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Liberian Churches Work for Peace, Plead for Americans to Help

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Peace Talks Are Scheduled for June 4, Humanitarian Situation is "Extremely Alarming"

May 28, 2003, New York City - Liberia's churches are pleading with American Christians to help them as they seek to bring emergency assistance, peace and hope in a nation battered by more than 13 years of civil war and whose situation seems only to grow more desperate every day.

Church leaders report a proliferation of armed groups, forced recruitment of children aged 12 to 18 years and amputations of men, women and children by the belligerent forces. The fighting has uprooted hundreds of thousands from their homes, driving them into overcrowded camps where the fragile shelters provide inadequate protection in the rainy season, which now has commenced. Today, fighting has rendered 80 percent of the country inaccessible to relief agencies, according to United Nations sources.

"The humanitarian situation is extremely alarming. Because there are no safe corridors, relief (supplies) are unable to reach the affected," said Benjamin D. Lartey, General Secretary of the Liberian Council of Churches, in a May 23 situation report. The World Food Program has stopped distributing food to an estimated 200,000 displaced people in camps around Liberia because the rations were being seized systematically by armed raiders as soon as they were handed out, according to the United Nations.

"As a result," Mr. Lartey said, "people are dying from starvation and diseases. Help is urgently needed to save the lives of thousands."

The global humanitarian agency Church World Service is striving to enlist U.S. churches and government leaders to take an active

interest on behalf of Liberia's beleaguered people, who feel forgotten by the United States, Liberia's long-time ally. CWS is funding the participation of five Liberian church leaders in peace talks scheduled for June 4 in Ghana, and has sent food, blankets and personal hygiene supplies for displaced Liberians. Concerned Christian Community, a CWS partner agency in Liberia, said the latest aid shipment was "like manna from above" and helped nearly 3,600 pregnant and nursing mothers, children and elderly in six internally displaced persons (IDP) camps near Liberia's capital city of Monrovia.

But both Church World Service and its Liberian partners emphasize that the great magnitude of the crisis will require much more in the way of humanitarian and political intervention. ...

Civil war broke out in Liberia in 1989 and has never really let go, scattering people and spilling arms across Liberia and into neighboring countries. The war officially ended with the 1997 elections and inauguration of President Charles Taylor. But in 1999, fighting broke out again, this time between government forces and rebels calling themselves Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD).

In April of this year, a new fighting group emerged in southeastern Liberia - the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL). On May 20, MODEL rebels took control of the Harper seaport and airport in southeastern Liberia.

Now a third force, the Grebo Defense Force (GDF) has emerged in the southeast and is fighting MODEL in River Gee County. "This group has been organized to protect their county from rebel incursion," said Mr. Lartey, a lay leader in the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. "This is a serious development, for if peace does not come soon, this could be the new trend for many armed groups to emerge."

Said Mr. Peter Kamei, a United Methodist who is general secretary of the YMCA of Liberia, "If nothing is done, a bloodbath like that in Rwanda or Burundi could result." He added, "Whether Americans accept it or not, they are looked to as Liberia's most precious ally." Liberia was founded by freed U.S. slaves, fought alongside U.S. troops in both world wars, supplied Firestone with rubber and - until the end of the Cold War - was the site of a strategic communications center. "There is a need for America's voice to be heard."

Peace Is Top Priority; Talks Scheduled for June 4

Liberia's 2.7 million citizens are pinning hopes on talks between government and rebel leaders, now scheduled for June 4 in Ghana after several postponements. The talks result in large part from the persistent diplomacy of the Inter-Religious Council of Liberia (IRCL), which comprises the Liberian Council of Churches and National Muslim Council of Liberia.

"All stakeholders are expected to be in attendance including the Government of Liberia and the rebel forces," said Mr. Lartey, an IRCL leader.

That will be a hard-won achievement. To lay the groundwork for the talks has required engaging literally dozens of parties. The IRCL has met repeatedly with all of them, beginning with the Liberian government and leaders of LURD and MODEL.

The IRCL also has maintained dialogue with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS); the European Union; the United Nations; Liberian civil society organizations and women's groups; all 18 registered political parties, including the ruling party, and the governments of the United States, Great Britain and France. To ensure that all obstacles to the June 4 talks are minimized, the IRCL was scheduled to convene a meeting in Freetown, Sierra Leone, May 25-26 between LURD, MODEL and the designated Chief Mediator of the Liberian Peace Process, retired General Abdulsalami Abubakar, former Nigerian head of state. ...

Churches Struggle to Meet Overwhelming Human Need

In the meantime, Liberian churches' humanitarian service among the displaced is nothing less than heroic. The Rev. Kortu Brown, a Pentecostal who directs Concerned Christian Community, a Liberian faith-based humanitarian service organization, has confirmed the successful distribution of the goods airlifted to Monrovia by Church World Service in mid-April. ,,,

CWS has a second, identical shipment of blankets, health kits and canned beef in process, and still needs \$100,000 toward its goal of \$150,000 in support for three more projects, including a joint Liberian Council of Churches/United Methodist Church nutritional, health care and educational project for 3,000 displaced families in Liberia's Bong region.