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U.S. Department of State

Liberia Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 1996

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LIBERIA

The Liberian civil war entered its seventh year with a continuation of death and destruction. In April and May, Monrovia was nearly destroyed by fighting in the capital. Up to 3,000 may have died and more than 2,000 foreign nationals were evacuated. Almost half the population of the capital of 850,000 inhabitants was displaced. The breakdown of law and order continued until West African peacekeepers (ECOMOG) regained control of the city in late May.

The fighting in Monrovia jeopardized the Abuja peace process that was launched in August 1995. A new peace accord--the fifteenth since the war began--was signed in Abuja, Nigeria, on August 17. It called for a cease-fire, disarmament, demobilization, reintegration, and the holding of national elections. The factions signing the new accord included: the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL); two ethnic wings--Krahn and Mandingo--of the United Liberation Movement for Democracy in Liberia (ULIMO); and a coalition of anti-NPFL forces composed of the Liberian Peace Council (LPC), the Lofa Defense Force, and a breakaway-NPFL group called the Central Revolution Council (CRC). The second Abuja Accord contained provisions for sanctions--such as travel restrictions, exclusion from elections, and establishment of a war crimes tribunal--for factions not complying with the peace agreement.

Although the capital returned to relative quiet by late May, when ECOMOG reasserted its authority, the factions continued to wage war in the countryside beyond the scheduled cease-fire date of August 20. A new State Council chair, Ruth Sando Perry, assumed office on September 3, creating the third Liberian National Transitional Government (LNTG III). Given noncompliance with phase one of the peace process (implementation of a cease-fire and disengagement of fighters), phase two (disarmament and

demobilization), which began November 22, faced formidable hurdles.

As an institution, the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL) remained largely inactive. Many AFL Krahn soldiers, however, joined Krahn LPC troops in April and May to fight against the NPFL and ULIMO-Mandingo forces in Monrovia. There was a small corps of nonfactionalized AFL soldiers who remained neutral in the April-May events and stayed, unarmed, in the Barclay Training Center.

The Liberia National Police (LNP) and the National Security Agency (NSA), which report to the Ministry of Justice, together with the Special Security Services, which reports directly to the LNTG, have responsibility for internal security, but they lacked the leadership, resources, and training to function effectively. The LNTG II appointment of a police director and top management team from one of the factions further reduced the effectiveness of the LNP. A special Rapid Response Unit (RRU), formed in 1995 to combat soaring violent crime in Monrovia, was infiltrated and corrupted by the NPFL. A new Minister of Justice appointed in September disbanded the RRU.

However, she was dismissed in December and her successor announced he would reconstitute the RRU. Members of the RRU committed serious human rights abuses.

ECOMOG was the key military force supporting the LNTG III, as it was for all previous interim governments. At the end of 1996, ECOMOG claimed to have approximately 7,200 troops from 6 West African countries; over half were Nigerian. Regional governments, which had promised 2,700 additional troops for ECOMOG after the Abuja II Accord was signed, had not followed through on their commitments by the end of the year. In the absence of an effective central government, ECOMOG assumed many police powers in areas under its control. In contrast to previous years, there were no confirmed reports of ECOMOG committing human rights abuses.

The economy, ravaged by civil war, remained in severe disarray. No reliable information on the GDP is available. Prior to 1990, the economy was based primarily on iron ore, rubber, timber, diamond, and gold exports. Ninety-five percent unemployment, massive displacements of civilians throughout the country, and widespread destruction and looting devastated productive capacity, despite the country's rich natural resources and potential self-sufficiency in food. Meanwhile, the parallel black market economy thrived as the faction leaders and businessmen exploited and looted the wealth of the country. Using forced labor and stolen goods and fuel, they logged old growth timber, used environmentally unsound mining methods, and illegally tapped rubber trees in the areas under their control. The millions of dollars of profits from these enterprises were used to purchase more munitions, reinforcing the cycle of violence.

Factionally affiliated Government forces, factional forces, and agents were responsible for numerous human rights abuses. Some individual AFL members committed killings. RRU forces were responsible for killings, disappearances, and brutality. Factional members of the RRU actively participated in plundering and burning the capital in April and May, while threatening and, in some cases, murdering civilians. Ministry of Internal Affairs agents also used brutality against suspects. Conditions in government jails were life-threatening. Police arbitrarily arrested and detained persons, and at times infringed on citizens' privacy rights.

Because of the war, citizens have not been able to elect a representative government. The judicial system, already hampered by inefficiency and corruption, collapsed for 6 months following the outbreak of fighting in April. There were attempts by authorities to limit freedom of the press and freedom of association; journalists practiced self-censorship. Violence and discrimination against women are longstanding problems and have been widespread during the war. The war resulted in extensive abuse of

children. The practice of female genital mutilation (FGM) persisted. Discrimination against minorities remains a problem. No progress was made in resolving outstanding incidents of past human rights abuses.

There were credible reports that some members of ECOMOG facilitated the delivery of--if they did not actually deliver--weapons and ammunition to the factions. Eyewitnesses also reported that some ECOMOG soldiers participated in the looting and destruction of Monrovia in April and May; this appeared to be limited to the Guinean contingent.

Although the 1985 Constitution, the Penal Code, and the Labor Code remain in effect, because of the civil war the rights provided for in these documents were largely not protected in practice.

The war has taken a horrendous toll on civilians. Of an estimated prewar population of 2.8 million, 200,000 died as a result of the civil conflict, 750,000 fled the country, and over 1.2 million are internally displaced. Approximately 1.5 million Liberians require humanitarian assistance to survive. The media, eyewitnesses, human rights groups, and international observers all reported flagrant disregard for human rights by the factional fighters. The factions committed summary executions, torture, individual and gang rapes, mutilations, and cannibalism. They burned people alive; looted and burned cities and villages; used excessive force; engaged in arbitrary detentions and impressment, particularly of children under the age of 18; severely restricted freedom of assembly, association, and movement; and employed forced labor.

Following the looting and destruction in Monrovia in April and May, which included facilities of the United Nations and humanitarian relief organizations, and left them without offices, vehicles, and resources; the few remaining NGO's had difficulty providing subsistence-level humanitarian relief, even within the Monrovia safehaven. The NGO's gradually rebuilt their staffs, even though fighters from various factions continued to hold up relief convoys, take relief workers hostage, and use civilians to attract humanitarian aid (see Section I.g.).

RESPECT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

Section 1 Respect for the Integrity of the Person, Including Freedom from:

a. Political and Other Extrajudicial Killing

Political violence has been endemic to Liberia since the war began in 1989. Factional members of the RRU and AFL committed illegal killings. There were credible reports of extrajudicial killings by all factions during the April and May fighting in Monrovia and elsewhere throughout the year. NPFL-dominated RRU forces targeted and killed political opponents of NPFL head Charles Taylor in Monrovia. One outspoken NPFL critic was kidnaped in April by NPFL fighters and forced to view the headless bodies of people critical of Charles Taylor as a warning. On October 31, there was an assassination attempt by unidentified individuals against Charles Taylor at the executive mansion in Monrovia. Fighters--whether AFL, LPC or one of the ULIMO sub-factions--also targeted their enemies, fighters and civilians alike, removed their victims' body parts and ate them in front of civilians.

Although they publicly professed adherence to the rule of law, the leaders of the major warring factions condoned and in some instances seemingly appeared to encourage the murder and maiming of both civilians and combatants (see Section I.g.). It was often impossible to determine whether these crimes were politically motivated or driven by tribal hatred (see Section 5). Among the many human rights atrocities in April, the Mandingo AFL Chief of Staff Mohammed Doumouyah was ritualistically

tortured, mutilated, murdered, dismembered, and cannibalized by Krahn fighters in front of hostages at the AFL Barclay Training Center in Monrovia. There have been no arrests.

The majority of civilian deaths took place during factional raids on villages (see Section I.g) in the countryside. ULIMO fighters executed civilians, and looted and burned their villages in Grand Cape Mount and Bomi counties. Even after the cease-fire of the Abuja II Accord went into effect in August, killings continued. Local human rights monitors reported that: On September 16, in Dia town 14 civilians were killed and the village--hometown of State Council chairwoman Ruth Perry--burned to the ground; on September 21, in Kango town, 16 civilians were murdered; on September 23, in Gunn town, 17 civilians were murdered; on September 28, in Sinje, another massacre took place (see Section I.g) with more than 20 civilian victims; on December 7, in Zwanna Town (Royesville), 8 civilians were murdered; and on December 14 in Armadu Town, Bomi Highway, 4 people were killed. Fighting between the NPFL and LPC in the southeastern counties continued throughout the year, again resulting in many civilian deaths as villages repeatedly changed hands.

No progress was made in investigating the many killings from previous years, including the December 1994 massacre at DuPont Road. ECOMOG transferred the alleged perpetrators of the murder and cannibalization of a university student in August 1995 to civil authorities. The case has not yet been heard in court.

b. Disappearance

There were no confirmed reports of disappearance perpetrated by the AFL, LNTG II or III regular police units or security forces, or by ECOMOG. However, there were credible reports of nighttime abductions and detention in secret jails by the NPFL-dominated RRU and other factions in Monrovia in April and May. The major factions were also responsible for many unexplained disappearances outside Monrovia (see Sections I.g., 5, and 6.d.). Two Liberian nongovernmental organization workers in Zwedru disappeared on April 1 and are presumed dead. There are credible reports that NPFL fighters abducted civilians, including children, to use as combatants and for forced labor in illegal rubber tree tapping and timber operations. Both ULIMO factions used forced civilian labor to harvest alluvial gold and mine for diamonds.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) runs a program allowing family members separated by the conflict to exchange Red Cross messages, mainly between people remaining in the country and relatives living abroad. Save the Children/UK reunited 140 children with their families during the year.

c. Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

The Constitution prohibits torture and other degrading treatment. There were no reports of torture by the LNTG II, or LNTG III police or security forces (with the exception of the RRU), or by ECOMOG. RRU forces were seen brutalizing civilians, burning houses, and looting during the April and May fighting in Monrovia. Men dressed in RRU trademark black clothes were involved in armed robberies and murders in the capital from June until September when they were disbanded.

Although the Supreme Court ruled that "trial by ordeal" or "sassywood"--commonly, the placement of a burning metal object on a suspect's body to induce confession in a criminal investigation--is unconstitutional, the Ministry of Internal Affairs continued to have licensed agents who subjected suspects to this practice. A lawsuit brought in 1994 for injuries resulting from sassywood is still pending before the Supreme Court.

All major factions engaged in torture and other cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment. Many victims exhumed in Monrovia after the April and May fighting had been "tarbeyed" before being killed--their arms tied tightly behind their backs at the elbow and wrist--an excruciating torture. Throughout the year, reports were received of rape, pillage, and the burning of villages in the western counties as the two ULIMO sub-factions fought for control. ULIMO-Mandingo fighters herded hundreds of displaced civilians into their Bomi county headquarters, Suehn, and held them hostage to attract relief food. When United Nations humanitarian workers were finally able to enter ULIMO-Krahn-controlled Tubmanburg in September, they found 20,000 starving civilians. Health care workers estimated the malnutrition rate at 83 percent; many people had died. Some civilians in Grand Cape Mount, when reached by the humanitarian community after 7 months, asked not to be given food because they feared that the fighters would kill them to get it (see Section I.g.). LPC and NPFL fighters were accused of beating, torturing, and killing civilians, especially persons suspected of being sympathizers of the other faction, and burned their villages in the southeastern counties. Humanitarian relief workers were frequently detained and harassed by fighters, their personal property and vehicles confiscated, and food, intended for hungry civilians, stolen. Members of all factions practiced cannibalism (see Section I.g.). The warring factions regularly committed violence against women, including individual and gang rapes.

Neither the LNTG II nor the LNTG III adequately addressed the life threatening conditions in government jails. There were incidents of starvation as the interim governments did not provide prisoners with adequate food or medical care. They did not pay guards for months. Cells were small, crowded, and filthy. Women, representing 5 percent of the central prison population, were held in separate cells, but there were no separate facilities for juvenile offenders. Ninety percent of the prisoners in the Monrovia central prison had been jailed for over 1 year without charge when the central prison was abandoned and the prisoners escaped during the fighting in early April. The central prison did not reopen until October 24 and very few of the escaped prisoners were recaptured.

The LNTG II and LNTG III granted human rights groups access to prisoners in Monrovia, and these groups frequently obtained needed medical treatment for prisoners. In a number of cases, the work of human rights groups and interested individuals resulted in the release of prisoners.

Reliable reports indicate that all warring factions operated secret jails both to enforce discipline in their own ranks and to intimidate or punish their enemies. The conditions in these clandestine jails were even worse than in government jails. Factions held prisoners in makeshift, substandard facilities and subjected them to various forms of inhuman treatment, both physical and psychological.

d. Arbitrary Arrest, Detention, or Exile

The Constitution prohibits arbitrary arrest and provides for the rights of the accused, including warrants for arrests, and the right of detainees to be either charged or released within 48 hours. In practice some Liberian National Police officers in Monrovia and Buchanan often disregarded these rights and made arbitrary arrests. Many officers, whose average monthly salary was already less than \$5.00, were not paid during the year and accepted bribes to arrest persons based on unsubstantiated allegations. As the police have no logistics or forensic investigative capabilities, they were unable to investigate crimes such as the August murder of Seh Vincent, a civilian representative in the Legislative Assembly.

In January the editors of a Monrovia newspaper were arbitrarily arrested and detained by the NPFL-appointed police director because of an article they published concerning the director (see Section 2.a.). On February 27, the NPFL-appointed Minister of Justice, acting without a warrant, arrested a journalist for an article he had written; the journalist was beaten but later released. On April 2, the NPFL detained a well-known religious leader and human rights activist on the fabricated charge of hindering law enforcement activities when he tried to mediate a dispute between faction leaders.

ECOMOG soldiers played the major role in policing the greater Monrovia and Buchanan areas. Many citizens continued to turn to ECOMOG rather than the unarmed, unpaid, and underequipped police force to arrest and detain alleged criminals. ECOMOG regularly turned detainees over to civilian authorities, as in the case of three men arrested for the October 17 murder, mutilation, and burning of two market women in Monrovia. There were no reports that ECOMOG officials coerced confessions from suspects.

Fighters outside of the ECOMOG safehavens of Monrovia and Buchanan did not honor due process safeguards and they arbitrarily detained numerous persons. Having almost unlimited power in practice to make warrantless arrests, they exercised that power often and capriciously, detaining persons, including international relief workers and missionaries, on spurious grounds or without charge for periods ranging from several hours to several weeks.

Approximately 750,000 citizens (over one-fourth of the prewar population), including former political leaders and human rights activists, fled the country because of the war.

The Government does not employ forced exile.

In April and May, over 2,000 foreign nationals, including United Nations agency and international humanitarian aid workers were evacuated when fighting broke out in Monrovia. In May approximately 5,000 civilians fled NPFL-LPC fighting in the southeast to seek refuge in Cote d'Ivoire. Approximately 2,000 civilians fled to Tabou, Cote d'Ivoire, when fighting began in September between the NPFL and LPC in Grand Gedeh county. Approximately 4,000 to 6,000 displaced Sierra Leoneans and 2,000 Liberians fled into Sierra Leone to avoid the fighting in the western counties in September. Many were forced back into Bo-Waterside in October and November due to fighting in Sierra Leone.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

While the Constitution provides for an independent judiciary, the judiciary has always been subject to political, social, familial, and financial pressures. Corruption and lack of professionalism remained a recurrent problem. Because of the war, the judiciary did not function in most areas of the country.

Under the Constitution, defendants have due process rights conforming to internationally accepted norms of fair trial. Most of these rights, however, were ignored in practice. The NPFL-appointed Abuja II Minister of Justice rejected a court order releasing an NPFL defector, reasoning that the courts had no jurisdiction because this was an internal NPFL affair since the arrestee was an NPFL member.

The court structure is divided into four levels with the Supreme Court, whose members were appointed by the LNTG II, at its apex. All levels of the court system, including the Supreme Court in Monrovia, functioned erratically until fighting began in April. Subsequently the courts remained closed until September.

Customary law was also used both in Monrovia and the countryside. As in previous years, the Ministry of Internal Affairs subjected persons accused of occult practices and other crimes to "trial by ordeal," submitting defendants to physical pain to adjudicate guilt or innocence (see Section I.c.).

In the areas controlled by the major factions, there was little pretense of due process; swift, arbitrary punishment was meted out by the faction leaders.

The Government does not hold political prisoners.

f. Arbitrary Interference with Privacy, Family, Home, or Correspondence

While the Constitution provides for these rights, in wartime Liberia LNTG II and LNTG III authorities sometimes ignored them. The Constitution provides that police must obtain a warrant, or have a reasonable belief that a crime is in progress, or is about to be committed before entering a private dwelling. In practice some police forced entry without a warrant to carry out arrests and investigations.

The warring factions committed the most egregious abuses. Combatants looted the entire country with impunity. Widespread destruction in Monrovia in April and May included private homes, schools, hospitals and clinics, shops, churches, government buildings, and the offices of United Nations agencies and NGO's. Many buildings were burned. United Nations agencies and international NGO's were targeted by the factions and were looted of \$30 million in equipment and vehicles in April.

g. Use of Excessive Force and Violations of Humanitarian Law in Internal Conflicts

The major warring factions inflicted considerably more harm on noncombatants than on each other. They deliberately targeted, tortured, and murdered civilians, and regularly murdered women, children, and the elderly, indiscriminately ransacking villages and confiscating scant food supplies.

The massacre of more than 20 people, mostly women and children, at Sinje, Grand Cape Mount county, on September 28 illustrates the factions' disregard for humanitarian law. An exhumation of the bodies revealed that a baby girl's skull had been crushed. She was buried still strapped to her mother's back; her mother had been shot. Many more civilians were wounded, including an 8-month-old girl who had her foot cut off. Investigation has yet to determine which sub-faction of ULIMO--Krahn or Mandingo--was responsible. There were probably dozens of additional massacres in remote areas of conflict involving hundreds of victims which did not come to immediate public attention due to extensive political and social disruption throughout the year.

In June volunteer relief workers including the ICRC unearthed more than 520 corpses from shallow graves where they were temporarily buried during the factional fighting in the capital. Most of the victims died from bullet wounds, starvation, or disease.

There were credible reports that NPFL, ULIMO-Krahn, ULIMO-Mandingo, and LPC fighters committed acts of cannibalism (see Section I.a.). In some instances, the fighters ate specific organs in the belief that it would make them stronger or invincible.

Relief organizations estimated that 1.2 million persons have been displaced since the war began. During this period, the factions have become experts at diverting humanitarian assistance. Most civilians are dependent on humanitarian aid for survival, but are often denied freedom to seek such assistance, as faction leaders and their followers forcibly detained them. These abducted civilians served as human shields for the fighters and were also used as forced labor (see Sections I.b. and 6.c.). The factions often refused access by international and humanitarian relief agencies to distribute food until a medical and nutritional emergency existed, as was the case in Grand Cape Mount and Bomi counties when thousands of civilians were held hostage for over 7 months (see Section I.c.). When assistance finally arrived for civilians, the armed groups frequently stole it. Fighters extorted humanitarian convoys at checkpoints, often insisting on providing "protection" for convoys, raiding upcountry warehouses, and taxing civilians in supplies after the delivery of food and medicines. Some civilians began asking that no food be delivered, as they did not want to be further brutalized by the factions. In October NPFL fighters looted 270 metric tons of food, then falsely accused two NGO workers of the theft. An NPFL spokesperson later declared that the food was intended for the civilians and, therefore, no crime was

committed. The NPFL fighters were not disciplined. None of the warring factions returned the equipment or vehicles stolen during the fighting in April and May to the U.N. or to the relief organizations from which they had been stolen.

Section 2 Respect for Civil Liberties, Including:

a. Freedom of Speech and Press

These freedoms are provided for in the Constitution and, with some significant limitations, were generally exercised in Monrovia. The former NPFL-appointed LNTG II Minister of Justice and the NPFL-appointed police director attempted to intimidate and restrict the press (see Section I.d.). Citizens, including journalists, usually showed restraint and self-censorship in favor of the interim governments. Due to continued economic stagnation, all newspapers struggled to get their editions published. Following the April hostilities, the press was virtually moribund.

The restrictive Media Law, instituted during the Doe regime, remains in force and provides the Ministry of Information wide discretion in licensing and regulating journalists. A 1993 decree, which also remains in effect, set up guidelines for reporting on war-related issues.

Despite threats and harassment from the factions, the independent press continued to function until April/May. The independent press was among the first targets when fighting broke out in Monrovia. Only 1 of 13 independent newspapers escaped destruction, as it had changed its offices 2 weeks prior to the outbreak of fighting, but had not moved its trade sign. The independent press lost almost all of its equipment and supplies as did the two printing houses in Monrovia. No newspapers were printed for almost 4 months. Although by December six independent newspapers were publishing sporadically in Monrovia, they were financially weak. The other independent newspapers were still trying to reopen, but one, the Daily Observer, discouraged by the destruction and intimidation, remained closed until January 1997.

In addition to the independents, there was one pro-NPFL newspaper, The Patriot, and one pro-ULIMO-Mandingo newspaper, The National.

Although there once were three regional television stations in addition to one in Monrovia, television broadcasts ceased when the war started and have not resumed. Prior to the April and May destruction in Monrovia, there were six radio stations. With the exception of the NPFL-owned station, the others were looted or destroyed. In December only the government radio station, ELBC, the NPFL station, KISS-FM, and the independent Radio Monrovia were broadcasting regularly. In November the NPFL initiated a new short wave radio station from Totota.

Academic freedom was generally respected at the University of Liberia, however, it has been closed since April.

b. Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association

The Constitution provides for the rights of peaceful assembly and association. The LNTG II and LNTG III generally permitted political parties and other groups to organize freely and hold public meetings in Monrovia. In February, however, both government officials and faction leaders vigorously opposed a civil society (including NGO's)-sponsored "stay at home day," the purpose of which was to express the popular demand for warring factions to disarm. In March the Women's Development Association of Liberia planned a public event on International Women's Day. The NPFL-appointed Minister of Justice

publicly criticized the rally and denied the organizers permission to march in the capital. The organizers were granted permission by ECOMOG and the march was held as scheduled. For security purposes, however, ECOMOG continues to generally discourage large-scale parades or demonstrations.

The factions severely restricted freedom of assembly and association in areas they controlled.

c. Freedom of Religion

The Constitution recognizes freedom of religion as a fundamental right, and Liberia has no established state religion. Although Islam is gaining adherents, as much as 40 percent of the population profess to be Christian. A significant portion of the population follows traditional animism or blends traditional religions with Christianity or Islam. Although the law prohibits religious discrimination, Islamic leaders complained that Muslims were discriminated against (see Section 5). There was no evidence of systematic violation of religious freedom by the warring factions.

d. Freedom of Movement Within the Country, Foreign Travel, Emigration, and Repatriation

The Constitution provides for freedom of movement throughout the country as well as the right to leave or enter. To protect the 1 million people in Monrovia and Buchanan from rampant lawlessness and banditry, ECOMOG established a protective cordon around those cities and numerous checkpoints within the capital. In April and May, however, ECOMOG failed to protect Monrovia from factional fighting. It was not until May 27 that the Monrovia and Buchanan safehavens were reestablished. When ECOMOG could not guarantee safe passage upcountry, it restricted the movement of civilians and humanitarian aid workers at various times throughout the year.

Throughout the year, factional fighters prevented freedom of movement, restricting a range of activities from resettlement of displaced people to ordinary commerce and travel, throughout the areas they controlled. The warring factions also impeded the movement of relief workers and supplies, and extorted, humiliated, and harassed civilians throughout the country at checkpoints and makeshift barricades. Even after the seating of the LNTG III Council of State in September, there were reports that beatings of international humanitarian workers and thefts of foodstuffs and humanitarian vehicles by the warring factions continued. In November, on the eve of disarmament, aid workers reported that fighters in Tubmanburg threatened to hold them hostage if the aid workers did not distribute food as they desired (see Section I.g.).

Since 1990 over 1.2 million citizens (of an estimated prewar population of 2.8 million) have been internally displaced. There are more than 750,000 Liberian refugees in neighboring West African countries. Some of the internally displaced returned to Monrovia in January-March, but fled again when fighting resumed in April. Most subsequently returned, and there was no influx of displaced persons returning to Monrovia following the Ajuba II accord.

The Government provides first asylum. Although in 1995 there were approximately 120,000 Sierra Leonean refugees in Liberia, because of the fighting in western Liberia where most of the Sierra Leonean refugees lived, it is not known how many still remain.

The LNTG III cooperated with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and other humanitarian organizations in attempting to assist refugees. However, inaccessibility to refugees due to fighting and security concerns severely limited the amount of relief assistance that could be provided. There were no reports of forced return of persons to a country where they feared persecution.

Section 3 Respect for Political Rights: The Right of Citizens to Change Their Government

Despite constitutional and statutory guarantees of free and fair elections, due to the civil war citizens could not exercise the right to change their government. A new interim government, the LNTG III, was installed on September 3, as a result of the signing of the Abuja II Accord on August 17. The Abuja II Accord calls for national elections in May 1997.

There are no restrictions on the participation of women in politics, however, they are underrepresented. Overall numbers of women in the LNTG II and LNTG III and the various political parties are small. With the advent of the LNTG III, a woman chaired the Council of State, but there were no women as government ministers. A woman was appointed as chairman of the Elections Commission.

One vice councilman on the Council of State is a Muslim.

Section 4. Governmental Attitude Regarding International and

Nongovernmental Investigation of Alleged Violations

of Human Rights

The interim governments have generally permitted domestic and international groups to operate, but factional members of the Council of State have harassed, threatened, and beaten local human rights and humanitarian workers when they did not like their reports assessing responsibility for human rights violations.

The few domestic human rights organizations were underfunded, understaffed, and their personnel lacked adequate training. These groups were specifically targeted during the April and May fighting in Monrovia by factional fighters. Several influential human rights activists, who were the targets of RRU killers, left the country. Some have not returned. In December there were eight small human rights groups in the country; all struggled to rebuild looted offices and secure the funding needed to continue their work. The support structure for the consortium of human rights NGO's in Monrovia was destroyed during the April fighting and has not been reconstituted.

Prior to the fighting in Monrovia in April, some of the domestic human rights groups, as well as lawyers performing legal aid work, visited prisoners in government jails. None reported governmental interference with their activities. There were no domestic human rights organizations outside the cities of Monrovia and Buchanan due to insecurity associated with the warring factions' hostility to such organizations, but a few Monrovia-based human rights workers and members of the press sometimes were able, often at great risk to themselves, to visit the countryside to investigate reports of massacres and other human rights abuses.

Although the United Nations Observer Mission in Liberia (UNOMIL) has responsibility for monitoring human rights, for most of the year no one carried out this function. No UNOMIL reports on human rights were made public. The trained human rights observer assigned to UNOMIL in October 1995 resigned in November 1995, claiming lack of support for his work by the Special Representative of the Secretary General. He was replaced by another trained human rights observer in December 1996.

Section 5 Discrimination Based on Race, Sex, Religion, Disability, Language, or Social Status

The Constitution prohibits discrimination based on ethnic background, race, sex, creed, place of origin,

or political opinion, but discrimination exists. There are no laws against gender-based discrimination, ethnic discrimination, or female genital mutilation (FGM).

Women

In the massive violence inflicted on civilians during the conflict, women suffered the most (see Sections I.c. and I.g.). Rape was commonplace. Even prior to the war, domestic violence against women was extensive but never seriously addressed as an issue by the Government, the courts, the media, or women's groups. Since the war began, several women's organizations were established in Monrovia and Gbarnga to advance family welfare issues, to help promote political reconciliation, and to assist in rehabilitating former combatants as well as civilian victims of war. Several NGO's in Monrovia and Buchanan have developed programs for treating abused women and girls and increasing awareness of their human rights. Facilities and equipment were destroyed in the April fighting. At year's end, the NGO's were attempting to restart many of their programs.

The status of women varies by region, ethnic group, and religion. Before the outbreak of the civil war, women held one-fourth of the professional and technical occupations available in Monrovia. Some women currently hold skilled jobs in government, including in the judiciary. On the whole, however, the situation of women deteriorated dramatically with the onset of war, the closing of most schools, and the loss of their traditional role in production, allocation, and sale of food. In urban areas, women can inherit land and property. In rural areas, where traditional customs are stronger, a woman is normally considered the property of her husband and his clan and usually is not entitled to inherit from her husband.

Children

Denied a normal childhood, Liberian youth have been seriously victimized by the civil war. The factions have abused children and have given no attention to their welfare; education and nurturing have been completely disrupted. Many who were disabled, orphaned, abandoned, or "lost" during a military attack on their homes or villages, accepted the protection and sustenance that joining a faction brought. The NPFL, LPC, and the two wings of ULIMO recruited and trained children as cooks, spies, errand runners, guards, patrols, and in many instances, combatants. Factions provided addictive drugs to children, thereby ensuring their compliance and continued participation in warfare. Many have been killed or wounded, have witnessed terrible atrocities, or themselves committed atrocities, becoming both victims and abusers in the conflict. There are no precise figures on the number of child soldiers, but some sources believe that 10 percent of the estimated 60,000 combatants are under 15 years of age; about 50 percent may be under 19. Many suffer from posttraumatic stress syndrome and have become addicted to drugs. Some NGO's and UNICEF initiated small retraining and rehabilitation programs for a limited number of former child fighters (see Section 6.d.), but these programs and facilities were destroyed during the April and May destruction of Monrovia.

Female genital mutilation (FGM) is widely condemned by international health experts as damaging to both physical and psychological health. FGM traditionally has been performed on young girls by northern, western, and central tribes, particularly in rural areas among traditional societies. Prior to the onset of civil war in 1989, approximately 50 percent of women in rural areas among northern, western, and central tribes between the ages of 8 and 18 underwent FGM. The war, however, has totally disrupted village life. Today probably less than 10 percent of females undergo FGM. In some instances, female health professionals in the tribes participated in the practice to the extent of providing hygienic conditions and postoperative care. The most extreme form of FGM, infibulation, is not practiced.

People with Disabilities

The 7-year civil war has produced a large number of persons with permanent injuries in addition to persons disabled from other causes. There is no legal discrimination against the disabled, but in practice they do not enjoy equal access. There are no laws mandating accessibility to public buildings or services.

Religious Minorities

The law prohibits religious discrimination. Some Muslims, however, who represent a growing share of the population, believe that Liberia's secular culture gives preference to Christianity in civic ceremonies and observances, and that discrimination spills over into areas of individual opportunity and employment. Although there are some Muslims in senior government positions, many Muslims believe that they are bypassed for highly sought-after government jobs.

National/Racial/Ethnic Minorities

Although the Constitution bans ethnic discrimination, it also provides that only "persons who are negroes or of negro descent" may be citizens or own land, thus denying full rights to many persons who were born or lived most of their lives in Liberia. There has been no governmental initiative to repeal this racial test, but there are reports that non-Liberians have acquired Liberian passports. The 1975 economic "Liberianization" law prohibits foreign ownership of certain businesses, such as travel agencies, retail gasoline stations, and beer and soft-drink distributors.

The roots of the current civil conflict can be found to a large extent in the historical division between the Americo-Liberian minority who comprised 5 percent of the population and the 16 indigenous ethnic groups. Ethnic tensions were exacerbated during the Doe regime (1980-89) because of domination by his ethnic group, the Krahn. Throughout the civil war, the factions used an individual's language to identify ethnicity and often summarily executed those from groups considered hostile.

Section 6 Worker Rights

a. The Right of Association

The Constitution states that workers, except military and police, have the right to associate in trade unions. The Constitution also states that unions are prohibited from partisan political activity. Government interference in union activities, especially elections and leadership conflicts, was commonplace both before and during the war.

Even though legal economic activity came almost to a complete halt during the on-going 7-year civil war, there were 32 functioning unions with the common objective of protecting the rights of their 60,000 members, who were largely unemployed. There is a proposal before the unions to merge into one body called the All Liberia Trade Union Unity Council which, if instituted, would encompass the Liberian Federation of Labor Unions. Despite this union activity, the actual power the unions exercised was extremely limited. The most vocal organization was the Liberian Seaman, Port and General Workers Union, which urged the government to pressure Liberian flag vessels to employ more Liberian workers.

The Constitution is silent on the right to strike, but labor laws protect this right. During the year, neither LNTG II nor LNTG III took discriminatory actions against organized labor. There were no noteworthy strikes during the year. Government officials were attempting to solve the problem of salary arrearages

for all civil servants at year's end.

Liberia's status as a beneficiary of trade preferences under the United States' generalized system of preferences (GSP) program was suspended in 1990 as a result of the Doe government's failure to take steps to provide internationally recognized worker rights.

Labor unions have traditionally affiliated with international labor groups, such as the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions.

b. The Right to Organize and Bargain Collectively

With the important exception of civil servants, workers (including employees of public corporations and autonomous agencies) have the right to organize and bargain collectively. In the past, agreements were negotiated freely between workers and their employers without government interference. In 1996 these rights were largely moot because of the lack of economic enterprise, especially in Monrovia, where only a few businesses resumed operations, usually with greatly reduced staffing, after the April and May fighting.

There are no export processing zones. All were destroyed when the war started.

c. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

The Constitution prohibits forced labor, but even before the civil war this prohibition was widely ignored in rural areas where farmers were pressured into providing free labor on "community projects" which often benefited only local leaders. During the year the warring factions continued to use forced labor for all purposes, including the exploitation and theft of national resources. Displaced persons reported that the LPC and the NPFL forced civilians to labor in the illegal timber cutting business throughout the southeast.

d. Minimum Age for Employment of Children

Even before the civil war, enforcement of the law prohibiting employment of children under age 16 during school hours in the wage sector was lax. Small children continued to assist their parents as vendors in local markets and on family subsistence farms. This practice persists, particularly in those areas affected by the war, where there are no schools. All factions recruited young children as soldiers. Many of these children remained under arms (see Section 5). Based on extensive interviews, one NGO reported that only the LPC abducted children and forced them to serve in the war.

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

The Labor Law provides for a minimum wage, paid leave, severance benefits, and safety standards, but with the war, the enforcement mechanisms collapsed. In the war-ravaged economy, citizens were forced to accept any work they could find, regardless of wage. A legal minimum wage of approximately \$0.90 per day for agricultural workers and 3 or 4 times that amount for industrial workers remains in force, but because of the war, it was not enforced.

The Labor Code provides for a 48-hour, 6-day regular workweek with a 30-minute rest period per 5 hours of work. The 6-day workweek may extend to 56 hours for service occupations and to 72 hours for miners, with overtime pay beyond 48 hours. Prior to 1990 there also were government-established and safety standards, enforced in theory by the Ministry of Labor. Because of the war these regulations

were not in fact enforced. Even under the Labor Code, workers did not have a specific right to remove themselves from dangerous work situations.

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