

West African military force enters Liberia

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The first detachment of Nigerian troops from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has been airlifted from Sierra Leone to Monrovia, the capital of Liberia, part of a “vanguard interposition force” that is intended to separate Liberian government forces from the surrounding rebels.

More Nigerian troops will be sent in this week, bringing the initial force up to 1,500. ECOWAS leaders meeting in Ghana at the end of last week agreed to a total force of 3,250 soldiers from Nigeria and other West African countries to be sent in over the next three weeks. At the insistence of the United States, Liberian president Charles Taylor is supposed to quit office in the next few days and leave for exile in Nigeria.

The ECOWAS intervention is effectively being carried out on behalf of the United States. Although the US now has some 2,300 marines on three ships off the Liberian coast, President George W. Bush has refused to make any commitment on US troop deployment.

For the last two weeks, the rebel group Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD), backed by neighboring Guinea, has stepped up its assault on Monrovia, resulting in hundreds of civilian deaths and a deepening humanitarian disaster.

Over a million people are trapped in the city with food and water supplies running out. Footage of the tens of thousands of displaced people living in makeshift shelters and empty buildings, constantly fleeing from the gun battles between irregular militias, is now shown daily on television news.

The other rebel group fighting the Liberian government, the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL), supported by the government faction in the Ivory Coast conflict, has taken over Liberia’s second city of Buchanan. Between them, LURD and MODEL now control most of Liberia outside of Monrovia.

The US-backed intervention in Liberia has had a drawn-out and indecisive character, partly due to divisions within the Bush administration and partly due to haggling between the US and the ECOWAS countries over financing the operation. A US vessel with marines on board was sent towards Liberia in June but was then withdrawn. ECOWAS announced it was sending in troops on July 4, but they then failed to appear.

Bush’s five-day visit to Africa at the beginning of July was expected to coincide with an announcement of a West African intervention with US backing, but instead Bush merely sent in a

small inspection team. The rebel forces took advantage of the disarray and broke the temporary cease-fire agreement of June 17, stepping up their assault over the last two weeks.

ECOWAS sent in a 10-man inspection team to Monrovia, supposedly to further assess the situation. Following Bush’s announcement that US ships were heading for the country, there appeared to be another cease-fire. West African ministers met with Taylor to check that he was actually prepared to leave, but this coincided with a further outbreak of fighting as Taylor’s forces attempted to push back the rebels before ECOWAS arrived.

Last week, the US summoned a special closed meeting of the United Nations Security Council tabling a resolution to authorise the West African intervention, to be followed by a full UN force scheduled for October. The US insisted that the resolution contain a clause exempting “contributing states” in the Liberian peacekeeping operation (i.e., US officials and military personnel) from prosecution for war crimes by the International Criminal Court. Despite token opposition to this clause from France, Germany and Mexico, the three countries abstained in the voting, enabling the resolution to be passed.

Whilst the US is hardly a supporter of UN diplomacy, it appears that the UN move was required to bring Nigeria and the West African countries on board. The neo-conservatives of the Bush administration consider that Liberia, a country with no mineral wealth and little strategic importance, should be dealt with at a minimum cost to the US, and would like other western powers to foot the bill through the UN.

Although Bush has attempted unconvincingly to show some humanitarian concern for a country that the US has looted and exploited for over a century, the Pentagon has made clear that it is opposed to risking troops on top of its commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan. State Department officials have seen some benefit in sending a military force to demonstrate that the US is concerned to “liberate” people living under a dictator where no oil wealth is involved. It seems that a compromise has been reached between the different factions of the administration by sending the present small number of US troops that will not be used in combat situations.

Nigerian president Obasanjo expressed the resentment of West African countries at being called on to police Nigeria on behalf of the US but without any financial backing in a BBC interview on Thursday, July 31.

In an unusually frank outburst, he attacked the US's offshore contingent of troops by comparing the situation to a house fire: "Somebody says 'here I am, I have my water, my fire engine, now when you put the fire out in your house, I will come in,' I wonder what sort of help that is, with all due respect."

Obasanjo pointed out that ECOWAS peacekeeping operations over 12 years cost over \$12 billion and resulted in more than 1,000 Nigeria soldiers killed. "The world did not acknowledge that, not even in terms of giving us debt relief for the contribution we made." Needless to say, he did not mention that the Western-backed Nigerian forces became completely discredited as unpaid soldiers looted the local population and effectively ended up as one more faction in the Liberian civil war.

All that the US has offered so far is a mere \$10 million paid to a US private company to give logistical support to the ECOWAS troops. It seems that with the passing of the UN resolution and UN secretary general Kofi Annan agreeing to provide some funding, the ECOWAS intervention has gone ahead.

As well as military and financial considerations, the peacekeeping operation has been further complicated because of the US insistence that peacekeeping can only proceed if Charles Taylor quits. Taylor is indicted for war crimes at a US-backed Special Court in Sierra Leone.

Taylor is undoubtedly a brutal dictator but hardly different from a whole layer of criminal elements on both the government and rebel side of the conflict that loot, rape and kill the local population, as well as recruit children, often supplied with drugs, to carry out their fighting. Whether Taylor will agree to go into exile and risk prosecution remains to be seen.

The Liberian catastrophe has resulted in growing demands in the press for a US-led intervention to rescue the people from a humanitarian disaster. There are repeated complaints that the US administration is not taking up its "historic responsibility" towards Liberia. The *Washington Post* complained in a editorial that Bush's strategy is "giving the appearance of responding to the United Nations' desperate pleas for US military assistance without actually providing any." An article in the British *Guardian* the next day moralised that whilst the US has a relationship to Liberia similar to that of Britain to Sierra Leone, unlike the UK the US has "consistently avoided the duties implicit in that relationship."

Whilst it is understandable that desperate Liberians have called on the US for help, a US military intervention, or for that matter the intervention of US-backed West African forces, will not provide any basis for security or improvement in the region. Even if carried out reluctantly, compared to the war on Iraq, and accepting that Liberia is a much smaller country with few resources, the result can only be the extension of neo-colonialism.

Despite the boasts of the British government and its *Guardian* supporters that Sierra Leone is a success story, a serious

examination of conditions there three years after British troops defeated the Liberian-backed rebels gives a different picture and indicates what faces Liberia.

It is true that the continued presence of British troops, backed by a large UN force, has stopped fighting in Sierra Leone itself. But conflict was exported, often involving the same rebel outfits preying on the local population, to the Ivory Coast, Guinea and Liberia. The French are now suppressing conflict in the Ivory Coast with a presence of 4,000 troops. A US-backed policing operation in Liberia would only shift fighting to Guinea or even other countries. Sierra Leone is now burdened with thousands of refugees that have fled the fighting in Liberia.

All the social and economic conditions that gave rise to the decade-long conflict in Sierra Leone are still present. There has been no revival of the country's economy, and it remains at the bottom of the UN list of underdeveloped nations. All that British officials can recommend is to attract foreign investors in diamond extraction and the mining of rutile (titanium)—as though a century of looting of the region's resources by Western multinationals is not the cause of its present plight.

Despite the operations of dozens of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), there has been minimal aid from the West compared to the billions of dollars that would be needed to restore even the limited infrastructure and public services that existed two or three decades ago.

The United Nations' mid-year review of May 2003, whilst making many references to "progress," cannot but reveal the abysmal situation. There are clearly few reliable statistics, and the report simply states that unemployment "remains very high, especially among the youth." An appeal by the UN for the tiny amount of \$109 million assistance for 2003 received less than 50 percent of the total. A staggeringly low figure of only 6.6 percent of the population has access to safe water, and the report states that 80 percent of shelter needs—given the continuing return of refugees—are unmet. Despite the huge HIV/AIDS crisis facing the African continent, the UN did not receive enough funds to provide either the diagnostic units or the support for people dying with AIDS that had been planned.

Above all, it is clear that despite all the talk of promoting a human rights culture, the country is effectively run by British officials assisted by the same tiny corrupt elite that were in power before the civil war began, and that without the continuing military occupation the country would quickly descend again into a bloody conflict.



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