

LIBERIAISSUE

Peace remains elusive in Liberia. In spite of all efforts, wide-spread civil strife continues to undermine human rights and freedoms. International concerns and regional (Economic Community of West African States Military Observer Group - ECOMOG) peacekeeping efforts have not contributed significantly to the restoration of peace or the re-establishment of human rights.

BACKGROUND

The period from September 1995 to November 1996 saw little real change in the catastrophic situation in Liberia. After six years of civil war with more than 200,000 victims, the various factions continue their attacks (now in one alliance, now in another), with the civilian population literally being taken hostage and finding itself in the middle of the most violent fighting since the start of the war in 1989. The 60,000 combatants (including 15,000 child-soldiers) have created a reign of terror, and thousands of desperate Liberians have swollen the ranks of the displaced to total approximately fifty per cent of the population. In the meantime, the heads of the different factions appear to have multiplied their efforts to sabotage all chances for a real settlement. There appears little hope for the disarmament process which, under the auspices of ECOMOG, was to be in full implementation at the end of November 1996; in late December, the UN announced the suspension of its disarmament and food distribution activities in the region extending from Tubmanburg to the Sierra Leone border due to blackmail attempts on the part of local militia. The slow progress in disarming is a reflection of the bad faith constantly being displayed by many factions.

In April 1996, the attempt of the Council of State to arrest faction head Roosevelt Johnson provoked the worst fighting since the war began. Monrovia was completely devastated and anarchy reigned; not only was the August 1995 Abuja peace accord violated, but the civilian population became victim to almost all abuses imaginable. Fighters faithful to Johnson took hostage civilians, ECOMOG soldiers and members of the resident Lebanese community; and all factions deliberately and arbitrarily killed civilians. To date, no enquiry into these atrocities has been undertaken. Allegedly, combatants from all factions were under the influence of alcohol or drugs and gave themselves up to massacres and pillage. Civilians were beaten, tortured, raped and summarily executed because of their ethnic origin or because of their suspected factional sympathies. Numerous Liberians have been subjected to forced labour. Given the number of armed factions and their constantly changing alliances, it remains difficult to identify precisely those responsible for the deaths and the pillaging.

Between April and June, numerous embassies and non-governmental organizations removed their staffs and/or restricted their activities in Liberia. Aid work was curtailed and the reduction in food, potable water and medicine distribution resulted in malnutrition and cholera, notably in Tubmanburg and the North West. Numerous peasants saw their September rice ration confiscated by armed factions; as well, in some villages, armed men destroyed the pumps supplying potable water. In October, humanitarian aid workers with