



U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Liberia

Country Reports on Human Rights Practices - [2007](#)

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Liberia is a constitutional republic with a population of approximately 3.5 million. In November 2005 Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was declared the winner of multiparty presidential elections, which domestic and international observers considered generally free and fair. Since the 2003 signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, which ended the 1999-2003 civil war between the former government and the country's two rebel groups--Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy and the Movement for Democracy in Liberia--the UN Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) peacekeepers and UN international police (UNPOL) had primary responsibility for maintaining security. Efforts to select and retrain personnel for the Liberian National Police (LNP) and the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL) continued. While civilian authorities generally maintained effective control of the security forces, there were instances in which elements of the security forces acted independently of government authority.

The government generally respected the human rights of its citizens; however, problems continued in some areas. Deaths from mob violence persisted. Police abused, harassed, and intimidated detainees and citizens. Prison conditions remained harsh, and arbitrary arrest and detention occurred. Lengthy pretrial detention and denial of due process and fair public trial were problems. Some incidents of trial by ordeal were reported. Corruption and impunity continued in most levels of the government. There was violence against women, especially reports of rape. The practice of female genital mutilation (FGM) remained widespread. Child abuse, trafficking in persons, and racial and ethnic discrimination were problems. Instances of child labor were reported, especially in the informal sector.

During the year the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) held activities to create public awareness of their work and took statements on past human rights abuses. The government made primary education free and compulsory for children.

RESPECT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

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

a. Arbitrary and Unlawful Deprivation of Life

There were no reports that the government or its agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings.

During the year a government investigation concluded that the August 2006 killing of a Special Security Service (SSS) officer by another SSS officer was a justifiable killing, and no action was taken against the officer.

There were allegations that ex-combatants from former government and rebel security forces were involved in killings, theft, and other crimes against workers at the Sinoe and Firestone rubber plantations while the ex-combatants were illegally tapping or stealing processed rubber for resale.

On November 19, armed men ambushed the vehicle of Michael Bruno, General Manager of the Liberian Agricultural Company (LAC), who was shot and killed. Police arrested eight people for the murder and their trials were pending at year's end.

Ritualistic killings, in which body parts used in traditional indigenous rituals were removed from the victim, reportedly occurred during the year. The number of such killings was difficult to ascertain since police often described deaths as accidents or suicides, even when body parts were removed. There were no prosecutions for ritualistic killings during the year.

There were continuing reports of mob violence during the year. On April 9, April 10, and June 10, angry mobs killed

persons suspected of theft in Monrovia. On September 3, a mob in Harbel, outside of Monrovia, overpowered the police, burned down the police station and killed a murder suspect being held. There were no arrests in any of the cases by year's end.

b. Disappearance

There were no reports of politically motivated disappearances.

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

The constitution prohibits such practices, but police and prison officials employed them.

Police sometimes abused, harassed, and intimidated persons, particularly during attempts to extort money at checkpoints.

There were reports that members of the LNP and UNMIL troops forcibly dispersed demonstrators and strikers during the year, resulting in injuries.

On June 19, LNP officers and UNMIL peacekeepers reportedly beat several students and four journalists during a student demonstration supporting the University of Liberia faculty's demands for payment of salaries. According to the nongovernmental organization (NGO) Reporters Without Borders, *New Democrat* journalist Daylue Goah was reportedly beaten on the neck and arms with batons and rifle butts until he lost consciousness. An UNMIL investigation was ongoing at year's end.

Unlike the previous year, there were no reports that police assaulted a human rights worker.

There were no developments in the October 2006 case in which police allegedly forced a false confession by placing a lighter under a suspect's genitals.

The practice of trial by ordeal, which involves placement of a heated metal object on a suspect's body or the insertion of an extremity into hot oil to determine whether the defendant is telling the truth, continued in rural areas. On April 16, President Sirleaf vowed to punish people who condoned the practice. On July 13, a Bomi hospital administrator was indicted for practicing trial by ordeal. The trial was pending at year's end.

In December Charles Dorbor stated at his treason trial that he had been tortured by Nelson Jallah, chief investigator of the National Security Agency (NSA), in order to get him to implicate political leaders in a treason plot. The case was ongoing, and at year's end the government had not provided any evidence to rebut Dorbor's testimony.

Mob violence and vigilantism--which resulted in part from the public's lack of confidence in the police and judicial system--resulted in deaths and injuries during the year.

During the year the UN Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) investigated reports of sexual exploitation and abuse by UN peacekeepers, UNMIL staff, UN private contractors and implementing partners. On August 2, the Special Representative of the Secretary General to UNMIL reported that two officers, who were involved in sexual exploitation and abuse, had been dismissed from UN service and reduced in rank. One of the two cases was substantiated, and the officer was serving a sentence in his home country; the other was still under investigation at year's end. The UNMIL Conduct and Discipline Unit and the OIOS were investigating seven additional cases at year's end.

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

Prison conditions were harsh and in some cases life threatening. Women and juveniles were subject to abuse by guards or other inmates. Monrovia Central Prison held almost four times its capacity due to the large number of pretrial detainees. In some counties the jail was a container with bars at one end. The government relied on the World Food Program (WFP) and NGOs to provide food to the prisons. The UN and NGOs continued to provide medical services. During the year both the government and international partners continued renovations at several county prisons, which resulted in fewer prison escapes than in the previous year. Prisons were understaffed, but during the year the Ministry of Justice hired 60 prison officers.

Men and women were held together in the same cell in some counties and cities. In many counties juveniles and adults were held together, and pretrial detainees were generally held with convicted prisoners.

The government permitted the independent monitoring of prison conditions by local human rights groups, the media, and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). Some human rights groups, including national and international

organizations, made regular visits to detainees held in police headquarters and prisoners in Monrovia Central Prison.

d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention

The constitution prohibits arbitrary arrest and detention; however, security forces continued to arrest and detain persons arbitrarily, although less frequently than in the previous year.

Role of the Police and Security Apparatus

The Ministry of Justice has responsibility for enforcing laws and maintaining order within the country and oversees the LNP and the National Bureau of Investigation. Approximately 15,000 UNMIL peacekeepers and 1,100 UNPOL officers had primary responsibility for maintaining security. The training of new AFL recruits continued; 605 soldiers completed basic and received advanced training, and another 485 started basic training. Approximately 600 UNPOL officers assisted with restructuring, recruiting, training, and equipping the LNP, which was composed of new recruits and those who served under the former administrations. Since 2004 UNPOL has recruited, screened, trained, and deployed 3,500 LNP officers; most were deployed to Monrovia, but by year's end UNPOL had deployed 1,200 LNP officers to counties. During the year the LNP's Women's and Children's Protection Section (WCPS) began establishing offices in the counties outside of Monrovia. The WCPS was generally ineffective, since it was understaffed and had limited resources.

The LNP operated independently and retained arrest authority; however, UNPOL and armed UN Formed Police Units accompanied LNP officers in joint patrols around Monrovia. LNP officers, who were unarmed, were slow to respond to criminal activities and often ineffective, which resulted in an increase in armed robberies during the year. Corruption and impunity were problems. Police had limited logistics, communication, and forensic capabilities and did not have the capacity to adequately investigate many crimes, including murders.

During the year the LNP investigated reports of police misconduct or corruption, and several LNP officers were suspended or dismissed for misconduct or corruption.

UNPOL, with the LNP, also set up a system of community policing forums to address community concerns with the police and the increase of armed robbery in Monrovia. This was done as a way for communities to work with the police instead of forming neighborhood vigilante groups to address rising crime. However, the forums were considered ineffective in facilitating community work with police.

On June 29, the immigration commissioner dismissed an officer for soliciting bribes from travelers at a checkpoint near Monrovia.

During the year conflicts occurred between police with overlapping jurisdictions. On July 9, LNP officers and Liberian Seaport Police officers (LSP) began fighting at the Freeport of Monrovia during the LNP arrest of two LSP officers, who were accused of theft. A total of 22 officers were reportedly injured. On August 9, a government board of inquiry, headed by the national security advisor, recommended the dismissal of the inspector general of police. President Sirleaf placed the inspector general on three-month probation and suspended the senior seaport commander for one month since they were in charge and giving orders during the attempted arrest and fighting. In June the government established a committee to develop a national security policy to prevent disputes between security agencies with overlapping jurisdictions; a draft security policy was submitted to the president at the end of December.

Arrest and Detention

The constitution requires warrants to make arrests and provides that detainees either be charged or released within 48 hours; however, warrants were not always based on sufficient evidence, and detainees, particularly those without the means to hire a lawyer, often were held for more than 48 hours without charge. The law provides for bail for all offenses except rape, murder, and treason. Detainees have the right to prompt access to counsel, visits from family members and, if indigent, to an attorney provided by the state. However, in practice, the government did not ensure such access for all detainees.

LNP officers and other government officials were responsible for the arbitrary arrest and detention of citizens during the year.

Police arbitrarily arrested demonstrators and journalists during the year, but the cases were not prosecuted.

The NSA detained and held Charles Dorbor, an ex-AFL leader, for six months without charge, claiming he was being held in protective custody as a state witness in the treason trial of Charles Julue and George Koukou. On July 30 Dorbor was charged with treason after stating in court that he was coerced by the NSA into implicating Julue and Koukou. Dorbor's trial was ongoing at year's end.

In September the government dropped its case against a prominent local businessman, who it arrested without warrant in September 2006 for economic sabotage.

Although the law provides for to an expeditious trial, lengthy pretrial and prearrest detention remained serious problems.

Approximately 95 percent of prisoners at Monrovia Central Prison were pretrial detainees. In some cases the length of pretrial detention equaled or exceeded the length of sentence that could be imposed for the crime. Trial delays were caused by judicial inefficiency, lack of court facilities and qualified judges, and corruption.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

Although the constitution and law provide for an independent judiciary, judges were subject to political, social, familial, and financial pressures, and corruption persisted. Judges regularly received bribes or other illegal gifts from damages that they awarded in civil cases. Judges sometimes requested bribes to try cases, release detainees from prison, or find defendants not guilty in criminal cases. Defense attorneys sometimes suggested that their clients pay a gratuity to appease or secure favorable rulings from judges, prosecutors, jurors, and police officers. By statute members of the bar must be graduates of a law school; however, some judges and magistrates were not lawyers.

The judiciary is divided into four levels, including justice of the peace courts, magistrate courts, circuit and specialty courts, and the Supreme Court. In 2005 the Supreme Court ordered the closure of all justice of the peace courts; however, some still operated during the year since no replacement courts were established. The Supreme Court appointed judges to counties outside of Montserrado County, but many judges and magistrates continued to abandon their posts, preferring to remain in Monrovia. Unlike the previous year, there were no magistrates dismissed for abandonment. Military and security tribunals can not try civilians.

Some judges assigned throughout the country were unable to hold court due to lack of security, supplies, equipment, or a courthouse. International donors supported additional prosecutors and defenders, resulting in approximately 17 qualified prosecutors and 13 public defenders in the country. Uneven application of the law remained a problem throughout the judicial system.

Traditional forms of justice administered by clan chieftains remained prevalent in some localities.

Trial Procedures

Trials are public and juries are used in circuit court trials but not at the magistrate level. Under the constitution, defendants have the right to be present, to consult with an attorney in a timely manner, and to have access to government-held evidence relevant to their case; however, these rights were not always observed. Defendants in criminal trials enjoy a presumption of innocence and have the right to an attorney, to confront witnesses in a public trial, and to appeal adverse decisions, but many of these protections were not available to defendants who could not pay bribes. There was no effective system to provide public defenders in rural areas; however, government efforts were made with international aid to set up functional public defenders throughout the country. Four full-time public defenders were responsible for cases in Montserrado County. Some local NGOs continued to provide legal services to indigents and others who had no representation. There continued to be long delays in deciding cases.

In July the Supreme Court upheld the August 2006 acquittal verdict of nine persons, including Orishall Gould, former managing director of the National Social Security and Welfare Corporation, on embezzlement charges. On October 22 the government lost its case against the jury from the trial for accepting bribes to find the defendants innocent.

Political Prisoners and Detainees

There were no reports of political prisoners or detainees.

Civil Judicial Procedures and Remedies

There is an independent civil law court in Monrovia, but circuit courts in each county function as both criminal and civil courts. Specialty courts, such as the tax court, probate court, and labor court, also address civil matters. There is no court to address lawsuits seeking damages for human rights violations. As with criminal courts, specialized courts were inefficient and corrupt. Administrative and judicial remedies were available to settle alleged wrongs. There were no problems enforcing domestic court orders. NGOs and the government continued to establish mediation centers that worked on reducing the judicial caseload.

Property Restitution

In February the committee created to deal with land disputes in Nimba County recommended that the disputed land currently occupied by Gio and Mano persons in Nimba County should revert to the original Mandingo owners. Despite the recommendation, there was no action taken by year's end to assist the Mandingos in removing the squatters. Efforts to make additional acceptable land available were ongoing at year's end.

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

The constitution prohibits such actions, and the government generally respected these prohibitions in practice.

Section 2 Respect for Civil Liberties, Including:

a. Freedom of Speech and Press

The constitution provides for freedom of speech and of the press, and the government generally respected these rights in practice; however, there were some reports of security officials harassing journalists during the year.

Generally individuals can criticize the government publicly or privately without reprisal and the government did not attempt to impede criticism.

In Monrovia there were approximately a dozen newspapers that published during the year with varying degrees of regularity; six were independent dailies, and five were independent biweekly papers. The government published the *New Liberian* newspaper.

Due to the cost of newspapers and transportation, the estimated 55-75 percent illiteracy rate, and road conditions elsewhere in the country, newspaper distribution generally was limited to the Monrovia region. As a result, radio remained the primary means of mass communication. There were 15 independent radio stations that regularly broadcast in Monrovia, approximately 24 local stations in other areas, one UNMIL radio station, and one government-operated station. Radio stations operated without government restrictions.

There were three local television stations; however, television was limited to those who could afford to purchase sets, generators, and fuel to provide electricity. For those persons and businesses with satellite capability, CNN, BBC, Skynews, Al Jazeera and SABC Africa generally were available.

The independent media was active and expressed a wide variety of views without restriction; however, journalists commonly accepted payments to publish articles.

On February 27, the ministry of information revoked the license of *The Independent* newspaper and ordered the closure of its offices for publishing explicit photos of Minister of State for Presidential Affairs Willis Knuckles. *The Independent* filed suit against the ministry, claiming the ministry's practice of licensing newspapers was unconstitutional. On May 4, *The Independent* reopened after the government reinstated its license. In October the Supreme Court declined to hear the case, stating the issue was moot since the paper was operational.

On June 19, LNP officers and UNMIL troops reportedly beat four journalists covering a student demonstration in support of faculty demands for payment of salary arrears at the University of Liberia. According to the NGO Reporters Without Borders, the LNP officers and UNMIL troops also tore up the identification cards of two journalists, Daylue Goah of the *New Democrat* and Evans Ballah of *Public Agenda*, and forced them to delete the photos from their digital cameras. UNMIL called for an investigation; the case was ongoing at year's end.

On October 29, the chief justice of the Liberian Supreme Court summoned newspaper editors and threatened to jail them for 30 days if they misspelled his name or had his photo next to articles that did not mention him. By year's end he had not jailed anyone for these reasons.

Internet Freedom

There were no government restrictions on access to the Internet or reports that the government monitored e-mail or Internet chat rooms. Individuals and groups could engage in the peaceful expression of views via the Internet, including by e-mail. Internet access was not widely available due to high cost and lack of infrastructure. High illiteracy also limited public exposure to the Internet.

Academic Freedom and Cultural Events

There were no government restrictions on academic freedom or cultural events.

b. Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association

Freedom of Assembly

The constitution provides for the right of peaceful assembly, and the government generally respected this right. However, LNP officers forcibly dispersed demonstrators during the year, resulting in injuries.

On March 28, LNP officers forcibly dispersed a demonstration by the Liberia Timber Workers Union in Gardnerville, resulting in several injuries.

On May 16, the Ministry of Justice set up a panel to probe reports of alleged police brutality during the Liberia Timber Workers' demonstration at Gardnerville and at the Firestone Worker's demonstrations in April. The panel found that there was excessive police force used in both incidents. However, by year's end no police were punished as a result of the panel's findings.

On June 19, LNP and UNMIL officers beat and forcibly dispersed several students at a student demonstration supporting faculty demands for payment of salaries at the University of Liberia. UNMIL called for an investigation; the case was ongoing at year's end.

Freedom of Association

The constitution provides for the right of association, and the government generally respected this right in practice.

c. Freedom of Religion

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the government generally respected this right in practice. Christianity was the dominant religion and most meetings, including official government meetings, began and ended with Christian prayers. Islamic leaders complained of some discrimination against Muslims, particularly in ongoing property disputes involving predominantly Muslim Mandingos.

All organizations, including religious groups, were required to register with the government; however, indigenous religious groups were not required to register and generally did not do so.

Societal Abuses and Discrimination

Ethnic tensions existed in Nimba County between the Mandingo and the Mano and Gio ethnic groups, mainly over property. The private sector in urban areas, particularly in the capital, gave preference to Christianity in civic ceremonies and observances. Throughout the year the Inter-religious Council and other religious organizations promoted dialogue between religious groups.

Incidents of ritualistic killings occurred during the year.

There was no notable Jewish community in the country, and there were no reports of anti-Semitic acts.

For a more detailed discussion, see the [2007 International Religious Freedom Report](#).

d. Freedom of Movement, Internally Displaced Persons, Protection of Refugees, and Stateless Persons

The constitution provides for freedom of movement within the country, foreign travel, emigration, and repatriation, and the government generally respected these rights in practice. However, LNP and Bureau of Immigration officers occasionally subjected travelers to arbitrary searches and petty extortion at checkpoints in and around Monrovia.

The government cooperated with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other humanitarian organizations in providing protection and assistance to internally displaced persons, refugees, returning refugees, asylum seekers, stateless persons, and other persons of concern.

The law prohibits forced exile, and the government did not use it.

On June 30 the UNHCR ended its assistance in repatriating Liberian refugees. NGOs estimated that thousands of other refugees had returned to the country without assistance during the year.

Approximately 1,902 of 3,546 Sierra Leonean refugees were made aware of their rights, registered, and verified for local integration in accordance with Liberia's Refugee Act.

Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)

A few former IDPs remained in closed camp areas throughout the year, although UNHCR assistance was no longer provided. An environmental NGO was responsible for addressing environmental hazards in former IDP camps. Unlike in the previous year, there were no reports that young girls were exploited sexually in the IDP camps.

In August 2006, the government changed management at Guthrie Rubber Plantation due to growing insecurity on the plantation and offered return assistance to IDPs and former combatants illegally operating the plantation. Approximately 300 former combatants registered for government and UN return assistance benefits and received job training during the year.

Protection of Refugees

The law provides for the granting of asylum or refugee status in accordance with the 1951 UN Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 protocol, and the government has established a system for providing protection to refugees. The government granted refugee status and asylum during the year. In practice the government provided some protection against refoulement, the return of persons to a country where there is reason to believe they feared persecution. The government also provided temporary protection to individuals who may not qualify as refugees under the 1951 convention and 1967 protocol. The government generally cooperated with the UNHCR and other humanitarian organizations in assisting refugees and asylum seekers.

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

The law provides citizens with the right to change their government peacefully, and citizens exercised this right in practice through generally free and fair elections based on universal suffrage.

Elections and Political Participation

In November 2005 Ellen Johnson Sirleaf won the national presidential elections with 59.4 percent of the vote in a runoff election. In the same elections voters selected 30 senators and 64 representatives. Domestic and international observers considered the elections generally free and fair. Individuals and parties freely declared their candidacies, and membership in the dominant parties did not confer any formal advantage. In preparation for the elections, the National Elections Commission registered 30 political parties; 22 candidates contested the presidential election. There were four successful by-elections for vacant legislative seats. Local and international observers considered the elections free and fair.

The state is highly centralized. The law provides that the head of state appoint county superintendents. Local governments had no independent revenue base and relied entirely on the central government for funds. As a result, there was very limited government functioning outside of Monrovia. Government efforts were made to regularly pay civil servants in the counties since civil servants often waited months to receive salaries in 2006. Local officials served mainly to lobby the central government.

The government claimed it did not have sufficient money to hold municipal and chieftaincy elections. The office of the Presidency lobbied the legislature to allow the president to appoint officials instead. On September 12, after public outcry, the government announced that municipal and chieftaincy elections would be held in 2008.

There were five female ministers, 12 female deputy ministers, five women in the Senate, eight women in the House of Representatives, and five female county superintendents. There were two female Supreme Court judges. Women constituted 33 percent of local government officials and 31 percent of senior and junior ministers.

Muslims occupied senior government positions, including one minister, one deputy minister, three senators, six representatives, one Supreme Court justice, and one county superintendent.

Government Corruption and Transparency

The law does not provide criminal penalties for official corruption. The World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators reflected that corruption was a serious problem, and corruption remained systematic throughout the government due to a culture of impunity. Some high-level government officials, including the president, were publicly committed to fighting corruption. Financial mismanagement decreased considerably at a macro economic level, but was still a problem along with lack of accountability within government agencies. The General Auditing Commission and Ministry of Justice are responsible for combating official corruption. Political appointees were directed to submit financial disclosures, but few

complied.

On June 13, the auditor general criticized the national budget for not including all government revenues and charged that the government was "three times more corrupt" than its predecessor; however, the auditor general presented no evidence to substantiate the charge.

The government dismissed or suspended a number of officials and was actively prosecuting former high-level government officials for corruption.

On January 15 former house speaker Edwin Snowe accused the presidency of paying \$5,000 (245,000 LD) to each member of the House of Representatives to vote for his removal as speaker. The president's office denied the allegations, and on April 6 the House Judiciary Committee was tasked to investigate the alleged bribery. No findings were published by year's end.

On January 30 former budget director David Zarlee was indicted for embezzling \$804,000 (48 million LD) from the former National Transitional Government of Liberia (NTGL). The case was pending at year's end.

On April 3, Edwin Snowe was indicted for embezzling approximately \$1 million (60 Million LD) from the Liberian Petroleum Refining Corporation when he served as managing director. Snowe was released on bond on April 13, although the government tried to have the bond revoked. On August 17, the court ruled in Snowe's favor, and he remained free on bail; the case was ongoing at year's end.

On December 7, former NTGL Chairman Charles Gyude Bryant was rearrested for embezzling approximately \$1.4 million (84 million LD) during his two years in office. Bryant was originally arrested on March 13, and released on bail the next day. He filed for a dismissal of charges on the grounds of having immunity as a former head of state. On August 27, the Supreme Court rejected his appeal, but Bryant remained free on bail until it was revoked on December 4 after he failed to appear in court. In December he was released on bail again after agreeing to appear in court; his case was pending at year's end.

During the year the government continued to take steps to increase transparency. The Ministry of Finance published the national budget and quarterly financial results, and state-owned enterprises published financial statements. International financial controllers, placed in key ministries and state-owned enterprises under the Governance and Economic Management Assistance Program continued to operate. Controllers helped improve financial management, purchasing, and contracting practices, and instituted financial controls that increased government revenues and helped to curb corrupt practices. However, single-source procurement and suspect concessions and contracts remained a serious concern. The Public Procurement and Concessions Commission renegotiated or cancelled a number of agreements entered into by the former government.

During the year former police director Chris Massaquoi, who was suspended on corruption charges in 2004, was reappointed Commissioner of Immigration and Naturalization. Former customs and excise commissioner Charles Bennie, who also was suspended for corruption in 2004, was appointed Director of Price Analysis at the Ministry of Commerce and Industry. Neither Massaquoi's nor Bennie's case had been prosecuted prior to their reappointments.

During the year J.D. Slanger, former head of the Bureau of Maritime Affairs, left the country; the corruption case against him remained pending at year's end.

The 2006 appeal filed by defendants in the 2005 corruption case involving the management of the National Social Security and Welfare Corporation remained pending before the Supreme Court at year's end.

The December 2006 embezzlement case of former Finance Minister Kamara remained pending at year's end.

The law provides for "no limitation on the public right to be informed about the government and its functionaries," but little government information was available, and there were few procedures for obtaining it.

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

A number of domestic and international human rights groups operated without government restriction, investigating and publishing their findings on human rights cases. Government officials were generally cooperative and responsive to their views.

There were four coalitions of human rights groups: the National Human Rights Center of Liberia with nine member organizations; the Network of Human Rights Chapters with eight groups; and the Human Rights and Protection Forum, an

umbrella organization of 70 to 80 groups; and the National Civil Society Organization with nine member groups. These coalitions sought to increase public discussion of human rights problems. Civil society NGOs continued to develop.

During the year the government worked to facilitate the free and safe movement of relief supplies by international NGOs and permitted visits by a UN panel of experts, the ICRC, and various UN agencies.

The investigation into the alleged September 2006 LNP assault on an employee of the Forum for Human Rights and Democracy was ongoing at year's end.

During the year the president appointed nine commissioners to the government's Independent National Commission on Human Rights, which was established in 2004. At year's end the commissioners were waiting to be confirmed by the legislature and to begin work.

In March 2006 the government transferred former president Charles Taylor to the Special Court for Sierra Leone to face war crimes charges in connection with the civil conflict in Sierra Leone. The case was ongoing at The Hague, Netherlands at year's end.

During the year the TRC held activities to create public awareness of their work and continued to take statements on past human rights abuses. At the end of 2007, approximately 14,000 statements had been recorded. Poor management, staff shortages, and disharmony among commissioners continued to hinder the TRC's effectiveness.

Section 5 Discrimination, Societal Abuses, and Trafficking in Persons

The constitution prohibits discrimination based on ethnic background, race, sex, creed, place of origin, or political opinion; however, the government did not effectively enforce these provisions.

The constitution enshrines discrimination on the basis of race; only persons who are "Negroes" or of "Negro descent" can become citizens or own land. Differences stemming from the country's civil war legacy continued to contribute to social and political tensions among ethnic groups, especially among the Krahn, Mano, Gio, and Mandingo.

Women

The law provides sentences for rapists ranging from seven years' to life imprisonment; accused rapists are ineligible for bail. However, the government did not effectively enforce the law. The law does not specifically criminalize spousal rape. The number of reported rapes increased during the year; however, the stigma of rape contributed to the pervasiveness of out-of-court settlements and obstructed prosecution of cases. Inefficiency in the justice system also prevented timely prosecution of cases. The government raised awareness of the issue of rape through billboard messages, radio broadcasts, and publicity campaigns.

Some local NGOs pushed for prosecution of rape cases or provided lawyers to indigent victims. The WCPS unit of the LNP stated that there were approximately 400 rape cases reported to the unit during the year; approximately 40 were prosecuted, and a few resulted in convictions.

The law prohibits domestic violence; however, it was a widespread problem. The government and the media made some efforts to publicize the problem, but the government did not enforce the law effectively. Several NGOs continued programs to treat abused women and girls and to increase awareness of their rights. The maximum penalty for domestic violence is six months' imprisonment. LNP officers received training on sexual offenses as part of their initial training.

In February the Gender Based Violence (GBV) Secretariat completed an analytical database on the types and frequency of attacks women faced, and in September the government completed a national action plan on GBV. The Ministry of Gender and Development organized the commemoration of World Rural Women's Day with 16 days of activism against gender violence and Women in Governance Forum.

Although prostitution is illegal, it was widespread.

The law does not prohibit sexual harassment, and it was a problem, including in schools and places of work.

Women have not recovered from the setbacks caused by the war, when most schools were closed and when women were prevented from maintaining their traditional roles in the production, allocation, and sale of food. Thousands of women remained displaced, preventing them from pursuing livelihoods or education.

Under the law, women and men enjoy the same legal status. Women can inherit land and property, receive equal pay for

equal work, and were allowed to own and manage businesses. A number of businesses were female-owned or operated. The government prohibits polygyny; however, traditional laws permit men to have more than one wife. No specific office exists to ensure the legal rights of women, but the Ministry of Gender and Development was generally responsible for promoting women's rights.

During the year professional women's groups--including lawyers, market women, and businesswomen--vocally expressed concern regarding government corruption, the economy, security abuses, rape, domestic violence, and children's rights.

Children

The government did not fully provide for the education and health of children, but it continued to improve the provision of these services. The budget for children's health and education increased. The Ministry of Gender and Development continued its efforts to train county coordinators on child rights.

Education is compulsory until students reach 16 years of age. The government eliminated fees for primary school, but fees continued for secondary school, and the government was unable to provide for the needs of the majority of children. School-related costs remained high, thereby making education unattainable for significant numbers of school-age children. In both public and private schools, families of children often were asked to provide their own uniforms, books, pencils, paper, and even desks. Gross enrollment rates were higher among girls than boys since 2005, and for primary education, the overall national gender ratio (defined as the ratio of girls to boys) was 0.96, though significant gaps remained in a few counties.

Due to the poor condition of government schools, many children who attended school, particularly in Monrovia, attended private institutions. Boys and girls generally had equal access where medical services were available.

Widespread child abuse continued, and reports of sexual violence against children increased during the year. Civil society organizations reported increased incidents of rape of girls under 12.

The government prosecuted child rapists during the year. On April 17, three Never Die church members were sentenced to life imprisonment for raping girls between the ages of 12 and 16. On June 7, Moses Vannie was convicted of raping a six-year-old girl. On August 7, two men were arrested for gang raping a 14-year-old girl, who subsequently died.

The law does not specifically prohibit FGM, and the government took no action against FGM during the year. FGM traditionally was performed on young girls of northern, western, and central ethnic groups, particularly in rural areas. The most extreme form of FGM, infibulation, was not practiced. Social structures and traditional institutions, such as secret societies, often performed FGM as an initiation rite, making it difficult to ascertain the number of cases.

During the year there were reports that young women and girls engaged in prostitution for money, food, and school fees.

Despite international and governmental attempts to reunite children separated from their families during the war, there were still many children who lived on the streets in Monrovia. It was difficult to tell who were street children, former combatants, or IDPs. Nearly all children had witnessed atrocities during the 14-year civil war, and some children had committed atrocities.

The government closed 10 orphanages during the year; 53 registered orphanages remained. Many unofficial orphanages also served as transit points or informal group homes for children. Orphanages were under funded and had difficulty providing basic sanitation, adequate medical care, and appropriate diet. They relied primarily on private donations and support from international organizations, such as the UN Children's Fund and the WFP, which provided food and care throughout the year. Many orphans lived outside these institutions.

Trafficking in Persons

The law prohibits trafficking in persons; however, there were police reports that persons were trafficked within the country, particularly for domestic work, labor, and prostitution.

Traffickers enticed their victims with false promises of a better life. Parents of trafficking victims were persuaded that their children would have better food and educational opportunities and that they would eventually return home.

Young children were at a particularly high risk for trafficking, especially orphans or children from extremely poor families. Trafficking victims often were subjected to harsh living and working conditions.

Penalties for trafficking range from one year to life in prison. Monetary restitution to victims is also provided for in the law. The law was not widely disseminated among law enforcement personnel, lawyers, and judges. The ministries of justice

and labor have primary responsibility for combating trafficking, but enforcement efforts were weak.

On September 12, a man was arrested when he attempted to sell a child in Monrovia. The case was being investigated at year's end.

International NGOs, local NGOs, and churches worked with the government to raise awareness about trafficking, and the WCPS continued to address trafficking issues. The government had limited capacity to provide services to victims; however, a local NGO provided shelter for abused women and girls, including trafficking victims.

The national antitrafficking task force appointed by the president in October 2006 continued to meet during the year; however, it had no program budget.

Persons with Disabilities

Although it is illegal to discriminate against persons with disabilities, such persons did not enjoy equal access to government services. No laws mandate access to public buildings, and streets, schools, public buildings, and other facilities were generally in poor condition and inaccessible to persons with disabilities. Many citizens had permanent disabilities as a result of the civil war. Persons with disabilities faced discrimination, particularly in rural areas. As in the previous year, there were reports that some babies with deformities were abandoned. The Ministry of Health and Social Welfare is responsible for protecting the rights of persons with disabilities. During the year the ministry conducted a series of sensitization programs for government social workers about persons with disabilities. NGOs provided some services to persons with disabilities.

National/Racial/Ethnic Minorities

Although the law prohibits ethnic discrimination, racial discrimination is enshrined in the constitution, which provides that only "persons who are Negroes or of Negro descent" may be citizens or own land. Many persons of Lebanese and Asian descent who were born or lived most of their lives in the country were denied full rights as a result of this racial discrimination. Differences involving ethnic groups continued to contribute to social and political tensions.

The country has 16 indigenous ethnic groups; each speaks a distinct primary language and was concentrated regionally. No ethnic group constituted a majority of the population.

Ethnic and religious differences between Mandingos and non-Mandingos did not result in violence during the year.

Other Societal Abuses and Discrimination

There was no societal violence or discrimination based on sexual orientation or against persons with HIV/AIDS.

Section 6 Worker Rights

a. The Right of Association

The law provides workers, except members of the military, police, and civil service, the right to associate in trade unions, and workers exercised this right in practice. The law prohibits unions from engaging in partisan political activity. Union power increased during the year; however, the largely illiterate workforce engaged in few economic activities beyond subsistence level.

In December 2006 the minister of labor suspended the leadership of the Firestone Agricultural Workers Union of Liberia (FAWUL) and appointed an interim leadership, an action subsequently overturned by the courts on April 2. On the same day the Aggrieved Workers Union (AWU), a group which split off from the FAWUL, demanded that both the FAWUL and interim leadership groups should be ineligible for leadership because both were failing to represent the workers of Firestone. After negotiations, elections were held on July 7, and the candidate of the AWU won the ability to represent Firestone workers in negotiations with management.

On July 20, the labor court nullified the election on the grounds that the labor minister held the election illegally. On December 6, workers began a work stoppage in support of the elected leadership. Government authorities did not intervene to prevent the work stoppage, but sent 150 police officers to quell violence against property and against workers who wanted to continue working. During the violence two people were detained and later released without charge, and five people were injured. On December 21, the Supreme Court upheld the election, confirming the Aggrieved Workers Union candidate, but did not rule on the legality of the strike itself.

The law does not prohibit antiunion discrimination, but there were no reports of such discrimination during the year.

b. The Right to Organize and Bargain Collectively

The law allows unions to conduct their activities without interference, and the government protected this right in practice. With the exception of civil servants, military, and police personnel, all workers have the right to organize and bargain collectively.

During the year the government implemented the October 2006 repeal of People's Redemption Council Decree 12, which had nullified labor laws that provided for the right to strike.

Several unions held strikes during the year, including the Firestone Labor Union and the University of Liberia Faculty Association (ULFA). The ULFA strike on June 18 closed down the university and required LNP and UNMIL intervention to stop university students from blocking roads and destroying property.

There were no export processing zones.

c. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

The law prohibits forced or compulsory labor, including by children; however, there were reports that such practices occurred.

d. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment

The law prohibits the employment and apprenticeship of children under the age of 16 during school hours; however, the government did not effectively enforce the law. Child labor was widespread in almost every economic sector, in large part due to extreme poverty. Throughout rural areas, particularly where there were no schools, small children continued to take care of younger brothers and sisters and to work on family subsistence farms. In urban areas children assisted their parents as vendors in markets or they hawked goods on the streets. Some children were engaged in hazardous labor in the alluvial diamond industry and in agriculture.

During the year there were reports that several rubber plantations employed children. There were also reports that children were forced to work in conditions that were likely to harm their health and safety, such as stone cutting or work that required carrying heavy loads.

There were no government programs to prevent child labor or remove children from such labor. An international NGO worked to eliminate the worst forms of child labor by putting at-risk children back into school. Other local and international NGOs worked to raise awareness about the worst forms of child labor.

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

The national law requires a minimum wage of approximately \$0.25 (15 LD) per hour for up to eight hours per day, excluding benefits, for unskilled laborers. The law also requires that agricultural workers be paid \$0.25 per hour (15 LD), excluding benefits. Skilled labor has no minimum wage. The highly competitive minimum wage jobs did not provide a decent standard of living for a worker and family. Families dependent on minimum wage incomes also engaged in subsistence farming, small-scale marketing, and begging.

The government continued to downsize and delete ghost names from the civil service payroll for more efficiency and transparency. In the 2007-8 national budget, the minimum civil servant salary was raised from \$30 (1,800 LD) to \$55 (3,300 LD) per month. Unlike in the previous year, the government generally paid civil servant salaries on time.

The law provides for a 48-hour, six-day regular workweek with a 30-minute rest period per five hours of work. The six-day workweek may be extended to 56 hours for service occupations and to 72 hours for miners, with overtime pay beyond 48 hours.

The law provides for paid leave, severance benefits, and safety standards, but enforcement was targeted solely at foreign-owned firms that generally observed these standards. The Ministry of Labor lacked the ability to enforce government-established health and safety standards. The law does not give workers the right to remove themselves from dangerous situations without risking loss of employment.

Due to the continued severe economic problems, most citizens were forced to accept any work they could find regardless of wages or working conditions.

