

Liberia: Peace at last?

Jan Hennop¹

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By Invitation

Introduction

Charles Taylor, former president of Africa's oldest independent republic, Liberia, flew off into exile in Nigeria on August 11, thereby raising hopes about an end to almost 14 years of continuous fighting in the west African country. Following the former warlord's departure to Nigeria, where he is being hosted at a luxury mansion in Calabar, in the south eastern corner of the country's Cross River state, his deputy Moses Blah took over on the same day and rebel leaders signed a peace deal a week later.

The new peace pact, which will see Blah hand over power to an interim government on October 14, has raised hopes of ending a four-year war, the latest in a series of wars the country has known. The pact calls amongst other things for an immediate end to the war and a ceasefire, as well as for the West African peacekeeping forces ECOMIL to be deployed to secure the ceasefire and to create a buffer zone between government and rebel forces. It also calls on the United Nations to deploy a stabilisation force in conjunction with ECOWAS forces under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, which allows the use of force, to back the transitional government until elections in 2005.

The peace pact was the result of seven weeks of intense negotiations between ECOWAS negotiators, government representatives, and rebel leaders. Although the rebel leaders demanded the position of vice-chairman and speaker of the Liberian parliament, ECOWAS negotiators refused the request for vice chairmanship, but agreed on the second condition. Following the August 18 peace agreement, Liberian businessman Gyude Bryant was chosen to take over from Blah on October 14 and lead the country until democratic elections in 2005. The newly elected government of Liberia is to be announced on the third Monday of 2006.

The role players

Blah, somewhat less charismatic than Taylor (who likened himself on the day of his departure to Jesus being sacrificed), retains most of Taylor's men in his caretaker government, backed by around 3,000 government troops and militiamen, who were badly demoralised by Taylor's departure. The three most powerful men within Blah's

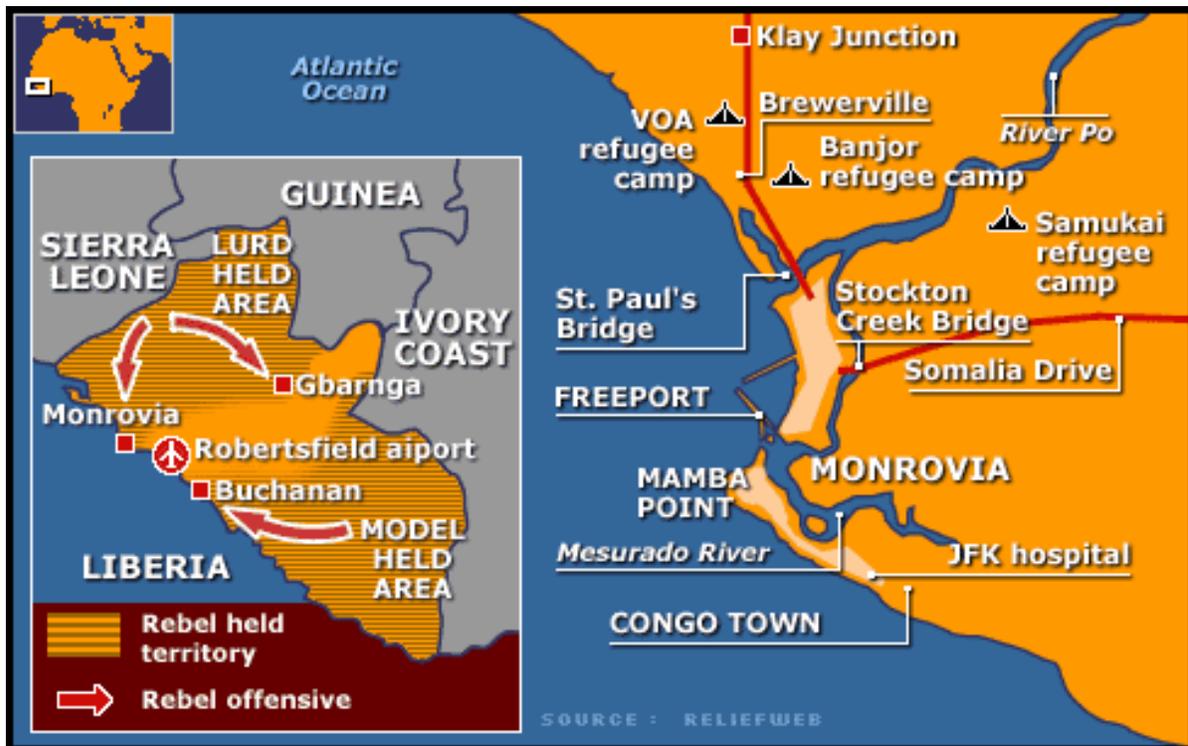
¹ Jan Hennop is an Agence France-Presse correspondent.

administration remain Minister of Defence Daniel Chea, Foreign Minister Lewis Brown, who replaces Monie Captan, and Reginal Goodridge, the Information Minister.

There are two rebel groups fighting in Liberia. The main group, which has an estimated fighting force of some 3,000 men is called the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD). LURD operates to the north and north east of the capital and is now headquartered in Tubmanburg, some 40 kilometres north of Monrovia, although their rear headquarters remain in Vionjama, about 600 kilometres north east of Monrovia in Lofa County, from where they launched their march on the capital four years ago.

LURD is commanded by its president, Sekou Damate Conneh, a Muslim, and its political arm is being headed by Sekou Fofana, who also acts as the rebel group's spokesman. Another powerful actor within LURD is its chief-of-staff General Seyea Sherrif, a former cacao farmer who also plays the role of the main negotiator with the UN's humanitarian arm (OCHA). Sherrif coordinates LURD's military positions and commanded LURD's forces as they fought their way down its northern road up to Monrovia's main bridge around mid-July (see map below). Sherrif has promised to open the interior of the country to humanitarian aid, but admitted to UN officials that he has difficulty in contacting his troops on the ground and UN negotiators handed him a copy of the peace deal signed in Accra only three days after it was signed. Thus, so far no aid has been able to reach hundreds of thousands of displaced people in camps, who are surviving on the barest essentials, such as fish caught in rivers, and cassava.

Map 1: Rebel offensive and rebel held territory
Source: ReliefWeb



LURD, like the majority of government forces, have very few uniforms and most of the fighting has been done in typical American "gangster rap" clothing, combined with

women's dresses, wigs and bandannas. The rebels are heavily armed with AK47 assault rifles, both normal and folding butt, RPG-7 rocket grenade launchers, and LMGs mounted on the back of fast-moving pick-up trucks have also been spotted. The majority of their forces are child soldiers (the UN estimates that some 80 percent of the rebel and government forces consist of child soldiers), called the SBUs (Small Boy Units), and drugs including marijuana and crack are freely available.

Both the rebels and the government deny the existence of child soldiers and when they do, they say the SBUs were involved in carrying food and water and never did any fighting. Around the end of August, three child soldiers, all of them with gunshot or rocket wounds were interviewed in a LURD hospital in Tubmanburg. All three admitted proudly to being involved in heavy fighting around the Gabriel Tucker Bridge in northern Monrovia. The youngest said he was 13 and the oldest claimed to be 19, but was estimated by doctors at around 16 years of age. There is also a number of women fighters within LURD, commanded by "Black Diamond", the *nom de guerre* for a young woman who joined the rebel forces after being gang-raped by government forces two or so years ago.

To the south of Monrovia, Liberia's second rebel group, the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL) controls the southern counties including parts of Grand Bassa, Rivercess and Sinoe counties (see map above). They are also in control of Buchanan, Liberia's second port city in Grand Bassa. Less is known about MODEL, which is led by Thomas Nimeli. MODEL is a split faction of LURD, after ethnic tensions surfaced in the main rebel movement, which consists largely of the Mandingo tribe, while MODEL has mainly fighters belonging to the Krahn ethnic group. Its forces are estimated to number around 1,500, and are armed and operate in the same way as LURD. At the time of writing, the UN was having difficulty contacting MODEL because all cellular communication had been destroyed in Buchanan.

The current military situation in Liberia:

ECOMIL forces, consisting of three battalions of Nigerian peacekeepers (no more than 2,000 troops at present) and one battalion of Malian and Ghanaian forces, have secured Monrovia as far as Robertsfield International Airport, about 55 kilometres to the south and the Po River Bridge, 14 kilometres to the north of the city. However, although the ceasefire has been signed, the situation on the ground in Liberia remains tense. There have been regular reports of skirmishes between government forces, especially militia, who remain loyal to Taylor, and both LURD and the smaller group, MODEL. Several reports situate the skirmishes between government and LURD forces in Gbarnga, some 130 kilometres north of Monrovia, and those between government and MODEL on the road to Buchanan. Until a week ago, fresh blood and empty cartridges bore testimony to these skirmishes. It was unknown, though, whether these skirmishes were the signs of an ongoing offensive between government and rebel forces, or whether word of the peace deal had not yet reached troops on the ground.

Civilians in Monrovia have expressed fear of government militias, who apparently cross over the bridges at night and have been implicated in revenge attacks on the local population whom they accuse of complicity with the rebels. In fact, both ECOMIL and the UN have accused government militias of shooting into the air, harassing an already spooked civilian population and looting their possessions when they flee.

Meanwhile, LURD has pulled back from its positions in Bushrod Island, north of Monrovia's Mesurado River which is spanned by the city's only two bridges, scene of the heaviest fighting in July. Several unarmed LURD commanders have been spotted in the area, as well as vehicles identified as belonging to LURD. It seems that even though the Gabriel Tucker Bridge (the New Bridge) and the Mesurado River Bridge (The Old Bridge) had been opened to the general population, the invisible frontline remains, with rebels reluctant to cross into the city centre, while government troops said they feared for their lives by taking the chance of crossing into Bushrod Island. Bushrod Island is now in control of ECOMIL, has been declared a gun-free zone and cars are regularly searched. It is impossible to say, however, whether LURD has indeed withdrawn all its weaponry or has formed caches, which could be redeployed in the event of the peace pact failing.

Monrovia:

Monrovia can be divided into two parts, separated to the north and south by the Mesurado River, which is spanned by two bridges, where most of the fighting in the city took place. The two bridges are the only link between the north and south (see map 1 above). To the north is Bushrod Island, which contains Monrovia's port and which was heavily looted by both civilians and rebels on the last day before the rebels' retreat to Tubmanburg. Bushrod Island is linked to the southern city centre, which Monrovia refer to as "in town" Monrovia, by two bridges. The newer bridge of the two is the concrete Gabriel Tucker Bridge, which was built in 1979, but has since not had any upkeep and was extensively damaged in the fighting towards the end of July and early August. It was feared that the bridge might collapse just after it was reopened, but so far it seems to be holding. It spans Providence Island in the middle, the first settlement of the slaves in 1817. The second bridge, about 500 metres towards the west, is called the Old Bridge or the Mesurado River Bridge, and is built from steel and wood. It's a much more hazardous crossing with wide gaps in the road surface.

Infrastructure within the capital, except for the outer shells of buildings, has almost completely been destroyed in the fighting. The electrical power station, brewery and water works were looted or destroyed, although UN personnel said they were able to recover some of the electricity generators.

The Freeport of Monrovia is a deepwater port with a draught of about 9 metres, according to the harbour pilot, Captain Q. Baci, an Albanian who has been working there for the past seven years. There is berthing space for at least two small cargo or container ships, but entering the harbour is extremely hazardous, as several sunken ships pose underwater obstacles and, because of fighting, the harbour has not been dredged for years. Captain Baci estimates that, currently, only 50 percent of the channel leading into the harbour could be used.

The port area is currently littered with at least a thousand containers, now rendered useless because their sides have been ripped open or badly damaged in the looting of 13 August. A major job in the harbour would be to clear it of looted containers, because there is no more space for any new containers to be brought in. Compounding the problem is the fact that the pilot boat has been looted, rendering it useless and all shipping traffic into the port has to be directed by way of two-way radio. Security at the port is being handled by the Nigerian ECOMIL troops, who have a machine-gun post near the docking berths and an Armoured Personnel Carrier (APC) with some four or five

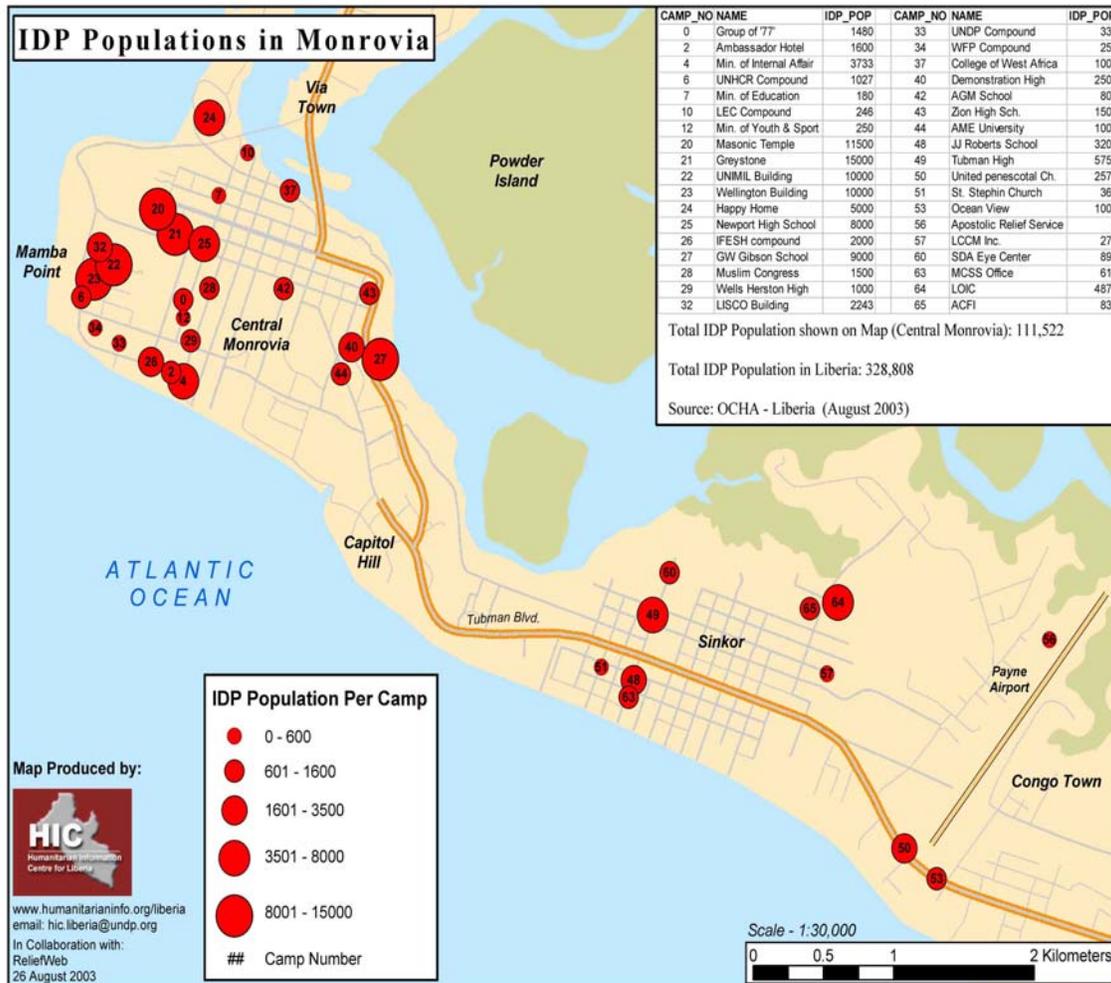
troops parked at the entrance. At the time of writing US Marines were also conducting regular patrols of the port area. But the Marines, except for about a platoon, have since pulled back to their amphibious ships anchored around five nautical miles off the coast, still making security a concern within the port.

Robertsfield International Airport is located around 50 kilometres south of Monrovia and has one of the longest runways in western Africa, able to accommodate any size plane, including 747s and Antonovs. It is currently guarded by a company of Nigerian ECOMIL soldiers who do regular sorties around the perimeter. There are walls and fencing around the airport but this is decayed in parts. There were some 150 US Marines at the airport as well, but they have since pulled back to their ships, leaving guard duty in the hands of ECOMIL. There is easy access to both the tarmac and the ECOMIL headquarters, which is situated about 300 metres to the left of the airport terminal.

Displaced people:

There are literally hundreds of thousands of displaced people in Liberia. During the height of fighting and before the Gabriel Tucker Bridge was reopened, the UN estimated that there were some 450,000 displaced people in Monrovia alone (the city has an estimated population of about 1.3 million).

Map 2: IDP Populations in Monrovia
Source: HIC Liberia/ReliefWeb/OCHA



Outside the city, some camps have been emptying while others have been filling with reports of renewed fighting. Apart from the camps to the north, there are three main camps for displaced people on the road towards Gbarnga, where aid is needed the most. These camps are called Maimu, Salala and Totota and have an estimated 60,000 displaced people between them. Reports of fighting further to the north have caused another influx of people, but for the moment nobody is leaving the camps. Should reports of fighting come closer, the displaced could pack up again and move in the direction of Monrovia, which could throw the city into a renewed humanitarian crisis.

In this regard, the UN's World Food Programme estimates that of some 10,000 metric tonnes of food, including maize, 6,500 tonnes were looted. Some 28 trucks were stolen, some of which were spotted in Tubmanburg, the WFP's logo painted over with LURD slogans. The UN's Ross Mountain is in the process of negotiation to get the trucks back.

Conclusion

Although reports of skirmishes are continuing in Liberia, it seems that for the moment the peace pact is holding in the country. But there are several factors that could play a role in returning the country to renewed civil war.

LURD, who have already expressed their dissatisfaction with Blah as President of the country, said they would resume fighting should he refuse to hand over power on October 14. It seems likely, though, that Blah will hand over power to Bryant, as his forces are now squeezed between ECOMIL (that acts as a buffer to LURD) in the north and MODEL in the south.

The rebels themselves remain the biggest unknown factor in the Liberian peace process and whether they will give up the four-fifths of the country they took over in the last four years of fighting for power-sharing with the ex-Taylor government, remains to be seen.

Then there is Taylor himself, in exile in Nigeria. As the UN Secretary General Kofi Annan's special representative in Liberia, Jacques Klein states: "Taylor with a mobile phone is still a government in exile." His influence in the equation, especially over the long term, also remains to be seen.

Compounding the problem is the departure of US forces from Liberia, scheduled to happen by October 1, two weeks before the handover of government, effectively leaving only ECOMIL forces in control until a UN peacekeeping force under Chapter VII can be deployed. And gathering UN peacekeeping forces could take up to four months, with military observers having to make assessments first, before a report can be presented to the UN Security Council for a decision on a mandate. UN sources estimate that the force could be deployed as late as January next year, effectively leaving ECOMIL in control of a volatile situation that, if left unchecked, could spiral out of control.