



WEST AFRICA

Youth, Poverty and Blood

The Lethal Legacy of West Africa's Regional Warriors

HUMAN
RIGHTS
WATCH

Youth, Poverty and Blood: The Lethal Legacy of West Africa's Regional Warriors

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I. Summary

There are some of us who can't seem to live without a weapon – anywhere we hear about fighting, we have to go. It's because of the way we grew up – and now it's in our blood. A warrior can't sit down when war is on....

– Mohammed, 24 year-old Liberian who fought in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire

Since the late 1980's, the armed conflicts in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire have reverberated across each country's porous borders. Gliding back and forth across these borders is a migrant population of young fighters – regional warriors – who view war as mainly an economic opportunity. Their military 'careers' most often began when they were abducted and forcibly recruited by rebels in Liberia or Sierra Leone, usually as children.¹ Thrust into a world of brutality, physical hardship, forced labor and drug abuse, they emerged as perpetrators, willing to rape, abduct, mutilate and even kill. Later, as veteran fighters struggling to support themselves within the war-shattered economy at home, they were lured by recruiters back to the frontlines – this time of a neighbor's war. There, they took the opportunity to loot and pillage; an all too familiar means of providing for their families or enriching themselves.

The flow of arms and combatants across the fluid borders of West Africa, paired with the willingness of governments in the region to support the actions of insurgent groups and government militias in neighboring countries has had lethal consequences, particularly for civilians. The armed groups these regional warriors are part of have a well-documented record of committing unspeakable human rights abuses against unarmed civilians and have so far enjoyed impunity for the violations they commit. Efforts by the international community to disarm and reintegrate these fighters into their home communities –including through training – have so far had limited success. At present, the armed conflict in Côte d'Ivoire and the unstable political situation in Guinea appear to be the current theaters into which these regional warriors are being drawn.

¹ In this report, the word "child" refers to anyone under the age of eighteen. The U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child states: "For the purposes of the present Convention, a child is every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier." Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 1, adopted November 20, 1989 (entered into force September 2, 1990).

The use of children as soldiers dates to the start of the conflict in 1989. Taylor's NPFL became infamous for the abduction and use of boys in war; a tactic later adopted by other Liberian fighting factions as well as other fighting groups in West Africa, most notably the Revolutionary United Front of Sierra Leone. Between 6,000 and 15,000 children are estimated to have taken up arms from 1989 to 1997.

The voices of the regional warriors heard in this report clearly illuminate the link between economic deprivation and the continuing cycle of war crimes throughout the region. The regional warriors unanimously identified crippling poverty and hopelessness as the key factors which motivated them to risk dying in subsequent armed conflicts. They described being deeply affected by poverty and obsessed with the struggle of daily survival, a reality not lost on the recruiters. Indeed they were born in and fight in some of the world's poorest countries. Many described their broken dreams and how, given the dire economic conditions within the region, going to war was their best option for economic survival. Each group with whom these combatants went on to fight with has, to varying degrees, committed serious human rights crimes against civilians, often on a widespread and systematic scale. The brutal armed conflicts in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Côte d'Ivoire have resulted in tens of thousands of civilians being killed, raped or maimed.

The findings of this report are based on in-depth interviews with some sixty former combatants who collectively represented fifteen armed forces – including both rebel insurgencies and governments – active at various times since 1989 within Sierra Leone, Liberia, Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea. The groups most frequently represented by those interviewed were the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), the United Liberation Movement of Liberia for Democracy (ULIMO), Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD), the Sierra Leonean Revolutionary United Front (RUF), the Sierra Leonean Army (SLA), the Sierra Leonean Civil Defense Force militias (CDF), the Ivorian Patriotic Movement of the Far West (MPIGO) and the Ivorian Movement for Justice and Peace (MJP).²

The ex-combatants interviewed ranged in age from seventeen to forty-eight, and were all male. They represented different levels of command and occupied numerous functions

²All of these armed groups have a well-documented record of committing human rights abuses against unarmed civilians, sometimes on a widespread and systematic basis. For further information:

See, "Sowing Terror: Atrocities against Civilians in Sierra Leone," *Human Rights Watch Report*, vol.10, no.3 (A), July 1998.

See, "Getting Away with Murder, Mutilation and Rape: New Testimony from Sierra Leone," *Human Rights Watch Report*, Vol.11 No 3(A), July 1999.

See, "How to Fight, How to Kill: Child Soldiers in Liberia," *Human Rights Watch*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (A), February 2004.

See, "Back to the Brink: War Crimes by Liberian Government and Rebels," *Human Rights Watch Report*, Vol. 14, No.4 (A), May 2002.

See, "Liberia, A Human Rights Disaster," *Human Rights Watch Report*, October 1990.

See, "Trapped Between Two Wars: Violence Against Civilians in Western Côte d'Ivoire," *Human Rights Watch Report*, August 2003, Vol. 15, No. 14 (A).

within their respective organizations, including operational commanders, the military police, administrators, recruitment officers, training officers, logistics officers, intelligence operatives, artillery commanders, and chaplains.

Most of those interviewed had fought with at least two armed groups in as many countries, and many had fought with three or more groups. Few – with the exception of those who had fought with the Sierra Leonean Civil Defense Force militias who joined to protect their villages from rebel attack – could articulate the political objective or ideological ‘raison d’être’ of the armed groups with which they fought.

The majority of these regional warriors began their fighting careers after being forcibly recruited by either the NPFL or the RUF, usually when they were still children. After fighting in their first war, however, nearly all willingly crossed borders to fight in other wars or ‘missions,’ a term these fighters used for war. At the time of recruitment into these subsequent wars, almost all were unemployed or living a precarious economic existence, and were motivated by the promise of both financial compensation and the opportunity to loot. Most interviewed received at least part of the financial compensation offered by the recruiters, and all participated in the looting and pillage of mostly civilian property, and benefited economically from it. Most used the money to pay rent, school and medical fees for their extended family, and to engage in petty trading.

The ex-combatants spoke openly about the atrocities they had witnessed, and in many cases committed, both with their original group and as combatants abroad. These former combatants were not necessarily more prone to commit abuses against civilians from a neighboring country than they were to abuse their fellow citizens. The degree of effective command and control, and discipline maintained within the various armed groups played a key role in the kind and frequency of violations observed and perpetrated by the interviewees while outside their country. Several described receiving clear orders to perpetrate atrocities against civilians, most notably during the 2000-2001 joint attacks by the RUF and Liberian security forces against Guinea. Numerous regional warriors singled out the LURD for its efforts to instill respect for civilians, and discipline those who committed abuses against them. However the LURD’s efforts were inconsistent and often unsuccessful. Some abuses, like looting and pillage, were not explicitly ordered, but were sanctioned at the highest level.

The majority of former fighters interviewed who had participated in the 2000-2003 United Nations-sponsored Sierra Leonean Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration program (DDR) received only partial benefits, were kept out of the skills

training component of the program or failed to receive any benefits at all. They also identified corruption in this process and an inadequate grievance procedure within the DRR program as serious problems. Many perceived the program's failure to engage them as having contributed to their decision to take up arms in subsequent conflicts. Similar problems were described by those within the 2003-2005 UN-sponsored Liberian disarmament program, although to a much lesser degree. A severe funding shortage of US \$39 million in the Liberian disarmament program not only left some 40,000 combatants at risk of missing out on job training and education, but appeared to make them more vulnerable for re-recruitment to fight in future armed conflicts.

Since April 2004, well over two-thirds of the Liberian ex-combatants interviewed, in addition to several of the Sierra Leoneans, had been asked to join fighting "missions" in Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire. Among those approached to fight in Guinea about half had been approached by commanders claiming to represent a fledgling Guinean insurgency, and the other half by those claiming to be supporters of Guinean President Lansana Conté. Aid organizations and United Nations officials working in Liberia say that hundreds of recently demobilized combatants, including children, have since at least November 2004 been re-recruited to fight in Côte d'Ivoire. The majority have, according to their reports, gone to fight alongside militias associated with the Ivorian government.

While Sierra Leone and Liberia's progress at silencing the guns is encouraging, the developments in the past year in Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea highlight the serious potential for the cycle of conflict and suffering to begin anew. All four countries – Sierra Leone, Liberia, Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire – remain vulnerable to political instability and conflict as a consequence of their domestic policies, the dire socio-economic conditions endured by their populations, a long legacy of weak rule of law and the instability of their respective neighbors. Deterioration in the military-political situation in Côte d'Ivoire would likely be accompanied by human rights abuses on a massive scale, given the proliferation of militias and level of ethnic tension. In Guinea, the unstable political situation and persistent ethnic tension in the south – also known as the *Forestière* region – coupled with an apparent regional effort to foment an insurgency aimed at unseating the government, give cause for alarm. Liberia is plagued by striking deficiencies within the judicial system, infighting and corruption within the transitional government; serious shortfalls in financing the program to reintegrate and train demobilized combatants and efforts by warlords to control the electoral process. While Sierra Leone has put its devastating civil war behind it, the deep rooted issues that gave rise to the conflict—endemic corruption, weak rule of law, crushing poverty, and the inequitable distribution of the country's vast natural resources—remain largely unaddressed by the government.

Addressing these complex problems requires accountability at all levels including the warriors who commit war crimes and crimes against humanity; the recruiters who abduct children; the arms dealers who flood the region with weapons; state and non-state actors who facilitate arms flows and benefit illicitly from war, and the governments whose corrupt and repressive policies all too often give rise to internal conflict

Governments of the region and the international community must pay strict attention to the importance of the economic sustainability of these fighters' new lives as well as the importance for parallel development of the communities into which they return. Shortfalls in funding to train and reintegrate tens of thousands of fighters who took part in Liberia's 1999-2003 armed conflict, as well as for programs to assist civilians whose lives were torn apart by the same, must be redressed. Corrupt practices in the disarmament and rehabilitation process, which has deprived many combatants of their benefits and made them more vulnerable for re-recruitment into other regional armed conflicts, must be addressed through the establishment of a grievance procedure endowed with the power to refer cases for prosecution.

The regional warriors interviewed for this report clearly point to the inextricable link between the level of economic deprivation and the continuing cycle of war crimes throughout the region. For that reason, improving the severe socio-economic conditions which in large part give rise to armed conflict in the region is vital. Tackling the root causes of this impoverishment is critical to putting an end to the phenomenon of mercenaries in West Africa; however it is a long-term process which necessitates sustained political will and effort on the part of governments and the international community.

II. Recommendations

To the Governments of Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Côte d'Ivoire

- Ensure that your governments proactively address the issues which have in large part given rise to armed conflict including bad governance, corruption, and the inequitable distribution of natural resources.
- Cease recruiting for, funding, arming or otherwise supporting armed groups whose goals include the destabilizing of a neighboring country.
- Cease recruiting any foreign national who has sought refuge in your country for use in your national security forces or militias where such persons are known to have fought with an armed group that is responsible for a systematic pattern of abuses.
- Take measures to prohibit your nationals and residents from hiring themselves out as foreign fighters to any armed force that is responsible for a systematic pattern of abuses.
- Criminalize activities associated with the cross-border funding, arming or otherwise supporting of armed groups that are responsible for a systematic pattern of abuses. Cooperate in the investigation and prosecution of individuals responsible for illegal criminal activity which may amount to war crimes.
- Criminalize and prosecute to the full extent of the law, individuals, nationals, or non-nationals involved in the recruitment or use of child combatants on your territory, be they for use in an armed conflict in your country or elsewhere.
- Facilitate access by the International Committee of the Red Cross to all armed groups present in your territory, be they members of your own national security forces, members of insurgent groups or known to be involved in the destabilization of a neighboring country.
- Ensure that those individuals most responsible for perpetrating widespread and systematic human rights abuses during armed conflicts on your territory or on the territory of a neighbor are held accountable for their crimes through a legitimate judicial process.
- Ensure that your governments establish status determination bodies to screen and separate combatants from refugees, and work swiftly to set up separate camps for combatants. Additionally, there is a need for improved policing to ensure that refugees are adequately protected and to guarantee the civilian nature of all refugee camps.

- Liberia, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea should follow the example of Sierra Leone by committing to cease using child soldiers and immediately sign and/or ratify the Optional Protocol on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict.

To All Governments donating funds to Liberia

- Provide the required funding to the United Nations Development Program Trust Fund, the European Community and the U.S. Agency for International Development to cover the US \$39 million shortfall for the rehabilitation and reintegration phase of the Liberian Disarmament, Demobilization, Rehabilitation and Reintegration (DDRR) program.
- Provide the required US \$165 million discrepancy between funds pledged at the February 2004 International Reconstruction Conference on Liberia and those which have been provided by donor nations. These funds are essential for, among other things, resettlement of hundreds of thousands of Liberian refugees and internally displaced people, and reconstruction of judicial and corrections institutions aimed at establishing the rule of law.
- Provide the required funding to cover the U.N. World Food Programme's US \$140 shortfall for their 2005-2006 projects for Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea which provides food aid for school children, internally displaced persons, returning refugees and ex-combatants.

To the Economic Community of West Africa (ECOWAS) and the African Union

- Strengthen the ECOWAS small arms moratorium and its implementation. The moratorium should be expanded to encompass all weapons categories, developed into an information-exchange mechanism, and made binding. Further efforts are needed to ensure that arms exporters comply with the moratorium, which could be facilitated through full participation in the proposed information exchange.
- Consider the imposition of sanctions – including arms embargos, travel bans, and economic sanctions – against governments involved in cross-border funding, recruitment of child soldiers, or arming or supporting of armed groups that are responsible for a systematic pattern of human rights abuses.
- Ensure that any troops deployed from ECOMOG remain completely neutral and desist from providing logistical or other support to any armed group.

To the United Nations Security Council

- Consider targeted measures against parties to armed conflict including parties in Guinea, Sierra Leone, Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire, and complicit actors in neighboring countries, whose actions contribute to illicit cross-border activities and to the consequent fuelling of conflict. Such activities expose civilians to further atrocities and abuse, and undermine efforts at establishing peace, security, legitimate economic activities, and the rule of law.
- Condemn the practice of recruitment of refugees from camps by governments and rebel groups in the region and request UNHCR to take urgent measures to improve protection, in collaboration with other UN and non-governmental humanitarian agencies.
- As recommended by the Secretary-General in his report on children and armed conflict (S/2005/72) regarding parties that have made insufficient progress in ending the recruitment and use of child soldiers, impose targeted measures including travel restrictions on leaders and their exclusion from any governance structure and amnesty provisions, and restrictions on the flow of financial resources to the parties concerned. In addition, make the end of child recruitment an explicit criterion for lifting existing arms embargoes.

To the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL), United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) and United Nations Operation in Côte d'Ivoire (ONUCI)

- Require the human rights sections of UNMIL, UNAMSIL and ONUCI to investigate and document current efforts to recruit recently demobilized combatants, especially children, and publicly report on their findings.
- Ensure that the military and civilian police personnel in UNMIL, UNAMSIL and ONUCI work in coordination to detect, report on, and prevent the movement of combatants and arms across their respective borders and into neighboring countries. If investigations identify individuals believed to be involved in cross-border funding, recruitment of child soldiers, or arming or supporting of armed groups that are responsible for a systematic pattern of abuses, they should be referred to the national courts for prosecution.
- Engage and deploy as soon as possible the two proposed child protection advisors (CPA) to assist the Secretary General's offices and peacekeeping missions in Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire with related child protection activities. Consider the deployment of additional child protection advisors to both missions.

To the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)

- Initiate a formal investigation into reports of efforts by any government or non-state actor to recruit children for use by any armed group, most urgently in Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire where there are credible reports of the recruitment of child soldiers by armed groups operating in Côte d'Ivoire.
- Encourage governments to take disciplinary measures or criminal charges as appropriate against individuals in state or non-state forces involved in the recruitment or use of child soldiers.
- Use its position as advisor to DPKO on the demobilization of child combatants to advocate for the end of the policy of providing cash payment to children taking part in any disarmament exercise.

To the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR)

- Enhance protection and security measures at refugee camps in Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea and Sierra Leone so that refugees from the region are protected from forced recruitment into regional conflicts. Specifically, an increase in the number of UNHCR protection staff working in all such camps is required.
- Ensure, in particular, that the UNHCR Guidelines on the Protection and Care of Refugee Children are fully implemented to prevent the recruitment of children from refugee camps or settlements.
- Publicly identify governments and non-state actors who persist in recruiting from refugee camps in Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea and Sierra Leone.

To the United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), World Bank and others involved in the design, management and evaluation of disarmament exercises

- Put in place measures to address allegations of theft and manipulation of benefits by former commanders and employees in the disarmament programs through the creation of a formal grievance procedure in which allegations could be registered, investigated and referred for prosecution. Ensure the grievance procedure is well publicized, easily accessible to combatants, and provided with the authority to refer cases for criminal prosecution.
- Ensure that there is an agreement, including a memorandum of understanding, between the United Nations and the government of the country in which the disarmament exercise is taking place, to investigate and prosecute, through the national justice system, those commanders and disarmament program employees

alleged to be involved in criminal activity including the fraud, embezzlement, diversion or misuse of disarmament benefits.

- Ensure that future disarmament programs desists from providing child combatants with cash payment, since this policy not only undermines efforts to successfully reunify and reintegrate them back into their families and communities, but also makes them more vulnerable for re-recruitment into subsequent armed conflicts.
- Ensure that a human rights education module is included in all future disarmament programs. This would include information on international humanitarian law or the laws of war, women's rights and children's rights. These classes should be compulsory, in-depth and should include discussions on accountability, responsibility and justice.
- Review job training options within rehabilitation and reintegration programs to ensure they are based on an accurate market analysis of local needs.
- Increase the number of qualified and experienced staff within the disarmament section of peacekeeping operations, including an officer responsible for providing oversight, evaluation and monitoring of the disarmament program.
- Closely monitor and continuously evaluate the functioning of DDR programs at every level to reduce wide-scale, low-level corruption arising from the participation of former commanders in screening procedures.
- Integrate DDR programs with other development and social services programs to share the burden of creating social stability and minimize the susceptibility of demobilized combatants to re-recruitment.

To the Government of Nigeria

- Surrender former Liberian president Charles Taylor to the Special Court for Sierra Leone which in 2003 indicted him on seventeen counts of crimes against humanity, war crimes and other serious violations of international humanitarian law for his role in human rights crimes during Sierra Leone's civil war.

To the International Committee of the Red Cross

- In addition to training active combatants in the laws of war, train recently demobilized combatants on the laws of war in coordination with U.N. and nationally run disarmament exercises.

III. Context

The Regional Warrior

All I've gotten in life, I've gotten through war.

– Lansana, 24 years-old, Sierra Leone

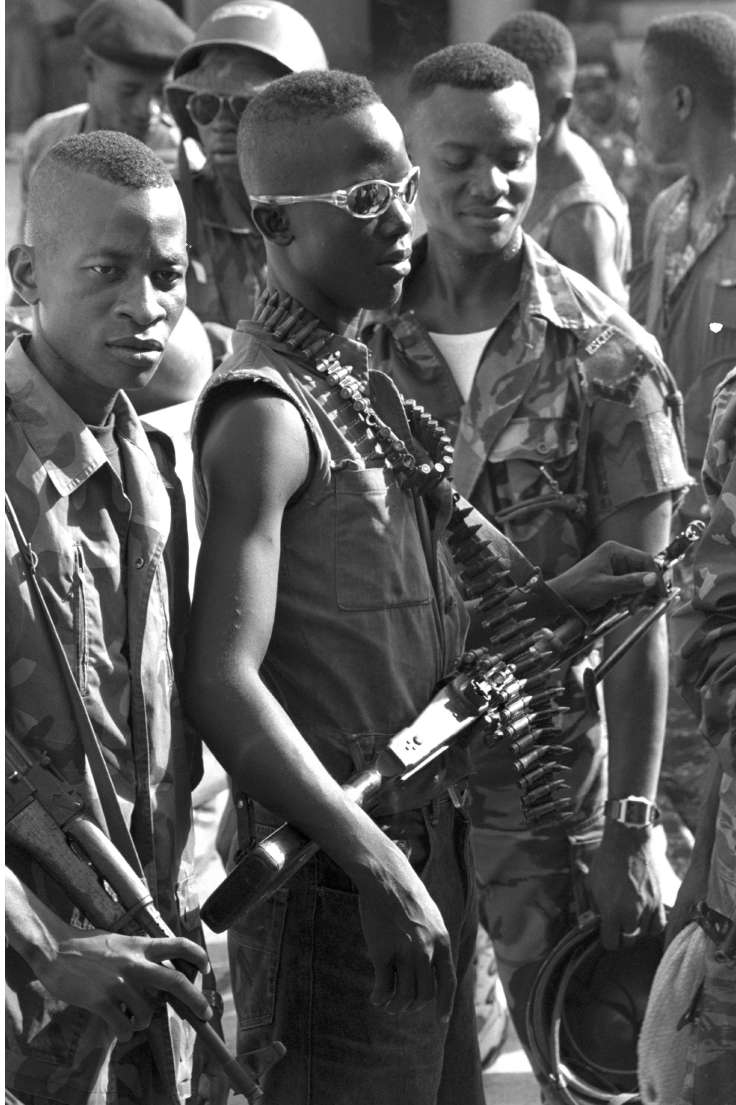
The vast majority of regional warriors interviewed by Human Rights Watch had first fought with one of four armed groups; the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) from 1989-1996, the United Liberation Movement for Democracy in Liberia (ULIMO) from 1992-1996, the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) of Sierra Leone from 1991-2001, or the Civil Defense Force (CDF) militias of Sierra Leone from 1994-2001.

Most had originally joined or been abducted and pressed into service as children. Those who had originally fought with the Liberian NPFL and ULIMO factions had been forcibly recruited or had joined voluntarily to more easily obtain food for themselves and their families. Some believed that by joining, they would be able protect themselves and their families from being harassed or targeted by armed factions, including the group they joined. A few others said that they joined to avenge the ethnic or tribally motivated violence that had claimed the life of a loved one. Nearly all of those who originally fought with the RUF had been abducted and pressed into military service. Almost all those in the Sierra Leonean CDF militia, the largest and most powerful of which is the Kamajors,³ said that they joined to protect their villages and communities from rebel attack.

A military intelligence source who has extensive experience in West Africa described the regional warriors as follows: “These guys form part of a regional militia I call the insurgent diaspora. They float in and out of wars and operate as they wish. They have no one to tell them where, when and how to behave. They’re been incorporated into militias and armies all over the place – Sierra Leone, Côte d’Ivoire – and are really the most dangerous tool that any government or rebel army can have.”⁴

³ The Kamajors are traditional hunters from the Mende ethnic group in the southern and eastern regions of Sierra Leone who believe in supernatural and ancestral powers. The Mende is Sierra Leone’s largest tribe comprising some thirty percent of the population.

⁴ Human Rights Watch phone interview, May 25, 2004



Rebels from the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) and Armed Forces Revolutionary Council [AFRC] patrol through the streets of Freetown, Sierra Leone shortly after a coup in May 1997 which overthrew democratically elected president Tejan Kabbah. Many Liberian fighters joined up with the joint RUF/AFRC forces during their nine months in power. © 1997 Corinne Dufka

In *Sweet Battlefields: Youth and the Liberian Civil War*, Swedish anthropologist Mats Utas explores the desperation felt by the youth drawn into the Liberian war. He writes: “For these young people, the daily prospect of poverty, joblessness and marginalization effectively blocked the paths to a normal adulthood; drawing them instead into a subculture characterized by abjection, resentment and rootlessness. As opportunity

came, their voluntary enlistment into one of the several rebel armies of the civil war therefore became an attractive option for many.”⁵

While most joined their first armed group under duress, the vast majority of ex-combatants interviewed by Human Rights Watch willingly crossed borders to fight in any and all subsequent armed conflicts or ‘missions.’ Junior Toe, the Executive Director of Liberian Ex-combatants Anxious for Development (LEAD), a local non-governmental organization which advocates on behalf of ex-combatants, explains:

‘There was war in Liberia and the majority of Liberian parents were unable to support their children. So male or female, the easiest way for them to have money was through war. During the first war [1989-1996], most were forced into it, but they then got used to it and got attracted to taking things. Also, another problem was that after the first disarmament, people left them just like that. The process wasn’t complete – there was no job training or assistance with reintegration. After 1997 the situation started going bad and because of economic hardship, violence came again and the same children went back into the game, but this time they did it voluntarily. While some were forced – the majority went in voluntarily.’⁶

As regional warriors, those interviewed by Human Rights Watch most frequently reported participation in the 1991-2002 Sierra Leonean armed conflict, the 2000-2001 cross-border attacks on Guinea from Liberia and Sierra Leone, the 1999-2003 Liberian armed conflict, and the 2002-2003 armed conflict in Côte d’Ivoire.

Since 1989, thousands of these fighters are estimated to have participated as armed protagonists in the regions conflicts’. The vast majority is believed to be Liberian or Sierra Leonean nationals, but fighters from Burkina Faso, Gambia, Ghana, Nigeria, Senegal and Guinea have also been involved. Anecdotal accounts from ex-combatants interviewed by Human Rights Watch corroborate reports from academic and official sources on the numbers involved: these estimates suggest that at least five hundred NPFL and a similar number of ULIMO fighters took part in Sierra Leone’s armed conflict, while a combined force of at least one thousand RUF and Liberian government troops participated in the 2000-2001 cross-border attacks on Guinea. During the 2002-2003 armed conflict in Côte d’Ivoire, the number of Liberians fighting for the Ivorian

⁵ Utas, Mats, *Sweet Battlefields: Youth and the Liberian Civil War*, Uppsala: Department of Cultural Anthropology and Ethnology, Cultural Anthropology. 2003.

⁶ Human Rights Watch interview, Monrovia, Liberia, August 8, 2004.

government was estimated to be between 1,500 and 2,500, while close to one thousand were thought to have fought alongside Ivorian rebels.⁷ The 1999-2003 Liberian war seems to have drawn in well over one thousand regional warriors, the vast majority of whom fought alongside the LURD.

Figures from the disarmament exercise in Liberia that officially ended in October 2004 provide an official profile of foreign combatants who took part in that conflict. According to statistics released in December 2004 by the Liberian National Commission for Disarmament, Demobilization, Rehabilitation and Reintegration (NCDDRR), 612 disarmed combatants out of a total of more than 103,019 identified themselves as foreign nationals including 50 from Côte d'Ivoire, 308 from Guinea, 242 from Sierra Leone, and a few others from Mali, Nigeria and Ghana.⁸

However, interviews with the ex-combatants suggest that the numbers of the Sierra Leonean fighters involved in Liberia were much higher. Human Rights Watch interviewed ten Sierra Leonean regional warriors who took part in the Liberian armed conflict and all of them said they had registered in the DDRR program as a Liberian, usually for fear of being denied access to the benefits of the program.⁹ Liberians and Sierra Leoneans who fought with the LURD consistently referred to the numbers of Sierra Leoneans in their battalions as being in the hundreds. The LURD officer in charge of recruitment in Sierra Leone told Human Rights Watch that he and his team had recruited at least 2000 Sierra Leoneans and he claimed to have records of all who had joined and died while fighting in Liberia from 2000-2003.¹⁰

In some cases, foreign combatants occupied the majority of command positions and a significant percentage of a neighbor's fighting force, as was the case with Liberian NPFL troops in the –Sierra Leonean RUF from 1991-1993, Liberian nationals in the Ivorian rebel Patriotic Movement of the Far West (MPIGO) and the Movement for Justice and Peace (MJP) from 2002-2003. The initial minority of local fighters within the RUF, MJP and MPIGO was in both cases, later supplemented through the often forced abduction of large numbers of civilians who were later pressed into military service.

⁷ International Crisis Group, "The War is Not Yet Over," Africa Report, November 28, 2003, p.23

⁸ United Nations Security Council, Fifth progress report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Mission in Liberia, December 17, 2004, S/2004/972, p.6.

⁹ When asked by NCDDRR officials to give their ethnic group, many fighters interviewed by Human Rights Watch indicated that they were from a Liberian tribe that was related in language and origin to their actual Sierra Leonean tribe; for example, a Sierra Leonean Mende indicated that he was a Liberian Vai.

¹⁰ Human Rights Watch interview, Monrovia, Liberia, August 14, 2004.

When fighting abroad, the regional warriors universally referred to themselves as being a member of the “Special Forces”. In the words of one regional warrior, “Special Forces were the vanguard, the arrowhead, the strongest, those who had been trained outside, those who could play a pivotal role. We were called Special Forces from the first time when NPFL soldiers went to fight in Sierra Leone until we came from Sierra Leone to pull Taylor from power.”¹¹ Many who had originally fought with the NPFL also referred to themselves as “missionaries for Charles Taylor.”

This population of fighters is often referred to by the international community as “mercenaries”, understood to be an individual hired to fight for a foreign army or more generally. Human Rights Watch takes no position per se on whether foreign adult combatants should take part in or be recruited for any armed conflict. However, Human Rights Watch calls on governments to prohibit their nationals and residents from hiring themselves out as mercenaries to any armed force that is responsible for a systematic pattern of gross abuses and to hold accountable any combatant fighting in an armed group that is responsible for a widespread or systematic pattern of human rights abuses. Government and non-state actors involved in using these combatants are also obliged to hold such individuals accountable according to the standards of international humanitarian law. This report focuses not on the illegality of becoming or working as a mercenary, but on the driving forces behind the phenomenon of mercenary activity in West Africa, the cycles of violence, impoverishment and recruitment and the flaws in disarmament programs that contribute to the problem.

The Sub-Regional Dynamic of West African Conflicts

You see, Liberia and Guinea are like brother and sister. And Sierra Leone and Liberia too are like brother and sister. We want peace in the four countries but it's the leaders who're making people lose their life and hurting people. They're the ones sending us to war. God doesn't want this, but in Africa one person can make everyone suffer.

— Abubakar, 40 years-old, Liberia

The populations of Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire have long suffered from a vicious cycle of bad governance, economic decline, political upheaval, conflict related violence, and impunity. Decades of corruption, tribal favoritism, and exploitation by their leaders, and the inevitable economic decline which followed created a fertile

¹¹ Human Rights Watch interview, Monrovia, Liberia, August 14, 2004.

ground for the formation of rebel insurgencies made up largely of unemployed and frustrated youth.

Dating back as far as the mid 1980's, state and non-state actors in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso had shown a ready potential to support rebel insurgencies aimed at destabilizing their neighbors. At one time or another, the governments of every one of these five countries has provided financial backing, arms and ammunition, training, logistical support to and even served as a staging base for armed insurgencies which they used as proxies for the purpose of destabilization, resource exploitation or in retribution for political or military policies of their neighboring countries.¹²



Nigerian peacekeepers patrol by the bodies of several NPFL fighters who were killed during clashes with ULIMO-J during two months of clashes between the two groups in April – May 1996. Hundreds of civilians were killed and thousands more wounded during the fighting. © 1996 Corinne Dufka

¹² Ellis, Stephen, *The Mask of Anarchy, The Destruction of Liberia and the Religious Dimension of an African Civil War*, London, Hurst and Company, London, 1999, pp66-93.

Christopher Clapham (ed.), *African Guerrillas*, Oxford, James Currey, 1998, pp. 155-193.

See, "Liberian Refugees in Guinea: Refoulement, Militarization of Camps and Other Protection Concerns," *Human Rights Watch Report*," Vol. 14, No. 8 (A), November 2002.

Conflict Mapping in Sierra Leone: Violations of International Humanitarian Law from 1991-2002: Executive summary, *No Peace Without Justice*, pp37-41.

This region is particularly susceptible to repeated waves of insurgencies because of the complex diplomatic relations that exist between neighbors. The alliances and acrimony between these states and the armed opposition groups they support are based on a convoluted web of military, political, economic, ethnic and sometimes personal factors, which have often shifted over time. Regional and international peacekeepers, notably those sent to Liberia in the mid 1980's from the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG), have also been involved in supporting some of these groups.¹³

Several governments derived considerable economic benefit from their support of insurgent groups in neighboring countries. From at least 1989, the Ivorian government, which provided logistical support to the NPFL, exported large quantities of Liberian timber through Côte d'Ivoire.¹⁴ Throughout Sierra Leone's war the NPFL and following the 1997 elections, the Liberian government, benefited enormously from the export and sale of Sierra Leonean diamonds.¹⁵

Some of the key state and non-state actors known to have supported insurgencies in West Africa include the Ivorian and Burkina Faso governments which, from at least 1989, provided backing for the NPFL; the NPFL which, from 1991, backed and provided combatants and logistical support for the RUF's insurgency against Sierra Leone, the Sierra Leonean government, which from 1991, used combatants from ULIMO to fight the RUF and in turn provided them logistical backing to attack the NPFL; the Guinean government which, from at least 2000, backed the LURD; the Liberian government which during 2002-2003 provided troops to support an insurgency against the Ivorian government; and the Ivorian government which armed and trained Liberians to assist in their military campaign against Ivorian rebels, who were also backed by Burkina Faso.¹⁶ [See Annex 2 for more complete of list state, non-state, and

¹³ Ellis, *The Mask of Anarchy*, pp 94-109, 110-132.

¹⁴ Ibid, p 165.

¹⁵ Ian Smillie, Lansana Gberie, and Ralph Hazelton, *The Heart of the Matter: Sierra Leone, Diamonds and Human Security*, pages 47-49, Partnership Africa Canada, January 2000.

¹⁶ Ellis, Stephen, *The Mask of Anarchy, The Destruction of Liberia and the Religious Dimension of an African Civil War*, London, Hurst and Company, London, 1999, pp66-93.

Christopher Clapham (ed.), *African Guerrillas*, Oxford, James Currey, 1998, pp. 155-193.

See, "Liberian Refugees in Guinea: Refoulement, Militarization of Camps and Other Protection Concerns," *Human Rights Watch Report*," Vol. 14, No. 8 (A), November 2002.

Conflict Mapping in Sierra Leone: Violations of International Humanitarian Law from 1991-2002: Executive summary, *No Peace Without Justice*, pp37-41.

International Crisis Group, "The War is Not Yet Over," Africa Report, November 28, 2003,

International Crisis Group, "No Peace in Sight," Africa Report, July 12, 2000

international actors known to have used foreigners and supported insurgencies in neighboring countries.]

Economic and Social Factors

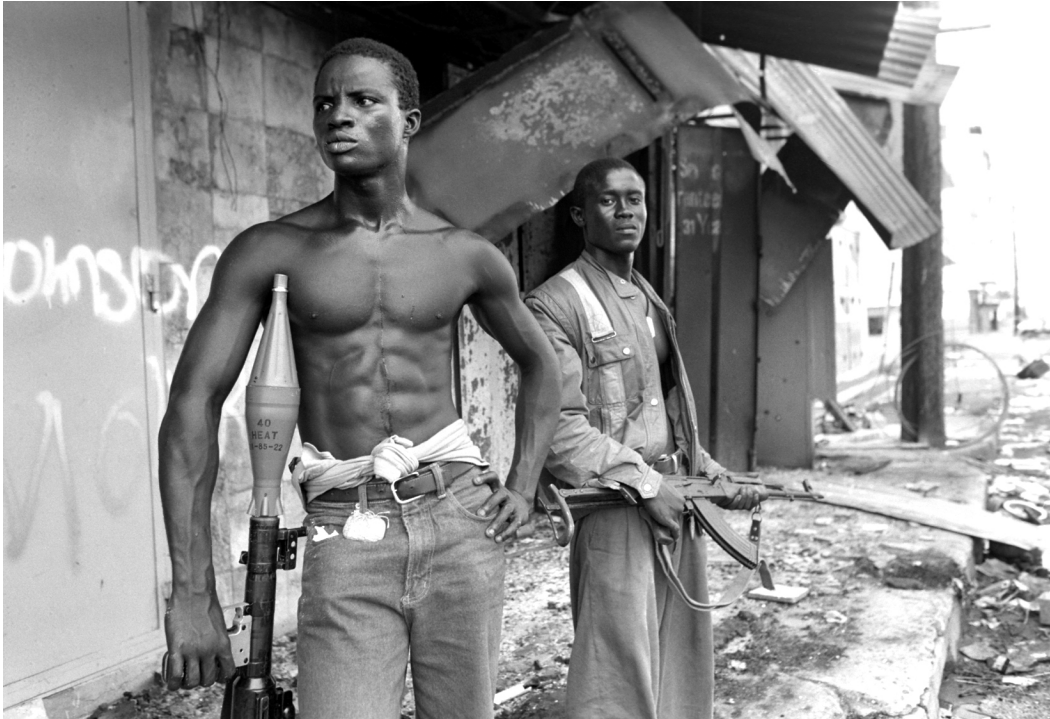
We thought things would be ok, but they went bad again. There was no food. It was the African way – I had to feed my parents. The commanders said there wasn't money to pay us, but that we could pay ourselves, which meant looting.

– Mani, 27 years-old, Liberia

Most regional warriors described being deeply affected by poverty and obsessed with the struggle of daily survival, a reality not lost on the recruiters. None of the ex-combatants Human Rights Watch spoke to had been gainfully employed at the time of their re-recruitment and only a few were gainfully employed when interviewed by Human Rights Watch. Most described earning just enough money each day to buy food for themselves and their families. The interviewees most often cited frustration over being unemployed or under-employed – in addition to their desire to provide for their families through looting or money received from recruiters – as their principal reason for deciding to go fight “another man’s war”. While some described being ashamed to admit to their families the source of their wealth, others said they were under pressure from their families to return from war with money and material possessions. These regional warriors told Human Rights Watch that their economic desperation had often been exacerbated by factors related to the Liberian and Sierra Leonean wars, including the violent death of the primary breadwinner, the loss of income generating family property and land, or the destruction of family business.

These regional warriors were born in and fight in some of the world’s poorest countries. The wars they fight in are both precipitated by poverty and exacerbating factors of continuing poverty. The poverty statistics and development indexes for Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Côte d’Ivoire demonstrate the extreme poverty of this region. For instance, Sierra Leone occupies the lowest possible rank (177) of the United Nations Development Programme’s Human Development Index (HDI). Its neighbors are also among the 20 least developed countries in the world: Burkina Faso occupies the 175th spot on the HDI, while Côte d’Ivoire’s rank is 163, and Guinea’s is 160. Although Liberia’s prolonged civil war means that it has not been included in recent Human

Development Indexes,¹⁷ other statistics demonstrate that the living conditions there may be worse than in Sierra Leone. Liberia's GDP per capita was just US \$169 in 2002,¹⁸ whereas Sierra Leone's was US \$520.¹⁹ And while 57% of the Sierra Leonean population lives on less than a dollar per day,²⁰ the Liberian figure – at 76%²¹ – is even higher.



Fighters with the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) stand within a destroyed building during a lull in the fighting in April 1996. Many fighters from Sierra Leone fought in Liberia both with the NPFL and, after 1997 when NPFL leader Charles Taylor became president, as Liberian government militias. © 1997 Corinne Dufka

Ironically, those fighters who fought with armed groups, primarily the RUF and NPFL, often described contributing to the very destruction of their villages, communities and the national infrastructure that had greatly exacerbated the post-war economic

¹⁷ The Human Development Index is a summary composite index compiled by the United Nations Development Programme that measures a country's average achievements in three aspects of human development: longevity (life expectancy), knowledge (literacy rate and school enrolment) and standard of living (GDP per capita). The 2004 Human Development Index is available at <http://hdr.undp.org/2004/>.

¹⁸ Millennium Development Goals Report, page 7, prepared by the Government of Liberia in collaboration with development partners (including USAID), and academic and private sector institutions, for the United Nations Development Programme (September 2003), available at <http://www.lr.undp.org/mdg.pdf>.

¹⁹ UNDP Human Development Index Report, 2004 (reporting statistics from 2002).

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ MDG Report, Liberia

depression that in turn motivated them to join other wars. This included the systematic looting of international aid organizations' offices that had, in effect supplanted the work of government ministries such as health and education. Scores of interviews with Sierra Leonean and Liberian civilian victims interviewed by Human Rights Watch for past reports described the profoundly long-lasting and devastating effect of losing their lives savings – often several hundred dollars – during a looting frenzy by one or the other armed groups.^{22 23} Any form of hard currency, often well-hidden within mattresses, cooking pots, and shoe boxes, was described by many regional warriors as the “nicest thing, the best find to have when you enter into somebody’s house.”²⁴

Many described their broken dreams and how, given the dire economic conditions within the region, going to war was their best option for economic survival. A thirty-five-year-old Sierra Leonean widower, who had fought with the CDF, Liberian militias, and in Côte d'Ivoire, explained why, if approached, he would willingly fight in another war:

My dream was to become an engineer – to have a profession and be a respected somebody. But it didn't work out that way. I'm hearing about recruitment now for an operation to overthrow Lansana Conté. And if I am asked to go to war again, I will go. I will. I have three children who don't have a mom. I have a twelve-year-old boy who wants to go to school, but I don't have enough money to buy him a uniform. I want more than anything for my children to be educated. By going to war I have sacrificed myself in this life and I will sacrifice again.²⁵

Many ex-combatants interviewed by Human Rights expressed frustration with their respective governments for what they perceived to be their failure to address corruption and bad governance, which, they said, had given rise to the Liberian and Sierra Leonean wars. Those from Sierra Leone accused their government of being indifferent to the plight of ordinary people and warned of future unrest if key social and economic rights were ignored. A thirty-five-year old regional warrior, who had fought with the CDF in Sierra Leone, and went on to fight in Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire, warned:

²² Human Rights Watch interviews, Sierra Leone and Liberia 1999-2002.

²³ See, “Getting Away with Murder, Mutilation and Rape,” *Human Rights Watch report*.

²⁴ Human Rights Watch interview, Sierra Leone, July 31, 2005.

²⁵ Human Rights Watch interview, Kenema, Sierra Leone, July 31, 2004.

I know why we fought the war in Sierra Leone but we were betrayed. If this government doesn't try harder to take care of us, if by the next election we are no better off than we are now, war will once again come to this country – and it will be worse than this past war. We suffered to defend this country, but what were we really fighting for? My children eat once a day and at times go to bed hungry. I see the chiefs, the big men, the ministers – they send their children to study abroad, whilst we live to suffer. They even use their money to buy justice in the courts. Let them heed this warning. We are talking about this now – we want another revolution.²⁶

A twenty-four-year-old Sierra Leonean who served as an intelligence officer with both the RUF and CDF, and who went on to fight with the LURD explained what makes ex-combatants vulnerable for re-recruitment and how important it is for governments to provide for their education:

I know lots who would easily slip back into it. It's even a problem to have a plate of food - these conditions make them easy to influence. If there is commotion in another land, they're too easily prepared to go back to war. They need to be educated. The future of our country is now left with our leaders. The more illiterates, the higher chance there will be another war. Another war, the higher the chance that will be atrocities committed. It's a rare educated man who would be so vulnerable as to succumb to the influence of people like the RUF. But if things don't improve, the more vulnerable we'll all be to there being another war. Even some are talking about that now. The mentality of those in government is that they don't listen to people down there. And this makes the youth feel that the best way to be listened to is when they have a rifle in the hand. They feel rejected and unheard and believe the only way to restore their past glory is to once again take up arms.²⁷

²⁶ Human Rights Watch interview, Kenema, Sierra Leone, July 31, 2004.

²⁷ Human Rights Watch interview, Freetown, Sierra Leone, July 27, 2004.

IV. The Recruiters, Their Promises, the Lure



Combatants with the NPFL patrol through the streets of Monrovia in April 1996. Clashes between forces from the NPFL and ULIMO-J during April and May 1996 left hundreds of civilians dead and thousands more wounded. Many Sierra Leonean fighters fought with both the NPFL and ULIMO-J. © 1996 Corinne Dufka

Individuals involved in the recruitment of regional warriors interviewed by Human Rights Watch were typically former commanders from the original armed group of the individual regional warrior. However, those involved in recruiting for the LURD, MODEL, and several Ivorian rebel groups also approached fighters who had previously fought with their enemies. The recruiters understood that, for most potential recruits, the association with their first armed group was not based on any particular political or ideological commitment. Therefore, the recruiters did not expect the recruits to have any such commitment to a future group. In fact, many combatants described switching allegiances in the conflict in their own country, and did so when fighting abroad as well.

Promises of Payment and the Opportunity to Loot

Most of the regional warriors interviewed said that they were motivated by the recruiters' promises of financial compensation, usually in American dollars, and of the opportunity to enrich themselves through looting. Most of those interviewed received some but not all of the money offered. However almost all said that they benefited considerably from the goods they looted and pillaged abroad. Mid-level commanders were often promised cars. Sometimes, combatants were promised drugs, a place in a future disarmament program, food or jobs as civil servants or in the new army, if the 'mission' was successful.

The commander in charge of recruitment in Sierra Leone for the LURD explained how he used the promise of money to convince fighters to join up. He also noted, below, how corruption and problems in the Sierra Leonean disarmament and reintegration exercise served to convince fighters to fight with the LURD. The majority of Sierra Leoneans interviewed for this report and for other Human Rights Watch research into this issue since 2000, named this individual as the one who had recruited them.²⁸

I had access to thousands of CDF who would go with me in twinkle of an eye...any number I wanted, I could get. No one was paid, it was voluntary. I told them a few things. First, that if Taylor continued in power, Sierra Leone would be at risk, that war could come to Sierra Leone again. Secondly, many of them had done badly out of DDR – they’d been betrayed and hadn’t gotten any benefit. So I told them if Monrovia falls, whatever you lay hands on is yours. That’s just the way it is – no warlord can pay his army. There are a lot of countries straining to pay their armies and they end up taking services away from the people in order to do it. Even though we looted a lot of cars from Monrovia, we tried to be humane; we sent word that people could come buy them back – so we negotiated and asked the owners to give a goodwill gesture. So in the end, they got their cars back and we got paid.²⁹

Most combatants explicitly identified looting as their objective in going to war, like this twenty-nine-year-old who joined the LURD as it was poised to take the capital Monrovia because, “no rebel would like to lose the opportunity to loot a capital city!”³⁰

The extent to which a combatant benefited from looting and pillaging in a neighboring country was proportional to the position he occupied within the armed group. Commanders had access to bigger items and a bigger share of looted goods than their subordinates. However, commanders also understood that denying their troops the ‘right’ to loot and pillage was tantamount to a potentially lethal breach of contract. A twenty-four-year-old Sierra Leonean ‘general’ and veteran of three wars and five armed groups, described this dynamic, as well as the illicit and cross-border ‘trickle-down’ effect of looted booty:

²⁸ Human Rights Watch interviews, Sierra Leone and Liberia, July-August 2004.

²⁹ Human Rights Watch interview, Monrovia, Liberia, August 14, 2004.

³⁰ Human Rights Watch interview, Freetown, Sierra Leone, August 17, 2004.

Anywhere you have rebel war you're entitled to get money. I got so many things during my time as a warrior. For example, after the LURD took Monrovia, we headed straight to the port and anything we wanted, we took. The most important thing was food, which we even shared with civilians. We also got a huge amount of money from the Lebanese to protect their shops from Vai Town to Clara Town. Commander S. was running that operation. We also looted the houses of the ones who'd moved away. Since there's war, you have to expect everything will be lost.

In August 2003, I brought back a vehicle I got straight out of the container from the Freeport of Monrovia. I sold it – a brand new Mitsubishi – for \$8000 to a Liberian businessman who'd come to the Sierra Leone/Liberia border where we had set up a big market. I brought back so many things from Monrovia – generators, building materials, clothes. However as a commander you have to share it with your junior commanders. Especially if you want to live a long life. We loaded up the Hi-lux with rice, coke, building materials, cloth bales, diesel and brought it to the border and set up a big market. People were coming from all over Sierra Leone and Liberia to buy stuff from us. I made over US \$3000 and shared a lot of it among my fifty men.

My boys were looting a lot at the port as well. A commander can't know all their secrets. After all, they're the ones who made me a commander. You have to let them do it or they could blow you off. People were crossing things over even though the Sierra Leone Army and police were there. The border looked closed during day but after midnight, it was wide open. With the money I made off the Mitsubishi, I'm now supporting three teams of diamond miners in Tongo Field. They're my boys and I take care of them. I didn't even disarm –I'm making more money now mining diamonds than I would if I went back to disarm in Liberia. This is why I like going on missions. Anytime anyone calls me on mission I will go there.³¹

Commanders encouraged looting by rewarding subordinates who 'shared' their loot, as explained by a thirty-five-year-old officer with the elite Anti-Terrorist Unit in Liberia, who spent several months in Danane, Côte d'Ivoire:

³¹ Human Rights Watch interview, Freetown, Sierra Leone, August 17, 2004.

There was a massive looting of Danane by Liberian soldiers; trucks, videos, cars, beds. People took from Danane whatever they needed in Liberia. There wasn't an order to loot, but it was understood. In fact, the hierarchy – Yeaten, Dolo, Gilbert Williams – encouraged it because they rewarded those who shared their loot with them.³²



Rebels from the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) and Armed Forces Revolutionary Council [AFRC] patrol through the streets of Freetown, Sierra Leone shortly after a coup in May 1997 which overthrew democratically elected president Tejan Kabbah. Many Liberian fighters joined up with the joint RUF/AFRC forces during their nine months in power. © 1997 Corinne Dufka

Most combatants shared the money with their families and used the funds to set themselves or their family members up in business. A nineteen-year-old former RUF rebel who from 2001-2003 fought with the LURD explains how he assisted his family with his loot from the battle for Monrovia:

I benefited from the LURD war – while there I looted a vehicle and later sold it at the Sierra Leone/Liberia border for US \$600. Then two televisions, and lots of money from a safe I'd shot open in Monrovia. After returning to Sierra Leone, I helped out my family – I gave my

³² Human Rights Watch interview, Monrovia, Liberia, August 12, 2004.

brother money to do small business, I bought clothes and rice for me and my family. I didn't save anything because I don't have any place to hide it. While I wait to see if the DDR program will work out, I'm working my motorcycle taxi which brings in about 5000 leones [US \$1.75] a day at least enough to eat. I felt as if I did bad to a Liberian man who I stole a car from. But, you can't struggle all that time in a war and not come out with something. And he should be happy that I didn't kill him – I just took his car.³³

Others described being deceived into going abroad by the recruiters or of not being fully informed about what they were going to do and the dangers involved. A twenty-one-year-old Sierra Leonean who fought with the CDF and in 2000 joined the LURD, described how his commander lured him to Liberia without telling him he wanted him to fight:

About four months after getting my DDR money, a Kamajor mate came to chat with me and my friends and suggested we go to Liberia. He didn't tell us what for, but I was just passing around with friends, not doing anything, so it sounded like a good idea. Besides, he had a lot of money and gave us a little. After the five of us crossed over into Liberia, he told us about the LURD and said we should join. I was surprised but soon overcame it. During our own war, he was one of my commanders and I trusted him. Once in Liberia, he gave us guns and another commander came to tell us about the operation. But he didn't really tell us why we were going to fight. One day, some time later, I heard one of the commanders talking about Charles Taylor; that he's not doing good and that we should fight against him. But aside from that, I didn't know why we were fighting that war.³⁴

Many of those who were recruited to fight to conflicts in a neighboring country could not articulate the political objectives and, in many cases' could not even name the organization they were a part of. For example, only one of the fourteen combatants interviewed who had fought in Côte d'Ivoire in 2002-2003 knew the name of any of the three Ivorian rebel groups operating during that internal armed conflict. Only a few of these interviewees knew the name of Ivorian President Laurent Gbagbo against whom the rebels were collectively fighting. This twenty-one-year-old's account was typical:

³³ Human Rights Watch interview, Bo, Sierra Leone, July 28, 2004.

³⁴ Human Rights Watch interview, Bo, Sierra Leone, July 28, 2004.

One day towards the end of 2002, my commander gathered a group of us and said there was a mission to Côte d'Ivoire. He said we'd get US \$300 each. We were plenty who went – enough us to fill up two truck loads. We weren't forced. Only the ones who had courage went. My commander explained that we were going to fight to help the rebels pull the president because he had killed our friend – or Taylor's close friend – although I didn't know who this was and what he was talking about. Two days before we left a juju man rubbed chalk on us and gave us special water so our life would be protected from bullets. Before crossing into Côte d'Ivoire we stopped at a village in Nimba and our commander paid us US \$50. After that, he said it was up to us to pay ourselves. I stayed there for one year, two months and was based in Danane and Man. But I benefited from loot – I got a video which I later sold for \$230 USD. In fact many of the Liberians were going back and forth to sell their loot.³⁵

A twenty-five-year-old Sierra Leonean who joined the CDF at age fourteen after the death of his father, and who years later went through the Sierra Leonean DDR program, demonstrates that his re-recruitment was linked to DDR. He described how the recruiter exploited his disappointment with the Sierra Leonean DDR program by promising him a second chance:

After disarmament, I used to grumble about how we'd fought the Sierra Leonean war but not seen any benefit from all our efforts. I was working for 2000 leones [US \$0.70] a day at a master's [*car repair*] garage earning only enough to get a little rice. One day in 2002, a CDF commander heard me complaining and said that he would give me an opportunity to go disarm again – in Liberia. He said there was an operation going on there and that if we went, we'd get a second chance at the DDR program. He asked me, 'what are you doing working for so little – you have to get enough to open your own shop.' I thought to myself that this might be a way for me to finally get some tools to work with; to be someone. I discussed this with my mom but she said that Liberia is not my country and that I shouldn't go fight another man's

³⁵ Human Rights Watch interview, Monrovia, Liberia, August 10, 2004.

war. But I told her, 'No. I have to bear that danger and go, that if I don't do something to get ahead, who will care for us.'³⁶

Recruitment in Refugee Camps

Several regional warriors described being recruited from within refugee and displaced persons camps in violation of national and international laws and standards that protect these populations. There is a general prohibition on military presence in refugee camps and settlements, which should always maintain their civilian and humanitarian character.³⁷ In the last 15 years, the General Assembly has repeatedly condemned the forced recruitment of refugees into armed forces.³⁸ The recruitment of refugee children into armed forces is strongly prohibited.³⁹ In addition, there is a specific prohibition on recruiting internally displaced children into armed forces, and host states are obliged to protect internally displaced adults from "discriminatory practices of recruitment."⁴⁰ All internally displaced people must be protected against enforced disappearances, including abduction,⁴¹ and against slavery or any contemporary form of slavery⁴² – concepts which arguably encompass forced military recruitment.

³⁶ Human Rights Watch interview, Kenema, Sierra Leone, July 31, 2004.

³⁷ The civilian and humanitarian character of asylum is affirmed in the Preamble to the 1951 Convention and the relevant provisions of the OAU Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa. *Also see* The Causes of Conflict and the Promotion of Durable Peace and Sustainable Development in Africa, Report of the Secretary General, 16 April 1998, at para. 54: ("Refugee camps and settlements must be kept free of any military presence or equipment, including arms and ammunition. Where there is a massive influx of people in need of asylum, immediate measures should be taken to separate the civilian population from soldiers and militiamen. The latter should be quartered separately and the neutrality and humanitarian character of the camps and settlements scrupulously maintained."); Security Council Resolution 1208, Art. 3, S/RES/1208 (1998) ("affirms the primary responsibility of States hosting refugees to ensure the security and civilian and humanitarian character of refugee camps and settlements in accordance with international refugee, human rights, and humanitarian law").

³⁸ See, e.g., G.A. Res. 45/140 (1990), art. 4 ("Condemns violations of the rights and safety of refugees and asylum-seekers, in particular... forced recruitment into armed forces and other forms of violence"); G.A. Res. 46/106 (1991), art. 5 ("Condemns all violations of the rights and safety of refugees and asylum seekers, in particular... forced recruitment into armed forces.")

³⁹ See, e.g., G.A. Res. 51/73 (1993), preamble paragraph 3 ("unaccompanied refugee minors are among the most vulnerable and at risk of neglect, violence, forced military recruitment, sexual assault and other abuses and therefore require special assistance and care"); G.A. Res. 56/136 (2001), Art. 9 ("Condemns all acts of exploitation of unaccompanied refugee minors, including their use as soldiers or human shields in armed conflict and their forced recruitment into military forces").

⁴⁰ *Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement*, U.N. Doc. E/CN.4/1998/53/Add.2, Principle 13 ("(1) In no circumstances shall displaced children be recruited nor be required or permitted to take part in hostilities. (2) Internally displaced persons shall be protected against discriminatory practices of recruitment into any armed forces or groups as a result of their displacement. In particular any cruel, inhuman or degrading practices that compel compliance or punish non-compliance with recruitment are prohibited in all circumstances.")

⁴¹ *Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement*, U.N. Doc. E/CN.4/1998/53/Add.2, Principle 10(1)(d) ("Internally displaced persons shall be protected in particular against: enforced disappearances, including abduction").

⁴² *Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement*, U.N. Doc. E/CN.4/1998/53/Add.2, Principle 11(2)(c) ("Internally displaced persons, whether or not their liberty has been restricted, shall be protected in particular against:

Most of the refugee camps mentioned by those interviewed were funded and monitored by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). For some ex-combatants, their recruitment from the refugee camp led to their first association with an armed group. Others described having sought refuge abroad to ‘get out of the rebel life.’ Some ex-combatants who were, at the time of recruitment, living in camps in Guinea, Sierra Leone, Côte d’Ivoire and Liberia described going voluntarily after being approached by recruiters. Others described being forcibly recruited, usually after the camp was attacked or looted, as was the case in 2000-2001 when refugee camps in Guinea were attacked by the combined forces of RUF rebels and Liberian government troops.

Human Rights Watch received reports of the recruitment of Liberian refugees, including children, from a UNHCR-monitored camp in western Côte d’Ivoire as recently as November 2004, around the time when Ivorian government troops briefly renewed their military offensive against the rebel-held north.⁴³ The U.N. Secretary-General in a February 2005 report⁴⁴ on children and armed conflict claimed that approximately twenty child soldiers with the LIMA *force supplétive*—a civilian militia which operates alongside the Ivorian army—were recruited from Niela camp for Liberian refugees in western Côte d’Ivoire.⁴⁵

A former child combatant, who joined the NPFL in 1991 and was in 1993 recruited from a refugee camp in Sierra Leone, went on to fight in Côte d’Ivoire:

I joined the revolution in 1991 when I was 12, but I got fed up with the rebel life after being beaten by my commanders and decided to go to Sierra Leone where I ended up in Waterloo refugee camp. But I couldn’t get away from the war life. At Waterloo, when I was about 14, I was recruited to join the ULIMO’s by a Mandingo named S. They promised

slavery or any contemporary form of slavery, such as sale into marriage, sexual exploitation, or forced labour of children”).

⁴³ Human Rights Watch interviews, New York, January 24, February 7, 15, 17, March 1, 2005.

⁴⁴ Fifth report of the U.N. Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict, S/2005/72, February 8, 2005, p.5.

⁴⁵ There was disagreement among United Nation organizations regarding when this recruitment took place: Those working within the office of the Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict indicated to Human Rights Watch that it had occurred in late 2004, while other United Nations officials suggested it had taken place as early as May 2003, outside of the official reporting period for the Fifth report of the U.N. Secretary General on Children and Armed Conflict [from December 2003-December 2004]. Requests through emails from Human Rights Watch to the UNHCR representative in Cote d’Ivoire to clarify this discrepancy were unanswered.

us money and said we'd be able to take whatever we could manage. I fought with ULIMO from 1992-1995.⁴⁶

A former Sierra Leonean Army (SLA) soldier, who fled to Guinea in January 1999 after Freetown was attacked by the combined forces of the RUF and the AFRC, was forcefully recruited with some fifty others when his refugee camp was attacked by the RUF in 2000k. The UNHCR presence in the camp had been greatly diminished due to the high level of insecurity in the region.⁴⁷ One international UNHCR employee had been killed and another abducted during a similar attack a few months earlier.⁴⁸ The soldier discussed his experience:

I managed to escape the fighting in Freetown and boarded a small pam-pam [*small boat*] to Conakry. After arriving, we were put into a refugee camp called Kalia – there were about twenty of us SLA's there. We knew ourselves, but didn't tell anyone else of our history. Then, in December 2000, Kalia was attacked by the AFRC /RUF together with some Liberians. They went there on a food finding mission. About fifty of us refugees were abducted. They took the young gallant men and young fine ladies and made us carry the looted refugee supplies all the way back to their base in Makeni. We walked all day and night for two days. After the war was over, I disarmed as an RUF.⁴⁹

A twenty-six-year-old, who fought for several years with the RUF before seeking refuge in Guinea, was recruited by the Sierra Leonean CDF from within the Kolomba Refugee Camp in Guinea in 2001. During this period, UNHCR noted its concern about the presence of Kamajor militiamen in the camp but had been forced to drastically scale back their operations in the area due to attacks inside Guinea by combined forces of the RUF and Liberian government troops.⁵⁰ The soldier described being trained within the camp:

⁴⁶ Human Rights Watch interview, August 16, 2004.

⁴⁷ See *Guinea Update: UNHCR deploys more staff in south Guinea*, UNHCR Country Updates, 4 Jan 2001 ("UNHCR drastically reduced its presence in Guinea's border areas last September in the wake of the murder by marauding rebels of the head of UNHCR's office in Macenta, followed by a string of violent attacks in several areas of southern Guinea.")

⁴⁸ The killing and abduction happened on Sept. 17, 2000. See, e.g., Alexander G. Higgins, *UN Says One Staffer Killed, Second Missing in Guinea*, AP, Monday, Sept. 18 2000.

⁴⁹ Human Rights Watch interview, August 17, 2004.

⁵⁰ See *Guinea Update: UNHCR Team Reaches Isolated Refugees*, UNHCR Country Updates, 6 Jan 2001 ("The presence of Kamajor militia, who oppose Sierra Leone's RUF rebels, was especially noticeable in Kolomba, which is just a few kilometers from the border. " and "The UNHCR team was able to travel Wednesday and Thursday to isolated border areas in the so-called 'bec du perroquet' (parrot's beak) west of

The Kamajors gathered the young men and encouraged us to work together to save the nation. The Guinean soldiers had an office inside the camp and sponsored us in this fight. They'd felt it after their country was attacked. They gave us medicine, guns and rice. About 500 of us joined the society inside the camp. Boys even from the age of 14 were joining. They trained us inside the camp for about three months. The training took place inside one of the school buildings which had been taken over by the Kamos. Before going on operation we got some single barrel guns from the Guinean soldiers. UNHCR must've been aware – we even had our military parade inside the camp. But because of the fighting, all the international people had fled the camp. After we entered Sierra Leone, we opened the road from Guinea all the way to Kenema.⁵¹

A UNHCR protection officer working with Liberian refugees in Sierra Leone from 2001-2003 told Human Rights Watch that although numerous allegations of recruitment of refugees within the camps there had been made, UNHCR had found no evidence to substantiate the claims.⁵²

This twenty-six-year-old CDF fighter who joined the LURD shortly before their last push into Monrovia in 2003 described picking up Liberian refugees and their supplies before crossing the border into Liberia:

Commander R told us our Liberian brothers needed our help to remove Charles Taylor from power. A few hundreds of us, most former Kamajors, left a day or so later in two trucks. We left at around 10:00 pm and drove around picking up people from Bo, the refugee camps at Gondama and Jembe and a few other places. In Jembe refugee camp we took our supplies from the stores. We crossed the border by foot at 1:00 am. We were all ages, from twelve years old to old men. We slept

the southern town of Gueckedou. The thumb of Guinean territory... houses dozens of refugee camps that UNHCR had been unable to reach since a series of rebel attacks in the region in early December.... The UNHCR team, which returned to Conakry on Friday evening, reported they were able to visit several of the larger camps in the area, including Kolomba").

See Possible Militia Recruitment in Guinea Camps Seen as Threat to Refugees, UNHCR UPDATE, Jan. 25, 2001 ("fresh fighting erupted in Gueckedou on Monday, forcing a UNHCR team to rapidly withdraw from Nyaedou towards UNHCR's regional base in Kissidougou").

⁵¹ Human Rights Watch interview, July 29, 2004.

⁵² Human Rights Watch interview, Sierra Leone, August 18, 2004.

at the border where we were given our guns then left the next morning for Sinje, on to Klay and then on to Monrovia. This was a few months before the fall of Monrovia. It seemed a lot of the people dying were the ones who'd never fought before. The LURD were in a rush – it was their last push before chasing Taylor from Liberia.⁵³

The rebel groups involved in recruitment from within refugee camps were usually operating in the country with the support or at least tacit approval of the host government. Notable examples of this, including several documented by Human Rights Watch, include the recruitment by the LURD of Sierra Leonean refugees from camps in Guinea from 2001-2003,⁵⁴ the recruitment by Liberian government forces of both Liberian IDPs and Sierra Leonean refugees from camps in Liberia from 2000-2003,⁵⁵ and the recruitment of Liberian refugees by recruiters from MODEL and Ivorian government backed militias from camps in western Côte d'Ivoire from 2002-2003.⁵⁶ As one MODEL general explained, "We convinced a lot of people from a refugee camp in Côte d'Ivoire to join us."⁵⁷ However, in each of these cases UNHCR failed to publicly identify the host government or rebel faction involved in the recruitment, due to pressures upon the UN agency to avoid upsetting relations with host governments, with the risk that refugee protection would be obstructed or removed if they spoke out.

⁵³ Human Rights Watch interview, Bo, Sierra Leone, July 28, 2004.

⁵⁴ See, "Liberian Refugees in Guinea: Refoulement, Militarization of Camps, and Other Protection Concerns," *Human Rights Watch Report*. Vol. 14, no 8 (A), November 2002.

⁵⁵ See UNHCR Emergency and Security Service, *Liberia: Civil War and Regional Conflict*, WRITENET Paper No./17 (May 2003), page 13 ("The persistent fear of IDPs as tools in the war has continued to dominate the security environment, prompting UN Secretary-General Annan to alert the Security Council to abductions, conscriptions and other gross violations against the displaced and refugees.")

See IRIN, *Liberia: IDPs Complain of Harassment, Forced Conscription*, April 16, 2003 ("Internally displaced persons (IDPs) have been the targets of constant harassment, intimidation and forced conscription by armed government militias at IDP camps in the western suburbs of the Liberian capital, Monrovia.")

See, e.g., Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2003: Liberia: Human Rights Developments* ("The intensification of the rebel attacks prompted President Taylor to declare a state of emergency on February 8, 2002, and precipitated a crackdown. Frequent raids occurred in crowded markets, in Krahn and Mandingo neighbourhoods, and in camps for the internally displaced around Monrovia, resulting in the arrest of hundreds of young men and boys, many of Krahn and Mandingo ethnic origin. Many of these were sent to the front.")

⁵⁶ See, *Trapped Between Two Wars: Violence Against Civilians in Western Côte d'Ivoire*, *Human Rights Watch Report*, August 2003, Vol. 15, No. 14 (A).

⁵⁷ Human Rights Watch interview, Monrovia, Liberia, August 12, 2004.

V. Regional Warriors and Human Rights Abuses

Any time there is war, there is badness and suffering.
– Abdul, 25, Liberia

The fighters interviewed by Human Rights Watch spoke openly about the atrocities they had witnessed and, in many cases, committed with their original group and as a foreign combatant. The vast majority had originally fought with two armed groups renowned for their brutality against civilians, the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) and the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) of Sierra Leone.⁵⁸ Each group with whom these combatants fought has, to varying degrees, committed egregious violations against civilians, often on a widespread and systematic scale. These violations include sexual violence, forced labor, summary execution including massacres, torture, mutilation and forced recruitment and use of children as soldiers. Their explicit motivation for fighting abroad, however, as noted earlier in this report, was the perpetration of another serious violation: the looting and pillaging of civilian property.

The combatants interviewed for this report had typically received no training in the laws of war either at home or abroad, and operated in armed groups where attacks against civilians were condoned, if not ordered, at the highest levels.⁵⁹ The fighters described perpetrating frequent violations against civilians who were exploited for sex, labor, and food. The groups they fought with – the NPFL, ULIMO, RUF and CDF militias – had a history of meting out deadly collective punishment against civilians on account of their political, ethnic or religious affiliation. During the armed conflicts in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Côte d'Ivoire, and in attacks on neighboring Guinea, tens of thousands of civilians have been killed, raped or maimed, and millions more have been forced into squalid refugee or internally displaced camps. This shattered the bonds of family and community needed to shield such fighters from their already precarious economic

⁵⁸ See, "Sowing Terror: Atrocities against Civilians in Sierra Leone," *Human Rights Watch Report*, vol.10, no.3 (A), Getting Away with Murder, Mutilation, Rape, July 1998.

See, "Getting Away with Murder, Mutilation and Rape: New Testimony from Sierra Leone," *Human Rights Watch Report*, Vol.11 No 3(A), July 1999.

See, "How to Fight, How to Kill: Child Soldiers in Liberia," *Human Rights Watch*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (A), February 2004.

See, "Back to the Brink: War Crimes by Liberian Government and Rebels," *Human Rights Watch Report*, Vol. 14, No.4 (A), May 2002.

See, "Liberia, A Human Rights Disaster," *Human Rights Watch Report*, October 1990.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

situation and at the same time made them more vulnerable to exploitation, recruitment and violence.⁶⁰



Civilians whose hands were amputated during the RUF/AFRC rebel offensive against the Sierra Leonean capital Freetown in January 1999 wait for medical attention outside a clinic in Freetown in June 1999. Many Liberian fighters took part in the devastating offensive which left several thousands civilians dead. © 1999 Corinne Dufka

The regional warriors came from countries characterized by a longstanding culture of impunity. As armed combatants, these warriors existed within a universe devoid of responsibility and justice for the most brutal of violations. The combatants originated from and fought in countries where the rule of law was weak and the judiciary compromised by a combination of corruption, ethnic favoritism, political party affinities and religious prejudice – factors which had in part given rise to the armed conflicts which engulfed the region. None of the interviewees indicated that the insurgent or state actor groups of which they were part had taken serious measures to hold accountable members believed to be responsible for serious crimes. In fact, none of the rebel groups active in the region since 1989 ever established a legitimate judicial authority within the territory they controlled. The perpetrators of the regions' wars, including those interviewed for this report, have not faced – nor seen others face – any

⁶⁰ Transcript of United Nations meeting 4933rd Meeting: Security Council Calls for Regional Approach in West Africa to Address Such Cross-Border Issues as Child Soldiers, Mercenaries, Small Arms. March 25, 2004.

legitimate accountability process. The exception is the Special Court for Sierra Leone, created by the United Nations through an agreement with the government of Sierra Leone which indicted thirteen of those “who bear the greatest responsibility” for serious violations of international humanitarian law and certain violations of domestic law committed in Sierra Leone since November 30, 1996.⁶¹ Prosecution is on-going for nine of the original 13 defendants, including three leaders from the CDF⁶², three from the RUF⁶³, and three from the AFRC⁶⁴. Two of the remaining four indictments – for RUF leaders Sam Bockarie and Foday Sankoh – were withdrawn after both died. Former AFRC leader Johnny Paul Koroma’s whereabouts are unknown; and Charles Taylor is “not in the custody of the Court.”⁶⁵



Wounded civilians are treated in a make-shift clinic in the Liberian capital Monrovia in April 1996. Thousands of civilians were wounded and hundreds killed in April and May 1996 when forces from the NPFL and ULIMO-J fought for control of key areas of the Liberian capital. © 1996 Corinne Dufka

⁶¹ See <http://www.sc-sl.org/about.html> (last visited March 1, 2005).

⁶² See “Background on Cases,” <http://www.sc-sl.org/CDF.html> (last visited March 1, 2005).

⁶³ See “Background on Cases,” <http://www.sc-sl.org/RUF.html> (last visited March 1, 2005); cases against Sam Bockarie and Foday Sankoh have been withdrawn.

⁶⁴ See “Background on Cases,” <http://www.sc-sl.org/AFRC.html> (last visited March 1, 2005).

⁶⁵ See <http://www.sc-sl.org/cases-other.html> (last visited March 1, 2005).

Human Rights Watch interviews with the ex-combatants suggested that they were not necessarily more prone to commit abuses against civilians from a neighboring country than against their fellow citizens. Rather, the degree of effective command and control, and discipline maintained in the different armed groups played a key role in the kind and frequency of violations observed and perpetrated by the interviewees while fighting outside their own countries. Some atrocities, like those committed against Guinean civilians during the 2000-2001 joint cross-border attacks by the RUF and Liberian security forces, were the result of clear orders given at the highest level.⁶⁶ Numerous regional warriors singled out the LURD for their efforts to instill respect for civilians, and discipline those who committed abuses against them. However, their efforts were inconsistent and often unsuccessful. Other war crimes, like looting and pillage, were not ordered, but were, sanctioned at the highest level within all armed groups represented by those interviewed for this report.

In some cases, the introduction of foreign troops into an internal conflict led to a dramatic increase in the frequency and nature of attacks on civilians. A notable example is the Ivorian armed conflict, where the involvement of the Liberian backed Movement for Justice and Peace (MJP) and Ivorian Patriotic Movement for the Great West (MPIGO) rebel factions, which included hundreds of former RUF fighters, members of Liberian militiamen, and notorious Sierra Leonean and Liberian commanders like Sam “Mosquito” Bockarie, Kuku Dennis, and Benjamin Yeaten, led to a marked increase in attacks against Ivorian civilians. Both the MJP and MPIGO were implicated in widespread killings, rapes, and abduction of children in and around the Western Ivorian towns of Man, Danane and Toulepleu.⁶⁷

High Level Orders to Commit Atrocities – the Liberian Security Forces and RUF in Guinea

All regional warriors who had participated in the 2000-2001 cross-border attacks on Guinea, namely on the towns of Gueckedou, Macenta and Nongowa, described receiving explicit orders to perpetrate atrocities against civilians. A twenty-nine-year-old operational commander with the Marine Division militias of the Liberian security forces described the orders he got:

They were harboring the LURD rebels so an order came that we should raid Macenta. The order was to cause destruction and really hurt their

⁶⁶ Human Rights Watch interviews, Sierra Leone and Liberia, July-August, 2004.

⁶⁷ See, “Trapped Between Two Wars: Violence Against Civilians in Western Côte d’Ivoire,” *Human Rights Watch report*, Vol 15, no 14 (A), August 2003.

feelings; to execute, burn houses and kill. This was a verbal order. I received this order from my Special Forces commander who said it had come from Taylor.⁶⁸

An RUF mid-level commander, whose father is Guinean, described similar orders he received before leaving from Sierra Leone to attack Gueckedou, and his reluctance to carry them out:

CO Mosquito called a meeting in Tongo with twenty-eight commanders from Kono, Kailahun and Tongo and said, ‘Gentlemen you are to advance to Gueckedou. This is a mission to kill the enemy, but also to kill everyone you come across, to turn the place upside down.’ Since my father was originally from Guinea I protested and said, ‘Guinea is my fatherland - I don’t want to burn it and do those things.’ He said, ‘Shut up - if you say that a second time, you’re a dead man.’ During the attack I saw the RUF kill many, many civilians and burn and loot. I killed three people and my boys killed others – I’m not sure if they were armed or not. We were following Mosquito’s orders to destroy and kill. We also attacked Nongowa – around midnight. We captured many refugees from the camps because we wanted them to guide us. I personally abducted twelve refugees from a camp two miles from Gueckedou. During the Guinea operation, we did so many bad things – more than at other times. And the Charles Taylor soldiers were even worse than we were. They killed plenty and burned and burned. I saw one group of Liberians kill eleven civilians.⁶⁹

Efforts to Respect the Laws of War Met With Limited Success – The LURD in Liberia

Previous research conducted by Human Rights Watch during the 1999-2003 Liberian war suggested that, while the LURD was responsible for serious human rights violations, including rape, summary executions, forced recruitment of boys and young men, and forced labor, such incidents were less widespread and systematic than those committed by Liberian government forces.⁷⁰ Nearly all regional warriors who fought with the LURD confirmed this impression. Foreign combatants who had previously fought with

⁶⁸ Human Rights Watch interview, Monrovia, Liberia, August 14, 2004.

⁶⁹ Human Rights Watch interview, July 31, 2004

⁷⁰ Human Rights Watch, *Back to the Brink: War Crimes by Liberian Government and Rebels*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (A) (May 2002).

the RUF and NPFL noted that, when fighting for the LURD, they were unable to ‘get away’ with as much as they had while fighting with other armed groups. They described numerous attempts by the leadership to ensure that their combatants respected the rights of civilians including meetings, orders given, and efforts to punish those accused of abuses, including through numerous extrajudicial executions. This twenty-four-year-old Sierra Leonean who had also fought with ULIMO, and the CDF, made this observation:

The LURD treated people better than those fighting in the first Liberian war. We really were under strict orders not to hurt civilians – this was difficult for some of the RUF who were used to doing these things, but they feared acting the way they had in the past for fear of being killed. However, some did misbehave and violate the LURD’s laws.⁷¹

A twenty-seven-year-old Sierra Leonean who had fought with the RUF, CDF and LURD described LURD efforts at discipline:

There was more discipline inside the LURD than with other groups. Shortly after arriving in Voinjama, Commander V gathered about 500 of us and talked to us about how we should behave. He explained that if we got a prisoner, we shouldn’t kill him. He and other commanders said we should not take civilians’ things, don’t take their women, don’t beat them. If you get problem with civilians don’t kill them. They didn’t take nonsense. We were afraid of doing bad to soldiers or civilians, they’d put you in the guard room or even kill you. The civilians used to complain to the commanders about how they were being treated. I saw them punish soldiers who’d looted. And once around Kematahun a woman complained about being raped by a LURD rebel, and V beat the rebel and put him in the guard room for one week.⁷²

However, as in all rebel groups represented by those interviewed for this report, the LURD’s efforts to discipline were inconsistent and often unsuccessful, as illustrated by the conduct of this LURD fighter who previously worked as a military police officer with the RUF:

⁷¹ Human Rights Watch interview, July 30, 2004

⁷² Human Rights Watch interview, Monrovia, August 14, 2004

I was an RUF MP for eight years and an MP with the LURD as well. With the LURD there were some rules. For example, the commander told us that anyone who rapes a girl from nine to fifteen years-old would die; in the Gola Forest I saw LURD combatants executed for raping. However, nothing happened if you raped an older woman – one above 15 years old. We had fine, fine girls. I had one too. They would be our wives because they were afraid to be killed. In Lofa I saw LURD rebels rape maybe eight or ten of them. Once we even entered into their society place [*where the female circumcision ritual is performed and a location from which men are strictly forbidden entry*] and abducted a few of them – but Commander M passed an order that we never do that again. I once killed civilians with the LURD. It happened even after A and S had told us how to deal with civilians – in a small village near Klay. We told them not to run but they were afraid and ran so we opened fire and killed several of them. We also recruited young boys and men, and carried them away for training. I even killed some who resisted being taken by us. I felt like I could do some of those things in Liberia because no one knew me there – they weren't my people.⁷³

Looting on Massive Scale – Not Ordered but Sanctioned at the Highest Level

Each ex-combatant interviewed by Human Rights Watch noted that the war crime of looting and pillaging occurred on a massive scale in every armed conflict described in this report. While not explicitly ordered by their commanders, the promise of economic benefit derived from loot and pillage was the key component of the verbal contract between recruiter, commander and regional warrior. As such it was described by those interviewed to have been sanctioned at the highest level of the respective command structures of the RUF, Liberian security forces, ULIMO, LURD and among those fighting in Côte d'Ivoire.

Numerous combatants described the hemorrhaging of looted goods crossing over the borders into the regional warrior's country of origin, and how this was permitted by the high command as compensation for their efforts. A thirty-two year old mid-level Liberian commander with the LURD who was subordinate to a Sierra Leonean LURD commander described this relationship:

⁷³ Human Rights Watch interview, Kenema, July 24, 2004

We called looting “knock-up.” The LURD forces were dominated by Mandingos from Guinea and Kamajors from Sierra Leone; many of them had never set foot in Liberia before. These guys seemed to have come into Liberia to loot – they were never stopped. The CO’s told us the Liberians that they were special, they were missionaries and that they were being paid for fighting for our cause, so when they took things back to Guinea or Sierra Leone – even big things like generators and cars – we didn’t say anything. The Kamajors looted more than us – they crossed everything over to Sierra Leone – rice, oil. During the battle for Monrovia, the looting was heavy. During these weeks I traveled to Kenema every day to sell what they’d looted; two times I went with my commander M. and about ten times with a Guinean commander. We crossed at night between midnight and 1:00 am in cars. The Sierra Leone army and police were there, but there was an agreement; they were paid something. For example, one time we took forty bags of rice – we kept thirty and gave them ten. We took TV, rice, building supplies, soda and lots of other stuff we’d taken when the LURD took the Freeport of Monrovia and things we’d taken from looting people’s homes.

There were similar levels of looting in western Côte d’Ivoire in 2002-2003 when Liberian government troops and hundreds of regional warriors helped themselves to the contents of Danane and other towns and villages. Liberians described the streets of Liberian towns being full of cars, trucks and heavy machinery with Ivorian license plates. The military operation into Côte d’Ivoire and the associated pillaging was, according to commanders interviewed by Human Rights Watch, coordinated by high level Liberian government officials. Some of those interviewed speculated that the pillaging would have assisted cash-strapped Taylor of Liberia, who was under pressure from the U.N. arms embargo and economic sanctions, to reward his soldiers in lieu of cash payment from the government:

When things got tense in Danane we left in a convoy of about seventy-five of us, mostly Mano and Gio. We left with all the things we’d been able to take. It’s a war – we needed something to bring back to benefit our people and besides, they hadn’t been paying us our salaries and what we’d been promised. It was a big convoy – we were bringing a lot of loot, we were bringing cars, house materials, generators, computers, trucks – all from Danane.⁷⁴

⁷⁴ Human Rights Watch interview, Monrovia, Sierra Leone, August 10, 2004



Thousands of frightened Liberians struggle to board a ship in the Freeport of Monrovia in May 1996 to escape heavy fighting between forces from the NPFL and ULIMO-K. The fighting from April – May 1996 resulted in heavy civilian casualties. © 1996 Corinne Dufka

Massive looting also took place when the RUF and Liberian government troops attacked Guinea in 2000. An operational commander with the Liberian Jungle-Fire militias explained:

The SOP [Standard Operations Procedure] of that operation was not to loot, but to destroy. However, people had to loot because that was the only way we were paid. My boys who went on the operation brought me a car engine, freezer, video, tapes, clothes, jeans, boots, and money. The code-name of this operation was Laspan.⁷⁵

⁷⁵ Human Rights Watch interview, Monrovia, Liberia, August 14, 2004

VI. Current Theaters: Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire

A friend came from Liberia and asked me to go for a mission. He said there's a package for me – that we would regroup with the guys who have taken war to be a business.

– Sheku, 35 years-old, Sierra Leone

Thirty-four fighters interviewed for this report, representing well over two-thirds of the Liberians and several of the Sierra Leoneans, had since April 2004 been approached and asked to join a fighting “mission” in Guinea. About half had been approached by commanders claiming to represent a fledgling Guinean insurgency, and the other half by those claiming to be supporters of Guinean President Lansana Conté who sought to organize militias to assist in national defense. Several had also been approached about fighting in the ongoing conflict in Côte d'Ivoire. Judging from the pattern set by the region's recent armed conflicts, a resumption of hostilities in Côte d'Ivoire or an internal armed conflict in Guinea would no doubt have devastating consequences for the civilian populations in both countries. The United Nations Mission in Liberia told Human Rights Watch they are concerned about ongoing recruitment of recently demobilized Liberian combatants for possible use in armed conflicts in neighboring countries.⁷⁶

Guinea

In August 2004, Guinean embassy officials in Liberia said they were receiving consistent reports about recruitment of former Liberian combatants “intent on destabilizing Guinea”. They said they had written letters to the United Nations to register their concern and asked that U.N. peacekeepers from UNMIL step up their patrols along Liberia's border with Guinea. They characterized the threat as coming not from a Guinean insurgency, but rather from foreigners who would rely on ‘mercenaries’ recruited from within Liberia and elsewhere. The Guinean ambassador to Liberia issued this warning: “Let me be clear: if we are attacked from Liberia, we will follow the attackers in hot pursuit until Ganta or anywhere else they may be based. The Guinean army is ready.” In 2001, the Guinean government responded to attacks on the Guinean towns of Gueckedou, Macenta, Foracariah and Pamelap with often indiscriminant helicopter gunship attacks on RUF controlled areas of northern Sierra Leone which killed scores of Sierra Leonean civilians.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Human Rights Watch interview, February 28, 2005.

⁷⁷ Guinean Forces Kill, Wound Civilians in Sierra Leone, *Human Rights Watch Press Release*, February 28, 2001.

The ex-combatants interviewed for this report gave detailed descriptions of encounters with recruiters who had spoken with them in Monrovia and in villages in Lofa and Nimba counties, which share borders with Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire. Most were approached by either one ex-fighter, or by a small group of former combatants, usually including one of their former commanders. A few gave detailed accounts of meetings. Those recruiting to destabilize Guinea appear to have been strong supporters of former president Charles Taylor of Liberia, including some of his former generals. The majority of recruiters working on behalf of President Conté predictably come from the ranks of the LURD. However, a 2003 split in the LURD leadership seems to have motivated several former high-level LURD commanders to begin recruiting for those opposed to President Conté. Those being used for the recruitment were typically former mid-level and unit commanders. Some were asked to mobilize their entire units. Interestingly, recruiters from both sides have adopted an 'affirmative action approach' and routinely seek out their erstwhile foes as well. Combatants were typically offered from \$100-\$500, and in a few cases \$1000, depending on their rank and position, and most were given a small token of money during the encounter with the recruiter.

A twenty-nine-year-old Liberian commander who fought in Liberia, Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire – and was at the time of this interview preparing to travel to Guinea to take part in a future operation there – explains the economic desperation which motivated him:

If I die in Guinea, then it was God who sent me to die there. I can bear taking that chance. But what I can't bear is not having money for my wife and children to eat, or pay the rent. Look at the present case – the one who came to tell me about the operation in Guinea gave me money to pay the rent. And that's what matters.⁷⁸

A former NPFL combatant was approached in June 2004 by those seeking to unseat Conté. He agreed to go to Guinea and was asked to organize some of his former subordinates. He explained:

I'm a general so people come to see me. In July a lady called W came to my place. She told me she wants me to go to Guinea; that the same way Taylor was taken from power in Liberia is the same way we're going to take Conté from power in Guinea. She said she'll give me \$1500 to do it and that she sought me out because of all the men I have. I told her I am willing to go because I'm sitting here doing nothing. After this first

⁷⁸ Human Rights Watch interview, Monrovia August 10, 2004.

meeting I went around meeting with some of my former boys but also former ex-coms from the LURD and MODEL. They're all willing to go – we're all suffering from lack of cash.

She told me we were going to have a meeting so I had gathered many of the boys together in the compound. She spoke to the guys and she gave them each US \$40 then and said she'd pay the rest when we arrived in Guinea. I fought in Lofa and know it well and am trying to find Lofians and boys who've fought there to go on the operation. I got my \$150 but it's already spent; I shared it with my parents, and used it to pay my children's school fees. I want to learn a trade but I don't know when the training program will start and I can't wait. I need money now.⁷⁹

This Liberian who formerly fought with the Liberian government forces has, since June 2003, been approached for re-recruitment by several people claiming to represent both sides of a future conflict in Guinea:

From June 2004 people have come to me to discuss the Guinea operation. About one month ago in Red Light [neighborhood] I was walking on the street with a few friends when a guy named J who used to be a LURD commander drove by with two other guys in a pick-up. They invited us to a drink at a local bar. While drinking J said, 'My man, I got a mission going and we need men. Even though we used to be enemies, we're all interrelated now.' We talked a long time – we drank two stouts each. He explained that the mission was to go as rebels against the government. He gave us a bit of money so we'd feel fine. I said I wasn't sure and he said, 'My man, you're going to miss an opportunity to eat well.'⁸⁰

A former LURD commander who said he had been approached numerous times by recruiters happened upon a meeting in Masambalahun, Lofa country in late July, 2004. He explained:

In July I'd gone to Guinea to buy some soap to bring back to Monrovia to sell. I was in Masambalahun and I saw that people were organizing themselves for a meeting. People started saying, 'the chief is going to

⁷⁹ Human Rights Watch interview, Monrovia, August 10, 2004

⁸⁰ Human Rights Watch interview, Monrovia, August 14, 2005

come to give us a brief.’ There were a lot of people there – about 175. He started talking about the mission and said, ‘we want you to go to Guinea.’ He said the junior commanders would get \$500 US and the big commanders \$1000, and that once we crossed over we’d be met by a Guinean official and would get all the necessary briefing. During the meetings some people got fed up and started leaving. I just sat and listened. I spoke with a few of them and they told me that they’d already registered for DDR but that since they were just sitting around with nothing to do, they might as well be on that side – meaning Guinea. Later in the day I saw about 50 of them going towards the ferry which crosses over into Guinea.⁸¹

Most fighters who had been approached for re-recruitment said they were not willing to fight in either Guinea or Côte d’Ivoire on account of their anticipated entry into a DDRR-sponsored job training or education program. They anticipated that this opportunity would make a significant difference in their lives. Four fighters who had all been approached to fight in either Guinea or Côte d’Ivoire gave their views.

A thirty-three year old Liberian who has been approached for recruitment several times:

We Africans are quick to get caught up in the cycle of violence because we have no education. If any of my former soldiers is offered as little as \$100 USD they’ll go follow the next war. I was invited to several meetings last month. My friends are talking to me about it – many have gone over.⁸²

A forty-three-year-old former LURD artillery commander:

I have one daughter who’s eight years old. She is my future. I don’t want to go again. The big men lied to us. They took us from our homes to accomplish their aim. I told them I wasn’t going to go. I made them to know what was in me before is not in me now – the war mentality.⁸³

⁸¹ Human Rights Watch interview, Monrovia, August 14, 2004

⁸² Human Rights Watch, Freetown, August 12, 2004

⁸³ Human Rights Watch interview, Monrovia, August 14, 2004

A twenty-seven-year-old who originally joined the LURD voluntarily to avenge the death of his father who was years earlier been killed by the NPFL:

Last month, a Guinean named K approached me and asked me to join for a new fight in Guinea – but to help Lansana Conté stay in power. I told him no. I said I had fought in Liberia for a reason and that that reason was over. He asked me if I didn't want to earn money. I've thought a lot about war...I thought about the reasons why I joined – to avenge my father's death – but then I asked myself, "am I God to be settling scores for my father's death?" This will be done later between the one who killed my father and his God. I'm preparing to do something for my future. I said no – no more.⁸⁴

A twenty-nine-year-old Liberian commander who joined the NPFL as a child:

My fighting friends have come to discuss this with me several times; they think I have the same mentality, but I'm not interested. Everything must have an end... and this war has come to an end. So many things happened that I saw. God spared my life and I don't want any more war. I sometimes have dreams that I'm caught in the middle of a battle with evil people after me. I wake up in the middle of the night, but my woman is trying to help me – she tells me everything will be OK and has taken me to church. Our life should have a purpose.⁸⁵

Côte d'Ivoire

Several combatants living in both Sierra Leone and Liberia told HRW that they had, since mid-2004, been asked to fight in Côte d'Ivoire, both for the *Forces Nouvelles* rebels and for the Ivorian government. A few did not know which side they were being asked to join. The November 2004 Ivorian government's raids against the main rebel-held cities of Bouaké and Korhogo appeared to have spawned an increase in recruitment efforts in Liberia, including of recently demobilized child combatants.

Social workers working with recently demobilized child combatants in Liberia told Human Rights Watch that scores, if not hundreds, of children who had been demobilized and reunited with their families during the Liberian disarmament exercise

⁸⁴ Human Rights Watch interview, Monrovia, Liberia, August 7, 2004.

⁸⁵ Human Rights Watch interview, Monrovia, Liberia, August 14, 2004.

have, since at least November 2004, been re-recruited to fight within Côte d'Ivoire. They reported that the children had been offered and given money, clothes and bags of rice.⁸⁶ The vast majority have, according to their reports, been recruited from Grand Gedeh, River Gee, and Maryland counties in Liberia – areas which border Côte d'Ivoire – and gone to fight alongside Ivorian government militias in western Côte d'Ivoire. Aid agencies working with demobilized Liberian children in Bong and Nimba counties in Liberia, said they believed some children had around November 2004 been recruited to fight alongside Ivorian forces which they believed to be rebels from the *Forces Nouvelles*. Counsellors working with these children said these former child soldiers openly spoke of their fears of being taken to fight in another war.⁸⁷ Another aid worker said they had identified six former commanders involved in the recruitment of children in Liberia who were all known by aid agencies and UNMIL.⁸⁸

The region's three United Nations peacekeeping missions – UNAMSIL, UNMIL and ONUCI – have made a concerted effort to address the problem of cross-border movements of arms in three ways: by conducting joint air and land patrols; by holding meetings between their respective military commanders and civilian personnel; and by basing liaison officers in each others' missions. Much of this is done in coordination with the United Nations Office for West Africa (UNOWA), which is mandated to promote an integrated sub-regional approach to conflict prevention and protection.⁸⁹ However, U.N. military personnel on the ground admitted that the heavily forested and porous nature of the borders make effective border control impossible. As one military officer put it, "geography is the key issue here. We could deploy several armies on these borders, and we still wouldn't find any hard evidence of or be able to stop the movement of combatants and arms."⁹⁰

⁸⁶ Human Rights Watch telephone interviews, January 25, February 7, February 15, 2005.

⁸⁷ Human Rights Watch telephone interview, February 25, 2005.

⁸⁸ Human Rights Watch phone interview, January 25, 2005.

⁸⁹ Progres report of the Secretary-General on ways to combat subregional and cross-border problems in West Africa, February 11, 2005.

⁹⁰ Human Rights Watch interview, Monrovia, Liberia, August 5, 2004.

VII. Problems in the Disarmament Programs in Sierra Leone and Liberia [1998-2005]

The commander called a meeting to collect our weapons. The bosses said they would contact us to go for training and the extra money, but they never did. Some of the guys later attacked the DDR building, but by that time I was into the next war so just said forget it.

– Patrick, 24 years-old, Sierra Leone

Nearly all the ex-combatants interviewed for this report were eligible for participation in United Nations funded and administered disarmament and training programs. These programs had their successes, but also their failures. For example, the Sierra Leonean program disarmed over 70,000 combatants, but up to 2,000 are thought to have been re-recruited and indeed later fought in wars in Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire.⁹¹ Considering that many of West Africa's recent conflicts started with a small number of combatants – often several hundred – and that the bulk were provided through abduction and forced recruitment, even this small failure has potentially broad ramifications. The Sierra Leonean program has recently finished and the second Liberian program is on-going, but the effectiveness of each program still needs to be evaluated. While successful disarmament programs are crucial to reintegration of ex-combatants back into society, they should not be expected to bear the entire burden of creating social stability following an armed conflict. Far reaching efforts must also be made to provide for parallel community development programs assisting the general population whose lives, communities and villages were destroyed during armed conflict.

The ex-combatants interviewed were potentially eligible for participation in one, two, or even three of these programs: Liberia (1997), Sierra Leone (1998-2003) and Liberia (2002-2005). The first Liberian disarmament program provided limited financial opportunities and almost no training. Combatants eligible for this program said they either had not bothered to enroll or had enrolled but perceived little economic or social benefit from the program. The majority of interviewees had participated in one or more of the later two programs: the Sierra Leonean Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) Programme, and/or the second Liberian initiative, the Disarmament, Demobilization, Rehabilitation and Reintegration (DDRR) Programme.

⁹¹ "Sierra Leone Completes Five-Year Disarmament Program", UN Wire, February 5, 2004 ("Francis Kaikai, the [National Committee for Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration]'s executive secretary, said that after disarming 72,490 fighters and demobilizing 71,043, including 6,845 child soldiers, he was 'no longer aware of any illegal armed groups posing a threat to the state of Sierra Leone'.")

Both the Sierra Leonean and Liberian programs were jointly administered by the respective governments through a national commission, and the U.N. peacekeeping missions. The disarmament portions of the programs were funded through assessed U.N. contributions⁹² while the rehabilitation and job training sections were funded through donations, managed through a trust fund. The trust fund in Sierra Leone was managed by the World Bank,⁹³ while the trust fund in Liberia is managed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).⁹⁴

Sierra Leonean Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration Program (1998-2003)

In Sierra Leone, some 72,490 combatants disarmed through the DDR Program.⁹⁵ After turning in their weapons to U.N. peacekeepers serving with the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL), ex-combatants entered a demobilization camp where they spent varying amounts of time, from a few hours to two weeks.⁹⁶ In the demobilization center, they received classes on civics and democracy.⁹⁷ Some, but not all, ex-combatants were also given classes on HIV/AIDS education and family planning.⁹⁸ Unfortunately, efforts to include a class on human rights education were, at the time, considered too controversial and this type of education was excluded from the program.

After completing this initial stage, ex-combatants received a sum of 300,000 leones (approximately US \$143), called a Transitional Safety Net Allowance (TSA).⁹⁹ When the training programs were prepared to take them – sometimes after considerable delays – they entered the job training or education program for which they had signed up. During the six-month training period, ex-combatants were paid a small monthly stipend. Upon completion of their course, they were to be given tools they could later use in their

⁹² Contributions from Member States to the UN regular budget which are determined by reference to a scale of assessments approved by the General Assembly on the basis of advice from the Committee on Contributions.

⁹³ The World Bank, "Sierra Leone: Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR)," Findings (Good Practice Infobrief), Africa Region, No. 81 (October 2002).

⁹⁴ UNDP, "Press Release: Reintegration of former combatants at risk in Liberia", Monrovia, November 3, 2004.

⁹⁵ "Sierra Leone Completes Five-Year Disarmament Program", UN Wire, February 5, 2004 ("Francis Kaikai, the [National Committee for Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration]'s executive secretary, said that after disarming 72,490 fighters and demobilizing 71,043, including 6,845 child soldiers, he was 'no longer aware of any illegal armed groups posing a threat to the state of Sierra Leone'.")

⁹⁶ Refugees International, "Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration in Sierra Leone," August 9, 2002, at 3.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid p 6

⁹⁹ Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, "The Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) Program," in *Precious Resources: Adolescents in the Reconstruction of Sierra Leone*, September 2002.

respective trade. The trades offered included carpentry, auto mechanics, masonry, tailoring, agriculture and a few others. Few combatants were given the opportunity to continue with primary or secondary education, although a limited number, including many commanders, were supported through secondary school or local university. At the beginning of the process, each combatant was given an identification card which had his picture and which served as his passport to enter all subsequent phases of the program.

Liberian Disarmament, Demobilization, Rehabilitation and Reintegration (2002-present)

The second Liberian disarmament program – the Disarmament, Demobilization, Rehabilitation and Reintegration (DDRR) Programme – is largely modeled after the program in Sierra Leone, although the Liberian program offers more opportunities for education and training. Under the Liberian program, the combatants were to be transferred to a cantonment, where – as in Sierra Leone – each combatant would surrender his or her weapon, register for the program, and receive an ID card.¹⁰⁰ Each combatant would receive a reinsertion benefit: the first payment of the reinsertion benefit was to occur upon discharge, and the second three months later.¹⁰¹ As part of the reintegration program, each combatant was to be provided with the opportunity to acquire basic skills “to support themselves and to participate in the community reconstruction process.”¹⁰² Ex-combatants were to select one of four training programs: formal education, vocational training, public works, or agriculture/ livestock/ fishing.¹⁰³

As of February 2005, the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) had disarmed and demobilized some 103,019 combatants.¹⁰⁴ This is nearly three times the expected number of 38,000 for which the Draft Interim Secretariat had budgeted in 2003.¹⁰⁵ The program has been criticized for not having strict enough admittance criteria, a factor that may have contributed to the inflation of the registration numbers. For instance, only 28,222 serviceable weapons had been collected by January 2005 – approximately one weapon for every four registered combatants.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁰ *Liberian Disarmament, Demobilisation, Rehabilitation, and Reintegration Programme: Strategy and Implementation Framework*, prepared by the Draft Interim Secretariat, Monrovia, October 31, 2003, at 27.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid*, p 28.

¹⁰² *Ibid*, p 28.

¹⁰³ *Ibid*, p 28.

¹⁰⁴ United Nations Mission in Liberia, “Mission Overview”, page 1 (January 12, 2005).

¹⁰⁵ */Liberian Disarmament, Demobilisation, Rehabilitation, and Reintegration Programme: Strategy and Implementation Framework/*, prepared by the Draft Interim Secretariat, page 38 (Monrovia, October 31, 2003).

¹⁰⁶ United Nations Mission in Liberia, “Mission Overview”, page 2 (January 12, 2005). Approximately 10,000 unserviceable weapons were also collected.



Liberian children jump rope during a lull in the fighting which engulfed the Liberian capital Monrovia in April 1996. Hundreds of civilians were killed and thousands more wounded during the 1996 clashes between Charles Taylor's NPFL and Roosevelt Johnson's ULIMO-J. © 1996 Corinne Dufka

There is a significant possibility that many who registered were never, in fact, combatants: only 150 rounds of small arms ammunition (SAA) were needed to enter the program.¹⁰⁷ The screening for adult fighters was less stringent than the corresponding process for child fighters; consequently 70-80% of the SAA entries were adult males.¹⁰⁸ There were considerable inconsistencies in enforcement of the eligibility criteria for DDDR, particularly in the screening processes conducted by MILOBS and NGOs.¹⁰⁹ These eligibility criteria were flexible in the beginning and were never thoroughly reviewed, damaging the credibility of the program.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ Minutes from meeting: "DD Wrap-Up: Key Points Discussed," Sessions on 8 December 2004 and 19 January 2005, page 1.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

Former commanders were present throughout the program, purportedly to verify the identity of former combatants.¹¹¹ The relaxed eligibility criteria and presence of commanders throughout the process led to the admittance of a significant numbers of individuals unrelated to the fighting forces – most believed to have been brought in by commanders who stood to gain economically from the practice. This may have also led to the exclusion of others unwilling to share part of their benefits.¹¹²

In mid-2004, several cases of young men carrying ammunition crossing into Liberia from Sierra Leone to enroll fraudulently in the DDRR program were reported, according to the Sierra Leonean Police. Sierra Leone Police officer Augustine M. Kalie, who is based in the southern town of Bo, described one case involving some thirty-eight Sierra Leoneans:

In June 2004 we received information of people organizing to take Sierra Leoneans over to Liberia to disarm so they could get a percentage of the DDR benefit. An intel officer first came with the information that a group of young men would be moving to the border. That day in June, we organized a team of officers and had them stop suspicious cars going along main road between Bo and the Liberian border. They stopped a Mazda truck with about 40 footballers all between 15-25 years old. They said they were on their way to play a match at Jimmi Bagbo – some 30 kilometers south. We found no arms/ammo and since they had the right to travel, we let them proceed. But we contacted our officers at Jimmi and were told the truck had continued South. Later we were told they'd crossed to Zimmi near the border. We stopped them there and brought 38 for questioning in Bo. Several of them told us that they'd been organized by a former LURD rebel named CV to go to disarm in Liberia and then split the profit with him and another commander. Of the 38, some were civilians, some school boys who'd been roped in and others CDF fighters who might or might not have served in the Liberian war.¹¹³

The striking disparity between the number of combatants expected to disarm and the number who were allowed entrance created serious difficulty for implementation of the DDRR program. In particular, the disparity affected organizations involved in raising

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid, page 1-2.

¹¹³ Human Rights Watch interview, Bo, Sierra Leone, July 29, 2004.

money for the rehabilitation and reintegration phase. The financial crisis led to the demobilization part of the program being shortened from twenty-one to five days, and the amount budgeted for each combatant being decreased from US \$1,400 per person to just under US \$800. Most alarmingly, it resulted in a severe funding shortfall of US \$39 million in the rehabilitation and reintegration phase of the DDRR program which at this writing, leaves some 47,000 ex-combatants at risk of missing out on job training and education.¹¹⁴ It also undermined what DDRR program officials envisioned to be a seamless transition between the “DD” or disarmament and demobilization phases of the program, and the “RR” or rehabilitation and reintegration phases of the same.¹¹⁵

During January 2005, some 4,000 ex-combatants enrolled in secondary schools were expelled because the DDRR program had failed to cover their school fees, provoking protests from the students. While their fees were eventually paid, tens of thousands of others are waiting to enter school and job training. Liberians, long fearful of this volatile population, are concerned at what will happen if ex-combatants are left idle. The long wait between disarmament and entrance into a job training or education program also leaves them vulnerable for re-recruitment into another armed conflict.

Payment to Demobilized Children in Liberia and Increased Risk of Re-recruitment

For the first time in any demobilization exercise, the Liberian DDRR program adopted the policy of giving demobilized child combatants cash payment, in addition to other benefits. According to United Nations employees and aid agencies working with the children, this policy not only undermined efforts to successfully reunify and reintegrate them back into their families and communities, but also made them more vulnerable for re-recruitment into future wars.¹¹⁶ Children who entered the DDRR program were given the same Transitional Safety Net Allowance (TSA) – US \$300 – as adult combatants. The children received the TSA after, in principle, spending from three to twelve weeks in a residential facility called an Interim Care Center (ICC), which was designed to provide counseling and facilitate reunification with their families and communities.

¹¹⁴ UNDP, “Press Release: Reintegration of former combatants at risk in Liberia,” Monrovia, November 3, 2004.

¹¹⁵ Confidential Memorandum to the Under-Secretary General from a Senior UNMIL Staffer, February 4, 2005, pages 2-4.

¹¹⁶ Human Rights Watch interview with UNICEF protection staff and social workers with child protection agencies, Monrovia, Liberia, August 13-14, 2004.

However, giving children money as part of the disarmament program has reinforced the link between child soldiers and their commanders, who often insisted on being given a portion of the child's TSA. It also undermined the process of reintegration by making the child feel under pressure to leave the ICC in haste. As one aid worker put it, "The children should have felt at peace to stay in the ICC's for as long as they needed. But instead their families and commanders pressured them to get out quickly, so as to have access to the money."¹¹⁷ The policy also left the children who returned home to their communities with a large sum of money by Liberian standards, open to exploitation by commanders, family members and others.

In some cases, the financial arrangement solidified the connection between child combatant and commander, making it less likely that the former child soldier would return to their families and civilian life.¹¹⁸ According to one aid worker, many children who had lost touch with their families felt under pressure from their commanders to tell the ICC social workers that their commander was a parent or close family relative, thus severely undermining the reunification process; "instead of waiting for us to find their families and reunify them, the kids were forced by their commanders to say that they were a close family relative of his – even a son or daughter – all to get access to the child's TSA."¹¹⁹

This policy also increased the likelihood of the children's re-recruitment because the commanders were more aware of the children's whereabouts in the event of a new armed conflict. The children could also potentially be seen by the commander as a future financial asset; that is, if recruited, the child could again be a ticket to future disarmament program pay-outs.¹²⁰ Aid workers said that the financial incentive actually resulted in commanders bringing children into the DDRR program who had not previously fought in an armed conflict, and more disturbingly, served as the motivation for children with no prior experience in war, to join a faction in Côte d'Ivoire in anticipation of a future disarmament payoff there.¹²¹

¹¹⁷ Human Rights Watch interview, Monrovia, Liberia, August 14, 2004.

¹¹⁸ See Refugees International, "Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration in Sierra Leone," August 9, 2002. ("Of particular concern is the fact that the command structure often remains intact in demobilization centers. The US Government is supporting a proposal that would separate commanders from their troops during the demobilization phase by having a separate demobilization camp for commanders, thus weakening the link between commanders and their troops.")

¹¹⁹ Human Rights Watch interview, Monrovia, Liberia, August 13, 2004.

¹²⁰ Human Rights Watch interviews with UNICEF protection staff and social workers with child protection agencies, Monrovia, Liberia, August 13-14, 2004.

¹²¹ Human Rights Watch interview, Cambridge, May 2, 2005.

Those defending the policy noted that the payment of TSA to children and its attendant financial motivations for the family, may have actually contributed to a “speedy family reunification.” They cite as evidence the fact that almost 100% of children have been reunified with their families. However, social workers doing home visits to recently reunified child combatants expressed alarm at the seemingly high numbers of these reunified children who have been re-recruited to fight in Côte d’Ivoire.¹²²



Young fighters with the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) sit on a street corner during a lull in the fighting in April 1996. Many fighters from Sierra Leone fought in Liberia both with the NPFL and, after 1997 when NPFL leader Charles Taylor became president, as Liberian government militias. © 1996 Corinne Dufka

The problem of children being vulnerable to re-recruitment is compounded by the lack of support for schools attempting to rehabilitate child ex-combatants.¹²³ Without

¹²² Human Rights Watch interviews with social workers from aid agencies, January 24, 2005, February 7 and 15, 2005.

¹²³ Refugees International, “Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration in Sierra Leone,” August 9, 2002. (“Schools that enroll child ex-combatants have the choice of receiving either educational, teacher or recreational materials. NGOs still need a great deal of support to increase educational opportunities for all children in Sierra Leone. This includes the rehabilitation of infrastructure, more cooperation with the Government of Sierra Leone... and more programs geared towards children, particularly former child combatants, whose schooling was interrupted by the war.”)

adequate educational opportunities, these children will remain vulnerable to the parasitic economic interests of their commanders.

Risks of Failure in the Disarmament Program in Liberia

The experiences of the regional warriors interviewed for this report demonstrate the potential for failure in the current disarmament program in Liberia and in any similar future programs. The majority of those interviewed had negative experiences with the DDR program in Sierra Leone; the program's failure to engage them contributed to their decision to take up arms with another armed group. Numerous combatants who were denied entrance into job training programs while going through Sierra Leonean DDR cited their disappointment and frustration as key factors in their decisions to cross a nearby border, pick up a gun, and once again return to the frontline. A second chance for job training or education through participation in the Liberian DDDR program was an additional motivation for crossing the border; this plum was frequently offered by recruiters as well.

Combatants interviewed by HRW consistently described a high degree of anticipation regarding the job training and education component of the Liberian disarmament program; they expected this component to make a significant difference in their lives. This was all the more important because the US \$300 Transitional Safety Net Allowance was often "eaten up" very quickly – sometimes within a few days – by the daily demands of the nuclear and extended family, by family emergencies such as illness, complicated births or funerals, or to support small, subsistence-oriented businesses.

The interviews revealed three key problems within the Sierra Leonean DDR program and to a lesser extent the Liberian DDDR program. The first was corruption by commanders and to a lesser extent, DDR/DDRR program employees who subverted benefits destined to their subordinates to themselves. Another was an inadequate grievance mechanism to submit complaints. Finally, many encountered difficulties in finding a job after training, due, in part, to a surplus of ex-combatants offering the same skill sets.

Corruption by Commanders and DDR/DDRR Program Employees

Many of those interviewed discussed the low-level corruption pervasive in the DDR/DDRR processes in Sierra Leone and Liberia, focusing in particular on the corrupt behavior of former commanders. The commanders exercised undue control over the DDR / DDDR processes by manipulating the combatant's enrollment in and access to program benefits. This type of corruption which involved the fraud, embezzlement,

diversion or misuse of disarmament benefits was not always immediately visible and evident, and was not directly addressed by those individuals responsible for managing either program. In both the Sierra Leonean and Liberian DDR/DDRR programs there appeared to be systems in place – including audits and financial oversight by an independent consultant -- to monitor the potential for high level corruption.¹²⁴ However, the commanders' participation in the implementation of the program was not sufficiently monitored to stamp out corruption at the lower level.

Combatants consistently complained that their former commanders had a great degree of control over their access to DDR/DDRR benefits. These benefits were sold by the commanders in exchange for a “cut” of the pay-out. The commanders often appeared to act in collusion with Sierra Leoneans employed by and working within the Sierra Leonean National Commission for Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (NCDDR). The problems with corruption began with the issue of who maintained possession of the key element of any DDR program: the arms. In both Sierra Leone and Liberia, there was a lag of weeks or months between when the DDR/DDRR program officially commenced and when the demobilization centers where the combatants spent several days or weeks were ready to open their doors. In the interim, both UNAMSIL and UNMIL were anxious to get the guns off the streets. They were concerned for two reasons: the potential for combatants to backslide on their commitment to the disarmament process – as was the case in Sierra Leone in May 2000; and, criminality in the face of an inadequate police presence.¹²⁵

In both Sierra Leone and Liberia, UNAMSIL and UNMIL allowed the commanders of the various armed factions to take control of the weapons.¹²⁶ While this may have been useful from a security point of view, it also consolidated power in the hands of the commanders. According to many of those interviewed for this report, the weapons the commanders collected during the Sierra Leonean and Liberian disarmament exercises

¹²⁴ Human Rights Watch interview with Charles Achodo, UNDP, via email, February 24, 2005 (“to avoid exposing our staff to possible corrupt inclinations, we contracted out the cash payment for the TSA and subsistence allowance to implementing agencies. This is based on our experience and lessons learned from Sierra Leone.” Also, “Financial management was contracted out to an international management consulting house, Price Water House. Consequently there was clear separation of financial and procurement management from programming, as well as political and policy process. Also a dynamic and systemic audit was initiated on a regular and frequent basis which helped in forestalling the possibility of management override of internal system of checks and control.”)

¹²⁵ Human Rights Watch interviews Sierra Leone, 2000, Liberia, March 2004.

¹²⁶ Human Rights Watch interviews, Sierra Leone and Liberia July-August 2004. See also UNMIL, “Second Progress Report of the Secretary General of the United Nations Mission in Liberia” (22nd March 2004), paragraph 56, S/2004/229.

were at times kept by the armed groups and at other times turned over to the peacekeepers.

In principle, the commanders were supposed to submit lists of fighters from whom they had received weapons. However, according to the ex-combatants interviewed by HRW who went through the process in Sierra Leone, the commanders could include on the list, and once the process began, admit into the program, anyone of their choosing. They were also in a position to coerce their subordinates into giving a percentage of the benefits or at worst, “sell” the place in the DDR program to a friend or relative, who was in turn willing to give the commander a cut from “their” DDR benefits.

Commanders pledged to provide detailed lists of those in their units to the U.N. and national administrators of the disarmament programs – indeed it was supposed to be a precondition to enroll in the process. However, there was no systematic provision of lists by factions involved in either the Sierra Leonean or Liberian armed conflicts. Minutes reflecting a discussion with United Nations and NGO workers to evaluate the disarmament exercise in Liberia noted, “the difficulty in the verification of real XC’s [*ex-combatants*] due to unavailability of reliable information or lists about the ex-combatants prior to the commencement of the programme.”¹²⁷ When lists of individual units were provided, those interviewed described no process for verifying that the names on the lists matched the actual fighters who had served under the commander. In any case, the lists appeared to be easily manipulated, and in many cases, never materialized. The U.N. and national administrators of both the Sierra Leonean and Liberian disarmament processes appeared to provide inadequate scrutiny of this process.

The problem of corruption within the Sierra Leonean DDR program, as described by those interviewed for this report, was particularly pronounced within the Sierra Leone CDF militia. Since most CDF militia men had initially volunteered for service out of genuine concern for their communities, they described a profound sense that they had been betrayed by their commanders and government militia officials whom they accused of stealing their benefits. The gravity of their experiences varied; some were kept out of the process by their commanders all together and never received their ID card, which was the passport to entry into the rest of the program. Some received their ID card and some benefits, but were kept out of the job training component after their commanders instructed them to handover their ID cards for safe-keeping, or after their places had been taken by people using their ID numbers. Mid- and high-level commanders had access to larger weapons which could be used by two or three combatants when

¹²⁷ Minutes from meeting: “DD Wrap-Up: Key Points Discussed,” Sessions on 8 December 2004 and 19 January 2005, page, p.2.

disarming. According to some ex-fighters interviewed by Human Rights Watch, the commanders trained friends and relatives on the use of these weapons, and then sent them to enroll in exchange for a portion of the benefits.

A thirty-five-year-old regional warrior, who joined the CDF militias in 1994 after witnessing a massacre by the RUF, described his disappointment over being denied access to the DDR program by his commanders and how he was later recruited to fight in Liberia alongside his former enemies:

I served with the CDF for seven good years but our elders played a trick on us. When it came time to disarm, I and many of my friends were not allowed. Instead, the commanders took their own children and friends who never fought for this country and disarmed them instead of us.

The problem was that not every Kamajor fighter had a gun. Before DDR began, our commanders told us to hand in the guns and then they controlled who got to disarm and who didn't. From my village we were about thirty Kamajors who couldn't disarm. It was the same in other villages. Meanwhile a cousin of mine who never fought, but who knew the commander got the DDR card on the condition that he gave 100,000 of the 360,000 leones to the commander. That cousin went for a six months training in masonry.

We later learned that the betrayal started way before DDR. The government was sending a lot of money for rice to feed us on the frontlines – but we never got it. The elders responsible for distributing it were selling it and sharing it among themselves. We saw the rice coming into Kenema in big, big trucks, but only the big men got it. And we went to the front hungry.

After the war – in 2001 – my intention was to learn to be a mason so I could support my family. But when I was kept from entering the DDR program, I went to fight in Liberia with those fighting to defend Charles Taylor. One day a friend who was with the RUF came to me and told me about the Liberia operation. He said it was going to be a six month operation and that if we survived we'd be given \$100 US.¹²⁸

¹²⁸ Human Rights Watch, interview Kenema, Sierra Leone, July 31, 2004.

After finding that his commander had used his ID number to register someone else in a computer training program, another CDF member went on to fight with the LURD:

I disarmed in Zimmi in 2001, got my first 300,000 leones [U.S. \$125] and signed up to study computers. Some weeks before the course was to begin, our commanders asked us to send our number and name to them. I did so thinking I was about to begin my course, but that's where the game was being played. When I went to NCDDR to register, they said the number which corresponded to my card had been taken. I told them to check again, but they said, sorry, that number has already been benefited. I fought every kind of way. My commander who did the dirty trick, told me to go to NCDDR but they said there was nothing they could do – if the computer says the number is taken, then it's taken, full stop. These people are discouraging us, the youth. The privileges given by the international donors have been abused by these people. Look at me I'm a young man. I want to lead a good life. But without education anything can encourage me to join and do bad.¹²⁹

These problems seemed less pronounced in Liberia, likely due to the more relaxed entrance criteria. However, there is still cause for concern, as a twenty-four-year-old mid-level commander who disarmed in August 2004 explained:

There is corruption there. The commanders are saying each rifle has a commission – they are selling the places. The commanders have a lot of guns, and he gives the guns to those he knows will give him a commission. I know plenty of true militia boys who've not seen any benefit from this war.¹³⁰

Since not every combatant in the rebel factions and civilian militias had their own weapon, the disarmament programs provided for larger weapons like mortars and rocket launchers to admit more than one person. This provided yet another avenue for corruption. This mid-level Sierra Leonean CDF commander described how during the Sierra Leonean DDR program he helped friends and family to enter into the disarmament program this way:

¹²⁹ Human Rights Watch interview, Monrovia, Liberia, August 14, 2004.

¹³⁰ Human Rights Watch interview, Kenema, Sierra Leone, August 10, 2004.

I helped 12 people get into the DDR program; they were never Kamos, but I did it to help them go forward. You see, the RPG carries two people; one for the launcher and one for the bomb. The LMG carries two – the one who fired and the one who carried the chain. Then, we were finding guns in the bush to give to people to disarm with. People came crying to me asking for help and this is what I did. We worked together to make our future brighter. Before we went to the DDR center, we trained them enough so the DDR people would think they knew how to use them. They got the 300,000 and they gave me 150,000. That's 150,000 for them to start a new life and 150,000 for me. Two were family members, a few others were young people in their teens, and a few were friends of mine in the 40's. Every one was doing it... these are our brothers and we did it to help them. It also helped the guns come out faster, so everyone was a winner.¹³¹

Many of those taking part in both the Sierra Leonean and Liberian disarmament programs were told by their commanders that paying them a percentage of their Transitional Safety Net Allowance was a precondition for enrollment. This was highlighted as a concern by numerous combatants interviewed for this report. It was also noted as a problem in the minutes from the Liberian “DD Wrap-Up” sessions: “Former commanders’ demands for their share of TSA (inclusion into the factions’ lists was a commitment to share the benefit, court cases by former commanders against children who have refused to pay) and the screening process posed challenges for CPAs [*child protection agencies*.]”¹³²

A thirty-five-year-old Sierra Leonean, who disarmed in Kenema in 2001, described his commander’s admonition to some 300 CDF militiamen:

I stayed with the Kamajors until the end and disarmed in Freetown with an RPG. I got both installments of 300,000 leones [US \$125] and trained in Kenema. I had to give 100,000 to my former commander. I had to. He gathered about 300 of us together and said that there had to be loyalty. That each of his boys should give him something. We had given our commanders our guns and unless we agreed to pay him something,

¹³¹ Human Rights Watch interview, Freetown, Sierra Leone, August 17, 2004.

¹³² Minutes from meeting: “DD Wrap-Up: Key Points Discussed,” Sessions on 8 December 2004 and 19 January 2005, p.4.

when the time to enter the program came, we wouldn't have been able to enter and get anything from it. .¹³³

A twenty-three-year-old Liberian who disarmed in July 2004, described a similar gathering:

I joined the LURD in 2003 and was with them for about five months. I gave my gun to my commander in Tubmanburg in October 2003 during a huge assembly of LURD people. They then put my name on a piece of paper. Then in July 2004, Commander T called all twenty-five of us in his unit together and said, "You're now going to enter the DDRR program and anything you get for me to be able to help me buy cold water, would be good. But you should definitely find something to give me." After I spent five days at the DDR site, I got my card and the first payment of \$150. All of us gave our CO \$75 US. We didn't give him all, only half. I gave it willingly.¹³⁴

Several younger combatants who had lost or become separated from their families – sometimes as a result of an abduction or atrocity committed by the same faction with whom they fought – looked at their commanders as surrogate fathers or family members. After receiving their SNA some of these younger combatants claimed to have willingly given up to half of it to their commanders. A twenty-year-old Liberian who had been abducted by the NPFL and lost a leg while fighting in Côte d'Ivoire described the relationship with his commander:

I went to Ivory Coast with my commander M. Ten of us went and spent one year, three months there. M got us together and said, "Gentleman, we're going to go on mission in Ivory Coast," but he didn't say who we were going to fight or why. He didn't offer to pay us anything but he said not to worry – that once there, we'd have a chance to pay ourselves, which means loot. We were based in Danane – I never learned the name of the group we were with. When got my first DDRR installment of US \$150, I give US \$75 to M. I did it because he fought for me – he did everything for me. He made sure I had water to bathe and wash my clothes and food to eat. Many others didn't give him any money and he didn't ask us, but I did it willingly. I'm all alone now – when I was a

¹³³ Human Rights Watch interview, Kenema, Sierra Leone, August 17, 2004.

¹³⁴ Human Rights Watch interview, Monrovia, Sierra Leone, August 20, 2004.

child I really wanted to learn to be a doctor. I learned about medicine from my mother who was a nurse. But both my parents are dead. M is like my father and is still taking care of me. Like after I was wounded, it was M and my friends who helped me. They are like my family now.¹³⁵

Many combatants described an element of intimidation or coercion between commander and subordinate, where the latter felt obliged to give the commander part of his benefits. The value in African societies placed on obedience to those in positions of authority was no doubt exploited by some commanders, as appeared to have been the case with this twenty-five-year-old Sierra Leone who disarmed with the CDF and went on to fight with the LURD:

In 2001 I disarmed in Bo town. I turned in my gun and received my DDR card and the first payment of 300,000 leones [US \$125]. But about a month later, my Kamajor commander asked me for my card – what could I say, he was my boss. I was due another 500,000 of benefits; a second payment of about 300,000, a card to enter skills training and a monthly allowance while being trained, but I didn't receive anything. I was told the commanders got everything.¹³⁶

Lack of Grievance Procedure

The disarmament and reintegration programs in both Sierra Leone and Liberia lacked an independent, formal and effective grievance procedure which would have allowed combatants to seek redress for their lack of access to benefits caused by the corruption of their commanders and DDR/DDRR employees, or for any other reason.

In Sierra Leone, the Executive Director of the NCDDR, Dr. Francis Kai-Kai admitted there were some cases of corruption within the program: "The fighters blamed their commanders....we knew what some were up to. We also knew the commanders had people they favored and brought into the process."¹³⁷ He said complaints were in theory channeled to an office within the NCDDR called the Complaint Bureau, and if left unanswered could then be referred to the Sierra Leonean Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC). However, none of those interviewed for this report knew of the existence of the Complaint Bureau, and the few who had lodged complaints with the ACC were told by

¹³⁵ Human Rights Watch interview, Monrovia, Liberia, August 7, 2004.

¹³⁶ Human Rights Watch interview, Bo, Sierra Leone, July 28, 2004.

¹³⁷ Human Rights Watch interview, Freetown, Sierra Leone, August 5, 2004.

them that the matter was outside the ACC's mandate.¹³⁸ At any rate, both the Complaints Bureau and the ACC were located in the capital Freetown, which was hours away by road and in effect inaccessible to the vast majority of ex-combatants.

In Liberia, Charles Achodo, the Rehabilitation and Reintegration Officer for the Liberian NCDDRR program said, "There is no formal grievance procedure [*within DDDR*] which the ex-combatants could access to address problems. However, there are informal networks of counselors and military observers, which are available to respond to the legitimate grievances of the ex-combatants during the process."¹³⁹

In both Sierra Leone and Liberia, United Nations peacekeepers were responsible for supervising the disarmament and demobilization process.¹⁴⁰ According to the fighters accounts', whenever they told United Nations peacekeepers involved in either the Sierra Leonean or Liberian program about having been denied access to benefits, they were advised to lodge their complaints with the national employees at the national disarmament commission, the local arm of the program. This was affirmed by UNMIL representatives who told Human Rights Watch that when presented with a complaint from a combatant, "we ask them to go to NCDDRR, to the Liaison contact person who tells us if there are any problems." When asked if they were aware of any such problems they went on to say, "We haven't needed a grievance procedure because we haven't heard of any problems; we have a well functioning relationship with the NTGL [*National Transitional Government of Liberia*] and NCDDRR. There is a strong presence of UNMIL and other NGO's at the demobilization sites. The DDR site supervisors live there and have a very good grasp of what's happening, so if there were any problems, they'd hear about it and since we receive daily reports from them, we'd hear about it too."¹⁴¹

Relying exclusively on local employees from the local arm of the disarmament program to address complaints is inherently problematic because, according to numerous combatants interviewed for this report, many of the commanders and fighters alleged to be directly involved in the scams were working in these local disarmament offices. The local commanders were useful allies to the U.N. and national authority managing and administering the disarmament programs and were employed at the national, regional

¹³⁸ Human Rights Watch was given a copy of a letter from the ACC to the NCDDR dated June 8, 2004, which referred to a complaint received by ex-combatants for the 'Omission of Names and Non Payment of Allowance' by DDR. The letter urges the head of DDR to take up the matter, "Since this matter falls outside the commission's mandate."

¹³⁹ Human Rights Watch interview with Charles Achodo, UNDP, via email, February 24, 2005.

¹⁴⁰ Human Rights Watch interview with Charles Achodo, UNDP, via email, February 24, 2005.

¹⁴¹ Human Rights Watch interview, UNMIL DDR staff, August 11, 2004.

and local levels of the program. The level of corruption described by those ex-combatants interviewed by Human Rights Watch, however, suggests that these employees lacked adequate training, management, supervision and discipline both by their national supervisors and the U.N. staff providing oversight to the program.

Corruption and fraudulent practices by the local disarmament office in Liberia – the NCDDRR – was noted by a high level UNMIL official working with the DDRR program who, in a confidential memo obtained by Human Rights Watch, observed that, “Since the NCDDRR representative did not regularly pay his staff, using NCDDRR officers as a main method of sensitization caused a tendency towards local corruption and fraudulent working practices. Indeed several CIVPOL investigations were conducted into the fraudulent and coercive activities of some NCDDRR officials during the DD phase.” The memo went on to recommend that, “if permitted by UN financial rules, local NCDDRR staff should be financed and physically paid by [*peacekeeping*] Mission staff rather than passing a lump sum to any NCDDRR representative for disbursement by his/her own means.”¹⁴²

The memo went on to note the problem of understaffing within the DDRR program by qualified and experienced United Nations personnel. In Liberia, it was observed that, “[*the*] UNMIL DDRR Section was understaffed...the whole of the eight month DDR phase...was carried out by ten attached staff led by only three international staff with DDRR experience.”¹⁴³

Several fighters described how international staff – including peacekeepers, U.N. employees from the disarmament unit and contractors – was often manipulated by commanders within the Sierra Leonean DDR programme. This former CDF fighter who was never allowed to disarm in Sierra Leone explained:

When we showed up at the DDR center, our commanders told us to wait. And while we were waiting, we saw their friends walking into the center and coming out with their DDR cards and benefits. You see, the whites [*NGO representatives*] and UNAMSIL people [*peacekeepers*] were there but they were strangers; they were controlled by our brothers. The ones who were lucky enough to get a card had to promise to give them the commanders a commission – 100,000 out of 360,000 leones. We

¹⁴² Confidential Memorandum to the Under-Secretary General from a senior UNMIL staffer, 4 February, 2005, page 7.

¹⁴³ *Ibid*, page 2.

were all born to this land; they are supposed to be our leaders. But they betrayed us. Sure we complained, but even if you know your rights, as long as you don't have money, they'll never take you seriously.¹⁴⁴

Numerous fighters interviewed by Human Rights Watch described going back repeatedly to the DDR cantonment sites, faction headquarters, or to their commanders' houses in an effort to gain access to their benefits, including entry into the program. Several were so angry that they beat up and threatened their commanders, and in a few cases destroyed their houses. One CDF fighter said he joined the LURD specifically to be able to get a weapon to kill his former commander. This Sierra Leonean explained:

For months I kept requesting my card but my Commander L, always said he'd misplaced it. I hollered at him and even punched him once, but it didn't matter. I couldn't complain to the DDR program because Commander L worked for DDR – in the computer room. I learned from my mates that he'd done the same thing to 20-30 other combatants – from different CDF units. We learned that he'd sold the cards and benefits for a profit to his friends. So they ended up getting the training that was meant for us. I wasn't able to complain to our overall commander because he had some months earlier gone to fight in Liberia.¹⁴⁵

A Liberian 'General' who readily spoke of being involved in current efforts to recruit his subordinates for a future military strike on Guinea, described how many Liberian commanders are taking half of the TSA given through the Liberian DDRR, and why he doesn't believe any complaints against this extortion will be heard:

The ones I've pulled together have nearly all gone through DDRR and got their first \$150, but for most of them, the Generals are taking half of it. My boys told me General X stopped his boys as they were leaving the VOA DDRR camp and took half the money from them there. We know this is going on but I've never gone to DDRR to tell them about it. And all the ones working there are the same generals anyway so what are they going to do.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁴ Human Rights Watch interview, Kenema, Sierra Leone, August 10, 2004.

¹⁴⁵ Human Rights Watch interview, Bo, Sierra Leone, July 28, 2004.

¹⁴⁶ Human Rights Watch interview, Freetown, Sierra Leone, August 10, 2004.

Another Sierra Leonean who went on to fight in Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire explained a similar experience and his successful efforts to resolve it:

The ones controlling the process were all ex-combatants. They'd take your picture for your card – which was the entrance to all your benefits – but two days later when you were told to come collect it, they'd say the card was missing. You'd walk up and down asking for it, but they'd already given it to someone else who used it to collect your benefits and enroll in training. You'd ask them again and they'd tell you to come back next week. You keep coming back and back until either you get fed up, or another worker agrees to take your snap again, but when they look you up on the computer, it would say you've already registered and received your benefits.

This happened to about thirty to forty Kamos I know, but all factions were grumbling about the same thing. We even gave the names of 100 or so who never got benefits and sent it to police, but they didn't act on either. We had a riot at DDR where we broke windows of the sub-office of DDR. This was all about corruption. Eventually we complained so much that the head of DDR investigated. We gave him the names of those involved in one scam. The first was an ex-combatant known as S – who got so much money he bought a Benz and built a house. He was eventually suspended. The second was a civilian lady named A. who worked on the computers. She's now living overseas. A third was another civilian named Mr. M. They all worked out of the pay office in the DDR office in Freetown.¹⁴⁷

Inadequate job training options

Several combatants who went through the job training complained of the surplus of skilled workers in certain fields which had been created by the Sierra Leonean DDR program. They were unable to find gainful employment because the economy could simply not absorb so many new workers – primarily carpenters, car mechanics and tailors – flooding into the market. This nineteen year-old, a former RUF fighter who went on to fight with the LURD, explains:

¹⁴⁷ Human Rights Watch interview, Freetown, Sierra Leone, August 17, 2004.

In 2001, I disarmed with the RUF in Bo and got training to be a carpenter, and at the end, they gave me a set of tools. But after the six month course, I couldn't get work. There were so many workshops – all over Bo. All over Kenema. Too many carpenters. After about seven months of trying, S ran into me on the street in Bo and told me, 'hey, I want you to be with me in Liberia.' She said they were paying \$200 to go. I was fed up and since she used to be my general, I told her I'd go.¹⁴⁸

Many combatants suggested that the job training component of the disarmament programs include a wider range of training options which might offer them better opportunities upon completion. Some DDRR officials in Liberia observed that the preparations for the program lacked sufficient market analysis into what types of employment were needed within the local economy.¹⁴⁹

Dr. Francis Kai-Kai, the Executive Director of the Sierra Leonean DDR program, noted the importance of having realistic expectations regarding the pace with which retrained ex-combatants could be absorbed into the war ravaged economy:

Incorporating ex-combatants into the economy was a huge challenge. When we designed the program, it was meant to be linked to the short, medium and long term recovery of Sierra Leone's economy. While we knew that when the ex-combatants went through the program there was no economy to talk about, we hoped that as it grew, the need for more skilled masons, carpenters, tailors and so on, would grow too. However, in the short term, we wanted to make sure the person had acquired some capacity, albeit limited, so that when they were back in their villages, they would be able to contribute to the immediate rebuilding of their devastated villages, and in the future, have skills to be able to support themselves and their families. We won't be able to tell how well it has worked until longer term studies are done, but we're hearing there is a reasonably good degree of success.¹⁵⁰

Charles Achodo, from the Liberian DDRR program, stressed the importance of sustained engagement with the ex-combatants even after the reintegration and

¹⁴⁸ Human Rights Watch interview, Bo, Sierra Leone, July 28, 2004.

¹⁴⁹ Minutes from meeting, DD Wrap-Up: Key Points Discussed, Sessions on 8 December 2004 and 19 January 2005, p. 3 ("basic socio-professional survey done at D2 but the operational and political timeframes did not allow for proper assessments").

¹⁵⁰ Human Rights Watch interview, Freetown, Sierra Leone, August 5, 2004.

rehabilitation program was completed. He said such initiatives could complement the job training received through the DDRR program and, in coordination with short and long-term community development initiatives, enhance the ex-combatants possibilities for gainful employment.¹⁵¹ The job training opportunities in the Liberian DDRR program did involve some elements of community development, including efforts to direct food-for-work participants into public works construction, and an increased emphasis on microfinance, especially for women ex-combatants.¹⁵² However, job training can best contribute to social stability if complemented by long-term community-based development programs that enhance the ex-combatant's ability to engage with his or her society.

Several ex-combatants from Sierra Leone went on to fight in the regions' wars despite having completed skills training and, in some cases, even though they had started to earn a living by their trade. They said the prospect of earning several hundred dollars was too much of a temptation, when compared to toiling at less than one dollar a day.

A military intelligence source with years of experience in West Africa put it this way:

You can have disarmament programs from here to eternity, but if they don't have jobs, they'll soon be looking around for another war. Take the ex-combatants in Sierra Leone. They still pose a threat – they are all formed into youth groups which are organized along military lines – many even have long range communication sets. They have no jobs, no economic future, few skills and are angry. Even for those who have been trained, the economy is so bad, there's nothing to do with the skills they have. They're just looking around for another war.¹⁵³

¹⁵¹ Human Rights Watch interview with Charles Achodo, UNDP, via email, February 24, 2005.

¹⁵² United Nations Development Programme, *Strategic and Operational Framework of Reintegration Support for Ex-Combatants* (3rd Draft for Discussion), pages 24-27.

¹⁵³ Human Rights Watch phone interview, May 25, 2004.

VIII. Conclusion

The regional warriors interviewed for this report described a universe as full of brutality as it was devoid of hope. They spoke of suffering at the hands of armed groups who devastated their villages, left their loved ones dead, robbed them of their childhoods and initiated them into a world of violence and impunity. As combatants at home and abroad they described acting as if they had license, to pillage, rape and take human life. Once the guns fell silent they found themselves suspended in a grim world of deprivation, boredom and poverty. Opportunity presented itself in the form of an offer to fight in ‘another man’s war.’ Defeated by the socio-economic conditions back home – conditions created in part by their own violent behavior – they slipped, optimistic, across borders and into their next war.

The regional warriors unanimously identified crippling poverty and hopelessness as the key factors which motivated them to risk dying in subsequent armed conflicts. This socio-economic reality is tragically mirrored by millions of others in West Africa and beyond, who, as aptly noted in the report of Sierra Leone’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission “languish in a twilight zone of unemployment and despair.”¹⁵⁴

That thousands of youth have grown to see war as the most promising economic opportunity on offer attests to serious failings within their own governments. To rise above this dangerous status-quo, these governments must wage war against the deep-rooted issues that gave rise to and triggered conflict in the first place – a culture of impunity, endemic corruption, weak rule of law, ethnic favoritism, crushing poverty, and the inequitable distribution of natural resources. Government institutions designed to represent and protect their people – the parliament, the judiciary, the police and army – must act responsibly and fulfill their constitutional and legal obligations instead of betraying them, and in some cases, preying upon the very populations they are entrusted to serve.

Key international actors working to resolve the crises in the region – the United Nations, the African Union and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) – must help governments stay the course towards transparency, development and the establishment of the rule of law. They must investigate and be willing to expose information about arms shipments, the recruitment of child combatants and governments that allow their territory to be used by proxy armies aimed at destabilizing

¹⁵⁴ Reuters, “Causes of Sierra Leone war still present – report”, October 6, 2004.

one another. They must also be committed to bringing to justice those state and non-state actors who bear the greatest responsibility for the most serious human rights crimes committed during the regions' armed conflicts. The pursuit of justice for victims must play a central role in all future efforts to end the region's conflicts and rebuild these devastated societies. Symbolic gestures that allow the organizers of widespread and systematic human rights crimes to go unpunished and political processes that allow war criminals to contest political office make a mockery of the suffering of countless victims whose lives have been torn apart by the violence.

Governments and the international community alike must listen to the voices of victims and perpetrators, like those interviewed for this report, who expressed a strong desire for the West African sub-region to rise above the devastating sub-regional cycle of violence that has blighted their dreams, destroyed their communities and engulfed the region.

The only thing I want is to learn. I want to work – that way you don't have time to think about doing bad things like going to war. A few months ago a commander came to Bo Waterside and told us to ready ourselves to fight again. I knew some people who were on standby, but I told him not to count on me. I don't even know where the new fight was. I'm not angry at him for taking me to Liberia the last time; poverty is to blame. When I don't have any money, I didn't have any other choice but go. But not again, with the chance for the new money and learning a skill in Liberia, development is what's in my head. I'm finished with war. I've got a woman now – and although we don't have children yet – we want to one day. I will be able to stand for my family, one day. I pray to God one day I still stand for my family....¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁵ Human Rights Watch interview, Bo, Sierra Leone, July 28, 2004.

IX. Acknowledgements

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Annex

Some state, non-state, and international actors known to have used regional warriors and/or supported insurgencies in West Africa from 1989 – 2003:

National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) 1989-1996: The NPFL launched its war against Liberian President Samuel K. Doe from Côte d'Ivoire. The NPFL received considerable logistical support from Côte d'Ivoire and for many years exported Liberian timber through Ivorian territory. The NPFL also received logistical support and training, and used some military personnel from Burkina Faso.

Liberian United Liberation Movement of Liberia for Democracy (ULIMO) 1992-1996: Liberian rebel group which, from 1992 onwards, received support from ECOMOG peacekeepers from the Economic Community of West African States and the Sierra Leonean and Guinean governments to help defeat the NPFL.

Liberian Peace Council (LPC) 1995-1996: From approximately 1995, received logistical support from ECOMOG forces in order to assist in defeating the NPFL.

Sierra Leonean Revolutionary United Front (RUF) 1991-2002: At first, the RUF was largely a proxy group funded and supported by the NPFL. From 1991, the NPFL provided significant military, personnel and logistical backing to the RUF, which continued even after NPFL leader Charles Taylor became Liberia's president in 1997, in breach of U.N. arms embargos against both Liberia and the RUF.

Sierra Leonean Government 1991 – 1994: Used Liberian ULIMO rebels to fight the Sierra Leonean government's battle with the RUF. In exchange for this assistance, ULIMO used Sierra Leone as a back-base for its war against the NPFL, and on several occasions, were joined by SLA soldiers who accompanied them on military operations into Liberia

Sierra Leonean Civil Defense Force Militias (CDF) 1997-1998: Received logistics, intelligence and other help from ECOMOG personnel stationed in Liberia and the transitional Liberian government to help defeat the Armed Forces Ruling Council (AFRC) which had in May 1997 overthrown democratically elected Sierra Leonean president Tejan Kabbah. The CDF trained inside Liberia, and in early 1998 launched a

military offensive from northern Liberia to drive the AFRC from power. They used many Liberians in this campaign.

Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) 1999-2003: Had recruitment officers in Côte d'Ivoire, Sierra Leone, and Ghana from where they recruited thousands of Sierra Leonean CDF and former RUF combatants, as well as Liberian refugees within camps in Sierra Leone, Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana.

Guinean government 2000-2003: Provided economic, military and logistical backing for the LURD which, in 2003, unseated then-president Charles Taylor.

Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL) 2002-2003: Liberian rebel group which broke off from the LURD and which recruited hundreds of Liberian refugees from Côte d'Ivoire

Government of Burkina Faso 2002-2004: From at least 2002 provided logistical support for the Patriotic Movement of Côte d'Ivoire (MPCI) which in September 2002 launched a failed bid to overthrow President Laurent Gbagbo. The MPCI went on to consolidate its control of the north of the country.

Government of Liberia 2002-2003: Shortly after the September 2002 coup attempt against the government of Côte d'Ivoire by the MPCI, the Liberian government created two rebel groups made up primarily of Liberian militia men and Sierra Leonean fighters formerly allied to the RUF. The two groups were called the Patriotic Movement of the Far West (MPIGO) and the Movement for Justice and Peace (MJP) and fought in western Côte d'Ivoire.

Government of Côte d'Ivoire 2002-2003: Permitted Liberian rebel group MODEL to actively recruit Liberian refugees and make use of Ivorian territory to launch attacks against Liberia in exchange for MODEL's help in combating Ivorian rebels. Hundreds of MODEL fighters actively worked alongside the Ivorian government army and smaller militia groups.

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The Lethal Legacy of West Africa's Regional Warriors

Since the late 1980's, the armed conflicts in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire have reverberated across each country's porous borders. Gliding back and forth across these borders is a migrant population of young fighters – regional warriors – who view war as mainly an economic opportunity. The armed groups these regional warriors are part of have a well-documented record of committing unspeakable human rights abuses against unarmed civilians. Efforts by the international community to disarm and reintegrate these fighters into their home communities have so far had limited success. At present, the armed conflict in Côte d'Ivoire and the unstable political situation in Guinea appear to be the current theaters into which these regional warriors are being drawn.

The findings of this report are based on interviews with some sixty former combatants who represented fifteen armed forces – including both rebel insurgencies and governments – active at various times since 1989 within Sierra Leone, Liberia, Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea. The report analyses the driving forces behind the phenomenon of mercenary activity in West Africa, the cycles of violence, impoverishment and recruitment and the flaws in disarmament programs that contribute to the problem. Their voices illuminate the link between economic deprivation and the continuing cycle of war crimes throughout the region. The report argues that tackling the root causes of this cycle of despair is critical to putting an end to the phenomenon of mercenaries in West Africa. Governments must wage war against the deep-rooted issues that gave rise to conflict and the international community must help these governments stay the course towards transparency, development and the establishment of the rule of law.

Forces from the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) patrol through the Sierra Leonean capital Freetown in June 1997 shortly after the government of democratically elected president Tejan Kabbah was overthrown by a coup led by the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC). The AFRC later asked the RUF to join forces with them. Since its formation in 1991, hundreds of Liberians have fought alongside the RUF.

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