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Liberian Strife Is Traced to Turbulent Past

Some Blame Turmoil On Its American Roots

By Karl Vick
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BENSONVILLE, Liberia -- The warlords of Liberia have names like Elmer Johnson and Charles Taylor, names as American as a Nebraska feed store, here on the west coast of Africa.

The names came appended to the former American slaves who sailed here early in the 19th century, women and men freed from slavery and urged to set up a society of their own across the Atlantic. The settlers set to it with relish, clearing jungle, establishing farms and -- in assembling the native African laborers to work on them -- demonstrating just how much can be in a name.

"If a Harris had a farm, all the boys who worked for him were named Harris," said James Enders, a Foreign Ministry official who, like 95 percent of present-day Liberians, did not descend from black Americans.

The "boys" were indentured servants, an indigenous African majority herded, coerced and controlled much as the settlers themselves had been back in the United States. And like the settlers, they had taken on the names of their masters.

"If you didn't have that name you couldn't have anything -- any school, any opportunity," Enders said. He and many other Liberians and analysts trace the turmoil unfolding this summer to the inequities of the country's past.

"That is the deep root of what is spreading today," said Enders. "Whatever Liberia is today, it's what America made it. Or what America allowed it to be."

As the USS Iwo Jima waits offshore with part of a contingent of 2,300 Marines, President Bush appears to be cautiously gauging the American obligation to this unique nation of more than 3 million people. So far, as two rebel armies besiege an embattled government, seven Marines have been sent ashore. Their assignment remains limited to coordinating logistics and communications with several hundred Nigerian troops already here.

Liberia's rebel fighters clutch AK-47 assault rifles, New Testaments and the belief that the rubber bands in their hair signal possession by demons. Their only apparent goal is raw power, the familiar backdrop a cowering population and a brutal colonial legacy.

But in Liberia, alone among African nations, the colonizers were Americans. And the legacy lives on in the strangest ways and the most unexpected cultural references.

"You won't have Charles Taylor to kick around any more," the economics minister, Samuel Jackson, proclaimed when the president pledged to resign and bow out of a political system modeled on the U.S. Constitution. Fittingly, perhaps, the Executive Mansion stands a wide avenue away from the domed congress building, which faces the Richard M. Nixon Institute, a private school.

The U.S. legacy can also be seen plainly in the country's geography.

"After Lexington you have Louisiana," a militiaman said recently, offering directions across a landscape that only fitfully resembles the American countryside it is named for.

Bethesda you pass going to the airport. Maryland County lies in the jungles bordering Ivory Coast. Virginia is a town five miles northeast of Monrovia, the capital, which was named for James Monroe, who was president when the freed American slaves began landing in Liberia. It became an independent nation in 1847 and is Africa's oldest republic.

Liberia also became one of the continent's worst cases of dysfunction and instability. Just one in five people can read and write. Only 2 percent of the land is farmed, mostly on Firestone's rubber plantations, rubber being Liberia's last surviving industry. Men can expect to die by 50, women by 53.

"I'm suffering day and night. My children suffer here. Can you imagine?" said John L. Tolbert, son of the last Liberian president to assume power through inherited privilege rather than the barrel of a gun.

William Tolbert descended from the settler nobility, men who wore top hats to formal events well into the 1960s and kept education largely to themselves. His son smelled strongly of cane liquor as he stood in the ruins of Bensonville, the tiny place 20 miles outside Monrovia that Tolbert intended to make Liberia's new capital.

"Artificial lake," John Tolbert said, gesturing toward the water below.

"Dream house," meaning the mildewed ruin on the next hill. "But he never lived there," John Tolbert said of his father. "They killed him in office."

The men who killed president Tolbert in 1980 were native Africans, army officers enraged by their disadvantaged status. But although they had a cause, they lacked any preparation for governing, and their coup pitched Liberia into a cycle of violence that turned faster and faster over the next 23 years.

Other African nations mounted liberation struggles typically led by charismatic leaders educated abroad. The nationalism they preached was ennobled by its defiance of the racism inherent in European colonialism.

Liberia went back to the bush, where the majority population had been consigned. Master Sgt. Samuel K. Doe, who was not a descendant of the settlers, succeeded Tolbert. When he was

murdered in his turn in 1990, rebels videotaped his death by mutilation as evidence against the popular belief that he had possessed life-saving powers of black magic.

Taylor, an articulate, U.S.-educated former warlord, was elected in 1997 after marching a rebel army to the edge of the capital. And he is conspicuous about his Christianity. A pulpit bearing a green cross dominates the largest meeting hall in the Executive Mansion. Presidential radio addresses begin, "In the name of our lord and savior Jesus Christ."

Liberia's population is 20 percent Muslim, but Christianity's dominance usually goes down easily in the capital, where on Sundays streets are lined with smartly dressed Monrovia residents headed to church, even during bouts of fighting. One exception: a prayer meeting last month before a captive audience at the soccer stadium where 40,000 refugees had sought shelter. An American evangelist whom Taylor calls his personal minister beseeched the badly underfed refugees to fast.

"We like to use religion and ethnicity for our own aims," said archbishop Michael K. Francis, a respected opposition figure. The Monrovia diocese provides many of the social services the government has ignored, including the country's only respected school system.

Francis, an irrepressibly jovial man, first championed the idea of sending international troops to stabilize Liberia after 14 years of civil war. It has worked in Sierra Leone, where Taylor's support of the Revolutionary United Front, rebels known for chopping off people's limbs, led to the president's indictment in June by a U.N.-backed court.

It could work here as well, Liberians say, provided the peace is put to good use. Most important, by all accounts, is disarming the unpaid, untrained, often underage government militia fighters who wreak havoc across the country, raping and looting even when there's no fighting.

"After the last war, we had no military restructuring and no retraining," said Mike Brapoh, a lieutenant in the Liberia's armed forces, which under Taylor has taken a back seat to militias often led by former members of his Small Boys Unit, a band of child soldiers. "Whether trained by the British or trained by the Americans or any country, we could learn from them," Brapoh said.

Brapoh spoke this week amid the ghostly tableau of Monrovia's downtown market. Normally bustling, the shabby stalls were haunted by young fighters who looked menacing even as they talked about the need to maintain a fresh cease-fire, which still held yesterday, as Taylor appeared to make preparations to leave the country on Monday.

Many fighters stank of the marijuana they routinely use to numb themselves for battle. One strode up and down Michelin Street, cocking his Kalashnikov and shouting at someone no one else could see.

Another militiaman, Augustine S. Saysay, said, "On Sunday I put my gun down, go to church." He held out his assault rifle. "I see a Marine, I say, 'Take it! Take it!' Let America come into Africa."

America has already been here. African American troops were stationed in Liberia during World War II. During the Cold War that followed, the sprawling seaside U.S. Embassy became the largest in West Africa. No other country south of the Sahara received more U.S. aid per capita during the 1980s.

But when the Cold War ended, the global scorecard was erased, and Africa no longer counted for much in U.S. policy. Liberia became particularly easy to avoid as the news from the country grew more and more frightening.

The country landed on Washington's agenda this summer by dint of timing as much as history: Bush was about to depart on a much-heralded visit to Africa just as the United Nations began casting about for a Western nation to lead a stabilization force in Liberia, a condition of Taylor's negotiated departure. Britain had done the same in next-door Sierra Leone, a former colony, as had France in neighboring Ivory Coast.

"It's a proven fact," said one U.S. official in Monrovia. "Nothing will get accomplished here -- nothing -- unless there's a Western state backing up the whole thing."

Advocates of U.S. action say that even a symbolic presence on the ground could help considerably. Liberians revere U.S. soldiers, and want them to supervise the Nigerians whose peacekeeping stint here in the 1990s left an aftertaste of corruption.

A U.N. peacekeeping mission presumably would replace U.S. troops by November. And with security, aid agencies could tend not only to the hundreds of thousands of displaced, but also to the hundreds of better-heeled Liberians who fled Taylor's government and might return to make politics civil again.

The exiles include many members of Taylor's own party, which filled barely a third of the seats in the joint House-Senate session that received Taylor's resignation on Thursday. Looters carried furniture out of the building as politicians stood for the invocation.

"I see a sparkling future coming up," said Justin A. Capehart, a settler descendant who stood in shorts and flip-flops on the road leading from Bensonville. Behind him a beautiful gingerbread-trimmed manor house, a style often favored by the settlers, was falling in on itself.

"We built a foundation and the foundation has been destroyed," Capehart said. "We have to build again, and it should be a school. Because for these young ones, literacy is everything."