

US marines sent to Liberia

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A United States naval vessel carrying 1,500 marines, 1,200 sailors as well as attack helicopters returning from Iraq is being diverted to the West African country of Liberia, raising the possibility of US military intervention. The diversion comes after an escalation of the civil war in Liberia, with the capital Monrovia surrounded by rebel forces that now control most of the country.

According to the *Financial Times* there is talk of the US leading a multinational intervention force that may include up to 2,000 Nigerian troops. There has been opposition from the Bush administration to sending US troops into Africa, especially since the last intervention, Somalia in 1993, led to the death of 18 soldiers.

The change of tack apparently results from the possibility that Monrovia could soon descend into a bloodbath and the country return to the “failed state” condition of the 1990s. Whilst Britain has effectively colonised Sierra Leone with the aid of a large United Nations force and France has deployed 4,000 troops in the Ivory Coast, the war in Liberia threatens to destabilise the whole of West Africa, with dire consequences for one of the US’s major sources of oil.

The attempts by West African countries to secure a peace agreement between the rebel groups—Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) and the Movement for Democracy and Elections in Liberia (MODEL)—and the Liberian regime of Charles Taylor continue. But so far the rebels have refused to sign up to a ceasefire agreed June 12 unless Taylor resigns. Taylor insists that a precondition for any deal is he is not prosecuted for war crimes.

A UN-backed Special Court in Sierra Leone indicted Taylor for war crimes the previous week. The Western powers have singled him out because of his backing for the notoriously brutal rebel forces in Sierra Leone’s civil war, trading Sierra Leone diamonds for weapons. The *New York Times* refers to him as “Africa’s

Slobodan Milosevic” and has called for his capture.

In an opinion piece on June 17 the *New York Times* suggested that troops from neighbouring Sierra Leone could be used but fresh forces would also be needed. And since “Liberia was founded by freed American slaves,” “The United States has a special responsibility to help.”

The immediate result of the court decision, however, has been to encourage LURD and MODEL to step up their military pressure on Monrovia. By insisting that the root of the conflicts in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Guinea and the Ivory Coast are due simply to the “evil” dictatorship of Taylor, the US and Britain have merely succeeded in further destabilising the region.

The Sierra Leone court decision follows a UN Resolution passed in May maintaining an arms, diamond and travel embargo against Liberia. According to *Africa Confidential*, the US and Britain persuaded France to support the measures against Taylor in exchange for more UN support for its military intervention in Ivory Coast.

Whilst it is true that Taylor is a brutal despot, the US and British initiative conveniently ignored the fact that LURD is not a liberating democratic force but one led by characters as dubious as Taylor that is backed by neighboring Guinea. A team of US soldiers has been training the Guinean army and Guinea was given tacit approval by the US and Britain to support LURD as a counterweight to Taylor. In the closed UN Security Council discussion on the region, Guinea received only a “mild warning” for supporting LURD.

Matters were further complicated as the government side in the Ivory Coast civil war, led by President Laurent Gbagbo, began backing the MODEL outfit, a splinter from LURD. Gbagbo backed their war against Taylor after Liberia had backed rebel groups opposing the government in the western region of Ivory Coast. According to *Africa Confidential*, the war waged from

the southeast by MODEL has escalated over the past two months to become an even bigger concern to Monrovia than LURD's attack from the north. It has taken over main timber producing areas and the key port of Greenville.

Tribalist differences between MODEL and LURD that mirror the rivalries between contending factions in the 1990s civil war make it likely that, as well as fighting Taylor, they would fight each other for control of the country and threaten a return to ethnic atrocities.

Monrovia has become a humanitarian disaster. Most aid agencies have left the country and it is estimated that up to a million people have fled into the capital to escape the conflict. Médecins Sans Frontières report large numbers of refugees without food and little water. There is now a serious threat of cholera due to overcrowding, lack of clean water and no sanitation. Several hundred have been killed in the fighting, with bodies left rotting on the outskirts of the city. Five hundred foreign nationals, mainly from the US and Europe, were evacuated by French helicopters to the Ivory Coast last week.

Although never formally a US colony, Liberia was effectively under American control from the 19th century on. It became a major source of rubber for the Firestone corporation from the 1920s, when the regime provided cheap labour to work the extensive plantations. Its huge iron ore deposits were exploited during the Second World War and afterwards. Whilst the population lived in poverty the US provided economic and military aid to its ruling elite throughout the postwar period. In absolute terms it received the fourth highest level of aid in sub-Saharan Africa (after Ethiopia, Congo and Sudan), and in per capita terms the highest level.

Its importance increased during the Cold War, as it became the site of US communications facilities that spied on the whole African continent. In 1980 an army coup seized power from the William Tolbert regime. Led by Master Sergeant Samuel Doe, it had gained support because of growing poverty, a result of the declining demand for iron ore and rubber. The new elite proved even more useful to the US, with aid payments under President Reagan increasing from the \$20 million of the late 1970s to a peak of \$95 million—a total of \$402 million between 1981 and 1985.

Liberia became the centre for the massive CIA covert

operations of that period, especially directed against Colonel Gaddafi, including operations to back the Chadian leader Hissene Habre in the war against Libya. Doe was singled out to receive special US security support, similar to that given to Mobutu in the Congo, and his clampdown against all political opponents was conveniently ignored.

Aid to Doe's regime was cut back at the end of the Cold War and the Liberian economy was allowed to collapse, as the US administration had no further use for it. The country descended into civil war by the 1990s.

Charles Taylor, then the leader of the main rebel faction, agreed with US Assistant Secretary Cohen in 1990 that he would take part in a US-brokered truce. But Cohen was overruled and Washington refused to mediate, especially as Taylor had been given support by Libya. The war was allowed to continue and several rebel factions emerged. The unpaid Nigerian peacekeeping force engaged in the same policy of looting and terrorising the population as the rebels. In the end the US supported a peace deal in which Taylor—as leader of the dominant faction—was backed to take power after rigged elections in 1997.

By 1999 the LURD had started operations out of Guinea. Overall some 200,000 people have been killed in the civil war.



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