

Liberia

Country Reports on Human Rights Practices - [2005](#)

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

March 8, 2006

Liberia is a constitutional republic with a population of approximately 3.5 million. After 14 years of civil war and 2 years of an interim government, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf was declared the winner of multiparty presidential elections on November 23, marking a significant milestone in the country's transition to democracy. Domestic and international observers considered the elections generally free and fair. President Johnson-Sirleaf replaced Chairman Charles Gyude Bryant, who led the interim National Transitional Government of Liberia (NTGL) since October 2003. In August 2003 the former government and the country's two rebel groups--Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) and the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL)—signed the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), which ended the 1999-2003 civil war. Approximately 15 thousand peacekeepers deployed by the UN Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) and 1,100 international police (CIVPOL) had primary responsibility for maintaining security, while the Liberian National Police (LNP) and Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL) were being retired and retrained. Unlike in the previous year, former rebel combatants no longer retained control of some rural areas. Civilian authorities generally maintained effective control over security forces.

The NTGL generally respected the human rights of its citizens, and the government passed legislation during the year to strengthen human rights; however, problems persisted in some areas. Poverty, unemployment, and illiteracy were widespread, and the country's infrastructure was severely damaged as a result of the war. The educational system barely functioned, and the country had no public electricity, potable water, sewer system, or postal service. The following human rights problems were reported:

- ritualistic killings and deaths from mob violence
- police abuse, harassment, and intimidation
- harsh prison conditions
- arbitrary arrest and detention
- lengthy pretrial detention
- denial of due process and fair public trial
- incidents of trial-by-ordeal
- official corruption and impunity
- violence and discrimination against women, especially rape
- female genital mutilation (FGM)
- neglect and abuse of children
- trafficking in persons
- societal ethnic discrimination
- child labor

During the year the NTGL established an Independent National Commission on Human Rights (INCHR) and a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) to investigate human rights violations and war crimes committed during the civil war.

By year's end more than 25 thousand disarmed and demobilized former combatants were required to enroll in reintegration programs, including vocational training, psychosocial counseling, or school; approximately 15 thousand former combatants were employed.

Some former combatants were responsible for human rights abuses during the year; however, there were considerably fewer reports of such incidents than in previous years.

RESPECT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

Section 1 Respect for the Integrity of the Person, Including Freedom From:

a. Arbitrary and Unlawful Deprivation of Life

There were no reports that the government or its agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings.

In 2003 as the war escalated, former government and rebel combatants killed an undetermined number of civilians by shooting them, burning them alive, or cutting their throats. Numerous internally displaced persons (IDPs) were killed during repeated raids on their camps. In late 2003 UNMIL and the interim government imposed order, but no action was taken against perpetrators of the summary executions, killings, or other crimes committed during the war. The newly established TRC was not operational at year's end.

Unlike in the previous year, CIVPOL investigators and human rights organizations did not uncover evidence of executions and massacres. In 2004 the Catholic Justice and Peace Commission (JPC) uncovered evidence of a 2002 massacre by former government forces of hundreds of civilians near Tubmanburg. No further investigation was made into these cases.

General Benjamin Yeaten, who was believed to have executed or supervised the 2003 execution of former deputy national security minister John Yormie and former deputy public works minister Isaac Vaye, remained in self-imposed exile at year's end.

There were no developments in any of the reported 2003 killings by the security forces of former president Taylor.

Unlike in the previous year, there were no reports that former government and rebel combatants killed civilians, but former combatants were responsible for civilian injuries (see section 1.c.).

No action was taken against the former MODEL fighter who killed a civilian in March 2004 for refusing to hand over his food. There were no developments in the May 2004 killing of a civilian by former soldiers during a demonstration to demand immediate payment of their resettlement grants.

Ritual killings, in which body parts used in traditional indigenous rituals were removed from the victim, reportedly occurred during the year.

There were sporadic instances of mob violence, which were exacerbated by ethnic conflict, religious differences, political divisions, vigilantism, high unemployment, and poverty. On September 30, an employee of a nongovernmental organization (NGO) witnessed a mob kill a man suspected of theft.

Unlike in the previous year, there were no reports of deaths resulting from land disputes. An independent investigation into the October 2004 dispute between Muslim Mandingos and Christian non-Mandingos found no government complicity in the ethnically based

violence that resulted in 19 deaths. The 250 persons arrested in connection with the incident were released, and no trials had been conducted by year's end.

b. Disappearance

There were no reports of politically motivated disappearances. During the civil war, government security forces and rebels were responsible for numerous disappearances.

The welfare and whereabouts of former Chief of Intelligence Peterson Marbiah, who disappeared when John Yormie and Isaac Vaye were arrested in 2003, remained unknown at year's end (see section 1.a.).

The 15 persons abducted in 2003 from Todee by former government militia remained missing at year's end.

Most of the ethnic Mandingo youths abducted between September 2002 and March 2003 by former government security forces for suspected involvement with the LURD rebel group remained unaccounted for at year's end.

The UNMIL investigation into the 2003 disappearance of foreign citizen Nabil Hage, who was believed to have been abducted by LURD, was ongoing at year's end. There were no developments in other 2003 abductions by LURD.

c. Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

The law prohibits such practices; however, prior to August 2003, police and security forces frequently tortured, beat, raped, and otherwise humiliated persons, particularly during interrogations of LURD detainees at the Gbatala security training base. According to Amnesty International, 73 percent of women over 18 who registered for the 2003-04 Disarmament, Demobilization, Rehabilitation, and Reintegration (DDRR) program reported sexual abuse.

During the year LNP officers sometimes abused, harassed, intimidated, and extorted bribes from persons, particularly at checkpoints.

For example, on September 30, LNP officers at a joint LNP and UNMIL-CIVPOL checkpoint beat and kicked the driver of a foreign embassy vehicle and arrested him; the driver had followed standard practice in refusing to allow the search of a diplomatic vehicle. One LNP officer was fired in connection with the incident, and two others were suspended for three months.

Political party members harassed and, in some cases, beat foreign and domestic journalists for allegedly supporting the opposition party (see section 2.a.).

During the year demonstrations by former combatants protesting disarmament or the government's failure to complete resettlement grants resulted in civilian injuries and extensive property damage. For example, on May 11, former combatants attacked NGO offices involved in demobilization activities; several persons were injured. The attackers were disgruntled because they had not been paid, and their training had been delayed.

During a May 27 graduation from a skills training program, more than one thousand former combatants began rioting and smashing vehicles when they learned they would

not receive the tools and training benefits that they had been promised upon graduation; two persons were injured. Police arrested and briefly detained several of the former combatants.

In November an UNMIL peacekeeper was arrested for raping a nine-year-old girl. The peacekeeper was being detained at year's end, and UNMIL was conducting an investigation.

The law prohibits trial-by-ordeal, which involves the placement of a heated metal object on a suspect's body or the insertion of an extremity into hot oil to determine whether the defendant is telling the truth; however, the practice reportedly continued in rural areas.

Lack of confidence in the police and judicial system resulted in mob violence and vigilantism (see section 1.a.).

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

Prison conditions were harsh and in some cases life threatening. The government did not provide detainees or prisoners with adequate food or medical care; however, an NGO continued its 2004 program to provide food to the prisons. During the year an NGO refurbished prison cells at Monrovia Central Prison, but the prison still held twice its maximum capacity, primarily due to the large number of pretrial detainees. In some counties the structure that served as a jail was a container with bars at one end. There also were reports that local officials forced prisoners to work for them.

There were no separate facilities for juvenile offenders. Convicted prisoners and detainees awaiting trial were not held in separate facilities. During the year a prison in Voinjama placed the accuser and the accused in the same cell for more than a month, even after the accuser admitted that he had accused the wrong person. Women and particularly juveniles were subject to abuse by guards or other inmates.

The government permitted the independent monitoring of prison conditions by local human rights groups, the media, and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). Some human rights groups, including the ICRC, made regular visits to detainees held in police headquarters and prisoners in Monrovia Central Prison.

d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention

The law prohibits arbitrary arrest and detention; however, security forces continued to arrest and detain persons arbitrarily, although less frequently than in previous years.

Role of Police and Security Apparatus

The Ministry of Justice has responsibility for enforcing law and maintaining order within the country and oversees the LNP and the National Bureau of Investigation (NBI). Approximately 15 thousand UNMIL peacekeepers and 1,100 CIVPOL officers had primary responsibility for maintaining security while the LNP and the AFL, which was under the Defense Ministry, were being retired and retrained during the year. Approximately 600 CIVPOL officers assisted with restructuring, recruitment, training, and equipping the LNP, which was comprised of new recruits and those who served under the former Taylor administration. During the year CIVPOL recruited, trained, and deployed more than 1,100 LNP officers to Monrovia and 7 surrounding counties; an

additional 300 recruits were sent to Nigeria for further training. In September the LNP opened a Women's and Children's Protection Section, and 50 officers had completed training to staff the unit by year's end. The LNP operated independently and retained arrest authority; however, CIVPOL accompanied LNP officers in joint patrols around Monrovia.

LNP officers, who were not equipped with firearms, were slow to respond and often ineffective, which resulted in an increase in armed robberies during the year. Corruption and impunity were problems. Unlike in the previous year, police handling of mob violence did not result in deaths; however, there were reports of police brutality, particularly during demonstrations. Police had limited logistics and forensic capabilities and did not adequately investigate many crimes, including murders. The LNP, with the assistance of CIVPOL's non-compliance unit, investigated reports of police misconduct, and CIVPOL issued several notices of noncompliance to LNP officers during the year. However, dismissals or other strong disciplinary measures were taken only in the most severe cases, such as rape or serious assault.

Public confidence in the police remained low, and vigilante groups formed during the year to protect persons and property. For example, on October 21, a vigilante group defended a Monrovia community against armed robbers because the LNP were unarmed and slow to respond.

Arrest and Detention

The law requires warrants to make arrests and provides that detainees either be charged or released within 48 hours; however, warrants were not always based on sufficient evidence, and detainees, particularly those without the means to hire a lawyer, often were held for more than 48 hours without charge. The law also provides for bail, but few suspects could afford it. Detainees have the right to prompt access to counsel and, if indigent, to have an attorney provided by the state, but the government did not ensure such access for all detainees.

On January 10, LNP officers arrested approximately 90 villagers who threatened to burn the Liberian Agriculture Company (LAC) rubber plantation, which planned to expand its operation into neighboring villages. The villagers did not want to relocate and were dissatisfied with LAC's financial settlement. The LNP detained the villagers in a jail cell designed for 12 persons and held them for more than 24 hours without food, water, or adequate toilet facilities. CIVPOL subsequently discovered the villagers and characterized their detention as "inhumane and illegal," noting that the LNP had prepared no arrest report or list of those detained. On January 11, the Ministry of Justice ordered the immediate release of the detainees, and the LAC expansion was stalled at year's end.

On September 30, LNP officers at a joint LNP and UNMIL-CIVPOL checkpoint beat and arrested the driver of a foreign embassy vehicle (see section 1.c.).

Unlike in the previous year, there were no reports that former rebel combatants arbitrarily arrested civilians and IDPs during the year.

No action was taken against former LURD combatants for arbitrarily arresting persons in June and August of 2004.

There were no reports of political detainees.

Although the law provides for the right of a person who is charged to receive an expeditious trial, lengthy pretrial and pre-arraignment detention remained serious problems. Trial delays were caused by judicial inefficiency, lack of court facilities and qualified judges, and corruption. In some cases the length of pretrial detention equaled or exceeded the length of sentence that could be imposed for the crime. Approximately 97 percent of the prisoners housed at Monrovia Central Prison were pretrial detainees. On September 30, the JPC reported that there were an estimated 40 inmates who had been jailed for more than 500 days without trial.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

Although the law provides for an independent judiciary, judges were subject to political, social, familial, and financial pressures, and the judiciary was corrupt. Courts regularly received bribes or other illegal gifts from damages that they awarded in civil cases. Defense attorneys often suggested that their clients pay a gratuity to appease or secure favorable rulings from judges, prosecutors, jurors, and police officers. By statute members of the bar must be graduates of a law school and pass the bar examination; however, some judges and magistrates were not lawyers. On September 16, the Supreme Court ordered the closure of all noncommissioned justice of the peace courts; however, some courts were still operating at year's end. No replacement courts were in place at year's end. There were reports of executive branch influence over the judiciary.

The judiciary is divided into four levels, with the Supreme Court at the apex. All levels of the court system in Monrovia, including the Supreme Court, barely functioned. The Supreme Court appointed judges to counties outside of Montserrado but four counties still did not have a court house at year's end, and others were in disrepair. Although judges were assigned throughout the country, in some cases they were unable to hold court due to lack of security, supplies, or equipment. There were five qualified prosecutors and nine public defenders in the country.

Trial Procedures

Trials are public and juries are used in circuit court trials but not at the magistrate level. Under the law, defendants have the right to be present, to consult with an attorney in a timely manner, and to have access to government-held evidence relevant to their case; however, in practice these rights were not always observed. Defendants in criminal trials enjoy a presumption of innocence and have the right to an attorney, to confront witnesses in a public trial, and to appeal adverse decisions, but many of these protections were not available to defendants who could not pay bribes. There was no effective system to provide public defenders, especially in rural areas. Some local NGOs provided legal services to indigents and others who had no representation. There continued to be long delays in deciding cases.

Traditional forms of justice administered by clan chieftains remained prevalent in some localities (see section 1.c.).

Political Prisoners

There were no reports of political prisoners.

f. Arbitrary Interference with Privacy, Family, Home, or Correspondence

The law provides for the right of privacy and the sanctity of the home and requires that police obtain a warrant or have a reasonable belief that a crime is in progress, or is about to be committed, before entering a private dwelling. The government generally respected these rights, and unlike in the previous year, there were no reports that police officers entered private homes, churches, and newspaper offices without warrants.

Police occasionally extorted money and goods from citizens, particularly at checkpoints.

Unlike in the previous year, there were no reports that former rebel combatants compelled communities to provide for them.

During the year the government ordered members of the Gio and Mano ethnic groups to leave the homes they occupied in Nimba and Lofa counties and return them to their Mandingo owners, who had fled the country during the civil war. The Gios and Manos refused to leave the homes, and the government did not forcibly reconstitute the properties to their Mandingo owners. A court case was ongoing at year's end.

Section 2 Respect for Civil Liberties, Including:

a. Freedom of Speech and Press

The law provides for freedom of speech and of the press, and unlike in the previous year, the government generally respected these rights in practice.

In 2004 there were reports that the NTLA threatened to arrest persons who criticized the legislative body or refused to appear before it, but there were no such reports during the year.

In Monrovia there were more than 30 newspapers that published during the year with varying degrees of regularity. Three were independent dailies, and nine appeared at least twice a week. Most newspapers were printed by one printing facility, but other facilities opened during the year.

Due to the price of newspapers and transportation, the estimated 75 percent illiteracy rate, and road conditions elsewhere in the country, newspaper distribution generally was limited to the Monrovia region. As a result radio was the primary means of mass communication. There were 12 independent radio stations that regularly broadcast in Monrovia, 25 local stations, and 1 government-operated station. Radio stations operated without government restrictions.

There were three local television stations; however, television was limited to those who could purchase sets, generators, and fuel to provide electricity. For those persons and businesses with satellite capability, CNN, BBC, Skynews, and SABC Africa generally were available.

During the year political party members attacked journalists at political rallies. The attackers claimed that the journalists were members of the opposition. Some persons sustained minor injuries.

No action was taken during the year against Anti Terrorist Unit forces responsible for the January 2003 torture of Throble Suah, a reporter for the *Liberian Inquirer* newspaper.

Journalists reportedly extorted money from citizens by threatening to publish negative articles about them and accepted bribes from politicians to publish negative articles about their opponents. After the Press Union of Liberia changed management during the year, the union encouraged citizens to file complaints against newspapers that published false information.

There were no government restrictions on the Internet or academic freedom.

b. Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association

Freedom of Assembly

The law provides for the right of peaceful assembly, and the government generally respected this right.

LNP, CIVPOL, and UNMIL troops used tear gas to disperse demonstrations during the year, and there were reports of police brutality. Unlike in the previous year, there were no reports that UNMIL troops beat demonstrators.

In January LNP officers used tear gas to disperse a demonstration at the Liberia Telecom Corporation; some demonstrators received minor injuries. At a political rally in September, police with batons beat persons after party supporters began fighting for t-shirts. In the beginning of October LNP officers used tear gas against their own superiors to protest their lack of regular pay. On November 11, following the release of the preliminary November 8 election results, UNMIL troops used tear gas to disperse a demonstration in support of presidential contestant George Weah.

No action was taken against former government security forces who forcibly dispersed and beat demonstrators in 2003, and none was considered likely.

Freedom of Association

The law provides for the right of association, and the government generally respected this right in practice. There were 30 registered political parties. Dozens of civil society organizations, organized around themes such as human rights, women's issues, development objectives, poverty alleviation, health concerns, and worker's associations, were active.

c. Freedom of Religion

The law provides for freedom of religion, and the government generally respected this right in practice. During the year respect for religious freedom continued to improve. Since taking office, the NTGL at all levels worked to protect this right in full and did not tolerate its abuse, either by governmental or private actors. Unlike in the previous year, differences between major religious groups did not result in mob violence.

All organizations, including religious groups, must register with the government; however, traditional indigenous religious groups were not required to register, and generally did not do so. Registration was routine.

Although the law prohibits religious discrimination, Islamic leaders complained of some discrimination against Muslims. During the voter registration process, Muslim

Mandingos were sometimes asked to provide extra documentation to prove citizenship; election officials claimed the additional documentation was in response to attempts by some noncitizen Mandingos to register. Although Muslims held senior government positions, including four ministerial posts, many Muslims believed they were bypassed for lower level civil service positions. Some Muslims complained that only Christian holidays were officially observed.

Societal Abuses and Discrimination

Some tensions existed between the major religious communities. The private sector in urban areas, particularly in the capital, gave preference to Christianity in civic ceremonies and observances, and discrimination against followers of other organized religions affected areas of individual opportunity and employment. Unlike in the previous year, ethnic, religious, and other differences between Muslim Mandingos and Christian non-Mandingos in Monrovia did not result in mob violence. However, ethnic tensions--often resulting from unresolved property issues--continued in Lofa County between the Mandingo and Lorma ethnic groups. Throughout the year the Inter-Religious Council promoted dialogue between religious groups.

Incidents of ritualistic killings were reported during the year. Little reliable information was readily available about traditions associated with the practice in which body parts used in indigenous rituals were removed from the victim. The number of such killings was difficult to ascertain, since police often described deaths as accidents or suicides even when body parts were removed. It was believed that practitioners of traditional indigenous religions among the Grebo and Krahn ethnic groups concentrated in the southeastern counties most commonly engaged in ritual killings. The victims were usually members of the religious group performing the ritual, and often included women and children. Body parts removed from a member whom the group believed to be powerful were considered to be the most effective ritually.

On June 2, in Grand Gedeh County, ritualistic killings were reported, and in July residents of Zwedru demonstrated against an increase in ritualistic killings. During the year NTGL Chairman Bryant stated that he would personally sign the death warrant of anyone found legally guilty of a ritualistic killing; however, no one was prosecuted for ritualistic killings during the year.

There was no notable Jewish community in the country, and there were no reports of anti-Semitic acts.

For a more detailed discussion, see the 2005 [*International Religious Freedom Report*](#).

d. Freedom of Movement Within the Country, Foreign Travel, Emigration, and Repatriation

The law provides for these rights, and unlike in the previous year, the government respected them in practice. As of year's end, government and UNMIL security forces effectively controlled all of the country, including all major border crossings. LNP officers reportedly subjected travelers to arbitrary searches and petty extortion at checkpoints in and around Monrovia; however, unlike in the previous year, ethnic Mandingos were not singled out for such harassment.

Unlike in the previous year, the government did not impose curfews.

The law prohibits forced exile, and the government did not use it.

Internally Displaced Persons

Relief agencies estimated that as of December, approximately 272 thousand IDPs had returned home since the end of the war, and approximately 54 thousand were awaiting repatriation in camps, settlements, and communities throughout the country. Conditions at most IDP camps were fair, but food, sanitation, and security were sometimes inadequate. During the year the government worked with international organizations to return IDPs to their homes and planned to resettle 15 thousand to 20 thousand IDPs per month. However, road conditions, elections, and intermittent funding gaps temporarily halted the return process and angered thousands of IDPs who planned to return home before the elections. Some IDPs chose to stay in camps because conditions were better than in the communities from which they came, while others remained to see whether peace would be sustained after the elections. Unlike in the previous year, there were no reports that former government and rebel combatants subjected IDP populations to rape, battery, arbitrary arrest, extortion, and theft. However, there were reports of rape in IDP camps, primarily committed by other IDPs or members of the surrounding community.

Approximately 190 thousand refugees from the country remained in neighboring countries, primarily in Sierra Leone, Guinea, Cote d'Ivoire, and Ghana. During the year UNHCR assisted the repatriation of approximately 35 thousand refugees, and another 30 thousand refugees returned to the country without assistance.

Protection of Refugees

The law provides for the granting of asylum or refugee status in accordance with the 1951 UN Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 protocol, and the government has established a system for providing protection to refugees. In practice the government provided some protection against *refoulement*, the return of persons to a country where they feared persecution, and granted refugee status or asylum. The government generally cooperated with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other humanitarian organizations in assisting refugees and asylum seekers. The government also provided temporary protection to individuals who may not qualify as refugees under the 1951 convention and 1967 protocol.

Unlike in previous years, there were no reports that refugees also were subjected to abuse, primarily by former government and rebel combatants who had reorganized as gangs.

Section 3 Respect for Political Rights: The Right of Citizens to Change Their Government

The law provides citizens with the right to change their government peacefully, and citizens exercised this right during the year in presidential and parliamentary elections deemed generally free and fair by domestic and international observers.

Elections and Political Participation

On November 23, the National Electoral Commission (NEC) declared Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, who won 59.4 percent of the vote, the winner of the November 8 run-off presidential election; none of the 22 presidential candidates received the required 50 percent plus one vote to win in the October 11 election. October election voters selected 30 senators and 63 representatives. Congress for Democratic Change (CDC) candidate and runner-up George Weah received 40.6 percent of the vote in the November 8 run-off election.

Despite the international community's assessment that the elections were free and fair, Weah mounted a legal challenge and charged the NEC with electoral fraud. On December 16, the NEC concluded that the CDC had presented no convincing evidence of fraud, and that errors committed during the electoral process had a "negligible effect" on the outcome of the run-off election. The CDC did not appeal the decision. There were a few reports of violence and intimidation during the elections and many irregularities. Members of the Mandingo community complained of discrimination and harassment during the voter registration process, the NEC Chairwoman publicly criticized one of the presidential candidates, and presiding officers assisted illiterate voters after they had reached the voting booths.

The NEC registered 30 political parties, 22 of which ran presidential candidates in the election. Individuals and parties freely declared their candidacies, and membership in the dominant parties did not confer any formal advantage.

The state is highly centralized. The law provides that the head of state appoint county superintendents. Local governments had no independent revenue base and relied entirely on the central government for funds. As a result there was limited government functioning outside of Monrovia, and civil servants often waited for months to receive salaries. NGOs provided many basic services, including education, health, and public works. Local officials served mainly to lobby the central government.

Along with the election of the country's first female president, there were 3 female ministers in the NTGL, 4 women in the 26-seat NTLA, and 1 female supreme court judge. The head of the NEC, also a former supreme court justice, was a woman.

Government Corruption and Transparency

Corruption was endemic throughout the government, and financial mismanagement and lack of accountability were serious problems. There was a widespread public perception of corruption in all branches and levels of government.

On September 9, the NTGL signed an agreement to implement the Governance and Economic Management Assistance Program (GEMAP), which calls for the provision of international financial controllers in key ministries and state-owned enterprises and requires full disclosure of governmental financial transactions. Such measures would be directed at purchasing and contracting practices, which lacked transparency and frequently did not include competitive bids.

The government dismissed or suspended a number of high-level officials for corruption. On March 14, the NTLA suspended its speaker, George Dweh, for allegedly embezzling \$90 thousand (5.86 million ld). On April 12, the government suspended Orishall Gould, managing director of the National Social Security and Welfare Corporation, for the alleged embezzlement of more than \$600 thousand (32.4 million ld). On August 3, the

government charged J.D. Slanger, head of the Bureau of Maritime Affairs, with embezzling \$3.5 million (189 million ld). After a few days of evading arrest, Slanger surrendered but was released on bail and believed to have left the country. On August 13, security forces arrested Alphonso Gaye, managing director of the Port Authority, and charged him with embezzling \$600 thousand (32.4 million ld). Gaye was released on bail, and the case was pending trial at year's end.

On November 17, in a decision that generated widespread press criticism, the NTLA passed a law allowing legislators to take government vehicles for private use when they left office. In December legislators leaving office stripped the capitol building of desks, computers, chairs, and carpeting.

In 2004 the government suspended Police Director Massaquoi and Customs and Excise Commissioner Bennie on charges of corruption; however, neither case was prosecuted during the year.

The law provides for "no limitation on the public right to be informed about the government and its functionaries"; however, little government information was available, and there were few procedures for obtaining it. Since government officials frequently circumvented established procedures, there also were few methods to track financial transactions.

Section 4 Governmental Attitude Regarding International and Nongovernmental Investigation of Alleged Violations of Human Rights

A number of domestic and international human rights groups generally operated without government restriction, investigating and publishing their findings on human rights cases. Government officials were somewhat cooperative and responsive to their views.

There were three coalitions of human rights groups: the National Human Rights Center of Liberia had nine member organizations; eight other groups comprised the Network of Human Rights Chapters; and four belonged to the Federation of Human Rights Organizations. The Human Rights and Protection Forum, an umbrella organization of 70 to 80 groups, also participated. These organizations sought to increase public discussion of human rights problems.

During the year the government worked to facilitate the free and safe passage of relief supplies by international NGOs and permitted visits by the UN Panel of Experts, the ICRC, and various UN agencies (see section 1.c.). Unlike in the previous year, there were no reports that former rebel combatants blocked the delivery of humanitarian supplies.

There were no developments in the 2003 case in which unidentified assailants assaulted and sexually abused three nieces of Ishmael P. Campbell, a human rights advocate and vice president of the Liberia Bar Association.

In 2004 the government established the INCHR to monitor compliance with human rights as provided for in the CPA and to promote human rights education in the schools, media, police, and military; however, the INCHR was largely ineffective due to insufficient funding.

In October Chairman Bryant announced the four female and five male members of the TRC, which was established to investigate human rights violations between January 1979

and October 2003 and to make recommendations about reparations, institutional reform, and prosecution of individuals. The TRC was scheduled to begin operation within three months of the induction of its nine members.

Section 5 Discrimination, Societal Abuses, and Trafficking in Persons

The law prohibits discrimination based on ethnic background, race, sex, creed, place of origin, or political opinion; however, the government did not effectively enforce these provisions. There were no laws against gender discrimination, ethnic discrimination, or FGM. Differences involving ethnic groups, notably the Krahn, Mano, Gio, Lorma and Mandingo ethnic groups, continued to contribute to social and political tensions.

Women

The law prohibits domestic violence; however, it was widespread and not seriously addressed by the government, the courts, or the media. Several NGOs continued programs to treat abused women and girls and to increase awareness of their rights. LNP officers received training on sexual offenses as part of their initial training. During the year UNMIL, CIVPOL, UNICEF, and the Sierra Leone police facilitated a 3-week training program for approximately 50 LNP investigators assigned to the Women's and Children's Protection Section that deals with sexual offenses.

On December 22, the NTLA passed legislation to strengthen existing rape laws. The new law provides sentences for rapists from seven years' to life imprisonment; accused rapists are ineligible for bail. Rape was common during the country's 14-year civil war, including in IDP camps. Few perpetrators were prosecuted due to a weak legal system, poor evidence, or social taboos against reporting sexual offenses. In December security forces reportedly arrested a traditional leader in Lower Margibi County for allegedly raping a nine-year-old girl and a Monrovia man for allegedly raping his step-daughter.

FGM traditionally was performed on young girls in northern, western, and central ethnic groups, particularly in rural areas. Because social structures and traditional institutions, such as the secret societies that often performed FGM as an initiation rite, were undermined by the war, many experts believed that the incidence of FGM had dropped to as low as 10 percent. However, since the end of the civil war, traditional societies were reestablishing themselves throughout the country, and the practice of FGM was believed to be increasing. The most extreme form of FGM, infibulation, was not practiced. The government took no action against FGM during the year.

Although prostitution is illegal, it was widespread.

The law does not prohibit sexual harassment, and it was a problem.

Women have not recovered from the setbacks caused by the war, when many schools were closed, and they were prevented from maintaining their traditional roles in the production, allocation, and sale of food. Thousands of women remained displaced, preventing them from pursuing livelihoods or education.

Women can inherit land and property, received equal pay for equal work, and were allowed to own and manage businesses. The government prohibits polygyny; however, traditional laws permit men to have more than one wife.

During the year professional women's groups--including lawyers, market women, and businesswomen--vocally expressed concern regarding government corruption, the economy, security abuses, rape, domestic violence, and children's rights.

Children

The government generally was unable to provide for the education and health of children. Due to the poor condition of government schools, many children who attended school, particularly in Monrovia, went to private institutions. Education was compulsory until students reached 16 years of age. Many private schools still needed to be refurbished due to wartime damage. School fees remained relatively high, thereby making education unattainable for many school-age children. In both public and private schools, families of children often were asked to provide their own uniforms, books, pencils, paper, and even desks. According to a 2003 UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) report, more than half of school-age children did not attend school.

Throughout the year local and international NGOs reported widespread child abuse, particularly by parents. Traditional punishments were often physical and included beatings with sticks and straps. Sexual violence against children was a problem in some areas, according to a 2004-05 study by the National Child Rights Observatory Group.

FGM was performed primarily on young girls (see section 5, Women).

Child prostitution and trafficking were serious problems (see section 5, Trafficking).

More than 15 thousand children were disarmed and demobilized during UNMIL's 2003-04 DDRR program. During the year ICRC efforts to reunite children who had been separated from their families during the war, including child soldiers, continued. Since 2003 approximately 700 children were reunited with their families, and an estimated 400 children awaiting reunification remained scattered within the country and in refugee camps outside of the country, according to the ICRC. Former child soldiers who turned over their weapons were entitled to a three-month stay in an Interim Care Center (ICC), which offered medical aid, counseling, reading lessons, and help tracing families. Initially many children refused to leave the ICCs due to concerns for their personal safety and lack of schools or other support in their communities; however, during the year many more children were successfully repatriated to their home communities.

Unlike in the previous year, there were no reports that former rebel combatants forcibly conscripted persons, including children, to serve as porters, laborers, and sex slaves.

Child labor was a problem (see section 6.d.).

There were thousands of children living on the streets of Monrovia, but it was difficult to tell who were street children, former combatants, or IDPs. Nearly all youths witnessed atrocities, and some committed atrocities. There were 40 registered orphanages and many unofficial orphanages that served as transit points or informal group homes. Orphanages were underfunded and had difficulty providing basic sanitation, adequate medical care, and appropriate diet. Many orphans lived outside these institutions, which received erratic government funding and relied primarily on private donations. In September a special government task force, composed of 17 organizations including the UN and NGOs, promised to close 35 orphanages that were exploiting orphans.

Trafficking in Persons

In June NTGL Chairman Bryant signed into law the country's first antitrafficking bill, which provides for criminal penalties ranging from one year to life in prison for traffickers; however, there were reports that persons were trafficked to, from, and within the country. Enforcement efforts were weak, but unlike in the previous year, the government did not obstruct the prosecution of suspected traffickers. One suspected trafficker was tried and acquitted during the year.

On September 7, the court acquitted a nightclub proprietress arrested in May 2004 on charges of trafficking three Moroccan women. The ministries of justice and labor have primary responsibility for combating trafficking.

NGO estimates of the number of persons trafficked to the country during the year ranged between 20 and several hundred. Victims were trafficked within the country and from neighboring countries for prostitution and labor. Young children were at a particularly high risk for trafficking, especially orphans or children from extremely poor families. Trafficking victims were often subjected to harsh living and working conditions.

There were reports of forced labor; however, none had been confirmed. There also were reports of the recruitment of child soldiers, but the reports had not been confirmed, and the matter was under investigation at year's end.

Traffickers enticed their victims with promises of a better life. Parents of trafficking victims were persuaded that their children would have better food and educational opportunities in another country and that they would eventually return home.

The international NGO AG Charities worked with the government, local NGOs, and churches to provide assistance to a limited number of trafficking victims, and the LNP opened the Women's and Children's Protection Section, in part to address trafficking issues.

AG Charities raised awareness about trafficking during the year through rallies, marches, and education campaigns. An antitrafficking task force composed of NTGL representatives, international organizations, foreign governments, and local NGOs began work during the year to develop a national antitrafficking action plan.

Persons with Disabilities

Although it is illegal to discriminate against persons with disabilities, in practice they did not enjoy equal access to public buildings or government services. No laws mandate access to public buildings, and streets, schools, public buildings, and other facilities were generally in poor condition and inaccessible to persons with disabilities. As a result of the civil wars, a large number of persons had permanent disabilities, in addition to those disabled by accident or illness. Persons with disabilities faced discrimination, particularly in rural areas. Babies with deformities often were abandoned. Some NGOs provided services to persons with disabilities. During the year special ballots were created to assist visually impaired voters.

National/Racial/Ethnic Minorities

Although the law prohibits ethnic discrimination, it also provides that only "persons who are Negroes or of Negro descent" may be citizens or own land. Many persons of Lebanese and Asian descent who were born or have lived most of their lives in the country were denied full rights as a result of this racial basis for citizenship.

The country has 16 indigenous ethnic groups; each spoke a distinct primary language and was concentrated regionally. No ethnic group constituted a majority of the population.

During the year ethnic, religious, and other differences between Mandingos and non-Mandingos continued but did not result in mob violence, as in previous years. During the Taylor administration, many Mandingo citizens fled their homes as a result of discrimination, arbitrary arrests, and violence; however, during the year Mandingos continued to return to Lofa, Bong, and Nimba counties.

Section 6 Worker Rights

a. The Right of Association

The law provides workers, except members of the military and police, the right to associate in trade unions, and workers exercised this right in practice. The law also prohibits unions from engaging in partisan political activity. Unlike in previous years, there were no reports of government interference in union activities.

Union power was extremely limited. Since the country's workforce largely was illiterate, economic activities beyond the subsistence level were very limited, and labor laws tended to favor management. However, during the year more employees, particularly civil servants, were willing to challenge management, reportedly because they felt safer doing so than previously.

The law does not prohibit antiunion discrimination, but there were no reports of such discrimination during the year.

b. The Right to Organize and Bargain Collectively

The law allows unions to conduct their activities without interference, and the government protected this right in practice. With the exception of civil servants, workers have the right to organize and bargain collectively; these rights largely were untested during the year because of the lack of economic activity. There are no export processing zones.

A 1984 People's Redemption Council decree nullified labor laws that provided for the right to strike, but that decree has not been enforced for years. Due to the destruction of the economy and the estimated 80 percent unemployment rate, strikes were infrequent.

c. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

Although the law prohibits forced or compulsory labor, there were reports that such practices occurred (see sections 5 and 6.d.). There also were reports of forced child labor, but none of these reports were confirmed. There also were reports that local officials forced convicts to work for them.

Unlike in the previous year, there were no reports that former LURD and MODEL combatants used forced labor to serve as porters, sex slaves, and to dig gold and diamonds in territories they controlled.

d. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment

The law prohibits the employment of children under the age of 16 during school hours in the wage sector; however, due to extreme poverty and lax enforcement, child labor was a serious and widespread problem. The minimum age for employment was consistent with the mandatory age for education. The Ministry of Labor lacked the resources to carry out its mandate to monitor child labor. Throughout rural areas, particularly where there were no schools, small children continued to take care of younger brothers and sisters and to work on family subsistence farms. In urban areas children assisted their parents as vendors in markets or they hawked goods on the streets.

During the year there were media reports that a foreign rubber company employed child labor. The company, which had a minimum age requirement for employment of 18 years, claimed that some employees had sent their children to tap rubber in their place. A legal case against the company was filed in a foreign court.

Unlike in the previous year, there were no reports that former government and rebel combatants forced children to work in the alluvial mining industry. There also were no reports that rebel combatants forcibly conscripted persons, including children, to serve as porters, forced laborers, and sex slaves.

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

The law requires a minimum wage of approximately \$0.20 (10 ld) per hour not exceeding 8 hours per day, excluding benefits, for unskilled laborers. The law also requires that agricultural workers be paid \$1.20 (60 ld) for an 8-hour day, excluding benefits. Skilled labor has no minimum fixed wage. The highly competitive minimum wage jobs did not provide a decent standard of living for a worker and family. Families dependent on minimum wage incomes also engaged in subsistence farming, small-scale marketing, and begging. Unlike in previous years, the government generally paid civil servant salaries, but payment arrears grew in the second half of the year.

The law provides for a 48-hour, 6-day regular workweek with a 30-minute rest period per 5 hours of work. The 6-day workweek may extend to 56 hours for service occupations and to 72 hours for miners, with overtime pay beyond 48 hours.

The law provides for paid leave, severance benefits, and safety standards, but enforcement was targeted solely at foreign-owned firms that generally observed these standards. There were government-established health and safety standards that the Ministry of Labor was responsible for enforcing; however, the ministry rarely enforced them. The law does not give workers the right to remove themselves from dangerous situations without risking loss of employment.

Due to the country's continued economic problems, most citizens were forced to accept any work they could find regardless of wages or working conditions. The Ministry of Labor lacked the resources to monitor compliance with labor laws.