

LIBERIA

Violent incidents in Lofa County in July, clashes between government forces and rebels in Nimba County in November and the events in neighbouring Sierra Leone and Guinea meant that security remained fragile in Liberia in 2000. The situation in the capital, Monrovia, did improve when checkpoints were removed, bringing the city nearer to normality. Crime levels also declined. However, continuing uncertainty continued to prevent any real economic recovery, and security concerns limited the activities of NGOs* and United Nations (UN) agencies.

Precarious peace

The incidents in Lofa and Nimba counties served as a reminder that dissidents still threatened the relative stability achieved in Liberia since the end of the civil war. The attacks on Upper Lofa and the town of Voinjama in July came from the Guinean side of the border where there are over 60,000 Liberian refugees. In September and November the border areas were again disrupted by attacks on villages and refugee camps in Guinea by rebel groups from both Sierra Leone and Liberia. The fighting moved back into Liberia in November, this time in Nimba County, with reports of a major battle between dissident forces and government troops. The situation on the Sierra Leonean border also remained volatile, prompting the Liberian government, in July, to ask UNHCR* to move 11,000 massed in Sinje, Liberia, further away from the frontier. On the positive side, the improved security in many other parts of the country allowed more Liberian refugees and displaced people to return home. The numbers were, however, well below those planned for 2000 in the repatriation programme. Many in Guinea and in the Liberian capital Monrovia pre-

* NGOs: non-governmental organizations

* UNHCR: Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees



⊕ ICRC delegation ⊕ ICRC office

ferred to stay where they were so as to benefit from the social infrastructure, particularly health centres and schools, which no longer existed in their villages of origin.

Political isolation

Four years after coming to power, the Liberian government still faced difficulties in its relations with other governments in the region. This was partly due to its alleged links with the rebel Revolutionary United Front in Sierra Leone. Potential external donors, in particular, remained highly cautious of the regime. Human rights organizations continued to criticize the actions of the army, police and paramilitary groups. The

media, too, frequently drew attention to alleged abuses of power.

The President continued to exercise a very personalized and direct form of leadership. In March he ordered the closure of two private radio stations, one supported by NGOs and the second, which subsequently reopened, by the Catholic Church. The incident caused a bitter row between the President and his local critics, and was also condemned by both the NGO and the diplomatic community in Monrovia.

The ICRC continued to assist displaced people and vulnerable returnees, and was able to visit security detainees in prisons, police stations and other places of detention.

A frail economy

International investment and business confidence failed to revive in 2000. Taiwan supported a number of government transport and power projects and a private Philippine company set up a forestry business. These had little impact on the local economy. Unemployment remained high, and many government officials went unpaid. The infrastructure of the country, which had fallen into chronic disrepair during the civil war, remained neglected. There was, however, some inflow of funds from overseas, as many Liberians living abroad, especially in the United States, continued to send money home to family members. It has been estimated that between a quarter and a third of the population regularly benefits from such overseas remittances.

Downturn in assistance

The number of NGOs working in Liberia continued to fall in 2000. By the end of the year there was no NGO or UN agency working in Lofa County. MSF,* which had been assisting the Kolahun hospital in Upper Lofa, pulled out after the incursions. In other developments not linked to the violence, UNHCR's rehousing programme for displaced people came to an end and the European Union ended its water and sanitation programme.

The Red Cross still operative

The Liberian Red Cross worked with WFP* until the end of 2000 distributing food to displaced people in Montserado County. It also ran 10 clinics funded by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and two financed by the ICRC. The International Federation also supported the development of six local Red Cross chapters, helped build wells and latrines, and promoted fundraising activities including fishing and livestock projects.

* MSF: *Médecins sans frontières*

* WFP: World Food Programme

The ICRC continued to enjoy a positive image among government circles, the media and a wider public. Football matches were used to demonstrate the importance of playing by certain rules, even in war, and travelling concerts also

put across the ICRC's message. The organization concentrated on protecting detainees and displaced people and providing them with practical help. It also carried out a number of water and sanitation projects for particularly vulnerable groups.

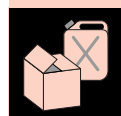
IN 2000 THE ICRC:



- visited prisons, police stations and other places of detention to monitor conditions, regularly visited 20 security detainees, provided medical and non-food assistance when needed, carried out minor repairs on cooking facilities and water-supply and sanitation systems, and provided regular medical care through an ICRC nurse;



- handled 2,803 Red Cross messages to put separated family members back in touch with each other;



- distributed non-food assistance to 7,200 people displaced by the Lofa incidents;



- supported 2 Liberian Red Cross clinics which at the peak of their activities provided assistance to over 2,500 displaced people and returnees a month;



- drilled wells, built latrines and repaired or developed water and sanitation facilities in counties coping with vulnerable groups;



- trained Liberian Red Cross volunteers in tracing procedures, supported the Society's dissemination activities in schools, and improved its emergency response capacities;



- organized information sessions for national and local authorities on the ICRC's activities and role, and in particular pressed for enactment of a law regulating the use of the red cross emblem at a workshop organized for members of the House of Representatives;
- spread awareness of international humanitarian law and the activities and mandate of the ICRC among the armed and security forces;
- used sporting, cultural and other events to promote Red Cross principles among a wider public, including the media and young people, and raised the profile of the activities of the Liberian Red Cross.



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