

Liberia faced with continuing instability as UN agrees 15,000 troops

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Aid workers in Liberia are reporting continued fighting, as well as attacks on civilians including looting, rape and summary executions throughout the north and central regions of Liberia. The attacks on civilians were carried out by both government troops and rebels from the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) group.

More than 4,500 refugees have fled Liberia to neighbouring Guinea since September 13 according to the latest reports from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Some 2,000 of the refugees arriving in the south of Guinea from the Lofa county region adjacent to Guinea fear ethnic reprisals from LURD as forces loyal to the Liberian government pull out. Refugees from Bong and Nimba county regions in central Liberia are reporting continued fighting between LURD and government forces. UNHCR's Africa Bureau Director said that "It is obvious that many areas in Liberia are still very insecure and fighting continues."

Further reports from relief workers in the east of Liberia next to Ivory Coast which is controlled by the rival rebel group, the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL), say there is a "delicate situation". The port of Harper is said to have only 3,000 people left in it, with some 30,000 having fled to Ivory Coast.

Despite the peace agreement signed August 18 between the Liberian government and the rebel groups, the 3,300-strong West African ECOMIL peacekeeping force that was intended to police the deal has hardly ventured outside the capital Monrovia. The rebel forces moved out of the capital by the beginning of August as the first ECOMIL troops moved together with some 200 US marines after President Charles Taylor agreed to leave for exile in Nigeria. However up to 80 percent of the remainder of Liberia is still under the control of

LURD and MODEL.

According to the recent report of UN Secretary General Kofi Annan the modus operandi of all sides in the civil war has included "deliberate and arbitrary killings, disappearances, torture, widespread rape and sexual violence, arbitrary arrests, forced conscription, use of child soldiers, systematic and forced displacement and indiscriminate targeting of civilians." At least half a million people out of the 2.7 million population have been displaced as a result of 15 years of civil war in the country, with some 310,000 having fled to Guinea, Ivory Coast, Sierra Leone or Ghana. More than 30,000 members of militia groups, 80 percent of them under the age of 18, are active in the Liberian countryside.

Taylor was replaced by his deputy Moses Blah who will hand over to a transitional government containing representatives from all factions in October. However, effective control is in the hands of retired US air force general Jacques Paul Klein, Special Representative of Kofi Annan in Liberia. The United States put a resolution to the UN Security Council September 19, which was unanimously approved, for the creation of a 15,000-strong peacekeeping force, the UN mission in Liberia (UNMIL). UNMIL, headed by Klein, and containing an international force of 1,115 police officers, has an initial mandate for 12 months to impose the peace settlement. It will be second only in size to the UN force in neighbouring Sierra Leone though is unlikely to be up to strength until next year.

The US is moving towards establishing a colonial-style administration under Klein's leadership in Liberia, following Britain's example in Sierra Leone and, more recently, France in the Ivory Coast. Divisions within the Bush administration, however, are putting the operation at risk with the possibility that

fighting outside Monrovia will get out of control. Whereas 1,000 British troops were deployed to crush the rebels in Sierra Leone and the French still have 4,000 troops in place to keep the warring factions apart in Ivory Coast, the US withdrew most of its 200 marines back to warships off the coast after two weeks.

Commenting on the Pentagon's reluctance to get involved the *Wall Street Journal* commented: "The US military argues it is already overstretched and simply doesn't have the capacity for a prolonged presence here. . . Marines of the 26th Expeditionary Unit now off Liberia boarded their warships in February, fought in northern Iraq in April and have been afloat ever since."

The *Journal* points out that the US troops are set to sail back to the US at the beginning of October despite the fact that the UN force will take months to be put in place. The West African director of the International Crisis Group, a Brussels based think tank, is quoted: "The departure of the Americans would undermine any possibility of securing wider surroundings of Liberia outside Monrovia. . . . It sets the UN, ECOMIL and West Africa in a danger zone again."

Klein is said to be hoping that a small American presence, focusing on training a reconstituted Liberian army, will be kept on and would "reassure other peacekeepers by its very presence."

There is clearly nervousness in US ruling circles that Liberia could prove to be a disaster. The same *Journal* article states that such a development would "threaten a part of the world seen as a critical source of oil and other sources needed by the west" and "dent America's credibility on the international scene and even undermine its latest efforts to put together a broader coalition in Iraq with the help of the United Nations."

Speaking at the UN, Klein referred to Liberia as a failed state. "Today Liberia is not even listed on the UNDP human development index. Seventy-five percent of its citizens are living below the poverty line; the unemployment rate is 85 percent; literacy is at 38 percent; 50 percent of the population is under 15 years of age. Added to this is that 70 percent of the belligerents are child soldiers, coerced, psychologically traumatised, manipulated and exploited by self-appointed military leaders. We have a phenomenon not known elsewhere in the world where the younger population is less well educated than their parents." He appealed for international donors to come forward to

overcome this dire situation.

There are no grounds to believe that serious economic aid will be forthcoming, however. An emergency appeal by the UN for \$69 million earlier this year raised only half the total. The UN has now relaunched the appeal at \$100 million. All indications are that the US will keep its expenditure in the country to a minimum. Even the promised funding for the current West African force has apparently failed to appear. Nigerian House of Representatives Army Committee Chairman Ado Dogo has demanded that the Defence Minister explains why Nigeria, whose troops make up half of the ECOMIL force, was not recouping its expenses for the operation. He pleaded with the UN to take over the funding and demanded to know who had authorised the spending of N8.4 billion (\$US6.4 million) on the Nigerian force.

Klein placed responsibility for the catastrophe on "warlords and despots" and a "criminal kleptocracy". Much was made of the fact that Charles Taylor looted millions from the Liberian treasury over the last few years and appears to have taken some of it with him to Nigeria.

Apart from the fact that Taylor was allowed to take power in 1997 by the US, despite his criminal past, such a superficial assessment completely ignores the role that imperialism has played in West Africa and in particular the role of US imperialism in Liberia. Economic decline in the post war period, as primary commodities such as the Firestone rubber that was Liberia's main export were in less demand, led to collapse in the 1990s. Aid was withdrawn when Liberia was no longer required to be a major centre for US intelligence operations in Africa that it had been during the Cold War period.



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