

THE LIBERIAN CIVIL WAR: THE FUTURE OF LIBERIAN REFUGEES

BY MOSES GEEPU-NAH TIEPOH*

INTRODUCTION

On December 24, 1989, a rebellion was launched against the Liberian government of the late Samuel Doe by forces of the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), led by Charles Taylor. This insurrection soon ignited into one of "Africa's most brutal fratricidal wars" in which thirteen thousand to fifty thousand people have been estimated killed and over 1.1 million persons (out of an estimated national population of 2.4 million people) were displaced from their homes; as many as seven hundred and fifty thousand people fled to neighbouring West African countries for refuge (Ruiz, 49, 52). Although there has not been an official estimate of the total economic and social costs of the war, many expect such an estimate to be gigantic in light of the massive destruction of economic and social infrastructures caused by the war. For instance, the hydropower station responsible for Monrovia's water supply was entirely destroyed and its rebuilding could take about five years and cost over \$550 million (*Ibid.*, 58).

The Doe government was overthrown in the war and with the imposition of a cease-fire by members of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) near the end of 1990, fighting among the various warring factions has ceased. Consequently, national, regional and other international efforts are in the process of enabling hundreds of thousands of Liberian refugees to be repatriated to their native land. Internationally supervised elections in Liberia are being conducted.

This paper presents a review of the war; the ECOWAS peace initiative in Liberia; relief efforts and conditions of Liberian refugees; and the current status of the Liberian conflict. We begin with a brief historical background to the war.

BACKGROUND

The seeds of what has become present-day Liberia were planted in the early 1820s with the repatriation of freed black Americans to the west coast of Africa by the American Colonization Society (ACS). Before the arrival of the black Americans, the Grain Coast, now called Liberia, was inhabited by indigenous African people who made their living mostly from horticulture, weaving, spinning, working metal and advanced agricultural techniques, such as "shifting system of rice cultivation" (Dunn, 10). With the advent of the black American settlers, a new economic and political order emerged, in which the returnees eventually assumed control of the established Liberian state and the indigenous majority experienced political, economic and social deprivations for a very long time.

Between 1847 and 1980, the governance of the Republic of Liberia was strictly monopolized by the descendants of the returned black Americans or 'Americo-Liberians,' as they became known. Only close to the end of this period were selected members of the indigenous population brought to the periphery of government. In the process of consolidating their rule over the *indigènes*, the Americo-Liberians had to fight

not less than twenty wars against the different ethnic groups of Liberia, who were quite determined to defend their lands and cultures from settler occupation. However, in the end, the returnees succeeded in imposing the so-called 'republic' on the indigenous majority.

Until about 1930, there wasn't any substantial capital investment in Liberia. The economy was dominated by a subsistence agricultural sector in which the ruling elites lived on the exploitation of indigenous labour.

After a brief period of internal political rivalry among the various sectors of settlers, the True Whig Party (TWP) ultimately emerged as the dominant political power-bearer of the Americo-Liberians. Through the exercise of 'caste power,' the TWP managed successfully to subdue all opposition and rule Liberia uninterrupted under a very tight one-party system of government for over a century (1878-1980).

However, the emergence of resolute political activism in the 1970s, coupled with deteriorated economic conditions, sharply undermined the social base of Americo-Liberian rule, so that by the end of the decade, the True Whig Party had become enormously unpopular among Liberians who viewed the Americo-Liberians as the architects of their economic and political problems.

Consequently, on April 12, 1980, a group of seventeen non-commissioned men of the Liberian Armed Forces, led by master sergeant Samuel Doe, overthrew the TWP government of William Tolbert in a bloody coup, thereby ending one hundred and thirty three years of Americo-Liberian hegemony in Liberia. A People's Redemption Council (PRC), comprising the seventeen coup makers, was quickly instituted to serve as the ruling council of the "Revolution." The new leader promised popular participation and economic development.

However, in just under three years, about half of his original councilmen

had been executed and some of his civilian cabinet ministers had fled into exile for their lives. By 1988, every social institution in Liberia had become repressed by the military government. Violations of human rights had become a trade mark of the regime. All of Liberia's social and economic indicators had abysmally degenerated. By 1989, ethnic tensions between the Krahn (Doe's tribespeople) and the Gios, had developed into a full-blown disease threatening Liberia's national stability. Thousands of Liberians were now refugees in foreign lands.

As soon as it was discovered that the military could not provide the appropriate national leadership, Liberians began expressing their discontent and opposition to the regime. But all peaceful efforts to remove the military regime from power failed, as the Doe government believed in fire power and not dialogue.

THE CIVIL WAR

The Liberian conflict began when, on December 24, 1989, the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) led by Charles Taylor, entered Nimba county, one of Liberia's north-eastern regions and declared its intention to overthrow the government of Samuel Doe and restore constitutional democracy, economic development and national unity (*West Africa*, 7-13 June, 91, 3149). The Doe regime reacted swiftly by starting a brutal counter-insurgency operation in Nimba, "destroying villages and exterminating members of rival ethnic groups" (*Liberia*, 2). These brutalities led many villagers to align themselves with the NPFL. After several months of fighting, the NPFL forces gained control over many parts of Liberia. As they gained greater control, the rebel forces resorted to acts of bloody retaliation against members of sergeant Doe's Krahn tribe for the atrocities they too had committed in Nimba. The conflict gradually degenerated into a tribalized civil war.

As the NPFL advanced into Monrovia, Liberia's Capital, government troops intensified their counter-attacks and thousands of Liberian people were massacred in the process. It has been estimated that between thirteen thousand and fifty thousand people were killed and 1.1 million people (out of an estimated national population of 2.4 million) were displaced. About seven hundred and fifty thousand people fled to neighboring countries for refuge. Of this number, three hundred and eleven thousand people went to Guinea; two hundred and seventeen thousand to the Ivory Coast; one hundred and twenty-six thousand to Sierra Leone; six thousand to Ghana; and one thousand to Nigeria (Ruiz, 54). One of the most violent acts in the war was the mass murder, on July 30, 1990, of six hundred civilian women, men and children in the St. Peter's Lutheran Church, a designated Red Cross shelter. The people had been in this Church for refuge and a group of government soldiers rushed into it and began a shooting spree.

As the war reached its height in August, 1990, conditions in Liberia, particularly Monrovia, became deplorable. People lived without food, water and light. Starvation and malnutrition were rampant, because international relief assistance was not initially forthcoming and the delivery of what was available was made difficult by the war.

As the size of the NPFL forces increased, it split into two rival factions: the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) headed by Charles Taylor and the Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia (INPFL) headed by Prince Johnson. Although the two forces were independently fighting against the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL) commanded by Samuel Doe, tensions between them deepened rapidly. On September 10, 1990, Doe was captured by the forces of Prince Johnson and later killed. This did not stop the war. The remnants of the AFL fought desperately in the streets of

Monrovia in an attempt to retain power. Meanwhile, the two NPFL factions were engaged in rival fighting, as each tried to assume final control of Liberia. The country became a killing field.

PEACE EFFORTS

The peace process in the Liberian conflict may be divided into two phases: the pre-ECOWAS phase and the ECOWAS phase. In the first phase, the Doe government initiated moves to resolve the conflict, with the hope that the government would remain in power. Within five months of the war, the government requested the intervention of the United States, the Liberian Council of Churches and the Association for Constitutional Democracy in Liberia (ACDL) based in the United States. The government's request failed to achieve any positive result, because Doe refused to accept ACDL's demand that he should resign and the U.S. request that he go into exile. On the other hand, he pledged his government's resolve to "fight to the last person" (Shettima, 7). In June, 1990, the Liberian Council of Churches convened a peace talk between Doe and the NPFL in Freetown, Sierra Leone. This meeting also collapsed, because Doe refused the demand that he resign.

Following the failure of the Freetown talks, it seemed that the Doe government was really in disarray. Ministers and other high officials of the government were abandoning their posts and secretly escaping from Liberia. Apparently in distress, Doe wrote a letter to the U.S. government, in which he stated:

Our capital is named after your president Monroe. Our flag is a replica of yours. Our laws were patterned after your laws. We in Liberia have always considered ourselves "step children" of the U.S. We implore you to come and help your step children who are in danger of losing their lives and children. (Ibid., 9)

Although in the early stage of the war, the U.S. Rangers were reported

to have been seen escorting Doe's forces in Nimba, the United States later refused to fully intervene in the war because of Liberia's increasing irrelevance to U.S. strategic interest, in light of the new changes taking place in global relations and also because of domestic public opinion against Doe.

In the second phase of the peace process, members of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) decided to sponsor a cease-fire in Liberia. In May, 1990 at its 13th regular meeting in Banjul, the capital of Gambia, the ECOWAS set up a Standing Mediation Committee (SMC) to deal with some of the political problems confronting the West African region. The Liberian problem occupied a forefront on the SMC agenda in view of its urgency and increasing regional implications. At a subsequent meeting in Banjul on July 5th, members of the SMC, including Gambia, Ghana, Togo, Mali and Nigeria, decided to send a 2,500-member peace-keeping force to Liberia. In August, the Community invited all the political parties, warring factions and interest groups in Liberia to an All-Liberian Conference in Banjul to form an Interim Government of National Unity (IGNU) to be headed by a non-partisan to the conflict. The mandate of IGNU was to provide the climate for national unity; facilitate International relief efforts; repatriate Liberian refugees; and conduct an internationally supervised election, in six months. All the parties invited, except Taylor's NPFL, attended the conference. Dr. Amos Sawyer was elected president of the Interim Government. And, although the NPFL was absent, it was offered six positions on the Interim Government, including the position of Speaker of the Interim National Assembly, which was reserved for Taylor. The United States and other countries declared their support for the ECOWAS initiative and pledged to work within its framework, even

though the United States has not officially recognized the Interim Government in Liberia.

However, when the ECOWAS forces, known as the Economic Community Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) arrived in Monrovia in August, 1990 they were fiercely resisted by the NPFL of Taylor. The INPFL of Johnson declared its support for the ECOWAS peace plan, although it later decided to withdraw its support from the Interim Government. The bombardment of ECOMOG's positions by Taylor's forces prompted the former to change its terms of reference from that of peace keeping to peace enforcement. The ECOMOG forces finally succeeded in creating a buffer zone among the three warring factions (NPFL, INPFL and the remnants of AFL).

Meanwhile, another dimension emerged in the conflict, when the Sierra Leone government complained that NPFL forces had crossed into Sierra Leone and started a war. Burkina Faso was also accused by the government of aiding the incursion. But the rebels quickly responded that they were members of Sierra Leone's own Revolutionary United Front. It was through the intervention of Guinea and Nigeria that the rebel forces were defeated.

On July 29-30, 1991 another ECOWAS-sponsored peace meeting was held in Abidjan, the Ivory Coast. At the end of the meeting, both interim President Sawyer and Charles Taylor declared that their differences had been overcome (*Ibid.*, 16). A 5-member sub-committee of the SMC was commissioned to work out modalities for the proposed national elections in Liberia. The subcommittee included Liberia, Senegal, Guinea-Bissau, Gambia and the Ivory Coast. Former U.S. President Jimmy Carter's International Negotiation Network (INN) was contacted to serve as part of the Liberian election process.

RELIEF EFFORTS AND REFUGEES

There were about seven hundred and fifty thousand Liberians who fled the war and over seventy-seven thousand were displaced. According to some international relief workers, international response to the Liberian plight was "too little, too late" (*Liberia*, 15). Emergency food supplies did not arrive in Liberia until September, 1990, nine months after the eruption of the war. The U.N. failed to designate a special representative to Liberia to facilitate relief efforts (*Ibid.*, 18).

Although the U.S. government led the relief efforts in Liberia, it has been criticized for not having done enough, given the long standing historical relationship between Liberia and the United States. Also, many countries consider Liberia as a U.S. problem, referring to the huge amount of military and economic aid donated to the Doe dictatorship. By mid-December, 1990, total U.S. relief assistance stood at \$72.6 million, including in-kind assistance and embassy contributions (*Ibid.*, 21). It now stands at \$140 million (*West Africa*, 11-17 Nov. 1991, 1887). In addition to the United States, several international relief agencies and voluntary relief groups were working in Liberia. These included the UNDP, UNICEF, the World Food Program (WFP), United Nations Development Relief Organization (UNDRO), Catholic Relief Services (CRS) and others (*Ibid.*, 21-22). There were also a number of Liberian voluntary organizations, including the Special Emergency Life Food (SELF); the Liberian Committee for Relief, Resettlement and Reconstruction (LICORE); the Christian Health Association of Liberia (CHAL) and others.

In the neighboring countries, where Liberian refugees fled, a number of problems, such as bad roads and lack of trucks, made relief efforts difficult. One unique feature of the Liberian situation was the

non-existence of refugee camps in the host countries. Before international relief assistance arrived, almost all of the refugees were accepted into the private homes of the host nationals. This eventually caused a strain on the resources of the local populations. However, when relief assistance later arrived, it was intended only for the refugees. The situation caused some resentment among many villagers who now needed assistance, too. A special appeal to the international community by UNDR0's officials for assistance to compensate the affected populations in Guinea met with a "very disappointing" response (*Ibid.*, 23).

THE CURRENT STATUS OF THE CONFLICT

Although there are good reasons for optimism, there are also grounds for caution towards the current peace process and the future of Liberia and its citizens. The optimism stems from the result of the latest round of peace talks held in Yamoussoukro, the Ivory Coast, at the end of October, 1991. According to the final communiqué released on October 30th, Charles Taylor has agreed to disarm his forces under the supervision of ECOMOG within 60 days. Following the process of disarmament by all parties, repatriation and rehabilitation of Liberian refugees will proceed. This will then provide the groundwork for elections to be conducted in April 1992 (*West Africa*, 11-17 Nov. 1991, 1886). Before the election, ECOMOG is expected to occupy all of Liberia's air and sea ports and create buffer zones to separate the warring factions. This would allow Liberians to return home and safely participate in the election. For such a task, ECOMOG is planning to augment its forces to ten thousand with the addition of troops from Senegal. It should be noted, however, that up to publication time, Taylor has not yet complied with the terms of Yamoussoukro IV; he has

not disarmed his forces and there are fears that this may jeopardize the election plan.

All those who attended the talks, including former U.S. President Jimmy Carter, expressed their satisfaction with the results. However, there are reports about possible "obstacles" to the plan from the Yamoussoukro talks (*Ibid.*). The United Liberation Movement for Democracy (ULIMO), comprising remnants of Doe's forces and supported by the Movement for the Redemption of Liberian Moslems (MRM), is said to be displeased with ECOWAS' concessions to Taylor and insists that the NPFL should disarm unconditionally. ULIMO's forces claimed to be 60 miles inside Liberia and vow to continue their "strictly military" campaign against Taylor's forces (*Ibid.*).

Meanwhile, efforts are being taken on the ground to actualize the Yamoussoukro plan. Prince Johnson, who had withdrawn his support for the Interim government, is now said to be coming back to ECOWAS. The ad hoc Supreme Court, established to moderate the election, is

now getting funding from U.S.-based organizations such as the National Democratic and National Republic Institutes (*Ibid.*, 1887).

While the current state of affairs in the Liberian conflict deserves both optimism and caution, there are reasons for more optimism. Firstly, the presence of Doe's supporters in the ULIMO has rendered that movement virtually without a base, in terms of both national and international support. Secondly, the ECOWAS peace process has strong domestic and international legitimacy and it will be difficult for a discredited force such as ULIMO to destroy it. I think the ball is in ECOWAS' court and also Taylor's. If Taylor truly cooperates with ECOWAS, I believe that the long-sought objective of peace in Liberia finally will be achieved in the foreseeable future. And Liberian refugees will then be safe and happy to return to their Liberian villages.

Note

*Moses Geepu-Nah Tiepoh is a researcher at the Centre for Refugee Studies, York University.

APPOINTMENT

Applications are invited for a full-time tenure stream appointment in Development and Refugee Studies, effective July 1, 1992, in the Department of Social Science, Atkinson College, York University, and as a Research Fellow in the Centre for Refugee Studies (subject to budgetary approval by the university).

The candidate should have special expertise in both development studies and various aspects of the refugee problem, and have a record of recognized publications in the field as well as some field experience.

Atkinson College is a Faculty of York University whose mission is to provide a range of degree programmes for adult students studying on a part-time basis. Experience in teaching adult students would be an asset.

The Centre for Refugee Studies (where the candidate will be located) is one of the largest research centres of its kind in the world dedicated to research, scholarship and education in the refugee field and has been selected as a Centre of Excellence by the Canadian International Development Agency.

The successful candidate will be expected to actively participate in the university's Faculty of Graduate Studies, to share in the unique educational mission of Atkinson College and to play a leading role in overseas research related to development, repatriation and refugee settlement.

Applicants should mail or fax a complete academic and professional curriculum vitae, and arrange for three confidential letters of recommendation to be sent to: Professor Griffiths Cunningham, Chair, Department of Social Science, Atkinson College, York University, 4700 Keele Street, North York, Ontario, M3J 1P3. Telephone: (416) 736-5235. Fax: (416) 736-5103.

York University is implementing a policy of employment equity, including affirmative action for women faculty. In accordance with Canadian immigration requirements, this advertisement is directed to Canadian citizens and permanent residents of Canada.