Chapter 9

Thugs' Paradise, Agencies' Guinea Pig and the Natural Resource Intrigue: The Civil War in Liberia

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Introduction

The so-called 'Liberators' played a deadly role in the Liberian civil war. They turned Liberia into a land where they dictated the affairs of the state with immense brutality and coercion. In order to enhance their grip on state power, these men and women created a human-made crisis in which they brought under their domain, the major natural resources of Liberia, notably timber and diamonds. The 'Liberators' could not have achieved this feat alone. Western European and East Asian 'friends' needed Liberian timber, while others wanted its diamonds. And so the major actor, Charles Taylor, became comfortable enough to create a paradise for loyal actors and accomplices who perpetrated heinous crimes against the Liberian populations with impunity. How did Liberia become a paradise for ruthless actors and lawless people (thugs)? What role did the major natural resources (rubber, timber and diamonds) play in the conflict?

Liberia's natural resources, especially timber and diamonds, entered center stage immediately the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) gained control of much of Liberia in 1990. Charles Taylor made informal arrangements with foreign Timber firms (Johnston, 2004). These arrangements were to later be more formalized when Taylor became President in 1997, thus showing the connection between unregulated private investment in weak states and the incidence of state failure and political instability (Johnston, 2004).

The arrival of shady firms to extract Liberia's resources only worsened the already fragile situation. Foreign firms such as the Oriental Timber Company (OTC), not satisfied with the unstable situation, brought in a private army to protect their concession areas. This army became brutal, intolerant and notorious (along with Taylor's Anti-Terrorist Unit) for flogging of employees working with the firm. Weapons were reportedly delivered covertly via a heavily guarded OTC airstrip by chattered planes to support and strengthen Taylor's army (Global Witness, 2002).

The fragile situation provided the basis for the arrival of United Nations agencies and foreign NGOs. Local NGOs also sprung up to help alleviate the

worsening situation. The UN agencies faced a humanitarian crisis unprecedented in the subregion: hunger, disease and insecurity. As the West African subregion braced itself (with support from the UN) to stabilize the situation, Liberia's case for intervention was a trial and error method, basically making the country a guinea pig for international agencies in the areas of food aid, security plans, revitalization, and most spheres of livelihood. Taylor's brutal exploitation of the people, war lord style of repressive governance and his continued decimation of opposition meant that political power was soon up for grabs among the several Liberian armed factions fighting one another for the purpose of control of strategic natural resources and state power. The fragile peace settlement that brought Taylor to power through a democratic election was thus eclipsed by the resumption of rebel war.

Historical Insights

Liberia has a population of slightly more than three million and a land mass of approximately 38,250 square miles. It is rich in natural resources like iron ore, timber, diamonds, and gold. It hosts one of the world's major tropical rain forests. Unemployment is approximately 80 per cent, and about 80 per cent of the population lives below the poverty line. Liberia is one of the two countries in Africa that was not subjected to colonial rule, albeit the second country Ethiopia was briefly occupied by the Italian fascist regime during World War II. Liberia is the oldest republic on the African continent.

In December 1989, Charles Taylor led a rebel group, the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) in an uprising against the government. Shortly thereafter, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Ceasefire Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) was sent to Liberia as a peacekeeping force but they failed to terminate the fighting. Civil war spread throughout the country as the NPFL battled ECOMOG, the Liberian army, a splinter rebel group called the Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia (INPFL), and the United Liberation Movement of Liberia for Democracy (ULIMO). A number of transition governments ruled Liberia during the 1990s as different cease-fires were agreed upon and broken. Finally, an ECOMOG disarmament programme initiated under the August 1996 peace agreement proved successful. Under considerable international scrutiny, presidential and legislative elections were held in July 1997. Charles Taylor, the man who instigated the Liberian civil war eight years earlier, was elected president. His political party, the National Patriotic Party, won a majority of seats in the National Assembly. The Liberian civil war killed more than 150,000 Liberians and displaced more than a million people between 1989 and 1996. However, his ascent to power failed to improve the lives of ordinary Liberians.

Liberian political and economic history has been marked by cruel repressions by powerful elite whose origin dates back to the arrival of the 'settlers' (emancipated black slaves from the Americas) in 1822 and the subsequent years (Zartman ,2000, p. 99). The arrival of the settlers or pioneers as they are

regarded in history literature saw the beginning of a series of conflicts with the indigenous people over land ownership. Even among the settlers themselves, there were instances of land conflicts as land was a major source of economic and political power even at that time. The conflict among the settlers came to a climax in 1870 when the first dark-skinned settler was elected president. He was accused of corruption, an accusation that caused him both the presidency and his life. The settlers maintained a stable democracy, so to speak, conducting regular elections that excluded the indigenous populations. They thus became powerful land owners by courtesy of the twin advantages of political power and western education they exclusive had. The settlers (and their descendants) progressively became the powerful elites, dominating the economy and political life of the country up to 1980. Being a neo-patrimonial shadow democracy, the political system produced and perpetuated 'strong man's rule' marked by executive absolutism and cult of the presidency (Sawyer, 1992, p. 278).

Although concession companies began arriving into the country in the 1920s and 1930s, the full strength of their activities was felt during the administration of William V.S. Tubman who came to power in 1944. Tubman initiated some questionable reforms in which retrenchment was to later replace the fading leader's earlier modernizing innovations and things began to fall apart (Zartman, 1989). Although many mining companies were operating in Liberia at the time, resources were exploited to benefit the Western industries and powerful elites, who built fabulous houses in Western countries and deposited their loots and profits into foreign accounts. This growth in Liberia's economy brought little or no benefit to the majority indigenous populations, leaving the country with poor road networks and public infrastructure. The indigenous people were not only excluded from participating in the country's economic life, they played a low-key role in the political affairs of the country. The indigenous people agitation for equal political status later led to a confrontation between them and the True Whig Party government headed by William R. Tolbert. He was overthrown in a military coup carried out on 12 April 1980 by indigenous lower rank army officers led by Master Sergeant Samuel K. Doe, thus ushering in a new chapter in the political history of Liberia.

Vandalism

Vandalism describes the crime of deliberate damaging of public property. This is exactly what happened in the long armed conflict in Liberia. Since 1990, many towns and villages have disappeared. Forests that once fed and protected rural communities have withered in the predatory exploitation of 'conflict timber' by different foreign stakeholders in the Liberian war economy. France and China have become the main competitors in reducing Liberia to a desert through predatory exploitation of timber and other biodiversity (Kamara, 2001).

The Oriental Timber Company, which brought in its own workers despite the over 90 per cent unemployment rate in Liberia after the first phase of rebel war, adopted a gold rush policy against the tropical rainforest (Kamara, 2001).

The war and foreign investment companies extremely vandalized the country's infrastructure, including roads, bridges, electrical and water supply, as well as human resources. Deforestation has taken place on a large scale without any attempt at reforestation, as was stipulated in most of the agreements signed with the Liberian government. Also, most of the business concession agreements provided for manpower development training for the unskilled Liberians as well as free primary education for employees' children, but all these were not realized (Concession Review Report of Liberia, 2005). Liberia's timber and diamond industries helped prolonged the civil war and destroyed the country's formal economy. The combination of these factors and others helped to worsen the decay of Liberia's state institutions.

Investment from foreign timber firms in Liberia reinforced an informal, clandestine economy which thrived and took primacy after the collapse of Liberia's infrastructure and formal economy. Heads of the various warring factions and their associates were the main people that benefited from these war economy transactions, leaving ordinary Liberians alienated. Timber firms and other industries served as proxies for collapsed state agencies. Taylor's shadow economy had serious negative effects on ordinary Liberians. Since Taylor depended on foreign investment for capital and security, and not the productivity of domestic citizens and industries, he had little incentive to provide Liberians with public goods and services.

Charles Taylor was actively involved in fueling the violence in the neighboring country of Sierra Leone. The relationship between the Liberian government and the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) was fed by the extraction of natural resources in both Liberia and areas under rebel control in Sierra Leone. He and a small coterie of officials and private businessmen around him were in control of a covert apparatus that included international criminal activity and the arming of the rebel RUF. Taylor used his position as rebel warlord and later president of Liberia to obtain preponderant diamonds from the RUF in exchange for arms. Known for its extreme brutality, the RUF killed many civilians in Sierra Leone and amputated limbs to instill terror in the populations.

Children in Sierra Leone were victimized, but not just by the severing of limbs. The RUF kidnapped children as young as seven years old and forced them to join their rebel movement. Those who tried to escape were either sent into battle frontline or killed if they were caught. Facing gun battles, thirst, and hunger, those who managed to escape often walked for more than fifty miles seeking safety.

The personal connection between ex-President Charles Taylor and late Foday Sankoh, the former RUF leader, goes back a decade to their paramilitary training in Libya as 'revolutionaries', their participation in the coup led by Blaise Campaore in his seizure of power in Burkina Faso, and to Sankoh's involvement in Charles Taylor's abortive attempt to seize power in Liberia during the early years of the rebel war in early 1990s (Hofstatter, 2001). While ex-President Taylor admits that he was a close friend of Foday Sankoh, he denies that he or his government had provided any weapons or assistance to the RUF.

Following the election of Mr Charles Taylor as president, Liberia became a major conduit for diamonds export and arms supply for the conflict in Sierra

Leone (Global Witness, 2006). Global Witness reports that the registration of planes and ships and the issuance of diplomatic passports was hideously abused in order to carry out the arms-for-diamonds transfers from Sierra Leone and also to ship Liberian timber overseas. Scores of ships flying Liberian flag were involved in this lucrative international trade from which the Liberian government, and by prebendal extension, President Taylor, realized millions of dollars in revenues. Many businessmen close to the inner-circle of President Taylor operated on an international scale, getting their weaponry from Eastern Europe transported on these ships.

On 5 March 2000, the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 1306. This resolution prohibited the export of diamonds from Sierra Leone and expressed concern at the role played by the illicit trade in diamonds in fueling the conflict in Sierra Leone (Hofstatter, 2001). Resolution 1306 also noted that such diamonds pass through Liberia. Hofstatter explains that a Report by a Panel of Experts set up under Resolution 1306 found overwhelming evidence that Liberia had been actively supporting the RUF at all levels – by providing training, weapons and related materiel, logistical support, a staging ground for attacks and a safe haven for retreat and recuperation.

On 1 December 2000, the United Nations General Assembly adopted Resolution 55/56. This resolution expressed concern about the problem of rough 'conflict' diamonds being used by rebel movements to finance their military activities and fuel conflict to overthrow legitimate governments.

A United Nations Panel, according to Hofstatter, concluded that Charles Taylor had overseen the smuggling of diamonds mined by the RUF and had dedicated part of this money to paying off rogue arms dealers who, in turn, use Liberian registered planes to deliver large quantities of weapons back to the RUF. The Panel also found that Burkina Faso had facilitated weapon shipments to Liberia, Gambia had allowed diamond smuggling within its borders, and Ukraine had been a primary source of illegal weapon shipments. On 7 March 2001, the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 1343. The Resolution called for the Government of Liberia to cease its military and financial support for the RUF, to end all assistance to armed rebel groups in the region, and to end all direct or indirect importation of rough diamonds from Sierra Leone. Resolution 1343 threatened a ban on all Liberia's diamond exports by 7 May 2001, unless Liberia cuts all ties with the RUF. Liberia did not cut its ties with the RUF, and the ban was placed on Liberia by the Security Council.

Following visits to Guinea and Sierra Leone in March 2001, Britain's Development Minister Clare Short repeated what is now a known factor for regional peace – that Taylor was at the heart of the collapsing region's 'instability'. The French, who at this point were accused of being pro-Taylor, seemed to have had enough of it. French Cooperation Minister Charles Josselin told journalists in Freetown (March 2001) that 'the relations between Charles Taylor and the RUF is no secret. We must recognize that Taylor has shown no sign of complying as yet. On 7 May the sanctions will go into effect and he will be responsible'.

However, in the Security Council's wisdom, Liberia's timber, which it says has fuelled regional chaos since it is battered for arms, will not be touched

by the sanctions even if imposed. This decision to sweep under the carpet the systematic disappearance of one of the vital rainforests in West Africa plundered indiscriminately to facilitate the region's destruction and finance internal repression, was a regrettable one. It is evident that logic and peacebuilding were not the factors considered in sanctioning the plundering of the rainforest, but appeasement of the French and the Chinese in their campaign to further exacerbate Liberia's already worsened economic and environmental degradation. But the long-term effects of this terrible example of vested-interest will come to hunt the global community after Taylor and his foreign partners are gone, leaving behind unimaginable misery.

It is this vested-interest that laid the pillars of West Africa's destruction because world leaders and global actors discounted decency and human rights considerations in enthroning some of the worst abusers as leaders in Liberia. If Liberia had enjoyed the world's attention as Sierra Leone did – courtesy of the British government – criminals bent on wiping out the Liberian rainforest would have not been positively portrayed as 'enlightened,' and 'colourful politicians' as some key Democrats in American political establishment once described Taylor (Kamara, 2001). The children of Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia itself would have been spared the inhuman treatment meted out to them by a bunch of gangland figures spreading despair for personal wealth.

Vigour of Vandalism

The social dislocation from the state which was perpetuated during the country's armed conflict that ended in 2003 can be seen in models developed in Max Weber's theory of the state and William Reno's theory of weak states. These explanations show logically the effects of the Liberian war – one which has been described as one of the wackiest, and most ruthless of all Africa's civil wars (Johnston, 2004, p. 442). Predatory foreign firms and rent-seeking elites have undermined state institutions for private gain, leaving the feeble citizens vulnerable to insurgency while rulers and firms remain able to benefit financially.

In barely a year the euphoria that greeted Liberia's post-war democratic dispensation gave way to deepening crisis and complex challenges. Liberia's 14-year fratricidal war has left in its wake a large militarized youth population. Of the 103,914 ex-combatants and people associated with fighting forces disarmed, only 28,000 weapons (UNMIL, 2004) were collected in a war that lasted for 14 years and fought by more than 10 warring factions. A significant number of ex-combatants still influenced by their commanders are engaged in organized crimes in most large cities of Liberia, particularly in Monrovia, Buchanan, Zwedru, and Tubmanburg.

A second challenge is entrenched inter-ethnic hostility. Liberia's civil war was in the main a product of the country's fragmented and hostile ethnic relations, tempered by neo-patrimonialism. Hitherto instrumental inter-ethnic conflicts have assumed symbolic and primordial significance given the alleged mutual desecration of shrines and other symbols of significance by rival ethnic groups.

This is particularly true for the Poro practicing ethnic groups who accused the Muslim practicing Mandingo ethnic groups of desecrating their shrines. As a consequence, 11 of Liberia's 16 ethnic groups who have the Poro and Sande traditions have mobilized a 'pan-Poro' revolt against the Mandingoes. In addition to primordial interests, inter-ethnic hostility has become an alibi for individuals bent on perpetuating the culture of loot and vandalism to occupy lands and houses belonging to rival ethnic groups.

Repatriating, resettling, and reintegrating over 50 per cent of its citizens displaced both internally and externally is Liberia's third post-war challenge. At one point during the civil war over, 1.75 million of Liberia's 2.5 million pre-war populations were displaced as refugees across the globe (see ICG, 2003). Land disputes, contention over housing and property rights, women's [especially widow's] rights to land, rekindling of war-related traumas and consequential reprisal attacks are no longer risk factors but growing problems that need urgent response. This phenomenon is rife in communities where basic social services like the provision of health services, education, safe drinking water, and electricity among others, are non-existent.

The fourth but most explosive post-war challenge is the illegal exploitation of natural resources. The Liberian civil war, in which multiple warlord and insurgent groups battled for the control of mineral-rich zones of the country, reinforced the long-held mentality that violence is the ultimate instrument in the management of natural resources in Liberia. An estimated 36,000 persons, 1,000 of whom are ex-combatants, still occupy the Guthrie Rubber Plantation in Western Liberia while at least 5,000 persons including 600 ex-combatants have laid claims to the Sinoe Rubber Plantation. Another estimated 30,000 persons including foreign nationals were, at the time of writing this contribution, still plundering Liberia's internationally reserved Sapo National Park for gold, diamonds, and endanger species (UN Secretary General, 2006). With the militarization of the state, long years of vandalization of natural resources and heightened expectation amongst ex-combatants and 'host communities' that they are entitled to stakeholder tangible benefits, natural resource conflicts are likely to remain a major security threat to the Liberian state.

Many critics argue that Liberia's new democratic dispensation tend to be based on traditional 'winner-takes-all' and 'winner witch hunts loser' politics. Opposition parties feel left out of the rebuilding of post-war Liberia. A large number of competent Liberians who belong to rival political parties feel and complain of being marginalized because of their differing political views. National reconciliation is severely undermined by this feeling of exclusion (whether perceived or real) within Liberia's so-called political class. While different structural causes laid the foundation for the Liberia civil war, the drivers and mobilizers of people for the war were disgruntled political elites.

What seems to complicate Liberia's internal challenges is prevalence of a turbulent and highly volatile Mano River region. For 14 years Liberia served as the 'eye in the regional storm' (ICG, 2003), exporting violence while at the same time igniting already combustible conflict factors in neighboring countries.

The economic, social, political, and environmental disruptions caused by that experience remains a crucial challenge.

The Role of International Agencies

The struggle for control of minerals and other natural resources is an important source of revenue in conflict. Rulers and warlords have used exclusive contracts with foreign firms to regularize sources of revenue, in lieu of a government agency to collect taxes (Nafziger, 2002, p. 157). Liberia as a nation attracted shady firms whose interests involved the extraction of primary commodities linked to the weapons trade.

The international dimension exacerbated and prolonged the Liberian civil war by adding significant sources of capital and wagons for non-state insurgencies (Johnston, 1994, p. 443). Such countries as France, the Netherlands, Indonesia, Malaysia and Ukraine were among the nations that created a market for these resources, controlled by few elite in Liberia for their own benefit. (Kamara, 2001) Should the United Nations be held responsible for not imposing immediate sanctions on Liberia's timber and logging industries, and excluding countries that have created market for the sale of these illegal resources? This question will not be explored in this chapter as it forms a different level of discussion. Liberia, like any other collapsed states, was at the crossroads of an international conspiracy. Despite serious international opprobrium and indictment during the 14 years war, Liberia found receptive audience in countries like France, Malaysia, etc., which had been dominant in Liberian industries at different levels. It is therefore no coincidence that most of these countries greatly increased the presence of their organizations and agencies during this period under the guise of humanitarian assistance and support.

Further to the exploitation of Liberia, some Western countries hunted by the guilt of their duplicity, saw foreign aid as a vehicle of restitution, righting past wrongs and buying pardon. Without doubt, this humanitarian device seemed immensely gratifying to all parties. The net result, however, was that the international aid process in Liberia was turned into a bizarre showcase of humanitarian commercialism. This was, in many instances, motivated by self-interest, ill-intention and strategic calculations. Liberia was used as a guinea pig or test ground for diverse models of reconstruction and peacebuilding activities, many of which were new initiatives that had not been tried elsewhere. The consequences have not been altogether pleasant, not least because of the contradictions and externalities that generally attend to donor-driven development intervention. The conduct of many aid agencies and their bureaucracies are, to say the least, deplorable. Most of these aid agencies have at least one thing in common: an uncanny ability to sense the prevailing mood in the donor countries and to adapt themselves to it. For instance, if humanitarianism is in the air, then they will make humanitarian statements, if environmental movements seem to be gaining political support, then the agencies will inject some ecology into their rhetoric (Hancock, 1997); if it is the concept of a welfare support which is on the

ascendancy in the donor countries, the agencies will highlight their own role in the international redistribution of wealth and will accordingly plan along that line in the development process. Where conservative market values enjoy resurgence, then notions like structural adjustment and 'poverty eradication strategies' as we have seen with the development intervention programmes of the Bretton Woods institutions, are promulgated, ventures of private enterprise are extolled, and market forces are assigned a god-like omnipotence. In this way, leading agencies use western aid to create profit for Western companies.

Who Benefits from Liberian Resources?

Public money is like holy water, every one helps himself to it (Hancock, 1997)! Who are the beneficiaries from Liberia's resources? Is it the Liberian people or aid agencies and their staff and donor countries, or, further, Western companies who came as investors and agents of trade in weapons? Many concession companies operated in Liberia's various industries, but neither the communities nor the population as a whole benefited from the export of the natural resources; less than 14 per cent of all taxes assessed were actually paid into government accounts and used to fund constructive governmental functions and social development (Concession Review Report, 2005, p. 34). Some local communities were terrorized by these concession companies, who funneled part of their profits from resource exploitation into the support of different war factions and private militias.

The powerful local actors and warlords were in strong collusion with the so-called foreign investors: '[today] they are in high places doing business with international investors; tomorrow, they are with rebels in the jungle and some time flying away to their carefully prepared retirement homes in Western countries' (Hancock, 1997, p. 181). Their embezzled fortunes would have long ago gone out ahead of them, usually to Switzerland, or to the United State, or some Western banks for safekeeping.

As former US Treasury Secretary, Don Regan, accurately put it when speaking of America and the mighty green back: 'we have become a haven currency and a haven country not only for people, but also for their money'. This is how the game works; public money levied from poor people's labour in the form of trade and resource exploitation is transferred to the rich countries in the form of foreign trade. The rich in the poor countries or the elite collect the proceeds and then send it back for safekeeping in banks to the rich countries. The real trick, throughout this cycle of expropriation, is to maintain the pretence that it is the poor in the poor countries who are being helped all along by creating jobs for them in there communities, which is far from the reality (Hancock, 1997).

The winners and beneficiaries of Liberia's resources are the main players – the Western countries and their firms and the Liberian elites who manage to keep a straight face while building up a billion-dollar bank account in foreign countries. Another beneficiary could be the donor's countries. The really clever players are those who have understood that every dollar of development assistance that comes into the country, whether through the national government or aid agencies,

creates an opportunity for undetectable personal enrichment. Even when donor countries insist on closely supervising the expenditure of the particular funds they have provided, this is not an obstacle to the enterprising fiddler who knows the meaning of the word 'fungibility'.

Conclusion

This chapter shows how Western countries and their investing companies have exploited and benefited from Liberia's natural resources and war economy. Instead of helping to rebuild the collapsed economy and institutions, foreign firms and the Liberian governing elites have tended to be more interested in exploiting and trading on timber and other primary commodities. The lucrative business in natural resources is beneficial to both the local and international elites, a malpractice that thrives at the expense of the majority of the Liberian people.

Despite enormous personal profits, Mr Charles Taylor (the ex-Liberian warlord and president) and his associates had an incentive to allow Liberia's formal economic and political structures to decay, thereby limiting political and economic opportunities for ordinary Liberians. Throughout most of Liberia's pre-war and war-time history, the civil society and the local population were not only denied empowerment, but in some cases were actually expelled from their areas, or had their livelihood damaged by the behaviour of concession holders. Crops were damaged, people were threatened by militias and salaries were unpaid, leaving the entire country vandalized. This is because natural resources, coupled with an increasingly global trade and an emphasis on deregulation of commerce provide the currency to acquire weapons and to enrich leaders of various war factions. Some scholars articulated empirical evidence from events in Liberia and elsewhere to argue that the presence of natural resources tend to prolong the duration of civil wars, but not to cause them (Ross, 2004, p. 5).

Clearly, natural resources and the correlated rents tend to have had an aggravating effect on the Liberian civil war and political transition. A positive transformation of the dysfunctional status quo would require the following:

- The Liberian people should be empowered with ownership of the natural resources; these resources belong to the people and not the few members of the governing elites who hitherto use them as sources of state patronage.
- When natural resource-related public assets are privatized, revenues should be deposited in a national investment fund.
- Structural devolution of political and economic power and resources should be promoted through state legislation and policy implementation.
- Line ministries dealing with natural resources should be separated from concession/holdings and future parliamentary oversight should be ensured.
- The Ministry of Finance should manage revenues and the natural resource line Ministries should do the long-term planning for the resource sector.
- Maximum transparency of revenues and transactions should be ensured.

- A strong legal framework that supports privatization and economic development outside of the natural resource sector should be developed.

The new democratic dispensation in Liberia that came into place in February 2006 presents a great opportunity for constructive political, constitutional and economic reforms. The post-war reconstruction of Liberia and the country's future will likely be better served if natural resource ownership and revenue management are treated as an integral part of the process of developing new structures.

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