



Covering events from January - December 2000

## LIBERIA

### Republic of Liberia

**Head of state and government:** Charles G. Taylor

**Capital:** Monrovia

**Population:** 3.1 million

**Official language:** English

**Death penalty:** retentionist



**Torture, ill-treatment and other human rights violations continued to be carried out by the security forces. Human rights defenders and journalists were arrested, assaulted and forced into exile. Political prisoners were sentenced to prison terms after trials which failed to meet international standards for fair trial. There was no progress in investigating past human rights abuses. The international community continued to accuse the Liberian government of assisting rebel forces responsible for atrocities in neighbouring Sierra Leone.**

### Fighting in Lofa County

In July armed opposition forces attacked Lofa County, northern Liberia; the government deployed the armed forces, the Anti-Terrorist Unit and war veterans against them. The government accused the Guinean government of allowing attacks on Liberia from bases in neighbouring Guinea. Thousands of people fled upper Lofa County. In December the Liberian authorities reported that about 100 soldiers had been killed in the fighting.

From September hostilities between armed groups along the borders between Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea resulted in massive population displacement. The Guinean authorities accused armed groups backed by Liberia and Burkina Faso, the armed opposition in Sierra Leone and Guinean dissidents of killing hundreds of people in attacks on border towns in the Macenta region of Guinea. The attacks resulted in massive displacement of Liberian and Sierra Leonean refugees and of Guinean nationals.

More than a hundred people, mostly belonging to the Mandingo ethnic group, were arrested by government security forces on suspicion of backing the incursion into Lofa County. Most of those arrested were held incommunicado without

charge in unofficial detention centres, including the military base in Gbatata, and were tortured. Dozens were allegedly extrajudicially executed. The number of those held incommunicado and summarily executed could be higher. Sierra Leonean refugees, including former child soldiers, were reportedly recruited by the Sierra Leone armed opposition which was supported by the Liberian government. There were also reports of forcible recruitment of Liberian nationals by the Liberian security forces. Insurgents allegedly from Guinea were accused of carrying out abductions of civilians.

Ethnic clashes broke out following the incursion and members of the Mandingo community suspected of backing insurgents came under armed attack by civilians in Lofa and Nimba Counties, allegedly with the acquiescence of local security forces on at least one occasion.

### **Involvement in the Sierra Leone conflict**

The international community continued to accuse the Liberian government of providing arms, ammunition and fighters, in violation of a 1998 UN embargo, to armed opposition forces in neighbouring Sierra Leone which have been responsible for large-scale atrocities against civilians.

The Liberian government continued to deny the allegations, accused the US and United Kingdom (UK) governments of seeking to destabilize Liberia, and called for an independent investigation.

In June the European Union expressed concern about Liberia's role in the illicit diamond trade from Sierra Leone and its failure to stop arms reaching rebel forces in Sierra Leone through Liberian territory, and threatened to suspend aid to Liberia. In July the UN Security Council imposed an embargo on diamond exports from Sierra Leone. In October the US government imposed visa restrictions on senior Liberian officials; the Liberian authorities announced reciprocal measures.

A UN panel of experts, established in August to investigate the link between the diamond trade and the conflict in Sierra Leone, published its report in December. The panel found evidence of the Liberian government's support for rebel forces in Sierra Leone, including military training and weapons transfers, and of trafficking of diamonds through Liberia from rebel-held areas. Other governments were found to have been implicated. The panel made recommendations, including for an embargo on diamonds from Liberia and a travel ban on Liberian officials by UN member states.

Amnesty International called for diamond trading in western Africa to be investigated and regulated in order to stop diamonds from rebel-held areas of Sierra Leone financing the purchase of arms used to kill and mutilate civilians in Sierra Leone.

### **Impunity**

No progress was made by the authorities in bringing to justice the perpetrators of massive human rights abuses carried out during the seven-year civil war which ended in 1996. There were also no independent investigations into political killings and other human rights violations committed by the security forces or armed groups operating in support of the government since the return to constitutional rule in 1997. Those responsible for the killing of Samuel Dokie, a former government minister who was arrested and later found dead with three others in 1997, were not brought to justice.

No independent or thorough investigation was carried out into alleged extrajudicial executions, torture and other human rights violations against members of the Krahn ethnic group and others during fighting in September 1998 between forces loyal to President Taylor and supporters of Roosevelt Johnson, a former faction leader. A 1999 UN investigation into the fighting obtained accounts of extrajudicial executions and other human rights violations by government security forces. They found that the dead and injured numbered several hundred and that ethnic Krahns had been targeted. The government had said 100 people had been killed or injured.

No training in international human rights standards was known to have been provided to the security forces, including special forces such as the Anti-Terrorist Unit which have been accused of serious human rights violations. Former combatants of the armed opposition group formerly headed by Charles Taylor, the National Patriotic Front of Liberia, which was implicated in major human rights violations, were recruited to the security forces without training in human rights.

### **Extrajudicial executions and torture**

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There were further reports of extrajudicial executions. The security forces continued to be responsible for torture and ill-treatment of political prisoners and criminal suspects. Liberian human rights organizations called for the closure of the Anti-Terrorist Unit base in Gbatala, central Liberia, where detainees have been tortured. Detention conditions in most police cells and prisons continued to be so harsh as to amount to cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment. Beatings and harassment of civilians by members of the security forces and former combatants continued, especially in rural areas.

- In May the bodyguards of a government official reportedly beat and burned three people in Monrovia; they were suspected of stealing from the official. One of them, Gbaela Willie, died as a result of his injuries. Monrovia police reportedly arrested four bodyguards and opened an investigation into the death.
- In September an army commander said that he had personally executed Aruna Boakai, an Anti-Terrorist Unit officer, in the town of Voinjama, Lofa County, for killing a soldier in August.
- In November a Senate committee investigated allegations that a senator had ordered the security forces to detain illegally, beat and flog civilians in River Gee County, southeastern Liberia. The investigation had not been completed by the end of the year.

### **Attacks on the news media and human rights defenders**

Journalists and human rights defenders were arrested, physically abused and threatened by the Liberian authorities.

- In March Suah Deddeh, Chair of the Liberian Press Union, was arrested and questioned by security officers after criticizing the closure of two privately owned radio stations, Star Radio and Radio Veritas, by the authorities. He was released the next day without charge. After protests, Radio Veritas was allowed to reopen but Star Radio remained banned.
- In late March James Torh, a prominent human rights activist, fled the country after Anti-Terrorist Unit officers twice came looking for him at his

home at night. In December 1999 he had been briefly detained and charged with sedition for allegedly making remarks critical of the government. When he did not appear at a court hearing in April, the authorities ordered his rearrest.

- In August, four journalists working for *Channel 4*, a UK television station - Sorious Samura, Gugulakhe Radebe, David Barrie and Timothy John Lambon - were detained for several days in Monrovia and accused of spying. The four were beaten following their arrest and one of them was threatened with death. They were released unconditionally after widespread protests.
- In September, staff members of the independent *New Democrat*, including its editor Charles Jackson, fled Liberia following death threats, intimidation and harassment by the security forces.
- In November armed men believed to be civil war veterans, who reportedly included a senior armed forces officer, attacked members of a non-governmental organization, the Centre for Democratic Empowerment (CEDE), in Monrovia. They stabbed and wounded Conmany Wesseh, and physically assaulted Amos Sawyer, formerly head of the Liberian interim government during the civil war and CEDE Chairman, and other staff. The armed forces officer and seven others were subsequently charged with aggravated assault and released on bail to await trial. However, others believed to be also responsible for the attack were not known to have been investigated by police. Local human rights activists called for an independent inquiry. Suspects arrested in connection with a 1999 attack on the home of Conmany Wesseh and death threats against his family had been released without charge or trial despite evidence against them.

### **Sedition and treason trials**

One trial ended, another started and an appeal was heard in trials held in connection with the fighting in Monrovia in September 1998 between government forces and forces loyal to opposition leader Roosevelt Johnson.

- In February a court martial convicted four army officers of sedition - General Joseph Jarlee, Major Alphonso Dubar, Master Sergeant Alexander Gee and Private Okpakakpu Monger - and sentenced them to 10 years' imprisonment. Five other officers were acquitted. There were concerns that the trial did not meet international standards for fair trial and about the alleged intimidation of defence lawyers. The defendants, who were reportedly beaten following their arrest, continued to be detained in harsh conditions at a military barracks. General Jarlee was reportedly denied adequate food or medical treatment.
- In June the treason trial started of five civilians - Jardiah S. Farley, Charles C. Sobue, Kaye Gbagba, Alpha Massaley and Roosevelt Togba - suspected of supporting Roosevelt Johnson's forces. The trial had not concluded by the end of 2000.
- In December the Supreme Court heard appeals by 13 people convicted of treason in April 1999 and by the prosecution in the same case which called for longer prison sentences. The Court increased the sentences from 10 to 20 years' imprisonment. In April 1999 the Criminal Court had given as its reason for a lenient sentence the "need for genuine reconciliation in the country". The trial had been marred by irregularities and some of the defendants had been beaten severely following their arrest. Most were former government officials serving 10-year prison

sentences in the Central Prison, Monrovia, where they were reportedly harassed and denied adequate medical care.

- In August the Liberian government issued an arrest warrant for Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, an opposition leader in exile, to face treason charges, with 14 others, for allegedly supporting the insurgents. Of those charged, only Raleigh Seekie was arrested and was still in detention awaiting trial at the end of 2000. Several other civilians suspected of supporting the insurgents were reported to have been arrested in Monrovia and in other parts of the country. It was not known whether they had been released by the end of the year.

### AI reports

- Liberia: Crackdown on media signals further repression of human rights defenders (AI Index: [AFR 34/001/2000](#))
  - Liberia: Attacks on media continue with the arrest of a foreign television crew (AI Index: [AFR 34/002/2000](#))
  - Liberia: Fear for safety of Conmany Wesseh and others (AI Index: [AFR 34/004/2000](#))
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