

August 22, 2003

Man in the News; A Man Without Enemies -- Charles Gyude Bryant

By TIM WEINER

Charles Gyude Bryant, the next leader of Liberia, appears never to have sought the job.

A successful businessman, a pillar of the Episcopal Church and, until today, a minor political figure in Liberia, Mr. Bryant emerged as a compromise figure during peace talks in the Accra, Ghana.

"I think we needed a neutralist," Mr. Bryant, 54, said today in a telephone interview. "The warring parties are too inflamed. There is too much anger among too many people. We need a cooling-off period."

"I see myself as neutral. I side with no group. I'll strive to bring the opposing factions together. We need to heal our country, to end the retribution and to see that the basic rights of the people are ensured."

Neutrality, if maintained, may prove to be a grace in a starving nation of three million, where war has taken perhaps a quarter of a million lives in the past generation.

"We have an obligation to the Liberian people to give him all the support we can, and we will," said Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, 64, a former international banker and senior United Nations official. She had led the early balloting among the candidates submitted by the government's negotiators to the rebel parties for their approval.

Many in Liberian political circles and among diplomats here had expected Ms. Johnson-Sirleaf to win, and speculation immediately rose that allies of the former president, Charles G. Taylor, saw her as the enemy and had plotted to block her.

She is a known commodity, having run unsuccessfully against Mr. Taylor in 1997. Mr. Bryant, by contrast, is so little known that his biography at the United States Embassy here consisted of one sentence: chairman of the Liberian Action Party, a minor political group.

But Mr. Bryant also has few known enemies, and that alone makes him a highly unusual man in Liberia.

Charles Gyude Bryant, whom most people here call Gyude (YOU-deh), was born on Jan. 17, 1949, in Monrovia. His family has roots in Maryland County, Liberia, one of the many places here with names that hark back to the nation's founding by freed American slaves in 1847.

Unlike many of Liberia's elite, he is not descended from American ancestors, but from the indigenous Grebo ethnic group.

He was awarded an undergraduate degree in economics at Cuttington University College in Monrovia in 1972, and two years later married his wife, Rosielee Williams, who works for United Airlines in the United States. They have three children. He runs a heavy-equipment company that has supplied much of the machinery that lies in ruins at Liberia's war-shattered port.

A first cousin, Anthony W. Deline II, chairman of the Liberian Mining Corporation, said, "He never wanted to be president, but he always wanted to be a leader."

The Very Rev. Jonathan B. B. Hart, the dean of Trinity Cathedral, where Mr. Bryant is chairman of the Episcopal Church of Liberia, said: "I never thought him to have political ambitions -- I saw him more as a kingmaker -- so I was surprised when I heard he was one of those being considered."

"He has the ability of decision-making" by consent, not fiat, Dean Hart said. "In the church we want decisions coming out of discussions, not unilateral decisions."

Jeddi Armah, news director of Radio Veritas, a Roman Catholic station here that is widely seen as the nation's sole reliable source of news, said Mr. Bryant was one of the few political figures in Liberia, however minor, with a clean record and a blank slate.

"Given that he's not tainted by the past," Mr. Armah said, "I'd like to give him the benefit of the doubt."