

# War in Sierra Leone and Guinea spreads to Liberia

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Reports from Liberia over the last few days indicate that conflict has sharply escalated between the government and rebel groups in the north of the country. The groups are backed by Guinea, which the Liberian regime has accused of conducting long-range shelling and bombing raids on its territory. Whilst sporadic fighting with the rebels has continued in the northern Lofa county area of Liberia since the civil war ended in 1997, the present hostilities appear to be on a much larger scale. Liberian reports say rebels have taken Zorzor town and the fighting has moved south to Salayea district. This is only 50 miles from Gbarnga, the key town in northern Liberia.

Last month, the Liberian defence minister, back from the frontline, said the seizure of Voinjama by the rebels in the most northern part of Liberia, amounted to “an overt declaration of war”. Liberia's President Charles Taylor has placed the country on a war footing. Any signs of opposition to his regime are being more ruthlessly suppressed than usual and 15,000 veterans of his guerrilla army from the 1990s civil war are being called up for active service.

There has been no confirmation of the scale of the fighting from Guinea or from other sources, but a United Nations relief coordinator in the area, Carolyn McAskie, said that 15,000 people had fled their homes in the region in the last three weeks. UN officials report that in total over 60,000 people have been displaced from the northern part of Liberia.

Fighting has spread into Liberia from the so-called “Parrot's Beak” region of southern Guinea, where rebel forces backed by Liberia have been fighting the Guinean regime for several months. McAskie, who had been on a three day UN mission to Liberia, Guinea and Sierra Leone, said that there were still some 300,000 refugees from Sierra Leone and Liberia trapped in this part of Guinea. This is despite the fact that tens of thousands of refugees are known to have fled the fighting, making the risky journey back into the eastern diamond-rich regions of Sierra Leone that are under the control of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF). McAskie said that the UN were still negotiating with the

Guinean government to secure safe passage for the refugees to areas further north, away from the border with Sierra Leone and Liberia.

Former Dutch Prime Minister Ruud Lubbers, recently appointed as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) described the refugee crisis as the worst in the world. However, Western support for the refugees has been pitiful. McAskie said that last months UN appeal for \$65 million to deal with the crisis had so far raised a mere \$2-3 million.

Moreover, Western interventions in the region have escalated the conflict. As the military strongman leading the most successful faction in the eight-year Liberian civil war, Charles Taylor was allowed to take power in the 1997 elections with US and Western backing. Now the US and Britain denounce Taylor for being at the centre of illicit diamond trading in Africa, and in particular for backing the RUF in Sierra Leone—an outfit that controls much of the diamond areas. A UN resolution tabled by the US and Britain calls for economic sanctions against Liberia, specifically a moratorium on diamond exports, however, there will not be a ban on rubber exports to the US. Under the terms of the resolution, Taylor is supposed to end his ties with the RUF—a UN committee has been investigating his claims that he has cut off this support—otherwise the sanctions will be imposed May 7.

It is clear that Western pressure is already being applied; Liberia is in a state of virtual economic collapse, with little running water or electricity in the capital Monrovia, civil servants have gone unpaid since January, the sewage system fails to work, and garbage is piling up everywhere. This cannot be simply ascribed to Taylor's personal corruption—he is said to run the economy as his private company—but must reflect cuts in Western support. It is hardly surprising that Taylor's response is a military one.

Britain has been a major contributor to instability in the region. British troops are presently training the Sierra Leone army and British “advisors” are involved in every aspect of running the government of President Kabbah. Because of the

British military presence, the RUF agreed to a peace deal last November. The RUF has now allowed UN troops into the area it controls, although it is opposed to any collaboration with the Kabbah regime. RUF fighters have been engaged instead in the war in Guinea, siding with Liberian troops and Guinean rebels fighting against the Guinea government.

There have been recent reports of forces from Guinea entering the RUF controlled east of Sierra Leone in order to pursue the RUF. Gibril Massaquoi, an RUF spokesman, told reporters they had come under attack in the diamond area known as Tongo Field and the main diamond area of Kono, close to the border with Guinea and Liberia. Massaquoi said, "The forces attacking are Sierra Leonean but they are being given covering shelling by the Guineans". He indicated that the troops were Kamajors, a tribal grouping being trained by Britain as part of the Sierra Leone army, and allied with Liberian rebels. Although Massaquoi provided no proof, he suggested that British-trained troops were involved.

It would not be surprising if the Western powers were now backing Guinea, as well as using British-trained troops to deal with both the Liberian regime and the RUF. There is growing impatience with the UN peacekeeping initiative. According to the *Independent* newspaper, on her recent visit to Sierra Leone Clare Short, British Secretary of State for International Development, "handbagged" Oluyemi Adeniji, head of the UN mission in Sierra Leone, demanding to know why the UN forces were not disarming the RUF. Focusing on the brutal murders and mutilations committed by the RUF, Short accused the UN of being dominated by bureaucratic malaise and refusing to learn the lessons of Rwanda and Somalia when atrocities could allegedly have been prevented by UN action. Short can hardly be unaware that the ineffectiveness of the UN is due in no small part to lack of support from the Western powers, not to mention their conflicting interests in the region.

The influential Brussels-based think tank the International Crisis Group (ICG) has called for an end to UN negotiations with the RUF. Calling Charles Taylor the "Milosevic of West Africa", it demands a common approach of the West and the UN to take on the RUF and Liberia, as well as an "international effort" to help Sierra Leone "re-establish good governance and reconstruct its shattered society." The ICG does not consider from where this international support will come; nor that society in Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea has been shattered precisely because of the way their resources of diamonds, timber and minerals have been appropriated by the West, and before that their peoples used as slaves. After winning initial support from the population of Sierra Leone, disaffection with President Kabbah has grown, taking on the form of strikes and demonstrations, as

it becomes clear that apart from military support there will be no significant Western aid to rebuild the economy. If the diamond areas are won back from the RUF, their revenues have already been promised to international corporations, rather than the local people.

The US is known to be involved in training the Guinean military, and US Republican Congressman Ed Royce recently gave a speech denouncing Charles Taylor. Royce called for sanctions to be implemented immediately, including timber as well as diamonds (France and China have opposed timber sanctions, as it would affect their trade with Liberia, and Royce did not mention the export of rubber to the US). Royce said, "The survival of Guinea is on the line... Conakry [capital of Guinea] has requested US military aid to bolster its armed forces' ability to secure its border. The US must strongly consider providing that aid now."

France is also shifting its stance and endorsed denunciations of Taylor. Charles Josselin, the French minister with responsibility for Africa, accompanied Clare Short on her recent visit to Sierra Leone. According to reports, he agreed with UN sanctions against Liberia, saying there was no indication that Taylor was complying with UN demands to stop supporting the RUF. There have, however, been no details given of French involvement in the region.

According to *Africa Confidential* magazine, French Prime Minister Lionel Jospin has opposed any open support for the Guinean regime of President Conte. Since several African corruption scandals have rocked the French political establishment, espousing open support for a regime that is notorious for its human rights violations and suppression of opposition would be an embarrassment. In the past France has looked favourably on Taylor, who works closely with President Compaoré of Burkina Faso and Libyan leader Colonel Gaddafi in his arms and diamond trading deals. France is apparently hoping for lucrative deals with Libya over oil and infrastructure projects, as well as the sale of military hardware and Airbus jets. However, there is now a serious threat of civil war in the key French ex-colony of Côte d'Ivoire.



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