

Liberia's Recovery

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JUST OVER TWO years ago the West African nation of Liberia was racked by chaos and civil war. Its economy had collapsed; its ruler was an indicted war criminal whose business partners included financiers of al Qaeda and Hezbollah. On Tuesday Liberians peacefully went to the polls for the first fully democratic election in the history of a country established in 1847 by freed American slaves. Twenty-two candidates, ranging from warlords to former officials of the World Bank and United Nations to an international soccer star, competed for president. A bicameral legislature also was to be chosen, under the protection of 15,000 U.N. peacekeepers. The results won't be known for a few days, and a presidential runoff might be necessary. Still, that voting could take place in a country infamous for much of the past 15 years for drugged child warriors, mass rape and one of the world's most despicable dictators is itself an extraordinary political breakthrough -- and a tribute to the international rescue operation led by U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan.

It is nevertheless a great understatement to say that Liberia still has a long way to go to reemerge as a sovereign and stable state. Despite two years of relative peace under a transitional government, it still lacks the basics of a modern government or economy. There is no electric grid, no piped water, no school system. Many of Liberia's sources of income, from forestry to rubber plantations, remain under the control of warlords. Most government revenue is stolen. Tens of thousands of demobilized combatants wait restlessly for jobs or schooling.

Liberia's donors have backed a novel and far-reaching solution to this first set of problems: a form of trusteeship under which the new government will be required to accept internationally appointed representatives in state companies, ministries and the judiciary. The appointees will share control over national revenue and spending, while foreign judges will "support and advise" Liberian courts as they take on political corruption cases. Liberia signed an agreement accepting the controls before the election, and the leading presidential candidates have announced their support. But the post-election implementation will be critical, as will the willingness of donors -- including the United States -- to provide money for basic reconstruction projects in exchange for the micromanagement.

Reconstruction, however, is not Liberia's biggest challenge. The inspiring elections ultimately will accomplish little unless they lead to the disempowerment of former dictator Charles Taylor, who from his exile in Nigeria still seeks to regain power and meddle in the affairs of Liberia's neighbors. Prosecutors of a U.N.-backed Special Court for Sierra Leone that indicted Mr. Taylor for war crimes have accumulated abundant evidence that he has violated the terms of the asylum he was granted in 2003 by the Nigerian government. Nigeria has resisted taking action, but has said it would respond to a request from a new Liberian government. Intimidation by Mr. Taylor may make that a tough decision. But the new Liberian president should nevertheless insist that Nigeria deliver the dictator to the Special Court. Only when Mr. Taylor is brought to justice will Liberians be sure that their recovery is real.