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Liberia: Genocide? (U)

There have been numerous reports of wholesale killing of civilians by Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL) soldiers, a predominantly Krahn force, and fighters from various militias. Many incidents involve killing members of one or more ethnic groups by fighters from a different--and frequently a traditionally hostile--ethnic group. (C)

It is difficult to determine to what extent the mass killings in Liberia-- which have been accompanied by the almost total breakdown of law and order-- are genocidal in nature or intent. While there have been numerous, sporadic reports of massacres, verifiable reporting is sparse. Ethnic hatred is deeply rooted and widespread in Liberia, but this does not necessarily equate to organized genocide. (S)

Decade of massacres

In the early days of the civil war, especially before President Samuel Doe was killed, there were many reports of massacres of civilians in Nimba County, traditional homeland of the Gio and Mano ethnic groups (see map). The massacres appear to have been conducted by Krahn AFL soldiers as retribution against rebel sympathizers. The first massacres occurred in late 1985 and took place on a large scale following the invasion by Gen. Thomas Quiwompka against President Samuel Doe; the invasion was supported by Mano and Gio tribesmen. Similar massacres by Krahn AFL soldiers occurred again in Nimba County in 1990. In this case, the Gio and Mano had been providing support and shelter for Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) forces, which were waging a military campaign to

overthrow the Krahn-dominated Doe regime. (C)

Numerous additional massacres of civilians by Krahn AFL soldiers occurred, some in or near Monrovia. On May 30, 1990, Krahn AFL forces rounded up and reportedly killed a number of Mano and Gio civilians in the Monrovia area at the UN compound. The motive appeared to have been Krahn soldier's rage brought on by heavy fighting against Taylor. On June 1, 1993, AFL troops massacred 300-400 Bassa people near Harbel outside Monrovia. Robbery and vengeance may have been factors: when the Bassa refused to continue complying with AFL extortion to get rice, they were killed. The role of ethnic hatred is unclear. (C)

There also have been massacres of Krahn in recent years, particularly in their Grand Gedeh homeland following Charles Taylor's capture of that area. Little information is available on these killings, but they probably were carried out by Gio and Mano NPFL fighters after the NPFL captured the county. Vengeance, looting, and ethnic antagonism may all have played a role; whether there was genocidal intent is not known. Similarly, NPFL forces reportedly killed 200 civilians in Kakata, Bong County in May 1993 for allegedly sympathizing with the enemy. One hundred civilians may have been killed at this time as well in nearby Lofa County by NPFL troops. (C)

Recent atrocities

Recent reports of massacres in southeastern Liberia--allegedly conducted by a Krahn militia, the Liberian Peace Council (LPC)--include one on December 28, 1995, against local inhabitants, mainly Bassa and Grebo, for sympathizing with Taylor. In Bong County, central Liberia, atrocities against civilians also have been committed by ULIMO-Mandingo, NPFL, and ULIMO-Krahn fighters. Massacres of civilians were reported during heavy fighting on October 30, 1994, and on December 28, 1995, amid a near-total breakdown of discipline among all militia units. (C)

On January 20, 1996, ULIMO-Krahn militias attacked and committed atrocities against civilians in the coastal city of Robertsport during a period of intense fighting in neighboring Tubmanburg. One unconfirmed report that a small number of Krahn were executed by NPFL forces in Monrovia during fighting this month. NPFL soldiers may also have conducted house-to-house searches and killings in the Sinkor area during April 26-May 2 fighting. Press reports claim that Krahn troops under Roosevelt Johnson carried out summary executions on the beach last week. (S)

Young and dangerous

Many fighters are teenaged or younger. They are untrained and undisciplined. In all the factions there is widespread alcohol and drug abuse. Many fighters are frightened and hungry, seeking food and valuables or to settle blood scores. Command and control is frequently nonexistent. (C)

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