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HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION IN LIBERIA

ISSUE

A long and brutal civil war ended with a fragile peace settlement last summer that continues to hold, but further international assistance will be needed to help bring it to a successful conclusion in the face of major challenges.

BACKGROUND

Liberia was founded by freed American slaves in 1822 and became independent in 1847. The local tribes' longstanding resentment of the more affluent settlers' descendants came to a head when Master Sergeant Samuel Doe ousted President William Tolbert in a bloody coup in 1980 and launched a decade of brutal dictatorship.

Charles Taylor's December 1989 rebellion against Doe ultimately toppled him, but plunged Liberia into a horrific civil war that caused 20,000 combat deaths while 40,000 starved and 700,000 refugees fled. In August 1990, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) sent Nigerian-led peacekeepers who held the capital Monrovia, installed an interim government of national unity (IGNU) of Liberian parties there, and imposed a ceasefire.

Taylor had 80% of Liberia and felt cheated of power by ECOWAS. Through 1991 and early 1992, he let a few peacekeepers deploy but repeatedly failed to honour agreements to encamp and disarm his fighters so elections could proceed. His initial popularity waned due to human rights abuses by his undisciplined troops. While some of Taylor's enemies formed the United Liberation Movement (ULIMO), his National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) sold resources to rearm for a second try for power.

In late summer 1992, ULIMO took west Liberia from NPFL. Taylor expelled ECOWAS peacekeepers from the rest of his territory and attacked Monrovia in force in October, causing 10,000 new deaths and 200,000 new refugees. ECOWAS imposed sanctions and doubled its peacekeeping force. The UN imposed an arms embargo and named a mediator. The regional force by April 1993 recaptured NPFL's key airport, seaport and railway as well as its plantations, and with the loss of half his land Taylor reopened talks via the UN.

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