

LIBERIA

HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES BY THE LIBERIAN PEACE COUNCIL AND THE NEED FOR INTERNATIONAL OVERSIGHT

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Introduction

In late 1993, a new armed faction emerged in Liberia, known as the Liberian Peace Council (LPC), which has been fighting Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) in the southeast of the country. While both sides have been responsible for severe human rights abuses against the civilian population, in recent weeks the LPC appears to have stepped up its campaign against civilians, especially those it considers to have supported the NPFL. Some 40,000 civilians have been displaced by the fighting, and they describe systematic and gratuitous abuses by the LPC.

There are consistent reports that elements of the Nigerian contingent of ECOMOG, the West African peacekeeping force -- not the Ghanaians or the Ugandans, who are also stationed in the area -- are aiding the LPC. Displaced persons and other observers report that the Nigerians are supplying arms and ammunition to the LPC as a way to weaken the NPFL, while profiteering on

the side. It is not clear how high up the collaboration goes in the Nigerian contingent.

The United Nations mission in Liberia, UNOMIL, has a mandate to report on violations of the cease-fire and violations of humanitarian law, but it has not been reporting publicly about the situation in the southeast. By avoiding the human rights issues, UNOMIL is failing to implement its mandate in Liberia.

In April, the U.N. Security Council extended UNOMIL's mandate for another six months, with the proviso that the situation be reviewed on May 18. Human Rights Watch/Africa calls on the U.N. to ensure that UNOMIL implements its mandate in Liberia, including the requirement to report on violations of humanitarian law. Human Rights Watch/Africa further calls on ECOMOG to launch an immediate investigation of the charges that members of the Nigerian contingent may be assisting the LPC, and make its findings public.

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Liberia remains a divided country: the Liberian National Transitional Government (LNTG), a coalition government, was seated on March 7 and now governs the capital, Monrovia, backed by the West African peacekeeping force (ECOMOG); Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), claims to control 60 percent of the country; the United Liberation Movement for Democracy in Liberia (ULIMO), made up primarily of soldiers from former President Samuel Doe's army, the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL), controls at least two western counties; and a new faction, the Liberian Peace Council (LPC), also made up largely of Krahn from the AFL, controls territory in the southeast.

The peace agreement signed in July 1993, known as the Cotonou accord, was believed to be Liberia's last, best hope. The accord stipulated that concomitant with disarmament, a five-person Council of State elected by all the factions would take power from the interim government until elections were held. A thirty-five-member transitional parliament would include thirteen members from the NPFL and the interim government, and nine from ULIMO. An important element of the plan involved the creation of a UN Observer Mission in Liberia (UNOMIL) to help supervise and monitor the agreement, in conjunction with ECOMOG. The plan also provided for an expanded ECOMOG force, under the auspices of the OAU, to be composed of African troops outside the West African region. By the end of January 1994, some 800 Tanzanians were deployed

in Kakata, and 900 Ugandans were in Buchanan.

Although some progress was made in early 1994 toward ending Liberia's bloody civil war, the situation is now very precarious. Political infighting and renewed combat have brought disarmament to a virtual standstill. As of late April, only some 2,500 combatants had been demobilized, out of a possible total of 40-60,000. In March, ULIMO split into two along ethnic lines: the Krahn group, headed by Gen. Roosevelt Johnson, is battling the Mandingos, led by Alhadji Kromah. The inter-ULIMO fighting in the western counties of Bomi and Cape Mount has reportedly claimed hundreds of civilian lives since it flared up in March. Two other factions, the NPFL and LPC, have been fighting in the southeast, taking a heavy toll on the civilian population.

Indeed, a characteristic of the Liberian civil war has been that civilians suffer the most, and are killed in far greater numbers than combatants. The lack of protection for civilians from abuses by all sides and the profound distrust among the warring factions remain obstacles to lasting peace.

The Liberian Peace Council (LPC)

The fighting between Charles Taylor's NPFL and a relatively new faction, calling itself the Liberian Peace Council (LPC), began in October 1993 and continues at this writing. The LPC claims to control six counties -- Sinoe, Grand Gedeh, River Cess, Grand Kru, Maryland, and Grand Bassa. The fighting, which began in the area of Grand Kola, got as far as the LAC plantation in early February, and had reached the outskirts of Buchanan by late April.

Little is known about the LPC. The LPC emerged after the Cotonou peace agreement was signed by the NPFL, ULIMO and the interim government in July 1993. It is clear that the LPC is an offshoot of former President Doe's army, the Armed Forces of Liberia, and of the Krahn wing of ULIMO. It is composed mainly of people from the Krahn ethnic group. "The LPC was formed because the Mandingos [in ULIMO] weren't going to spill blood to liberate Grand Gedeh [the county where many of the Krahn live]," a well-informed, foreign observer in Monrovia noted. "The only way to get the LPC to disarm is to convince ECOMOG that they will be safe with Taylor in the government."¹

The LPC's strength is estimated to be some 800 fighters, organized into mobile combat units. It is headed by George Boley, a Krahn and former minister of education in the Doe government, also formerly a member of ULIMO.

According to Boley, the LPC was formed because of "continued acts of atrocities by the NPFL in southeastern Liberia" since the Cotonou agreement. He also claimed that most of his fighters were refugees from the Ivory Coast who had been forced to flee from the NPFL. Boley described the LPC as "a broad-based national entity which advocates the protection of the rights of exiled and displaced citizens and residents of Liberia as well as the restoration of constitutional democratic leadership in Liberia."²

In recent statements, LPC spokespersons have made it clear that they will continue fighting until they are included in the transitional government. LPC Secretary General, Octavius Walker, told reporters on April 14 that the LPC wanted six seats in the transitional parliament as well as portfolios in the interim government, but that discussions with the NPFL had failed to produce an agreement on amending the Cotonou accord to include the LPC. "We will fight on until they include us in the administrative process," he said.³

LPC and NPFL Attacks on Civilians

Thousands of civilians have been displaced by the fighting, with some 40,000 registered in the city of Buchanan alone, according to international relief organizations. Testimony from displaced persons and foreign observers indicates that the LPC is responsible for serious human

¹Human Rights Watch/Africa interview in Monrovia, April 26, 1994.

²James Butty, "Threat to Peace," *West Africa* magazine, London, December 6-12, 1993.

³"Liberia Militia Says It Will Fight On," *Reuters*, April 14, 1994.

rights abuses against the civilian population, especially those the LPC considers to have supported the NPFL. Abuses include

widespread looting, arbitrary arrest and detention, forcible recruitment, beatings, torture, rape, and extrajudicial executions.

The NPFL has also been responsible for abuses against civilians. When the NPFL recaptures a village from the LPC, the inhabitants are often considered to have collaborated with the LPC. In one incident reported in January 1994 in Yapperstown, the NPFL killed eight women and nine men whom they accused of helping the LPC.⁴ As a foreign national in Buchanan noted: "It's terminal either way. If the NPFL comes, they say you are LPC, and visa versa."⁵

David, a displaced Bassa man who arrived in Buchanan in late April, described the way civilians have suffered at the hands of both factions: "First the NPFL took our things. They killed my brother's pregnant wife in November 1993. My brother survived and told me about the killing." Then, he said, the LPC came: "They told the whole village to leave. We escaped -- about 300 or 400 of us -- and went to the bush for two months."⁶

In some cases, the displaced persons either do not know, or are afraid to reveal, which faction was responsible for the attack. One very elderly man interviewed by Human Rights Watch/Africa in a Buchanan hospital had been shot in the chest and had his right hand smashed by the same fighter. "It's just gratuitous violence," a foreign relief worker commented.

There are many cases of villages being burned by either the NPFL or the LPC, and sometimes both factions destroyed part of the village at different times. Among the villages in the southeast reportedly burned include the following: Darsaw Town; Debah Town; Johnsoo Town; Bleabeh Town, almost entirely burned by the LPC, then the NPFL burned what remained; Jamestown, burned by the NPFL; Talowtown, burned by both NPFL and LPC; Tubmanville, burned by LPC; Yapperstown; Flayzor Town.⁷

The majority of the displaced are women, children, and the elderly; able-bodied men are usually arrested and either forcibly recruited or incarcerated. Many of the displaced are suffering from bullet wounds, dehydration, or malnutrition. Some civilians were caught in cross-fire, but others were clearly targeted.

Abuses by the LPC

While both sides are responsible for widespread looting, arbitrary arrests, beatings, and extrajudicial executions, it appears that the LPC has stepped up its campaign against civilians. On one day in mid-April, twelve displaced persons arrived in Buchanan, having been tortured with roasted

⁴Human Rights Watch/Africa interview in Buchanan, April 26, 1994.

⁵Human Rights Watch/Africa interview in Buchanan, April 26, 1994.

⁶Human Rights Watch/Africa interview outside Buchanan, April 23, 1994.

⁷Human Rights Watch/Africa interviews in Buchanan, April 1994.

cutlasses by the LPC. The men were burned on their backs and on their genitals; the women were beaten.⁸

The following cases were reported to Human Rights Watch/Africa:

- J., a medical worker from River Cess, fled the fighting with eighteen of his relatives in late February 1994. He was arrested by the LPC on March 3 in Neetown, apparently because he had an identity card issued by the NPFL's civilian arm, the NPRAG, which the LPC took as proof that he fought with the NPFL. His relatives were allowed to continue to Buchanan, but he was subjected to a form of torture known as "tabey."⁹ Although one LPC fighter wanted to execute him, another fighter intervened and brought him to the battalion commander, a former AFL colonel. He was then taken to a makeshift jail. Despite their threats, J. refused to state that he was an NPFL rebel.

During his imprisonment, he was forced to work for the fighters, performing such functions as picking cassava, cutting wood, digging for copper, and picking coconuts. There were approximately seventy-five other men in the jail with him, all civilians from the Bassa ethnic group. The women, girls, and children were held separately in a church building, and it was believed that many of the women were raped by the LPC.¹⁰

- In early April, a young man was identified by an LPC fighter to be an NPFL rebel. Although he denied the charge, the LPC arrested him and tied him up. The fighters roasted their cutlasses in a fire and then burned the man over various parts of his body. Since the man continued to deny the allegation, one of the fighters decided to take more drastic measures to force the confession: he got his army knife, and cut out the man's right eye. At that point, the battalion commander arrived, angered because he had not ordered such treatment. However, since they had no means to care for the wounded man, the commander ordered him to be executed. Five LPC fighters took the man into the bush and killed him with cutlasses.
- On February 3, 1994, the LPC captured Gorwor Town and began searching the civilians. They found three young men, one about fifteen years old, the other two in their early twenties. When searching the youngest one, they found a Charles Taylor T-shirt in his bag (on the back was written, "Ghankay¹¹ is OK"). All

⁸Human Rights Watch/Africa interview in Buchanan, April 26, 1994.

⁹"Tabey" is a form of torture used by all the factions in Liberia. It involves tying the victim's elbows behind his or her back, which forces the chest to protrude and often causes nerve damage in the arms.

¹⁰Human Rights Watch/Africa interview in Buchanan, April 23, 1994.

¹¹Charles Taylor claims to have Gola ancestry. During the war, he adopted a new middle name -- "Ghankay" -- which means warrior in the Gola language, and is often referred to by this name.

three young men were then shot.

- M., a twenty-seven-year-old medical worker, was arrested by the LPC in Newcass beach and forced to work as a combat medic. When he tried to refuse, three Krahn soldiers beat him.

The Role of ECOMOG

There are consistent reports that members of the Nigerian contingent of ECOMOG -- not the Ugandans or the Ghanaians, who are also stationed in the area -- are aiding the LPC. Displaced persons and foreign observers believe that the Nigerians are supplying arms and ammunition to the LPC as a way to weaken the NPFL, and possibly profiteering on the side.

The background to the hostility between NPFL and the Nigerian contingent of ECOMOG dates back to the initial ECOMOG intervention in August 1990, when Charles Taylor accused Nigeria's President Ibrahim Babangida of attempting to rescue Liberian President Doe. Taylor's NPFL soon targeted West African nationals from the countries participating in ECOMOG, including many Nigerians; it is believed that hundreds were executed, and hundreds of others were held in detention.

An uneasy truce existed between 1990 and 1992, but the recalcitrance of the warring factions made a political settlement impossible. The NPFL grew increasingly hostile toward ECOMOG, particularly the Nigerian contingent. Taylor referred to Babangida as a "mad dictator" and accused him of trying to commit genocide on the Liberian people.

ECOMOG finally began to deploy its forces in NPFL territory in April 1992, in accordance with the Geneva peace agreement, but was forced to withdraw all its forces after the offensive of a new warring faction, ULIMO, against the NPFL. However, Taylor prohibited the departure of 580 ECOMOG soldiers stationed in NPFL territory, and effectively held them hostage until late September, when they were released due to the intervention of former President Jimmy Carter. During their return to Monrovia, many of the soldiers were humiliated, beaten, and had their weapons, vehicles and personal belongings confiscated by the NPFL. This incident increased ECOMOG's hostility toward the NPFL.

The situation exploded again in October 1992, when the NPFL attacked Monrovia. The urgency of the situation compelled ECOMOG to accept the assistance of other Liberian factions -- the AFL and ULIMO -- in fighting the NPFL. There have been many allegations that ECOMOG actually armed ULIMO and the AFL. Sources in the State Department and the Pentagon have confirmed that ECOMOG supplied -- or at least facilitated -- some arms to AFL and ULIMO. There were also many reports that ECOMOG provided transportation to ULIMO fighters.

A remarkably similar pattern seems to be emerging between Nigerian ECOMOG and the LPC. Residents of Buchanan report that LPC fighters have free run of the city, sometimes checking their weapons at an ECOMOG checkpoint at the outskirts of the city and reclaiming them when they leave. Some observers have reported seeing a joint ECOMOG/LPC checkpoint, and displaced persons report seeing the Nigerians transporting LPC.

The implications of this are obviously very serious, even though it is not clear how high up the collaboration goes in the Nigerian contingent.

On March 7, the Liberian National Transitional Government was seated, a new interim government with representatives of all the factions who signed the Cotonou agreement in July 1993. A high-ranking official of the new government was skeptical about ECOMOG's intentions:

At one time, there was only Taylor, there was no ULIMO. ECOMOG sat here until ULIMO was born under some mysterious circumstances. They told us not to worry, that ULIMO would be put in its place. Now, they say the same thing about the LPC.¹²

A foreign diplomat in Monrovia echoed this sentiment, calling the LPC "ULIMO East."¹³ He continued: "Who monitors the monitors, monitoring the peacekeepers?"

However, there are also examples of other contingents in ECOMOG protecting civilians from the LPC. When the LPC attacked Compound 2 outside Buchanan in March, many civilians were injured or killed, and those who could fled to SOS Village, approximately six km. away, where the Ugandan contingent of ECOMOG was based. This was followed by some 175 NPFL fighters with about 400 of their relatives who also sought refuge at SOS Village, and who agreed to hand their weapons over to ECOMOG. The LPC responded by accusing ECOMOG of assisting the NPFL. For its part, the NPFL accused ECOMOG of enticing the soldiers to come into the disarmament center, and demanded that their soldiers be returned.

The U.N. Response

UNOMIL was established by the Security Council on September 22, 1993, initially for seven months. It comprises 303 military observers tasked with monitoring the cease-fire and verifying that the regional peacekeeping force, ECOMOG, is fulfilling its mandate to secure the country and carry out disarmament. UNOMIL is also supposed to help coordinate humanitarian relief and report violations of international humanitarian law to the Secretary-General. This mandate should enable the U.N. to deploy personnel throughout the country and provide accurate information about what all the factions are doing, including their responsibility for human rights violations.

In April, the United Nations Security Council extended the UNOMIL's mandate for another six months, but called for the situation to be reviewed on May 18 and June 30. This provides an important opportunity to re-examine UNOMIL's progress and purpose, and reinforce the need for its mandate to be implemented.

UNOMIL has not been reporting publicly on either the violations of the cease-fire in the southeast or violations of humanitarian law, although apparently reports are being sent to New York. According to General Opande, the commander of UNOMIL: "We collect as much information as possible, wherever we go, whatever we see, whatever we hear." But he made it

¹²Human Rights Watch/Africa interview in Monrovia, April 27, 1994.

¹³Human Rights Watch/Africa interview in Monrovia, April 27, 1994.

clear that UNOMIL has to be careful in investigating human rights abuses. "We've done some investigations, but they haven't been conclusive."¹⁴

UNOMIL is itself restricted in its movements, and has not been capable of conducting investigations of such violations. As a U.N. colonel explained:

Often a twelve or fifteen-year-old boy stops a U.N. car, and starts complaining and arguing....He only knows that he is in power and that he has someone who will do anything he commands -- even kill. Sometimes it takes hours of discussion, when they have no right to restrict us.¹⁵

In one incident in March, General Opande was evacuating forty-six civilians from a combat zone. Although he had received authorization from the faction that controlled the area, ULIMO, the convoy was still harassed at every checkpoint. After the LPC attack on Compound 2, UNOMIL apparently tried to investigate reports that civilians were killed by the LPC; the UNOMIL observers were then detained by the LPC for a couple of hours.¹⁶

When asked about the relations between Nigerian ECOMOG and the LPC, UNOMIL officials admitted that they had heard such reports, but could not confirm them. "Maybe there are some deals going on between ECOMOG and the LPC," one U.N. official said. "But they don't need a lot of weapons and ammunition to take an area in Liberia." He continued: "These factions take what they want from a village -- they kill, rape, stay in charge for a couple of weeks. Then the other group counterattacks. But they don't really attack each other; it's the civilians who are attacked."¹⁷

Unfortunately, the U.N. is reluctant to discuss human rights abuses, for fear of derailing the peace process. According to former president of the interim government, Amos Sawyer:

The question of casting blame for anything -- including human rights violations -- is the last thing the U.N. wants to get involved in. It stands in the way of access. The U.N. is being unwittingly manipulated by the so-called parties, because it wants to maintain its relevance to those parties.¹⁸

By avoiding the human rights issues, the U.N. is failing to discharge its mandate in Liberia.

Recommendations

¹⁴Human Rights Watch/Africa interview with General Opande in Monrovia, April 20, 1994.

¹⁵Human Rights Watch/Africa interview with Colonel Winkler in Monrovia, April 19, 1994.

¹⁶Human Rights Watch/Africa interview in Monrovia, April 18, 1994.

¹⁷Human Rights Watch/Africa interview in Monrovia, April 19, 1994.

¹⁸Human Rights Watch/Africa interview with Amos Sawyer in Monrovia, April 25, 1994.

To the United Nations:

The U.N. mission in Liberia constitutes one of the only means of exerting pressure on the Nigerians, as well as the warring factions, to halt this downward spiral.

- The U.N. must implement its mandate: U.N. observers are authorized to report on violations of the cease-fire and of humanitarian law, and they must protest publicly when they are restricted in their movements.
- The U.N. must pay close attention to the situation in the southeast, and perhaps recommend replacing some of the Nigerian contingent with Ghanaians and Ugandans, who have a good reputation among the civilians.
- The new human rights officer for UNOMIL must engage in active human rights monitoring, so that human rights violations can be documented and their perpetrators identified.
- The human rights aspect of the UNOMIL mandate must be reinforced, so that the observers are fully cognizant of their responsibility to report on violations of human rights.

To ECOMOG:

- ECOMOG should launch an immediate investigation into the charges that members of the Nigerian contingent are assisting the LPC, and make its findings public.
- ECOMOG must ensure that all the warring factions -- NPFL, AFL, ULIMO, and LPC -- are disarmed and demobilized in a systematic and even-handed manner.

This report was written by Janet Fleischman, Washington representative of Human Rights Watch/Africa. Most of the individuals interviewed for this report asked to remain anonymous, out of concern for their security.

Human Rights Watch/Africa (formerly Africa Watch)

Human Rights Watch is a nongovernmental organization established in 1978 to monitor and promote observance of internationally recognized human rights in Africa, the Americas, Asia, the Middle East and among the signatories of

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