

Fragile condition: Brutalized Liberia rebuilds

by [Chris Herlinger](#) in the [November 29, 2003](#) issue

In a country where the absurd and surreal routinely intersect with everyday life, it was hardly a surprise to find the staff of the Liberia Council of Churches meeting in a room shorn of everything from pencils to wall hangings. Only days earlier, a council employee had found bills and memos from the office being used to wrap fish in the markets of Monrovia. The council's general secretary, Benjamin Lartey, was trying to hunt down and buy back the agency's desks, chairs and office equipment, which had been stolen and now were being peddled on street corners. Looting had been the norm in the final days of Charles Taylor's presidency.

Postwar Liberia is breathing a little easier, but it is still on edge. People are in something of a trance, not quite believing or trusting in the calm. There is ample reason for apprehension: Liberians have seen their hopes for peace dashed many times.

Taylor came to power after a 1989 revolt against dictator Samuel Doe, which led to seven years of civil war. Fighting resumed in 2000 when Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy revolted against Taylor. Hundreds of thousands have died in the fighting.

Liberians in exile are among those reluctant to invest in Liberia's future. They hesitate to respond to one more call for assistance, said Lartey, a leader of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church who frequently visits the U.S. "'We've been through this two to three times,' they'll say, 'How do we know this won't happen again?'"

They don't, of course. The prospects for stability are decidedly mixed as one of the worst years ever in Liberian history ends. But there is hope in this strikingly religious country: Taylor has fled to ignominious exile in Nigeria, a peace accord has been signed and an interim government, headed by the respected businessman and Episcopal lay leader Gyude Bryant, is in place.

But as in Afghanistan, security remains fragile, particularly outside of the capital. It's an open question whether the interim government installed in mid-October will have the staying power, capacity and international support to begin rebuilding a brutalized society.

The government is working under enormous constraints. As part of a peace accord that ended fighting and called for a two-year interim government, Taylor loyalists and members of two major guerrilla groups—including LURD—must share power and parcel out various government positions, an arrangement that already has bumped into problems and may prove permanently impractical.

With so much at stake, and with worry about security far from receding, government officials acknowledge that success will have to be measured by concrete benchmarks: disarming the tens of thousands of combatants (many of them under the age of 20 and some as young as eight or nine); reestablishing the rule of law; and, more immediately, easing the pain and difficulty of everyday life. One way to do that is to lower the price of gasoline. Fuel prices, like so much else in Liberia, were artificially inflated so Taylor could get his cut of the profits.

Some observers say the new government has roughly till the beginning of February to show it can make a concrete difference in people's lives. Otherwise, anger could prompt renewed conflict and a new round of violence.

Government leaders, knowing they are under great pressure, plead for patience and for international support in a country where there is precious little money—Taylor looted the treasury—and where political culture remains mired in distrust and acrimony.

"Liberia is at a crossroads now—we need all the help we can muster," Wesley Johnson, vice chairman of the new government, said in a September interview.

The plea, made to a visiting American, was no accident: Liberians are still disappointed by the meager number of U.S. peace-keeping troops. I saw more U.S. soldiers at the U.S. Embassy than on the streets of Monrovia. People could not believe that the U.S., with its long relations with a country "settled" by former U.S. slaves, had not done more for Liberia in its moment of paramount need.

Need there was, and is. Liberia has a host of humanitarian problems—a cholera epidemic, food shortages and widespread postwar trauma to name just three. Aid

workers wonder: "Where do we begin?"

That is a question that Lartey and other religious and civic leaders are asking too. Lartey is one Liberian who has staked much on the future. He could have chosen to leave the country permanently, but he didn't. "Much is expected of us," said Lartey, 60, who has been a businessman, Taylor opponent and government official.

His decision to remain in Liberia has cost him deeply. His wife divorced him during an earlier cycle of violence, saying she couldn't take another war and wanted out. "You must love suffering," she told her husband.

Despite his own problems of harassment and abuse by Taylor's government, Lartey evokes the biblical language of gratitude that is common among Liberians. "I have been blessed," he said.

At the core of his commitment to Liberia lies something of an unanswered question about his country's sufferings. People of Lartey's generation cherished the ties with the U.S. and saw Liberia as a model for the entire African continent. "We're a peace-loving people," Lartey said. "When I hear about these atrocities, I have a hard time reconciling these stories with the Liberia I knew when I was growing up."

As the staff meeting ended, the late afternoon rains lifted and blue sky peeked through clouds. I suggested a visit to the nearby beach. My hosts were noncommittal. Later I realized why: during the summer siege, commonly called "World War III" by Liberians, proper burials weren't possible, so dozens, perhaps hundreds, of the dead were buried in the sand of Monrovia's beaches.