

# UNOMIL (UN Observer Mission in Liberia)



(Figure 1: Map of Liberia)

## Liberia

The Republic of Liberia is located on the west coast of Africa, bordered by Sierra Leone to the northwest, Guinea to the north, Ivory Coast to the east, and the Atlantic Ocean to the south and west. The capital of Liberia is Monrovia.



(Figure2. Flag of Liberia)

### **Geography**

The landscape is characterized by mostly flat to rolling coastal plains that contain mangroves and swamps, which rise to a rolling plateau and low mountains in the northeast.

Tropical rainforests cover the hills, while elephant grass and semi-deciduous forests make up the dominant vegetation in the northern sections.

### **Climate**

The equatorial climate, in the south of the country, is hot year-round with heavy rainfall from May to October with a short interlude in mid-July to August.

During the winter months of November to March, dry dust-laden harmattan winds blow inland, causing many problems for residents.

### **Administrative divisions**

Liberia is divided into fifteen counties, which, in turn, are subdivided into a total of 90 districts and further subdivided into clans.

## Government and politics

The government of Liberia, modeled on the government of the United States, is a unitary constitutional republic and representative democracy as established by the Constitution.

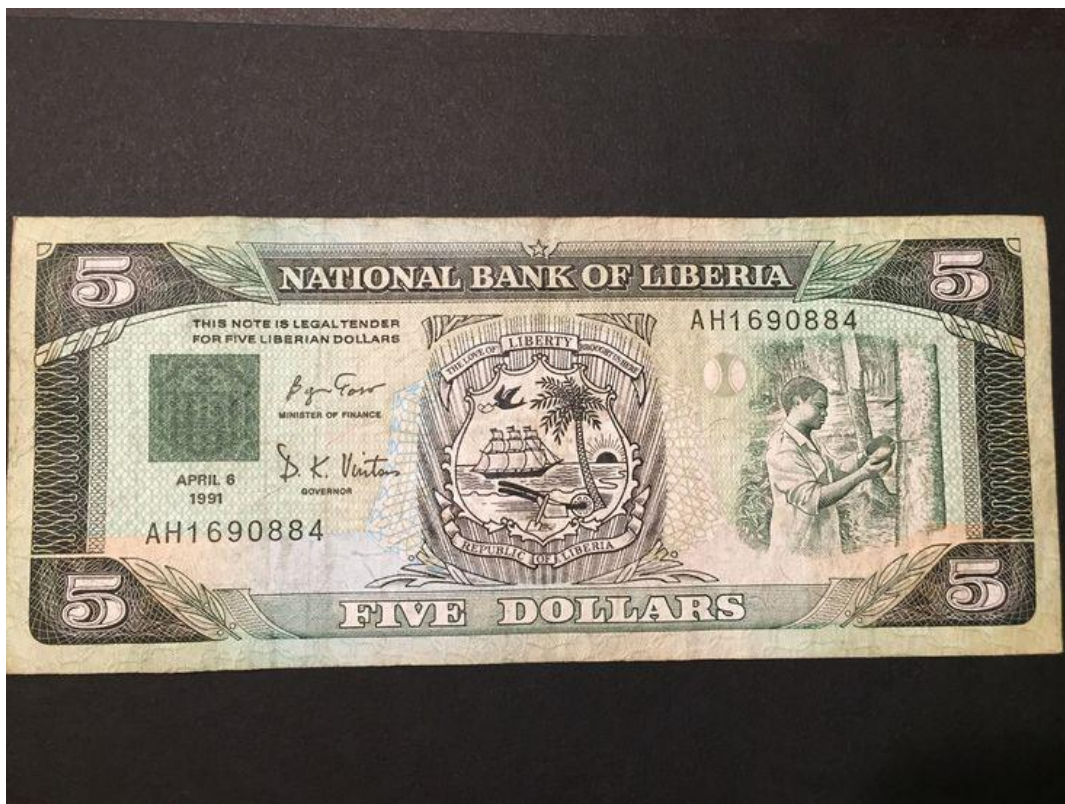
The president serves as head of government, head of state, and the commander-in-chief of the Armed Forces of Liberia.

## Corruption

Corruption is endemic at every level of Liberian society, making Liberia one of the most politically corrupt nations in the world. As such, corruption is not specifically a punishable crime under Liberian law, which further exacerbates the nature of corruption present in the country.

## Economy

The Central Bank of Liberia is responsible for printing and maintaining the Liberian dollar, Liberia's primary currency (the United States dollar is also legal tender in Liberia).



(Figure 3. Liberian currency in 1993, Liberian dollar)

Liberia is one of the world's poorest countries, with a formal employment rate of 15%.

Historically the Liberian economy has depended heavily on foreign aid, foreign direct investment and exports of natural resources such as iron ore, rubber, and timber.

## **Shipping flag of convenience**

Due to its status as a flag of convenience, Liberia has the second-largest maritime registry in the world behind Panama. It has 3,500 vessels registered under its flag, accounting for 11% of ships worldwide.

## **Languages**

English is the official language and serves as the lingua franca of Liberia. 27 indigenous languages are spoken in Liberia, but each is a first language for only a small percentage of the population. Liberians also speak a variety of creolized dialects collectively known as Liberian English.

## **Religion**

According to the latest National Census, 85.6% of the population practiced Christianity, while Muslims represented a minority of 12.2%.

## **Education**

The literacy rate of Liberia was estimated at 60.8% (64.8% for males and 56.8% for females).

## **Health**

A number of highly communicable diseases are widespread, including tuberculosis, diarrheal diseases and malaria.

## **Polygamy**

One-third of married Liberian women between the ages of 15–49 are in polygamous marriages. Customary law allows men to have up to four wives.

## **Liberian civil war**

The Liberian Civil War was an armed conflict that took place in the West African country of Liberia from 1989 to 1997. It was fought between the forces of the Government of Liberia, led by President Samuel Doe, and the rebel forces of the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) led by Charles Taylor. The conflict claimed the lives of over 250,000 people, displaced nearly a million others, and left the country's infrastructure devastated.

The civil war began in 1989 when the NPFL launched a rebellion against the government of Samuel Doe. The war quickly escalated into a full-scale conflict that engulfed the entire country including many smaller "independent" fractions (as ULIMO, United Liberian Independence Movement, LOFA county fighters, etc.). Over the course of the war, both sides committed numerous atrocities against civilians and employed child soldiers, who were forced to fight in the conflict. In addition to the human toll, the conflict caused severe damage to the country's infrastructure and economy.

ECOMOG's involvement in the Liberian Civil War began in 1993 when it launched Operation "Iron Fist", an offensive against forces loyal to Liberian leader Charles Taylor. The operation saw ECOMOG forces launch a series of ground assaults and aerial bombardments in an effort to dislodge Taylor's forces from their positions. The operation was successful and Taylor's forces were forced to retreat.

In addition to Operation "Iron Fist", ECOMOG forces also provided humanitarian assistance to civilians affected by the war. This included providing medical care, food, and shelter to those affected. ECOMOG also provided security for the safe evacuation of non-combatants from the war zone.

## **Cotonou Peace Agreement<sup>1</sup> and Cease-Fire Agreement**

At the conclusion of the meeting on 25 July, IGNU (Interim Government of National Unity), NPFL and ULIMO signed the Cotonou Peace Agreement. The Agreement laid out a continuum of action, from the ceasefire through disarmament and demobilization to the holding of national elections.

On military aspects, the Agreement provided for a ceasefire to take effect on 1 August 1993 and outlined steps for the encampment, disarmament and demobilization of military units. To ensure against any violation of the ceasefire between 1st

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<sup>1</sup> In July 1993, a three-day meeting was held in Cotonou, Benin, under the co-chairmanship of the Secretary-General's Special Representative, President Canaan Banana of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) and Mr. Abass Bundu, Executive Secretary of ECOWAS.

August and the arrival of some 4,000 additional ECOMOG troops, including from OAU countries outside the West African subregion, as well as the main body of a United Nations observer contingent, the parties agreed to establish a Joint Ceasefire Monitoring Committee, comprising representatives of the three Liberian sides, ECOMOG and the United Nations.

The UN called on the parties to end the Liberian Civil War and peace talks began in Geneva (Switzerland) in August 1993 under the leadership of the UN Special Representative of the Secretary General (SRSG), Sir Trevor Gordon-Sommers.

As a result of previous positive experiences, the Hungarian Defence Forces were able to delegate a military consultant who served as a PA (personal advisor) to the political leaders of the mission. The consultant, Colonel László Forgács, was part of every military decision made. His recommendations and advice was acknowledged in every single instance by the UN New York HQ.

Col. Forgacs was called from the UNAVEM II (Angola) Mission to join the talks as Military Adviser to SRSG in August 1993.

After nearly one week of negotiations, the parties involved (Liberian Government, NPFL, ECOMOG, ULIMO and the others) agreed on a Liberian Ceasefire Agreement, an immediate ceasefire and the establishment of a UN Mission (UNOMIL) under the supervision of the UN. Colonel Forgács, who had a wealth of experience in previous ceasefire agreements and monitoring at UNIMOG and UNAVEM Missions, played a crucial role in the drafting and acceptance of all the agreements.

Since the successful conclusion of the Geneva talks, and despite the SRSG's recommendation to the UN leadership in New York that Colonel Forgacs participate in the final plans in New York, there has been no response. I traveled back to Angola and continued my preparations to set up another (Uganda) mission.

## **ECOMOG**

ECOMOG is the military force of ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States). Established in 1975, ECOMOG is an international peacekeeping force that is intended to help maintain peace and security in the region. It is composed of troops from the 15 member states of ECOWAS, and is headquartered in Abuja, Nigeria.

The ECOMOG forces were able to restore a semblance of order in the region. They were able to maintain a cease fire between the warring factions, provide security for the civilian population, and restore basic services such as electricity and water. Additionally, ECOMOG troops were able to disarm and demobilize combatants from both sides of the conflict, as well as to train and

equip a new unified national army. These efforts helped to create a more stable political environment and paved the way for a lasting peace in the region.

## **Role and activity of Col. Laszlo Forgacs in UNOMIL**

UNOMIL (United Nations Observer Mission in Liberia) was established by Security Council Resolution 866 of 8 September 1993, in response to the civil conflict in Liberia. The advance mission/team was led by Colonel Laszlo Forgacs of Hungary, he arrived in Liberia in September 1993.

At that time he was a member (Regional Commander in Northern Region, Luanda) of the UN Angola Verification Mission (UNAVEM III), but with the decision of UN HQ New York he was transferred to Liberia in 1993 being part of the Technical mission<sup>2</sup> to prepare and later to establish a Military Observer Mission in Liberia (UNOMIL).

He was responsible to establish a Mission with an advance party (31 Military Observers - MILOBs), start implementation of Peace Agreement signed parties involved in War and peace-keeping forces (ECOMOG) in Geneva. Introduce cease-fire control and monitoring regime, JACIG (Joint Arms Control Implementation Group). He has chaired JACIG 11 times till the arrival of the main body of UNOMIL. The mission also sought to monitor and verify the cessation of hostilities and to monitor the disarmament of all military and paramilitary personnel.

As he was part of the advance team for the United Nations Observer Mission in Liberia (UNOMIL), which was headed by a retired Canadian Brigadier General and was tasked with preparing for the mission's visit to Gbarnga. As part of the advance team, he was responsible for conducting research into the political, security and humanitarian situation in the region, as well as coordinating with the local authorities and liaising with the various UN agencies and international organizations involved in the mission. He also provided technical advice and assistance to the UNOMIL team.

He served as the Deputy Chief of Mission in charge of military affairs in UNOMIL.

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<sup>2</sup> Technical Mission to Liberia (from original official UN paper

List of Mission Members:

1. Maj-General J.M.G. Baril, Military Adviser and Head of Mission (Will leave Monrovia on 10 Aug 93 for New York).
2. Mr. I.C. Douglas, Consultant ( Retired Brig-General. Will be required to move to New York from O-tawa on 3 Aug 93 ).
3. Colonel L. Forgacs, UNAVEM II ( Moving directly to Monrovia from Luanda. Will be required to move to New York from Monrovia along with other members of the technical mission).
4. Major D. Taylor,
5. Major A.K.S. Chauhan,
6. Ms. M. Carey, Political Affairs Officer,
7. Mr. J. Renninger, Political Affairs Officer,
8. Ms. M. Grossi,
9. Mr. Terence Burke,

The mission's mandate involved the following activities:

- Ensuring that the Cotonou Agreement is observed
- Supervision of the ceasefire and support of ECOWAS
- Participation in the demilitarization and disarmament process
- Border security, halting smuggling traffic
- Support of ECOMOG, firearm disposal activities
- Assisting the work of the UN and other humanitarian organizations
- Organizing and overseeing national elections

He also had the responsibility of training, equipping, and deploying the United Nations military observers to all parts of the country.

## **Cooperation UN Military Observers with regional Peace-keeping forces (UNOMIL and ECOMOG<sup>3</sup> in Liberia)**

The United Nations Military Observers (UNMOs) have been deployed to numerous regional peace-keeping forces around the world. UNMOs have worked closely with regional peace-keeping forces, such as the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) in Liberia to:

- Monitor ceasefires and peace agreements
- Protect civilians and resolve disputes
- UNMOs are tasked with providing an impartial and independent assessment of the situation on the ground
- Providing support to regional peace-keeping forces. UNMOs have provided valuable intelligence and logistical support to ECOMOG, such as helping to coordinate the delivery of food, medical supplies and communication equipment

They have also monitored the ceasefire lines and reported on violations. In addition, UNMOs have provided valuable advice and guidance to regional forces in order to ensure the successful implementation of peace agreements.

## **Curiosities and specialties from Liberia, United Nations and UNOMIL:**

1. As the delegate of Hungary and a member of the UNAVEM mission in Angola, I was not at all prepared to be fully responsible for the establishment of UNOMIL and lead the

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<sup>3</sup> ECOMOG Troop Deployment

The Special Representative of the Secretary-General has informed on 21 August 1993 that the present strength of the ECOMOG force in Liberia is as follows:

Troop Contributing Country	Number of Troops
• Nigeria.	8,266
• Ghana.	1,041
• Guinea	599
• Sierra Leone	400
• Gambia	10
• Mali	6
Total:	10,312



mission until the arrival of the main forces. But I did it with the best knowledge and it worked WELL and successfully.

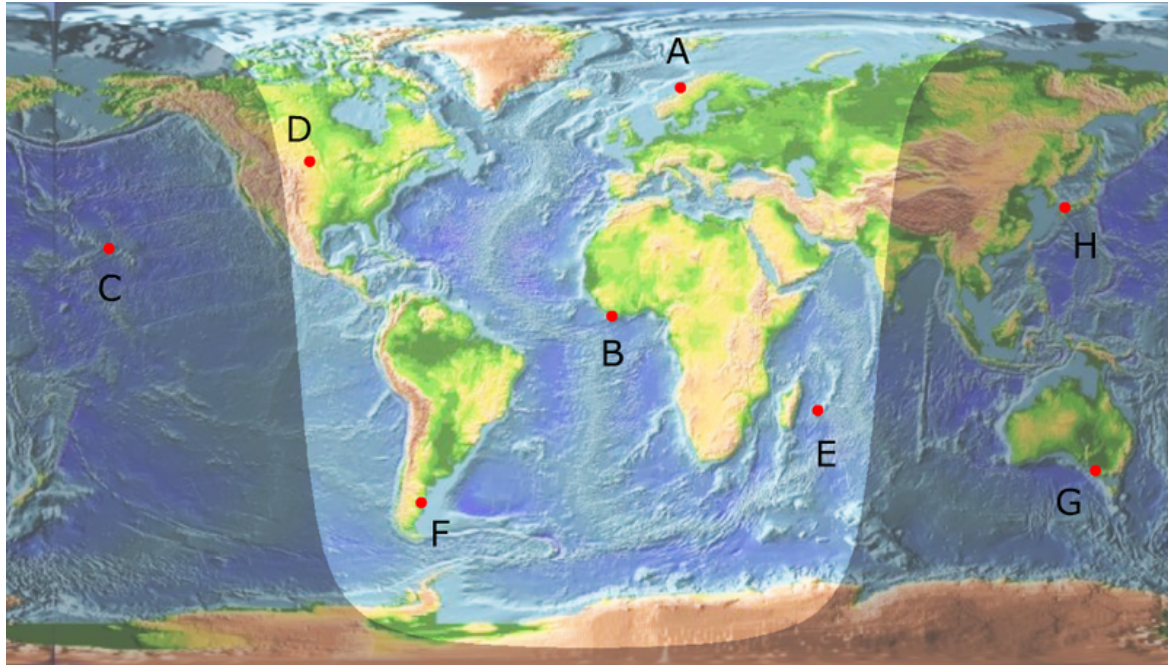
2. It happened that, being the member of the Technical (mission preparation, advance group) one day before our departure from Liberia, the UN Secretary General's military adviser (Major-General J.M.G. Baril) called Colonel Forgacs - on the satellite phone we have - to ask if I would undertake the immediate launch and setup of the mission. Being a soldier, I accepted the challenge, if the Hungarian official bodies agreed - they agreed and I became the UNOMIL soldier and Leader of the Advance Party.
3. They promised to send UN Military Observers and technical equipment as soon as possible, but the first officer who arrived two weeks later was a Bangladeshi medical captain! Until then, I had to take care of everything, investigating ceasefire violations, chairing JACIG meetings, etc. It was lucky he had a UN driving license so we could share the work.
4. The first UN cars and radios started arriving after about 3 weeks - luckily, the other UN Missions in Liberia helped out, primarily UN WFP and the others with what they could (computer, secretarial tasks, etc.).
5. Every time I had to bring them (NPFL representatives) to the JACIG meetings, bring them from across the ceasefire line (CFL at the place next to Kakata town), passing through the representatives of the NPFL, as this ensured their UN protection. It was about 11 miles from CFL to the blown (they called "broken") bridge, there was a road, but no cars on that side. At the time, there was no phone service, and no way to contact them to arrange their transport. This was a long and arduous process, especially when the roads were in bad condition, and it took a lot of time and effort to make sure they could attend the meetings.
6. It was about 11 miles from the blown (they called "broken") bridge, there was a road, but no cars on that side. There were 11 NPFL checkpoints along this 11 mile stretch of road. I once asked why there were so many checkpoints - they said that they had something to deal with, but there was no traffic, only my UN car moved back and forth once a week.
7. On one occasion I went and picked up the leading politicians and commanders of the NPFL, I came back and they stopped me, they looked suspiciously at the people sitting inside, they didn't know them, even though they were their commanders, when they saw that I was taking them "the big white UN soldier" we could go right away.
8. I knew that most of Liberia is primeval forest, unfortunately I didn't see any animals (monkeys in the trees, birds, snakes), the forest was empty. Explanation, there was no provision, supply there, only weapons, so they ate everything that had legs, flew, or crawled.
9. Child fighters: I had heard about it before, but until I arrived in Liberia, I had only distant, faint ideas of what child fighters were.
  - a. But reality hit me when I first crossed the ceasefire line and entered the NPFL area. Crossing over, I thought I was going to be confronted by "Marcona" soldiers dressed in military uniform, but over there I only saw 6-8 skinny, 8-12 years old children dressed in rags with shiny, modern weapons;
  - b. I was even more surprised when they introduced themselves as "Captain X, Major Y, Lieutenant Colonel Z, ..." but they didn't have any rank insignia;

- c. They never went to school, they didn't even know how to read or write, they only knew how to use weapons and kill.
10. I also heard the most frightening case there, how the NPFL treated people. During one of their attacks, they had to attack through a larger swamp, they drove the soldiers, mainly child soldiers, into it, not caring that the swamp was full of alligators - because of this, hundreds of them got lost there, they disappeared!
11. We set up UNOMIL HQ in a building at the "Mamba Point" part of Monrovia - for your information: "mamba" is the most dangerous snake in Liberia - fortunately there were few there then, because I didn't meet them, but it could have been.
12. The biggest threat was tropical diseases, especially malaria. I also took "anti-malaria pills" daily.  
A very egregious incident occurred and the Mission had to deal with the consequences: We had a Russian "kung-fu" fighter, a strong-willed UN military officer. He caught it once (this means a fever of 40 degrees for a week), and he was cured. A month later, he was cured again, but you couldn't tell he was so weak, he had lost weight - I asked him why he didn't take medicine, he said that he didn't have any, that he wasn't allowed to go on the mission and to ask for shame, even though our doctor had enough.  
I ordered his medical evacuation in the shortest possible time, despite all his pleas and promises!
13. OMEGA<sup>4</sup> navigation Station in Paynesville: Colonel Forgács has a degree in radioelectronics (low current, microwave and pulse technology) engineering, and during one of his patrols he was surprised to notice that he was driving past an OMEGA station. What he had only learned about and heard about was now face to face with the Paynesville Omega Transmitter station. This is rarely found and seen by the UN Military Observer, which is also its basic (civilian) profession.

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<sup>4</sup> OMEGA

was the first global-range radio navigation system, operated by the United States in cooperation with six partner nations (including Liberia). It was a hyperbolic navigation system, enabling ships and aircraft to determine their position by receiving very low frequency (VLF) radio signals in the range 10 to 14 kHz, transmitted by a global network of eight fixed terrestrial radio beacons, using a navigation receiver unit. It became operational around 1971 and was shut down in 1997 in favor of the Global Positioning System.



Paynesville Omega station “B” was inaugurated in 1976 and used an umbrella antenna mounted on a 417-meter steel lattice, grounded guyed mast. It was the tallest structure ever built in Africa.

Colonel Laszlo Forgacs (Hungary) who served as the Leader/Commander of the Advance Party and later the Chief of Staff of UNOMIL was praised for his work in establishment of newly set MILOB mission, in the peace process and awarded the United Nations Medal “IN THE SERVICE OF PEACE”. In particular, he was successful in negotiating the start of the peace process and chairing (11 times) JACIG.

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<sup>5</sup> Omega Transmitting Stations:

- A: Bratland, Norway
- B: Paynesville, Liberia
- C: Kaneoke, Hawaii, USA
- D: Lamoure, North Dakota, USA
- E: Plaine Chabrier, La Réunion
- F: Golfo Nuevo, Trelew, Argentina
- G: Woodside, Victoria, Australia
- H: Sushi-Wan, Tsushima Island, Japan



(Figure 2: United Nations Medal)

Col. Forgacs finished in January 1994 one year of service as assigned to the staff of the UN for the period of the mission at UNAVEM-II and UNOMIL and returned to his motherland, Hungary to his Armed Forces.

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## **Next (new) station**

At the time, Hungary was requested to deploy a former UN military officer, fluent in both Russian and English, with the rank of Brig. General, to serve as the Chief Military Officer (CMO) in Georgia/Abkhazia, and act as the Head of the UN Monitoring Mission (UNOMIG).

The Hungarian Military Authority, Ministry of Defence, and possibly even the Foreign Ministry missed a crucial opportunity. It's hard to say why, but perhaps it was due to petty envy, indecision, or irresolution.

It's a shame, really, because I had the potential to be promoted during this mission period - just like others who were clever enough to be promoted quickly, such as Colonel John Hvidergaard (Denmark), who was even given the rank of Brigadier General for this mission despite not knowing Russian!

It appears that at that moment, the aforementioned entities may have overlooked my presence, being content with my efficient execution of duties in Liberia.

However, it is regrettable that with such an attitude, Hungary forfeited its highly esteemed position in the UN Missions. As a result, the aforementioned governing bodies subsequently reported to the UN and were pleased to appoint a highly capable Colonel, Col. Forgacs, to serve as Chief of Staff and second in command, boasting proficiencies in Russian language.