

January 1999

## LIBERIA

### ISSUE

Assuming the government is genuinely determined to enforce its obligations and promises to re-establish the rule of law, respect for human rights and promotion of national reconciliation, it still faces enormous obstacles and challenges in consolidating peace and security.

### BACKGROUND

President Taylor won the 1997 elections, supervised by some 13,000 ECOMOG troops and 500 international observers, which marked the end of a seven-year civil war. Taylor promised to give high priority to a stable environment for economic development, and eliminate corruption. The Liberian Constitution provides most of the human rights protections associated with liberal democracies.

The human rights record in 1998 was poor with problems in many areas. A culture of violence, ethnic tension, and impunity has taken root. Essentially, the Taylor government has not taken the necessary measures to mitigate the chaos that has marked Liberia's recent past, and this has resulted in increased insecurity in Liberia, combined with a war-ravaged economy in severe disarray.

Members of the **Armed Forces of Liberia**, no longer engaged in fighting, have turned to looting and harassing civilians. Intimidation of journalists by **security forces**, arbitrary arrests, illegal detentions and torture to obtain confessions were common. The **national Human Rights Commission**, created by legislation in 1997, can only investigate present and future human-rights abuses but lacks the power to compel witnesses, as well as government funding to conduct its activities. The judiciary is prone to political and economic influence.

**Nigeria's unilateral withdrawal from ECOMOG** in Liberia in January 1999, leaving the mission with few resources, is likely to aggravate an already deplorable human-rights situation. Nigeria accused Liberia of assisting the rebel **Revolutionary United Front (RUF)** forces fighting the democratically-elected government in Sierra Leone.

Liberia has no laws against **gender-based discrimination or female genital mutilation (FGM)**. This practice is widespread in the northern, central, and western parts of the country. In rural areas, where traditional customs are stronger, a woman is normally considered the property of the husband and his clan, and usually is not entitled to retain custody of their children or inherit from a deceased husband.

The **UN Special Representative on Children Affected by Armed Conflicts** visited Liberia in March 1998 to assess the situation of children after a period of protracted civil war. The report notes that the conflict has had a devastating effect on children, many of whom have known no other way of life. The categories of children identified as having special protection needs include **ex-combatant youth, refugee and internally displaced children, sexually abused girls, and unaccompanied and street children**. A major legacy of the Liberian civil war has been the many child soldiers that are in Liberia. This problem, however, does not engage the attention that it should deserve from the government.

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