

Liberia signs peace accord to lead country into elections
Edward Harris and Kwasi Kpodo, *Associated Press*, 8/19/03

A peace accord signed by Liberia's government and rebels offered hope of ending 14 years of vicious war and aimed to lead the violence-shattered African nation to elections in two years. Monday's signing of the accord came in a fast-paced week of momentous events in Liberia, beginning with warlord-president Charles Taylor's resignation and Aug. 11 departure from Liberia under pressure from rebels, West African leaders and the United States.

The accord, signed in Accra, Ghana one week after Taylor's flight into exile, ended a three-year insurgency that devastated Liberia, left thousands dead and drove out Taylor. It calls for a two-year transition government meant to lead into elections. The two rebel movements - Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy, and the Movement for Democracy in Liberia - signed, along with representatives of Liberia's post-Taylor government.

"Today is a good day. Today is a happy day. The war is over," Liberians United leader Sekou Conneh declared, exchanging copies of the deal with his rebel and government counterparts, and embracing them. In Monday's peace deal, rebels and government officials alike waive any claim on the top posts in the interim government - yielding control to noncombatants for the first stretch of rebuilding.

Rebels and members of Taylor's ex-government will be allowed lower-ranking positions - seats in Cabinet and the legislature - in the interim government. Moses Blah, Taylor's designated successor, is to resign in October to make way for the power-sharing government. "I want to believe that with the signing of this agreement today, Liberia will never be plunged into another spiral of violence in the quest for political power, or under the false pretense of liberating the people," said retired Nigerian Gen. Abdulsalami Abubakar, chief mediator in the 2 1/2 months of talks.

Peace talks, under way since June 4, were quickly sidelined by fighting that overtook the capital after all sides violated a June 17 cease-fire accord. Rebels on Thursday lifted their siege of Monrovia, allowing vital food and aid to flow. Ghana President John Kufuor was on hand for the agreement, which saw representatives of the United Nations, European Union and African Union sign as witnesses. The United States also has had an influential delegation at the talks. Calm settled into Monrovia as shopkeepers opened for the first time in a month, though many residents and refugees who crowded the capital had little money with which to buy desperately needed food.

Brig. Gen. Festus Okonkwo, leader of a two-week-old West African peace mission, said he expected to have a second full Nigerian battalion on the ground by the end of the week. The first troops from Ghana, Senegal and Mali would join them within the same period. About 150 American forces are on the ground as well in Liberia, a nation founded with U.S. backing by freed American slaves in the 19th century. President Bush said Monday that the Marines have a limited mission and will be withdrawn by Oct. 1.

"Their job is to help secure an airport and a port so food can be off-loaded and the delivery process begun to help people in Monrovia," Bush said in an interview last week with Armed Forces Radio and Television Service in Miramar, Calif., where he was visiting with thousands of Marines, sailors and Coast Guard personnel. A transcript of the interview was released Monday. Liberians and the international community have held out hope that Taylor's departure, and a promised U.N. peace force, will make a difference this time. "Any agreement that sticks is to the benefit of the humanitarian situation, and the people of Liberia," Ross Mountain, the top U.N. humanitarian official in Liberia, said Monday.

Hours before the peace deal, Liberian Defense Minister Daniel Chea accused rebels of new attacks, saying rebels had pushed north Sunday from the former northern Taylor headquarters of Gbarnga. "The fighting is ongoing. We are not going to put up any counteroffensive," Chea said. "For us, the war should be over by now. Our boys have died enough. I think the war needs to come an end." Liberia's capital and countryside has been in ruins since 1996, the end of a devastating 7-year civil war launched by Taylor, then a rebel leader, trained in Libyan guerrilla camps. The civil war killed at least 150,000 Liberians. The conflict, and the years of fighting after, displaced virtually all of Liberia's more than 3 million people, at one time or the other, aid groups estimate. Taylor won the presidency in 1997, elected largely out of fear he would re-ignite the civil war if he lost. The northern-based Liberians United group launched their insurgency in 1999, and were joined late last year by the Movement for Democracy in Liberia, based on the Ivory Coast border.