

Bringing peace to West Africa: Liberia and Sierra Leone

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Introduction

This paper discusses the tortured peace processes in the West African states of Liberia and Sierra Leone, delineating lessons learnt from the complicated and prolonged diplomacy and external military interventions that characterised these efforts.

In important ways, though each of the conflicts was driven by their own internal dynamics, there were strong linkages between them which complicated their resolution. The difficulty arose partly from the failure of external mediators to understand the linked dynamics of the conflicts, as well as the mercenary interests that largely drove them. This paper will attempt to delineate these linkages by a detailed and chronological discussion of the mediation efforts and lessons learnt. It focuses especially on Liberia and Sierra Leone, in part because the conflicts in these two countries have now ended, but also because the mediation and external interventions in those countries illuminate most completely the chequered nature of such efforts in marginal areas of the world.

The wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone confronted policy makers and mediators with a fundamental challenge: how to deal with armed non-state actors who appeared less interested in politics than plunder, and who, therefore, were extremely difficult to accommodate in any rational political settlement. Two characteristics marked the mediation efforts. First, these conflicts were among the first post-Cold War conflicts in a region of little strategic value to the great powers. As a result, the mediation efforts for the most part were dominated by NGOs, religious and other civil society groupings, whereas the intervention of

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regional players was often limited and controversial. Second, because of the nature of the key armed players, painstakingly negotiated agreements or accords were often meaningless to the extent that the issue of negotiation or mediation itself became controversial.

Liberia was the first of the two to implode into conflict and regional attention focused on it, once it became clear that the US (Liberia's then most important ally) was uninterested. In 1996, more than a dozen broken accords later, Yusuf Bangura, a scholar with the Geneva-based United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD), spoke of Liberia as presenting the "thieves' dilemma":

All armed groups are keenly aware that none has operated under any formal system of rules that is based on trust, honesty, principles, and respect for law and order. Indeed each leader has so much blood on his hands that none believes the others are capable of using power for the common good. Each is therefore likely to opt for the gun in the 'rational' belief that a first strike would give advantages or in the rather 'irrational' consolation that it is better to deny the prize to the enemy even if everybody dies in the process.²

In fact, it was only after high-profile international intervention, in the form of thousands of UN troops with a mandate to shoot to protect civilians that the Liberian conflict was brought to an end in 2004.

Mediation efforts in Sierra Leone followed a slightly different pattern. When the war started in 1991, it was immediately seen as a spill over of the Liberian conflict, and though the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) emerged to take credit for the violence, it was seen as a front for Liberia's chief warlord, Charles Taylor. Regional efforts, therefore, initially focused on supporting the Sierra Leone government to beat back "the bandits," as it was commonly put. The support came in the form of a few thousand troops from Guinea and Nigeria to protect key installations in the country and to support the ill-trained and incompetent Sierra Leone army. However, as the conflict escalated, local and international NGOs, civil society organisations and religious groupings mobilised to put pressure on the government and others to begin a negotiation. Among the most prominent in this endeavour were the Women's Movement for Peace in Sierra Leone and the Inter-Religious Committee. International NGOs, including the London-based International Alert (IA) were among the first high-profile outside parties to meet with, and finally convince, the RUF leadership in its forest hideouts in eastern Sierra Leone to come out and begin serious negotiations with the government. This involved providing the largely isolated RUF much-needed international publicity and some logistical support (in the form of satellite phones), prompting condemnations from the Sierra Leone government. IA was accused of dealing in diamonds with the RUF. ICRC, which also had some contacts with the RUF, found that one of its offices in

² Quoted in Max Sesay, "Bringing Peace to Liberia," Conciliation Resources paper, 1996.

Sierra Leone was raided by West African troops supporting the government of Sierra Leone. In 1995, a group of women activists in Sierra Leone who ventured into RUF territory as “mothers, sisters and wives” of the rebels also went badly wrong. The RUF abducted key members and had them executed. Alarmed by these developments, the Secretary General of the then Organisation of African Unity (OAU) spoke of “an anarchy of good intentions.”

If the many Liberian armed factions proved unwieldy to mediators, Sierra Leone’s RUF – which was for most of the conflict the sole insurgent force – was singularly illusive. For many years after the conflict started, the leadership was simply a series of disembodied voices occasionally heard on the BBC. Unlike Liberia, with flamboyant rebel leaders like Charles Taylor, there was no public face for the RUF for many years. The group was only lured out of the bush as a result of the efforts of, primarily, the ICRC, with IA playing a more covert and controversial role. That was in 1996, when the RUF appeared in Ivory Coast for peace talks with Sierra Leone. I attended those initial talks as a journalist, spending over two weeks in the Hotel President in Yammoussoukru where the talks were held. What struck me then was the complete absence of coherence in the RUF’s position. Mediators had to hire lawyers for the RUF to craft a position for them that would be included in the final peace accord, signed in November 1996. Perhaps predictably, the accord collapsed a few months after, and fighting broke out again. As in the case of Liberia, the war in Sierra Leone ended in 2002 only after thousands of UN troops, backed by a robust British military, forced the disarmament of the rebels.

One key lesson learnt from the mediation efforts relating to both Liberia and Sierra Leone is that while indigenous initiatives – the role of religious groups, academics, women’s groups, other civil society organisations – is always to be welcomed as the spearhead of mediation, it should not be seen as a substitute for more high-profile external intervention, in particular that of the UN, which in addition to its incomparably greater resources, also confers greater legitimacy than others. Wars are primarily about power, and while the powerless can charm the powerful into all kinds of agreements, the important element of enforcement is lacking. And this will surely undo such agreements. The other lesson that emerges, particularly in the case of Liberia, is that once a commitment has been made to intervene militarily, such an intervention must be done with sufficient force and determination to overwhelm the internal armed combatants. The West African intervention force Economic Community of West African States Military Observation Group (ECOMOG) clearly lacked this in both countries, but especially in Liberia. Finally, an important lesson is that mediators need to know who the armed combatants are – their motivations, backers, and strength. The failure to do so for many years with respect to Liberia and Sierra Leone led to a lot of false steps by mediators.

This latter point has also been very relevant in the Ivorian conflict, whose handling by external actors has been markedly different from Sierra Leone and Liberia. Because of the economic importance of Ivory Coast, and in particular the

significant French interests in the country, the Ivorian crisis attracted immediate international attention in 2002. The conflict also benefited somewhat from the experience of Liberia and Sierra Leone. In just four years, thirteen peace agreements were signed, but none of them seemed to grasp the inspirational role and personal interest of Guillaume Soro, an obscure former student leader leading the rebellion. This was finally recognised, in the fourteenth and most recent accord, signed on 4 March 2007 in the Burkinabe capital, Ouagadougou, which calls for all fighters involved in the conflict to be integrated into the national army, and for Soro to play a key role in the government, almost certainly as Prime Minister. If any agreement offers a hope for a resolution, this might be it.³

Liberia

The Liberian conflict unleashed a humanitarian catastrophe on a massive scale. In the first year of the war, as many as 700 000 Liberians fled the country, many of them to Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea and Sierra Leone. Tens of thousands more fled to Ghana and Nigeria.

By August 1990, there were officially 80 000 Liberian refugees in Sierra Leone, which included Liberia's most politically active leaders, like Doe's Vice-President Harry Moniba. In May 1990, the talks held in Freetown set up a five-member Consultative Group composed mainly of Anglophone West African states (Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone, The Gambia and Guinea). This Group, known as the Standing Mediation Committee (SMC), was charged with maintaining peace and security in the region and initiated talks between Doe's disintegrating government and the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) in Freetown in July 1990.

While the SMC appeared well-meaning, it was flawed as a primarily Anglophone outfit in a region with a strong Francophone presence. This was all the more problematic as the Francophone countries like Ivory Coast and Burkina Faso had obvious interests in the Liberian conflict: both of them were known supporters of Charles Taylor and his NPFL. Some SMC members, including its dominant power, Nigeria, were suspected of backing President Samuel Doe: Nigeria's Ibrahim Babangida was a known ally of Liberia and was believed to have significant personal investments in Liberia. Little wonder that Ivory Coast and Burkina Faso, with backing from France, actively undermined the SMC's efforts. Burkina Faso, for instance, allegedly provided troops to fight alongside Taylor. The strength of the SMC, on the other hand, was that early on it incorporated leading civil society leaders from Liberia in its efforts. These included religious groups, academics, women's groups and others. In fact, shortly after it was set up, the SMC made Amos Sawyer, a leading Liberian academic and activist, a key interlocutor, and finally interim President of Liberia.

Given the composition of the SMC, it is not surprising that the NPFL, always a slippery player anyway, refused to cooperate. At the first meeting of the SMC, the

³ See "Carving up the Country," *Economist* 8 March 2007.

NPFL was represented by Tom Woewiyu, who announced at a press conference shortly after the initial meetings that his group would not be accepting any ceasefire proposition. Nor, he declared, would it accept any Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) peacekeeping mission, a possibility he described as an “invasion.”⁴ The talks, it seemed, were getting nowhere.

However, the West African leaders pressed on. On 6 August, leaders of the SMC convened for two days in Banjul, The Gambia, to discuss plans to resolve the humanitarian disaster in Liberia. The SMC agreed on a peace plan which called for an immediate ceasefire in Liberia, the creation of a ceasefire monitoring group to be known as ECOMOG, the formation of a broad-based Interim Government for Liberia, the appointment of a Special Representative of ECOWAS who was to work closely with the ECOMOG commander in Liberia, and ultimately the conduct of free and fair elections in the country. This plan was approved by the Authority of ECOWAS Heads of State and Government on 25 August 1990. That same month ECOMOG was set up to re-establish order in Monrovia. The NPFL condemned the move and vowed to resist any ‘invasion force’.

Unanimous agreement within ECOWAS was not to be expected. The Francophone countries, led by Ivory Coast, openly criticised the approach of the SMC. Ignoring them, and in quick order, nearly 4 000 troops from five West African states (Nigeria, Ghana, Guinea, Sierra Leone, and The Gambia) were dispatched to Monrovia from their forward base in Freetown, under the command of Ghanaian Lieutenant-General Arnold Quainoo. The mission was billed as a disinterested and necessary humanitarian intervention.⁵

Unlike previous peacekeeping missions, ECOMOG intervened in the Liberian crisis before any ceasefire agreement and, indeed, against the express wishes of the most important warring faction, Taylor’s NPFL. Taylor had promised to attack the West African troops if they ventured into Liberia, and did so the very first day the troops landed in Monrovia. Regional rivalries and differences also complicated the mission. The only Francophone state to contribute troops to ECOMOG was Guinea (Conakry), long at odds with other Francophone states in the region.

This controversial beginning ignited a debate among African scholars about the role and mandate of the interventionist force. Was it a bold attempt at peacekeeping, offering strong lessons in regional conflict management in a world in which the international community was progressively disengaging from Africa?⁶ Or was it an ill-conceived and regionally divisive intervention exercise by autocratic leaders with disastrous consequences for regional cohesion and sustainable democracy?⁷

4 See Aboagye, *ECOMOG*, 59.

5 *New Citizen*, 8 November 1990.

6 Margaret Vogt, ed., *The Liberian Crisis and ECOMOG: A Bold Attempt at Regional Peacekeeping* (Lagos: Gabumo Publishing Co., 1992).

7 Max Ahmadu Sesay, “Civil War and Collective Intervention in Liberia: A Strange Case of Peacekeeping in West Africa,” *Review of African Political Economy*, 67 (March 1996).

Many West African militaries lacked capabilities—weapons, equipment, logistics, etc.—for planning and conducting sustained campaigns outside their own countries. Only Nigeria had an air force and navy of any significance. ECOMOG was generally hampered by logistical constraints, including the lack of maps, poor roads, old vehicles, inadequate supply of fuel and food, not to mention an uncertain and often hostile political climate. Also, the quality of ECOMOG's joint multinational military leadership was spotty. While some commanders, like the Nigerian General Joshua Dongonyaro, were astute and decisive, maintaining sustained pressure on the rampaging NPFL fighters, others, like the force's first commander General Arnold Quainoo (from Ghana) were perceived to be less aggressive. It was during Quainoo's tenure that one of the faction leaders, Prince Yormie Johnson, captured the beleaguered Doe, and executed him along with 70 of his bodyguards.

President Doe was captured on 9 September 1990 by Johnson's faction when he ventured, unannounced, to ECOMOG headquarters in Monrovia's Freeport, an area that had been secured by Johnson's NPFL. He was tortured in the most brutal fashion and was left to bleed to death.

The event severely undermined the credibility of the West African intervention force. Serious questions were asked as to why the peacekeepers did not act to save Doe, who was nabbed by Johnson whilst on a visit to their headquarters. Quainoo was promptly recalled and replaced by Nigerian General Joshua Dongonyaro. The removal of Doe did not bring the factions closer to an agreement. The war escalated instead. ECOMOG, however, was able to secure Monrovia sufficiently to install the Interim Government of National Unity (IGNU) for Liberia, which in August 1990 had been elected in Banjul, The Gambia, under the auspices of ECOWAS. However, the Interim Government, which was headed by Amos Sawyer, a famed political scientist, was rejected by Taylor and was so beleaguered that it had to rely entirely on ECOMOG for protection.

A chief lesson derived from the above attempts is that a peace-keeping or peace-enforcement force can only be effective if there is a peace to keep. There has to be agreement between the armed factions about the need for an external interposing force. Where an intervening force decides to step in without such an agreement in order to protect civilians, it has to be deployed in sufficient numbers, and with maximum logistical backing, to make an immediate difference – which is to say, to pacify the warring factions by force. ECOMOG had failed to do this in the first place and later attempted to make up for its initial mistakes by appeasing the NPFL. This created its own complications, clearly helping to prolong the war in the country and the suffering of its people.

Sierra Leone: A spill over conflict?

On 1 November 1990, Taylor broadcast a statement on the BBC threatening to attack and destroy Sierra Leone's international airport, arguing that by allowing its territory to be used as an operational base for ECOMOG, Sierra Leone had

made itself a legitimate target. In March 1991, attacks by armed groups from Liberia on parts of eastern and southern Sierra Leone led to serious fighting and bloodshed in Sierra Leone. The Revolutionary United Front (RUF) emerged out of the initial fighters and was led by Foday Saybanah Sankoh, an aging former Sierra Leonean soldier who had hitherto been fighting in Taylor's NPFL. The group claimed that it aimed to overthrow Sierra Leone's President Momoh and his "corrupt and despotic" one-party state. However, its campaigns were characterised by terror attacks on civilians and nihilistic destruction of property. Sankoh had trained in Libya with Liberia's Charles Taylor, and it was soon clear that it was the better educated and equipped Taylor who was actually manipulating the RUF.

Facing defeat, Momoh invoked a bilateral defence pact that Sierra Leone had signed with Guinea in 1971. Guinea troops promptly intervened on the side of the beleaguered Sierra Leone troops. This temporarily held the advance of the RUF in check, but the war continued.

By 1994, after Sierra Leone's government hired mercenaries who seriously battered the RUF in key areas of the country, the RUF began to send out tentative feelers for peace. Sierra Leonean civil society capitalised on this to pressure the junta to organise elections and begin peace talks. The call for dialogue was first made by the country's Catholic Archbishop, Joseph Ganda, who implored the military regime to engage the rebels in talks. This sparked the emergence of various "independent" civil society and international NGO peace initiatives. The government responded by setting up a National Security Council (NSC) comprising representatives of the government, the army, the police, the Bar Association, the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ), the Labour Congress and the University of Sierra Leone. In December 1994, the government sent a letter to the UN Secretary General imploring him to use his "good offices to assist in bringing about a peaceful settlement to the rebel war." The Secretary General promptly despatched Felix Masha, a Tanzanian diplomat, to Freetown to make preliminary contacts with all parties. Masha was soon replaced by Berkhanu Dinka, an Ethiopian diplomat who continued the exploratory contacts. These efforts, however, were low-profile. National attention was focused on replacing the military junta with a civilian administration which, it was hoped, would more appropriately tackle negotiations with the RUF. Elections were held in March 1996 and won by the Sierra Leone Peoples Party (SLPP) under Ahmed Tejan Kabbah, a former UN bureaucrat, who took over as president.

The new president accelerated talks with the RUF. The initial meetings, facilitated by the ICRC and (somewhat covertly) International Alert (IA), were held in Yammoussoukru. The ICRC arranged for Sankoh and his entourage to be airlifted from their forest hideout in eastern Sierra Leone and flown into Ivory Coast. The UN, OAU and ECOWAS had representatives at the talks. The RUF delegation appeared unprepared for the meetings, and at the opening session, Foday Sankoh made a rambling speech which failed to set out the group's expectations, not to mention principles. IA's Special Envoy at the talks,

a Ghanaian named Addai Sebo (a confidante of both Charles Taylor and Sankoh), played an advisory role to the RUF leader during the talks. The talks subsequently moved to Abidjan, where the elected government of Sierra Leone was represented by the new Attorney General, Solomon Berewa, who brought a sense of urgency and smoothness to the proceedings. Lawyers were hired for the RUF to draft its demands into a coherent document, and a London-based Sierra Leonean lawyer who had earlier initiated “independent” talks with the RUF, Omrie Golley, became unofficial legal adviser to the RUF leadership. This new arrangement gave focus to the talks, but it was clear that the RUF – which hardly understood the magnitude of the proceedings, perhaps viewing it all as a kind of game – was not seriously committed. On 30 November 1996, the Abidjan Accord was signed. Both sides to the conflict, government and RUF, declared “with immediate effect” a “total cessation of hostilities”, and agreed to give priority to the “establishment and consolidation of a just peace.” The talks lasted for nearly eight months.

The agreement collapsed in May 1997 after rogue government soldiers overthrew Kabbah and invited the RUF to join a power-sharing agreement under what they chose to call the Armed Forces Ruling Council (AFRC). This arrangement turned out to be chaotic, and the AFRC was ousted in 1998 by West African troops led by Nigeria. Kabbah was reinstated, but the war continued. It climaxed in a devastating attack on Freetown by the rebels in January 1999. Over 5 000 people were killed and nearly a thousand survivors suffered crude amputations. A large part of the city was destroyed. These atrocities finally led to a massive UN and British intervention, and, after a programme of disarmament and elections, Sierra Leone’s war was declared over in 2002.

The negotiations were clearly not conducted in good faith, in particular on the part of the RUF. There were too many interests, and the role of the IA, while initially positive, became unhelpful. There must be a limit to how much influence or role an NGO should be allowed to play in mediation efforts involving governments, the UN and major regional organisations. A key strength of international NGOs in mediation is the perception that they are unbiased, with no ties to the parties to the conflict. IA compromised itself by appearing to be close to the RUF, at the same time as earning condemnation from the Sierra Leone government.

A more serious understanding of the warring factions, in particular an understanding of their motivations ought to inform negotiations. Documents unearthed since illuminate this point. For instance, a letter from Sankoh to the Libyan government (one of his key external backers) dated 4 December 1996, shortly after the signing of the Accord, requests money to buy arms. Sankoh states that the RUF had signed the Abidjan Accord “just so as to relieve our movement of the enormous pressure from the international community while I will use this opportunity to transact my business in getting our fighting materials freely and easily.”⁸

8 Quoted in Gberie, *A Dirty War*, 63.

Liberia again

Liberia's war, however, continued almost unabated, and half a dozen or so broken accords would have to be signed before it would end, and only after massive UN intervention. Shortly after the Interim Government was set up, in September 1991 another Liberian factional army emerged. The United Liberation Movement for Democracy in Liberia (ULIMO) was formed in Sierra Leone out of the remnants of Doe's army. Vowing to rid the country of Taylor and his rebels, the group launched attacks from eastern Sierra Leone against Taylor's "Greater Liberia." In October 1991, ECOWAS's mediation led to yet another accord, signed in Yamoussoukro, Côte d'Ivoire. It called for the encampment and disarmament of all factions in the country, to be followed by national elections.

In fact, Taylor's forces and ULIMO continued fighting, and in October 1992, Taylor launched the highly destructive "Operation Octopus" on Monrovia. ECOMOG repulsed the attacks after heavy fighting, and the UN Security Council imposed an arms embargo on Taylor and the other factions. The Security Council also appointed a Special Envoy to Liberia, Trevor Gordon-Somers, a Jamaican diplomat. The Liberian conflict was now receiving high-level UN attention, but Gordon-Somers' relationship with ECOMOG and the Interim Government was far from cordial. The ECOMOG command and troops, on which the whole peace mission depended, objected to the UN's intrusive presence, which did not have boots on the ground. Gordon-Somers, on his part, was suspicious of ECOMOG, which he viewed as not entirely altruistic. At one point the ECOMOG command openly declared that it would not protect UN personnel in the country, and asked them to bring in troops to provide their own security. The relationship between the two groups remained tense for much of Gordon-Somers' tenure until his replacement by a West Africa, James Jonah, a senior Sierra Leonean UN official.

Liberia's opportunistic factions tended to splinter whenever there was hope of a resolution of the crisis. In March 1994, ULIMO split into Krahn and Mandingo factions, respectively ULIMO-J (headed by Roosevelt Johnson) and ULIMO-K (headed by Alhaji Kromah). It was in that same month that the new Council of State was inaugurated, with a little known lawyer, David Kpomakpor, as chairman, while Sawyer quietly left the political scene. Violence continued in the country, however, with the different factions fighting for dominance. In September 1994, the Akosombo Agreement was signed by leaders of the three main factions—NPFL, AFL, and ULIMO-K—calling for an immediate cessation of hostilities and a reconstituted Council of State, which would reflect a better balance of factional forces in the country. Disputes inevitably broke out over this latter point, and the Agreement collapsed over matters of power sharing, with Taylor insisting that he should dominate any such arrangement. Three months later, in December, the Akosombo II Agreement was signed. A ceasefire came into effect, along with a commitment to conduct elections in late 1995.

The Akosombo Talks were initiated by ECOWAS, the OAU and the UN, and it brought together leaders of the warring factions, various civil society groups in Liberia, and exiled politicians. The talks were chaired by Ghana's President Jerry Rawlings.

In early 1995 ECOWAS, now chaired by Nigeria's General Sani Abacha, once again brought all the factions together in Abuja. The old divisions in ECOWAS, Anglophone and Francophone, had been largely tempered with the inclusion of troops from Senegal (but not Ivory Coast and Burkina Faso, which refused to send in troops). The mission also benefited from substantial logistical support from the US, which channelled most of its resources through the Senegalese division, which it viewed as most credible. Abacha, under pressure in Nigeria for his illegal and brutal rule, was determined to make an impact internationally and expended substantial resources into the operation. He also was not shy of making overtures to Nigeria's traditional allies in the region, including Ivory Coast and Burkina Faso, both of which were assiduously wooed, and henceforth made a commitment not to oppose the mission openly. An agreement confirming the ceasefire was hammered out, and in September the Council of State, which included leaders from the three major factions, was established, with Wilton Sankawulo, an ageing academic, as chairman. The Abuja Accord scheduled elections for August 1996, and provided for the comprehensive deployment of ECOMOG troops throughout Liberia to oversee a planned disarmament and reintegration process. However, in April 1996, barely four months before the scheduled elections, heavy fighting broke out in Monrovia between Taylor's troops and fighters loyal to Roosevelt Johnson. The fighting went on for over two months and left hundreds of people dead, and large parts of Monrovia destroyed. As a result, another peace agreement, known as Abuja II, had to be signed. In accordance with its provisions, the Council of State was reconstituted in September 1996 with Ruth Perry, Liberia's first woman head of state, in the chair. It also provided for elections to be held in May 1997.

ECOMOG ordered the warring factions to dismantle their military wings, and scheduled disarmament to be completed by January 1997. The process, however, was extremely flawed, and Taylor's faction remained virtually intact, while less powerful factions were encamped and disarmed.

On 19 July 1997, Liberians went to the polls to elect a new government. Only 750 000 out of an estimated population of over two million were registered to vote. Taylor, the richest and still the most powerful man in the country, won the elections. Now both the *de facto* and *de jure* leader of Liberia, Taylor did little to improve the conditions of the war torn nation. In 2001 the country imploded into destructive factional fighting mainly as a result of Taylor's lack of commitment to reconciliation and state building. That year, a new grouping emerged called the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD): it was created from remnants of die-hard anti-Taylor factions, and its core comprised ex-ULIMO fighters, many of whom had been disarmed just

before the elections. Finding Taylor's misrule and predatory violence insufferable, in 1998 they had regrouped in the forest regions of Guinea (Conakry) bordering Liberia to renew the struggle. There other Liberian dissidents joined them, and eventually formed LURD. LURD received active support from Guinea (Conakry) which in 2000 had repelled Taylor-supported armed incursions into the country's diamond-rich south-eastern forest regions.

In September 2002, a group of about 750 retrenched soldiers, hastily recruited by a former military leader, attempted to take over the government of Ivory Coast in a violent coup. Rebel attacks appeared to have been well-coordinated, and were bloody. In the first few days of fighting, 400 people were killed, many of them in Abidjan. In November 2003 two new 'rebel' groups emerged in western Ivory Coast. The two groups, the Mouvement Populaire du Grand Quest (MPIGO) and the Mouvement pour la Justice et la Paix (MJP). It emerged, however, that the rebels were dominated by former Revolutionary United Front (RUF) soldiers from Sierra Leone and units from Liberia's army loyal to then President Charles Taylor. Pillage, rather than politics, appeared to be driving their 'insurgency'. Tens of thousands of Ivorians fled the country. Suspecting Liberia's President Charles Taylor of involvement, the Ivorian authorities armed and supported a faction of LURD called the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL). Both LURD and MODEL rapidly gained strength, and by July 2003 both rebel forces were besieging Monrovia.

On 18 August 2003, in Accra, Ghana, the Liberian government signed a Comprehensive Peace Agreement with the rebels, political parties and civil society actors. In the course of the negotiation, the UN-created Special Court for Sierra Leone issued a long-sealed indictment accusing Taylor of being "most responsible" for the war in Sierra Leone, and issued an international warrant for his arrest. The incident seriously undermined Taylor's already crumbling authority, and on 11 August 2003, he relinquished power and went into exile in Nigeria. A two-year National Transitional Government of Liberia (NTGL), under the presidency of businessman Gyude Bryant, was established until formal elections were held in October 2005. In September 2003 the UN Security Council established the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) and called for the deployment of 15 000 United Nations peacekeeping troops. The UN mission was mandated to disarm the armed militias, and to conduct the elections in October 2005.

Conclusions

As we have seen, the Liberian and Sierra Leonean wars were intimately linked. They were also among the first post-Cold War conflicts in Africa. This was both an advantage and a disadvantage. On one hand, it meant that because of their non-strategic location and general lack of significance in world affairs, they would be spared the Big Power chicanery and involvement which so much deformed countries like Angola and the Congo. On the other hand, it meant that the conflicts would be largely ignored by the outside world and would be allowed to fester for unnecessary long periods.

The result was that it was left with other West African countries, led by Nigeria, to attempt to resolve the conflicts both by mediation and military intervention. The attempts were flawed because there was hardly any consensus regionally about the interventions, and partly because the intervening countries were barely prepared, logistically, to launch their military forces on foreign missions. Preparation for the missions in Liberia and Sierra Leone were largely ad hoc and ECOMOG did not intervene with sufficient force and resources to make immediate impact. In Liberia, ECOMOG quickly became a part of the belligerent forces, rather than a peace-enforcement one.

An equally important problem was that a basic lack of understanding around the nature of the conflicts in Liberia and Sierra Leone, and in particularly their intimately linked nature. Mediators tended to treat each country in isolation, only to realise that progress made in one of them was quickly offset by renewed troubles in the other. Only after nearly a decade of warfare was Liberia, and its President Charles Taylor, finally recognised as the epicentre of the conflict raging the sub-region. The nature of the wars themselves – as largely mercenary warfare with pillage of the region's mineral and forest resources, rather than driven by high politics or ideology – was understood only later, after intensive research and lobbying by NGOs like Partnership Africa Canada and Global Witness, and by the UN itself. Once the centrality of resources like diamonds was identified, sanctions were imposed to accompany military intervention, and this proved to be highly effective.

As we have seen, the same lack of understanding marred the resolution of the far more complicated Ivorian crisis. It is only hoped that the 4 March 2007 Ouagadougou Agreement will finally lead to an end to the crisis, the reunification of the country, and transparent and fair elections, setting the basis for long term stability.