

As ECOMOG troops prepare to pull out

President Taylor cracks down in Liberia

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22 June 1999

President Charles Taylor has said that foreign troops sent into Liberia during the eight-year civil war are to leave later this month. The occupying force, known as ECOMOG and comprising mainly Nigerian troops, is due to evacuate on July 26, the one hundred fifty-second anniversary of Liberia's independence. Taylor made the announcement on June 7, after returning from a trip to other African countries including Nigeria. He said that ECOMOG's departure would coincide with the symbolic burning of weapons seized from the various conflicting factions at the end of the civil war. The arms consist of tens of thousands of assault rifles, artillery pieces and millions of bullets.

A military strongman who began the bloody civil war in order to seize power, Taylor is now unchallenged in his control of Liberia. While he lives in a luxurious mansion, he recently told journalists that running water and electricity are luxuries for the inhabitants of the capital, Monrovia. He is intent on showing that any opposition to his policies will be suppressed. The Justice Ministry has drawn up a new list of suspects to be charged with treason—already six opponents are awaiting trial. This continues a pattern that began several months ago when two other groups were accused of treason, tried and sentenced. Thirteen people are already serving 10-year sentences, including one of Taylor's former advisers, Bai Gbala, and a former presidential affairs minister, Charles Breeze.

All the treason charges result from clashes near the American embassy in Monrovia, between government forces and supporters of Taylor's opponent, Roosevelt Johnson. Nine members of the army are facing trial on similar charges of sedition, accused of conniving with dissident forces to overthrow the government. The Justice and Peace Commission suspects other prisoners may have been tortured, after police in Buchanan

denied them access to cells.

Taylor was accused of embezzlement when he was a member of the previous US-backed military dictatorship of Samuel Doe and was forced to flee to America. On his return to Liberia, he became prominent in a group known as the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL). The NPFL was one of a number of parties that gained popularity due to the widespread hatred of the Doe regime. The NPFL had no program, other than to replace Doe with themselves. They used widespread pogroms to increase their power, making war into a business. The fight for the leadership of the NPFL was not a political struggle, but a series of mafia-style murders. When NPFL secretary-general Moses Duopu publicly criticised Taylor for describing him as a "cold-blooded capitalist," Taylor had him and other NPFL leaders murdered.

With a growing number of rival military groups contending for power, the civil war escalated. The death toll during the war as a whole is estimated at 200,000, with around 750,000 fleeing abroad and over a million internally displaced. At the beginning of the 1990s, when the scale of the bloodshed became widely known, many Liberians expected that the US would intervene to stop it. Instead, the US launched its assault on Iraq and sent forces to Liberia only in order to evacuate American and European nationals. The US spurred on Nigeria to play the role of regional policeman. ECOMOG forces were sent in under Nigerian control, backed by the US and other Western powers. They soon became discredited, acting as yet another faction in the fighting, using the same methods of plunder as the NPFL. "'ECOMOG Enterprises' was open for business" throughout the war, was the wry comment of one businessman.

By 1996, the US and its Nigerian stooge were seeking

a settlement with Taylor as the only viable contender for power. A series of peace negotiations began, involving representatives of all the main groups. After several agreements failed, the talks finally led to the signing of the Abuja Accords. Under the terms of this settlement, the disarmament of the various warring factions finally took place between November 1996 and February 1997. ECOMOG was then able to extend its control. The elections in July 1997 were imposed under military rule. As the main rebel faction, Taylor and the NPFL won 75 percent of the vote and on August 2, 1998 the new government was sworn into office.

After fighting against ECOMOG, Taylor had to change tack when he came to power. Despite his claims that they were training dissidents to fight against him, he had to accept ECOMOG's presence and increasingly came to depend upon them. The terms of the Abuja Accords put ECOMOG in charge of training a "neutral" Liberian army, following the disarmament of all the warring parties (including Taylor's NPFL). Taylor abrogated this agreement at the end of 1998, claiming that as president he had sole authority over the organisation of the armed forces. He began to recruit his own men into the Liberian army, making it clear that he was preparing to rule without ECOMOG's presence. ECOMOG Commander Major General Victor Malu said that if requested to leave, the troops would be out of Liberia within 30 days. It has taken until now, however, for Taylor to take up this offer.



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