

# Liberian civilians still dying in civil war

By Hiram A. Ruiz

In theory, Monrovia, the beleaguered capital of Liberia, is safe. ECOMOG, the peace-keeping force that was sent in by a group of West African nations, says it forces and those of rebel leader Prince Johnson are now in control of all of Monrovia and surrounding areas. The main road leading into the city is lined with men, women, and children carrying small bundles. They are among the team of thousands of people displaced by the fighting who are now pouring back into Monrovia. Those who are too weak or sick to walk are pushed in wheelbarrows. Bodies of those who couldn't make it lie on the side of the road.

The city they are reentering remains in a state of crisis. There is no water supply; the population has swelled from 150,000 just three weeks ago to more than 320,000 today; everyone in the city is totally dependent on outside food aid; many are still displaced from their homes; and although the civil war's front line has been pushed well outside of Monrovia, much of the city center is deserted because the 2,000 remaining "soldiers" of the late President Samuel Doe's Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL) — the same men who for months (many would say years) terrorized the civilian population of Monrovia, killing, raping, and looting at will — are still armed and continue to threaten large areas in the vicinity of the late president's mansion and nearby army barracks, where they and their 4,000 dependents are holed up.

I was recently in Monrovia and went to St. Peter's Church, scene of one of the AFL's worst outrages. On July 30, a group of AFL soldiers forced their way into the church, which has been designated as a Red Cross sanctuary, and massacred hundreds of civilians who had sought refuge there from the fighting. When I visited, the church remained much as it was left on the day of the massacre. Although many of the dead had been removed, dozens of decomposing bodies remained strewn throughout the church. In the dark, I almost stepped on what was left of a young child's body. It was a sight too horrendous to describe — and one that none of us who witnessed it will ever forget, more than 24 hours after leaving the site, I could still smell the rotting flesh.

The men who committed this atrocity not only remain armed and at large, but continue to play a role in negotiations regarding the future of Liberia. The leaders of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) peace-keeping force, the ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG), say that the AFL are restricted to the executive mansion and do not represent a threat to the city; but while I was in Monrovia, I could hear firing near the city center. Prince Johnson, the man who seized and killed Doe, has said that if ECOMOG cannot contain Doe's men, he will take the matter into his own hands. That would of course lead to renewed warfare and bring an end to the relative calm that has permitted some relief operations to be mounted in Monrovia.

ECOWAS has appointed an interim government made up of civilians in exile who have in the past opposed Doe. While the interim government has the backing of ECOMOG, it does not command any military force, and it is very unclear at this point what success it will have in establishing actual authority. Johnson has voiced support for the interim government. So has the AFL. But Charles Taylor, the rebel leader whose invasion of Liberia last December set off the civil war, has refused to negotiate with the interim government.

Johnson is — to say the least — unpredictable. Although he is said to be quite reasonable and serious about his responsibilities during the mornings, Johnson reportedly drinks heavily beginning in the afternoon and becomes a very different man by evening.

It is the evening Johnson that I encountered. I was at a hospital with two colleagues when Johnson, who has supported the hospital financially, arrived with an armed escort and video cameraman. Johnson became enraged when he saw a sign asking patients to contribute a small amount — no more

than a couple of dollars — upon admission to the hospital. He ordered the doctor in charge arrested and threatened to shoot him. We later learned that Johnson personally beat the doctor severely.

Having seen Johnson in action, he does not come across as the sort of man who will be happy to step out of the limelight and remain in the shadow of the interim government.

There have been some positive developments. The first of more than 67,000 metric tons of food aid pledged by the U.S. Government has begun to arrive. Relief organizations are once again sending personnel, including much-needed doctors and nurses, as well as medicines and other relief supplies. UN agencies may also return. ECOWAS has appointed an interim government that is due to arrive in Monrovia any day. But these developments are all threatened by the continuing political impasse and the potential for resumed violence.

ECOMOG recently bombed the Taylor-held port of Buchanan, forcing two ships carrying food aid to leave. Taylor retaliated by shelling Monrovia's port. The next scheduled shipment of food there has also been canceled.

A negotiated settlement to the civil war must be found. There cannot be two Liberia's — one controlled by Taylor; the other by ECOMOG, the interim government, and Johnson. Also, there likely will be no peace while the AFL remains present and out of control. The international community must find a way to peacefully remove the AFL and their dependents from Monrovia — for their own safety and for the sake of all Monrovia. Until peace returns to Liberia, and the country is reunited under one stable, hopefully democratic, government, the Liberian people will not be able to begin the long and difficult process of healing the wounds that have divided them, or of reconstructing their ravaged nation.

*(Mr. Ruiz, a policy analyst with the U.S. Committee of Refugees, has just returned from a fact-finding visit to Monrovia, Liberia.)*



AP LaserPhoto  
Feelings run high in the African-American community about what continues to happen in war-torn Liberia. Civilians in that country are still dying as a result of the fighting.

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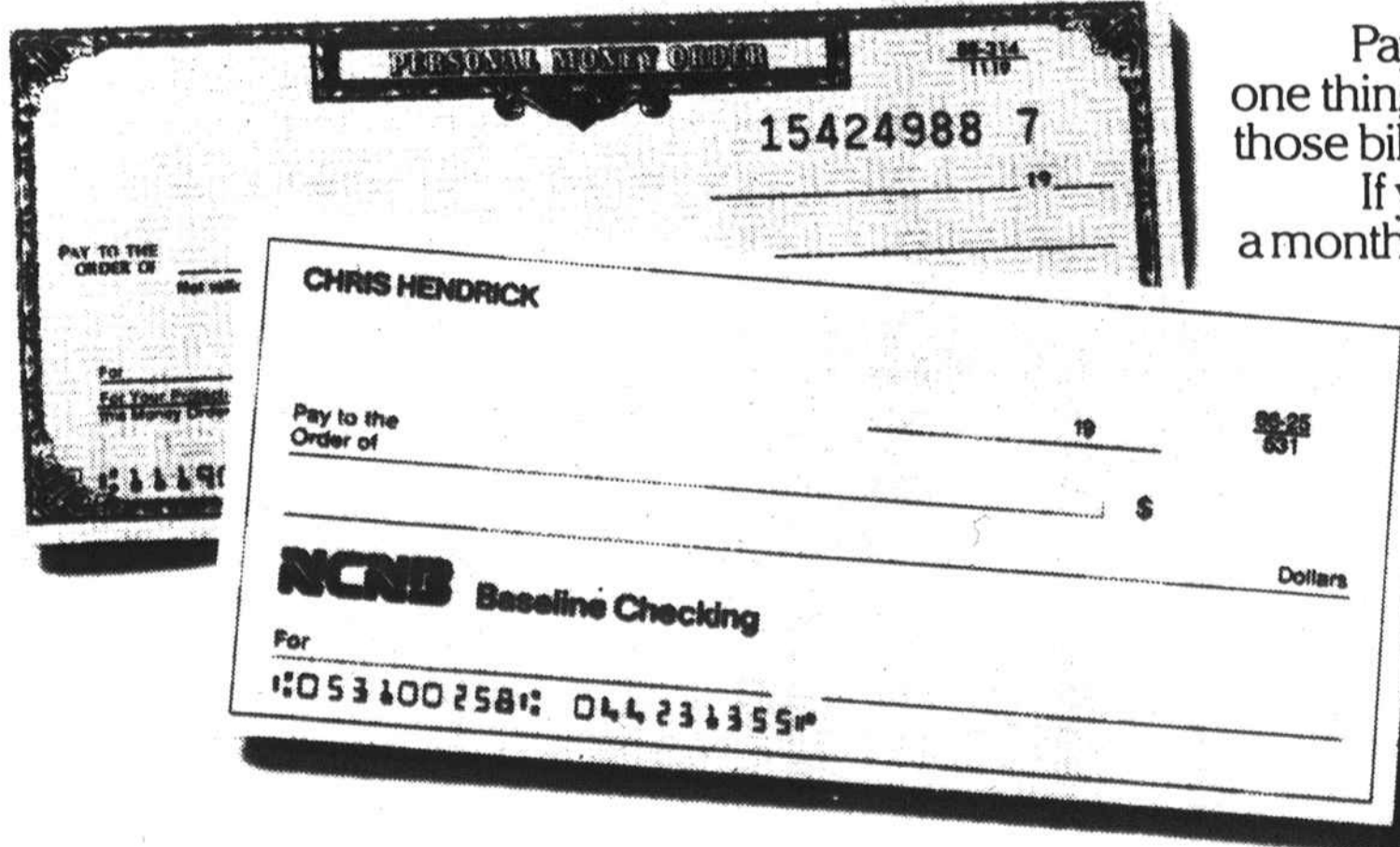
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