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Chaos in West Africa

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ABIDJAN, Ivory Coast, May 4 — Liberian mercenaries fight alongside Ivory Coast government forces. Guinean soldiers open their barracks for Liberian rebel gun-runners. Veterans of Sierra Leone's insurrection show up to assist rebels in Ivory Coast. Weapons are ferried from Burkina Faso to the Liberian capital, in brazen violation of a United Nations embargo.

This, according to recent reports by United Nations investigators and international advocacy groups, is what the chaotic conflicts of West Africa look like today.

These are not conventional civil wars. Rather, they are part of a lethal, internecine web that has ensnared every country on this suffering patch of the continent, as guns proliferate across the bush, hardened fighters roam in search of work and rebel armies flourish with the succor of neighboring heads of state.

Restoring a measure of normality here is among the toughest challenges facing the United Nations, diplomats and international advocacy groups say. The next test comes on Monday, when the Security Council considers whether to renew sanctions against Liberia.

Liberian officials admit they violate the sanctions. But the issue is whether sanctions against Liberia alone are sufficient, when rebels and their government patrons in the region share responsibility for the mayhem.

The fate of millions of ordinary people who must live in this bedlam is at stake, as well as the manpower and money already invested in the region, from France's deployment of nearly 4,000 soldiers to a former colony, Ivory Coast, to peacekeepers from Britain in a former colony, Sierra Leone. The United States, by contrast, has refrained from intervening directly in Liberia, which was founded by freed American slaves, and has opposed an expanded United Nations role in Ivory Coast.

A report to be released Monday by the United Nations' Expert Panel on Liberia details the ways the government of Charles Taylor and his rebel enemies continue to violate the United Nations arms embargo, through a network of Serbian arms dealers, Chinese timber companies and fake documents. Some of the same companies, the panel says, have delivered weapons to neighboring countries, including Ivory Coast. The panel calls for additional scrutiny of all rebel groups and their government benefactors across the region. "The basis for the imposition of the sanctions against Liberia needs to be reassessed because violence and conflict are spreading across the region and are

generated not only by Liberian forces," the panel concludes. "A comprehensive new approach by the Security Council to the situation in all of West Africa is required."

The British ambassador to the United Nations, Sir Jeremy Greenstock, is scheduled to lead a Security Council Mission to the region in mid-May. Its goal, in part, is to look at the impact of arms trafficking and mercenaries in fueling conflict across the region. The British-based advocacy group Global Witness has proposed including timber in the new Liberia sanctions package. Proceeds from logging, it alleges, have financed other wars in the region.

Sanctions prohibit the Taylor government from selling diamonds and buying weapons and bar top government officials from traveling overseas, on the basis of its support for the rebel army known as the Revolutionary United Front in Sierra Leone, which was known for hacking off its enemies' limbs.

Its two top commanders have been indicted by a United Nations-backed war crimes court. One of them is accused of having aided the Ivory Coast rebels and gone into hiding in Liberia, which Mr. Taylor — himself at risk of prosecution as a war criminal — has vehemently denied.

Liberia says it plays no part in aiding rebels in the lawless west of this country.

With insurgents tightening the noose on the Liberian capital, Monrovia, the Foreign Minister Lewis Brown, said his government had neither means nor will to foment trouble elsewhere. He openly admitted that his government continued to buy guns.

"We are using our money to defend ourselves," he said in a recent interview. "If we get a dime, what do you think we are going to do with it, build toilets on Broad Street?"

On sanctions, he said he hoped for sympathy from Washington. "They clearly have to include other violators," he said.

The Taylor government has found an improbable ally of sorts in the International Crisis Group, a research and advocacy organization based in Brussels that for years pointed to Liberia's destabilizing role. In a report issued last week, it urged the United Nations to investigate other countries in the region and warn their presidents about their potential vulnerability to sanctions and war crimes prosecution if they keep meddling in their neighbors' affairs. "A strategy centered on Liberia alone will not be enough," the group argues in its report. "Rebel groups ally with neighboring heads of state in symbiotic relationships to pursue wars of revenge."

In a sense, the bloodshed has come full circle. The insurrection that Mr. Taylor started from here more than 13 years ago wreaked havoc in Liberia, fostered a war of rape and mutilation in Sierra Leone, and nipped at Guinea's southern heels. Last September, a failed coup dragged Ivory Coast, long an oasis of political stability, into West Africa's vicious cycle. There was little cause for wonder when veterans from the region's wars

landed here and began pulling a new generation of young Africans into their fraternity of killing and banditry.

Government and rebel leaders signed a cease-fire over the weekend, but not without rebel accusations of new attacks by the army.

Even if the cease-fire holds, refugee camps here and in Ghana have become recruiting grounds for new fighters, the United Nations panel says. Hired hands have bragged to researchers with the Crisis Group of 10-year contracts that could take them into Togo next.

Roughly 1,000 former rebels from Sierra Leone prowl West Africa for a paycheck, the panel estimates. Ever-growing numbers of youths from Sierra Leone, Liberia, Guinea and Ivory Coast are now schooled in nothing but the art of destruction.

The panel cites numerous links between government forces in one country and rebel operatives in another. It offers the example of Liberian soldiers and pro-Taylor militias who crossed into western Ivory Coast and came back loaded with cars and cellphones. Ivorian government forces, meanwhile, recruited Liberians from inside refugee camps, the panel reports. The government used them to fight western rebels, the panel reasons, and also "encouraged" a new insurrection in Liberia.