

Liberia - First Civil War - 1989-1996

The Liberian Civil War, which was one of Africa's bloodiest, claimed the lives of more than 200,000 Liberians and further displaced a million others into refugee camps in neighboring countries.

Elections are scheduled for 1991. But late in 1989, severe communal violence broke out after a failed coup attempt against Doe. Several hundred members of the Gio and Mano tribes, that had been ill-treated by Doe, revolted in the northeast.

On December 24, 1989, a small band of Libyan-trained rebels led by Charles G. Taylor, invaded Liberia from the Ivory Coast. Taylor, Doe's former procurement chief, is an Americo-Liberian of both indigenous and Americo-Liberian ancestry. He graduated from Bentley College in Massachusetts and is said to have tastes that run to fine suits and silk ties. With explicit support from neighbouring African nations and a large section of Liberia's opposition, Taylor's National Patriotic Front rebels rapidly gained the support of Liberians because of the repressive nature of Samuel Doe and his government. Various unpredictable events, like the Gulf war and the consequent US disengagement from Liberia, coincided to turn this into a protracted civil war, with ultimately west African ECOMOG intervention. A final cease-fire and peace accord in 1996 was followed by the installation of a transitional government of all factional leaders.

Liberian troops and provincial security forces were dispatched to Nimba County to counter the insurgency and indiscriminately killed Liberian civilians without regard to the distinction between combatants and noncombatants. In response to this insurgency, President Doe launched an unrelenting wave of violence against the inhabitants of Nimba County. Media reports and international human rights organizations estimated that at least 200 persons, primarily members of the Mano and Gio ethnic groups, were killed by troops of the Government of Liberia during the counterinsurgency campaign.

When the cold war was over and Charles Taylor's band of rebels--some of them children--clashed with government forces and other ethnic militias in the streets, the resulting conflict was so frighteningly gruesome that for many it was almost impossible to understand. Between December 1989 and mid-1993, Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) is estimated to have been responsible for thousands of deliberate killings of civilians. As NPFL forces advanced towards Monrovia in 1990, they targeted people of the Krahn and Mandingo ethnic groups, both of which the NPFL considered supporters of President Doe's government.

ECOMOG troops, predominantly from Nigeria and Ghana, entered Monrovia -- and prolonged the war by aiding Doe's troops. This resulted in a daily massacre of non-Khran Liberians in Monrovia by Doe's Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL) men.

Although the sources of the Liberian conflict are complex, on one level it represents an attempt by Americo-Liberians to re-establish themselves as the dominant political force in Liberia. The war was not about tribes seeking dominance over one another. Charles Taylor led the invasion into Liberia in the name of trying to right the wrong for the Gios and Manos. This was the motivator for the two ethnic groups who joined the movement. When the Taylor rebels entered Nimba County, their home, the conflict quickly drew in the Mandingoes, who are mostly Muslims. The Gio tribe soon formed their own separate rebel forces under Prince Johnson, and a bloody three-way civil war began.

Sam Dokie and other prominent individuals of Nimba County initially welcomed the Taylor/Sirleaf-Johnson rebel incursion into Liberia to resist Doe's Khran ethnic fighters. The County leaders rapidly mobilized young men to join the rebel forces believing that Taylor was sincere when he said the sole purpose of his attack was to remove the tyrant, Samuel K. Doe from power. After discovering Taylor's plans for the Liberian people, Dokie and others separated themselves from the National Patriotic Front of Liberia [NPFL]. Dokie along with his wife and two others were brutally murdered by Taylor's NPFL-controlled Security forces.

As the fighting escalated into civil war, three distinct factions became engaged in a national power-struggle: forces loyal to Doe, and two mutually opposed rebel groups led by Charles Taylor and Prince Yormie Johnson. Taylor, a former Doe aide, and Johnson had started their campaign under the same banner, the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL). Tribal affiliations played a key role in the split between the Krahn, to which Doe and most of his adherents belonged, and the Gio and Mano people, who formed the bulk of the rebel forces. Fighting between Doe's troops and the Taylor/Johnson axis began at the end of 1989. Johnson assumed the presidency temporarily during September 1989, after which it passed through several hands, settling for a time in those of Amos Sawyer, who managed to pacify some parts of the country.

Libya may have used the Liberian civil war to undermine US influence in Liberia, since the CIA had reportedly used Liberia as a base to attempt the overthrow of Gadaffi's regime. Burkina Faso's president Blaise Campaori, another Libyan protege, provided foreign mercenaries and training bases for Taylor. Military supplies and manpower from Libya and Burkina Faso were transported by road through the Ivory Coast to Liberia.

One of the factors that drove the warlords to reject a transition to normalcy was their exploitation of Liberia's natural resources. Once the war started, Taylor found wealth, and the war was increasingly about maintaining that fortune. The warlords were wantonly exploiting their country's resources to keep themselves and their ragtag forces in weapons with virtual impunity, and in some cases complicity. The primary sources of revenue for these warlords were Liberia's diamonds, timber, rubber, gold, and iron ore. Timber and rubber are among Liberia's main export items. Liberia earns more than \$85 million and more than \$57 million annually from timber and rubber exports, respectively. Alluvial diamond and gold mining activities also account for some economic activity.

Barely 6 months after the rebels first attacked, they had reached the outskirts of Monrovia. Liberia has been marked by intermittent civil war ever since. Although many Liberians were glad to see Doe's repressive regime removed, no group that emerged from the civil war was powerful enough to replace the Doe government. As a result, the Republic of Liberia was plunged into a state of chaos from which it has yet to emerge.

Despite a cease-fire agreement signed in Bamako, Mali, in 1990, the civil war never really ended.

Prince Johnson, who had been a member of Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) but broke away because of policy differences, formed the Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia (INPFL). Johnson's forces captured and killed Doe on September 9, 1990.

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) intervened and succeeded in preventing Charles Taylor from capturing Monrovia. An Interim Government of National Unity (IGNU) was formed in Gambia under the auspices of ECOWAS in October 1990 and Dr. Amos C. Sawyer became President. Sawyer was backed by a Nigerian-led peacekeeping force, known as ECOMOG (ECOWAS Monitoring Group). Taylor refused to work with the interim government and continued the war.

The war spilled over into Sierra Leone in 1991, when Foday Sankoh led a mixed group of Liberians and Sierra Leoneans into Kailahun in eastern Sierra Leone. President Momoh's troops attempted to train a fighting force from among the 250,000 Liberian refugees in Sierra Leone. The ex-Liberian Broadcasting Corporation head, Alhaji Kromah, organised Mandingo Muslims and Krahn refugees in Freetown to form the United Liberation Movement of Liberia (ULIMO).

The Krahns and Mandingoes became the direct targets of Taylor's NPFL group. In neighboring Sierra Leone, refugees of these two tribes led other tribes in organizing the ULIMO faction and returned to Liberia. It was this group in 1992 that helped the West African ECOMOG peacekeeping force stop the takeover of Monrovia by Taylor's NPFL rebels.

With the escalation of violence that began in August 1992 it seemed as if even the limited peace Liberia possessed had been completely shattered. The re-emergence of overt civil war threatened to return Liberia to the state of terror and brutality that prompted Africa Watch monitors to call Liberia a "human rights disaster." By 1992, several warring factions had emerged in the Liberian civil war [all of which were eventually absorbed

in the new government]. Roads leading out from Monrovia were not open for travel except for very limited pre-approved trips into Cape Mount and Bomi counties. Travelers, including US citizens, had been detained, harassed and delayed by forces of the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL). Five US citizen nuns were killed in Gardnersville by NPFL Troops in October 1992. Roberts International Airport outside of Monrovia was closed. Limited air service existed only between Spriggs Payne Field in Monrovia and Abidjan, Cote D'Ivoire, and Freetown, Sierra Leone. No major international air carrier served Spriggs Payne Field. Overland routes to other West African countries were not open.

In January 1993 a security buffer around Monrovia was re-established by forces of the West African Peace Monitoring Group. The authority of the interim government never extended beyond Monrovia's suburbs. ECOMOG defended the city, which became a civilian safe haven with as many as a million people at some points.

Taylor and his NPFL guerrillas - mostly from the Gio and Mano peoples who are historic rivals of the Krahn - kept fighting. To complicate matters further, at least three new guerrilla formations appeared as both Taylor's NPFL and its main opponents split into factions. A peace accord signed in the Beninois capital, Cotonou, in the spring of 1994 was quickly forgotten.

The United Liberation Movement for Democracy in Liberia split in 1994 between ULIMO-J (mainly Khran ethnics headed by Roosevelt Johnson) et ULIMO-K (mainly Mandingo ethnics headed by Alhaji Kromah).

Liberia's seven warring factions -- including the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), the United Liberation Movement with two wings referred to as ULIMO-J and ULIMO-K, the Liberia Peace Council, NPFL-CRC, the Lofa Defense Force and remnants of the Armed Forces of Liberia loyal to former president Samuel K. Doe -- continued to fight. In September 1995, after failing to honor more than 13 signed peace accords, under the auspices of the Economic Community of West African State, a Liberian Council of State comprising the seven warring factions was formed under the Abuja Peace Accord. Throughout January and February 1996, the deployment of UNOMIL and ECOMOG forces to monitor the peace process is stalled due to a lack of funding and political will.

During the first week of April 1996, the failure of the Council of State to resolve internal power struggles led to a resumption of fighting in Monrovia. In April 1996, the Liberian Council of State sent police-militia to arrest Prince Johnson on murder charges. As a direct result, fighting erupted in Monrovia between 'government forces' and LPC, AFL and ULIMO-J fighters loosely allied under Johnson and based at Barclay Training Centre. Johnson's forces took 600 civilians as 'human shields'. Some 1,500 people were killed in the clashes that lasted seven weeks.

On 17 August 1996, after 134 days of killing and mayhem, Nigeria and other West African states brokered a cease fire between the warring factions. Taylor emerged the dominant power, winning the 1997 presidential election. ECOMOG was dominated by Nigerian forces. General Sani Abacha, the corrupt ruler of Nigeria, enjoyed a good rapport with Taylor. Abacha persuaded Taylor to agree to the ceasefire and to participate in the election. But Taylor was not as popular with other military leaders in Nigeria as he had been with Abacha.

It took seven years of intertribal warfare and of repeatedly broken cease-fires, for the combined efforts of neighboring African countries and of the UN to impose a settlement and to organize elections. Disarmament in January 1997 was followed by democratic elections in July, which were won by Charles Taylor with 75% of the vote.

President Taylor firmly established lasting peace internally and, once achieved, has started increasingly to welcome back to the country opposition of all kinds, including most former warlords. He undertook a constructive role in the Sierra Leone conflict, which had been started more or less simultaneously, proposing that all sides involved should be given a fair chance of participating in future elections. These efforts had resulted in the present UN-monitored disarmament process in Sierra Leone and a general return of peace in the sub-region. It also earned Liberia credit and re-establishment of diplomatic relations, as well as a constructive review of the economy by Washington institutions.

While President Taylor's first two years in office demanded strenuous efforts to reconcile different factions, maintain peace, avoid post war excesses, and establish dialogue with Nigerian-led ECOMOG who were still fighting rebels in Sierra Leone, the tide had clearly turned since mid 1999. With the UN peace mission in Sierra Leone, the sub-region seemed finally set to recover after the decade of unrest which followed ten years of steep decline. Having achieved 'sustainability' of government, the time had finally come for sustained economic development.

The 1989-1996 civil war had a devastating effect on the country's economy. Most major businesses were destroyed or heavily damaged, and most foreign investors and businessmen left the country. Iron ore production has stopped completely, and Liberia depends heavily on timber and rubber exports and revenues from its maritime registry program. Relatively few foreign investors have returned to the country since the end of the civil war due to the depressed business climate and continuing instability.

Liberia is still trying to recover from the ravages of war. Six years after the war, pipe-borne water and electricity are still unavailable, and schools, hospitals, roads, and infrastructure remain derelict. As a result of the civil war, there were 157,000 IDP's in approximately 36 camps in 1997. International agencies and the Liberia Refugee Repatriation and Resettlement Commission (LRRRC) have been able to resettle approximately 126,243 displaced persons since 1998. In October 2000 fighting in northern Lofa county further increased the number of displaced persons. There were an estimated 15,000 to 20,000 IDP's in the country at the end of 2000.

Young persons were victimized during the civil war of the mid-1990s. An estimated 50,000 children were killed; many more were injured, orphaned, or abandoned. Approximately 100 underfunded orphanages operated in and around Monrovia; however, many orphans lived outside these institutions. The National Military Families Association of Liberia (NAMFA) tried to provide for orphaned military children; it registered hundreds of street children. These institutions did not receive any government funding, but relied on private donations. Nearly all youths witnessed terrible atrocities, and some committed atrocities themselves. Approximately 21 percent (4,306) of the combatants who were disarmed under the provisions of the Abuja Peace Accords were child soldiers under the age of 17. Many youths remained traumatized, and some still were addicted to drugs. The number of street children in Monrovia and the number of abandoned infants increased significantly following disarmament. Although pressured by the Government to cease their programs, international NGOs and UNICEF continued retraining and rehabilitation programs for a limited number of former child fighters. These children were vulnerable to being recruited in subregional conflicts, since most had no other means of support.

(source: <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/liberia-1989.htm>)