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## 1999 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices

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### LIBERIA

Liberia is a centralized republic, dominated by a strong presidency. Although the Constitution provides for three branches of government, there is no effective system of checks and balances, and presidents traditionally have wielded extraordinary power. Americo-Liberians, descendants of freed African-American slaves from the United States and the Caribbean who make up about 5 percent of the population, dominated the country's government through the True Whig party until 1980. In 1980 Sergeant Samuel K. Doe, a member of the indigenous Krahn ethnic group, seized power in a military coup. Doe was killed by rebels in 1990 early in the 7-year-long, ethnically divisive civil war, which was ended by the Abuja Peace Accords in 1996. Forces led by Charles G. Taylor, who is of both indigenous and Americo-Liberian ancestry, emerged dominant. In July 1997, Taylor won the presidential election, and his National Patriotic Party (NPP) won three-quarters of the seats in the Legislature. The elections were administratively free and transparent, but were conducted in an atmosphere of intimidation, as most voters believed that Taylor's forces would have resumed fighting if he had lost. Most other leaders of the former warring factions subsequently left the country. The bicameral Legislature exercised little independence from the executive branch. The judiciary is subject to political influence, economic pressure, and corruption.

The regular security forces included: The Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL); the Liberia National Police (LNP), which has primary responsibility for internal security; the Antiterrorist Unit (ATU), composed of an elite special forces group; and the Special Security Service (SSS), a large, heavily armed executive protective force. There also are numerous irregular security services attached to certain key ministries and parastatal corporations, the responsibilities of which appear poorly defined. The national army, which fought against Taylor's faction during the civil war, has yet to be downsized and restructured as required by the Abuja Peace Accords, although a restructuring plan exists. Only a few contingents have been deployed to maintain security in parts of rural areas. The many newly created security services absorbed Taylor's most experienced civil war fighters, including undisciplined and untrained loyalists. While civilian authorities in

Monrovia generally maintained control of the security forces, frequently they acted independently of government authority, particularly in rural areas. Members of the security forces committed numerous serious human rights abuses.

Liberia is a very poor country with a market-based economy that has yet to recover from the ravages of the civil war. Average per capita income is estimated at only a small fraction of the prewar level. Prior to 1990, the cash economy was based primarily on iron ore, rubber, timber, diamond, and gold exports. Unemployment of 85 percent, a 15 percent literacy rate, the internal displacement of civilians in Lofa and Nimba counties, 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 and former combatants continued to exploit the country's natural resources for personal benefit. Extortion is a widespread phenomenon in all levels of society.

The Government's human rights record remained poor, and there were serious problems in many areas. The security forces committed many extrajudicial killings. They were accused of killing or causing the disappearance of citizens from Lofa county. Security forces tortured, beat, and otherwise abused or humiliated citizens. The Government investigated some of the alleged abuses by the security forces, but in all cases in which officers were charged, they either were treated leniently or exonerated. Prison conditions were harsh and sometimes life threatening. Security forces continued at times to use arbitrary arrest and detention, and lengthy pretrial detention remained common. The judicial system, hampered by political influence, economic pressure, inefficiency, corruption, and a lack of resources, was unable to ensure citizens' rights to due process and a fair trial. In some rural areas where the judiciary had not been reestablished, clan chieftains administered criminal justice through the traditional practice of trial-by-ordeal; at times the authorities tacitly condoned this practice. Over 1 dozen political prisoners remained in jail. Security forces violated citizens' privacy rights, conducted warrantless searches, harassment, illegal surveillance, and looted homes. The Government restricted freedom of the press and assaulted, threatened, and intimidated journalists into self-censorship. Security forces restricted freedom of movement, using roadblocks to extort money from travelers and returning refugees. Security forces frequently harassed human rights monitors. Violence and discrimination against women remained problems. The education and care of children remained widely neglected, and female genital mutilation (FGM) continued to increase. Societal ethnic discrimination remained widespread, ethnic differences continued to generate violence and political tensions, and the Government continued to discriminate against indigenous ethnic groups that had opposed Taylor in the civil war, especially the Mandingo and the Krahn ethnic groups. Forced labor, including by children, persisted in rural areas. Child labor remained widespread, and there were reports of forced child labor. Ritualistic killings also persisted.

## **RESPECT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS**

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

#### a. Political and Other Extrajudicial Killing

Security forces continued to commit extrajudicial killings during the year. Human rights organizations estimate the number of extrajudicial killings to be approximately 100;

however, there were no convictions of the perpetrators. Beginning in August when it appointed Paul Mulbah as the new director of the LNP, the Government stepped up its efforts to curb these and other abuses by members of the security forces.

There were credible reports that government forces as well as members of the Loma ethnic group harassed and intimidated members of the Mandingo ethnic group, including the burning of mosques. There are credible reports that during the incursions and counter-attacks in Lofa county, hundreds were killed and thousands of citizens plus refugees from Sierra Leone were forced to flee the area. In July Sierra Leonean refugees began to leave two refugee camps in northern Lofa country because of the instability and harassment by security forces. Many walked for days to reach the help of the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Bomi county, which transported them to a refugee camp near the border with Sierra Leone. Lofa county residents complained of constant harassment and intimidation by the police and paramilitary forces used by the Government to quell the incursions.

In May a human rights organization reported that a security officer was beaten to death and called for an investigation. The LNP stated that the officer had died in a traffic accident. President Taylor later told a press conference that the officer died while in detention. No one was charged in connection with the officer's death.

A U.N. team visited in May to investigate the September 1998 violence. No government forces were arrested. The Government arrested 14 Krahn civilians in 1998 and tried them for sedition. Thirteen were convicted in 1999 and are serving 10-year terms. Nine Krahn AFL soldiers were arrested and were standing trial at year's end. Five other Krahn arrested in 1998 in connection with the September 1998 violence were not charged by year's end.

The President Pro Tempore of the Senate told the Inter-parliamentary Union that the investigation into the 1997 killings of opposition political leader Samuel Saye Dokie and three family members continued. However, authorities did not report any results from a promised investigation.

There was no follow-up in investigations of the 1998 extrajudicial killings of Mannah Zekay, John Nimely, or others reported during that year.

There was no report released by the Government following its November investigation of the reported killing of as many as 30 Mandingos in Lofa county in August. Although the authorities subsequently arrested 19 persons, they did not charge anyone with a crime. Mandingo residents of Lofa county continued to be afraid to return to their homes.

Reports of ritualistic killings, in which human body parts used in traditional rituals are removed from the victim, continued to occur. The number of such killings is difficult to ascertain, since police often described deaths as accidents even when body parts have been removed. Deaths that appear to be natural or accidental sometimes are rumored to have been the work of ritualistic killers. Most reported ritual killings were from the southeastern counties. In August the Government sent a high-level national police delegation to investigate alleged ritual killings in Harper, Maryland county.

#### b. Disappearance

Security forces produced suspects whom they had held without charge when the courts issued writs of habeas corpus on the applications of human rights organizations. Their disappearances were often the result of prolonged illegal detention at the Gbartala base (see Section 1.c.). There were a number of reports that ethnic Mandingos disappeared following the violence in Lofa county in April and August. Eyewitnesses gave a detailed account, stating that all the men in a Lofa county village were taken away by government security forces. It is not known whether the missing individuals were killed or fled to Guinea or other parts of the world. There were no reports by year's end that the Government carried out its promised investigation of the incident.

There were no developments in the 1998 disappearance case of market woman Nowai Flomo.

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

The Constitution prohibits torture and other degrading treatment; however, government security forces sometimes tortured, beat, and otherwise abused and humiliated citizens. In several cases, security forces produced suspects whom they had held without charge when the courts issued writs of habeas corpus on the applications of human rights organizations. The detainees charged that they were tortured while in detention at a security training base in Gbatala. Victims reported being held in water-filled holes in the ground, being injured when fires were kindled on grates over their heads, being urinated on, and suffering beatings and sexual abuse. In October human rights organizations called for the closure of the base because of the reports of torture there. The number of credible claims of such treatment indicates a pattern of abuse at the base. The Government did not report any results of its promised investigation by year's end.

An assistant minister for public security and some security force members were dismissed and tried and convicted of aggravated assault after being charged with forcibly removing a magistrate from his courtroom and torturing him because they took exception to a court ruling.

In March in Dambala, a village near the border with Sierra Leone, a group of armed soldiers reportedly beat and detained men, raped women, and looted homes.

Government security personnel assaulted and injured a few journalists (see Section 2.a.).

Members of the security forces, as well as the ATF, AFL, and the SSS were implicated in numerous reports of harassment, intimidation, and looting. Beginning in August, new LNP director Mulbah took steps to investigate and discipline officers accused of human rights abuses. For example, in October citizens of the southeastern county of Maryland reported harassment and intimidation by officers, including a shooting and beatings of local citizens (see Section 1.e.). In response the director dispatched a team of LNP inspectors to investigate. In October two SSS officers were found guilty in an SSS investigation and imprisoned for harassing and intimidating citizens.

Security force personnel in rural areas were paid and provisioned inadequately and often extorted money and goods from civilians. There were many credible reports that security forces harassed returning refugees, displaced persons, and refugees from Sierra Leone, especially in the border areas. Numerous abuses occurred following the incidents in Lofa

county in April and August (see Sections 1.f. and 2.d.).

Government security personnel were involved in the looting of 1,450 tons of food intended for Sierra Leonean refugees, theft of vehicles belonging to international organizations and nongovernmental organizations (NGO's) and the personal property of foreigners and citizens. The international community publicly decried the Government's support for the Revolutionary United Front rebels in the civil war in Sierra Leone.

During the first half of the year, the police manhandled numerous petty traders and confiscated money and goods in various market areas, while attempting to prevent small traders from operating outside areas designated for them. Paul Mulbah, the police director appointed in August, took steps to end these abuses.

Clan chieftains continued to use the traditional practice of trial-by-ordeal to resolve criminal cases in rural areas. Although the Supreme Court ruled that trial-by-ordeal--commonly the placement of a heated metal object on a suspect's body in an attempt to determine whether the defendant is telling the truth--is unconstitutional, the Ministry of Internal Affairs continued tacitly to condone the practice in an unknown number of cases during the year. A lawsuit filed in 1994 for injuries resulting from trial-by-ordeal was still pending before the Supreme Court at year's end.

The widow of an Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL) soldier reported that after her husband was killed on duty at the Liberia-Guinea border during the April incident, she was beaten severely and abducted by members of the Mandingo ethnic group and taken to Guinea. She later escaped and returned to the country.

Prison conditions were harsh and in some cases life threatening. There were credible reports of unofficial detention facilities in which detainees were held without charge and in some cases tortured. The Government did not provide detainees or prisoners in official facilities with adequate food or medical care. Cells at Monrovia Central Prison are overcrowded, mostly with detainees awaiting trial. Only about 10 percent of the total prison population have been convicted of criminal offenses. Convicted prisoners and detainees awaiting trial are not confined in separate facilities. Many of the detainees have been subjected to lengthy pretrial detention, and in some cases, the period of detention approximates the length of sentence for the crime in question. Similar conditions exist in the Barclay Training Center military stockade. In some counties, the structure that serves as a jail is a container with bars at one end.

In a number of cases, human rights groups and interested individuals achieved the release of prisoners. In November a legal aid organization obtained the release without bail from Monrovia Central Prison of a pregnant woman charged with theft. The woman, who was 8 months pregnant, had been detained without trial since July.

Women, who constitute about 5 percent of the prison population, were held in separate cells. Their conditions are comparable to that of the male prisoners and detainees. There were no separate facilities for juvenile offenders.

The Government permits the independent monitoring of prison conditions by local human rights groups, the media, and the ICRC. The ICRC is allowed to visit prisoners in prison facilities and police detention centers without third parties present and to make regular

repeat visits. However, visits to unofficial detention centers often are denied. For example, despite requests made by NGO's to the Defense Ministry, no independent monitor has been allowed to visit the Gbatala base in which victims have been detained illegally and tortured.

#### d. Arbitrary Arrest, Detention, or Exile

The Constitution prohibits arbitrary arrest and detention; however, security forces continued at times to arrest and detain persons arbitrarily. The Constitution provides for the rights of the accused, including warrants for arrests, and the right of detainees either to be charged or released within 48 hours. Although the Government generally adheres to these standards, warrants were not always based on sufficient evidence, and detainees, especially those without the means to hire a lawyer, often were held for more than 48 hours without charge. In some cases, persons were detained secretly at unofficial detention centers (see Section 1.c.).

The Constitution provides for the right of a person who is charged to receive an expeditious trial; however, lengthy pretrial and prearraignment detention remained a serious problem (see Section 1.c.). Five detained soldiers awaiting court-martial for desertion during the September 1998 incident have been incarcerated in the stockade since November 1998. Should they be convicted, the maximum sentence would be 6 months' imprisonment.

The police have only limited logistics and forensic capabilities and cannot adequately investigate many crimes, including murder cases. When the courts release known criminals for lack of evidence, police officers often rearrest them on specious charges.

Authorities charged journalists with contempt and detained some journalists (in one case for more than the legal limit of 48 hours, without charge (see Section 2.a.)).

The Government did not use forced exile, but the security forces frequently harassed and threatened opposition figures and human rights activists to the point that a number of them departed the country due to fear for their personal safety or that of their families. An internationally renowned human rights activist was forced to leave the country for fear of his life by various security officials. In January 17-year-old child rights advocate Kimmie Weeks fled the country to avoid harassment by security personnel disturbed by his charges that the Government was training child soldiers. Several times during the year, President Taylor publicly alleged that some of these opposition figures had gone abroad to conspire in the overthrow of his Government. The effect of such statements was to keep numerous prominent opposition figures and former warlords out of the country throughout the year.

#### e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

Although the Constitution provides for an independent judiciary, judges are subjected to political, social, familial, and financial pressures, leading to the corruption of the judiciary. Some judges and magistrates are not lawyers. The judiciary determined that it is not feasible to retire immediately all judicial personnel who are not legally trained but intends to replace those currently sitting by lawyers as they retire. The Supreme Court ruled that members of the bar must be graduates of a law school and pass the bar

examination. The executive branch continued to exert undue influence on the judiciary. Early in the year, the President's personal aide-de-camp prevented the execution of a Supreme Court decision against a major bank. The aide reportedly feared that its failure would injure the country's fragile economy. The Court was not able to enforce its decision, at least partially because the plaintiff did not inform the Court that its decision was not executed.

The judiciary is divided into four levels, with the Supreme Court at the apex. All levels of the court system in Monrovia, including the Supreme Court functioned erratically. In 1997, for the first time in the country's history, a juvenile court system was established for all 13 counties. However, by year's end, the only functioning juvenile court was in Monrovia. The Monrovia juvenile court has heard 50 cases since its inception. A criminal court established in late 1997 specifically to handle armed robbery cases remains ineffective. The Government's efforts to revitalize the court system outside Monrovia continued to be troubled by lack of trained personnel, infrastructure, and lack of adequate funding. Although judges were assigned throughout the country, in some cases they were unable to hold court due to lack of supplies and equipment. Several localities reverted to traditional forms of justice administered by clan chieftains (see Section 1.c.).

Under the Constitution, defendants have due process rights that conform to internationally accepted standards. However, in practice these rights are not always observed. Defendants have the right to a public trial and timely consultation with an attorney. However, there is no effective system to provide public defenders, especially in the rural areas. Courts regularly received bribes or other illegal gifts out damages that they awarded in civil cases. Defense attorneys often suggested that their clients pay a gratuity to appease judges, prosecutors, and police officers to secure favorable rulings.

There are 13 political prisoners. In September 1998, following Operation Camp Johnson Road, the Government arrested 9 Krahn members of the armed forces and 19 civilians, including some senior Krahn leaders, on charges that included treason and sedition. The Government dropped charges against 5 of the civilian suspects in return for their testimony as state witnesses; the trial of the remaining 14 civilian defendants was completed in April. One defendant was acquitted, and the 13 others were convicted of treason and sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment (see Section 1.e.).

The jury trial was public and attended by international observers. Some observers believed that the defendants did not receive due process and that the jury was influenced significantly by ethnic ties. The military trials of nine Krahn AFL officers' remained in progress at year's end.

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

The Constitution provides for the right of privacy and the sanctity of the home; however, authorities regularly infringed on these rights. The Constitution provides that the 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 police and paramilitary officers frequently entered private homes and churches without warrants to carry out arrests and investigations. Since Mulbah's appointment as LNP director, the LNP took some steps to address the culture of impunity in the police force, but very little has been done to control the military and paramilitary forces' gratuitous acts of random cruelty

against civilians.

The security forces harassed and threatened opposition figures and their families by conducting illegal surveillance. In some cases, they entered the homes of opposition figures, usually at night. Former combatants also harassed citizens with little fear of reprisal for their actions. In July approximately 100 former combatants stormed the home of a democracy advocate while he was out of the country, looting his home and terrorizing his family. No charges were brought against any of the former combatants. This incident and several other illegal entries prompted an opposition party leader to suspend the community development project that she sponsored. Several journalists and human rights activists resided in the homes of friends or relatives for months at a time due to fear that the security forces might follow through with their threats against them. These incidents of harassment increased significantly in the immediate aftermath of the violence in Lofa county in April and August, particularly against members of the Mandingo ethnic group. In rural areas, armed security forces illegally entered homes, most often to steal food, money, or other property (see Section 1.c.). This problem was especially prevalent in remote parts of Lofa county during the year.

## Section 2 Respect for Civil Liberties, Including:

### a. Freedom of Speech and Press

The Constitution provides for freedom of speech and of the press; however, the Government restricted this right in practice. Security agents threatened and assaulted journalists and intimidated many journalists into practicing self-censorship.

With some notable exceptions, government officials are grudgingly tolerant of the press. However, they frequently rebuked the media publicly for what they considered negative reporting of events. Security personnel sometimes interpreted such criticism as a license to harass, threaten, and even assault targeted persons. Some media executives suspended journalists for broadcasting or writing news articles that were critical of security forces. At times such news reporting that criticized the Government brought threats of violence, closure, or directives from powerful government figures to advertisers that they should discontinue business with that media outlet. Government officials stated that there were no journalists in jail.

Government officials criticized journalists who used the Internet to express opinions that the authorities considered detrimental. Many persons believed that the Government blocked Internet access during the latter half of the year.

Journalists generally are left to print or say what they dare, provided that they are willing to face strong criticism and the possible consequences. Sometimes journalists are brash and even provocative, but they also go through periods of self-censorship after they receive threats, whether perceived or genuine. Government security personnel assaulted and injured a few journalists and security agents confiscated or destroyed some equipment (see Section 1.a.). Journalists were charged with contempt, some were detained (in one known case, more than the legal limit of 48 hours without charge), and some sought asylum outside the country (see Section 1.d.). In July a consignment of *The African Observer* was seized upon arrival at Roberts International Airport because it contained an article that authorities considered critical of the Government.

No action was taken during the year in the case of the police forces' 1998 flogging of journalist Hassan Bility.

The Ministry of Information, Culture, and Tourism did not apply fee regulations regarding yearly licensure for media outlets uniformly. It changed the deadline for fee payments, and although it allowed some delinquent media outlets to pay their fees late, it did not accept late payment from one newspaper with the result that the newspaper had to cease publication. Authorities considered a former editor now in exile of the newspaper to be antigovernment and believed that his successors were carrying on his tradition.

There is still only one printing facility capable of producing newspapers, and its management is subject to pressure from the Government. Several editors of the independent media practice self-censorship in order to stay in business and keep their advertisers (who also respond to official pressure). To meet costs of production, the typical newspaper's eight pages include two or three pages of advertisements or paid announcements, further reducing the amount of news reported. Some articles included are the result of "cadeaux," gifts or money that supplement reporters' meager salaries. Production costs force publishers to set the prices of their newspapers beyond the means of most citizens.

Reporters investigated human rights violations and corruption issues, but in some cases, practiced self-censorship due to fear for their physical safety. Several incidents heightened that fear. For example: Repeated detainment and assault (requiring hospital treatment) of a freelance reporter for suspicion of treason because of casual contacts with a member of the diplomatic corps; the assault on the editor of an independent newspaper by a security officer (with no subsequent punishment); and the assault on a reporter who had gone to the office of a ruling party official to seek clarification on a news article. An investigation of the last incident by the Press Union of Liberia determined that the assault was carried out with the party official's acquiescence, in the presence of others, but there was no apology or reprisal. Verbal assaults on the press by government officials have been common but the authorities "justified" them as personal opinions that they freely expressed under the Constitution. One government official accused the entire independent media of being paid by a Western government to write "all kinds of lies" against the Liberian Government.

In some cases, there were indications that journalists were entrapped by authorities in order to damage the reputation of the profession in general. Authorities charged 13 journalists and several policemen with conspiracy to confiscate and sell expired, imported frozen poultry after the journalists went to the national port to report on destruction of the meat. Although charges against the policemen were dropped quickly, the journalists were suspended from their jobs and the press union for several months until a grand jury refused to indict them due to lack of evidence.

In Monrovia 10 newspapers were published during the year, although some publish very irregularly. Two are dailies, and five generally appeared once or more a week. One is published by the Public Affairs Bureau of the Ministry of Information, Culture, and Tourism, and one sometimes is published by the communications network owned by the President. The others are produced independently and vary in their political balance.

In addition to the high price of newspapers and the high rate of illiteracy (between 70 and

85 percent), which limits their circulation, newspaper distribution is limited to the Monrovia area by high transportation costs and the poor state of roads elsewhere in the country. Television is limited to those who can purchase sets, the generators, and fuel to provide electricity. For those persons and businesses with satellite capability, the Cable News Network is available. Radio is the primary means of mass communication.

Of the seven radio broadcasting stations, two are owned privately (one of these also broadcasts television programs); one is operated by the Catholic Archdiocese; one is an evangelical Christian station; one (Star Radio) is a noncommercial station managed locally but funded primarily through international organizations; one is owned by President Taylor (Liberia Communications Network); and one is the national station (Liberia Broadcasting System). Due to the economic situation in the country and the dependence on generators requiring expensive fuel purchases, most of the stations limited broadcasting hours and in some cases ceased operation for short periods.

At the end of the year, the Government continued its refusal to renew Star Radio's short-wave frequency allocation. Although the station, which is allowed to broadcast locally via FM, is politically neutral and now has local management, there has been no change in the government's policy toward the station. The Government's limitation of Star Radio to FM broadcasts prevented its broadcasts from reaching audiences outside the immediate Monrovia area. The only radio station with a short-wave frequency strong enough to reach all parts of the country is owned by the President. Radio Veritas, operated by the Roman Catholic Archdiocese, has a short-wave frequency but a limited broadcast area and antiquated equipment.

Call-in radio talk shows are popular and frequently a forum for both government and opposition viewpoints. Interviews with prominent persons are broadcast frequently. In August former combatants looted a civil rights activist's home in reaction to his comments on a popular radio talk show (see Section 1.f.). Members of a church, whose tenets include free sex among its members, even among members of the same family, were indicted for incest and other crimes after describing their beliefs and practices in detail on the same show. At year's end, they were free on bail pending trial.

Academic freedom continues to be generally respected at the University of Liberia; however, President Taylor replaced the previous university president with a member of the ruling party. At times students reported professors' opinions to various government officials.

Although university administrators have been concerned about the militancy of the student groups on campus, which include a high percentage of former combatants, actual physical violence has been rare. Security forces were not called to intervene on campus.

Students occasionally protested about the lack of resources, which they blamed more on central government appropriation practices than on the university administration.

#### b. Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association

The Constitution provides for the right of peaceful assembly, and the Government generally respected this right in practice. The Government used objective criteria to approve or disapprove permits for public meetings. The approval process appeared to be

administered fairly. Approvals for marches and gatherings sometimes were made contingent upon rerouting or changes in venue. In September there were clashes between public high school students who protested the Government's failure to pay their teachers and the police. The students attempted to close some public schools. The new LNP director intervened personally and the situation was calmed after only a relatively small number of injuries inflicted by both sides and scattered property damage.

The Constitution provides for the right of association, and the Government generally respects this right in practice. Registration requirements can be onerous but do not appear to be discriminatory towards any specific group.

#### c. Freedom of Religion

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice; however, there were some exceptions.

There is no established state religion. However, government ceremonies invariably open and close with prayer and may include hymn singing. The prayers and hymns are usually Christian but occasionally are Muslim. Although Islam is gaining adherents, as much as 40 percent of the population practice either Christianity or elements of both Christianity and traditional indigenous religions. Although religious ritual killings reportedly occur, there is little reliable information available about them, their perpetrators, their victims, or the religious faiths that are involved (see Section 1.a.).

All organizations, including religious groups, must register their articles of incorporation with the Government, along with a statement of the purpose of the organization. However, traditional indigenous religious groups generally need not and do not register. The registration is routine, and there have been no reports that the registration process is either burdensome or discriminatory in its administration.

Early in the year, President Taylor dismissed all but one of his cabinet ministers after they failed to accompany him to a church service. Explaining his action, Taylor initially stated that anyone who did not know God could not serve in his Government. Subsequently Taylor stated that religion is a private matter, but that cabinet ministers are required to be present at public ceremonies that the president attends. Some days later, Taylor rescinded both actions and reinstated the ministers at the urging of several persons and organizations.

#### 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; however, the Government restricted this right in practice. Security forces' maintained checkpoints where travelers routinely were subjected to arbitrary searches and petty extortion. Security forces also extorted money from returning refugees.

The law includes provisions for granting refugee/asylee status in accordance with the provisions of the 1951 U.N. Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol. During the year, the Government provided first asylum to 120,000 Sierra Leonean persons living along the western border of the country; it granted asylum to these

persons in 1998. The Government continued to cooperate with the Office of the U.N. High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) and other humanitarian organizations in attempting to assist these asylees. However, inaccessibility due to poor road conditions and the limited capacity of local NGO's severely restricted the amount of relief assistance that could be provided. Violence in Lofa county in April and August led to the suspension of assistance by local and international NGO's in that area (see Section 1.a.).

In April government security personnel looted Voinjama, in northern Lofa county, in the wake of a purported attack by Liberian dissidents who had taken refuge in Guinea. Mandingo residents of Voinjama then fled to Guinea because of the incident and remained unwilling to return because of their fear of harassment by the Liberian security forces. No one was punished. In August in Kolahun, northern Lofa county, where in the aftermath of another incursion from Guinea, security forces once again looted stores of food intended for Sierra Leonean refugees. The refugees, fearing the dissidents and the security forces, migrated south towards another established refugee camp in Sinje (see Section 1.c.). The Government cooperated with the UNHCR's efforts to assist the migration to the new location. International donors remained unwilling to send any further assistance to Lofa county, and international and domestic NGO's are reluctant to resume operations there because of security concerns. The Government and the UNHCR established a second refugee camp in Sinje, a location easily accessible from Monrovia, to accommodate the refugees from Lofa county.

There were no reports of the 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

The Constitution provides for the right to vote in free and fair elections, and citizens exercised this right in 1997 in elections that international observers deemed free and transparent; however, the elections were conducted in an atmosphere of intimidation, as most voters believed that military forces loyal to Charles Taylor would have resumed the civil war if Taylor lost the election. Since the legislative elections were held on the basis of proportional representation, Taylor's National Patriotic Party won control of the legislature by the same 75 percent majority that Taylor received in the popular vote for the Presidency. The 1997 legislative and presidential elections were held under a special election law in accordance with the terms of the Abuja Peace Process.

The Legislature did not exercise genuine independence from the executive branch. Opposition legislators, who held only one-quarter of the seats in the House of Representatives and in the Senate, generally were more docile than some independent members of the ruling NPP. In March Senator Charles Brumskine, an NPP member, fled the country expressing fear for his life, after stating that the NPP had forced him to resign from his position as President Pro Tempore of the Senate. He later resigned his senatorial seat and has not returned to the country. A few weeks later, the ruling party manipulated the committee structure such that five opposition figures lost their chairmanships. Congressional committees failed to develop expertise in their respective areas of responsibility. No major legislation was enacted during the year. However, the House of Representatives succeeded in blocking the demolition of the Barclay Training Center military stockade.

The State is highly centralized. The President appoints the superintendents (governors) of the 13 counties. Municipalities and chieftaincies are supposed to elect their own officials, but elections, postponed in 1998 due to lack of funds and disorganization, were not held during 1999 for the same reason. However, a by-election was held in November to fill the seat vacated by Senator Brumskine. Local governments at all levels have no independent revenue base and rely entirely on the central government for funds. Education, health services, and public works are provided by the central Government. Local officials serve mainly to lobby the central Government.

There are no restrictions on the participation of women in politics; however, women remained underrepresented in government and politics. The number of women in high-ranking positions in the Taylor Administration and in the various political parties is low. Only 5 of the 26 Senators and 5 of the 64 members of the House of Representatives are women. Of the 20 cabinet positions, 2 are held by women, a woman serves as Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, and a woman chairs the National Reconciliation Commission. There are no women's caucuses, but the ruling party has a women's organization.

Muslims also are underrepresented in government; only one cabinet minister is a Muslim.

#### Section 4 Governmental Attitude Regarding International and Nongovernmental Investigation of Alleged Violations of Human Rights

The Taylor Administration permitted domestic and international human rights groups to operate largely without interference; however, members of the security forces frequently harassed domestic democracy and human rights activists, and forced some human rights activists t