

July 13, 2003

There's Hope in Liberia's History

By JIMMY CARTER

ATLANTA

Liberia is ready to be rescued from disaster, and the time is ripe for persistent but modest American involvement in this process. I have full confidence that a joint effort with West African nations will be successful.

I made my first visit to Liberia as president in 1978, when the nation was a symbol of stability and economic progress in West Africa. The visit represented a continuation of the strong ties between our countries that had been maintained for more than 150 years, since freed American slaves established a government there in 1822. President William Tolbert enjoyed worldwide acceptance as an enlightened Christian layman, having been the elected leader of the Baptist World Alliance, representing almost all organizations of this major Protestant faith.

My wife, Rosalynn, and I noticed the minimal level of security, both for Liberian public officials and for visiting dignitaries, quite different from what we had experienced on other foreign visits. When questioned, American Embassy personnel explained to the Secret Service that Liberians were a peaceful people and violence was unlikely.

Two years later, a sergeant named Samuel Doe was assigned to a beach patrol near the president's home and he and his platoon decided to present some of their grievances to the highest authority. Within a few hours, the president and his 13 cabinet members were executed, and Sergeant Doe and his youthful followers became the governing authority.

A struggle among warlords continued, and President Doe was captured in Monrovia, tortured and dismembered in September 1990. By that time, Charles Taylor gained control of 95 percent of the country, excluding only the small area surrounding the capital. The 13-member Economic Community of West African States sent troops into Monrovia to protect what was left of the government, and chose a distinguished professor as acting president.

The Carter Center adopted Liberia as one of its peace efforts in Africa, and I began visiting the country in 1990, working closely with the Economic Community of West African States and its military arm. By traveling throughout the country, we also became well acquainted with civilian leaders and the different warlords, and encouraged other nations in the region (primarily Nigeria) to attempt to stabilize the country so that a democratic government might be established. As time for elections approached, there were two principal demands for any warlord wishing to be president: disbanding his army and turning in all weapons.

This effort by West African leaders, strongly supported by the Liberian people, was successful. All the major armies disbanded, and coalition troops confiscated almost 40,000 weapons, ranging from pistols to artillery pieces. A blanket amnesty was declared, and a flood of refugees and displaced persons returned to their local villages to vote. As the prime monitors, we encouraged a liberal interpretation of voter registration, and there were no disputes among the candidates about this procedure.

Carter Center monitors visited polling sites throughout Liberia on Election Day in July 1997, and were impressed with the overwhelming commitment to peace and democracy. Rosalynn and I began our day at a large open-sided shed near the capital, and we had tears in our eyes when we saw people, overwhelming numbers of registered voters, lined up in the dark, in a steady rain, long before the polls opened. At the end of the day, Charles Taylor received about 75 percent of the total vote — because of strong support of people whom he had dominated in the rural areas and because others in Monrovia felt that he might resort to violence if he lost.

Unfortunately, the United States government played a minimal role in Liberia after the election. There were high hopes, but it became increasingly obvious that Charles Taylor was determined to maintain dictatorial powers and had little commitment to an honest government or to the well-being of the people. It was also clear that he was involved in inciting dissension in neighboring Ivory Coast and Sierra Leone. Because of these disappointments and concern about the safety of our staff, we decided to close our office and have restricted our subsequent involvement to staying in touch with regional and Liberian leaders.

Now that President Taylor has said he will resign, the coalition of West African nations should reassume their former role, with Nigeria, Ghana and other countries providing troops. A relatively small but significant American military presence of perhaps 2,000 troops should join the coalition. In addition, the world community should provide necessary economic assistance to revive Liberia's economy. Drawing on our experience, the Carter Center and other international monitors can help to ensure a proper electoral process.

Liberia has significant agriculture, forestry and mining resources, and with Mr. Taylor's departure the Liberian people will be eager to participate peacefully as we join them in restoring stability and democracy.

Jimmy Carter, the 39th president of the United States, is chairman of the Carter Center and winner of the 2002 Nobel Peace Prize