

2. AFRICA

THE MANO RIVER CONFLICTS AS FOREST WARS

By Paul Richards

The Upper Guinean forest belt of West Africa –from eastern Sierra Leone to western Ghana– is prized for its biodiversity; especially the Liberian forests. The area around the Nimba Mountains –where Liberia, Guinea and Cote d'Ivoire meet– is among 25 most important biological “hot spots” of global conservation significance. It is also home to four of Africa's current or recent civil wars.

Civil war began in Liberia on 24th December 1989 with an incursion into Nimba County by fighters seeking to overthrow Samuel K. Doe's government. The major faction was led by a dissident Americo-Liberian, Charles Taylor. Groups with connections to the war in Liberia became involved in conflicts in neighbouring countries (Sierra Leone, Guinea, Cote d'Ivoire). The Revolutionary United Front (RUF), launching its rebellion from forests on the Liberian border, fought successive governments in Sierra Leone from 1991 to 2002. Insurrections against President Conteh of Guinea flared in 2000, especially in forested districts adjacent to Liberia, assisted by the RUF. War resumed in Liberia, 1999-2003, when groups backed by Guinea, Sierra Leone and Cote d'Ivoire tried to unseat Charles Taylor, president since elections in 1997. Fighting erupted in Cote d'Ivoire in 2002, when an army revolt divided the

country into a government-controlled forest belt in the south and a rebel-controlled savanna north. President Gbagbo's government also faced a second insurgency, launched by the Mouvement Populaire Ivoirien du Grand Ouest (MPIGO), in forested terrain around Danane, the town from which Charles Taylor's faction first launched its invasion of Liberia. After 15 years, the wheel of forest war had come full circle.

Unemployed young people, with little education and poor job prospects, join militias to escape a life of grinding poverty. Once skilled in war, the fighters move among the factions with little regard for national boundaries. The four Upper Guinean forest conflicts are sometimes referred to by the name of the river that threads its way through the thick forests along the border between Liberia and Sierra Leone. Increasingly, it is realised these Mano River conflicts require regional solutions. Since the forest is a common element it is worth asking whether the forest itself contributed to war, and if so, how forest management might assist conflict resolution.

The Liberian war was substantially funded by logging operations. Ambassador William Twaddell, testifying to the Africa sub-committee of the US House of Representatives in 1996, estimated the Taylor rebels gained \$75 million annually from diamond, timber and rubber exports. Liberia accounts for about 40 percent of the remaining Upper Guinean forest. Timber exports (mainly to France) from ports controlled by Taylor was valued at \$53 million per year during the period 1990-94, funding purchase of cheap Eastern European arms and ammunition. The Liberian Constitution of 1986 requires natural resources to be

managed “in such a manner as shall ensure maximum feasible participation of Liberian citizens under conditions of equality”. After Charles Taylor became president of Liberia he took over the granting of concessions by decree. From 1999 timber was the regime’s main source of support, accounting for half of export earnings and 20 percent of GDP. The main concessionaire –the Oriental Timber Company– exported timber worth \$36 million in 2000 and \$43 million in 2001. Total Liberian timber exports in 2001 were estimated at \$80 million.

Taylor’s support for the RUF in Sierra Leone gained him international notoriety. The Security Council authorised a sanctions regime, including a ban on international trade in “all round logs and timber products originating in Liberia” (SC Resolution 1521 of 2003) to deprive combatants of their revenue. A weakened Mr Taylor, under military pressure from two directions, agreed to a Nigerian offer of asylum and vacated the presidency in August 2003, being replaced by an interim government of national unity, pending elections in 2006. Meanwhile, a 15000 -strong United Nations peacekeeping force has deployed throughout the country, and demobilization of armed factions has begun. UN peacekeeping forces, backed by British troops, had earlier brought an end to the long-running conflict in Sierra Leone, and successfully disarmed c. 70000 combatants. French troops were deployed between the factions in Cote d’Ivoire, and the Guinean rebels appear to have been defeated militarily. There is now a chance to end all four conflicts, but lessons need to be learned.

The Upper Guinean forest has proved an ideal environment for low-intensity guerrilla warfare, in which the agents were often irregulars recruited from among

marginalized rural young people skilful in bush survival. The tactics were largely based on ambush and raiding, drawing extensively on local knowledge of forest by-ways. Ill-equipped government troops in Liberia and Sierra Leone had little capacity for a kind of jungle warfare the American army found daunting in Vietnam. Air attacks –by Nigerian peacekeeping forces– probably inflicted more casualties on civilians than on rebels, well hidden in caves and other secure recesses in the forest. The RUF in Sierra Leone became especially adept at this kind of jungle warfare, until flushed into the open by the night vision equipment and helicopter gunships of South African mercenaries.

A factor in war spreading from Liberia to Sierra Leone, Guinea and Cote d’Ivoire has been that significant portions of the international borders these countries share with Liberia are thickly forested. Cross-border forest populations are often linked by kinship and marriage, and much local commerce and social interaction takes places via unregulated cross-border forest tracks and footpaths. The rebels mingle with the locals, promising to help right ancient wrongs –e.g. land or chieftaincy lost through the arbitrary imposition of colonial borders or the expropriation of allegedly “empty” land as government logging or conservation reserves. British post-war aid to Sierra Leone has emphasised retraining a national army equipped to defend its borders. But there is only so much that can be achieved with better maps, night vision goggles and counter-insurgency know-how. A radical answer would be to cut down the forests. Some roadside gallery forests on the Liberian border, protected by local chiefs for the benefit of travellers from pre-colonial times, were cleared by the Sierra Leone army in the early 1990s to create free-fire

zones to fight the RUF. But massive deforestation for military strategic purposes seems as impractical as it is unthinkable. What are the alternatives?

A sound approach would be to tackle the problems driving young people into the forests to fight. Post-war studies with ex-combatants in Sierra Leone and Liberia identified lack of access to education and poor job prospects as two major factors disposing young people to fight. Demobilization in Sierra Leone included major emphasis on skill training. The battle is now to provide jobs. This is not just an economic problem but also an issue of political reform and human rights. Throughout the region many young people are excluded by poverty and accident of birth from education, access to land and even citizenship (as among Muslim migrants into the forests of southern Cote d'Ivoire). Local land and labour laws lead to young people remaining within traditional communities to be exploited by codes of deference reflecting social values inherited from an era of domestic slavery. An AK47, allied to bush survival skills, buys a temporary escape, but many fighters soon become war-weary, recognising that militia life is unsustainable. The career of Nixon Gaye –a Liberian child soldier recruited in Nimba County by Charles Taylor's militia– exemplifies the problem. A fighter at 14, by the age of 17 he was leading the Special Forces assisting the RUF in eastern Sierra Leone, until sent back to Liberia by an RUF leadership appalled at his atrocities. Gaye then went to ground in a rubber plantation in Margibi County, where he and his wild teenage companions camped under the trees, reputedly subsisting on grubs and whatever they could hijack from relief supplies diverted through the plantation they

had been hired to protect. Too unstable to be incorporated in Charles Taylor's regular forces, Gaye's group was chartered for high-risk missions behind lines controlled by Nigerian peacekeepers. This appears to have included a terrible massacre at Harbel apparently undertaken to discredit Liberian government forces. Gaye was eventually wounded and taken to Gbarnga, Taylor's base, where he was killed, aged 20. He had become a liability when the Liberian factions were edging towards a peace deal. Some ex-combatants remain attracted to imitate Gaye's short-lived infamy, but most see little point in burning out so quickly.

What is not in doubt is the capacity of these young fighters to endure in remote bush conditions many others would find intolerable. Is there a more positive way to make use of the capacity of young West African fighters to survive in the forest? Forestry itself holds few prospects. Sierra Leone, Guinea and Cote d'Ivoire are largely logged out. Liberia has enough timber, but the sector only employs 7000 people. Concessionaires bring in skilled operatives. There may be better prospects in tree-crop planting. Would ex-combatants qualify? Many fighters in the Mano River conflicts joined militias to help protect their families and communities. They are often welcomed home. Where they enjoy land rights planting rubber or oil palm is an option. The training component of demobilization in Sierra Leone did not give enough emphasis to the design and implementation of tree crop packages. This needs to be remedied in Liberia. Fighters less certain of their reception are often interested in work that signals their renewed commitment to society. In urban areas, some ex-combatant groups have moved into socially necessary but unattractive work such as rubbish

collection. In rural areas, land resource management provides similar scope to demonstrate social worth. In fact, several RUF groups, retaining their band structure from the bush war, have moved into cooperative agricultural development. One such group has rehabilitated swampland destroyed by alluvial diamond mining. Perhaps ex-combatants could undertake a range of other land resource recovery, maintenance and protection tasks, including forest protection? The challenge is to rethink environmental protection in terms of work that will help stigmatised ex-combatants prove their social worth. In both symbolic and practical terms this would be a proper antidote to the poison of forest war in West Africa.

Paul Richards
Technology & Agrarian Development Group
Social Sciences Department, Wageningen
University and Research Centre
6706 KN Wageningen
The Netherlands

References and further reading on request
from paul.richards@wur.nl

CONFLICT TIMBER AND LIBERIA'S WAR

By Arthur G. Blundell

In 2002, forestry accounted for an estimated 22 percent of Liberia's GDP and half of its exports. Forests are important to the 85 percent of Liberians who are unemployed and many of who rely on shifting cultivation. However, forests have also been a source of instability. Over the past two decades, timber has funded conflict and the security forces of logging companies have engaged in widespread human rights abuses, including massacres. To eliminate this 'conflict timber', the United Nations Security Council (UN) banned the export of forest products from Liberia in 2003. The sanctions remain and the UN has demanded reform of the forest sector to prevent revenue from funding the resumption of violence. This paper summarizes the history of the conflict, the role of timber, and the use of targeted sanctions.

In 1820, rather than receiving their liberty in the USA, 86 ex-slaves were sent to West Africa to found a new country: Liberia. Their descendants, less than 3 percent of present-day Liberians, ruled until 1980, when a semi-literate sergeant seized power. Samuel Doe's kleptocracy lasted a decade until the cold war ended and with it, Liberia's strategic importance. With failing support from the USA, Liberia descended into a brutal civil war, lead by the Libyan-trained insurgent Charles Taylor. Exploiting ethnic animosity, Taylor soon captured most of the country, which gave him control over Liberia's lucrative natural resources.