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Liberia (1989 - 2003)

Liberia's civil war began in 1989. Though most violence ended in 1997, renewed clashes in 2003 drew international attention, and led to the deployment of a United Nations peacekeeping force to the country. An estimated 150,000 people - one in twenty Liberians - died in the conflict. The fighting involved widespread killing and rape of civilians and forced recruitment of child soldiers.

From Liberia's founding in 1847, its politics were dominated by Americo-Liberians—descendants of former American slaves who resettled in Liberia. In 1980, an indigenous Liberian named Samuel Doe took over the government. Doe mimicked the old regime's ethnic favoritism on behalf of his own group, the Krahn, and in 1985 former Doe allies staged a coup. When it failed, Doe retaliated by massacring thousands of Gios and Manos, people of the ethnic groups of the coup leaders. Doe's opponents formed the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL). NPFL attempts to oust Doe were ineffectual however, until 1989 when Charles Taylor led an incursion from the northeast, marking the start of the civil war. Taylor had cultivated the external support of Burkina Faso, Libya, and Côte d'Ivoire, and his internal support came mainly from Gios and Manos. After just a few months of fighting, the Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia (INPFL) split from Taylor and the NPFL. The INPFL assassinated President Doe in 1990, but fighting continued between Doe's Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL), the NPFL, and the INPFL.

Despite a proliferation of armed groups during the war, these remained the three strongest factions. Other groups' influence lay largely in their abilities to create military stalemates or to spoil peace agreements. Early negotiations were brokered by the regional Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). ECOWAS sent peacekeeping forces to Liberia in 1990, but as there was no peace to keep, the troops became engaged in the fighting themselves. After 1994, the United Nations and the Organization of African Unity took over negotiations. No solid peace agreements were secured, however, until Taylor's NPFL had attained military dominance and Taylor himself was assured a role in the government.

In 1997, Taylor won a landslide victory in internationally validated elections. Liberians were tired of war, and many believed that, had Taylor not been elected, he would have continued fighting. Taylor initially invited opposition groups into the government, but later he cracked down on all dissent. By 1999, a new rebel group formed largely of Krahns and Madingoes, called Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD), was regularly engaging Taylor's army. As a result of Taylor's support of rebels in neighboring Sierra Leone, and his human rights abuses in Liberia, the United Nations imposed sanctions on Liberia in 2001. In 2003, the Liberian rebels overran the capital, Monrovia, and Taylor took asylum in Nigeria. In November 2005, Ellen Sirleaf-Johnson was elected president, becoming Africa's first woman head of state.

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Aning, Emmanuel Kwesi (1997) *The International Dimensions of International Conflict: The case of Liberia and West Africa*. Copenhagen: Centre for Development Research.

Ellis, Stephen (2001) *The Mask of Anarchy: The Destruction of Liberia and the Religious Dimension of an African Civil War*. New York: New York University Press.

Online Resources

BBC News. *Country Profile: Liberia*.

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Timeline

1980 - Samuel Doe overthrows and executes President Tolbert

1985 - Doe wins rigged presidential election, survives coup attempt

1989 - Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) invades Liberia

1990 - INPFL splits from NPFL, assassinates Doe; ECOWAS peacekeepers deployed

1991 - NPFL agrees to disarm and set up National Unity Government

1992 - NPFL attacks peacekeepers, overruns Monrovia

1994 - "warlord agreements" incorporate NPFL and AFL in transitional government

1995 - Abuja agreements signed and modified

1996 - fighting continues, spreads to Monrovia

1997 - Taylor wins presidential and parliamentary elections

1999 - fighting spills over from Sierra Leone; Liberian rebels attack from north

2001 - UN imposes arms embargo

2003 - fighting intensifies; Taylor flees to Nigeria; Interim Administration created; UN launches major peacekeeping mission

2005 - Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf wins presidential elections