

# Liberia

<b>Response to Information Request Number:</b>	LBR01002.ZAR
<b>Date:</b>	5 October 2000
<b>Subject:</b>	Liberia: Information on the Special Security Service
<b>From:</b>	INS Resource Information Center, Washington, DC
<b>Keywords:</b>	Liberia / Arbitrary arrests / Death in custody / Executive power / Extrajudicial executions / Freedom of association / Freedom of expression / Freedom of political opinion / Gross human rights violations / Harassment / Impunity / National security / Public safety / Repression / Special Security Service / SSS / Special Security Unit / SSU / Summary executions / State responsibility / Suspected persons / Torture / Use of force

## Query:

What is Liberia's SSS?

## Response:

The Special Security Service (SSS) is a security force within the government of Liberia dedicated to the protection of the president. Prior to 1980, the unit was specifically designated for presidential protection (Pajibo, 29 August 2000). It was created by President Tubman and modeled on the United States Secret Service (Jones, 12 September 2000).

A policy analyst for Africa Faith and Justice Network explained that after the coup in 1980, in which Samuel Doe seized power and established a military government, Doe's army the SSS had overlapping functions. Problems developed with the "unruly" behavior of the security forces (Pajibo, 29 August 2000). A Liberian human rights attorney with Liberians United for Peace and Democracy explained that after the 1980 coup, the Doe government purged most of the professionalized SSS officers and replaced them with members of Doe's ethnic group, the Krahn (Jones, 12 September, 2000).

During the Doe administration, the SSS as well as several other security forces were coordinated by the Joint Security Commission. It included the Ministers of Defense, Justice, and National Security, as well as the heads of the military and the police (LCHR 1986).

As resistance to the Doe government grew, human rights violations became widespread. Torture, disappearances, extrajudicial executions, imprisonment of opposition leaders, and restriction of freedom of expression were all commonplace violations of human rights under Doe's government (AI 1997, 11-12). As Doe's power base diminished, he began to rely on the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL) to carry out atrocities. After 1985, a year in which Doe was challenged by Jackson Doe (no relation to Samuel Doe) and General Thomas Quiwonkpa, the AFL began to target the Mano and Gio ethnic groups in Nimba county because both Jackson Doe and Quiwonkpa were natives of that region (AI 1997, 12).

In 1989, Charles Taylor entered the country through Nimba county with fighters known as the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) in an effort to overthrow the Doe government.

The NPFL committed serious human rights abuses, particularly targeting the Krahns and Mandingoes who were suspected of supporting the Doe government (AI 1997, 12).

The policy analyst with Africa Faith and Justice Network indicated that when the war first started it is difficult to know exactly what happened to the SSS during this time. Although the AFL was viewed as the official Liberian army, members of the SSS may have collaborated with the AFL to put down the rebellion. As the analyst pointed out, the SSS had a fluid and undefined role. As such, they could easily have been included with the AFL and deployed alongside the AFL in terms of presidential protection (Pajibo, 29 August 2000).

During the first year of the civil war, the AFL attacked unarmed civilians throughout Nimba county in an effort to repel the NPFL advance into Liberia. However, by 1990 the NPFL was controlling over 90% of Liberian territory. As the war continued, President Doe was eventually captured and tortured to death by a faction of the NPFL known as the Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia (INPFL). The fate of the SSS and AFL organization remained unclear, as six major factions emerged. These factions did not explicitly include either the SSS or the AFL. However, since the SSS and AFL were predominantly made up of Doe's supporters, the Krahns and Mandingoes, it is plausible that members of the organization joined other factions. Krahn and Mandingo factions included the Liberian Peace Council, led by George Boley and consisting of Krahns; the United Liberation Movement of Liberia for Democracy (ULIMO) created in 1991 by Krahn and Mandingo ethnic groups and led by Alhaji F.V. Kromah; and the Roosevelt Johnson-led Krahn breakaway group known as ULIMO-J (AI 1997, 13).

All of the factions committed serious human rights abuses, including but not limited to deliberate and arbitrary killings of unarmed civilians, torture, cruel, inhumane, and degrading treatment of prisoners, summary executions, rape, hostage taking, and forced displacement of civilians. Child soldiers were also forcibly conscripted (AI 1997, 13).

According to the Liberian human rights attorney, when the Doe regime disintegrated, the SSS did as well. Some elements were subsumed into factions of the military and dispersed as were other AFL soldiers after Doe's death (Jones, 12 September 2000).

During the interim government, the SSS was dormant. However, when Charles Taylor was elected to the presidency and took power, the SSS was reactivated (Jones, 12 Sept. 2000).

By the war's end in 1997, the Abuja Accord called for elections and disarmament. By the terms of the accord, the army was to be reconstituted to include members from all of the warring factions. However, after Charles Taylor's victory in the presidential elections on 19 July 1997, he did not acknowledge that part of the peace accords. Rather, the police, SSS, and military were filled with former soldiers of the NPFL. The policy analyst suggested that every able-bodied NPFL person was integrated into the new army, such that 60-75% of the personnel of the new national security forces were Taylor supporters (Pajibo, 29 August 2000). The Monrovia-based National Human Rights Monitor (NAHRIM) reports that "the SSS, since the inauguration of the new government, has been infested with former fighters of the rival NPFL of the incumbent President, Charles Taylor" (NAHRIM, 1998).

However, the Liberian human rights attorney indicates that it is very possible that members of the SSS under the Doe government (who were not members of the Krahn tribe) could have been reinstated in 1997 to Taylor's SSS, particularly if they had professional training or experience. Reinstatement would also be likely if the individual was from a tribe that was loyal to the Taylor rebellion or of Americo-Liberian descent (Jones, 12 September 2000).

Additionally, the Taylor administration has created a new security unit, known as the Executive Mansion Special Security Unit or simply as the Special Security Unit (SSU). This unit was initially intended for the protection of the President and his family. However, a

Liberian human rights advocate stated that, "today, these men are seen not around the mansion or the residence of the President, but all over the city, at check points, major intersections, and in the communities carrying long-range weapons...Most of the men in these units are former fighters of the NPFL, who are trained for war and not for civilian protection" (Sannoh, 15 July 1998). The SSU may be a small part of the larger, 1500-member SSS; however, this is unclear (Williams 1998).

Since the reconstitution of the SSS under the Taylor administration, it has been linked to multiple human rights abuses. Members of the "security forces" in Liberia, which include the armed forces, the national police, the SSS, as well as other irregular security services attached to key ministries and parastatal corporations, have committed numerous human rights abuses. Abuses attributed to the security forces include:

- Extrajudicial killings, particularly the September 18 killings of perhaps hundreds of ethnic Krahn who were suspected to be affiliated with a faction (ULIMO-J) that opposed Taylor during the Civil War
- Arbitrary arrest and detention
- Torture, beatings, abuse, and humiliation of citizens
- Violation of citizens' privacy rights, conducting illegal searches and looting homes
- Restrictions on the freedom of the press
- Restrictions on freedom of movement, using roadblocks to extort from travelers and returning refugees
- Harassment of human rights activists (US DOS 1999, 231-232).

More specifically, members of the SSS have been directly linked to a number of human rights abuses. The most prominent include the Camp Johnson Road operation of September 18, 1998, the murder of Samuel S. Dokie, and the abduction and murder of Madam Nowai Flomo.

On September 18, 1998, security forces including the SSS in Monrovia conducted a military assault, code named Camp Johnson Road. This district was a stronghold of Roosevelt Johnson, a former faction leader of ULIMO-J, and his supporters, who were members of the Krahn ethnic group. There had been some unrest in the area due to attacks by supporters of Roosevelt Johnson, who were apparently acting with impunity. The government indicated that they were entering the area to restore law and order (AI 1999, 236). Hundreds of SSS officers and members of the police Special Task Force, joined by scores of irregular former combatants of Taylor's NPFL, employed automatic weapons, rocket-propelled grenades, and mortars. According to the US Department of State, "credible reports indicate that as many as 300 persons, most of them Krahn, many of them women and children, were killed in a 17-hour battle and in subsequent house-to-house searches and summary executions by government forces" (USDOS 1998, 233).

Five SSS officers were charged in January 1998, for the 29 November 1997 murder of political opposition leader Samuel Saye Dokie and three family members. The director of the SSS publicly admitted that he had ordered the Dokie's arrest, but he disavowed participation in or knowledge of the murders (USDOS 1998, 233). Though two members of the SSS were charged, they were acquitted (AI 1999, 237).

On the night of June 28, 1998, nine members of the SSS allegedly abducted Nowai Flomo, whose sister is an officer in the SSS, from her residence in Monrovia. Several persons claimed to have witnessed Flomo's ritual murder. Though an SSS officer was arrested, he was not brought to trial (USDOS 1999, 233).

According to the Liberian human rights attorney, a lot of the human rights abuses occur not because of institutionalized orders from the SSS Director or the President. Rather, the individual members of the SSS want to please their boss by intimidating or threatening opponents of the president. According to Jones, these individuals often act with impunity

and are praised or rewarded in some fashion. The nature of the system, he says, leads to abuse and intimidation at the individual level out of an effort to please President Taylor, even without direct orders from the President or the SSS Director (Jones, 12 September 2000).

Despite these many human rights violations, the experts all indicate that it is very difficult to attribute human rights violations directly to individuals within the SSS. One expert says, "I wouldn't be surprised if the majority of SSS officers would be human rights abusers," but also strongly emphasizes that there is no way to know for certain.

This report was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the RIC within time constraints. This response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum.

### References

Amnesty International (AI). 1998. *Amnesty International Report 1998*. New York: Amnesty International USA.

Amnesty International (AI). 1999. *Amnesty International Report 1999*. New York: Amnesty International USA.

Amnesty International (AI). 1997. *Liberia: Time to Take Human Rights Seriously--Placing Human Rights on the National Agenda*. [Internet] URL: <<http://www.amnesty.org/ailib/aipub/1997/AFR/1300597.htm>> [Accessed on 1 September 2000]

Best, Kenneth. Former Liberian Journalist and currently Executive Director of Jubilee Center, Inc. 25 August, 2000. Telephone Interview.

Danish Immigration Service. January 1999. *Report on the Roving Attache Mission to Monrovia, Liberia, 7 - 13 June 1998*. Copenhagen: Danish Immigration Service. [Internet] URL: <<http://www.uldst.dk/sjle/liberiaeng98/index.html>> [Accessed on 29 August 2000].

Jones, Mohamedu. Human Rights Attorney. Liberians United for Peace and Democracy. 12 September 2000. Telephone Interview.

Lawyers Committee for Human Rights (LCHR). 1986. *Liberia: A Promise Betrayed*. New York: Lawyers Committee for Human Rights.

National Human Rights Monitor (NAHRIM). 8 July 1998. *3<sup>rd</sup> Quarter (April 1 - June 30, 1998) Report: Liberia* [Letter to the Associate Grants Officer for Africa, National Endowment for Democracy]. Monrovia, Liberia: NAHRIM INC.

Pajibo, Ezekiel. Senior Policy Analyst. Africa Faith and Justice Network. 29 August 2000. Telephone Interview.

Peterson, Dave. National Endowment for Democracy. 29 August 2000. Telephone Interview.

Sannah, Benedict. 15 July 1998. *Enhancing Liberia's Security in the New Millennium*. National Conference on the Future of Liberia: Liberia Vision 2024. Monrovia, Liberia.

United States Department of State (US DOS). 26 February 1999. *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 1998--Volume 1*. U.S. Government Printing Office. Washington.

Williams, Abraham M. "A Crisis of National Security." *The Perspective*. 6 October 1998.  
[Internet] URL: <[http://www.africanews.org/west/liberia/stories/19981006\\_feat6.html](http://www.africanews.org/west/liberia/stories/19981006_feat6.html)>  
[Accessed on 13 October 1998]

*Last Modified 06/14/2002*