

Ending the Horror

By Ezekiel Pajibo (July 15, 2003)

As a Liberian living in Zimbabwe, I, like many of my expatriates, have been tying up Africa's phone lines trying to reach my relatives in Monrovia. The reports of violence in the mainstream press have deep meaning for me, as I worry about the fate of my family, especially my mother, who was just released from the hospital. My sister told me that rocket-propelled grenades fired by Liberia United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) rebel forces had landed on the house where she lived. My mother's house also suffered such an attack. Thankfully, their lives were spared, but immediately after the explosions destroyed the houses, desperate vandals looted them, and my sister and mother are now among the 1 million Liberians who are displaced. They were able to seek refuge at the Faith Healing Temple in Logan Town, about a mile from their homes. As I spoke to them, the voices of others, especially crying babies, were audible in the background.

Historical Underpinnings of Crisis

Liberians have become the world's refugees, fleeing their country en masse. They have been running for the past 13 years, but some would say that they started running in 1980, when Samuel Doe took over the country. He did so in a violent coup d'état during which Liberia's 19th President and then Chairman of the Organization of African Unity (now the African Union) William R. Tolbert was killed. The 1980 coup undermined and ultimately derailed the growing political reform and democracy movement that had emerged in the late 1970s to challenge the True Whig Party dictatorship of Tolbert. It also launched the country's descent into political violence and criminality, a descent which has continued unabated.

Liberia-U.S. Relations

When Master Sergeant Doe took over the reins of power in Liberia, the Reagan administration embraced him. It viewed him as a line of defense against the Soviets during the cold war. The Liberian government between 1980-1985 was the largest recipient of U.S. aid in Sub-Saharan Africa, receiving \$500 million during that period. But Doe did not spend that money on schools or hospitals, nor did he maintain the country's infrastructure. He did, however, with U.S. encouragement, modernize the Liberian military. Salaries and benefits for soldiers were increased. The army used its enhanced position to launch terror and mayhem on ordinary Liberian civilians. In this way, the militarization of politics in Liberia was born. Doe became the most repressive Liberian leader in its history,

while President Ronald Reagan called Doe his good friend and entertained him at the White House.

Liberia at that time had a so-called "strategic relationship" with the United States. The country was the location for a broadcasting relay facility owned by the Voice of America that beamed U.S. propaganda to continental Africa and the Middle East. It also hosted an Omega Navigation Station, which was a naval intelligence gathering entity for the south Atlantic, and the United States and Liberian governments had an agreement that allowed the U.S. military access to Liberian sea- and airport facilities. The U.S.-based Firestone Corporation had the world's largest private rubber plantation located in Liberia.

When Doe rigged the Liberian election in 1985, former U.S. Secretary of State George Shultz said that given the high illiteracy rate in the country, it came as no surprise that Doe won the elections—Washington therefore duly recognized him. One of the most glaring pieces of evidence of the rigged election happened after polling stations were closed, the ballot boxes were assembled, and counting had begun. Doe dismissed the Elections Commission and named a new team of fifty handpicked individuals to count the ballots, and they declared Doe the winner.

Doe's repressive rule sparked unrest, and Charles Taylor, a fugitive from the U.S. penal system, launched a war in 1989 that continues to embroil Liberia today. More than 200,000 people have died, a million have been displaced, and several hundreds of thousands are refugees in the region and elsewhere. The Liberian war spilled over first



into Sierra Leone, where the “chopping off of limbs” shocked the international community, then into Guinea, where it was contained and where the U.S. has been giving military assistance. More recently, we witnessed the violent disturbances in Cote d’Ivoire. West Africa, where no war for independence was fought, has now become a theater of armed conflict. Liberia has been transformed from a peaceful, non-violent nation to a hemorrhaging wound in the heart of Africa.

The Case for U.S. Intervention

It is easy for commentators to suggest that the most important reason the U.S. should get involved in Liberia is because the country was settled by freed slaves from the United States. The best case is that U.S. intervention in Liberia represents accepting moral responsibility for U.S. support of Doe’s regime and the destruction that followed.

Certainly, an appropriate U.S. role would be to provide ECOWAS forces with logistical and financial support while also providing U.S. ground troops. The United Nations would be further emboldened to play a more active role in a transitional process. It would add more pressure on President Taylor to step down. U.S. troops on the ground would also pressure the two rebel groups: Liberia United for Reconciliation (LURD) and Democracy and Movement for Democracy in Liberia

(MODEL) to end their violent atrocities. Neither group is an acceptable alternative to the current regime. Like Taylor’s forces, they have committed egregious human rights violations.

One important factor regarding the fate of President Taylor that cannot be negotiated is the dropping of war crimes charges against him. But the following scenarios might be explored. Nigeria has offered Mr Taylor asylum and he has accepted. Given that war crimes don’t have statutes of limitation, he can be pursued once the country has returned to some normalcy and a legitimate government is in place. No doubt Liberian human rights campaigners, including this writer, will make it their singular duty to make sure Mr. Taylor answers for his crimes not only against the people of Sierra Leone but the people of Liberia.

The idea of Liberia exists as a shining example of how best to transform a terrible crime to a great social innovation. Africans were taken from Africa and sold into slavery and their descendants returned to reclaim their birthright. How did this idea get so corrupted? Therein lies the problem. Liberia presents a moral challenge not only to the U.S. but to Africa as well.

(Ezekiel Pajibo <epajibo@africaonline.co.zw> is an independent researcher/consultant based in Zimbabwe and an analyst for Foreign Policy In Focus (online at www.fpif.org.)

Published by Foreign Policy In Focus (FPiF), a joint project of the Interhemispheric Resource Center (IRC, online at www.irc-online.org) and the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS, online at www.ips-dc.org). ©2003. All rights reserved.

Foreign Policy In Focus

“A Think Tank Without Walls”

Established in 1996, Foreign Policy In Focus is a network of policy analysts, advocates, and activists committed to “making the United States a more responsible global leader and global partner.” For more information, visit www.fpif.org.

Recommended citation:

Ezekiel Pajibo, “Liberia: Ending the Horror,” (Silver City, NM & Washington, DC: Foreign Policy In Focus, July 15, 2003).

Web location:

<http://www.fpif.org/outside/commentary/2003/0307liberia.html>

Production Information:

Writer: Ezekiel Pajibo

Editors: Emira Woods, IPS, John Gershman, IRC, Matthew Draper, IPS

Layout: Tonya Cannariato, IRC

