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LIBERIA

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The elections on July 19, 1997, brought Charles Taylor and his National Patriotic Party (formerly the National Patriotic Front of Liberia, or NPFL) to power for the next six years with 75 percent of the popular vote and 70 of the 90 seats in the Legislature. While the elections marked the end of the seven-year civil war, they also introduced the enormous task of consolidating peace, security and human rights.

BACKGROUND

The campaign leading up to the April elections was conducted in an atmosphere of intimidation and was marred by several incidents of violence. However, the elections themselves, supervised by some 13,000 ECOMOG troops (ECOWAS Cease-fire Monitoring Group) and 500 international observers, were described as peaceful and transparent, although plagued by many irregularities.

Despite its role in supervising the elections, the ECOMOG force, and specifically the Nigerian troops who are by far the largest contingent, was the subject of numerous human rights complaints throughout 1997, for rape, torture, summary execution, illegal detention, kidnapping and brutality. In May, during a sweep for illegal arms, they flogged several civilians, killing one, and in September, while assisting the police, they opened fire on striking workers at a Firestone plant, wounding many of them. ECOMOG is due to be pulled out of Liberia by February 2, 1998.

The credibility of the new Government has been strained by a number of events, including the as yet unsolved murder of a political opponent of President Taylor, Samuel Dokie and three members of his family. Vice President Dogolea ordered the public flogging of a member of the Legislature because of a minor traffic incident. The legislation creating the National Human Rights Commission was passed quietly, without fanfare and without consultation with any national or international human rights organizations. Considering the fear still lingering among many sectors of the population, for example the Krahn and Mandingo peoples known to have supported the regime of Samuel Doe and later to have opposed Taylor's NPFL, the lack of publicity about the NHRC is not encouraging.

It is reported that human rights organizations and journalists, although now working in better conditions, are still subject to threats and intimidation by members of the Government and the police. The justice system is in a pitiful state, with its independence much in doubt and a huge backlog of cases. There is no system for dealing with young offenders, of whom there are many.

Much remains to be accomplished in the field of women's rights in Liberia. In law a woman has full status as a person and, in case of widowhood, should inherit from her deceased husband. In fact she is the property of her husband and as such has virtually no rights at all. Female genital mutilation is widespread, although there are no official statistics to support this well-known fact.

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