

INTERNATIONAL

Liberia blamed in Sierra Leone conflict

By Jeff Cooper

Special to Sentinel-Voice
ACCRA, Jan. 18 (IPS) — As the fighting between the West African Peacekeeping Force and rebels continues in the Sierra Leonean capital of Freetown, neighboring states are openly pointing fingers at Liberia as the power behind the Sierra Leone rebels.

President Jerry Rawlings of Ghana has been one of the most outspoken West African leaders in blaming Liberian President Charles Taylor for the Freetown carnage that has claimed more than 2,000 lives.

Rawlings told a Liberian delegation during a recent visit to the country that it was disappointing that Liberia, which now enjoys relative peace as a result of ECOMOG's peace role in its seven-year civil war that ended in 1997, was now supporting rebels against those same peacekeepers in a neighboring country.

"I am receiving you with difficulty, because we find it difficult to believe you," President Rawlings told the delegation referring to Liberia's denials that it is involved in the Sierra Leonean conflict.

"Lives are at stake and Ghana is not going to take

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any treachery lying down," Rawlings told Liberian Vice President Enoch Dogolea, who delivered a special message to the Ghanaian leader from Taylor on Sierra Leone.

Rawlings warned Liberia to stop supporting the rebels or risk facing the full might of the sub-region. The Ghanaian leader also claimed that Ghana has access to intelligence reports on the rebels' movement from Liberia, their support, and information on the supply of sophisticated weaponry now being used against ECOMOG in Freetown.

"Liberia's support for the RUF (Revolutionary United Front) is a stab in the back of countries contributing troops to ECOMOG... I am talking as a military man who is risking the lives of his troops on the field and that gives no room for diplomatic talks," President Rawlings said. He added that he would "not clothe his feelings in

diplomatic niceties."

Ghana's Foreign Minister echoed the president's sentiments.

"We cannot hide our outrage and disappointment, because we cannot have a relationship that presumes friendship and manifests in back stabbing," Foreign Minister James Victor Gbeho said.

Liberia's Foreign Minister Monnie Captan, who accompanied his Vice President to Accra, the Ghanaian capital, would only say that a conflict in any neighboring country is a threat to another country, and he described the war in Sierra Leone as "a sore situation" that needs urgent attention.

Besides Ghana, Britain also has alleged that Liberia is meddling in Sierra Leone.

British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook sent a strongly-worded message to Liberia in early January suggesting that Britain had evidence of Taylor's support for the rebels

and forces loyal to the civilian President Ahmed Tejan Kabbah.

The United States and Nigeria also have blamed Taylor for the conflict.

Ironically, the tiny country of Liberia — with an estimated 2.8 million people — has hardly begun to recover from its own seven-and-a-half year civil war which left more than 250,000 people dead and the economy and infrastructure in ruins.

But, despite its own difficulties, "Liberia must be watched closely in the sub-region," said one analyst.

In protest of Liberia's covert support for the rebels, ECOMOG has announced that it is withdrawing its remaining batch of soldiers from Liberia.

The Sierra Leone conflict had its genesis with a civil war in neighboring Liberia that lasted from December 1989 to July 1997.

The jailed RUF leader, Corporal Foday Sankoh, launched his war against the Sierra Leone government in 1991 from neighboring Liberia with the help of Taylor. He was then a rebel leader and the strongest opponent to the Economic Community of West African States' peace plan for Liberia.

Opposition leader slain in South Africa

RICHMOND, South Africa (AP) — Gunmen on Saturday shot to death a South African opposition party official who had been accused of inciting political violence.

Sifiso Nkabinde, who was kicked out of President Nelson Mandela's African National Congress in 1997 because of allegations he had spied for apartheid police, was killed outside a shopping center, police said.

The gunmen also shot at two others with Nkabinde, but no details were immediately available on their conditions.

ANC leaders had accused Nkabinde of being a central

figure in political violence that has plagued the KwaZulu-Natal region for over a decade.

More than 10,000 people died in a decade of political clashes in KwaZulu-Natal that preceded the first all-race elections in 1994.

Most of that violence stemmed from conflict between the ANC and the Zulu nationalist Inkatha Freedom Party.

In a trial last year, Nkabinde was acquitted on charges of killing 16 people. The judge ruled for acquittal, saying prosecutors had lied and witnesses sounded as if they had been coached.

Nkabinde said in an interview last year with The Associated Press that ANC leaders implicated him in factional fighting for political reasons, and denied any involvement.

Mandela commended the police at the time for arresting Nkabinde, saying it would "prevent further incidents of violence."

Bantu Holomisa, leader of Nkabinde's opposition United Democratic Movement, said he suspected the "barbaric" attack was politically motivated. He urged UDM supporters to resist the temptation for revenge attacks.

"We appeal to the people of Richmond to assist the police in tracking down the perpetrators," he said. Richmond is about 280 miles southeast of Johannesburg.

Military and police security forces, which have been boosted recently to about 500 members in the region, were stationed outside Nkabinde's home.

"The government will leave no stone unturned in searching for the killers of Mr. Nkabinde," Mandela said.

Military helicopters also patrolled the area to monitor "tension that may arise," said police Director Bala Naidoo.

WORLD BRIEFS

ZIMBABWE'S FORMER PRESIDENT GETS 10 YEARS FOR RAPE

HARARE (IPS) — Former Zimbabwean President Canaan Banana was sentenced on Jan. 18 to 10 years in prison. He will only serve one year because nine were conditionally suspended. The once-respected former head of state, international mediator, theologian, author and family man was found guilty of 11 counts of homosexual rape and ordered to pay \$13,500 in compensation to his former presidential aide, Jefta Dube, and to the family of the man killed by Dube. Banana's lawyers however immediately launched an appeal against the conviction and sentence in Zimbabwe's Supreme Court, leaving the former head of state under house arrest.

PANAMANIAN GOVERNMENT TO CHANGE FEES FOR CANAL VESSELS

PANAMA CITY (IPS) — The Panamanian government announced that it will draw up new guidelines for setting the tolls paid by vessels using the Panama Canal, which will go into effect in the year 2000. Foreign Minister Jorge Ritter, who is also Canal Authority Minister, told foreign correspondents in Panama that as of the year 2000, canal revenues would no longer be aimed at simply covering costs, as under the current system, but also at bringing in a profit. He said future rates would be based on several basic principles: canal operating and maintenance costs (including write-offs); the protection of water resources; working capital and required reserves; payments to the national treasury, stipulated by the constitution and the law governing the Canal Authority; the funds needed to expand, upgrade and modernize the canal; interest on the canal's value based on the interest rate approved by the Canal Authority; and losses from previous years.

MORE OF TOGO'S YOUNG PEOPLE STARTING TO SMOKE

According to figures from the General Statistical Office, the amount of tobacco, cigarettes and cigars imported into Togo has been increasing rapidly. It went from 746 tons in 1995 to 1,173 tons in 1997. In terms of value, the jump has been even greater: from 4.2 billion CFA francs to 7.4 billion francs in the same two-year period. (One dollar is equal to 500 CFA francs). "There isn't a day when I do not smoke," said 22-year-old Moudachirou Ousmane, a driver's apprentice at the road transport terminus in Kara, 413 kms north of the Togolese capital, Lome. "I can't live without cigarettes. I don't get much from it but it just makes me feel good. It's really great, especially when I smoke a cigarette while chewing cola nut (a bitter light narcotic popular in West Africa)," said another apprentice, Fataou Ismailou.

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