

Without US Attention the Liberian Tragedy Will Continue to Fester

by Herman J. Cohen

A Swedish academic expert on US policy in Africa once remarked to me that “the United States does not want to get involved in African conflicts, but at the same time cannot stay away from them.” Nowhere has this American policy ambivalence toward Africa been so demonstrable as in the Liberian tragedy that began to unfold in 1990, and continues to plunge the Liberian people deeper into the depths of despair thirteen years later.

When Charles Taylor, the current President of Liberia, crossed the border into the northwestern quadrant of his country with 200 Libyan trained fighters on Christmas Eve 1989, all eyes turned toward the US for a solution. Taylor’s guerrilla war was fueled by ethnic hatred and fought by young boys armed with heavy weapons and rendered fearless by mind altering substances. Within months, nothing was left of Liberia’s limited infrastructure, and hundreds of thousands of Liberians had either become refugees in neighboring countries or crammed in desperate straits into the capital city of Monrovia from which there was no escape, except by sea.

In the State Department’s Africa Bureau at the time, we proposed a dramatic diplomatic intervention that would have taken the then President Samuel Doe into exile in a US military aircraft, opened the border into Sierra Leone to help Doe’s incompetent army escape slaughter, and allowed Charles Taylor to take power with a minimum loss of additional blood. While this proposal was approved by the highest levels in the State Department, it was vetoed at the National Security Council level. There was a fear that the proposed action would have made Liberia a US dependency for decades, if not longer. Consequently, we limited our actions in the first half of 1990 to evacuating US citizens who opted to leave. Ironically, the protection of US citizens in Liberia required the presence offshore of a small naval armada with 1,500 US marines who could have easily and quickly intervened to stop the war with minimum risk.

In the absence of a US intervention, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) decided to send its first ever peacekeeping force into a member country to attempt to stop the carnage. The force of approximately 5000 troops was led by the Nigerian army that provided the bulk of the soldiers, along with peacekeepers from Ghana, Sierra Leone, the Gambia and Guinea (Conakry). Unfortunately, while the ECOWAS soldiers came to keep the peace, they ended up as combatants because Charles Taylor saw them as enemies determined to keep him out of power. Taylor was encouraged to think this way by the governments of Ivory Coast and Burkina Faso who disagreed with the ECOWAS action, and continued to supply him with arms and money.

The war of proxies in Liberia continued until 1997, brutalizing both Taylor’s forces and the West African forces, with the Liberian people suffering untold hardship through pillage, rape and death from bullets, disease and malnutrition. Throughout this period, the United States continued to dance around the Liberian problem, refusing to take

charge, but providing large amounts of costly humanitarian assistance and sending diplomats to monitor endless and futile cease-fire discussions. In 1997, Taylor and the President of Nigeria were able to work out a cease-fire that led to a presidential election in which Taylor was elected by voters who were deathly afraid to vote for anyone else.

The newly elected President Taylor had a short-lived honeymoon with the United States and the international community. He began early on to support the notorious RUF insurgency in Sierra Leone, exchanging guns for diamonds. (The RUF were the war criminals who chopped off arms and legs of innocent Sierra Leone citizens.) The US led the campaign to sanction and isolate Taylor. In addition, Taylor demonstrated that his concept of power was to continue to pillage Liberia in the same way that his fighters pillaged the country when the war was still ongoing. IMF and World Bank offers to start rehabilitation and stabilization programs were ignored or aborted. The credo in the State Department was "we will help Taylor if he will only demonstrate a willingness to help his own people."

The 1990-1997 war created more than devastation of infrastructure or services. Ethnic hatreds morphed into cries for revenge. In particular, the Krahn and Mandingo ethnic groups, who had suffered the most from political violence, began organizing for retaliation. By the year 2000, anti-Taylor insurgencies were launched from neighboring Guinea (Conakry), and later from the Ivory Coast.

Looking at the situation in Liberia today in the second half of 2003, we see a flashback to the second half of 1990, with the government in control of the center of the city of Monrovia and the rebels in a position of siege. As they were 13 years ago, much of the population are refugees in neighboring countries or trapped in Monrovia under horrible conditions. There is currently a cease-fire waiting for the international community to decide what it wants to do.

The West Africans have agreed to supply two to three thousand peacekeepers. In view of what happened between 1990 and 1997, most observers within and outside of Liberia are concerned that history will repeat itself in the form of a long war of proxies. The fact that Nigerians will supply the bulk of the peacekeepers does not inspire confidence given their earlier track record. For this reason, all factions in Liberia, who are tired of the endless war, all of Liberia's neighbors, the UN Secretary General, and both the UK and France, are urging the United States to take the lead in peacekeeping with its own military contingent.

As they did in 1990, US policy makers are again agonizing about the appropriate US role in Liberia, if any. Having put forward the State Department's proposal for a dramatic diplomatic intervention in 1990, I join with those who feel that the US has a unique capability to bring Liberia out of the horror of endless conflict and set it on the path to democratic transition.

Opponents of US military participation in peacekeeping in Liberia scoff at the historical relationship between our two countries. Nevertheless, the relationship has

substance in the sense that only the United States enjoys the confidence all Liberians. Only the United States can send peacekeepers to Liberia and confidently expect Liberians to welcome them peacefully. The chances of Liberia becoming another Somalia or Iraq in terms of dangers to US forces are virtually nil. The UK's historical relationship to neighboring Sierra Leone and France's historical relationship to neighboring Ivory Coast recently permitted those governments to bring about peaceful transitions after civil conflicts that were ignited or exacerbated from Liberia.

If President Bush decides to send US peacekeepers to Liberia, the number need not be massive, and their stay need not be long. A small US military presence in a lead role, with West Africans in a backup role, would make a peace process irreversible. My prognosis is that within six months, the administration of Liberia could be taken over by an interim regime bolstered by a heavy presence of UN civil servants as in the early days of Namibia or East Timor. In this respect, let one thing be clear. Liberia is not a failed state that needs to be rehabilitated. Liberia is a state that never was. It has lacked everything needed to constitute a state from its founding in 1847 to the present time. There will need to be a period of UN tutelage.

If there are not to be "US boots" on the ground in Liberia, I fear for the future of that country, as well as for the stability of West Africa from Senegal to Ghana. We missed an opportunity to stabilize Liberia in 1990. Let's not miss it again in 2003. The hundreds of millions of dollars in disaster assistance that we expended in Liberia are not a substitute for sound policy.

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