County in August 1999, Taylor allegedly recruited some ex-combatants to fight with government forces and asked for the full alert of all militia groups in the country. The government's dislodging activities were allegedly hindered by heavy artillery fire coming from the Guinean border (STAR, 17 August 1999). Moreover, Taylor has complained about the arms embargo, weakening the government facing rebel attacks, and declared he would search for help from external allies (Reuters August 16, 1999).

Despite its partiality in the conflict, ECOMOG prevented a major humanitarian catastrophe from taking place, because of its role in securing emergency aid and evacuating civilians (Howe 1997). However, ECOMOG's mandate, limited to peacekeeping and the monitoring of peace agreements and cease-fires, seemed disconnected to the dynamics of warfare and economic networks on the ground (Howe 1997; Lyons 1998). The breakdown of numerous cease-fires and peace agreements highlights the fact that conflicting parties were not seriously engaged in the ECOMOG-led process and continued to pursue their own agenda. The impartiality of mediating actors, together with perceived fairness and equal participation in the peace agreement by all parties appeared to be crucial to the success of peaceful transition. ECOMOG demonstrated an ability to prevent Taylor from winning the civil war but no capacity to build an alternative political structure to contain him, and finally, Taylor achieved his goal through the electoral process (Lyons 1998). ECOMOG also played an important role in the disarmament of conflicting parties and ensured security in Monrovia during the elections in 1997.

The election process was challenged by the need for a dual transition to peace and democracy, and its main achievement was the termination of the war, whereas the actual democratization remained incomplete (Lyons 1999). Furthermore, the transition process occurred without completely investigating wartime crimes and abuses on all sides. Therefore, the transition did not address certain political, social and economic grievances, that would be essential for sustainable peace and stability. The short-term international support for the electoral process failed to address the incompleteness of national

reconciliation and the patrimonial perception of the state as a source of unlimited power and resources¹². Another great challenge was, and still remains, the refugee problem as over the half the country's population of 2.6 million was displaced internally and externally (Ero 1995). Also, the concern over the predominance of child soldiers in different warring factions, leading to the militarization of Liberian youth (Ellis 1998), constitutes a major source of insecurity. International donors should thus concentrate on the demobilization and integration of former combatants in the social structure¹³. Currently, the abusive strong presidency, by interference in the judicial and legislative processes, undermines the separation of power, which is a constitutive part of a stable democratic system.

The need for a regional solution for Liberian chronic insecurity, finally erupted into open fighting, constitutes one of the main challenges also to the Sierra Leonean peace process, thus conditioning the overall stability of the sub-region. The reporting on the incidents has been very cautious, due to continued harassment of journalists in Liberia, contributing to media self-censorship and flaws in the democratic consolidation. The international community should seriously review their overall policy in the region in order to address economic¹⁴, social and political grievances in Liberia and neighboring countries in a coordinated manner, as the complexity of the current situation requires flexible responses instead of unilateral conditionalities. Only a comprehensive plan to stabilize the Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone border region could contribute to a long-term peace and development after years of suffering and uncertainty.

¹² See William Reno's writings about African "warlord states", Reno 1998.

¹³ The concept of an integrative peace process, developed in Mali, combining disarmament with development efforts appears indispensable also in the case of Liberia, where social and economic infrastructure remain badly damaged a few years after the conflict and where the problem of displaced people persists partly unsolved. Furthermore, the ongoing Sierra Leonean conflict constitutes the major factor of insecurity in the sub-region and affects Liberia in many ways.

¹⁴ For example, donors have recently focused on the illegal diamond trade as a source of revenues for rebel activities.

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Chronology

- **December 1989:** NPFL-fighters, mainly from Gio and Mano ethnic groups, led by Charles Taylor, launch an incursion, aiming at the overthrow of President Samuel Doe.
- **1990:** Escalation of a civil war: AFL fights against NPFL, which extends control to most of the country, apart from Monrovia. ECOWAS creates a Standing Mediation Committee (SMC) to monitor developments. Bamako Cease-fire and Banjul Agreement between AFL, INPFL, and NPFL.
- **1991:** Effective partition of Liberia. War spills over into Sierra Leone. Yamoussoukro accords I-IV providing for the disarmament and encampment of factions, for the handover of all territory to ECOMOG control and for the elections conducted under ECOWAS supervision.
- **1992:** ECOMOG urges NPFL to disarm, NPFL calls for neutral UN peacekeeping force. "Operation Octopus", an all-out assault on Monrovia by NPFL. The UN Security Council's arms embargo on all factions; US condemns the non-partiality of ECOMOG.

- **1993:** The Geneva cease-fire and the signing of the Cotonou Accord, by NPFL, ULIMO and the Interim Government of National Unity (IGNU), which allows representatives of armed factions to join transitional government. The UNOMIL (United Nations Observer Mission in Liberia) established to oversee the implementation of the Cotonou Accord and to ensure the neutrality of ECOMOG.
- **1994:** Failure of the Cotonou Accord, due to factional squabbles over the composition of the transitional government, the continued emergence of new armed groups, and the limited resources of peacekeepers. The Akosombo Agreement signed by the NPFL, ULIMO-K and AFL. The Accra Clarification signed by all factions, including both wings of ULIMO. The council of state included representatives of all factions.
- **1995:** Rapprochement between Charles Taylor and Nigerian President Sani Abacha. The Abuja Accord drew all armed groups into a transitional government, with Charles Taylor (NPFL) and Alhaji Kromah (ULIMO-K) assuming a prominent role.
- **January-April 1996:** The lack of resources stalls deployment of ECOMOG/UNOMIL. Dispatchment of police-militia to arrest Roosevelt Johnson. Heavy fighting between “government” forces and predominantly Krahn factions. Violence and intensive looting by all factions. Johnson flown to Ghana. International Contact Group of Liberia (ICGL), an inter-governmental committee of donor countries, concerned with augmenting the ECOWAS peace efforts.
- **August-December 1996:** The signature of the Abuja II Accord, providing for the disarmament to begin in November 1996 and for elections to be scheduled for May 1997. ECOMOG increases its forces in the implementation of the Abuja Accords. Numerous cease-fire violations occur.
- **January-February 1997:** Disarmament and conversion of militias into political parties.
- **July 1997:** Presidential elections: high turnout of estimated 85% of registered voters, ECOMOG provided security in polling stations. Charles Taylor won the presidency with more than 75% of the vote.
- **1998:** Insecurity, human rights abuses and limitations of press freedom continues, alleged preparation of coup plot by Taylor’s (mainly) Krahn opponents in meetings in neighboring countries.
- **September 18-19, 1998:** Security forces attacked Camp Johnson Road in Monrovia to arrest Roosevelt Johnson; diplomatic impasse between the US and the Liberian government following the shooting incident at the embassy. In October, the treason trial against the alleged coup plotters, including several Krahn leaders begins in Monrovia.
- **January-March 1999:** Accusation of Liberia’s support for Sierra Leone rebels. The Liberian government denies, but recognizes that Liberian mercenaries fight in Sierra Leone. The US and other donors seriously consider sanctions against Liberia. Condemnation of alleged coup plotters.
- **April-June 1999:** Incursion to the Voinjama region from Guinea, leading to the hostage-taking of foreign aid workers. Charles Taylor accuses his rival Alhaji Kromah of destabilizing the regime and Guinea for training mandingo-dissidents. The Guinean government denies the allegations. The allegations of Liberian plans to attack Sierra Leone. Liberian organizations appeal for international support for post-war reconstruction.
- **July 1999:** The destruction of arms from the civil war under ECOMOG supervision; Unease of ex-combatants dissatisfied with existing reintegration efforts.
- **August 1999:** 50 aid workers and their families taken hostages by unidentified rebels, but later released to Guinea. The armed rebel group of estimated 1,000 fighters, called “Joint Forces of Liberian Liberation (JFLL), attack in Kolahun and Voinjama in north-western Liberia; rebel spokesperson “Mosquito Spray” says rebel Liberian fighters in Sierra Leone, having been disenchanted by the peace agreement and by Charles Taylor. State of emergency declared, later lifted. The ECOWAS conference on fighting in Liberia, in view to find a regional solution. Guinea denies alleged involvement in the rebellion and arrests an unknown rebel leader, possibly responsible for the incursion. Liberia urges to end the arms embargo and seeks military help from allied countries. Mopping up in the region.
- **January 2000-:** Insecurity continues in Lofa county. The EU suspends its aid due to the alleged continuation of Liberian support for Sierra Leonean rebels.