

Hoping for Stability, Liberians Cast Votes

Country Attempts To Move Past Bloodshed, Chaos

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MONROVIA, Liberia, Oct. 11 -- Sarah Davis, 31, a doughnut seller and mother of four, woke at 4:30 a.m., hoisted her baby son onto her back and walked more than a mile to cast her vote for president at Matilda Newport Junior High School. She declined to say whom she would vote for, but she was eager to say why.

"If we don't have security, war will come again," Davis said as she waited at dawn in a line of voters that snaked several hundred yards.

Eager to put years of political chaos and bloodshed behind them, more than 1 million Liberians voted Tuesday in the country's first presidential and general elections since 1997. Many said they wanted a leader who could stabilize Liberia, rebuild failed institutions and bring development after 14 years of intermittent civil war that ended in 2003.

The National Election Commission said results in the presidential race would be announced within 15 days. The top candidates include George Weah, 40, a former international soccer star who has appealed to Liberia's jobless youth, and Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, 66, a Harvard-educated economist.

About 800 official election observers reported that voting at 1,166 polling stations went relatively smoothly. But some polling centers opened late, and crowds at many others were agitated and angry about the slow process.

At the Matilda Newport school, police beat the crowd with clubs, and Nigerian peacekeeping troops, part of a U.N. force, shoved young men back after they forced their way into the polling station. Order was quickly restored, but the crowd continued to shout complaints at officials.

Weah and Johnson-Sirleaf were among 22 presidential candidates, including a number of U.S.-educated professionals. Varney Sherman has a law degree from Harvard, Togba-Nah Tipoteh earned a doctorate in economics from the University of Nebraska, and Winston Tubman has degrees from both Harvard and the London School of Economics.

The candidates also included some of Liberia's most notorious former insurgent leaders: Sekou Conneh, a onetime rebel leader, is running for president; Jewel Howard Taylor, the wife of the exiled former president, Charles Taylor, is running for the Senate.

Despite the calm of election day, many Liberians said disturbances could flare up before the results are announced. In a letter delivered to a newspaper, a group calling itself the "Yanna Boys" vowed violence if Weah lost.

But with a 15,000-member U.N. peacekeeping mission here and many presidential hopefuls urging their supporters to accept the results, officials said a major disturbance was unlikely.

Young Liberians, many of them former fighters, are a driving force in the election. More than 40 percent of the 1.3 million registered voters are younger than 28.

Supporters said Weah's lack of formal education or political experience were not as important as his clean record and philanthropic deeds during the years of war.

At a rally Saturday, more than 100,000 Weah supporters turned out in the intense heat and cheered as he was introduced as the next president. Johnson-Sirleaf is counting on strong support from women, who make up just more than 50 percent of registered voters. But at three polling stations Tuesday, an informal survey of 25 voters of various ages showed the majority had voted for Weah.

Alexander Sumo, 23, a former fighter, said Weah was the only man he and other ex-combatants would trust as president. Sumo spent two years fighting for Conneh, the insurgent commander, but when the civil war ended, he said Weah persuaded many fighters to disarm and gave them each \$75.

"He's the only man that can talk to us, to cool us down," he said. "Everybody thought we were armed robbers, criminals. But George said, 'You are my little brothers.' "

An elderly, blind voter named King Edward, dressed in a dapper tweed hat and Air Jordan sneakers, walked grandly on his daughter's arm from the polling booth. He said many people had voted for Charles Taylor in 1997, hoping he would bring peace, only to be bitterly disappointed when the civil war continued.

This time, Edward said, he voted for Charles Walker Brumskine, a lawyer from the Liberty Party, in hopes he would bring economic development to Liberia.

"This country is 158 years old, but I, a blind man, have to buy water. This country should be beautiful," he said. "We want no more war."