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U.S. Department of State

Liberia Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 1997

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LIBERIA

After more than 7 years of civil war, implementation of the August 1996 Abuja Peace Accord restored peace to Liberia. The human costs of the war were immense--200,000 war-related deaths, 1.2 million persons displaced internally, and approximately 750,000 refugees in neighboring countries.

Under the provisions of the Abuja Accords, presidential and legislative elections were held on July 19 for the first time in 12 years. Thirteen political parties competed, including the parties of the three major former faction leaders--Charles G. Taylor, Alhaji Kromah, and George Boley. Charles Taylor won the presidency with over three-quarters of the votes cast and his party, the National Patriotic Party, won control of both houses of the legislature. The elections were judged free and transparent by international observers. Taylor was inaugurated as President on August 2 and promised to give high priority to national reconciliation, human rights, the rule of law, ensuring a stable environment for economic development, and eliminating corruption. The judiciary is subject to political influence, outside pressure, and corruption.

Approximately 10,500 West African peacekeepers (ECOMOG) were deployed throughout the country, providing the security that facilitated disarmament, demobilization, the holding of national elections, and the return of some refugees. More than 20,000 weapons and over 10 million rounds of ammunition were turned in to ECOMOG between November 1996 and February 1997, the end of the period for voluntary disarmament. Demobilization and reintegration programs for the more than 20,000 former combatants who disarmed (21 percent of whom were former child fighters under age 17) were established but many former combatants were unable to participate. While significant disarmament was

achieved, factional command and control structures were not completely dismantled and remained largely in place. ECOMOG remained the key military force supporting the Liberian National Transition Governments (LNTG) III and IV as well as the new Taylor administration. In December ECOMOG began drawing down its troops in preparation for leaving the country; an agreement for a continued ECOMOG presence was being negotiated. For the past 7 years, ECOMOG assumed many police powers in the absence of a central government capability. The outlook for maintenance of security after ECOMOG's departure remains unclear. Although the ECOMOG peacekeeping force generally maintained internal discipline, there were a number of incidents in which individual ECOMOG soldiers killed and tortured civilians.

As an institution, the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL) remained largely inactive. In October the Government announced that it would begin restructuring the AFL, although the Abuja Accords stated that ECOMOG was to restructure the AFL. The President's decision resulted in a very public dispute between him and the ECOMOG force commander. The new Taylor administration also sought to move 4,000 largely Krahn AFL troops and their families from the central barracks in downtown Monrovia to the outskirts of the capital, creating tension between the AFL troops and the new Government.

Under the LNTG III and IV Governments, the Liberia National Police (LNP) and the National Security Agency (NSA), which report to the Ministry of Justice, together with the Special Security Services (SSS), which report directly to the Head of State, were responsible for internal security, but they lacked the resources and training to function effectively. After Taylor's inauguration in August, his administration made security a top priority, placing many NPFL former combatants in the security apparatus. In September Taylor reappointed as police director his cousin, who was known to have directed and participated in the looting of Monrovia in April and May 1996. In October the President announced that a 1,000-man paramilitary force would be armed and deployed along the border with Sierra Leone to prevent a spillover of hostilities from that country. By year's end, the administration had placed several hundred unarmed NSA and SSS officials at major border crossing points with Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea, and Sierra Leone. Members of the security forces committed human rights abuses.

The economy, ravaged by civil war, remained in severe disarray. The Taylor administration inherited an external debt estimated at over \$2 billion and over \$230 million in domestic debt. No reliable information on the gross domestic product was available. Prior to 1990, the cash economy was based primarily on iron ore, rubber, timber, diamond, and gold exports. Eighty-five percent unemployment, a 15 percent literacy rate, the continued internal displacement of civilians, and the absence of infrastructure throughout the country continued to depress productive capacity, despite the country's rich natural resources and potential self-sufficiency in food. Government officials, businessmen, and former combatants continued to exploit the wealth of the country, logging old growth timbe