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LIBERIA: CIVIL WAR AND REGIONAL CONFLICT

Thomas S. Kamara

Independent Analyst, Netherlands

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Executive Summary

Liberia's cycle of anarchy has its foundations in a policy of appeasement in which warlords, responsible for many atrocities, assumed political power without mechanisms to ensure peacebuilding. With the likely cancellation of the October 2003 elections, and rising insecurity, the country is at a critical crossroads. Conditions for humanitarian relief work have dramatically worsened, and improvement is unlikely. The expected mass return of refugees has ended in a repeat exodus that carries regional implications, while Liberian links to the conflict in Côte d'Ivoire show the extent to which Liberia remains at the centre of regional instability.

The proliferation of armed groups, and the recycling of regional rebels, a scenario that hastened state collapse in the 1990s, has prompted reports of re-alignment between Sierra Leone rebels and President Taylor. The killing of Sierra Leone warlord, Sam Bockarie, by Liberian troops in May 2003, shows the fluid nature of regional rebel alliances. Thousands of former RUF fighters, now floating rebels, remain a threat to neighbours or home countries.

But the Liberian rebels, united only in opposition to President Taylor, provide no political alternative. Divided along ethnic lines, with the Krahn's supporting MODEL and the Mandingo's LURD, and devoid of a programme, there is reason to fear another violent ethnic contest for power reminiscent of the 1990s when these two groups waged bloody wars. The rebels have been accused of committing serious atrocities against civilians, and are incapable of the reforms required in order to deal with the terrible humanitarian situation.

These developments suggest a power vacuum in the coming months, generating a debate on whether President Taylor should retain power as head of an interim government.

Several scenarios are considered, all fraught with humanitarian problems:

- **Military Stalemate:** This could prolong the war, and seriously exacerbate the humanitarian problems. With 60% of the country already in rebel hands, access to IDPs and refugees would continue to become more difficult.

- **Military Victory by Either Side:** A military triumph by President Taylor would implant more chaos and leave neighbours frightened, thus increasing the likelihood of their backing new Liberian rebel movements in self-defence. A rebel victory would also entrench the political and security crisis.

- **An Inclusive Interim Government:** Several successive such governments failed to ensure peace in the 1990s. The scramble for power and resources, with attention diverted from disarmament and resettlement programmes, could lead to more anarchy within such a regime.

- **UN Intervention:** The best model, which many Liberians are proposing, is a peace model along the lines of that developed for Sierra Leone. But the price tag makes this unlikely, even if it provides the best hope for restoration of peace and averting further regional destabilization. The subregional group ECOWAS, without UN cushioning, is too weak and compromised to be able to provide a solution.

1 Introduction

Liberia's cycle of instability has led to the effective partition of the country, with rebels in charge of 60% of the area against a background of deepening humanitarian catastrophe. But the attendant insecurity, which has implications for the whole region, has its foundations in the rise to power of former rebels and their accompanying rewards. International endorsement shielded the serious atrocities committed. Leading figures within the US Democratic Party establishment promoted the warlord Charles Taylor, now an elected president, as a folk hero suitable for African continental leadership.[1] This would turn out to be a recurring pattern in international appraisals of events in Liberia. A UN human rights worker, in the country at the time, observed that even within international circles such as the UN and international tribunals "it is as if tens of thousands of ethnic cleansing, execution, rape, and torture cases never happened".[2]

President Taylor's overwhelming 1997 electoral victory, with his party taking 75% of the legislative seats to establish uncontested control over state institutions, and removed any hope for the checks and balances needed for post-war justice. The elections, and their conduct, only served to legitimize future abuses. The election process was in fact characterized by a calculated avoidance of human rights discussions, particularly remarkable considering that the war left 700,000 refugees and 1.4 million internally displaced. Human rights groups demanded "thorough investigations" in order to curtail impunity.[3] But such demands were ignored.

In the rush to find a face-saving exit out of Liberia's relentless and destabilizing war an economic burden has been inflicted on many impoverished West African states. Many of whom contributed peacekeeping troops based on the logic Charles Taylor held the key to regional stability. This was done despite evidence of Taylor's continued links to the rebels in neighbouring Sierra Leone. Appeasement would turn out to be a costly mistake, which only served to encourage the violence that was engulfing many states in the region.

Anxious to establish his presidential authority, President Taylor ignored warnings from the then US President Clinton and many civic leaders that the sudden departure of the 10,500 West African soldiers of ECOMOG would leave a dangerous security vacuum and regional instability. More than 20,000 weapons and over 10 million rounds of ammunition had been surrendered to ECOMOG by February 1997.[4] But contrary to agreements, tens of thousands of ex-combatants, many of them President Taylor's feared rebels, remained mobilized to be redeployed immediately after the counting of ballots. This meant that mistrust and ethnic rivalries, largely responsible for the sustained conflict, would resurface, primarily because defeated opponents feared reprisals, now that former military foes serving as security and civic authority figures would determine their fate and future. President Taylor's fears for his

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[1] See Anderson, J. L., The Devil They Know, *The New Yorker*, 27 July 1998

[2] Cain, K. L., The Rape of Dinah: Human Rights, Civil War in Liberia, and Evil Triumphant*, Human Rights Quarterly*, Vol. 21, No 2, 1999

[3] Human Rights Watch, *Liberia: Emerging from the Destruction*, New York, November 1997; Amnesty International, *Liberia: Heightened Fears of Further Human Rights Violations on the Eve of First Post-civil War Elections*, London, 18 July 1997

[4] United States, Department of State*, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices 1997: Liberia*, Washington DC, 30 January 1998

personal security, fears resulting to a large extent from the conduct of the war, would also be instrumental in determining his post-war handling of dissent. He simply saw too many enemies around. But this in turn would provide the impetus for a return to war; in the absence of an environment conducive to confidence-building, reconciliation was lacking.

Any doubts that there would soon be a return to the wartime pattern of indiscriminate killings passed with the murder of an opposition politician, his wife and two family members immediately after the elections. This incident raised the question of who would be next and sparking an exodus of real or imagined opponents. By September 1998, ethnic Krahns, defeated in the military contest and now suspected of posing security threats for the Government, were attacked in densely populated city neighbourhoods, and about 300 people, many women and children, were killed, while thousands of survivors fled into neighbouring countries, mainly Côte d'Ivoire.[5]

These new exiles, many of them veterans of various rebel factions, would supply the reservoir of fighters for unfinished business. President Taylor's bellicosity towards Guinea and Sierra Leone added the impetus that would finally ignite the flames of war. Large numbers of Mandingos, with kinship links to Guinea, had been evicted from their homes and hundreds had been killed, while the government's promised investigations failed to materialize. Between 1999 and 2000, fighting intensified along the border with Guinea, while President Taylor blamed the US and Britain. But the attacks, which killed hundreds of Guineans and destroyed major towns, incensed anti-Liberian sentiments and led to calls for vengeance. The stage was set for another round of fighting in a catastrophic humanitarian environment, which would result in far more destruction than the first phase of the war.[6]

2 Overview of Governance and Security Since 1997

2.1 The Position of the President

The quality of President Taylor's leadership has been the subject of much external criticism, while reforms needed to avert conflict have been absent. In 2002 Taylor rejected wide-ranging reform proposals put forward by a state-sponsored national reconciliation conference, sending clear signals that the status quo would be sustained. US Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, Walter Kansteiner, told a Congressional Committee that the country was "West Africa's most failed state", while warning that change in the President's manner of leadership was unlikely.[7] Another US official said that the President's "behavior is more closely akin to a gang than that of a president".[8] Perceptions amongst European diplomats were similar, describing President Taylor as a threat not just at home, but capable of spreading conflict far beyond his borders.[9]

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[5] United States, Department of State, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices 1998: Liberia*, Washington DC, 26 February 1999

[6] See, i.a, Amnesty International, *State of Emergency Signifies a Greater Need for International Involvement in Human Rights Protection*, London, 9 April 2002; Cross-border Crisis, *Africa Confidential*, 21 July 2000; Guinea: Demonstrators Denounce Liberia, Sierra Leone, *BBC Monitoring*, 27 February 2001, quoting *Radio Guinée*

[7] Kansteiner, W., Statement by Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs before Foreign Relations Sub-committee on African Affairs, 11 June 2002 (unpublished document)

[8] Corey, C. W., Liberia's Ability to Foment Regional Trouble is Contained, *The Washington File*, 11 December 2002

[9] Douglas, F., Liberian Leader Again Finds Means to Hang On, *Washington Post*, 4 June 2002

Fundamental decisions on national matters, including the economy, revolve around the President. Empowered by the Act of the Legislature granting him "the sole power to execute, negotiate and conclude all commercial contracts or agreements with any Foreign or Domestic Investor for the exploitation of any of the Strategic Commodities [i.e. all natural resources] of the Republic of Liberia…"[10] There have been several reports of resources used to maintain a network of an expanding patronage system with billions of dollars diverted into foreign banks.[11]

This posture has led to international isolation. Former US President Jimmy Carter, a key actor in the peace process and then with close ties to President Taylor, closed down his Liberian centre for democracy-building, regretting that the President had made it "increasingly difficult" to be "effective in supporting democracy."[12] The European Union, under British influence, withheld a US$35 million aid package, in protest at President Taylor's regional polices.[13] This isolation contributed to the growth of dissent, forcing the Government to rely heavily on its militias to ensure submission. Human rights defenders, as well as ethnic and political foes, were systematically targeted. International denunciation intensified, while the European Union opened talks with the Government on arresting the abuses.[14]

2.2 Character and Composition of the Military

Liberia no longer has an army, in the conventional sense. About 2,250 professional soldiers were retired on suspicion of ethnic Krahn links.[15] Replacing the army are multiple militias with various structures and command centres all converging on the President. Various means of redeploying loyalist rebels have been devised, including employment in logging companies, from where they are seconded to the Government when needed.[16] A "general" is anyone with links to the President and capable of collecting fighters for the front for fees.

Although crucial portions of various post-election peace agreements required a professional, ethnically balanced and inclusive army, the Government, citing the Constitution, reneged and enlisted former rebels and mercenaries from various West African states in overlapping security organs.[17] Among these is the Anti-Terrorist Unit (ATU), the President's elite bodyguard unit, whose members have seen their monthly salaries drop from US$250 (US$400 for commanders) prior to sanctions being imposed, to barely US$50, if paid at all.[18]

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[10] Liberia, Legislature, *Strategic Commodities Act*, Monrovia, 2000

[11] See, Global Witness, *The Usual Suspects: How the Liberian Government Supports Arms Trafficking and Mercenary Activities in West Africa*, London, March 2003

[12] Carter Center, Carter Center Shuts Down Liberia Operation, Atlanta GA, 7 November 2000 (press release)

[13] Rebel Paymaster Loses EU Aid, *The Guardian* [London], 14 June 2000

[14] Amnesty International, *Liberia: Killings, Torture and Rape Continue in Lofa County*, London, 1 August 2001

[15] Agence France Presse, Wary of Coup, Liberian Leader Rules through "henchmen": Observers, 10 April 2003

[16] Global Witness, *Taylor Made: The Pivotal Role of Liberia's Forests in Regional Conflict*, 2 ed., London, September 2001, p. 4

[17] United States, Department of State, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices 2002: Liberia*, Washington DC, 31 March 2003

[18] International Crisis Group, *Tackling Liberia: The Eve of the Regional Storm*, Freetown; Brussels, 30 April 2003

Such dwindling privileges have led to low morale, and many have surrendered across the border in Sierra Leone.[19]

2.3 Government under Scrutiny by the International Community

President Taylor's destabilizing regional policies, the enormity of the humanitarian crisis and reports of links with global terrorism have combined to bring the country into the international focus. Reports emerged that President Taylor had received US$1 million from al Qaeda to facilitate diamond buying in Sierra Leone.[20] Belgian officials told of a scheme that involved US$300,000 weekly diamond buying trips from Brussels via Abidjan to Monrovia and then on into rebel held areas of Sierra Leone.[21]

The Clinton administration, partly due to the influence of some members of the Congressional Black Caucus, had developed sympathies for the Liberian Government.[22] A row between London and Washington ensued, with the former contending that the latter was ambivalent on Liberia's regional instability schemes, while the Americans insisted Britain was not heeding President Taylor's "positive role" in such events as the release of kidnapped peacekeeping soldiers in Sierra Leone.[23]

Such an interpretation of the crisis hindered a regional solution. The US$3.9 million allocated in the US State Department budget for peacekeeping remained unspent, while Nigeria was spending US$1 million per day in Liberia's extended Sierra Leone war.[24] However, the US attitude would change as the regional security and humanitarian situation deteriorated. In October 2000 the US imposed a travel ban on President Taylor and some key members of his government.[25] Listing Liberia and Burkina Faso as centres of instability, Washington contemplated freezing their assets, while its UN ambassador, Richard Holbrooke, accused presidents Taylor and Blaise Compaore of fuelling conflict to profit from illegal diamonds, in a scheme that enabled Liberia to export US$ 300 million worth of diamonds – originating in Sierra Leone – while Liberia's own diamonds were worth less than US$10 million.[26]

The new Republican US administration confirmed and strengthened the hardline policy, with congressional leaders leading the onslaught and accusing President Taylor of ties with organized crime.[27] US officials declared the President a "gangster", warning that the country was a hotbed for terrorists within the region.[28] This was a decisive blow to the Liberian

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[19] Agence France Presse, Sierra Leone Troops Deploy along Liberian Border, 11 April 2003

[20] Carroll, R., West African Leaders 'in al-Qaida Plot', *The Guardian* [London], 30 December 2002

[21] Hill, A., Bin Laden's $20m African 'Blood Diamond' Deals, *The Observer* [London]**,** 20 October 2002

[22] Anderson, J. L., The Devil They Know…

[23] Buchan, D., US UK Fall Out on Liberia, *Financial Times* [London], 16 June 2000

[24] Lizza, R., Where Angels Fear to Tread: Sierra Leone, the Last Clinton Betrayal, *The New Republic*, 24 July 2000

[25] United States, Department of State, Susan Rice Outlines U.S. Policy on Sierra Leone**,** 11 October 2000, http://usinfo.state.gov/regional/af/security/a0101102.htm (accessed April 2003)

[26] Associated Press, Lederer, E.M., Countries Accused in S. Leone War, 31 July 2000

[27] United States, House of Representatives Subcommittee on Africa, Elections in Sierra Leone: A Step Toward Regional Stability?, Washington DC, 16 May 2002 (transcript of hearing), http://commdocs.house.gov/committees/intlrel/hfa79669.000/hfa79669_0f.htm (accessed April 2003)

[28] Kansteiner

Government, since President Taylor had assumed office with high expectations of US economic aid.

The UN became more strongly engaged as links between the Liberian Government and the RUF rebels in Sierra Leone remained and weapons and trainers poured across the border. The result was intransigence, leading to the kidnapping of 500 UN troops in 2000, released only upon President Taylor's orders. British officials claimed "continuing evidence establishing… links between the rebels and supporters in Liberia".[29]

Eventually the Security Council imposed an arms embargo and travel ban on President Taylor and his key officials, as well as foreign business associates, based on findings by a UN Panel of Experts establishing links between the Liberian Government, the RUF rebels and diamond smuggling.[30] Sanctions were re-imposed in May 2003 after the UN Panel, following a tour of the region, found it "awash with weapons". The Panel also urged the Security Council to reconsider the basis for the Liberian sanctions and adopt a regional approach, taking into account that the proliferation of weapons had led to the spread of conflicts that were not all generated by Liberian forces.[31] However, it must be said that sanctions as a means of containing Liberia's role in the regional conflicts have been largely ineffective. Following several reports of sanctions violations, President Taylor finally announced in March 2003 that he would openly import weapons in defiance of the sanctions. This followed condemnation by the UN Security Council of the Liberian Government, the rebels and other regional states, all accused of violations of the sanctions. The Security Council warned of the threat to regional and international peace, and the attendant result of refugee flows, as a result of the illicit traffic in weapons.[32]

2.4 Implications for the Special Court in Sierra Leone

President Taylor's personal and overt entanglement with the RUF rebels further emerged in April 2003 when a former RUF rebel commander testified to the Sierra Leonean Truth and Reconciliation Commission that Taylor had been instrumental in ordering the incursions by RUF and NPFL rebels into Sierra Leone in March and April 1991. These incursions have been widely held to be the beginings of that country's civil war.[33] Indictments before the Special Court of RUF rebel leaders therefore state that they are alleged to have acted "in concert, at all levels" with President Taylor.[34]

These links have continued, again surfacing in April 2003 when the Court, warning it had the "legal authority" to arrest President Taylor, accused him of shielding two of its fugitives - RUF Commander Sam "Mosquito" Bockarie and former junta leader Johnny Paul Koroma.

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[29] Liberia Reportedly Arming Guerrillas, *The Washington Post*, 18 June 2000

[30] United Nations, Report of the Panel of Experts Appointed Pursuant to U.N. Security Council Resolution 1306 (2000) Paragraph 19, in Relation to Sierra Leone, December 2000, paragraph 212

[31] United Nations, Security Council, Security Council Extends Sanctions Against Liberia until 7 May 2004, Unanimously Adopting Resolution 1478 (2003), 6 May 2003, SC/7752 (press release)

[32] United Nations, Security Council, Security Council Condemns Government of Liberia, Other Parties for Failure to Comply with Arms Embargo, Continuation of Weapons Imports, 13 December 2002, SC/7600 (press release)

[33] *Sierra Leone News*, 18 April 2003, http://www.sierra-leone.org/slnews0403.html (accessed May 2003)

[34] *Sierra Leone News*, 18 March 2003, http://www.sierra-leone.org/slnews0303.html (accessed May 2003)

The Government denied the claims, threatening "total anarchy" if the President is arrested. But hints of a possible indictment were apparent when the Court's prosecutor declared that arrangements had been made to serve indictments and arrest warrants "abroad".[35] The Court urged President Taylor to safeguard any credibility left by "immediately" transferring the men. In early May reports emerged that President Taylor had re-deployed Koroma in command of 3,000 men along the Sierra Leone-Liberian border, and that Bockarie was operating along the Liberian-Ivorian border with 40 to 50 armed former RUF rebels.[36] In early May, however, Bockarie was killed by Liberian government troops for allegedly resisting arrest, and his body displayed in Monrovia.[37]

3   Political Legitimacy in the Absence of Elections

3.1 Prospects and Problems for Stability

The level of lawlessness and the escalating insecurity, which have generated conditions far worse than those under which the 1997 elections were held, have led to confusion over the prospect of the scheduled October elections actually being held. The US government and others have called for their cancellation, while at the same time Liberian government officials have warned of the "great dangers" that would follow a postponement.[38] Recently, however, the chairman of the ruling NPP ruled out any prospect of polls, endorsing instead such previously rejected options as a stabilization force and an interim government. Against this, President Taylor has maintained that the process towards elections would go on because the constitution gave him no choice.[39]

Cancellation of the elections would entail a new political landscape after October, and a number of proposals have been floated. One, from the local Inter-faith Mediation Committee, comprising Muslim and Christian leaders, is for an interim government with President Taylor as head. Another, from the International Crisis Group (ICG), is for an interim government, "internationally assisted, and to the extent necessary, administered", followed by total disarmament and encampment of combatants, along with a commitment from President Taylor not to contest subsequent elections.[40]

Experiments with interim governments, of which Liberia has had five since the 1990s, have been unsuccessful and disastrous. Obstacles such as heightening insecurity, the effective partition of the country, and the obvious absence of the political and electoral mechanisms to

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[35] See, Associated Press [Freetown], Sierra Leone Asks Liberia to Extradite Rebel Leader, 1 March 2002; New Breed Tribunal, *Newsweek*, 4 March 2003; Court Warns Liberia President over Sierra Leone, *Dow Jones International News*, 1 May 2003; *Sierra Leone News*, 4 May 2003, http://www.sierra-leone.org/slnews.html (accessed May 2003)

[36] *Sierra Leone News*, 4 May 2003, http://www.sierra-leone.org/slnews.html (accessed May 2003)

[37] United Nations Integrated Regional Information Network for West Africa, Liberia-Sierra Leone: Bockarie Said Killed in Shoot-out with Liberian Forces, 6 May 2003

[38] United Nations Integrated Regional Information Network for West Africa, Liberia: US Warns Both Government and Rebels, 20 March 2003; Liberia Faces Danger – Cabinet Director Warns Against Elections Failure, *The News* [Monrovia], 24 March 2003

[39] NPP Welcomes Intervention Force, Says Elections Not Possible, *The News* [Monrovia], 1 May 2003; Dennis, J.R., Taylor Maintains Elections Schedule – Says He Has No Choice, *Allaboutliberia.com*, 7 May 2003, http://www.allaboutliberia.com/may2003/230507n2.htm (accessed May 2003)

[40] International Crisis Group, *Tackling Liberia...*

ensure credible polls may have to be overcome for new rounds of democratic elections. An interim government with President Taylor as head is unlikely to achieve this objective, while ostracizing him with his militia power base intact carries uncertain consequences.

3.2 International Perceptions and Legitimacy

A key demand from international actors has been UN verification of conditions for credible polls. Charges of "intrusion" and meddling ensued by the Liberian government. [41] But UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan told the Security Council that elections without a ceasefire and a level playing field would lack credibility. [42] In fact, President Taylor's bill to transform displaced centres into electoral constituencies, which IDPs and political parties rejected, was an admission of the impracticality of the polls. [43] Meanwhile, human rights groups insisted that the mushrooming of loyalist militias "lacking defined command structures" meant that election violence would be almost certain. [44]

Financial constraints also present problems. Out of an estimated elections budget of US$11 million the Government had only allocated US$600,000 in March, along with "logistics" it said were worth US$2 million. [45] This indicated a likely funding shortfall and the President found himself pleading with the elections commission to find means for funding the process. [46]

4   LURD and MODEL Rebels

4.1 Ethnic and Political Factors behind the Rebellion

The LURD (Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy) rebel movement emerged from the ashes of the Liberian civil war and the ethnic persecution that followed, particularly against ethnic Mandingos and Krahns, who are now serving at its commanding levels. [47] Many of them were ex-fighters who had been forced into exile as early as 1998, barely a year after the post-war elections. The multiplying refugee and displaced persons camps have been sources of recruitment, with the Ivorian conflict providing additional opportunities. [48]

The rebellion would have commenced earlier than 1999. But the embittered combatants, frightened of their security being determined by a man they had fought for over half a decade, and coupled with a harsh economic environment, simply lacked the resources and

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[41] Liberia, Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism, Keeping the Record Straight on US-Liberia Relations, Monrovia, 15 January 2003 (press release); Taylor Threatens to Expel Diplomat, *The News* [Monrovia], 21 March 2003

[42] United Nations, Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation in Liberia, 26 February 2003 (S/2003/227)

[43] United Nations Integrated Regional Information Network for West Africa, Liberia: Internally Displaced Want Elections Postponed, 22 January 2003

[44] United Nations Integrated Regional Information Network for West Africa, Liberia: Catholic Commission Concerned about Election Security, 16 January 2003

[45] GOL Gives ECOM US$2m Worth of Logistics, *The Inquirer* [Monrovia], 21 March 2003

[46] United Nations Integrated Regional Information Network for West Africa, Liberia: Elections Will Go Ahead in October, Says Taylor, 21 March 2003

[47] International Crisis Group, *Liberia: Unravelling,* Freetown; Brussels**,** 19 August 2002

[48] Agence France Presse, [Monrovia], Liberia to Seek Explanation from Ivory Coast over Weekend Attack, 21 January 2003

organization for renewed war. This would change within the dynamics of President Taylor's regional politics and international perceptions that ensued. Neighbouring states, fearing attacks from Liberia, provided sanctuary.

4.2 Possible Sources of Support

The eight-year Liberian civil war ended in alliances in which Guinea had backed the Mandingo/Krahn faction United Liberation Movement for Democracy in Liberia (ULIMO). President Taylor, convinced Conakry remains an enemy state, began to woo Guinea's opposition and dissidents, which led to accusations that he was fomenting rebellion in Guinea.[49]

Liberia's entanglement with regional rebel movements sparked a scramble in which each state attempted to strengthen its internal and external security by supporting rebels against neighbouring governments as a counter-measure. Security along the Guinea-Liberia borders has been ensured due to Conakry's relationship with LURD rebels. Human Rights Watch, in a letter to the UN Security Council, said it had evidence of Guinea as the rebels backer, and called for an investigation.[50]

The spread of the Ivorian war, with Liberian involvement, opened another locus of support in Abidjan, now the main backer of the splinter rebel faction Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL).[51] The mushrooming of rebel factions along Côte d'Ivoire's western borders, where hundreds of fighters were reportedly dispatched under Liberian command, provided an opportunity for Ivorian President Laurent Gbagbo, who was in need of fighters against his own rebels, to rely on his ethnic Krahn allies who have penetrated deep into Liberia in a series of rapid attacks to capture key areas.[52] The competition for Liberian rebels has been intensive, and French troops have intercepted hundreds of fighters bound to the front for either the rebels or the government.[53] This is a clear signal of Abidjan's policy of reciprocity for President Taylor's links with western rebel movements in which Liberian fighters are playing an important role.[54]

Exiled Liberians in neighbouring countries have also been accused of channelling money into the rebellion.[55] There have been suggestions that the British Government has provided Intelligence support and other forms of low key backing. President Taylor has cited Washington's US$3 million military assistance package to Guinea (along with US$26 million for the West African Stabilization Programme and an additional US$8 million for training and equipment) as evidence of Washington's support for the Liberian rebels. Thus he has

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[49] Farah, D., Refugee Tide Swells in West Africa, *The Washington Post*, 13 February 2001

[50] Human Rights Watch, Deteriorating Human Rights Situation in Liberia, New York, 19 July 2002 (press release)

[51] See Strategic Forecasting, *New Rebel Offensive Moves to Oust President Taylor*, 8 April 2003, http://www.stratfor.biz/Story.neo?storyId=215176&countryId=153 (accessed April 2003)

[52] International Crisis Group, *Tackling Liberia…*

[53] Liberia's Civil War: The Mother of Local Wars, *The Economist*, 10 April 2003

[54] Human Rights Watch, *Côte d'Ivoire: Liberian Fighters Attack Civilians*, New York, 14 April 2003

[55] Randall, T.L., Pro-Tempore Lashes Out at Exiled Politicians – Identifies with Internally Displaced, *Allaboutliberia.com*, 6 April 2003, http://www.allaboutliberia.com/April2003/230407n5.htm (accessed April 2003)

insisted that Washington end its support as a means of ending the war.[56] But Washington has dismissed these claims, arguing that the military assistance is aimed at containing President Taylor's scheme to overthrow President Lansana Conté with the objective of generating "new revenue flows for [his] regime".[57] Meanwhile, President Conté has justified his relations with the rebels on the basis of "self-defence" following Liberian-led attacks in 2000.[58]

4.3 Political Programme, Problems and Leadership Structure

A coherent political blueprint is lacking. Unity within the rebel movements is based on nothing other than collective opposition to President Taylor and a desire to rule, all part of the ruthless scramble over state resources that intensified in the 1980s following the overthrow of the Americo-Liberian regime of President William Tolbert by Samuel Doe. The leadership structure remains fluid, and there is constant power struggle against a background of competing interests and objectives.

Inside Liberia there is evidence of widespread resentment against ethnic Mandingos (who dominate LURD) seen as foreigners not deserving of national leadership. Likewise, there are memories of the years of draconian rule by ethnic Krahns (who dominate MODEL). Such feelings pose serious problems for either group as they attempt to consolidate power. An earlier united front of these two ethnic groups ended in a series of violent attacks when Mandingos teamed up with Charles Taylor against Krahns in the 1996 fighting in the capital that left over 3,000 killed.[59] This split has resurfaced, with the emergence of the Ivorian-linked MODEL as an expression of the divide between two ethnic groups that have found common cause to unite against a common enemy but are unable to sustain the unity. This has allowed the Government (which has of course also relied on tribal alliances) to issue warnings of a looming tribal war.[60]

4.4 Abuses Against the Population

Civilians remain the prime targets in a war in which there is hardly any evidence of combat casualties. Summary executions, abductions, forced labour, recruitment of child soldiers and rape have been rampant on both sides, though Human Rights Watch suggested that the rebels committed less serious abuses than the Government troops.[61] Amnesty International, in a letter to the Security Council, blamed the rebels for "serious violations", including "deliberate and arbitrary killings, torture and abduction and recruitment of children … for combat".[62]

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[56] Human Rights Watch, *Back to the Brink: War Crimes by Liberian Government and Rebels: A Call for Greater International Attention to Liberia and the Sub Region*, New York, 1 May 2002; Reuters, U.S. Says Risk to Americans Rises in Liberia, 26 March 2003

[57] Corey, Liberia's Ability...

[58] Guinea: I Am sick but in Perfect Mental Condition, Guinean President Reportedly Says, *BBC Monitoring*, 19 March 2003, quoting *Radio France Internationale*

[59] Human Rights Watch, *Liberia: Emerging from the Destruction…*

[60] Randall, T.L., Liberian Crisis Could Degenerate into Tribal Feud – Defense Chief Warns, *Allaboutliberia.com*, 15 April 2003, http://www.allaboutliberia.com/April2003/230415n1.htm (accessed 16 April 2003)

[61] Human Rights Watch*, Côte d'Ivoire: Liberian Fighters...* ; Human Rights Watch, Deteriorating...

[62] Amnesty International, Liberia: The UN Security Council Should Accord Highest Priority to Protection of Human Rights, 22 November 2002 (press release)

5 Implications of the Côte d'Ivoire Rebellion

In his report to the Security Council on Liberia in 2002, Kofi Annan declared that: "The subregional dimensions of the Liberian conflict have now clearly come to the fore with reports of the involvement of Liberian armed groups on both sides of the fighting in the Côte d'Ivoire conflict."[63] ECOWAS ministers have become increasingly concerned over the impact of the Liberian crisis on the region, signalling in April 2003 that it posed "great dangers" to regional integration and security.[64]

Regional rivalries present in the Liberian war, with Francophone and Anglophone states divided, established the basis for continued regional conflicts. Côte d'Ivoire had been President Taylor's only neighbouring ally, serving as the corridor for his rebellion from December 1989 to 1997. Despite predictions that the Côte d'Ivoire-Taylor ties would end with the death of President Houphouët-Boigny, and subsequently the overthrow of President Konan Bedie, this proved wrong. The rise of General Robert Guei to power cemented Taylor's Ivorian ties. An ethnic Yacouba in charge of the army during the crucial years of Côte d'Ivoire's support for Taylor's rebellion, and therefore responsible for coordinating his military activities within the country, Guei's rise solidified the links, while his fall from power enabled him to recruit Liberian mercenaries.[65]

Liberia's role in the Ivorian crisis was therefore a natural outcome of the longstanding connection. With large numbers of trained fighters looking for employment, the Ivorian rebel campaign has provided an opportunity for many. The sudden rise of two additional rebel factions within the western corridor would have been difficult without Liberian links or backing, and there have been consistent reports linking President Taylor to the formation of Côte d'Ivoire's western rebel factions.[66] But the overt Liberian involvement in Côte d'Ivoire has nevertheless fuelled anti-Liberian sentiments within the country, with widespread reports of killings and other crimes against refugees caught up in the war.[67]

5.1 Ivorian Concerns and Claims

Côte d'Ivoire's position as a key centre of Liberian rebel operations goes back to 1989 when it, together with Burkina Faso, served as Charles Taylor's ally. This left it vulnerable, and there were concerns that it was only a matter of time before Côte d'Ivoire too would join the club of unstable states. Not all weapons meant for Liberia passed through. Some were left behind.[68]

In a sign of the shifting regional alliances, Abidjan now claims that Liberia and Burkina Faso are backing the rebellion. But current Ivorian worries over the Liberian factor in its politics date back to 2000 when reports emerged that Liberian fighters had been deployed to back General Robert Guei in his quest for power. When MPIGO (Mouvement Populaire Ivoirien

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[63] United Nations, Report... (S/2003/227)

[64] Reuters [Abidjan], Liberian War Threatens West Africa, Ministers Say, 7 April 2003

[65] Agence France Presse, [Abidjan], Liberia Denies Claims that Guei Is Recruiting Mercenaries, 19 December 2000

[66] Global Witness, *The Usual Suspects...*

[67] Astill, J., Refugees Caught in War's Pincers, *The Guardian* [London], 17 February 2003

[68] Olurin, A, Case of What You Sow You Reap, *The Guardian* [Lagos], 15 December 2002

du Grand-Ouest), one of the new Ivorian rebel movements, declared that its rebellion was to avenge the killing of Guei, this was therefore seen as persuasive evidence of a Liberian connection.[69] The Liberian role was again highlighted with reports that MPIGO leader Felix Doh met with President Taylor in early 2003.[70]

But if President Taylor thought an alliance with the Ivorian rebels would ease his burdens, the rise of the new Liberian rebel movement, MODEL, changed the military-security equation as the war entered Liberia. Key towns along the Ivorian border falling to the rebels, who now control 60% of the country. Swift rebel advances convinced President Taylor that negotiations with President Gbagbo were inevitable, but the latter insisted on Liberia's admission of links with the Ivorian rebels as precondition for talks.[71]

The cross border war, and its political and economic implications, finally forced presidents Gbagbo and Taylor to reach agreement in late April 2003. In an effort to improve border security they agreed to setting up a joint border force, backed by French and West African forces, in order to stop the "infiltration of armed bands spreading terror and desolation on both sides of the border". The Ivorians insisted, however, that the project must be judged on the basis of progress "on the ground".[72] Meanwhile alignments among rebel militias were changing, and one week after the agreement Liberian and Sierra Leonean rebels ambushed and killed MPIGO leader Felix Doh, for reasons that remain unclear.[73] But Liberia's role, and the ruthlessness associated with its mercenaries, continues to spark resentment, to the extent that refugees from areas of western Côte d'Ivoire affected by this inter-guerrilla fighting were calling on the African Union and the UN to expel the Liberian mercenaries.[74]

5.2 Perceptions in Guinea/Sierra Leone

The recycling of rebels within the region remains a source of continuous fear, leading to concerns in Guinea and Sierra Leone that the hundreds of fighters currently engaged in Côte d'Ivoire and those "reintegrated" into Liberia's various militias might return to add to the instability. The reduced UN and British military presence in Sierra Leone, at a time when Liberia remains the epicentre of regional instability, carries serious future security implications.

But Abidjan's aloof attitude in the Liberian and Sierra Leone wars has led to a feeling of *déjà vu*, particularly amongst ECOWAS states that have carried the burden of ending regional conflicts. Both Guinea and Sierra Leone had viewed Abidjan as a source of their conflicts. Imprisoned Sierra Leone rebel leader Foday Sankoh lived in Abidjan, while Guinea became uneasy over Côte d'Ivoire's alliance with Charles Taylor in the 1990s.

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[69] Agence France Presse, Rebels in Western Ivory Coast Fighting to Avenge Former Military Ruler, 11 December 2002

[70] Agence France Presse, Rebel Chief's Death Proves Ivory Coast War Goes On Despite Reconciliation, 29 April 2003

[71] United Nations Integrated Regional Information Network for West Africa, Côte d'Ivoire: Humanitarian Envoy Returns to Abidjan, 22 April 2003

[72] Ivory Coast Eyes Liberia Border Pact, *BBC News*, 27 April 2003, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/2978895.stm (accessed April 2003); Associated Press, Togo Says Liberia, Ivory Coast Agree to Up Border Patrols, 27 April 2003

[73] Agence France Presse, Rebel Chief's Death...

[74] Agence France Presse, Refugees Report Heavy Fighting in Western Ivory Coast, 25 April 2003

This relationship, seen as the root of Taylor's intransigence in the 1990s, led to ECOMOG bombing raids on Ivorian territory in attempts to cut off his supply lines within Côte d'Ivoire, and as warnings to President Houphouet Boigny to contain the warlord.[75] The Ivorian port of San Pedro became a major transit point for weapons and timber. General Adetunji Olurin (the ECOMOG commander in 1992), concluded at the onset of the Ivorian civil war that Abidjan is paying the price for its regional politics.[76]

6 Refugees/IDPs and International Relief Aid

6.1 The Socio-Economic Environment for Refugees, Returnees and IDPs

Although insecurity remains the prime factor hindering refugee return to Liberia, the economic situation has also contributed. Basic services are lacking in an economy with half of its US$70 million current budget allocated to security and to containment of the spreading war.[77] But the country's total assets in Swiss and Burkinabe banks stand at US$3.8 billion, which is reported to be greater than the assets held by Nigeria and South Africa.[78] Poverty is now endemic, with an estimated 76% of the country's pre-war population of 3.2 million living on less than one US dollar per day, while unemployment stands at 85%. Many civil servants have not been paid for over a year. Current levels of displacement stand at an estimated 530,000, along with 38,000 Ivorian refugees, 43,800 Liberian refugees, and 15,000 Third Country Nationals refugees fleeing from Côte d'Ivoire.[79]

With this level of decline, the IMF, citing extra-budgetary expenditures and other unconventional economic practices, in 2003 suspended Liberia from its membership. Thus the provision of basic necessities has been left to relief agencies, NGOs and churches, while the Government claims an international conspiracy has hampered its efforts to meet the needs of the population.

Statistics depicting the socio-economic difficulties are staggering. For every 1,000 children born, 117 die within a year, 194 die within 5 years, with 70% dying from preventable diseases such as malaria. General educational levels are poor: 80% of students in schools are in classes below those appropriate for their ages and 70% of the population are illiterate.[80]

6.2 Influx of Refugees from Côte d'Ivoire

Heightened insecurity in what is now referred to as "the wild country" – the heavily forested border between Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire – has left tens of thousands of refugees and residents at the mercy of roaming bands, with reports of massacres and mass rapes beyond the view of humanitarian agencies.[81] But the influx into Liberia from Côte d'Ivoire is an indication of the desperate state in which refugees find themselves, because it offers no relief.

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[75] Aboagye, F. B., *ECOMOG: A Sub-regional Experience in Conflict Resolution, Management and Peacekeeping in Liberia,* Accra: Sedco Enterprise, 1999, p.113

[76] Olurin

[77] Agence France Presse [Monrovia], Liberia Seeks to Spend More Than Half of Its Budget on Fighting Rebels, 10 October 2002

[78] Global Witness, *The Usual Suspects...*

[79] Associated Press, Top UN ...

[80] Reuters [Monrovia], Hope Fades for Suffering Liberians, 20 April 2003

[81] Reuters, Ivory Coast, Liberia, Back Force for Chaotic Border, 26 April 2003

"If the situation in Côte d'Ivoire is serious", said a UNHCR official, "the situation in Liberia is catastrophic." [82]

UN agencies reported 72,000 Liberian refugees in Côte d'Ivoire at the outbreak of the Ivorian war, of whom about 9,000 fled back home during the first months of the war.[83] The Liberian Government, fearing the security and economic impact of the influx, strengthened its borders, where it reported heavy fighting.[84] By April 2003, an estimated 100,000 people, including Ivorians, Liberians and other West African nationals, had fled into Liberia.[85]

Relief agencies may well have believed that the growth of antagonism against Liberians in Côte d'Ivoire justified their repatriation, but the effect has been highly detrimental. The war, and its accompanying terror, soon reached not only the Liberians, but Ivorians along with other nationals, who were forced to chose one chaotic, dangerous country or the other.[86] These floating refugees, shifting between borders, remain beyond the reach of aid agencies, and the exact nature of atrocities behind these lines, particularly ethnic reprisal killings, remains unknown.

6.3 Treatment of IDPs in Liberia

IDPs have become a source of fear and suspicion, and therefore have been subjected to various abuses. IDPs provided the cover for the infiltration of rebels into urban centres during the 1990s, and the Government's conviction that the present rebels have adopted similar tactics has generated abuses against them.[87] This is in spite of the fact that the majority of IDPs, 80% of the 200,000 displaced, are women and children.[88] Despite promises from President Taylor to provide "perimeter protection" for IDP camps, a series of abductions were recorded in displaced camps as the war hit the city outskirts in March 2003.[89] The persistent fear of IDPs as tools in the war has continued to dominate the security environment, prompting UN Secretary-General Annan to alert the Security Council to abductions, conscriptions and other gross violations against the displaced and refugees.[90] These harsh measures sparked mass protests of women from IDP camps in April 2003. "Our sons and husbands were dragged out of their camps into unmarked vehicles and taken away to unknown destinations", they declared in a statement.[91]

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[82] United Nations Integrated Regional Information Network for West Africa, Côte d'Ivoire: UN Seeks US $85 Million for War Victims, 29 April 2003

[83] 9,000 Liberians Return from the Ivory Coast, UNHCR Reveals, *The News* [Monrovia], 28 November 2002

[84] Agence France Presse, Ivorians Fleeing to Liberia to Escape Fighting: Charles Taylor, 28 November 2002

[85] United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, UNHCR Starts Gradual Return to Liberia's Border Areas, 29 April 2003

[86] Human Rights Watch, *Côte d'Ivoire: Liberian Fighters...*

[87] International Crisis Group, *Tackling Liberia…*

[88] Inter Press Service, Rights-Liberia: War Threatens Survival of Children, 25 April 2003

[89] United Nations Integrated Regional Information Network for West Africa, Liberia: IDPs Complain of Harassment, Forced Conscription, 16 April 2003

[90] United Nations Integrated Regional Information Network for West Africa, Liberia: Keep Looking for a Solution – Annan, 28 April 2003

[91] Agence France-Presse, Women Activists Launch Campaign Against War, 17 April 2003

A humane IDP policy is lacking despite pleas to the Government for a political agenda on the issue.[92] In January 2002, UNHCR Commissioner Ruud Lubbers met with President Taylor to discuss issues such as guaranteeing humanitarian access, safe passage and state condemnation of acts hindering these objectives.[93] However, no agreement was signed. Problems soon surfaced when the World Food Programme, lacking access to victims, warned in June 2002 of a "humanitarian catastrophe" for an estimated 20,000 crossing into Côte d'Ivoire, and 120,000 around the capital.[94] The fate of 25,000 Liberian and Sierra Leone refugees was unknown following battles between rebels and Government.[95]

Such levels of abuse and deprivation have led to the return of tens of thousands into hostile Côte d'Ivoire since the beginning of the year. They come into a situation that UNHCR describes as being "caught between a rock and a hard place."[96]

6.4 Role of International Organizations

The failure of the Liberian state to contribute to the provision of basic needs has left enormous burdens on UN agencies and NGOs operating in a situation of increasing donor neglect.[97] Intensive fighting in April 2003 saw mounting IDP and refugee figures, while agencies worried over dwindling food supplies and humanitarian workers were forced to withdraw from 11 of Liberia's 15 counties.[98]

UNHCR officials were quoted in February 2003 as stating that they had lost touch with 8,000 Liberian refugees in a particularly dangerous area.[99] Relief delivery is in itself now a dangerous occupation. During the 1990s, UN relief bodies and NGOs were targets of rebels in search of foods and valuables, a situation that contributed to prolonging the war and cushioning the warlords. The pattern of looting targeting relief agencies is now being repeated, leading a UN official to express "growing concern" that food distribution as an activity is becoming a specific target of armed attacks.[100]

7   Conclusion: Possible Scenarios

In Liberia's current political and security vacuum even the immediate likely developments are not easy to forecast. However, it is possible to outline a number of scenarios, and to provide a tentative assessment of their impact on the humanitarian outlook.

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[92] Pan African News Agency, UN Official Says Taylor Key to Regional Peace, 16 February 2001

[93] GOL, UNHCR Sign Agreement, *The New Liberia* [Monrovia], 16 February 2001

[94] Agence France Presse, WFP Fears 'Humanitarian Catastrophe' in Liberia, 20 June 2002

[95] Farah

[96] United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Hundreds Flow Back into Côte d'Ivoire amid Liberian Conflict, 10 April 2003

[97] United Nations Integrated Regional Information Network for West Africa, Liberia: Humanitarian Agencies Worried over Scarce Resources, 25 March 2003

[98] Pan African News Agency, WFP Monthly Food Demand Climbs in Liberia, 9 April 2003; No Relief Access to 11 Counties – U.S. Embassy, EC, UN Express Concern, *The News* [Monrovia], 10 April 2003

[99] Astill, Refugees...

[100] United Nations, Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, UN Calls for Protection of Civilians, Humanitarian Access in Liberia, 16 April 2003

7.1 Military Stalemate

Military stalemate rather than a decisive military victory for either the Liberian Government or the rebels is increasingly likely, as UN Secretary-General Annan has told the Security Council.[101] But President Taylor has embarked on a peace offensive with Côte d'Ivoire, with promises not to "provoke combat" along their borders.[102] A decision by Côte d'Ivoire to shift its alliances could cut off the supply lines for the MODEL rebels, whom are at present supplied from the Ivorian side of the border. However, a similar Liberian attempt at rapprochement with Guinea, ally of the LURD rebels, has failed. The rebels have occupied timber-producing areas, depriving President Taylor of much needed funds for weapons. Continued stalemate would have grave access and protection consequences for thousands caught behind rebel lines.

7.2 Military Victory by Either Side

An outright military victory by either the rebels or the Government, although unlikely, would itself simply set the stage for prolonged political crisis. A rebel victory, would give them control of the government, might produce a timetable for possible elections, but would then raise the question of whether elections could be held in such a manner. A Government victory could solidify President Taylor's position, and thus his intransigence regarding political and economic reforms, not to mention the continued dangers he poses to neighbouring states.

There are serious humanitarian and security dangers if a military solution is pursued to finality. A siege of the capital or an invasion could generate ethnic and political killings on the scale of the early 1990s, and would worsen the plight of over a million inhabitants already heavily dependent on relief agencies, while those in rebel-held areas would remain inaccessible for relief or protection.

7.3 An Interim Government with Rebel Representation

As mentioned above, various prototypes for an interim government have been advanced. The ICG proposed a plan that calls for an internationally backed or supervised interim government without President Taylor and the rebels. Some key Liberian opinion leaders believe President Taylor should lead an interim administration until peace is restored. The ICG option would require substantial international engagement to implement, apart from the absence of a mechanism to address the rebels' political demands. But an interim government, including the rebels and with President Taylor as head, is fraught with dangers in the absence of total disarmament and subsequent resettlement of refugees and IDPs.

7.4 UN Intervention

A comprehensive internationally supported plan, as the UN has hinted, would seem to be the most viable way out of the conflict, particularly if implemented along the lines of the Sierra Leone peace model. However, whether this is a realistic option at all is most uncertain, due to many factors, prime amongst them the question of cost. Washington, Liberia's traditional benefactor, says it has "no moral obligation" to support a regime change in Liberia, only to contain its regional "predatory" exploits.[103]

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[101] United Nations, Report... (S/2003/227)

[102] Agence France Presse, All Sides in Ivory Coast War, Including Liberia, Sign Ceasefire: Officials, 1 May 2003

[103] Corey, Liberia's Ability...

If ECOWAS, plagued with internal problems and weak economies, attempted to back up an international plan for Liberia it might again fall prey to the type machinations that led to its failure in Sierra Leone, amidst corruption charges against military officers and politicians.[104]

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[104] McGreal, C., Sierra Leone Force Accused of Sabotage, *The Guardian* [London], 9 September 2000

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