

LIBERIA: UNRAVELLING

I. OVERVIEW

The international community is often left to bemoan the fact that it lacks effective early warning tools for major humanitarian crises and conflicts. Yet, today in Liberia it is presented with almost a textbook case of all the major warning signs of a deteriorating situation across a range of political, military, economic and social fronts. The real question will be whether it can not only recognise these signs, but also muster the will to take effective action to prevent the situation from escalating into broader violence.

Liberia's continuing, but somewhat sporadic, civil war – pitting government forces against rebel Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) forces – is the most obvious manifestation of the current crisis.¹ While the government has enjoyed some recent battlefield successes, recapturing Tubmanburg in mid-July 2002, for example, after the town had been held by the LURD since 11 May, rumours of LURD counteroffensives, including a potential assault on Monrovia itself, are dominant. While it does not appear at this time that the LURD has the military strength to take the capital, any attack on Monrovia would cause widespread panic, likely trigger broad movements of internally displaced people and drive undisciplined and poorly coordinated official government forces and associated militias to launch sharp reprisals against civilians it accuses of serving as rebel “collaborators”.

The sentiment in Monrovia is that civilians would be the biggest losers in any direct struggle for the capital, and President Taylor has made clear that he would not shy from a broader military conflagration – at times sounding almost as if he would relish the prospect. Liberians are not prepared for a return to war and have chosen to tolerate Taylor for the immediate future. As one senator within Taylor's National Patriotic Party argues, “Liberians are tired of Charles Taylor, but the bullet is not a friend”.²

This dangerous military equation has developed against a backdrop of a steadily eroding economic, political and social situation. The salaries of most government officials, including the military and militia groups, are at least six months in arrears. Both government forces and the LURD rebels have resorted to looting civilians and humanitarian aid to finance their operations in recent months. The government of President Taylor is quick to blame its myriad financial and military woes on the impact of international sanctions and an arms embargo imposed by the UN Security Council in May 2002. The economic situation remains quite grim, with high unemployment, more than 100,000 people already internally displaced by the fighting,³ 40,000 to 60,000 Liberians who have fled to neighbouring countries as refugees this year alone,⁴ rampant corruption and an understandable lack of international investor confidence. Many Liberians now believe they are entering a catastrophic humanitarian emergency phase reminiscent of the 1989-1996 civil war.

The pressure is also mounting on Sierra Leone, which is trying to rebuild following its eleven-year war, which ended with elections in May. Daily reports from the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) highlight the number of Armed

¹ This briefing paper, based substantially on field research carried out by ICG in summer 2002, updates and extends analysis of the conflict in the Mano River Region and, specifically, the Liberia situation, that was presented initially in ICG Africa Report N°43, *Liberia: The Key to Ending Regional Instability*, 24 April 2002.

² ICG interview, Monrovia, July 2002.

³ ICG interview with UNHCR officials, Monrovia July 2002.

⁴ ICG interview with UNHCR officials, Monrovia July 2002.

Forces of Liberia soldiers now crossing into the country – some simply to loot, others as deserters. There are growing concerns that President Charles Taylor might use their presence in Sierra Leone as a pretext to raid border towns in order to ward off potential attacks from the LURD or other anti-Taylor forces. In June and July, senior UNAMSIL military personnel went to various Sierra Leonean border towns to monitor the impact of Liberia's conflict.

The domestic political situation also remains quite convoluted as the country moves toward a presidential election currently scheduled for October 2003. Opposition to President Taylor is deeply divided. Opposition political parties have little presence in the outlying counties, and many opposition leaders remain regrettably committed to the sole goal of securing the presidency for themselves at any cost. "Everyone wants to be president" is the common cry of civilians frustrated at opposition groupings that lack any serious program to govern.

While opposition groups portray their ineffectiveness as entirely stemming from government intimidation, their own winner-take-all approach seems to vary little from that of the current government. President Taylor recently argued that Liberia's political feuds are so entrenched that they "border on hatred".⁵ Further, the failure of the LURD rebels to articulate any political platform beyond Taylor's removal, and the general unwillingness of those opposition figures backing the LURD to step forward publicly, have left Liberians and the international community unclear as to whether the military alternative to Taylor would prove politically more attractive.

The international approach to Liberia has put considerable pressure on Taylor's government, without establishing a clear roadmap toward either reforming, replacing or working with that government. Both the United States and the United Kingdom have pushed for isolating Taylor, largely in response to his role in backing the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) rebel group in Sierra Leone's civil war and supporting rebel counter-incursions into Guinea during 2000. The Liberian government has frequently accused the U.S. and UK of supplying and training the LURD. However, Liberia has clearly been low on Washington's list of foreign

policy priorities, and internal Bush administration splits on Liberia policy have caused a general drift. The European Union has more broadly sought to engage with the Taylor government and establish benchmarks for progress, but this approach has also seen limited forward movement. In short, the international community's awkward stance – working neither to engage nor to remove President Taylor – has produced a wounded government that is increasingly desperate, in the face of a steady civil war and a general population that remains braced for the worst.

This briefing argues that the international community will need to arrive at new clarity in dealing with Liberia and choose between the poles of engagement and isolation. The most promising approach, although one obviously deeply controversial and with its share of shortcomings, is reaching some accord directly with President Taylor that would achieve his graceful retirement at the end of his presidential term in October 2003 – and permanent departure from the political scene – in exchange for guarantees of his safety and protection against prosecution by the recently convened Special Court in Sierra Leone. Such a transition would also need to be supported by a general ceasefire with LURD and the introduction of a stabilisation force along the lines of the one currently operating in Sierra Leone.

II. THE MILITARY FRONT

The level of confusion, misinformation and uncertainty regarding the civil war is striking. Information and reporting from the battlefield is sketchy and often manipulated by both the government and rebel forces. Given that the government is increasingly relying on militia to carry the burden of fighting in forward areas, and that LURD uniforms often consist of little more than similar coloured T-shirts, even those close to the front are left with an unclear picture of who is fighting whom – much less why they are fighting.⁶ Few credible international news reports of the combat are available, and international NGOs have often been left to patch together their best estimate

⁵ ICG interview with President Taylor, Monrovia, 11 July 2002.

⁶ Refugees often cite red as a popular colour worn by both LURD and government forces. ICG also noticed a number of militia boys wearing red T-shirts but with tiger imprints on the front.

of the current situation through a combination of their own fieldwork and accounts from the internally displaced. This has resulted in what a local resident of Monrovia was left to describe as a “phantom war”.⁷

Little of the fighting takes place in set piece battles between the government and the LURD. Instead the LURD will move on a village or town, most of whose occupants will flee. The LURD will then loot those assets useful for its military campaign, after which the government will move to take back the position, sometimes encountering LURD resistance and sometimes not. The government security forces who then occupy the location are widely accused of more comprehensive looting of civilian assets before they allow citizens to return. The fact that security forces are permitted to “pay themselves” remains a prime motivating factor for the government in finding fighters willing to go the front at a time when it has not been able to meet payrolls through more traditional budgetary means.

LURD’s largely hit-and-run tactics have allowed it to make inroads in locations a short distance from Monrovia, but the group has largely failed to hold key strategic towns such as Gbarnga, which returned to government control during the second week of May 2002, and Tubmanburg, which was wrested back from the LURD in mid July 2002. This has created tremendous apprehension in Monrovia, however, that the capital is the ultimate target of the LURD, and the environment in the city is quite tense. International organizations have updated their emergency contingency plans, and the wives and families of many prominent Monroviens, including government officials, have left for safer locations. A recent move by the UNHCR to relocate its headquarters to a more central Mamba Point location in Monrovia (close to the U.S. embassy and EU mission) was widely seen by locals as driven by security concerns, although the UNHCR has officially downplayed this aspect. Casualty figures on both sides remain impossible to determine, with some suggestions that a number of government wounded have been treated directly at the Executive Mansion.

Recent arrests by President Taylor of accused coup plotters within his own security services have also heightened the general sense of mistrust and fear in Monrovia, as has a prominent falling out between

Taylor and the chief of his own National Patriotic Party, Cyril Allen, on 9 June 2002.⁸ Cabinet reshuffles in mid-July are also seen as signs of Taylor’s increasing distrust of senior people around him. The decision to give his National Security Adviser the position as Minister of State within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has largely been interpreted as an attempt by Taylor to keep an eye on those in his government whose support might be wavering. A state of emergency continues in effect for Liberia, and although no curfew is in place in Monrovia, checkpoints are set up along the road every evening. Few local citizens wish to be out on the streets after 10 p.m. when they become active. Sandbag emplacements have recently been set up at checkpoints not far from the president’s residence, and security forces within Monrovia have launched several “cordon and search” operations.

There are also credible reports that increasing numbers of prominent local ethnic Mandingo figures in Monrovia have had their homes searched and assets seized by the government. Ethnic Mandingos and Krahn, both prominent elements within the LURD forces, were also highly influential in the earlier government of President Samuel Doe that President Taylor ousted. During 2002, greater numbers of former combatants and militia groups that fought during the 1989-1996 period have been reactivated by President Taylor to serve as the core of his defence against the LURD, and new units are being created such as the Jungle Warriors.

All these factors have combined to create a Liberian population that appears quite easily spooked. Camps for the internally displaced are being placed unusually close to the roadside, one international humanitarian worker observed, enabling these people who have already been uprooted by conflict to move quickly should fighting again threaten their safety.⁹ As one Western diplomat put it, the

⁸ Cyril Allen was a key financier of Charles Taylor’s war in the 1990s and remained a prominent figure in his inner circle. There are various reports about Allen’s suspension as chairman of the ruling party: one suggestion was that Taylor was angry at Allen’s anti-government attacks that blamed ministers for high levels of corruption and the poor state of the economy. Other reports suggest that Taylor suspended Allen because he had taken too large a share of tax revenues.

⁹ ICG interview with international aid worker, Monrovia, July 2002.

⁷ ICG interview with a local journalist, Monrovia, July 2002.

“population is so traumatised that many would rather run than fight Taylor”.¹⁰

A 13 May 2002 incident in Arthington, 25 kilometres from Monrovia and Taylor’s birthplace, underscored this reality. What actually transpired remains unclear. The government claimed that the LURD attacked the town, but was repelled after the President came on the radio to call for calm. Only a Methodist church was hit by fire, however. Taylor’s home and surrounding areas were left untouched. Others suggest that the government was simply testing its own weapons or that a government soldier had launched several practice rounds of a rocket propelled grenade. Nevertheless, there was near panic in Monrovia.

The influential Lebanese business community evacuated most of its wives and children following the killing of three Lebanese in Kakata in April 2002, as did some government officials. A number of international NGO workers also left the city, and people began showing up at the U.S. embassy hoping they could be evacuated. International war insurance coverage has not been available for Monrovia since January 2002 in a further sign of lack of confidence in the current situation.

Despite the fact that a UN arms embargo is in place for Liberia, this appears to have deterred neither the government nor the LURD from gaining access to supplies of weapons. President Taylor adamantly insists that Liberia has a UN-mandated right to self-defence and that “any nation would do that” given such a “clear and present danger”.¹¹ Since the embargo has no enforcement mechanism and Liberia’s borders are porous, the illegal arms trade is alive and well within the region. The Taylor government has accused the U.S., UK and Guinea of providing the LURD with weapons, although it appears to be trying to soften its stance toward the role of the Guinean government. Both the U.S. and UK have officially denied assisting the LURD. The U.S. does offer non-lethal training and assistance to the Guinean armed forces. Liberia appears able to secure weapons from the former Soviet states, and there have been allegations that Nigeria has also been a source of weapons. Given the secrecy with which these transactions are conducted, as well as

the general security environment within Liberia as a whole, it is extraordinarily difficult to determine the merits of all these claims.

All this is to suggest that the current environment in Liberia is very volatile, and that it would take very little to drop a match into what increasingly looks like a pool of petrol. Worse still, current tensions are layered on top of some fundamental faults within the security structures of both government forces and the LURD that make the situation even more troubling.

During his time in power, President Taylor has increasingly practiced a strategy of “balkanising” his security forces to ensure that no single military, police, intelligence or militia faction will be strong enough to challenge him. Individual security elements remain loyal to their immediate commander and to the President, but little exists in a normal operational chain of command. For example, many militia and security elements feel no compulsion to take orders from the relatively marginalised Minister of Defence in conducting field operations. Indeed, more often than not militias appear to have been given the lead in coordinating counterattacks on LURD positions, such as at Gbarnga and recently Tubmanburg.

The end result of President Taylor’s strategy to develop multiple redundancies within his security services has been a confusing proliferation of military groups: the elite Anti-Terrorist Unit (ATU) that serves as a palace guard; the Special Operations Division (SOD); the Special Security Services (SSS); the police; a very weak Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL) that serves as the traditional military; and a hodgepodge of militia groups including the Marines, the recently remobilised “Wild Geese” and a host of others. The LURD has claimed that the government is again recruiting child soldiers as part of its war drive, a charge that deserves broader investigation.¹² During its field work, ICG has seen some militia “boys” allied with the government who appear quite young.

¹⁰ ICG interview with Western embassy official, Freetown, June 2002.

¹¹ ICG interview with President Taylor, Monrovia 11 July 2002.

¹² “Taylor’s use of children as human shields on battlefronts in Bomi derails LURD’s forces from taking Monrovia very soon as expected in this week”, LURD Press Release July 11, 2002. Human Rights Watch wrote a letter to the UN Security Council on 17 July 2002 detailing the forceful conscription of and renewed use of child combatants by members of the Liberian security forces.

Competition, suspicion and rivalries between the many security organs, including fights over resources, appear to be on the rise. Military discipline has never been a particular strength in Liberia, and such a personality-dominated security structure would seem to be a recipe for trouble if fighting intensifies. President Taylor also appears to remain deeply suspicious of his own security forces. The ATU has had four turnovers in its senior ranks within the last six months, and both a senior ATU official and the Minister of Defence were briefly placed under house arrest. Most of the fourteen to 22 individuals arrested as “coup plotters” in late June 2002 were also from the security services. The threat of potential military defections to the LURD remains a serious concern, and Taylor appears to believe that the threats to his rule from within his own security services are as profound as that posed by the LURD.¹³

The fact that the government remains roughly six months in arrears in payments to many elements of the security services is also a problem.¹⁴ Having large numbers of armed young men roaming the countryside with no resources available to them other than what they can secure at gunpoint is clearly destabilising. The government seems to recognise the danger of having troops unpaid and has recently imposed new taxes and “fees” as part of a broader effort to pay the fighters defending it. As one local opposition figure noted, “Taylor is scrounging everywhere to pay the troops”.¹⁵

The composition of the LURD also contributes to the destabilising dynamic. Many, including the government of Liberia, accuse the LURD of being composed of little more than ULIMO-K and

ULIMO-J factions that lost the 1989-1996 civil war, have simply regrouped and are launching a new effort to assume power from the neighbouring territories of Guinea and Sierra Leone. The LURD, while acknowledging that these elements are involved in its military campaign, claims to have broadened its support both ethnically and militarily so that it is representative of the people from all Liberia’s thirteen counties.¹⁶ Both ULIMO-K and ULIMO-J were involved in frequent battlefield excesses in the past, and there is little desire among most Liberians to return to the factional fighting that virtually destroyed the country during the 1990s. If the LURD is unable to demonstrate that it represents a cleaner break with the past and the failed factional leadership of the last thirteen years, it will likely be unable to broaden its political support among average Liberians.

Further, while the LURD has taken some pains to avoid human rights abuses and indiscriminate looting, its 20 June 2002 attack on the Sinje refugee camp, 80 kilometres northwest of the capital, and the hostage-taking of five nurses from the Liberian humanitarian organisation *Merci* the same day, and their continued detainment, does not reflect well on the group.

Failure to establish a clear-cut political agenda beyond removing Taylor continues to plague the group.¹⁷ The many ambiguities surrounding the LURD, including its political and financial benefactors, make it a cipher for many Liberians. As one lawyer in Monrovia observed, “If someone is coming to liberate me, I would at least like to know who they are”.¹⁸

A great many Liberians remain convinced that President Taylor, as he did during the 1989-1996 period, will do whatever it takes to win the war. In this sense, he maintains something of an edge in the balance of ruthlessness. Many Liberians believe he will engage in a protracted and devastating civil war before he would consider actual power-sharing. The sense that he is fully committed to “burning down Liberia’s house to save it” drives much of the dread that seems to fill the streets of Monrovia. Removing

¹³ Many expatriates also share the belief that the main threat, especially around Monrovia, is likely to come from within the Taylor camp.

¹⁴ In early July 2002, President Taylor announced that government workers would receive some payment before the nation’s Independence Day on 26 July, with officials suggesting that payments would cover a two-month period; bringing the arrears down from roughly eight months to six months for most government employees, including security officials. However, there appear to have been some continuing difficulties in providing even these partial payments. Interestingly, those security officials deployed in the recaptured town of Gbarnga were some of the only ones interviewed by ICG who did not complain of a failure to be paid, furthering adding to the suspicion that they were engaged in “self-financing”.

¹⁵ ICG interview with civil society activist, Monrovia, July 2002.

¹⁶ ICG interview with LURD political representative, June 2002.

¹⁷ LURD representatives openly admit that they have spent the last four years trying to bring down President Taylor, ICG interviews, June-July 2002.

¹⁸ ICG interview with local lawyer, Monrovia, July 2002.

Taylor solely by force continues to seem an unlikely prospect, although the potential for the war to be greatly expanded is considerable.

The LURD has indicated it is willing to engage anyone – except Taylor – in face-to-face talks, although Taylor remains firmly in control of the country. Taylor also recently dismissed the potential for direct talks with the LURD, accusing it of being little more than “terrorists” and “Islamic extremists” and likening Liberia’s right to self-defence to that involved in the U.S. campaign in Afghanistan.¹⁹

III. THE DOMESTIC SITUATION: WAITING FOR THE OTHER SHOE TO DROP

A faltering economy and a deeply troubled political system exacerbate Liberia’s difficult military situation and call into question the wisdom of holding the presidential elections scheduled for 2003 if events on the ground do not fundamentally change in the near term. Even areas of the country like the Southeast that are not affected by the war are in a mess. As one senior diplomat vividly remarked to ICG, “ports in Buchanan, (the heartland of Taylor’s timber industry) are near closure, railway lines are over-run with grass, giant cranes are frozen in time, and factories are rotting away”.²⁰

Unemployment is currently estimated at 75 to 80 per cent, large numbers of people have left their communities as refugees or internally displaced, internal travel is daunting for many Liberians apprehensive about passing through checkpoints, and international investment has largely dried up. Many businesses in Monrovia are now getting visits from government officials asking them to help fund the war effort against the LURD.²¹ Those major businesses that continue to operate, such as the Firestone rubber plantations and large logging concessions managed by the OTC Company, are largely extractive. While the government continues to enjoy income from such concessions, little of the revenue appears to trickle down to average Liberians.

This lack of economic opportunity, coupled with government arrears in payments to its employees and a general decline in international aid, has increasingly pushed many Liberians to operate largely within a barter system. Inflationary pressures also persist, and more and more of the business community prefers to deal almost exclusively in the hard currency of U.S. dollars rather than the “Liberty” (the Liberian dollar). Basic items such as gasoline and rice have become increasingly unaffordable to many Liberians, due in part to the government tax burden on such goods.

Liberia’s political situation is as problematic as its economic one. President Taylor continues to object to what he sees as unfair treatment by the international community, often couching his arguments in terms of his legitimacy as a democratically elected leader protecting Liberia’s sovereignty. The West Africa region as a whole is hardly a bastion of democracy, and Taylor’s claim on power is no less legitimate than that of President Conté in neighbouring Guinea, who has enjoyed far warmer relations with the West, giving some measure of credence to the government’s complaints that it is the victim of a “double standard”.

In many respects, today’s Liberia is simply not an environment particularly conducive to democracy. It has a large number of political parties (at least seventeen) but many exist in little more than name and largely to advance the special interests of their particular heads. Other than Taylor’s National Patriotic Party, most political parties are simply shells or operate largely in exile. Many have no registered bank account, no party offices in the counties (the ruling party has a sub-office in every county), little grassroots organising ability and few avenues for fundraising among constituents.

The causes for such an underdeveloped system are manifold. A healthy share of the blame can be placed directly on the opposition parties themselves. As one civil society activist notes, “the problem of leadership starts with Charles Taylor, but it does not end with him; many of Liberia’s leaders have failed”.²² Opposition parties have been fractious in their efforts to present a credible alternative to Taylor, have shown little interest in any political prize other than the presidency and have not sought to effectively develop the broader people power machinery useful in promoting a range of

¹⁹ ICG interview with President Taylor, Monrovia, 11 July 2002.

²⁰ ICG interview, Monrovia, July 2002.

²¹ ICG interview with Western official and Monrovia businessman, July 2002.

²² ICG interview, Monrovia, July 2002.

candidates. A considerable number of opposition politicians who would aspire to the presidency are also tainted by their earlier affiliations and roles in the fighting between 1989 and 1996. Many who are vying for the presidency also belong to the generation of politicians in government positions in the 1980s that is blamed for Liberia's current situation. Deep divisions and failure to reach consensus on possible ways forward means that there is little faith in the recently created Collaborating Political Party, which is aimed at bringing all opposition groups together. Further, given the resource-starved nature of Liberia, many opposition figures have been vulnerable to being bought off by the ruling party.

Many of the most prominent Liberian opposition leaders continue to operate in exile. They insist that the security situation in Liberia is such that they could not operate effectively on the ground. While some security concerns are certainly warranted, one diplomatic representative in Monrovia was led recently to complain, "The problem with the opposition is that they, excuse my language, don't have any balls. They complain about the security situation but haven't been willing to come back and test it". President Taylor points to the May 2002 visit of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf to Monrovia as proof that he is willing to allow opposition figures to operate openly in Liberia, but most opposition leaders remain reluctant to test this proposition given Liberia's frequent political violence during the last decade.

A recent series of competing and often conflicting "reconciliation conferences" designed to bring different Liberian political groups into greater harmony has only underscored the considerable disarray facing the government and opposition groups alike. Three have taken place: in Bethesda, Maryland (U.S.), 28-29 June 2002; Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, 8-11 July, and Monrovia, 26 July through late August. But in classic Liberian political style, opposition groups have remained divided about the purpose of the reconciliation conferences leaving one opposition figure to remark that "it is reconciliation in a state of confusion".²³ "Reconciliation is the bottom line" for Taylor and his rivals, one government official told ICG,²⁴ but the conferences have done little to

impress the citizens of Liberia who see the opposition as a failure.

These conferences are perfectly emblematic of the general failures of the political system as a whole. The real reconciliation dilemma, as the same government official remarked, is that since 1980 the rivalry and tribalist tendencies stemming from the time of Samuel Doe's presidency have never been resolved. Combined with their deep-seated personal grudge against Taylor, Liberia's opposition groups have continued to perpetuate the politics of hate from that period. President Taylor has a point when he states that in "Liberia (and Africa generally) we do not have oppositions, we have virtual enemies".²⁵

It is also clear that with mounting apprehension about potential LURD offensives, the general space for civil society as a whole is increasingly limited. In a country where Taylor displays billboards with such statements as "Words can be more harmful than bullets" and "Unbalanced news is also a human rights abuse", journalists and civil society activists have found it increasingly difficult to speak out without severe consequences. Those opposition figures, independent journalists and human rights activists who remain in Liberia feel increasing government pressure and often engage in self-censorship to avoid running afoul of the authorities. As one local lawyer noted, "We have to be circumspect. It is a very dangerous time with the state of emergency".

Journalists and civil society activists are increasingly becoming wary and distrustful of one another, and many have chosen to remain silent rather than share their thoughts. Many also have doubts about who is really a representative of civil society and who is doing the bidding of President Taylor. The fact that it was someone purporting to be a member of civil society who informed President Taylor about the critical speech given by human rights lawyer Tiawan Gongloe in Guinea in March 2002, which led to his arrest and subsequent imprisonment, has constrained activists from speaking out freely even in private gatherings.²⁶

²³ ICG interview, Monrovia, July 2002.

²⁴ ICG interview, Monrovia, July 2002.

²⁵ ICG interview with President Taylor, 11 July 2002.

²⁶ On 24 April 2002, Tiawan Gongloe was arrested and beaten up by Liberian police. See ICG Africa Report N°49, *Sierra Leone After Elections: Politics As Usual?*, 12 July 2002, p. 14.

The government is shrewd in selectively targeting those opposition figures, journalists and human rights activists whom it wishes to silence. Such selective persecution allows the government to avoid charges that it is operating a broad police state and lets it point to a handful of independent newspapers and opposition figures as evidence of its support for free speech. However, the periodic targeting of key individuals for engaging in treasonous activity or alleged coup plotting allows the government to effectively chill civil society as a whole and makes it extremely dangerous for any given individual to engage in prominent criticism. The 24 June 2002 arrest and detention of Hassan Bility, editor of the independent *Analyst* newspaper, on grounds that he was in e-mail communication with supporters of the LURD, is eloquent demonstration of how the government is increasingly prepared to silence its critics despite President Taylor's claims to ICG that the state of emergency has not undermined free speech.²⁷

The situation outside Monrovia is even more daunting. With the government's myriad, and often unaccountable, security forces in the field, it is difficult to imagine how a presidential campaign that would meet the standards of a free and fair contest could take place in 2003, particularly given that the civil war continues to disrupt life in much of the country. While President Taylor was adamant in insisting to ICG that he would move forward with the 2003 presidential election as scheduled, and his security personnel could provide ample security from the LURD for balloting to take place,²⁸ he failed to recognise that the greatest concerns among many opposition politicians and voters themselves are the activities and intimidation of those self-same government forces charged with protecting them.

Taylor has expressed confidence in his electoral prospects for 2003 and suggested a willingness to accept some form of election monitors to observe the contest, but monitors alone would do little to counter the general threat that non-uniformed militia fighters would pose to candidates actively opposing Taylor in the countryside. Democracy is obviously the best hope for Liberia but it would be highly

problematic for the international community to embrace an election that would so clearly be structurally flawed from its onset. For a fair election to be held in Liberia, facts on the ground will simply have to change.

The population movements triggered by the fighting with the LURD will also pose some special problems for any potential election. Because of the flow of internal displacements within Liberia, the population of Monrovia has swelled, and tens of thousands are now living in makeshift camps supported by the international humanitarian aid community elsewhere in the country. If representation were to be based on where people are currently "residing", as is the standard under Liberian electoral law, Monrovia would be heavily represented in the legislature, and some of the larger camps of the displaced would probably be eligible for their own representation. This would leave the counties where LURD activities have been most intense and from where most people have fled, such as Nimba and Lofa counties, dramatically under-represented. In theory, those individuals who have fled the country as refugees would be unable to vote.

IV. A MUDDY INTERNATIONAL APPROACH

The international community's approach to Liberia reflects deep divisions in how best to deal with the government, frustration with the failure of reform to take root, and continuing animosity toward the role that the Taylor government has played in regional security affairs. The U.S. and UK have pushed harder for isolating the government, while the European Union (EU) has modestly attempted to engage with Taylor on a host of governance-related programs in hopes he will change his ways. Both the U.S. and UK have remained largely silent on the activities of the LURD and offered only the faintest condemnation of rebel activities. The LURD claims that it is West Africa's Northern Alliance, believing that its role is to build up a strong coalition of forces in the region to oust President Taylor.²⁹

Both approaches have met with limited success, in part because they are directly at odds with one another. UN sanctions, including travel restrictions, have been felt acutely by a government that has

²⁷ ICG interview with President Taylor, Monrovia, 11 July 2002. Hassan Bility and others arrested with him are currently waiting to face a military court on grounds that they have been operating a terrorist group in Liberia. Six Mandingoes were arrested, including Bility.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ ICG interview with LURD representative, June 2002.

been reluctant to make what it sees as concessions to a hostile outside world by acceding to UN Security Council demands. But sanctions alone will not create a new or more democratic government in Monrovia. As one frustrated senior UN official noted to ICG, member states of the UN Security Council “need to get their act together; currently they are going separate ways”.³⁰

Part of the problem with the current international approach stems from the general disarray in U.S. policy toward Liberia. Given its special historical relationship with the country, many both within Liberia and the broader international community look to the U.S. for leadership. Unfortunately, Liberia has slipped very low down on the U.S. foreign policy radar screen, and many Liberians interpret general neglect as overt hostility. Divisions between the U.S. embassy in Monrovia, the State Department and the National Security Council – particularly with regard to the extent to which President Taylor should be engaged – have effectively paralysed U.S. policy.

Hopefully, with the appointment of a new U.S. Ambassador to Liberia, the U.S. will clarify its approach. At confirmation hearings on 9 July 2002, Ambassador John Blaney indicated that, “our most immediate objective has been, and remains, to curb Liberia's role as a source of regional instability”, and that the U.S. government would continue to monitor closely the impact of sanctions. Blaney added, “We should also focus on longer-lasting assistance to foster community development, democracy and good governance. Appreciable efforts will still be required to meet the basic needs of Liberia's population, whether returning refugees, internally displaced, or those who are victims in other ways”.

The government of Liberia clearly prefers the engagement option, and President Taylor indicated to ICG, “The EU approach is the proper one”. When asked what he would appreciate from Washington, President Taylor was succinct: “Talk. We have not been contacted or engaged by senior U.S. government officials. They cannot talk at us”. Some U.S. officials privately criticise their government's role, stating that the U.S. ought to have “been a player” like the E.U. in driving home key policy initiatives rather than wishing Taylor away.³¹

The Special Court that will be convened in Sierra Leone, as well as the potential for maritime or timber sanctions, offer the international community considerable leverage to pressure Taylor if it wishes to pursue a path of further isolating his government. The UN sanctions are up for three and six-month review in August 2002. On 23 July 2002 Secretary General Kofi Annan announced that a panel of experts would conduct a mission to review the sanctions. The panel is expected to serve for three months up to October 2002, and considerable attention will need to be given to these issues then. However, as noted in the following section, simply isolating President Taylor within an increasingly failed state also has considerable drawbacks.

V. MAKING THE BEST OF BAD CHOICES

All the barometers tracking the potential for broader war in Liberia seem to be sliding into more dangerous ranges. Indeed, the broad consensus of opinion, even among those government officials willing to talk frankly, that the overall situation is steadily deteriorating is striking. Some go as far as to deem the situation “hopeless”.³² A retrograde civil war, a crumbling economy, an increasingly threatened leadership, the re-emergence of militia groups associated with past abuses and an uneven international approach to the conflict all seem to spell trouble – not only for Liberia, but also for the West Africa region as a whole.

Equally striking is the relative paucity of attractive policy options. When most Liberians and international officials are asked what can be done to improve the situation, an awkward silence often ensues. A purely military solution is unattractive to most Liberians, who feel that any struggle between the LURD and the Taylor government in the streets of Monrovia would have devastating consequences for the civilian population, an assessment with which it is difficult to disagree. Both Taylor and the LURD seem to have the capacity to wage a protracted conflict and are willing to do so. Taylor is “the master of brinkmanship”, according to one Western official, and it is almost as though he has nothing to lose by returning to the bush to fight a long drawn-out war.³³ It would seem equally evident that while

³⁰ ICG interview, in Freetown, June 2002.

³¹ ICG interview, Monrovia, June 2002.

³² ICG interview, Monrovia, July 2002.

³³ ICG interview, Freetown, June 2002.

sanctions have had a considerable impact, they alone will not serve to oust him from power. Instead, years of sanctions might only push Liberia further into a decayed state where militias able to loot their own salary effectively control large swathes of the country.

Alternately, the notion of simply ignoring Taylor's many previous transgressions and embracing a policy of full engagement – in essence forgiving and forgetting – is unsavoury. Simply plunging ahead with a presidential election in which a Taylor victory is pre-ordained would betray the long-term hopes for Liberia and likely leave the country with six more years of very grim prospects.

Several questions are then key, including how the fighting between the LURD and the government can be resolved without plunging the country deeper into war, how the role of President Taylor can best be handled, and how space for a genuine democratic contest can be created. The solutions would seem to be intertwined.

There is some speculation in Monrovia that President Taylor would consider an exit from the political scene but there are three immediate impediments. First, many suggest that President Taylor is deeply concerned that he will be prosecuted by the Special Court in Sierra Leone for his role in that country's civil war. The emotional response from some of Taylor's senior advisers, and Taylor himself, when questioned by ICG highlight the sensitivity of this issue in the President's inner circle. Deeply suspicious of both the U.S. and the UK, it would appear that Taylor is quite nervous that they will manipulate the court to remove him from power, and that if he were to travel internationally or step down, he might be snatched and delivered to the court – despite the fact that no enforcement provision was provided when the Special Court was established to deliver those indicted to justice.

Secondly, given the violent end met by some of Liberia's previous leaders, Taylor is understandably concerned that his physical safety can only be guaranteed by maintaining his hold on the presidency and over the security services. Given the allegiance of his followers and history of battlefield success, it would also appear that even if Taylor were somehow to lose the election, his continued presence would pose an ongoing security threat to whatever government followed.

Thirdly, the relationship between Taylor and his own National Patriotic Party is a complicating factor. Growing numbers of party members have expressed concern that – much as the late President Samuel Doe's National Democratic Party essentially ceased to exist after his death – Taylor's political demise would ultimately destroy their party and their political fortunes and potentially expose them to retribution.

All these factors combine to suggest that easing Taylor out may be a more productive approach than military confrontation. Such a scenario could be conducted as follows. First the U.S., the UK and France would pressure both the Taylor government and the LURD to accept a ceasefire. They, with Nigeria, would also send a high level envoy to discuss the situation with Taylor and propose, as one international aid worker suggested, "an offer he cannot refuse". Such an offer would allow Taylor to complete his term of office, as scheduled, in October 2003. In exchange for his agreement to go into exile then and remove himself permanently from Liberian politics and military affairs, Taylor would be granted immunity from prosecution by the Special Court and be given basic assurances of his physical safety. A small number of advisers could be allowed to follow him into exile under similar conditions.

During the prior period in which Taylor was completing his term in office, an expanded UNAMSIL force could be introduced into Liberia. This force would monitor the ceasefire between the LURD and the government, perform basic peacekeeping functions, and help provide security for an eventual presidential election contest. The general structure of the UNAMSIL in Sierra Leone could be replicated, although Senegal would be an ideal candidate to play the lead West African role; Senegal is often preferred as a lead nation in any force because it is perceived to have performed a more neutral peacekeeping role than other West African countries during Liberia's first civil war.

From the time of Taylor's departure until a proper election could be held, Liberia would be governed by an impartial transition government with input from a contact group formed by the U.S., UK, France, Nigeria and Senegal.³⁴ Indeed, such a

³⁴ The idea of a contact group has gradually gained ascendancy. At the recent Liberia reconciliation conference in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, opposition groupings drew up the *Ouagadougou Declaration*, which called for an

Contact Group should be formed as soon as possible to help coordinate a sensible international approach. Key during this period would be comprehensive disarmament of all sides to the conflict. Further, a quick security sector reform program in the interim period, aimed at keeping a tight check on the different elements of Taylor's diverse security forces, would be paramount for building a stable environment ahead of the elections.

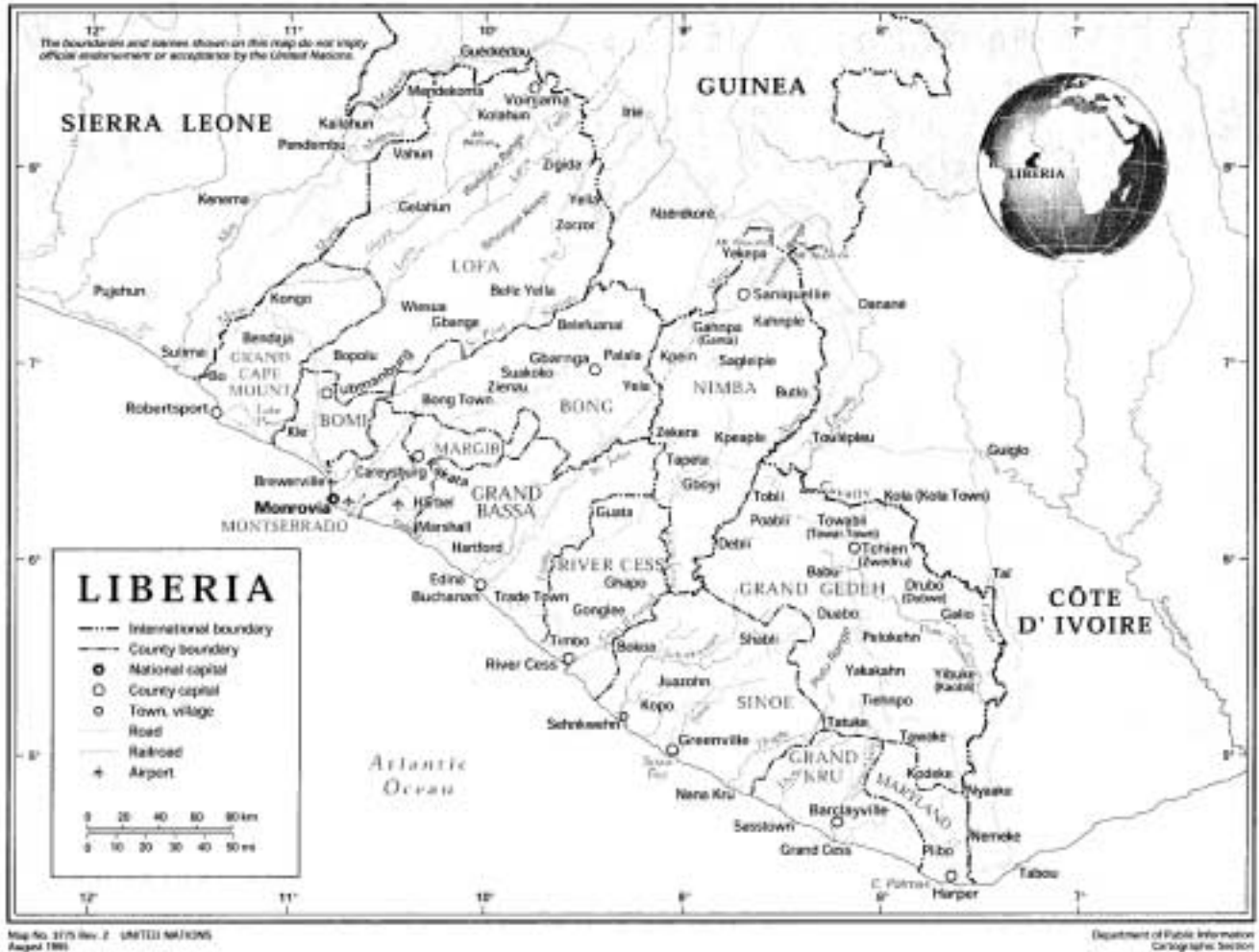
Obviously, this is a policy that would be deeply controversial. It is far from certain that Taylor would accept such an arrangement. He continues to crave acceptance and legitimacy from the outside world, and any such offer would likely run counter to his notion of leadership for Liberia. Many human rights activists would question the wisdom of granting immunity from the Special Court. However, it should be underscored that even if Taylor is indicted, getting him before the court is an altogether different matter. The end result of an indictment in the absence of such a deal could only prove more destabilising, with a wounded and desperate Taylor who sees no way out being willing to fight the LURD and any other comers to the last man in a Liberia that is increasingly impoverished and divided.

There clearly are no easy answers in Liberia. However, there is abundant evidence that without a re-energised international approach, an already difficult situation is poised to erode further.

Freetown/Brussels, 19 August 2002

"international contact group". Following the conference, French Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin stated that France supports "the idea of a contact group which will be able to encourage a true resolution of this crisis", BBC Monitoring, 22 July 2002.

APPENDIX A MAP OF LIBERIA



APPENDIX C

ABOUT THE INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP

The International Crisis Group (ICG) is a private, multinational organisation committed to strengthening the capacity of the international community to anticipate, understand and act to prevent and contain conflict.

ICG's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, ICG produces regular analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international decision-takers.

ICG's reports and briefing papers are distributed widely by email and printed copy to officials in foreign ministries and international organisations and made generally available at the same time via the organisation's Internet site, www.crisisweb.org. ICG works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The ICG Board – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring ICG reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policy-makers around the world. ICG is chaired by former Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari; and its President and Chief Executive since January 2000 has been former Australian Foreign Minister Gareth Evans.

ICG's international headquarters are at Brussels, with advocacy offices in Washington DC, New York and Paris and a media liaison office in London. The organisation currently operates eleven field offices with analysts working in nearly 30 crisis-affected countries and territories and across four continents.

In *Africa*, those locations include Burundi, Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sierra Leone-Liberia-Guinea, Somalia, Sudan and Zimbabwe; in *Asia*, Indonesia, Myanmar, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Pakistan and Afghanistan; in *Europe*, Albania, Bosnia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro

and Serbia; in the *Middle East*, Algeria and the whole region from Egypt to Iran; and in Latin America, Colombia.

ICG raises funds from governments, charitable foundations, companies and individual donors. The following governments currently provide funding: Australia, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, the Republic of China (Taiwan), Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom.

Foundation and private sector donors include The Ansary Foundation, The Atlantic Philanthropies, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Carnegie Corporation of New York, Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, Ford Foundation, John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, John Merck Fund, Open Society Institute, Ploughshares Fund, Ruben and Elisabeth Rausing Trust, Sasakawa Peace Foundation, and William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

August 2002

APPENDIX D

ICG BOARD MEMBERS

Martti Ahtisaari, Chairman

Former President of Finland

Maria Livanos Cattau, Vice-Chairman

Secretary-General, International Chamber of Commerce

Stephen Solarz, Vice-Chairman

Former U.S. Congressman

Gareth Evans, President & CEO

Former Foreign Minister of Australia

S. Daniel Abraham

Chairman, Center for Middle East Peace and Economic Cooperation, U.S.

Morton Abramowitz

Former U.S. Assistant Secretary of State and Ambassador to Turkey

Kenneth Adelman

Former U.S. Ambassador and Director of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency

Richard Allen

Former U.S. National Security Adviser to the President

Saud Nasir Al-Sabah

Former Kuwaiti Ambassador to the UK and U.S.; former Minister of Information and Oil

Hushang Ansary

Former Iranian Minister and Ambassador; Chairman, Parman Capital Group, Houston

Louise Arbour

Supreme Court Justice, Canada; Former Chief Prosecutor, International Criminal Tribunal for former Yugoslavia

Oscar Arias Sanchez

Former President of Costa Rica; Nobel Peace Prize, 1987

Ersin Arioglu

Chairman, Yapi Merkezi Group, Turkey

Emma Bonino

Member of European Parliament; former European Commissioner

Zbigniew Brzezinski

Former U.S. National Security Adviser to the President

Cheryl Carolus

Former South African High Commissioner to the UK; former Secretary General of the ANC

Victor Chu

Chairman, First Eastern Investment Group, Hong Kong

Wesley Clark

Former NATO Supreme Allied Commander, Europe

Uffe Ellemann-Jensen

Former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Denmark

Mark Eyskens

Former Prime Minister of Belgium

Marika Fahlen

Former Swedish Ambassador for Humanitarian Affairs; Director of Social Mobilization and Strategic Information, UNAIDS

Yoichi Funabashi

Journalist and author, Japan

Bronislaw Geremek

Former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Poland

I.K.Gujral

Former Prime Minister of India

HRH El Hassan bin Talal

Chairman, Arab Thought Forum; President, Club of Rome

Carla Hills

Former U.S. Secretary of Housing; former U.S. Trade Representative

Asma Jahangir

UN Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary or Arbitrary Executions; Advocate Supreme Court, former Chair Human Rights Commission of Pakistan

Ellen Johnson Sirleaf

Senior Adviser, Modern Africa Fund Managers; former Liberian Minister of Finance and Director of UNDP Regional Bureau for Africa

Mikhail Khodorkovsky

Chairman and Chief Executive Officer, YUKOS Oil Company, Russia

Elliott F. Kulick

Chairman, Pegasus International, U.S.

Joanne Leedom-Ackerman

Novelist and journalist, U.S.

Todung Mulya Lubis

Human rights lawyer and author, Indonesia

Barbara McDougall

Former Secretary of State for External Affairs, Canada

Mo Mowlam

Former Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, UK

Ayo Obe

President, Civil Liberties Organisation, Nigeria

Christine Ockrent

Journalist and author, France

Friedbert Pflüger

Chairman of the German Bundestag Committee on EU Affairs

Surin Pitsuwan

Former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Thailand

Itamar Rabinovich

President of Tel Aviv University; former Israeli Ambassador to the U.S. and Chief Negotiator with Syria

Fidel V. Ramos

Former President of the Philippines

Mohamed Sahnoun

Special Adviser to the United Nations Secretary-General on Africa

Salim A. Salim

Former Prime Minister of Tanzania; former Secretary General of the Organisation of African Unity

Douglas Schoen

Founding Partner of Penn, Schoen & Berland Associates, U.S.

William Shawcross

Journalist and author, UK

George Soros

Chairman, Open Society Institute

Eduardo Stein

Former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Guatemala

Pär Stenbäck

Former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Finland

Thorvald Stoltenberg

Former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Norway

William O. Taylor

Chairman Emeritus, The Boston Globe, U.S.

Ed van Thijn

Former Netherlands Minister of Interior; former Mayor of Amsterdam

Simone Veil

Former President of the European Parliament; former Minister for Health, France

Shirley Williams

Former Secretary of State for Education and Science; Member House of Lords, UK

Jaushieh Joseph Wu

Deputy Secretary General to the President, Taiwan

Grigory Yavlinsky

Chairman of Yabloko Party and its Duma faction, Russia

Uta Zapf

Chairperson of the German Bundestag Subcommittee on Disarmament, Arms Control and Non-proliferation



International Crisis Group

International Headquarters

149 Avenue Louise, 1050 Brussels, Belgium · Tel: +32 2 502 90 38 · Fax: +32 2 502 50 38
E-mail: icgbrussels@crisisweb.org

New York Office

400 Madison Avenue, Suite 11C, New York 10017 · Tel: +1 212 813 08 20 · Fax: +1 212 813 08 25
E-mail: icgny@crisisweb.org

Washington Office

1522 K Street, Suite 200, Washington DC 20005 · Tel +1 202 408 80 12 · Fax: +1 202 408 82 58
E-mail: icg washington@crisisweb.org

Paris Office

51 Rue Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 75001 Paris, France · Tel: +33 1 44 88 60 20 · Fax: +33 1 44 88 24 26
E-mail: icgparis@crisisweb.org

All ICG reports are available on our website: www.crisisweb.org