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**THE LURD**

**LURD WEBSITE**

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| **THE RISE OF THE LURD INSURGENCY**  Since the first sketchy news reports in July 2000 and then spring 2001 of guerrilla fighting in Liberia’s north-western Lofa County, the LURD has been something of a mystery to the outside world. The group is essentially a loose coalition of anti-Taylor forces, drawing upon a variety of militia factions and refugee groups, increasingly backed by Guinea, with more indirect support from Sierra Leone, the U. S. and Great Britain.  As Liberian dissidents collected in regional capitals and refugee camps during 2000, and groups such as the Justice Coalition of Liberia and the Organisation of Displaced Liberians (ODL) began to mount attacks within Liberia, an effort was undertaken to combine the various anti-Taylor groups into a single force. Against the backdrop of an unravelling peace process in Sierra Leone, meetings were held in Freetown in February 2000 among the Justice Coalition of Liberia, the Organisation of Displaced Liberians and the Union of Democratic Forces of Liberia (UDL). The latter was an umbrella group comprising the various factions of Liberian dissidents present in Sierra Leone, and brought together by **Dr. Laveli Supuwood**, a former Liberian Minister of Justice and senior National Patriotic Front of Liberia political figure, who had fallen out with Taylor in 1994. The meetings produced the declaration of a union of these anti-Taylor forces into the LURD, which shortly established liaison with the British military.  Sierra Leone appeared to be a natural base of operations for the LURD. Many fighters were already there, the border is just 120 kilometres from Monrovia, and the group enjoys senior political support in the country. However, despite backing from senior Nigerians, Sierra Leone Armyofficers and Kamajor militia commanders, President Kabbah was disinclined to allow the LURD to use his country as a prominent staging ground for attacks. The LURD lobbied hard but unsuccessfully to be permitted to base their activities out of Pujehun and Zimmi on the border. Indeed, when Kabbah was presented with a LURD plan to attack Monrovia from the sea, he leaked it to Charles Taylor. Kabbah had previously released a letter from the LURD requesting support, allowing Taylor to finger a number of the leaders.  In short, it became clear that an invasion could not be organised from Sierra Leone. Gradually the LURD began to shift attention to Guinea, where it had a foothold in border regions and was tolerated – though not yet supported – by the Conté government.  **GUINEA ENTERS THE FRAY**  By July 2000, the LURD invaded Liberia from Guinea. In Sierra Leone, Kamajor hunter militias were mobilising for a similar venture. While the U.S. and Britain have admitted no involvement, the groups involved were in contact with military officers from these countries, and certainly disenchantment with Taylor runs high in both London and Washington. The LURD made some inroads into Lofa County in north-western Liberia but the Kajamor hunter militias never attacked, likely due to opposition from Kabbah.  In September 2000, Charles Taylor counterattacked, boldly widening the war by sending the bulk of the RUF that remained loyal to him into Guinea. The RUF was accompanied by many Liberian fighters, as well as Guinean dissidents sponsored by Taylor, including former Guinean General Zoumanigui who had led a 1996 coup against President Conté. The attack was well targeted, driving straight into the most populous, wealthy regions. One front was on the Liberian border and sought to take the forest region. A second, coming from Kambia in Sierra Leone, went for the capital, Conakry. At the height of the invasion, the RUF and Guinean dissidents took the cities of Macenta and Guéckédou near the Liberian border, reached the outskirts of Kissidougou, slightly farther north, and got one third of the way to Conakry.  President Conté, fearing elements of his army might join Zoumanigui, relied on mobilising LURD forces, and even Sierra Leonean “Donso” hunter militiamen in Guinean refugee camps. Using these as ground troops, and backing them with helicopter gunships and artillery, he pushed the RUF back into Liberia and Sierra Leone by January 2001.  The over 500 LURD fighters in Guinea played a key role in repulsing the Taylor-backed forces, and in many ways, the invasion was an important turning point for the movement. The Guinean Ministry of Defence came to work closely with it, and LURD leaders note that President Conté personally greeted their troops in Conakry as they were sent to fight. President Conté also moved to return the war back to Liberian soil, supporting the Donsos and the LURD to pursue their enemies deep into Sierra Leone and Liberia. He provided further air and artillery support, and Guinean troops crossed into Sierra Leone. Guinean gun ships bombarded several Sierra Leone and Liberian towns, obliterating Koindu, a major trading centre and RUF base in Sierra Leone town. The offensive aimed to reach Monrovia and topple Taylor. U.S. support for Guinea’s military was increased, and Guinea greatly stepped up supply of the LURD. Kamajor and Donso fighters, freed by the lull in Sierra Leone, travelled via Freetown and Conakry to join the LURD invasion. Kamajor chiefs and senior British military officers jointly visited Guinea's sensitive forest region. The offensive, launched in mid-November 2000, advanced rapidly in Lofa County.  In January 2001 the offensive turned east, driving for the centre of Taylor’s National Patriotic Front of Liberia movement, Gbarnga. Its success – killing hundreds of RUF, bringing the Donsos to within a few kilometres of the Kono diamond fields and taking the LURD deep into Lofa County – led Taylor to restart the peace process in Sierra Leone, requesting RUF disarmament and UN deployment in Kambia.  Taylor’s new interest in peace was driven by the fact that he was fighting on three fronts – in Liberia, on the Kambian border with Guinea, and in Kono in Sierra Leone. Trying to eliminate one of these fronts made military sense. Also in January 2001, the U.S. and British diplomatic offensive in the Security Council resumed. Armed with the report of an UN expert panel demonstrating Taylor’s links with the RUF and the trade in conflict diamonds, the U.S. called for sanctions.  Frustrated primarily by Taylor’s francophone West African allies, including Burkina Faso and Mali, who were supported quietly by France, sanctions were delayed until May 2001 to give Taylor a last chance to comply with UN resolutions. This did not happen but **France** ensuring that the most damaging sanctions proposed, on timber and maritime registry, were not part of the package imposed in May 2001.  However, the embargo that was put in place significantly raised the price of arms and ammunition for Taylor, since he had to smuggle them into the country. Making the fight against the Guinean-backed insurgency more expensive for him was part of a U.S. strategy to drain the Taylor’s finances and weaken his hold on power. A parallel move was to create a Special Court for Sierra Leone to prosecute war crimes. Vigorous American support for this stemmed at least partly from the expectation that it would indict Taylor, thus further isolating him. Agreements for the court were drawn up in the summer 2000, and initial preparatory missions were scheduled for September 2001.  However, the Guinean backed offensive soon stalled as supplies were limited, and the LURD encountered stiff resistance near Gbarnga. Many current LURD fighters also suggest that their troops were not fully up to par at the time, with fighters composed mostly of former Mandingos from the ULIMO-K faction.  The LURD appeared more disordered and ill-disciplined than it is currently, and civilians report that it committed serious attacks on civilians until at least June 2001. A retreat by LURD during the rainy season left Liberian government forces in control of much of Lofa County by fall 2001.  While the first serious LURD invasion failed in its military objective of taking Gbarnga, it did galvanise increasing support for the group. Many prominent Liberian opposition figures, who had previously dismissed its chances, began approaching the LURD. Most importantly, many fighters from other parts of the region joined.  The ongoing disarmament process in Sierra Leone also stimulated interest as many parties saw the RUF “disarmament” as less an admission of defeat than a tactical retreat from Sierra Leone into Liberia. Various sources indicate that between 600 and 2,000 RUF crossed into Liberia by the end of 2001, with some RUF combatants as far away as Freetown saying they had been offered between U.S.$300 and U.S.$500 to fight for Charles Taylor.  In response, around 500 Kamajor fighters, many from tribes whose traditional lands span the Sierra Leone-Liberia border, passed through Freetown and Conakry to the Guinea border to join the LURD. These forces were also sent mainly on a contract basis, paid from U.S. $200 to U.S. $300 each. In October 2001, a number of Liberian dissidents who had formerly served in the “Special Forces” of the Sierra Leone Army left Zimmi in the south-east of Sierra Leone to join the LURD in Guinea. Facing opposition from President Kabbah, they had given up on invading from Sierra Leone. LURD forces in Guinea also received reinforcements from Liberians exiled in Côte d’Ivoire. These new fighters shifted the military balance within the LURD away from the Mandingos, and provided a fresh force of highly motivated and experienced men, who would be the driving force behind the new incursion.  **DRIVING DEEPER INTO LIBERIA**  The LURD began a new major offensive in November 2001. Instead of heading east for Gbarnga, it drove south along the Sierra Leone border, hoping to establish contact with dissident fighters still waiting there. This strategy appeared to work. Voinjama fell in December, as well as Valhun, Foya and, later, Bopulu. Groups of combatants began crossing into Liberia from Sierra Leone in a steady, though small, stream from November onwards.  However, by 25 December 2001 the Liberian army at Kolahun had joined with RUF forces operating out of Sierra Leone and attacked the LURD rear, ambushing convoys and retaking Foya. The LURD was forced to return north to fight the government military leader Roland Duo, who commanded a mix of Liberian, RUF and Guinean rebel troops at Kolahun. But in January 2002, after an angry message from President Conté, President Kabbah deployed his troops to Kailahun to block RUF activities, and the LURD won a victory at Kolahun.  By early February 2002, the Liberian army was in disarray, and Duo was recalled to help with defences around the capital. A large LURD contingent remains along the Sierra Leone border, guarding against another RUF invasion from Sierra Leone, and combing the Lofa bush for government forces. The conclusion of the disarmament process in Sierra Leone has also pushed active elements of the RUF into Liberia. The elusive senior RUF figure Sam “Mosquito” Bockarie was reported in February 2002 to be operating in Lofa County just across the border, rallying RUF combatants.  The war threatened to spill into Sierra Leone on another two occasions in early and late December 2001. Kamajor reconnaissance missions reported that Bockarie was in the southern Liberian border town of Congo with many men. The Sierra Leone government panicked, ordered deployment to the border and authorised constant combat helicopter patrols. The second scare coincided with a crackdown by Kabbah on LURD members in Freetown. It is likely that Taylor was using the invasion threat to force Kabbah to remove the LURD completely from Sierra Leone. Since the temporary arrest of most high level members in Freetown, some have gone underground or shifted to other locations in the region. While on the Sierra Leone border, the LURD was outflanked by the RUF, elsewhere it continued to advance, capturing large amounts of ammunition and enjoying significant defections from government forces at Totota and Lofa Bridge. Casualties were low and resistance almost nonexistent. In a style of combat common in the Mano River War, strategic positions tended to change hands several times as defenders yielded if outnumbered. The main resistance the LURD faced on previous incursions had been from militia commanders in Lofa like Roland Duo and the Lorma Commander of the Lofa Defence Force, “Farsu”. By February 2002 both Duo and Farsu had been defeated, opening up Lofa County to the LURD.  Most importantly, the shift in the character of the LURD away from a Mandingo force, and the lobbying of LURD Vice-Chairman Laveli Supuwood, a prominent Lorma, had succeeded in shifting the loyalty of the Lorma tribe away from Taylor. The remnants of the Lofa Defence Force shifted from Farsu to the LURD, and so opened the way for an advance on Zorzor and south to Gbarnga. Zorzor fell on 28 February 2002, and LURD troops have reached Salay. In central-southern Lofa, the LURD captured the diamond mines at Fassama. After much internal debate over how mining could split the group, it was decided that no one would be allowed to mine. The 2,000 youths who were already doing so in Fassama were ordered to leave, but were offered the option of fighting for the dissidents. Many chose to join, swelling LURD’s ranks. Currently, LURD forces control most of Lofa County and an arc of territory that puts them within striking distance of Monrovia, Gbarnga and the Mano River Bridge on the Sierra Leone border. By mid-February 2002 LURD troops were just 44 kilometre from Monrovia, at Klay Junction. The front line of Charles Taylor’s Mano River War had come full circle.  The international community may rejoice that war has left Sierra Leone, but it cannot be sure that peace has come there until the wider war ends. The links between Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone are so extensive that peace is truly indivisible. It is unfortunate that it is only this insight that might generate international commitment to Liberia. The people of that country are deserving in their own right of attention. The current conflict in Liberia has not yet reached the scale and brutality seen in Sierra Leone, but as many as 200,000 Liberian war-related deaths from 1990-1996 are evidence that it has the potential. Now is the time for a comprehensive effort to treat the cause of the region’s problems.  **A PROFILE OF THE LURD**  Given the LURD’s rather remarkable battlefield gains over the last year, further exploration of its motivation, history, organisation and tactics are warranted. Such an analysis is key to understanding both the political process needed in Liberia and the limits of what military activity can do to end the regional violence.  **A. ORIGINS**  The LURD is a diverse coalition of former factions and political figures from Liberia’s civil war, though it also involves some new faces and organisations. It is tied together by a single common aim: to drive Charles Taylor from power. Many key actors fled Liberia in 1997, convinced that Taylor’s election was a fraud perpetrated by ECOMOG and fearing a campaign of retribution and terror. The killings of critics, including former Taylor ally Samuel Dokie, a prominent market woman Nowai Flomo, and Vice-President Enoch Dogolea convinced many that the government was willing to use extra-judicial killings to consolidate control. Moreover, many claim to have faced daily persecution in Monrovia.  A key event in the formation of the LURD was a fire fight between Taylor's forces and former fighters from Roosevelt Johnson’s Krahn-based ULIMO-J faction at Camp Johnson in Monrovia on 18 September 1998. The ULIMO-J fighters had gradually built up an increasingly strong presence in that neighbourhood over summer 1998. They claimed that violence and intimidation by government forces had forced them together for protection. Officials in the Liberian government counter that Johnson was consolidating forces to establish an area of control from which to launch a coup. After some skirmishes between Johnson’s men and police, Taylor dispatched the Special Operations Division, a paramilitary unit, to break up the camp. Several Johnson fighters were killed, and a group including Johnson sought protection in the U.S. Embassy, from where they were evacuated to Sierra Leone and Nigeria.  Around 600 ULIMO fighters left Liberia in the months following, most for Côte d’Ivoire. Many Mandingo fighters from Alhaji Kromah's ULIMO-K faction also feared retribution and decided to remain in refugee camps in Guinea. Other Liberians, who had fought with both the Kamajor militia group and the Sierra Leone Army in Sierra Leone’s civil war, remained in Sierra Leone.  **The late Nigerian ECOMOG General Maxwell Khobe had played a key role in establishing initial links between these dissident groups.**  Some LURD fighters claim to have been organised by **Maxwell Khobe** to attack Liberia in August of 1998. The first Liberian dissident attacks on Liberia may have come as early as August 1998 by the Justice Coalition of Liberia, though the government says that the first attack was in April 1999. The Justice Coalition of Liberia was commanded by a former senior brigade commander of Taylor’s own National Patriotic Front of Liberia forces, **General Liberty**. He had been tasked with guarding Taylor’s arms caches during the 1997 elections, but had surrendered to ECOMOG after Taylor murdered his mother in retaliation for Liberty’s declaration that he wanted to resign from the National Patriotic Front of Liberia. The Justice Coalition of Liberia attacked Kolahun on 11 August 1998, but was forced into Guinea by the RUF counterattack on ECOMOG forces in late 1998. The Guineans gave the group no help since they feared resumption of the conflict with Liberia.  Another Liberian dissident group based in Guinea, the Organisation of Displaced Liberians, made a brief raid on Liberia on 1 April 1999. It was composed mainly of Mandingo refugees in Guinea, and was headed from the U.S. by a former ULIMO faction led by **warlord Alhaji Kromah**. The Guinea-based head of the group was **William Hanson**, a devout catholic and human rights advocate, who had taken up arms in memory of the five American nuns and catholic father he had lived with for years who were murdered by Taylor’s troops in October 1992.  The Justice Coalition of Liberia attacked Lofa again in October 1999, striking south from the Guéckédou area of Guinea. It took Kolahun and Foya along the border and held them for 21 days before being forced back into Guinea. This series of relatively low level attacks gave impetus to form the LURD coalition in February of 2000 as discussed above.  **B. MILITARY STRENGTH AND EVOLVING TACTICS**  Senior LURD leaders remain convinced they have the capacity to take Monrovia militarily. They have encountered only limited resistance from government forces so far and believe many government troops are dispirited and unwilling to die for Taylor. Many within the LURD also feel their large number of well-trained and experienced former Liberian army troops are more capable than those Taylor still has. Some National Patriotic Front of Liberia militias recently remobilised by Taylor appear mainly interested in looting. **The number of LURD combatants is in flux and almost impossible to estimate closely**. At any given time a significant percentage of LURD combatants are outside the country resting or visiting families. In addition there is constant change in the composition, as tribes and communities join the cause, and government defections continue.  **There is sometimes a blurred line between a civilian supporter and a combatant. LURD commanders uniformly claim around 14,000-15,000 combatants but this likely includes carriers, spies and other unarmed members. Based on the numbers known to travel to Lofa from other parts of the region, however, the figure is probably closer to 2,000-3,000 serious combatants operating in Liberia.**  There are many reports that Charles Taylor has been moving arms and supplies into south-eastern Liberia in case he loses Monrovia. Such a fallback, in addition to promising a long war, would also likely widen it. Many LURD fighters and supporters are still in Sierra Leone, and hundreds of fighters from Liberia's first civil war – from Prince Johnson’s Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia, George Boley’s Liberia Peace Council and Roosevelt Johnson’s ULIMO-J – are in refugee camps in Côte d'Ivoire, near the Liberian border. A prolonged war would likely bring an invasion of Liberia from dissidents based in these two countries.  The most recent LURD offensives have also seen evolving battlefield strategies. First, they decided to push south along the Sierra Leone border. Secondly, they now avoid fighting for roads or towns and pursue a strategy of infiltration of south-western Liberia through the thick bush of Southern Lofa, looping around government strongholds and disrupting supply lines. This was how Klay Junction was attacked in early February 2002. The LURD claim between 300 and 500 men were assigned to that mission but the number that actually attacked was likely closer to twenty. The third innovation is to emphasise political education of the troops.  **Learning from the RUF’s disastrous experience, LURD trainers and political figures have been stressing the necessity to avoid civilian casualties. Troops have been strongly warned against attacking civilians and told to treat surrendering or wounded prisoners humanely**.  As a result, with the exception of members of the Kissi tribe, who have been targeted because of pro-Taylor and RUF bias, civilians inside Lofa report that the LURD have largely ceased serious human rights violations since June 2001. A provost marshal has been appointed, and a system of civil administration is being set up among local chiefs to allow cases of abuses to be brought before the military leadership. At least one LURD soldier has been executed for abuse, a man who killed a Gbandi woman married to a local chief. LURD spokesmen claim that their strategy of avoiding towns and more pro-government areas like Bong County is driven by a concern to protect civilians.  An increasing food shortage inside Lofa County, generating conflict between civilians and combatants, combined with the constant influx of new fighters, has made it difficult to maintain discipline. **Refugees in Sierra Leone report that while LURD fighters treat civilians much better than Liberian government forces, they do loot towns and pressure civilians to carry water and supplies for them**. Liberian government forces have spread terror in towns close to the front, telling civilians that LURD uses power saws to cut off limbs. Such tales often rapidly empty towns, which then allows government troops to loot items left behind. More seriously, refugees also report that Armed Forces of Liberia and RUF forces have committed widespread and systematic rape, killing and torture of civilians.  The refugee and internally displaced crisis developing in Lofa is to a large extent the result of such government practices. To counter the propaganda against them, the LURD sometimes force civilians to return to LURD controlled towns to view conditions. Civilians confidentially interviewed by ICG within Lofa County reported that the LURD provided them with small amounts of food and medicine. The group has even facilitated the evacuation to Guinea of supportive tribes, such as happened for 800 Gbandi villagers threatened by government forces. **It is clear that LURD efforts to treat enemy combatants humanely has paid off, with many combatants and prisoners switching sides**.  **C. INTERNAL UNITY**  The LURD remains an uneasy coalition of diverse groups whose unity does not extend far beyond the desire to overthrow Taylor. **While many intense rivalries have been overcome to form a coalition, the political leadership is still divided by petty conflicts and personal animosities, as individuals jockey for position and control**. Some younger and more idealistic members, such as the spokesman, William Hanson, play a consensus-building role, but almost all senior members harbour presidential ambitions. In recognition of the risk, LURD political leaders have banned themselves from visiting troops at the front. Field combatants appear to enjoy fair unity, and there have been no reports of fighting among units. While some units are more ethnically homogenous, others are a mix of tribal backgrounds. Many fighters are contemptuous of the political in-fighting. While the organisation does not appear to have close links with former warlords such as Alhaji Kromah or Roosevelt Johnson (and claims to have rejected their requests to join), many senior figures are associated with former factions in the civil war.  The current Chairman of the LURD National Executive Council is **Sekou Dammate Conneh**, a former used car and fuel salesman, as well as finance ministry official from Monrovia, who has never been involved in Liberian politics, or in any armed faction, before. He was chosen largely in deference to **his wife, Ayesha Conneh**, who rose from humble beginnings as a market woman to the heights of power in 1996, when she had a vision warning President Conté of Guinea of a military coup. Ayesha is now Conte’s top spiritual advisor and universally-feared by senior Guinean officials. Conté is highly superstitious and has proved willing to remove cabinet ministers, and murder potential opposition figures, on a Conneh vision.  There are two serious potential splits within the LURD. One would replay the ULIMO-J and ULIMO-K split between ethnic Mandingos and Krahns. The LURD is largely a coalition of these two groups, but as the insurgency has progressed many from other tribes, particularly the Lorma, have joined and diluted Krahn-Mandingo tensions. Sekou and Ayesha Conneh are both Mandingos, but the LURD leadership is ethnically diverse, and the appointment of **Prince Seo**, a Krahn, as Chief of Staff and military leader in 2001 has also helped to defuse Krahn-Mandingo tensions.  **The second potential problem is between the political leadership in Conakry, and the military leadership, in Voinjama, Liberia and headed by Sekou Conneh. Such a split, were it to occur, would have serious implications for the region, since LURD supporters and potential fighters in Sierra Leone and Cote d’Ivoire only recognise the Conakry leadership**.  **D. POLITICAL PROGRAMME**  LURD leaders are divided and often confused and inconsistent when asked their political program. Some say their problem is just with Taylor, and they will negotiate when he has resigned and, for example, the vice-president has taken over. Others say Taylor’s entire government must go. All agree on the basic outline of some form of post-Taylor transitional administration, which would put strong emphasis on reintegration needs of combatants, establish a truly national army and lay the groundwork for free and fair elections. The differences come over the form of that administration. The various positions roughly break down into two camps, one supporting an interim presidency to prepare elections, and the other supporting a “Council of State” similar to the attempts made during the civil war. Some Council of State advocates are willing to support an interim presidency if the president is not a Krahn, Gio or Mandingo but a distinguished and relatively neutral figure chosen out of LURD. Most interim presidency advocates, including Sekou Conneh and **Joe Wylie**, support that position because they covet the top job. Council of State advocates want the LURD to play an important role in a transitional administration, but admit they could accept a non-LURD, neutral administration.  **E. GUINEA’S SUPPORT**  President Conté has often publicly claimed that he does not support the Liberian dissidents. In fact, his government is the LURD’s primary source of direct military and financial support. Basic weaponry, military supplies and food are all supplied at the orders of President Conté, and channelled through Ayesha Conneh and her network of businesses. These were quite limited in the past, but they have been increased as the LURD launched their most recent offensive. LURD wounded are treated free of charge in Guinean military hospitals and until recently were allowed to recuperate in Kissidougou. Ayesha and Sekou Conneh live in government housing and drive Guinean government vehicles. Ayesha is guarded by Conté's own personal Red Beret guard.  Guinean military commanders, from border areas to senior figures in the Ministry of Defence, are strongly supportive. Guinean support for the LURD is due to a number of factors. First Conté's foreign policy is largely isolationist. The guiding principles are opposition to French interests in Africa (growing out of historical Guinean suspicions of the former colonial power) and assurance of regime stability by whatever means necessary, including supporting neighbours. Since the early 1990s, Guinea has had a strategic relationship with the U.S., which gives substantial military support.  The next military program scheduled will be the training and equipping of an 800-man Rapid Reaction Force designed to meet any Liberian border incursion. The project will cost U.S.$3 million, which implies a significant increase in American military aid. America’s interest in Guinea stems in part from its economic involvement, which is extensive. Guinea has the world’s second largest reserves of Bauxite, and more diamonds than Sierra Leone and Liberia put together. American firms have the lion’s share of the foreign contracts. U.S. officials are keen to point out, however, that they also have significant democracy and human rights promotion programs in the country. They defend their support for Conté while vilifying Taylor by the fact that Guinea has been a stabilising, rather than a destabilising force in the region. They also claim that their efforts to improve Guinean treatment of refugees and to advance other human rights issues have had a significant effect over the last two years.  The French and Libyan backed popular insurgency of Charles Taylor contradicted both principles, and Guinea was an early strong backer of the 1990 ECOMOG deployment to keep Taylor from Monrovia. Since then, deep animosity and distrust has developed between Conté and Taylor, with Conté at one point vowing that he would never agree to be in the same room with the Liberian president. This animosity led Guinea to actively support the ULIMO faction against Taylor in the Liberian civil war, though the support was ended after Taylor’s election in 1997. Renewed support for Liberian dissidents is based on the profound shock that the invasion of September 2000 by Taylor-backed forces caused. With the exception of a small incursion from Guinea-Bissau in 1970, Guinea had never experienced war within its borders in its post-independence history. Far more than a mere border incursion, the Liberians backed forces tried to take the capital and directly supported General Zuomanigui, a former coup-leader.  In short, the invasion threatened to transform Guinean relative peace into Sierra Leone’s anarchy within a few months. When criticised for bringing war to Liberia, Guinean officials are quick to point out that their nightmare scenario unfolded just eighteen months ago, and compare their right of self defence to the U.S. response to terrorism. It is unclear, however, how far Conté's support for the LURD goes, since his supply and assistance to has been carefully limited. In addition, LURD chairman Sekou Conneh is a Mandingo, an ethnic group which Conté has persecuted in his own country. Lack of trust between the LURD and their Guinean sponsors was illustrated in late 2000, when fighting between them destroyed much of the town of Guéckédou. This ambivalence has prompted some observers to speculate that Conté's support aims merely to create a buffer zone between Guinea and Liberia to prevent another invasion. An additional factor is likely Conté's close association with Ayesha Conneh, since Guinean support for the LURD increased after her husband was made Chairman.  **F. THE WIDER INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY**  Aside from some low level contacts with British, French and American military, which ceased around six months ago, the LURD have had little contact with the international community. **This is unfortunate, since even the most minimal engagement could greatly influence the group, which is still forming its character, hierarchy and program**. LURD could easily become personalised and radicalised, and as a result, possibly fragment. A few strong and principled messages now from the international community could positively influence its development and save a great deal of effort later, when LURD may be at the peace table. In addition, LURD efforts to protect civilians in operational areas should be welcomed and supported. If not governments then international human rights groups should engage it, monitoring and assisting it to build such protection efforts.  However, this kind of limited, principled engagement should not be mistaken for support for the LURD, either moral or otherwise. It is unclear as yet whether the LURD forces have or will have the power to take Monrovia. But the fractiousness and disunity within the LURD indicates that they cannot be trusted to bring stability to Liberia if they do remove the Taylor government by force. Such success would likely bring on another protracted conflict, in which Taylor forces would exploit divisions within the LURD as they did with opponents during the previous civil war.  The actual and potential pressure exerted by the LURD insurgency might contribute to Taylor’s willingness to consider a larger reform program. But such military pressure should not be a substitute for an international policy aimed at developing a more coherent and sustainable solution for the country.  The international community should not forget that the LURD’s consent will also be necessary to bring an end to Liberia’s new and old war. It cannot be assumed that American leverage over President Conté will be enough to secure LURD agreement, since the dissidents have increasingly been stockpiling supplies within Liberia to make themselves self-sufficient. In addition, Conté is rarely responsive to foreign requests regarding his country’s security. The LURD should, therefore, be engaged in a limited manner by the international community.  **The Mano River War will not end without a serious commitment from powerful members of the international community, and much will hinge on a better understanding of Liberia’s internal political situation.** |