

72/96

AI INDEX: AFR 34/01/96

12 APRIL 1996

LIBERIA: ACTION MUST BE TAKEN NOW TO PROTECT LIVES OF CIVILIANS
THREATENED BY ARMED CONFLICT

All parties to the Liberian conflict and the international community must act quickly to protect the lives of civilians threatened by armed conflict in Liberia, Amnesty International said today.

Monrovia, the capital of Liberia, has been the scene of heavy factional fighting for several days and an unknown number of civilians have been killed. Armed factions are holding hostages and have hampered efforts to evacuate civilians from Monrovia.

“Factions holding hostages should release them immediately and all parties should ensure the safety of civilians, and in particular not attack civilians. Civilians who wish to do so, must be allowed to leave areas of fighting,” Amnesty International said.

“It is crucial that the United Nations (UN) remains in Liberia in sufficient numbers at precisely the time when its role is vital to report on human rights issues and when its presence can help protect civilians against human rights abuses.”

Since 8 April 1996 some 600 people, many of whom seem to be hostages, have been held at Barclay Training Centre military barracks by those loyal to former armed group leader, Roosevelt Johnson. They include mostly Liberian civilians, members of the West African peace-keeping force, known as ECOMOG, and Lebanese nationals. Many of them were reportedly coerced to go into the barracks to act as a human shield against attack by opposing forces.

Attempts to evacuate civilians by US armed forces helicopters were temporarily halted when the helicopters were attacked, including by rocket-propelled grenades, by fighters on the ground, although the helicopters were clearly performing a humanitarian function.

Non-essential staff from the UN Observer Mission in Liberia (UNOMIL), which was set up in 1993 to oversee a peace process and also has a humanitarian and human rights component, are being relocated from Liberia following this latest outbreak of fighting. Press reports suggest this is a short-term measure.

BACKGROUND

The current outbreak of violence began on 6 April 1996 when police tried to arrest Roosevelt Johnson, former leader of a faction of one of the armed groups involved in Liberia's civil war, the United Liberation Movement of Liberia for Democracy (ULIMO), known as ULIMO-J, whose members are predominantly of the Krahn ethnic group. Police units were attacked and fighting broke out between Krahn loyal to Roosevelt Johnson and fighters of two other factions, the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), and the other ULIMO faction, known as ULIMO-K.

In March, Roosevelt Johnson had been replaced as leader of ULIMO-J after internal disagreement. Later that month the Council of State, a joint presidency comprising leaders of the NPFL and ULIMO-K and another armed group, which was organized under a peace

agreement signed in Abuja, Nigeria in August 1995, suspended him from his government post. The reason given by the Council of State for trying to arrest him was his alleged involvement in the murder of an associate of the new leader of ULIMO-J. Roosevelt Johnson resisted arrest claiming that the police were allied to the NPFL.

Fighting is now focused on the Barclay Training Centre, the home of the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL), where Roosevelt Johnson continues to resist arrest with support from Krahn members of the AFL, and members of the Liberian Peace Council, another Krahn armed group. The brutal civil war in Liberia, which began in December 1989, has been characterized by the killing of civilians and a blatant disregard for international humanitarian standards and human rights law by all parties. The Abuja peace agreement in August 1995 brought a reduction to the levels of violence, but the current events call into question its viability.

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