

# Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea—no peace for the masses

Trevor Johnson  
27 September 1999

Two years after the end of Liberia's 1989-97 civil war, and with the Sierra Leone conflict supposedly over, life for the mass of people in the region is still beset by instability, violence and the threat of war.

For 7,000 Sierra Leoneans this has meant being forced to make a five-day trek from their refugee camp at Kolahun in Liberia's upper Lofa County to Tarvey in lower Lofa, to escape constant harassment by Liberian security forces. When they arrive in Tarvey they face overcrowded camps, where the occupants already suffer bloody diarrhoea, and run the risk of epidemics such as cholera. Even this escape route was closed for 600 refugees from the Kolahun camp, who were too weak to make the journey.

From February 1998 until August this year, some 16,000 Sierra Leoneans had been living in the Kolahun camp. Eight thousand had already made the trek to Tarvey in August, following dissident activity in the area, according to Médecins sans frontières, the French aid agency.

All the Sierra Leonean refugees in Lofa County are being relocated because of government-backed harassment. A spokesman for the UNHCR said the refugees would be relocated to Sinje, Grand Cape Mount County. There are already 5,000 Sierra Leonean refugees in Sinje.

Lofa County is close to the point where Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea meet. It contains a densely forested area criss-crossed by rivers, which is difficult for government forces to reach. Due to years of oppression and corruption, people have fled there from Sierra Leone and Liberia, preferring the difficulties of life in the forest to the threats of death or mutilation at home. Many of the victims who have fled there are from minority ethnic groups such as the Krahns and Mandingoes.

Charles Taylor's regime, put in power with Western backing in 1997, is responsible for continuing atrocities, particularly against ethnic minorities and political opponents. In September 1998, Taylor ordered his forces to storm a densely populated area of Monrovia, the Liberian capital, with artillery weapons, mortars, machine guns and bombs. According to the US State Department, about 300 people, mostly ethnic Krahns, were gunned down. Other reports put the number of people killed at over 1,500. This led to an exodus of Krahns out of the country, with as many as 18,000 fleeing into refugee camps.

In April 1999, the campaign of terror intensified. The border town of Voinjama was attacked. The government first claimed that dissident forces based in Guinea were responsible. Weeks later it admitted that the atrocities were the work of its own security forces.

The authorities in Liberia and Guinea both claim that armed groups invaded the border area in August. Liberia accused Guinea of allowing rebels based there to attack Liberia. Guinea counter-charged that a group from Liberia had killed around 30 people in an incursion. Each side has said that the attacks upon it could only take place with the backing of the other country, while denying having any influence upon rebel groups themselves.

This would not be the first time that the Taylor regime has destabilised a neighbouring country by supporting armed incursions by rebel groups. Taylor is known to have supported the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), the group which was fighting the Kabbah regime in Sierra Leone and which was responsible for many of the atrocities there. The RUF has operated out of western Liberia for some time.

An attempt to agree a common approach to the issue by the governments of the three countries was made at

a summit last week, held under the auspices of ECOWAS, the regional group dominated by Nigeria. Hosted by Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo, it included representatives from Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Guinea and Togo.

The leaders of Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea agreed to set up a joint security committee to establish military collaboration in the border area, expelling those not wanted so that they could be dealt with in their country of origin. The three states agreed to swap lists of dissidents for this purpose.

It will only be a short time before this agreement is broken. The armed occupying force, known as ECOMOG (comprising mainly Nigerian troops), was sent into both Liberia and Sierra Leone to police the conflicts, without achieving any real stability. Taylor's National Patriotic Front was elevated into power in Liberia, and efforts are being made to establish a coalition in Sierra Leone made up of the former Kabbah regime and the RUF. Whilst this has given state power to some of the participants in the conflicts, it has not resolved the issue. Despite this, ECOMOG troops have pulled out of Liberia, and are in the process of pulling out of Sierra Leone.

The economies of Liberia and Sierra Leone are at present dysfunctional, having been ravaged during years of civil war. Both Sierra Leone and Liberia are rich in minerals—such as diamonds, bauxite and iron ore—but their inhabitants suffer extreme poverty, with life expectancy down to 37 years in Sierra Leone.

Nigeria has always acted as self-appointed policeman in the region, and is likely to be pressuring the smaller countries to resolve their most obvious manifestations of instability so that big business can move in. However, none of the governments of the region will do anything to lessen the suffering of the masses there, and now Guinea could also be drawn into the same downward spiral as her two neighbours.



To contact the WSWs and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**