

Liberating Liberia

Charles Taylor and the rebels who unseated him

Nicole Itano

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INTRODUCTION

The resignation and departure of Charles Taylor on Monday 11 August 2003 came suddenly and unexpectedly to the outside world, which had long viewed Liberia's president as one of the continent's most wily and intractable troublemakers. For almost 14 years, first as a rebel and later as Liberia's democratically elected president, Taylor had been waging war in his own country and in those of his neighbours. Nothing—not sanctions, elections or the arming of rebels—seemed able to weaken his grasp on power.

Yet on 11 August, with three powerful African presidents sitting at his side, a bitter Charles Taylor handed power to his deputy, Vice-President Moses Blah. Just hours later, he headed into exile on a Nigerian plane, setting the stage for an extraordinary week that saw the withdrawal of rebels from Liberia's capital, Monrovia, the arrival of the first American peacekeepers in Africa since Somalia, and the signing of a peace deal that includes a two-year transitional government followed by elections in 2005.

On 14 October, Moses Blah handed over the Presidency to Gyude Bryant, a 54-year-old businessman who was chosen by delegates to the Liberian peace talks in Ghana to head the new broad-based transitional government of national unity. Under the peace agreement signed on 18 August by Moses Blah and the two rebel movements, the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) and the new Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL), the new transitional government has been given the task of governing Liberia for the next two years and preparing the country for fresh elections in 2005.

Events moved so quickly that it was difficult at the time to place them into much of a context. Although Liberia's future is far from settled, the short time that

has elapsed makes it possible to generate a more comprehensive picture of what occurred and to come to some understanding of the forces that contributed to Charles Taylor's fall. While Taylor's decision to accept exile may have shocked much of the international community, who believed the Liberian president would hold on to power until the bitter end, at home it was greeted with less surprise. By the time rebels advanced to Monrovia in June, spurred on by the indictment issued against Taylor by the United Nations Special Court in Sierra Leone, his government was crumbling from the inside. The siege of Monrovia is only part of the story.

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This paper also examines the ramifications of Taylor's departure from Liberia and its prospects for peace. Even with Taylor gone, the country's problems run deep and the peace there is still extremely fragile. Throughout the recent conflict, both rebel groups maintained their primary goal was the removal of Charles Taylor, but ethnic-based dissatisfaction and disempowerment lie at the root of their grievances. Neither group is likely to accept any long-term political scenario that does not give them a substantial

share of power. Much will also hinge on the effectiveness of demobilisation and disarmament, and especially the repatriation of the country's thousands of child soldiers. The failure of such programmes in the run-up to Liberia's 1997 elections—largely due to interference from Taylor—was what had set the stage for the present conflict. Liberia's lost generation will not simply disappear.

Most of the information in the following pages, unless otherwise noted, is drawn either from interviews with people in Monrovia during August 2003 or from direct, first-hand experience of the events during more than three weeks of reporting in the city. An attempt has been made throughout to explain what ordinary people—refugees, soldiers and local community workers—thought about the events taking place around them. Where historical information has

been used to help put events into context, the facts presented are widely accepted and uncontroversial, unless otherwise noted and cited.

BACKGROUND

The crisis in Liberia came under the international spotlight in June 2003, when rebels from the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) made a rapid advance towards the capital, Monrovia, eventually seizing part of city, including the port, and placing the rest under virtual siege. Although the current conflict has been running since at least 1999, just two years after Charles Taylor was elected president, little international attention was given to the situation in Liberia until the LURD reached the outskirts of the capital on 5 June. In fact, for almost a year after the 1997 elections, many international observers speculated that Taylor and his National Patriotic Party government had invented the conflict—which at this point was confined to largely inaccessible areas in Liberia's north—to put pressure on the international community to drop arms and diamond embargos on the country. Even as recently as 2003, although the existence of a rebel group was acknowledged, almost nothing was known about the group, its aims or leadership. Nor was the international community much inclined to help Taylor, who was accused of arms smuggling, human rights abuses and robbing his country blind.

By mid-2003, however, three factors intersected to put the issue firmly in the public eye. First, there was the indictment of Charles Taylor by a UN-backed war crimes tribunal in Sierra Leone on 4 June, the same day peace talks opened in Accra, Ghana. Second, the dramatic and quick-moving advance of the LURD on Monrovia created a visible humanitarian crisis in the capital. Tens of thousands of displaced people took refuge in buildings near the US Embassy, at one point piling the bodies of war casualties near the gates of the building in a macabre protest that was broadcast around the world.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, in late June 2003, US President George W Bush called for Charles Taylor to step down and began hinting, in the run-up to his long-awaited trip to Africa, that the US might send troops to help stabilise the situation. In the aftermath of the conflict in Iraq, the fact that Bush was even considering deploying troops in Liberia was regarded domestically as an indication that the US saw an increased threat from "failed states", even in areas of the world not normally considered part of America's strategic interest. Such an intervention, it was thought, would mark a major policy shift, especially for a president who was elected on an isolationist international agenda and had repeatedly called on the memory of America's intervention in Somalia as a warning against interventionism. As is explained later, the situation in Liberia in August 2003

was not in any way analogous to that of Somalia in 1993, when 18 soldiers died in a single botched mission, but the memory of that disastrous intervention still looms large in the memory of many Americans and no doubt influenced the scope and scale of American involvement in Liberia.

I arrived in Monrovia on 31 July, to a city under siege. Most of Monrovia's outlying areas had been abandoned, both because of actual insecurity and because government troops had demanded that people leave or be considered rebel collaborators. Incidents of rape and looting, often by government soldiers, were common and another factor that led many families to flee deeper into the city. In one refugee centre, the Samuel Doe Stadium where at least 50,000 people had taken refuge, more than 1,000 women came forward saying they had been raped during the current conflict. On the government side of the city, hundreds of thousands of people had taken refuge in neighbourhoods like the Mamba Point, a diplomatic quarter near the sea, because those neighbourhoods were near the UN offices and the US Embassy, from which they expected help, and because they were older neighbourhoods that contained more concrete buildings, which are less susceptible to mortar attacks and stray bullets. Ironically, the areas to which people fled were among the hardest hit by rebel shelling and many were close to, or even on the front line.

By 31 July, although there was still fierce fighting on the front line, the frequency of mortar attacks had decreased and people were beginning to leave their places of refuge for the first time in almost two weeks to search for food and water, both of which had grown critically scarce. Although the security situation improved in the days that followed, food and fuel remained in short supply until two weeks later when the rebels handed over control of the port, where most of the city's supplies were stored, to West African peacekeepers. The price of rice rose to almost \$2 a cup, far beyond the reach of most people, and many people resorted to swimming across a swamp to reach rebel territory where the markets were full of looted food aid. It was not possible to gain access to the rebel side of the city until 5 August, after the first peacekeepers arrived, although later assessments indicate that the humanitarian situation on the rebel side was never as bad as on the government side, in part because there were fewer people there.

The LURD advance can be divided into three main offensives, called "the three world wars" by residents on the government side. The first, beginning on 5 June—one day after Taylor was indicted for war crimes and peace negotiations began in Accra, Ghana—brought the rebels to the outskirts of the city. A ceasefire was signed on 17 June, but held for less than a week before the launch of a second attack that brought rebels into Monrovia's industrial area, called Bush Rod Island, which included the city's port. The LURD pulled back

in the first days of July, after the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) agreed to send peacekeepers, but made a final push into the city beginning from 17 July, when they took the whole of Bush Rod Island and consolidated their hold on the port. Meanwhile, the second rebel group, MODEL, formed in March and believed to be an offshoot of the LURD, was advancing from the eastern border with Ivory Coast. On 28 July, ten days after the LURD took Monrovia's port, MODEL seized Liberia's second city, Buchanan, and its port.

Although citizens began fleeing into Monrovia when the LURD first neared the city in early June, it was "World War 3" that caused the most damage and casualties. During this last offensive there was intense shelling of the city, particularly the three main bridges: two in the heart of the city (called the Old Bridge and the New Bridge) connecting Mamba Point with Bush Rod Island and, later, a third called the Stockton Creek Bridge a few miles north of Monrovia. Neither side appeared to have the military capacity to take and hold any of the three bridges and it seemed that the bulk of the fighting was being conducted by poorly trained teenage and child soldiers, many stoned and drunk, shooting across the bridges. Were it not for the diplomatic intervention of West African leaders that led to Taylor's departure and the arrival of West African peacekeepers, the stalemate could have lasted indefinitely.

Taylor's crumbling government

Perhaps the most surprising element of the recent events in Liberia is that Taylor eventually agreed to hand over power and leave for exile in Nigeria, albeit on a note of bitterness. For 14 years, since his days as a rebel leader and warlord, Charles Taylor has largely ignored criticism from the international community. Liberia has been subject to arms and diamond embargos, while he himself is subject to personal travel sanctions and branded an international pariah. Within his own region of West Africa, he was shunned as a troublemaker and accused of fermenting civil wars outside his borders. Yet he did little to mend his ways.

Until the very end, there was speculation that Taylor would renege on promises and either refuse to stand down or stand down and refuse to leave the country. Even after setting the date of 11 August for his resignation, he refused to say when or if he would leave the country. Yet, when the day arrived, after a brief ceremony in Liberia's decaying and looted Executive Mansion and attended by Liberia's elite, he handed over power to Blah and within hours was on a Nigerian military plane bound for Abuja with Ghanaian President John Kufuor, chairperson of ECOWAS, and Mozambican President Joaquim Chissano, chairperson of the African Union (AU).

What few people understand, however, is that Taylor's regime was crumbling from the inside, even before the LURD offensives on Monrovia put him on the defensive and the indictment left him nowhere to go. The tactics that had served him well as a rebel leader were less effective as president and by June, Taylor's government controlled only one-third of the country and seemed unable to defend much of the territory it did control. The LURD, who advanced from Guinea, had taken much of the north, while MODEL was advancing rapidly from the west. Taylor and his officials blamed their inability to defend the country on international arms embargos, but although there is some evidence that the recently implemented timber sanctions did have some effect on the Liberian government's revenues, Taylor continued to buy arms illegally right up until the end. A weightier factor in his government's decline was Taylor's own style of rule, which caused him to centralise power in himself and keep the Liberian military fractured and divided, making him unable to mount an appropriate defence against the relatively well-organised LURD.

The armed forces placed in charge of Monrovia's defence—and probably the defence of other outlying areas—were a hodgepodge of small fighting units composed mostly of young men and boys as young as ten years. Liberians said that after his election in 1997, Taylor marginalised the national army, the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL), because he questioned their loyalty. Members of the northern Krahn ethnicity, against whom Taylor had been fighting since 1989, dominated the AFL and many were recruited under the late President Samuel Doe. Instead, Taylor created a network of competing security units and militias, headed by longstanding supporters, many of whom

had been child soldiers who fought with him when he was a rebel leader. Most prominent among these was the Anti-Terrorism Unit (ATU), headed by Taylor's son, "Chucky". Others, more informally organised, had names like 'Jungle Fire' or no name at all, and were simply informally organised units of boys led by a slightly older boy who had been with Taylor during his days in the bush.

This organisational structure was not so different from the one Taylor had used as a rebel leader. As the war progressed, however, Taylor became increasingly paranoid about his own security and increasingly unwilling to trust his safety to any single group, even the elite ATU. Opposition politicians were increasingly purged from the government, accused of plotting against the government, and Taylor himself retreated more and more into his own heavily fortified house. On 10 July 2002, he closed the James Spriggs Payne Airport, until then the city's main airport, on the grounds that air traffic so close to his

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house posed a security threat. Commercial and humanitarian air services were moved to the Roberts Field Airport, about an hour's drive from the city, while military air services halted completely for lack of running equipment. Even before the siege of Monrovia began, Taylor had retreated into his house (called the "White City" although it is grey). The house had effectively become the centre of government, with most meetings between the president and his advisors taking place behind its walls. Outside, the city's sycophantic local press corps and other suppliants gathered and would sometimes be briefed by officials as they left the house.

Very few government soldiers visible in the capital had proper uniforms, although after the West African peacekeepers arrived on 4 August, uniformed soldiers replaced many of the militia members at roadblocks and checkpoints. Prior to that, however, most government fighters wore civilian clothes heavily influenced by American rap and gang culture—although seemingly stuck in the 1980s—although members of the ATU wore brown uniforms and some militia fighters wore bright yellow t-shirts. Among those who wore civilian clothes, however, ripped t-shirts and bandanas were popular, as were elaborate braided hairstyles. One high-ranking frontline commander, who gave his name as General Cairo Pooh-Pooh ("because you can smell me, but you can't dodge me") looked like 'Michael Jackson meets Mad Max'. He wore black jeans tucked into black high-tops and a single, black, fingerless glove and arrived, wheels screeching, in a white Toyota sedan whose doors had been ripped off and its body painted with green spots. Even Taylor's bodyguards looked more like nightclub bouncers than proper military men.

Many government soldiers also had tattoos or carried *juju* (traditional magic) charms, which they believed protected them from bullets, and marijuana and alcohol use was quite widespread. Many were so stoned and drunk they could barely speak, so that deciphering the hierarchy and structure of government forces was extremely difficult. Nearly every commander at every checkpoint claimed to be a general in charge of thousands of men who had fought for Taylor since his days as a rebel, even if he was clearly only in his teens and would have been a small child at the time. One checkpoint commander, who called himself General Edward Johnson and said he was 29 years old, claimed to have been fighting continuously for Taylor for the past 13 years. He also claimed to have had time to finish high school, itself an unusual accomplishment in Liberia, and to acquire an undergraduate degree in criminal justice, quite an accomplishment for a man who would have started fighting at the age of 16.

Although there was some sense of hierarchy and a command structure, the fighting at the frontline, at least on the government side, appeared to have been waged with little strategy or order. The statements

made by Defence Minister Daniel Chea, with their references to fronts and offensives, made the war sound far more organised than it actually was on the ground. Few of the frontline fighters had any means of communication with their superiors and the highest-ranking officers stayed well clear of the fiercest fighting. On the government side—the only area accessible to journalists while the fighting was going on—the streets were deserted except for the soldiers, who would occasionally run out to the entrance of the bridge and shoot widely for a few seconds before running back to hide behind a wall. Little effort was made by either side to actually cross the bridge, although sometimes the commanding officer would force his men onto the bridge by threatening them with his pistol.

Government officials and commanders of all ranks blamed international arms embargos for their inability to defend the city, much as they had long blamed the sanctions for their inability to provide services to the Liberian people. Although the 1997 election was declared fair by most international observers, including the US, UN arms sanctions imposed in 1992 on all parties in the civil war were never lifted, largely because of Taylor's alleged involvement in funding and arming rebel groups in neighbouring countries like Sierra Leone and Ivory Coast. However, Taylor and his government believed (and often argued when they were caught buying arms illegally) that as the legitimately elected government of Liberia, they should be allowed to purchase arms without hindrance. "What kind of mind set would keep an arms embargo on an elected government that is trying to protect three million people? It's because they don't like Taylor," said Sam Jackson, then Minister of State for Financial and Economic Affairs, who spent much of June and July in London trying to drum up support for Taylor. "If we had the ability to buy arms openly, LURD would not be at the Freeport today."

While arms sanctions may have played some role in diminishing the ability of government to mount a credible defence, there is evidence that Taylor's government was able to continue purchasing and importing weapons right up until his departure. Just days before Taylor handed over power to Blah, Nigerian peacekeepers controlling the airport confiscated a shipment of weapons, rumoured to have originated in Libya. The weapons arrived in a large aeroplane during the middle of the night that was met by a high-ranking military official.

Still, there is little doubt that Liberia's army was in disarray even before 23 June and ill prepared to defend the city against the rebel advance. The government no longer had air power and its two remaining helicopters had not moved from the James Spriggs Payne Airport for three to four months. A worker at the airport said the helicopters needed replacement parts and no longer functioned. Government soldiers were also armed primarily with

AK-47s, although they did have some sniper guns and heavier weapons, including mortars. Since such weapons were usually seen in the hands of intoxicated children, however, it is unlikely that they were used to their full capacity. Eyewitness reports from both sides of the frontline indicated that either the rebels had far more artillery (mostly 81 mm mortars) or used it more effectively. Certainly there were considerably fewer civilian casualties on the rebel side from mortars (called rockets by local residents). The only visible communications equipment among government troops in the city were occasional cell phones, which required both power to charge the batteries—often difficult to find in a city with no electricity or running water since 1997—and pay-as-you-go cards for airtime.

The LURD advance, and particularly their seizure of the port, further exacerbated the government's desperate military situation by cutting off supplies of food and fuel. Even government elites were unable to access basic commodities. Taylor himself was unable to find enough fuel to power the generators that ran his radio station, Kiss FM, and when he gave his last address to the nation on Sunday, 10 August, he had no way of broadcasting it to Liberians. Nor was there any Liberian with the equipment to record such a speech, so Taylor allowed one foreign journalist to tape the address and then demanded payment for the tape. As an instance of how utterly absurd the situation had become, the Thursday before Taylor resigned, the Chief of Police was driving around town in an SUV dragging a motorcade of five motorcycles on a tow rope behind him.

By August 2003 even his own soldiers and staunchest supporters were saying it was time for Taylor to leave. A few days before he stepped down, Taylor went to the headquarters of his National Patriotic Party (NPP) for a last meeting with his party executive. Several hundred party supporters gathered outside, some waving flags with Taylor's picture or singing songs in his praise, hoping to catch a last glimpse of their president. Even these few party loyalists said Taylor's departure was inevitable, although some said they hoped he was planning a return. "People say he is the problem," said one man, 23-year-old Emmanuel Johnson. "So if he steps down, we are hoping the problem will be over." Liberians are a practical people when it comes to politics and most Monrovia shared Johnson's pragmatism in the days leading up to Taylor's departure. Indeed, it was difficult to find anyone in Monrovia who thought Taylor should stay. Some of the more informed Liberians believed Taylor should leave because he was not fit to govern, but many people simply believed that since the international community had made Taylor's departure a prerequisite for intervention, he had to go.

Nevertheless, to hear such sentiments from a card-carrying member of Taylor's party, and even from petty party officials and workers at his privately owned radio and television station, showed how little support Taylor actually had in his own country.

Enthusiasm for the war on the frontline was no greater than at the headquarters of the NPP. Most soldiers said they were tired of fighting, that they wanted peace and the arrival of international peacekeepers and that when Taylor left they would remain loyal to whoever became the next president. On the day the first Nigerian peacekeepers arrived, 4 August, the fighting suddenly stopped, even though only about 100 troops had arrived and none of them had even left Roberts Field Airport. A day later, government and rebel soldiers were crossing the bridge to exchange gifts with their former enemies. "No more war, we want peace," shouted a drunk government soldier who called himself General Uncle T, his AK-47 held high above his head, after crossing the Old Bridge into rebel-held territory. After a half hour on the other side, he came back exclaiming: "We rapped together, we danced together, we played football together. We are all brothers."

LURD and MODEL

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The peace agreement signed on 18 August authorised the creation of a transitional or caretaker government giving equal power to the Liberian government and each of the two rebel groups, LURD and MODEL. It was an incredible concession to the two rebel groups, one of which was less than six months old and neither of which had any leader to speak of. By all accounts, both were relatively small, loosely organised groups whose leadership and aims only became widely known this year. Yet they managed, in a very short period of time, to bring down one of West Africa's most wily leaders.

Most observers date Liberia's current conflict to April 1999, when Taylor's government first announced that the country had been attacked near the Guinea border. A few months later, in August, the government claimed rebels had launched a second attack and taken five towns in the northern province of Lofa. Since almost nothing was known about these new rebel forces and independent verification was almost impossible, many longstanding Liberia observers questioned whether the attacks were a ploy to force the UN to drop arms sanctions against Liberia.

According to James Brabazon, a television journalist who spent several months with LURD last year, the organisation claims to have been founded in July 1999, during a meeting in Freetown, Sierra Leone and based out of Guinea. That date falls after the first attacks, so whether or not LURD as currently constituted was involved in those first attacks is

uncertain. By 2000, however, they were an active force in the Liberian interior and came close to Monrovia on several occasions in the past few years. Taylor missed the inauguration of the AU in July 2002, for example, because a LURD offensive had brought the rebels close to the city. It was not until 5 June 2003 that they entered the outskirts of the city for the first time, but many in Monrovia speculate that LURD did not enter Monrovia previously, not because they did not have the military capacity to do so, but because they did not think they would have sufficient international support for their call for Taylor's removal. These observers note that LURD began "World War I" just a day after the UN Special Court in Sierra Leone indicted Taylor on war crimes and peace talks began in Accra, Ghana.

After his 2002 trips, Brabazon described LURD as a reunification of the United Liberation Movement of Liberia for Democracy (ULIMO), a group involved in the 1989 to 1997 phase of the war that had split along ethnic lines into two factions: ULIMO-J led by Roosevelt Johnson and comprising mainly ethnic Krahns, and ULIMO-K led by Alhaji Kromah with a membership primarily of Islamic Mandingos. Brabazon estimated their total forces to number fewer than 3 000.¹ In March 2003, however, the arrival of a new group calling itself the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL) and working out of the Ivory Coast led to speculation that LURD had split along similar ethnic lines as the old ULIMO factions. Local press reported that MODEL had been formed by Krahns, most of whom are Christian, who were unhappy with the election of Sekou Damante Conneh Jr, an ethnic Mandingo, as the LURD's National Chairperson. Both groups, however, deny that they are connected in anything but their dislike of Taylor and it is certainly possible that MODEL simply formed independently to take advantage of Taylor's weakness. The brother of former President Doe, a Krahn, remained in the LURD leadership throughout the Accra talks.

Nevertheless, there does appear to be some ethnic component at play between the two groups, although even less is known about the structure of MODEL than about that of LURD. Allegedly supported by the Ivory Coast, a claim that the country's leadership denies, MODEL moved rapidly westward towards Monrovia from Liberia's eastern border. The organisation claims to have substantial support from Liberian expatriates living in the US and a large number of its political leaders currently live in the US. At the Accra peace talks, three of MODEL's four-member negotiation team were Liberian exiles living in America and MODEL's Chairman, Nimely Yaya (a Krahn) is a former UNICEF worker who has lived in the US for the past 20 years. On the ground, however, MODEL appears to have close ties with and receive support from the Ivory Coast. Many of the rank and file soldiers said they had been trained or armed in the Ivory Coast and the group's military leader,

General Boi Bleaju Boi (the one member of the negotiating team who lives in Liberia) keeps his family there. Indeed, there are good reasons for the Ivory Coast to support a Krahn-dominated rebel group in Liberia. Tensions have been high between Taylor and Ivorian President Laurent Gbagbo, especially after Taylor's support of the Movement from the Great West (MPIGO), one of the rebel groups that last year sent the Ivory Coast spiralling into civil war. Despite his dislike of Taylor, however, Gbagbo is not likely to support the Mandingo-dominated LURD in Liberia since he blames his Muslim neighbours for fermenting much of the instability in his own country and would probably hesitate to support an organisation that might bring about the creation of another Islamic-led neighbour. Additionally, the We ethnic group, which lives on the western border of the Ivory Coast, is closely related to the Krahn in Liberia and would therefore make a logical ally.

Like the ULIMO-K, LURD is dominated by ethnic Mandingos and based out of Guinea, where Conneh's wife is said to be a close spiritual advisor to the president. Many of the older soldiers had been involved in armed insurrection for years and quite a number had been based outside the country, in either Sierra Leone or Guinea, since before Taylor's election in 1997. For example, Lieutenant Colonel Marie Teah, a high-ranking female soldier, claimed to have been living in exile since 1990. She said her family fled because of the instability in 1989/1990 and ended up in a refugee camp in Sierra Leone. After a few months there, she joined ULIMO and when that organisation split stayed with the Guinea-based faction. Like many LURD soldiers, Teah spoke of being an exile from her own country because of her support for ULIMO—which fought Taylor—and because of her Mandingo ethnicity and Islamic religion.

Despite some accusations that one of LURD's main goals was the conversion of Liberia to Islam, religion did not seem to be a dominant feature of the organisation. Although many of the highest-ranking LURD officials said they were practising Muslims, their approach to the religion was generally casual. Islamic greetings and names were rarely used, prayer times were not strictly adhered to and the clothing worn by both women and men was more western than Muslim. Indeed, many of the women fighters dressed in quite revealing outfits, which would certainly have been deemed inappropriate by a group with fundamentalist Islamic leanings. Arabic graffiti were visible in a few places in rebel Monrovia, although English-language graffiti were far more prevalent. However, drugs and alcohol were much less liberally used among LURD troops than among government or MODEL troops and many LURD soldiers said intoxication was frowned upon by high-ranking officials. The scarcity of alcohol could be because of the organisation's religious leanings, or could simply be a sign of better discipline.

Both LURD and MODEL claimed their primary, indeed their only goal, was the removal from power of Charles Taylor. Initially, they seemed to have little idea about what would come after Taylor and could formulate few concrete ideas about the nature of a post-Taylor Liberia. As the peace negotiations in Accra progressed, however, and their chances of success began to appear brighter, the leadership of both groups began making increasing demands regarding their role in the interim government. In the week after Taylor's departure, for example, both groups threatened to return to arms if they were not given certain high-ranking positions, including the Vice-Presidency and many of the most lucrative cabinet positions. At one point, the LURD force commander in Monrovia, General Seye Sheriff, even hinted that the organisation would not be satisfied with anything less than the presidency. Under international pressure, however, they eventually dropped such claims.

Nor would a Mandingo or Krahn-led government have much popular support within Liberia. Like Taylor, the rebel groups are blamed for the country's current troubles and most Liberians say they would rather see the government led by people who have stayed outside of the current conflict. There is also an ethnic element to the distrust of LURD and MODEL. A number of people mentioned that when the old Americo-Liberian families left—the descendents of freed slaves who never constituted more than 5% of the population but dominated the country's politics for the first 150 years of its history—their houses and businesses were taken over by Mandingos. The Krahn, in contrast, are stereotyped as poorly educated and thuggish and are associated with the failed and sometimes brutal rule of Doe, who overthrew Liberia's last Americo-Liberian president, William Tolbert, in a military coup in 1980. In a few cases, people explicitly said they would not accept a Mandingo or Krahn president for Liberia. "I would not accept a Mandingo president," said one woman, Fagina Brooks, "Because they are not citizens of Liberia." This coastal-interior tension is not unique to Liberia. In the Ivory Coast, the recent civil war was started by dissatisfied members of internal tribes (most of whom are also Muslim) who believed they were discriminated against in the army and civil service.

As in the government forces, young boys and teenagers dominated both rebel armies, although LURD also had a small unit of women. By all accounts, their total number of troops was far smaller than the number under Taylor's command. One LURD commander, Colonel Martin Collins, who described himself as a senior military advisor to General Sheriff, said a vanguard force of 3 500 soldiers operating under the project name "Operation Butterfly" conducted the attack on Monrovia. He

claimed that this was supposed to be followed up by a second phase, called "Operation Spider Web", with 18,000 to 20,000 troops, but that the second phase had been called off due to the progress of the peace talks and the departure of Taylor. Since no evidence has been seen of this larger second force, it is likely that the 3 500 troops who participated in "Operation Butterfly" constitute the bulk of LURD's forces. At the moment it is impossible to estimate the strength of MODEL's force.

The rebels, and in particular LURD, were as fantastically dressed as their counterparts on the government side. When reporters first crossed the bridges into LURD territory on 4 August, they found groups of young fighters holding weapons spray-painted in florescent green, yellow and pink, with their heads often coloured to match. Like the government soldiers, the LURD soldiers were dressed in a mixture of American gangster-rap clothing, wigs and the occasional dress. Members of a special women's unit, known both as the Women's Auxiliary Corps and the Women's Artillery Commandos, wore tight tank tops, sandals and form-fitting jeans, despite being involved in active battle. With the exception of a few top commanders, almost none of the LURD fighters had proper uniforms.

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However, despite the lack of uniforms, the LURD appeared far better organised than their counterparts on the government side. Very few of the soldiers were stoned or drunk and the command structure appeared functional, with even low-ranking soldiers able to indicate to whom they reported directly and the names—or at least war names—of the top commanders. Sheriff, for example, was widely known under his war name "General Cobra", while the leader of the

women's unit was known as "Black Diamond". The LURD rebels were also much better armed than government troops and were responsible for most of the mortar attacks—and as a result most of the civilian casualties—though like the government troops they lacked training and were often unable to use many of their weapons. The mortars, for example, landed mainly on civilians, causing little damage to the military infrastructure.

With a few exceptions, most citizens living on the LURD side said that they had been treated quite well and that LURD had shared food from the port with civilians, although in the last days before they withdrew from Monrovia, rebel soldiers chased away thousands of civilians who had gone to the port in a last-ditch effort to stock up on food. Additionally, when access was first gained to LURD territory, there were several bodies that had been stripped naked and left to rot in the sun along the main road. Civilians said most were the bodies of looters who had been shot by LURD and left there as a

warning. In at least one case, two LURD fighters were executed for killing civilians. Indeed, the group's withdrawal from Monrovia was met with fear by many residents of Bush Rod Island, who were afraid that government soldiers would cross to take retribution on civilians who had stayed there. In the days after the LURD pulled back to Tubmanburg as part of the peace agreement, dozens of small, citizen-organised vigilante groups sprang up. Their main fear, they said, was of government soldiers, although they were also afraid of general criminal behaviour and said the LURD had imposed a certain degree of stability in their territory.

The same cannot be said of MODEL, who appeared far less organised and far more brutal than their counterparts in LURD. MODEL soldiers operating roadblocks between Monrovia and Buchanan were heavily under the influence of alcohol and often demanded bribes in return for permission to pass, something uncommon in LURD and government territory. In general, MODEL appeared less ideologically motivated and less disciplined. Civilian reports from Buchanan indicated that human rights abuses were quite widespread and that MODEL troops had taken almost anything that could be moved. In addition, in the week following Charles Taylor's departure, MODEL continued to advance towards Monrovia and the airport, perhaps to strengthen its position at the bargaining table in Accra.

International intervention

The signs of Liberia's cultural connection to the US are to be seen everywhere in Monrovia, from the shape and design of the number plates on cars to the slight southern twang of Liberian English. Despite the chequered history of the Americo-Liberians, who forced native Liberians to work in conditions very similar to those they had left behind in America, Liberians turned to the US for help in the most recent crisis. In the end, America played a grudging but probably vital role in securing the peace in Liberia and facilitating Charles Taylor's departure.

Most of the old Americo-Liberian families left Liberia in the aftermath of Doe's coup, yet their century-and-a-half of rule left an indelible imprint on the country and turned it into the closest thing America has to a former colony. Liberians generally characterise their relationship to America as that of a little brother and there is probably no country in the world that is as pro-American as this tiny West African nation. International debates about the legitimacy of America's invasion of Iraq and the "war on terror" were considered irrelevant there; as far as most Liberians were concerned, they needed help and they believed America had an obligation to assist. Unlike in Somalia, where American troops were viewed with a measure of distrust, in Liberia there was enormous goodwill towards America. Government troops, civilians and rebels all said they welcomed any American intervention and were disappointed at the US's slow response.

By contrast, there was considerable initial scepticism about West African peacekeepers, particularly the Nigerians. In 1990, ECOWAS, under the guise of ECOMOG (the ECOWAS Monitoring Group) had arrived in the country to enforce a peace deal between Taylor and Doe. They did not leave for almost eight years and are accused by many Liberians of prolonging the conflict for their own personal gain. Many Liberians say the ECOMOG troops, particularly the Nigerians, established businesses in Liberia and would buy Liberian goods—often raw materials like diamonds and timber, but also used cars and refrigerators—and export them to their home countries where they could be sold at a profit.

Despite its long history in Liberia and its use of the country as a foothold in Africa during the Cold War, the US was hesitant about engaging in another conflict, especially one that had the potential to become a long-lasting quagmire. Military officials were concerned about over-committing American troops abroad, especially when no immediate end could be seen to the conflict in Afghanistan or Iraq. Additionally, the spectre of Somalia still loomed, making the Bush administration wary of becoming involved in peacekeeping in a country beset by warlords and with little perceived strategic importance. At the same time, the "war on terror" had changed the geopolitical landscape and made the US worried about the potential threat posed by failed states. Bush had also justified his war in Iraq in part on humanitarian grounds, and there was pressure on the US government to remain consistent to that idea and help remove another bad leader (Charles Taylor) in a country without Iraq's strategic oil interest. Ultimately the US did intervene, but for a short time and with the absolute minimum risk to its own troops.

During his trip to Africa in early July, President Bush said he was considering military intervention in Liberia but was waiting for the report of an advance team on the logistics and feasibility of such an operation. On 25 July, he sent three war ships, bearing more than 2,000 US Marines, to the coast of Liberia, but continued to hedge on the nature and duration of any operation, again saying he was still waiting to hear from his military advisors. As the *Los Angeles Times* later stated, the assessment team had reported back more than a week before, during Bush's Africa trip, saying not only that such an intervention was feasible, but also that it was justified to avert a humanitarian disaster in Monrovia. But still the US delayed.

Eventually, a West African force consisting mainly of Nigerian troops was convinced to take the lead in a Liberian peacekeeping effort, but only after a substantial commitment of American money and logistical support—the amount is still unknown—and promises by the UN to reinforce the West Africans. The first contingent of Nigerians, a battalion of troops redeployed from the UN's peacekeeping effort in

Sierra Leone that was winding down, arrived on 4 August and fighting in the capital came to an immediate halt, even before the troops had left the airport. By 11 August, when Taylor left, about 1,400 Nigerian troops were on the ground, operating under the name ECOWAS Mission in Liberia or ECOMIL, although many Liberians still referred to them as ECOMOG. West African military leaders said they had specifically abandoned the name ECOMOG because of its negative connotations, and emphasised that they had learnt lessons from the past. The biggest lesson was probably not to go it alone. Although West African peacekeepers were greeted enthusiastically by Liberians, who by 4 August were happy for intervention from anyone, the real threat of American force, symbolised by the ships offshore, gave the West Africans important psychological support.

Although the ships did not come into sight until the day Taylor left, their presence added force to the Accra negotiations. When they did finally appear, just hours after Taylor resigned, it was seen as a symbolic gesture that the US was fully backing ECOMIL. Three days later, when 150 Marines were deployed to the airport and American fighter jets and helicopters put on a spectacular air show over the Old and New Bridges, where LURD was handing over control of its territory to the West Africans, many Liberians believed the US had at last come to their rescue. In fact, the American presence in Liberia was to be incredibly short-lived. The Marines stayed on the ground only until the second Nigerian battalion had arrived, and the ships began leaving the region on 1 October, the official beginning of the UN's peacekeeping effort in Liberia, although only a handful of the expected 15,000 troops had arrived.

Nevertheless, even this short intervention helped keep all parties to their promises by backing up West African diplomacy and peacekeeping efforts with the threat of real force. In the long term, however, the question will be whether the US, and the international community in general, retains enough sustained interest in the country through the coming years of rebuilding and reconciliation.

Challenges for the future

The departure of Taylor opens up the possibility of peace, but the situation in Liberia remains fragile. There are numerous indications that, although Taylor has left, he continues to interfere and the Nigerian government has had to warn him to refrain from contacting officials. However, the former president's influence is likely to diminish now that the new transitional government is in place, as fewer of his close confidants are in power. Indeed, the current transition can be a major test of Liberia's peace and the will of

the West African peacekeepers and the international forces that have arrived. Some worry that the withdrawal of the American ships from Liberia's coast will leave a major power void, especially since the UN force will not be at full strength for some time. After all, Taylor did end his final speech to the people of Liberia—which almost no Liberians heard since he had no means of broadcasting it to the nation—with the words “God willing, I will be back.”

Ultimately, however, the success of Liberia's peace will depend largely on the success of disarmament and demobilisation efforts. Many Liberians blame the country's current instability on the failure of disarmament in the run-up to the 1997 elections, which legitimised Taylor's position. Although the Abuja Accords, which set the stage for the 1997 elections, provided for the disarmament and demobilisation of soldiers from all warring factions, many Liberians say Taylor blocked several of its provisions, including the reorganisation and integration of the AFL and restructuring of the media. When the elections finally came around in 1997, Taylor was still powerful and many Liberians say they voted for Taylor then because they thought by giving him what he wanted (the presidency) the war would end. “People thought that if he did not win, the war would begin again,” said Anthony Collins, a refugee at the old Masonic Temple, once a bastion of Americo-Liberian power.

Nor were many of the young soldiers who participated in that conflict fully rehabilitated. Many of the fighters in the current conflict claimed to be long-time soldiers and a number said they had been demobilised in 1997, but had returned to arms because they had nowhere else to go. The situation today

is even worse. After 14 years of nearly constant war, a whole generation of young men has grown up under arms and knows no other way of life. Breaking the cycle of war will require the successful disarmament and rehabilitation of these young men. “It will be peace if the UN comes and collects our weapons and gives us money,” said one 27-year-old government soldier on the frontline, Victor Fayah, in the days before Taylor's departure. “If they don't, anyone who comes, we will join them. We'll spoil the whole thing.” Like many soldiers, Fayah, who claimed to have been fighting since he was 14, said he would not give up his weapon for free. In 1997, he claims, he willingly handed over his weapon to peacekeepers and was given 2,000 Liberian dollars, the equivalent at the current exchange rate of about \$40. That money was soon gone and, with no education or skills, a year later he joined the army again. His unit had not been paid in two years, but their guns, he said, gave them the power to take what they needed. He wants at least \$300 for his weapon and the

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promise of school or a job. "If the UN doesn't pay us, we will take the weapons, the guns and the grenades, and we will rob."

If Taylor can be kept out of the picture, however, perhaps this time Liberia does have a chance at peace. No one in the government or either rebel group seems to have either the personal backing or grand ambitions of Taylor, so the peace process may be allowed to progress without the kind of interference it encountered last time. The departure of Taylor should also mean an influx of development aid into the country and hopefully the eventual reestablishment of services in Monrovia, which has not had electricity or running water since at least 1997. High on the list of priorities once the immediate displacement crisis has been addressed should be the rehabilitation of the country's main hydroelectric dam, which will cost an estimated \$150 million.

For now, however, just feeding and housing Liberia's three million people will be a monumental task. The circumstances of the 1,5 million who live in Monrovia is desperate, but perhaps more challenging will be addressing the needs of Liberia's rural population, many of whom are also likely to have been displaced from their homes and unable to plant and cultivate crops. For the first time, however, there is hope.

NOTES

- 1 J Brabazon, Liberia: Liberians united for reconciliation and democracy, Royal Institute of International Affairs Briefing Paper No. 1, February 2003.



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About this paper

August 2003 was a dramatic month for Liberia. Rebels held Monrovia under siege, West African peacekeepers moved in, President Charles Taylor stepped down and the United States made its first peacekeeping foray into Africa in a decade. For Liberia, trapped in a 14-year cycle of civil war, recent events offer a first chance at peace, but the task ahead is enormous. Years of war and Taylor's corrupt rule have left the country almost entirely destroyed.

About the author

Nicole Itano is a freelance reporter based in Johannesburg, South Africa. She has reported from 15 African countries, for a variety of international media including the Christian Science Monitor, the New York Times, the Sydney Morning Herald and the Associated Press. During August 2003, she spent three weeks in Monrovia on assignment for the Christian Science Monitor, an American newspaper based in Boston. Ms. Itano has a bachelors degree in history, with an emphasis on modern African history, from Yale University in Connecticut.

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Brooklyn Square • 0075 • Pretoria • SOUTH AFRICA
Tel: +27-12-346-9500/2 • Fax: +27-12-460-0998
Email: iss@iss.co.za • <http://www.iss.co.za>

67 Roeland Square • Drury Lane • Gardens •
Cape Town • 8001 • SOUTH AFRICA
Tel: +27-21-461-7211 • Fax: +27-21-461-7213
Email: issct@iss.co.za

