

Liberia: violence is the only norm

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ONCE again, Liberia has landed in a grave crisis following eruption of a civil war as it has been so many times in the past 20 years. One can't rule out another Rwanda if no effective peace-keeping is inducted immediately. Uncertainty, ethnic killings, unrealized hopes and ruined lives have become part of the Liberia's social life. Every now and then, there is a flicker of optimism but then suddenly it is blown away by the stormy winds of violence.

The country is facing a threat of total anarchy as competing gangs make a bid to march on Monrovia with an eye on ejecting the current occupants of the executive (presidential) mansion. As fighting became intense in recent days, the nation's morale has once again sunk to the lowest depth.

The United Nations Security Council has passed a US-sponsored resolution to create a multinational peacekeeping force in war-torn Liberia. The resolution authorizes troops from Liberia's west African neighbouring states to take whatever action is needed to get humanitarian supplies to the country's people, who have suffered extreme hardships during recent intense fighting between the Monrovia government and rebels.

The Security Council has asked the United Nations to take over peacekeeping and stabilization duties in Liberia by October. But Kofi Annan thinks it could be difficult to form a full peacekeeping force in two months. Meanwhile, the Liberian President, Charles Taylor, has agreed to step down on August 11, a few days later than expected. The announcement came after West African ministers met Mr Taylor to discuss plans for him to go into exile in Nigeria.

Meanwhile, the thrust by the Liberians United for Peace and Reconciliation (LURD) rebels for the control of Monrovia continues. The rebels are in control of the areas from Brewerville to the Gabriel Tucker and Waterside bridges, including the strategic Freeport of Monrovia. At the two bridges, remnants of Taylor fighters who are still loyal to him are putting up resistance. This has become a do-or-die situation for the loyalists. The rebels' attack on the city continues despite claims by the government that its forces were in control of the two bridges. Foreign journalists are said to have left their Mamba Point hotel for the American Embassy.

Liberia, one may recall, became a country when American slaves

tion of a five-man transitional government.

The 1989-1997 civil war left Liberia a lawless land and destroyed its economy. All the warring parties including Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), the United Liberian Movement for Democracy in Liberia, and a host of other, smaller militias armed children, drugged them, and encouraged them to kill, rape, torture, and pillage indiscriminately. The civil war, which was one of Africa's bloodiest, claimed the lives of more than 200,000 Liberians and forced more than half of Liberia's 2.6 million people into refugee camps in the neighbouring countries.

The United Nations estimated that between 15,000 and 20,000 children had participated in the conflict. Taylor's NPFL emerged as the most tenaciously cruel, the best-funded, and the least scrupulous militia backed by foreign powers. Throughout the 1990s, he reneged on a series of peace deals brokered by regional international agencies and continued his ruthless military campaign. Civilian casualties mounted.

After considerable progress in negotiations conducted by the United States, United Nations, Organization of African Unity, and the Economic Community of West African States, disarmament and demobilization of warring factions were hastily carried out and special elections were held on July 19, 1997 in which Charles Taylor and his National Patriotic Party won by a large majority, primarily because Liberians feared a return to war if Taylor were to lose.

Within a year, Taylor ousted West African peacekeepers, freeing his militia's hands in the border region with Sierra Leone. It only took until January 1999 for the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), a brutal Sierra Leonean rebel group trained and financed by Taylor, to enter Freetown by force, destroying much of the city and committing widespread atrocities against the civilian population. When U.N. peacekeepers arrived in Sierra Leone and the tide turned against the RUF, their leader Sam "Mosquito" Bockarie and at least 200 of his henchmen took refuge in Liberia.

There Taylor began arming them with the proceeds of the illegal diamond trade, and there the RUF's ranks swelled with Liberian mercenaries who exported Liberia's tradition of raping and maiming civilians as a military tactic.

By February 2000, various groups of Liberian dissidents



freed in the early 1800s inhabited it, and this is where it gets its name from. It became a republic in 1847. The freed slaves were called Americo-Liberians, and became an elite group living on the coast of the country. They had little in common with the tribal communities living there. One such tribe is called the Krahn, to which Samuel Doe belonged.

In 1980 Doe staged a coup and executed the incumbent president, William Tolbert, in his mansion. Doe built strong ties with the United States, received a lot of money for pushing out the Soviet interests from the country, and gave exclusive rights to the US to use Liberia's ports and land. So, the US had no objection to his authoritarian policies, ban on newspapers and opposition parties and holding of rigged elections.

Political parties remained banned until 1984. Elections were held on October 15, 1985 which Doe's National Democratic Party of Liberia (NDPL) won. The elections were marked by widespread fraud and rigging and were followed by increased human rights abuses, corruption, and ethnic tensions. The standard of living, which was much better in the 1970s, declined drastically.

On November 12, 1985, former Army Commanding General Thomas Quiwonkpa invaded Liberia from neighbouring Sierra Leone and almost succeeded in toppling the government of Samuel Doe. Members of the Krahn-dominated Armed Forces of Liberia repelled Quiwonkpa's attack and executed him in Monrovia. Then, on December 24, 1989, a small group of rebels led by Doe's former procurement chief, Charles Taylor, invaded Liberia from Cote d'Ivoire. Taylor and his National Patriotic Front rebels rapidly gained the support of Liberians because of the repressive nature of Samuel Doe and his government. Barely 6 months after the rebels first attacked, they had reached the outskirts of Monrovia.

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) intervened and succeeded in preventing Charles Taylor from capturing Monrovia. Prince Johnson who had been a member of Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) broke away because of policy differences and formed the Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia (INPFL). Johnson's forces captured and killed Doe on September 9, 1990.

An interim government of National Unity (IGNU) was formed in Gambia under the auspices of ECOWAS in October 1990 and Dr. Amos C. Sawyer became President. Taylor refused to work with the interim government and continued to fight. By 1992, several warring factions had emerged in the Liberian civil war, all of which were absorbed in the new transitional government. After several peace accords and declining military power, Taylor finally agreed to the forma-



A resident in Monrovia, capital of Liberia, runs for shelter as rebels and government troops exchange fire.

had joined forces in Sierra Leone to form Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD), an armed insurgency group. Throughout 2000 and 2001, LURD forces launched a series of offensives into Liberian territory. They succeeded in decimating the RUF, but in the

process destroyed much of what was left of the border region between Liberia and Sierra Leone.

More than 100,000 people have been displaced along the border of Sierra Leone and Liberia since the beginning of this year, when fighting between the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) and troops of President Charles Taylor intensified. Now the situation along the border is becoming increasingly volatile, as troops loyal to Taylor make more frequent forays into Sierra Leonean territory in search of LURD rebels and deserters from the Liberian army.

As the fighting has intensified, it has become more difficult for aid agencies to reach refugees in the affected area. According to Monrovia's independent daily *The Inquirer*, which had placed a journalist behind rebel lines, there are "more than 200,000 people living in deplorable conditions and hiding in the forests" of Lofa County.

Deji Popoola, U.N. Population Fund Representative for Liberia, says the civil war "is bleeding the country dry." Current estimates put the unemployment rate at between 80-85 per cent. In this diamond-rich country, more than 76 per cent of Liberians subsist on less than \$1 a day.

Edwin Tettah, an associate professor of economics at the University of Liberia in Monrovia, says the state of the Liberian economy is appalling. Iron mining operations, which formerly provided the country with its largest source of foreign capital, have been shut down. The U.S.-owned Firestone Plantation Company, which once operated the world's largest rubber facility in Liberia, currently operates only three of its 45 divisions.

Liberia's primary legal source of foreign currency is the roughly \$2 million a month Liberians receive from relatives in the United States. Its second most lucrative source of foreign income is the \$13 million a year it earns in royalties from ships flying the Liberian flag.

Liberia is burning and the international community must now intensify its pressure on the warring parties to end violence and allow peace to prevail in the country and the region. The violence is fast spreading to other population centres in the country and an immediate action is required to save lives. Given the gravity of the humanitarian situation that has developed in recent days, the need for a general truce could not be overemphasized. But half measures will not ease the situation, as they have never done for almost two decades. ■