

## Notorious Liberia Warlords Seek Rebirth as Senators

By REUTERS  
October 13, 2005

GANTA, Liberia

A rebel leader who drank beer while his men hacked up the president and an infamous warlord called "General Peanut Butter" are hoping to bury their pasts and be elected senators in Liberia's first post-war polls.

Tuesday's presidential and parliamentary elections were intended to draw a line under a 14-year civil war which ended two years ago after killing a quarter of a million people and uprooting almost a third of the population.

Some of the war's most notorious killers now want to reinvent themselves as elected politicians through the polls, whose votes were still being counted on Thursday.

Former rebel leader Prince Yormi Johnson watched while his men cut off the ears of President Samuel Doe in 1990 and then tortured him as television cameras rolled.

Now he hopes to become a senator for Liberia's northern Nimba County, where former President Charles Taylor launched the rebellion that triggered the civil war.

"That's history," Johnson said.

"Our concern now is one of reconciliation," he told Reuters in a bar in Ganta, near the Guinea border, as supporters swigged beer behind him.

Running against Johnson in Nimba County is Adolphus Dolo, or "General Peanut Butter," one of Taylor's henchmen, accused by rights groups of recruiting child soldiers.

"There is no way that I would tell you that I was not a part of the war," Dolo said, standing at a cocktail bar in the corner of the living room of his Monrovia home as guards patrolled outside.

"But people owe their allegiance to individuals, not to institutions... and all of our institutions are broken down," he said softly, shuffling leaflets carrying his campaign slogan "Let him butter your bread."

## WAR CRIMES

According to initial voting returns, the frontrunners in the presidential race are George Weah, a 39-year-old international soccer star untainted by links with warlords and former Finance Minister Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, who once supported Taylor but broke off ties.

Liberia's civil war rumbled on for 14 years, ripping the country's infrastructure to pieces and only ending when Taylor went into exile in August 2003 as rebels bombarded the capital with mortars.

Self-appointed generals with names like ``Bad Boy" and ``Butt Naked" paid child soldiers with marijuana and amphetamines to fight. Monrovia is still without piped water or electricity.

The balance of power in parliament will be key to the new president's ability to govern smoothly.

But human rights groups and diplomats warn that putting into office men and women accused or suspected of war crimes could undermine Liberia's return to stability.

Human Rights Watch said in a report last month that three former faction leaders, five individuals under U.N. sanctions and several military commanders accused of rights abuses stood for office in Tuesday's polls.

Four of them stayed in contact ahead of the elections with Taylor, who lives in exile in Nigeria and is wanted for war crimes by a U.N.-backed tribunal in Sierra Leone

``These are people who have shown total disregard for the rule of law and now they are supposed to be upholding it," Corinne Dufka, head of HRW's West Africa division, told Reuters.

``Those who have committed serious abuses should be held accountable," she said.

But in Ganta's muddy backstreets, Johnson and ``General Peanut Butter" seem to have won over at least some voters.

``Prince is a fearless man, a no-nonsense man," said Jesco Teah, a 39-year-old tailor.

``We want him to be part of the reconstruction process. Let him rebuild what he has damaged."

2005 Copyright Reuters