

Liberian Stories

A population caught in a cycle of violence and displacement



Displaced in Monrovia, June 2003

Photo courtesy of Teun Voeten / Vanity Fair

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Random violence, looting, rape, forced recruitment, family separation and general chaos have been part of the daily life of many Liberians for more than a decade. In addition to countless civilian deaths, the ongoing conflict in Liberia is causing hundreds of thousands of people to flee throughout the region. It is estimated that, by June 2003, 100.000 Liberians were displaced within their country whilst 150.000 had sought protection in neighbouring Sierra Leone, Guinea and Ivory Coast.

A pattern of warfare has developed in which rebels and government forces alternately capture, lose and recapture territory. As a consequence people have to flee repeatedly. They either seek shelter in the bush, where they survive with little food and no health care or they flee to towns further from the constantly moving frontline. As more and more of the west of Liberia comes under rebel control, many people are compelled to flee towards Monrovia. With nowhere else to go, thousands live in makeshift camps. But as the fighting progresses closer to the capital, these camps in turn are attacked, forcing people to run away yet again, some into the bush, many onto the streets of the capital, and some towards international borders.

In their search for safety most Liberians have only a scant choice. Whether they choose to move within Liberia or attempt to travel to a different country and live as a refugee, security is usually short-lived and never guaranteed. Whichever route they take, they face harassment and extortion and the risk of rape, forcible conscription or death along the way. Even if they flee abroad, depending on which country they arrive in, they risk being forcibly returned to their country of origin or recruited as fighters whilst inside the refugee camps. Liberians who make it to the relative security of refugee camps have to survive in poor camp conditions where there is often a shortage of food, a lack of hygiene and sexual violence.

As a medical organisation MSF is in close contact with Liberian refugees in Sierra Leone, Guinea and Ivory Coast, as well as displaced Liberians in their own country. In the course of our work we speak with and listen to them every day. In this document we aim to highlight the plight of Liberians and their permanent struggle to find security and survive in inhumane conditions. These are the stories of people who are traumatised by the lack of safety in their place of origin, who suffered from additional violence during their flight and continue to live in hardship in the various camps throughout the region.

Civil war first ignited in Liberia during the late 1980s, when the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), headed by Charles Taylor, rebelled against Samuel Doe's arbitrary presidential rule. In the conflict that followed, from 1989 until 1996, according to conservative estimates at least 80,000 lives were lost in a country with a population estimated to be only about three million.

After a short period of relative peace, fighting resumed in 1999 when a new rebel faction, Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD), launched a bid to overthrow president Charles Taylor's government and entered Liberia through neighbouring Guinea.

Through assaults on towns and villages, the LURD rebels managed to gain power in north-western Liberia. As they steadily took ground in Lofa county, a hit-and-loom pattern of warfare emerged in which towns were attacked first by LURD and then by government troops. Neither the rebels nor the government troops were able to keep new territory for long and battle lines shifted continuously. This transformed Lofa into a kind of no man's land with virtually no access to vital humanitarian assistance for the population for over three years. During 2002, LURD attacks on towns in Bomi Hills and Grand Cape Mount counties enlarged the conflict zone to cover much of western Liberia.

In early 2003, a second rebel faction, Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL) emerged. Whilst LURD maintained power in the northern regions, MODEL made gains in the south-east of the country. Currently, both rebel factions are fighting for power against President Taylor's various armed forces, which include the Antiterrorist Unit (ATU), the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL), the Special Security Service (SSS), the Special Operation Division (SOD) and numerous other militia groups. The ongoing hostilities not only involve brutal combat, with increasing civilian casualties over recent months, but also make it possible for both government troops and rebels to commit widespread human rights violations. Killings, rapes, forced labour, looting, the forcible conscription of young males into military service are widespread. In addition thousands of people are being blocked from leaving their country to find refuge elsewhere.

In June 2003, the rebels mounted two separate attacks on the capital, Monrovia. On both occasions the resultant fighting plunged the city into chaos, causing many thousands of people to flee their homes and to seek shelter in abandoned buildings and a football stadium. There were hundreds of civilian casualties as people were caught in the crossfire or were killed by mortar shells and rockets. It is estimated that 600 people died and a thousand were injured. Extensive looting of homes, shops and hospitals and health clinics by rebels and government forces compounded the suffering of non-combatants.

There is now not a single public hospital functioning in the whole of Liberia. The already crippled health care system¹ is struggling to cope with a cholera epidemic and widespread malnutrition. In the aftermath of the June attacks MSF was treating an average of 350 cases of cholera a week and there has been a significant rise in severe malnutrition, particularly affecting children under five.

¹ E.g. The number of registered doctors in the country is currently 32 and there are only 185 registered nurses.

Discussions about an international intervention in Liberia do not discharge the parties on the ground from their responsibilities. Warring parties have an obligation to respect the rights of the civilian population. In Liberia, they do the opposite and routinely violate people's rights.

In order to prevent further avoidable suffering, MSF urges the warring parties in Liberia, governmental troops and rebel fighters alike, to:

- Treat the civilian population humanely in all circumstances and to cease indiscriminate killings, sexual violence, extortion and forced recruitment,
- Allow civilians safe access to the basic services and supplies they need for their survival, such as food and medical supplies,
- Allow humanitarian organisations safe access to the civilian population in all parts of Liberia,
- Ensure the right of every Liberian to leave his country.

MSF urges host governments of Liberian refugees to:

- Continue to provide protection and assistance for Liberian refugees, with UNHCR's support,
- Keep their borders open for Liberians who seek safety outside their homeland.

Sarah, 36, is from Bomi county. When she talked to MSF on 23rd June 2003 she was living in Plumcor IDP camp, just north of Monrovia. A day later the second rebel attack on Monrovia forced everyone in the camp to flee once again.

I used to have a market stall selling clothes in a town called Klay. I had been in the business for 15 years. When the rebels attacked Klay last year I fled with my mother and my children and headed for the Po River on foot. On the road, government soldiers searched me and took all our money – they were doing the same to most people. They took 2,800 Liberian dollars from me – all the money I had saved from my business.

Later, the rebels attacked Po River so we ran away again and came here to Plumcor camp. My mother was very traumatized by all the shooting. We arrived here on February 19th 2003.

Two weeks ago rebels entered the camp. We heard shooting and we ran away without taking anything with us. We ran towards the swamp and tried to get across. But some people couldn't make it across the swamp and they died – including children. While I was trying to get across, my daughter went missing. A stray bullet hit my brother's son and he died instantly – he was only 13 years old. We couldn't tell if the bullet was fired by government troops or rebels.

We went and hid in the bush and then went and slept in a village. But as the fighting got closer and closer we had to keep moving from village to village until we were finally in Duala [a part of northern Monrovia].

Once we were in Duala we couldn't move further and we had to stay there until the fighting stopped. It went on from Sunday until Thursday. We went into someone's house and couldn't come out, so we couldn't get food and water. Some neighbours eventually gave us water, but we didn't get any food for 4 days.

When the fighting stopped I went from house to house asking if anybody had seen my daughter. Eventually I found her in the school building - somebody had brought her into town with them. She was missing for 6 days in total, but thank god she is fine and unharmed.

I left her in town with my mother and came back to the camp alone last week. When I got here I met my two brothers, but everything in the house has been looted and we have absolutely nothing. There is no food being distributed and I have no money to buy food- I just have what people give me. My whole body is aching from the running.

1. LEAVING HOME: reasons for fleeing

In 1999 civil conflict re-kindled in the North West of the country, causing hundreds of thousands of Liberians flee from their homes. These people are not of a particular ethnic group, tribe, class or religion – they are from all walks of life, all ages, all beliefs. They are farmers, nurses, businessmen, school children, shopkeepers, university students, government inspectors, grandmothers. All are forced to leave their homes because they fear for their lives.

Many people **flee their homes** during a rebel attack on their village or town. Others run away as government troops mount counter-assaults to recapture territory. Attacks by both warring parties are invariably violent, causing fatalities and casualties amongst civilians, destroying homes and propagating widespread panic.

"In February I was in the market with my family when it was attacked. They were shooting in the air with their guns. They took people's things and burned cars, and they took away my 16-year-old sister. My uncle died in the gunfire. The rest of my family ran away from the area and I fled with my wife and four children."

Displaced man, mid thirties, Plumcor camp

"When rebels came and attacked the town we ran away into the bush. After a couple of weeks, the government troops came and recaptured the town. They burnt many buildings and killed people.... One night in Kolahun in July 2001 the government forces came and captured the town and many people were trapped in the fighting. My older sister was killed and my father was killed as he was trying to run away. I can't remember the number of people who died that day, but it was many, many people."

Refugee man, Bandajuma camp

"When the rebels entered Lofa, lots of killings took place, by the government troops and by the rebels. My brothers were killed. Many people fled into the bush and some people managed to cross into Guinea and Sierra Leone. I decided to head for Monrovia with my wife and mother and children, but when we got there life was very difficult."

Male refugee, Bandajuma camp

Attacks generally happen without any warning, sometimes at night. Civilians usually do not know which direction the gunfire is coming from and therefore which way to run to for safety. This causes many to get injured or killed in the crossfire whilst trying to escape.

"The attack happened during the night. Most of the workers got killed. My little daughter of two got killed.... Everyone was running away, nothing was left"

Male refugee, 32, Gondama camp

"There was a sudden attack on the market in Grand Cape Mount...my father was killed in the gunfire".

Displaced man, mid thirties, Plumcor camp

"Kolahun was attacked on a Monday, the market day, early in the morning. The town was surrounded and they fired in the air, then in the direction of houses. One shell was fired in the middle of the centre of the town. I was in bed with my two children of 7 and 10. I

went immediately to the bush with my children. People were running in all directions. Once in the bush I heard that my mother and my wife were killed. They were in the centre of town during the attack."

Male refugee, 50, Tekoulo camp

Some people describe attacks in which civilians are fired at indiscriminately. Others report that the rebels fire their guns into the air or at the ground.

"When they come they come with heavy firing. It's only with the grace of God that you can escape... They fire indiscriminately. And when they come to peoples houses they loot everything."

Male refugee, 35, Gondama camp

"Government troops were attacking people in villages near the road and looting. They opened fire on people and sometimes killed whole villages."

Sierra Leonean woman, previously living as a refugee in Liberia, now returned to Sierra Leone

"I was on assignment in Grand Cape Mount county working in a hospital...on June 20th we heard a gun shot. After a few seconds, the whole place was under sporadic firing...we just saw people running helter skelter in the town. After that the rebels entered the health clinic compound. They were firing their guns in the air. In fact the rebels actually did no harm to people - I didn't see them kill or hurt anyone. When they came in to the health centre they said plainly that they did not come for any of the civilians - only the soldiers.... After a while they collected five of our nurses and took them away, and also took some drugs.... before the rebels had left had told us we should not stay - we should leave Liberia."

Male refugee, Gondama camp

"I left my home in Grand Cape Mount last July. There was an attack on the market in our town and everyone ran in all different directions. The rebels were shooting into the ground."

Displaced woman, early twenties, Plumcor camp

As families run from the attack, **children frequently become separated** from their parents in the panic.

"When the attack happened two weeks ago, my eight children fled in different directions. My two-year-old daughter has been sick for a long time, so I had to carry her across the swamp and I could not keep all the children together. After all the running the two year old got sicker and she later died.... I have three of my other children here with me now, but after the death of my daughter I do not have the strength to go and look for the other five. They are still missing. There is no-one else that can go and look for them because I do not have any other family with me here"

Pregnant displaced woman, 42, Plumcor camp

"Two weeks ago rebels entered the camp...we heard shooting and we ran away.... while I was trying to get across the swamp my daughter went missing.... when the fighting stopped I went from house to house asking if anybody had seen my daughter. Eventually I found her in a school building...she was missing for six days in total "

Displaced woman, mid-thirties, Plumcor camp

People also lose contact with husbands, wives, siblings and parents whilst fleeing. Many never find them again.

"There was an attack by the rebels and everybody scattered in different directions. I didn't know what had happened to my husband so I came on the road with my 8 children"
Five months pregnant displaced woman, Plumcor camp

Rebel and government attacks are frequently accompanied by **sexual violence**. Women and girls are separated from their families and forced to stay with the fighters. Although it is hard for people to openly talk about such issues, even though it is sometimes not explicitly stated, it is strongly implied by interviewees that rape and sexual assault is commonplace.

"They took away my 16-year-old sister. We have not heard anything from my sister who was taken by the rebels - we think she is still with them in Bomi County. Lots of other girls were taken by them too."
Displaced man, 34, Plumcor camp

"The rebels took away my nineteen year old sister and told me that she was not coming back. We have not heard or seen anything from her since"
Displaced man, 36, Plumcor camp

"The fighters are raping people on the streets"
Refugee woman, 25, Jimmi Bagbo camp

"Soldiers caught me and my friends but four of us could escape. I was one night with the soldiers before I could escape. We ran away during a moment of chaos. They were shooting but they did not get us. We ran into the bush. I was there for three days and then I went to Sinje"
Refugee woman, 26, Gerihun refugee camp

As the rebels gradually gain control of territory in the north-west of Liberia and fighting spreads into Grand Cape Mount and Bomi counties, more and more people begin to leave their homes because of fear that there will be an attack on their area in the near future.

"We used to live in Bomi County. We farmed, but I also earned money as a teacher. We left on April 10th 2002, after we heard that fighting was approaching. We did not wait until the fighting came to our house, but tried to get ahead of it by getting in the car and heading towards Monrovia. It was myself, my wife, three children and my mother and father in the car"

Displaced man, Plumcor camp.

Since a relatively constant pattern of warfare emerges, in which a rebel attack is inevitably followed by a government counter-assault, even people who survive a rebel attack on their town often decide to leave their houses before government troops retaliate. The confusing situation is worsened for civilians by the fact that government fighters sometimes deliberately spread false rumours of an imminent rebel attack in order to cause people to flee their homes. This gives them an opportunity for the widespread looting of money and possessions.

"After they [the rebels] left we were afraid that government soldiers would come and loot us - we were worried about what they would do."

Male refugee, Gondama camp

As tensions grow between the warring parties, **civilians from rebel-occupied territories are increasingly accused by the government troops of aiding or supporting the rebels.** Men from Lofa county - the area where the first rebel incursions occurred - are particularly victimised, causing many of them to attempt to flee the country. Even people who have moved from Lofa to Monrovia have been accused of sympathising with the rebels and threatened with violence.

"Because we were from Lofa, the government troops said that we supported LURD and that they would kill us."

Male refugee, Bandajuma camp

"I had to be very careful whilst travelling - I was at risk because people say that it is my tribe that brought the war... The government forces on the streets were very aggressive towards me. They said things like 'Your brothers are bringing the war, so we will squash you all like ants.' "

Male refugee, Bandajuma camp

"The President accused the Lofarians of encouraging war, and we were seriously accused of helping the rebel incursion.... An order was given to slaughter men of my kind, so for this reason we travelled from bush to bush... People were living in fear and people suffered a lot."

Male refugee, Gondama camp

The widespread **forcible recruitment** of young boys into the warring factions causes many parents to send their children out of the country. There are numerous reports of male children being rounded up, given guns and forced to fight. These youngsters, sometimes as young as ten, generally become drug users and whilst under the influence of drugs commit atrocities such as killings and rapes.

"I am 14 years old. I am coming from Monrovia where I was going to school. I left Monrovia on the 1st of March 2002. Because the war was coming to Monrovia my father told me to leave and come to the refugee camp. He was afraid because I am young. They search young people and force them to become soldier".

Refugee boy, 14, Gerihun camp

"When I was in Monrovia I was still studying. They started to recruit young soldiers. One day I was playing football in a place close to my home when a car parked close to the road. Soldiers walked out and came to the playing field. I was very scared. I started to run and decided to leave and go to Sierra Leone".

Male refugee, 18, Gondama camp

Young women are also sometimes coerced into joining the fighting forces.

"In Liberia they ask the girls and boys to fight. We were being attacked on the streets. I said that I am not a fighter. I was scared when I left. People were running behind me and tried to force me to be a fighter. This happens a lot. They take people on the streets and force them to fight. They are the army and the militia. They take boys. Small boys. They teach you how to fight."

Refugee woman, 25, Jimmi Bagbo refugee camp

As the conflict draws on, the circumstances of people who continue to live within the war zone are worsening. Since 2000, access for aid workers has not been possible in three quarters of the country, but refugees coming from the area into Sierra Leone in 2003 report a **severe lack of food** in the region and a **total lack of access to health care** and medicine for the sick.

"I have been living in Lofa county. I have come here because my three-year-old granddaughter is very sick. We were living in the bush for a long time, but we had hardly any food and no medicine. A girl used to help us by bringing us food, but during the last weeks she had a severe cough. Now my granddaughter has a very bad cough and cannot stand upright. We walked for three days to get here. There are many people there who are sick in the region that we came from and there is no food. But only the people who are very sick are allowed to cross the border into Sierra Leone"

Elderly woman, Zimmi way station

Since the beginning of 2003 more or less 10,000 people have crossed the border between Liberia and Sierra Leone or Guinea. The reports of those who arrive suggest that many more people are trying to flee because of the dire humanitarian situation, but are being prevented by the warring parties. They are either blocked deliberately by rebel forces - who sometimes explicitly prohibit them to flee their villages - or are blocked indirectly by being trapped between the fighting groups.

Anna, 27, was living in Seigbeh camp just north of Monrovia when she talked to MSF on 23rd June 2003.

In 1990, at the beginning of the war, I was 14 years old. A soldier from the NPFL came to my village and asked who owned me. My parents identified me as their daughter, and the soldier said that he wanted to take me as his wife. My mother refused and said that she wouldn't give her daughter to the army, but the soldier took me away by force and raped me for a whole day. I was very injured and my insides started falling out through my vagina. The man kept me for one week, and then I went back to my family.

In 1994, I was taking my grandmother from Monrovia to Bomi county. When we got to a checkpoint the fighters separated the girls from everybody else. We tried to run away, but at night the army got flashlights and found us, and took us to a place under a bridge where there were mattresses. Three men raped me. The next day I couldn't walk.

Since then I have had violent stomach pain all the way down to my feet and I can't do anything. It was one year before I started menstruating again, and it is very painful. I can't conceive, so I have no children. Everyone around me has little ones, but I don't. Last year I went for a medical check-up and I was told that I had damage to my womb. But I didn't have enough money for the operation.

I started cooking for people in order to get money, and I saved up 4000 Liberian dollars. But then I had to flee from Bomi to here after a rebel attack and I gave the money to my mother to look after. The money was taken from her when she was on the road, and also my mattress and clothes, so now I have nothing.

The day before yesterday - 21st June 2003 - I went to the bush to look for wood. There were three government soldiers with guns. One of them saw me and he asked, "Where are you going?" I said I was looking for wood. Then he told me "you are assigned to me for the day". I was very afraid. He forced me to go far into the bush and he undressed me. Then he raped me. When I got dressed afterwards he took 50 dollars from me. I came back to the camp and yesterday I felt very sick. My stomach is very painful, but I don't have any money to go for treatment.

2. ON THE ROAD: dangers in hiding and during flight

Caught in dire circumstances with no hope of future improvement, the only available option is to flee whenever there is an opportunity.

During an attack on a village, people panic and **flee in all directions**. In most cases, people first run into the bush where they stay and hide in one place or move around to avoid being detected. Some decide to stay hidden in the bush for many months, scared to return to their homes but uncertain where else to head for safety.

Usually people have no time to collect their belongings or pack food supplies before they leave their home, so whilst hiding in the bush they have few clothes and only wild foods to sustain them. People describe suffering from **extreme hunger** because all they had to eat was what they could forage - mainly yams, bananas and cassava.

"The rebels were beating people in the towns, so we stayed in the bush for 3 months. I t was me and 3 children. All we had to eat was what we could find, mainly cassava and bush yams." *Male refugee, mid-thirties, Jimmi Bagbo camp*

"On February 2nd 2001, the rebels again attacked Voinjama city and we fled leaving all our belongings just to save our lives. We were in the bush for a number of months without food, mostly living on yams".
Male refugee, 70, Jimmi Bagbo camp

"When the attack happened I ran into the bush and hid. We stayed there for two weeks and the only thing we had to eat was cassava."
Displaced young woman, Plumcor camp

Without access to health care or medicine, people become sick and many die.

"I am from Bomi Hills. I was living with my family but now we are separated. I was going to school there. I was living happily with my family and my friends. Last year there was a serious attack and everyone went to the bush. I was there for three days. Children were dying. We were hungry and some people were sick. My father died"
Refugee woman, 26, Gerihun camp

"The rebels came into town and I ran into the bush with my family. We had no medicine and some people died - lots of people had malaria and some people had no-one to take care of them"
Male refugee, mid-thirties, Jimmi Bagbo camp

Instead of remaining in the bush, some attempt to travel by foot or car to an international border in order to seek refugee status in Guinea, Sierra Leone or Ivory Coast. Others try to travel to other regions of Liberia to live with relatives or find lost family members. In 2002 and 2003, many headed towards Monrovia and ended up living in camps on the outskirts of the capital, often having to flee repeatedly from camp to camp as the front line of fighting moved closer and closer towards the governmental seat of power.

Whilst on the road, in whichever direction they are travelling, many people become a **victim of violence once again**. As they flee, civilians are frequently harassed, often have their possessions stolen and are at risk of rape, forcible conscription and extortion. For fear of encountering violence if they travel during the daytime, civilians often only dare to move at night.

Some people recount how members of their family are killed in the chaos of attacks on the road.

"I am coming from Monrovia and that is where my children are. On my way to Sierra Leone my husband was killed. He was killed outside the city. He was killed during an attack on the road. We were running during the attack and I did not see him anymore. I did not see his body, but my friend saw his body and told me that he was dead".

Refugee woman, 41, Gondama camp

Others describe **getting trapped** in the ongoing fighting between rebels and government troops, with deaths and injuries being caused by stray bullets or mortar shrapnel as people try to escape across difficult terrain.

"We ran towards the swamp and tried to get across. But some people could not make it across the swamp and they died – including children. While I was trying to get across, my daughter went missing. A stray bullet hit my brother's son and he died instantly – he was only 13 years old."

Displaced woman, 30, Plumcor camp

"Two weeks ago there was heavy fighting when the rebels came to this camp and we ran away to the swamp. I was with my two children, my mother and my grandmother. As we tried to cross the swamp there was heavy shooting and my grandmother, who was weak and sick, got stuck and there was no way to get her out. We had to leave her there. My brother went to look for my grandmother and they found her body in the swamp yesterday".

Displaced woman, 20, Plumcor camp

"When the shooting started I went through the swamp. I had five children with me and it was very difficult to get them across."

Displaced woman, 40, Plumcor camp

The threat of being recruited by force to fight for either the government or rebel troops is high, especially for men.

"On my way I came across two soldiers and they asked me for money. They beat me a lot and they harassed me and they left me on the street. After beating me they asked me to join them to where they were going. Other people asked me to follow them because if I did not they would kill me."

Male refugee, 37, Gerihun camp

Almost everyone describes having **money and possessions taken** from them whilst travelling. This happens frequently at checkpoints, where arbitrary abuse and extortion is the rule.

"On the road, government soldiers searched me and took all our money - they were doing the same to most people. They took 2.800 Liberian dollars² from me - all the money I had saved from my business."

Displaced woman, 31, Plumcor camp

"I came on the road with my 8 children. On the way I was harassed by soldiers - they took clothes and money".

Pregnant displaced woman, Plumcor camp

A high price is usually demanded at the border crossing to Sierra Leone and Guinea. By the time people reach such a crossing they often have nothing of value left. Nevertheless they have to **pay to escape**. The amount varies from border post to border post.

"When we came at the border we had to pay money to the Liberian soldiers. I paid 30 Liberian dollars. If you do not have the money they will take your clothes, anything. If you do not have anything, you will not cross the border".

Refugee woman, 26, Gerihun camp

"When we got to Bo Waterside we tried to cross to Gendema. They asked for 150 Liberian dollars, but I managed to negotiate down to 125 dollars, because that was all the money we had left. My wife was crying because she didn't know how we would manage, and everybody was hungry."

Male refugee, Bandajuma camp

Sometimes fighters make civilians "pay" by forcing them to work, for example making them carry goods. There are also reports of woman being forced to have sex with soldiers or rebels in order to be able to cross borders.

"I am a Liberian refugee from Kolahun town. I had 7 people in my family but I left 4 of them behind in Kolahun. They were left behind because they did not have 50 Liberian dollars to pay for the pass that is issued to people to cross to Guinea by rebel forces. If you do not have 50 Liberian dollars to pay you can carry a load on your head for more than a 100 km on foot. They were not able to carry a heavy load on their head and walk for a long distance because they are old.

I left Liberia because the rebels were beating me and forcing me to work for them for free. You had to carry an ammunition box on your head for very long distances. If you complained that you were tired you will be killed. One of my friends died because of that."

Refugee man, 23, Tekoulo

"We crossed the border in Gendema. We had to pay at the border but the question is not money but life. LURD obliged us to carry load and if you don't do it they kill you. There are no rights for us. For women they rape you or you get killed."

Male refugee, 32, Gondama camp

In addition to the dangers during travelling associated with the conflict, people have to endure the **physical stress of the journey**, often having to walk for days without food whilst injured or whilst carrying children or belongings.

² 1000 Liberian dollars = 14 euros.

"People are sick after all the running - I just came back from burying a child of malnutrition."

Displaced man, 33, Plumcor camp

Hazardous geographical conditions add to the danger, especially during the rainy season when rivers and swamps cause many more unnecessary deaths. There are numerous stories of people, including children, drowning whilst trying to cross the rivers separating Liberia from its neighbouring countries.

Even when people manage to reach international borders, they are sometimes **refused access**, or, having crossed, are **forcibly sent back**.

"Young men and women cannot cross the border into Guinea. They are being refused to leave by the rebels. They have to go back to their villages and work for them. You either have to pay them to cross, or work for them. You have to be good to them. Only the old and sick men can cross."

Refugee man, 50, Tekoulo camp

"I paid 250 Liberian dollars to get permission to cross the border into Guinea. At the other side of the border another selection took place and my two sons of 20 and 25 were refused access. They were sent back to the other side to the rebels. I am here now in the refugee camp with my two girls of 14 and 10. Every night I cry for my husband who died during the attack and for my two sons of whom I do not know where they are"

Refugee mother, 45, Tekoulo camp

"Young men do not arrive in Tekoulo camp because they have to carry sacks and once on this side of the border they are sent back to carry once more other sacks. When they refuse they beat them very hard."

Refugee woman, 60, Tekoulo camp

James, 30, is a Liberian refugee now living in Bandajuma camp, Sierra Leone. He told MSF his story on 11th June 2003.

I lived in Masambolahun village in Lofa County. When rebels came and attacked the town we ran away into the bush. After a couple of weeks, the government troops came and recaptured the town. They burnt many buildings and killed people. The troops knew that people were hiding in the bushes, and they called everyone to go back into the town, but people were afraid and many left and went to Kolahun.

One night in Kolahun in July 2001 the government forces came and captured the town and many people were trapped in the fighting. My older sister was killed and my father was killed as he was trying to run away. I can't remember the number of people who died that day, but it was many, many people.

I decided to go to Gbanga to try and find other members of my family. I had to be very careful whilst travelling - I was at risk because people say that it is my tribe that brought the war. I met some friends I knew from school and they told me that the situation was OK in Monrovia, so I started to look for a job there. I found a job working in a pharmacy and after two months I sent for my wife and children.

But the government forces on the streets were very aggressive towards me. They said things like *"your brothers are bringing the war, so we will squash you all like ants"*. I was extremely worried and eventually I said to my boss *"I just want to fly - I don't think I will survive here"*. My boss gave me 2000 [Liberian] dollars to help us get away.

We went to Duala and found a taxi. I have three children, but the taxi driver said that he would only allow two children - we would have to pay extra for the third child. He charged us 150 dollars to take us from Monrovia to Bo Waterside. When we got to the Iron Gate checkpoint in the northern part of Monrovia the soldiers demanded to know where we were going. I said we were going to visit relatives in a refugee camp. They confiscated my ID card and made us pay 50 dollars to go through.

When we got to Bo Waterside we tried to cross to Gendema. They asked for 150 dollars, but I managed to negotiate down to 125 dollars, because that was all the money we had left. My wife was crying because she didn't know how we would manage, and everybody was hungry.

When they opened the cross point so that we could get across the bridge into Sierra Leone it was like the gates of heaven had been opened. I just couldn't believe it.

On the Sierra Leonean side the soldiers said it was OK to pass, and we got to Gendema, where we were registered by UNHCR. We spent one month in a transit camp sleeping on the bare ground. There were 6000 other people there. Later they started calling the names of the people who could go to the camps. When they called my name I was extremely happy. We arrived here on March 16th 2002.

3. FROM CAMP TO CAMP: surviving continuous displacement

Most Liberians flee firstly within Liberia, seeking refuge with relatives in other towns or in camps set up for internally displaced people. As the fighting takes ground closer and closer to their first safe haven, these people are repeatedly forced to flee, with the frontline closing in around them. Many people are living on the run since the resumption of fighting in 1999. Some of them flee across international borders into Guinea, Sierra Leone and Ivory Coast, where they now live as refugees.

"I was living in Lofa County in Voinjama. When the rebels hit we fled to the bush where we stayed for one week with 26 persons. There was no food. We walked during two weeks through the bush to the main road. One friend helped us with transportation to get in one camp. The camp was in Monrovia and I searched for work. One night when I came back from work the army on the road attacked me. They took everything from me: all my money, my watch and all my clothes. The next day I decided to leave because they were catching young men to go and fight on the front. So I decided to leave with my family to Sierra Leone".

Male Refugee, 27, Gerihun camp

Several of the refugee camps in the neighbouring countries are mixed camps. They group together people of different nationality and ethnic origin. Some people are returnees (ex-refugees who have returned to their country of origin), others internally displaced and refugees. It is a situation that easily leads to tension between the different communities. At the same time tension can increase between the host and camp community.

Liberians know what life in a camp means. Most of them stayed in different types of camps when fleeing from one location to another in a desperate effort to stay one step ahead of the war. Repeatedly the **camps themselves become a target for attacks** and looting. Particularly, for internally displaced people it is difficult to find security in camps.

"I was in my house when the rebels attacked this camp two weeks ago. They went from house to house looting everything. They told me that I had to give them money - I gave them all the money I had which was a thousand Liberian dollars. I stayed here with my family and the rebels were here for a week taking everything - mattresses, money, trousers and food" *Displaced man, mid-thirties, Plumcor camp*

"When I came back to my house in this camp everything had gone. I don't know who took the things from the house, but there was nothing left. I feel sick, but because we don't have money to buy food we have to eat cassava instead of rice".

Displaced woman, 28, Plumcor camp

"When we got here the door to our house was open and everything was gone, including our mattress and clothes"

Displaced man, mid thirties, Plumcor camp

"The rebels came to the house and said they would not hurt us. But they took all our money, food and belongings. They moved from house to house looting everything, even people's jeans and shoes. Everything in the camp has been vandalised"

Displaced man, Plumcor camp

In spring 2003, insecurity led to people refusing food parcels in some IDP camps north of Monrovia. People were afraid that having food would endanger them by leading to harassment by fighters. However, the lack of food is currently so severe and malnutrition so high that people accept the risk of receiving food, even though they have to give half the food or more to the militias.

"I went to the MSF clinics, they gave me tablets for malaria and told me to take them after a meal. But I have no food"

Displaced person, Plumcor camp

At an individual level, **personal security in camps is not guaranteed** either. People in refugee or displaced camps are often in such a vulnerable condition that the law of the strongest prevails. The most vulnerable can become victim of different forms of exploitation, including sexual exploitation and violence.

"The day before yesterday - 21st of June 2003- I went to the bush to look for wood. There were three government soldiers with guns. One of them saw me, and he asked me "where are you going?" I said I was looking for wood. Then he told me "you are assigned to me for the day". I was very afraid. He forced me to go far into the bush and he undressed me. Then he raped me. When I got dressed afterwards he took 50 Liberian dollars from me. I came back to the camp yesterday and yesterday I felt very sick. My stomach is very painful, but I do not have any money for the treatment."

Displaced woman, 27, Seigbeh camp

But even when refugees are living in relative security, **life in camps is always harsh**. People arrive exhausted, malnourished and traumatised. They have to live for years in a camp often without employment, little social activities and are dependent on humanitarian aid.

The food in the camps is limited. In most locations food distribution happens once a month and depends on the possession of a food ration card. A refugee or a displaced can only get this card when he or she is officially registered. Many people arrive in the camp without being registered.

"Every day there are new arrivals in the camps. People are coming by foot. Some come from the border, some come and look for their family. When UNHCR came for the verification procedure a lot of the foot arrivals were left out. They were not accepted because they don't believe that these foot arrivals are refugees. But they are here now and they are not registered. This means that they do not have a food ration card and if there is a food distribution they will not receive any food. So other refugees will have to share food with them."

Female refugee, 49, Gerihun camp

"Life in the camps is hard. The food is the most difficult thing. I did not know that there was a way station. I arrived here directly. I did not register. I do not have a food ticket.

I work for other refugees to get food. I went to the verification but I was not allowed to register.

Refugee girl, 26, Gerihun camp

"In the camp life condition is too difficult. The food is not enough. Me, I have to feed sixteen people on my ticket. People ask me to give them food. They do not get food because they are not registered".

Male refugee, 27, Gerihun camp

Despite the scarcity of food, refugees sometimes sell part of their food parcel because they **lack other basic materials**. Many people have given all their belongings to the different armed groups in order to pass roadblocks on their journey. When they arrive in the camps, their clothes are often the only thing they have. So food frequently turns into purchasing power for other goods such as shoes, tarpaulin and pots.

Lack of latrines, shelter problems, limited education for children, lack of information are just some of the additional daily problems people encounter in the various camps.

"There are not enough latrines in the camp. We are going to the river but when it is raining it is difficult so people do it everywhere. There are faeces between the huts".

Refugee woman, 49, Gerihun

"My father had a stomach problem for a while and when we got back here he became very ill and died. When we got back here the health clinic was closed. My wife had to deliver the baby last week in the house. She only had some neighbours to help her".

Displaced couple, Plumcor camp

"Since I came to the camp I have not been able to build a house because I don't have a husband here to cut the wood for the shelter. I have been living for a year in the transit centre at the camp. To get money I have to cut wood and collect cassava leaves to sell. That's the only way that I can get food for the children together. If I do not go and break wood, none of the children get anything to eat. I'm five months pregnant so it is very hard." *Displaced woman, 42, Plumcor camp*

People become **separated from their closest relatives** whilst fleeing. Children are living in the camps without their parents and many women left their husbands behind. People do not know if their family survived the fighting or if they are safe. Some people try to get in contact with the rest of their family via the ICRC tracing programs. As many parts of Liberia are inaccessible very often it is in vain. The insecurity about the fate of their family creates additional stress and trauma.

"I have no brothers or sisters in the camp and my husband is still in Liberia somewhere - I don't know exactly where he is...I have no way to contact him."

Female refugee, mid-twenties, Jimmi Bagbo camp

"I came alone with my elder sister. She is 19. We are separated from our parents and this is very difficult. Our father and mother are there. They are in Monrovia. I sent them a message via the Red Cross."

Refugee boy, 14, Gerihun refugee camp

" I am on my own here. I am feeling bad because I do not have my relatives with me. I have no friends here in the camp. I wash clothes, I cut wood, and I farm."
Refugee girl, 26, Gerihun camp.

The combination of family separation, continuous harsh living conditions and the **lack of hope for a better future** accumulates for some into despair. In the words of one refugee:

"Our lives in the camps are traumatic and it adds to the traumas we had in the past."
Refugee teacher, 27, Gerihun refugee camp

Josephine, 26, is a Liberian now living in Gerihun refugee camp in Sierra Leone. MSF talked to her on 9th June 2003.

I come from Bomi Hills. I was living with my family but now we are separated. I was going to school there. I was living happily with my family and my friends. The war came to Bomi Hills on May 2001. There was a serious attack and everyone went to the bush. I was there for three days. Children were dying in the bush. We were hungry and some people were sick. My father died.

Soldiers caught me and my friends but four of us could escape. I was with the soldiers for one night before I could escape. The soldiers were young, around 20 years old. We ran away during a moment of chaos. They were shooting but they did not get us. We ran to the bush. I was there for three days and then I walked with other people to Sinje. We walked for one week and we ate cassava. There was no food and sometimes we slept hungry. We were more than 60 when we arrived in Sinje. We waited for one week and then we came across with ten people. We walked and we had to pay money to the Liberian soldiers. I paid 30 Liberian dollars. If you don't have money they will take your clothes, or anything. If not you don't cross the border.

The Sierra Leonean army on the other side was friendly. They checked our load and checked if we had any arms with us. At first we did not go to the camp - I stayed for two months close to the border.. From the border I came to this camp. I had to work for two months to get money for transport to this camp. I could not come before because I had no money.

Conclusion

The world's attention has been primarily focusing on the latest crisis in Monrovia and the manoeuvring for political power. With this document MSF hopes to broaden understanding of the circumstances faced by ordinary Liberians on a daily basis. Their stories are testimony to the unrelenting human suffering experienced right across the country.

As long as the warring parties fail in their obligation to respect the basic rights of civilians, the hardship of the Liberian population will continue.

As stated in the introduction, the warring parties should:

- Treat the civilian population humanely in all circumstances and to cease indiscriminate killings, sexual violence, extortion and forced recruitment,
- Allow civilians safe access to the basic services and supplies they need for their survival, such as food and medical supplies,
- Allow humanitarian organisations safe access to the civilian population in all parts of Liberia,
- Ensure the right of every Liberian to leave his country.

Governments hosting Liberian refugees must:

- Continue to provide protection and assistance for Liberian refugees, with UNHCR's support,
- Keep their borders open for Liberians who seek safety outside their homeland.

Abraham is 60 years old. MSF met him in August 2002 in Tekoulo transit camp, Guinea

I am a farmer from Kolahun. My story starts two years ago in September 2000 when I had to leave Kolahun with my family after Taylor's troops attacked my village. My family, together with other villagers, lived in the bush for three months. Some people of the village were recruited by Taylor's troops to transport luggage to Monrovia.

In January 2001 the LURD retook Kolahun and Foya. We decided to go back to Kolahun and to reinstall ourselves there. I worked for six months. In June 2001 Taylor attacked Kolahun. Together with my family I fled to Nyewoelehun (a village in the bush) where we stayed for one week. It was the time needed for LURD to recapture Kolahun. We went back to Kolahun after one week and I again worked for another six months.

On the 10th of December 2001 rumours spread that a new attack by Taylor was going to happen very soon. People started to leave again and many went to N'gokohun, another village in the bush. Finally we went there as well and stayed there for four days, the time for Taylor to arrive, attack and set the whole village on fire. There were 14 deaths between the villagers and the displaced. The next day LURD attacked again and this allowed us to return to Kolahun.

On the 19th of December Kolahun was encircled by four groups of Taylor and the fights lasted from 4 o'clock in the night until 8 o'clock in the morning. LURD resisted and pushed Taylor's troops back, who came back the 23rd of December, with the same strategy. LURD resisted until the 25th of December. During this whole period it was impossible for my family to flee the town because the town was encircled by troops. On the 25th of December LURD lacked ammunition and advised the population to escape the city. In order to allow people to leave LURD put an automatic weapon on their vehicle to open a passage for the people. This allowed my family to leave Kolahun and to go to Honiahun. On the 27th of December LURD retook Kolahun, which allowed us to return. The last fights killed many people. More than 500 persons died. On the 29th on December people were recruited by LURD to collect to bodies from the street and to set them on fire. It took two weeks.

In January 2002 a new period restarted in which normal life seemed to have returned. It lasted again for six months. On the 8th of June at two o'clock a rocket exploded in the proximity of Kolahun. Fights took place from two until five in the afternoon. A second rocket fell on the city. Most of the LURD soldiers were not present at that time but left for the neighbouring villages to collect coffee in order to start business. Kolahun was retaken by Taylor and people fled again. I left with my family for Kanela and was three days in the bush without eating anything.

In mid-June I decided with my family to find refuge in Voinjama. In order to reach this place we walked during three nights, resting and hiding during daytime. LURD was in the town. On 28th of June Taylor's troops attacked the city but did not manage to enter. LURD advised people to stay in town. On the 5th of July 2002 Taylor's troops tried again to enter the city but again without success. LURD did not allow people to leave. In order to leave you needed to get a "laisser-passer" and to pay 25.000 Liberian dollars for this.

ANNEX I: Map of Liberia



ANNEX II. MSF in the region.

MSF has been active in West Africa for more than 17 years, supporting local clinics and hospitals and improving access to health care, responding to epidemics such as cholera and yellow fever and assisting vulnerable people, among them the displaced.

As the violence in Liberia escalated and thousands fled in front of the advancing fighting, MSF responded by providing medical services for refugees in neighbouring countries and within camps for IDPs inside Liberia.

MSF in Liberia

MSF has been working in Liberia since 1990. The organization was present during the eight-year civil war in the 1990s providing access to health care for vulnerable populations, working inside Liberia in hospitals and clinics.

Since 1999, when the first attacks of the second Liberian conflict occurred in the Upper Lofa region, MSF continued the existing program and upgraded its assistance by working in camps for "Internally Displaced People" (IDPs) - victims of the war who have fled their homes to other parts of the country.

Monrovia

MSF has been working in Redemption Hospital and in seven health clinics in Monrovia, focusing on the poor areas of town. After the last attack on Monrovia in June 2003, which caused the temporary closure of Redemption Hospital, MSF opened two hospitalisation units in the Mamba Point area. In addition MSF has set up extra cholera treatment units to cope with the most recent cholera outbreak.

MSF has also been working in 3 of the 9 IDP camps just north of Monrovia in Montserrado county. Since people did not receive food since March 2003 due to the lack of security, MSF is focusing on severe malnutrition in these camps.

Bong country

In June 2002, following attacks on Gbarnga in Bong country (central Liberia), MSF started supporting the camps at Maimu. The team ran clinics, organised sanitation, built shelters, provided water and offered health care during childbirth. The camps' population was about 40,000 people.

This area has remained fluid with new camps opening and old ones moving depending on the security situation.

Nimba and Grand Gedeh counties

In November 2002, the crisis in Liberia escalated yet further when a new front opened up in the eastern regions of the country near the Ivory Coast border. In late November and early December nearly seventy-five thousand people sought refuge in Nimba and Grand Gedeh counties in the east of Liberia.

MSF worked in transit camps for IDPS and in Toe Town in Nimba county, Zwedru in Grand Gedeh county and Harper in Maryland county, all close to the Ivory Coast border. The Toe Town camp was attacked by MODEL – a new rebel faction - in February 2003 and had to be evacuated. People who had been sheltering in the camps fled into the bush. Three aid workers from the Norwegian Adventist Development and Relief Agency were killed, all humanitarian agencies withdrew and the whole Grand Gedeh region became cut off from aid.

Zwedru, where MSF built a clinic, set up the water supply and ran measles vaccination campaigns, was attacked at the end of March. The 5,000 who were living in the transit camp (some of them the same people who had escaped Toe Town only a month earlier) fled and MSF has had no news of them since. The MSF team in Zwedru was forced to make a dangerous evacuation over the Ivory Coast border along with members of other humanitarian aid agencies.

The advance of the rebels also brought an end to the work of MSF in Karamblay near the Loguato border crossing. In the transit camp which housed 6,000 people, MSF had set up a field clinic, organised a measles vaccination campaign, trucked in water and built latrines. On the southern stretch of the border between Liberia and Ivory Coast, two mobile teams had been providing health care to twelve locations, primarily for refugees and returnees. In Seclepie, MSF was the leading organisation for health and nutrition.

At present, for reasons of insecurity MSF's activities in Liberia are restricted to Monrovia and immediate surroundings.

MSF's work for Liberian refugees in Sierra Leone, Guinea and Ivory Coast

MSF has also been working in refugee camps in neighbouring Guinea, Ivory Coast and Sierra Leone for Liberians who fled outside the country.

Sierra Leone

MSF is working in refugee camps in the Bo, Pujehun and Kenema districts. Most of these camps originally housed Sierra Leonean people who had fled from their homes during the Sierra Leone civil war (1991 – 2002). Since 2002, refugees from Liberia have been housed in the same camps. MSF is responsible for health in seven camps (Jembe, Bandajuma, Jimmi Bagbo, Gerihun; Gondama; Taiama and Tobanda). Each camp holds between 5,000 and 8,000 people. MSF is also responsible for water and sanitation provision in Jembe camp.

Since February 2002, MSF has been monitoring the refugee situation at the Sierra Leone/Liberia border crossing point at Gendema to assess the possible influx of more Liberian refugees.

MSF is supporting the Zimmi transit centre and three clinics in the area and monitoring the health situation of refugees from Liberia.

Guinea

Much of MSF's work in Guinea has centred on caring for the refugees that have sought shelter there over the years. As fighting intensified in Liberia teams were already in place along the borders and able to provide support in Macenta, N'zerekoré, Gueckedou, Kissidougou Albadaria. MSF is working in Tekoulo transit centre, Boréah, Lene, Nona and Kouankan camps providing medical care and water-sanitation assistance.

Ivory Coast

MSF is working in Tabou camp which hosts refugees who fled Maryland county, after the attacks of spring 2003.