

# When Intervention Flounders: An Introductory Note on the Political Consequences of Foreign Intervention in Liberia

Baala, Gawuga Thompson\* & Obuah, Emmanuel Ezi

*Department of History and Diplomatic Studies, Faculty of Humanities, University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria*

*\*Corresponding author*

**Abstract:** - Foreign intervention is a foreign policy tool. It is deployed by one state or group of states to halt ongoing crisis or forestall possible outbreak of war for the avoidance of humanitarian crisis. Thus, most interventions launched in Africa in the recent past lacked elements of consent. The ‘international community’ arguably intervened once it could reasonably establish that the rights of citizens may have been violated or the threats to these right imminent. Thus, embattled regimes have been removed in preference for ‘international community’s’ backed opposition governments. The aftermaths of foreign interventions in some African states negatively destroyed any foreseeable roadmap for sustainable peace in the region. Using the realist theory of international politics, the study argued that foreign intervention in Liberia failed to sustain peace in the country in 1997 and 2003 because most states involved pursued their national interests. It fingers the United States, a country with the military and diplomatic capabilities to intervene in Liberia. Based on a survey research design, the study showed the linkage between the pursuit of national interest and failed intervention in Africa. It negatives the outcome of foreign intervention in Liberia. It also identifies some political consequences of foreign intervention in the country and concludes that foreign intervention in Liberia has its own cost. It recommends the construction of local post-intervention peace-building regime to create enduring peace in war ravaged states.

**Keywords:** Foreign Intervention, Humanitarian Intervention, Transitional Justice, Peace-building.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Liberia was greatly helped by international friends and regional allies to overcome its devastating crisis from 1989-2003. In fact, most Liberians admitted the country could not have fixed the problem timeously the way it did but for foreign supports and international involvements in the crisis. Joseph Pratt, a valuable interviewee, put foreign assistance in resolving the Liberian conflict in range given his assessment of how some countries role proved helpful and how other did not (Pratt, 11:01:18). Whatever foreign supports Liberia got during the war drew on her relations with the intervening states. The states too each weighed their actions against their national interests before committing themselves.

Thus, it was not difficult to understand why some close ally including the United States sat on the fence while

giving clandestine supports to their favoured parties in the crisis. Even among states committed to intervention in Liberia, there were conflicting interests from rule of engagement; timeline of operation, groups with whom sympathy lied and the ECOMOG command’s leadership (Vogt, 1992). Part of the reasons adduced for international involvement in the crisis was skewed based on its possible sub-regional and global consequence.

More so, it has been argued how the crisis caught the attention of the international community because of the potential effect of the crisis towards destabilizing the entire sub-region and even beyond and going by the negative effect it was already exerting on their immediate neighbours (Nwolise, 1992).

Looking back on the kind of relations Liberia had with selected states involved and the influence of such relations on the crisis, the study has shown how such support helped or worsened the course of resolving the crisis particularly its political effects.

## II. POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES OF FOREIGN INTERVENTION IN LIBERIA

Foreign intervention in Liberia has its own costs. Some political consequences of foreign intervention in Liberia include regime change, failed institution, internationalization of the conflict and sub-regional peace initiative. Each consequence will be assessed internally and externally where applicable.

Thus, political consequences of foreign intervention in Liberia are construed changes which occurred within the spectrum of decision making during and after a crisis. The political impacts were both positive and negative having a number of internal and external indicators.

### *Regime change*

Regime change has been a reoccurring decimal in Africa’s interventions. Regime change was pursued by some intervening states in Liberia. The United States, Russia, Libya, Cote d’Ivoire, Burkina Faso and Guinea sought an end to unfriendly regimes in preference for a friendly one. At

different times during the Liberian crisis, one or more of the listed states acted to undermine the sovereignty of Liberia by lending open support to rebel groups. For instance, the United States denied Liberia the benefits of the US-Liberian Defence Pact signed in 1959 and rendered false the widely held belief among Liberians that the US would come to their aid in the case of attacks (TRC 2009, p. 110).

Unexpectedly, the United States did not act swiftly on the 'intelligence' at its disposal even with credible evidence by the Liberian Government that insurgency against it was not without external support. Under President Williams Tolbert, officials hinted the US Government in Monrovia before the Rice Riots that Russia was complicit in the eventual riots. Rather than act upon such privileged information, the US felt skeptical. Its officials disagreed with President Tolbert and concluded that the proximate cause of the riots was the "exploitation of an emotional issue, the price of rice, by an opposing group which had nothing to lose by holding an unauthorized demonstration" (TRC 2009, p.111). Even, Tolbert youthful military executioners and successors accomplished a major political feat no one believed they could do on their own bringing down an aged long autocracy with supposed close ties to the United States (TRC 2009, p. 109). In the end, the lesson of forceful removal and imposition of foreign proxies was that, in practice, regime change does not build peace and political stability as shown in Doe and Taylor's transitions in Liberia.

#### *Failed political institutions*

Most states that experience foreign intervention also share common characteristics; being failed states. These indicators include the collapse of state institutions, legitimacy issue/leadership, multiple authorities, widespread insecurity and insurgency. Throughout Liberia's travail, military agencies in the country were bastardized to the point that they shared obligation with insurgent groups. This was also the case with the Government of Liberia (GOL) and warring factions in the country; the NPFL, INPFL, ULIMOs, and LDF in the 1990s and LURD and MODEL in the 2000s enjoyed this privilege. Not only did the GOL signed peace agreements with supposed insurgent groups, on demand, all aspects of the 1986 Constitution of Liberia relating to the composition and functioning of three arms of government were suspended to give way to an extra-constitutional arrangement favoured by the latter (CPA, 2003).

The character and dimension of the Liberian crisis fit the perfect description of a failed state. The conquest and reconquest of territories in Liberia and illegal expropriation of natural resources by armed groups were rife. What more savagery and less value on human lives were required to fit the description of a failed state given the trivial reasons for taking human life:

Many more crossing through check points were killed Spriggs Payne Airfield, Duport Road, Bushrod Island, Soul Clinic Mission, Old Road, Cotton Tree, Kakata, Iron Gate or God

Bless You Gate, University of Liberia Fendell campus, Hende, Bong Mines, Barnesville, etc. They were killed on suspicion of belonging to one ethnic group or another; for being "an enemy"; for looting; for their personal belonging including rice, cassava, snickers, cash, etc.; membership with the NDPL, working for government of Liberia; having a pot belly, smelling or looking like a Krahn, Gio, Mano or Mandingo enemy; unable to speak any indigenous Liberian language and a host of other causes which justified Liberia being labelled a "butcher house" by former Gambia President, Sir Dauda Jawara (TRC 2009, pp. 122-123).

Liberian lives were lost while those who survived physically lost their dignity. For instance, "...In Buchanan and Monrovia, dogs were eating the dead bodies of human being in the streets as men and women on the UL Fendell Campus unashamedly bathed together naked in a dirty little stale water better known as the "Adam and Eve" creek" (TRC 2009, p.123).

Failed institutions exposed neighbouring states to illegal immigrants; this also has some attendant effects. The phenomenal location of Libya existed in Gaddafi's time but border control was tightened while immigrants were clammed down; the present situation of lawlessness in the country has become welcoming to refugees fleeing crisis and economic hardship in their climes from the MENA and other parts of Africa. Libya lately has been in the news for the wrong reason since 2011.

The aforementioned occurred because of the erosion of state control or state failure. Foreign intervention relaxes the normal course of administering the state. Once intervention has occurred, the sovereignty of an affected state is suspended or even breached. Throughout the period of intervention, the structure, authority (legitimate power), law, and political order of states fall apart while balkanization of sovereign territory by warlords into camps were commonplace. For Liberia, it was a situation in which the old order collapsed occasioning a general retreat to ethno-nationalism as the residual and viable form of identity (Oche 2000, pp.79-80). Charles Taylor in the last days of the Doe Government controlled over 90 percent of the country's territory called 'Greater Liberia'. Prince Yomie Johnson INPFL controlled the strategic Free Port in Monrovia. This was replicated toward the end of the Taylor Government where three groups of GOL, LURD and MODEL had equal stake at the Accra Peace Talks leading to the signing of the CPA (2003).

#### *Internationalization of conflict*

Ordinarily, the Liberian crisis was a civil war that should be resolved nationally but the scale of destruction and wastages in human lives and property internationalized the situation. The use of hired foreign mercenaries further underscored the height of callousness that defined the character of the crisis. Early warning signals including cross-border migration, internally displaced persons (IDPs), refugee

crisis and incessant attacks on foreigners and foreign interests in Liberia sucked affected states into the crisis.

The issue of cross-border migration was not really about poor border management. Government complicity was a factor. The Governments of Cote d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso provided safe haven for insurgents and allowed their territories for use as bases for launching guerilla attacks against the GOL. According to the TRC Report (2009, p.117), "Tonia King, son-in-law of former President Tolbert ...provided sanctuary in Ivory Coast for all dissidents following Doe's clamp down and Quiwonkpa's death". The reasons for international involvement have continued to multiply but the effects are twice the latter. Most African conflicts have not been adequately curbed by foreign intervention than the way it facilitated the spread and ignited similar conflicts in neighbouring states in and outside the sub-region. Ekwe-Ekwe (1990, p.133) described neighbours to a crisis state as contiguous states; not only are they seen as external parties in intervention but also as determinants of the extent of intervention in civil wars. The issue of neutrality on the part of most intervening troops and the aloofness of others greatly impaired the peace building process such that trust which is a vital ingredient of any peace building efforts was often shattered.

The West African sub-region not only contributed but suffered accruable conflict negativities. Akpuru-Aja (2014, pp. 330-331), identified the losses on the part of an intervening state (Nigeria) to include dead soldiers brought home and buried without honours and no adequate care for the injured; a debatable estimated cost of operation on Nigeria to the tune of US\$10billion; poor welfare scheme for soldiers on peacekeeping mission which dealt a blow to their morale and professionalism...each personnel was paid as low as US\$150 per month as monthly take home, to mention a few.

Some West African states were known for training and abetting insurgent groups against local authorities in Liberia; they allowed insurgent groups to plan attacks and strikes from their bases in the abetting countries. Such acquiescence or open support to insurgency against another states were at the base of internationalizing of an otherwise localized conflicts and their negative consequences. Nwolise (1992 & 2002, p.57 & p.146 ), position alluded to this that "...some scholars, historians and political commentators may see the breakdown of law and order and the accompanying indiscriminate killing of people including foreigners as the foundational events for the internationalization of the Liberian crisis...the internationalization of the crisis began much earlier with the seeking of external support by the rebel leader, Charles Taylor toward his plans to overthrow President Doe's government.

Libya also trained many of the NPFL officers and men and could have been partly responsible for the dearth of support from the US to Charles Taylor; Libya was seen by the former as a major source of funding for the NPFL and its

insurgency operations (Nwolise 1992, p.57). However, the long term effect has erosion of sub-regional solidarity which hitherto existed between neighbouring African states.

#### *Sub-regional peace initiative*

Foreign intervention in Liberia has further produced sub-regional capacity for peacekeeping, enforcement and post-conflict reconstruction. ECOWAS developed quite a number of peacekeeping initiatives notably ECOMOG and ECOMIL and also contributed troops to UNMIL in Liberia. ECOWAS was formed as an economic union but an eventual realization that peace was a sine qua non for regional economic cooperation informed the signing of two ECOWAS protocols: "...the organization, however, underwent one of its radical legislative measures in 1978 and 1981...the Non-Aggression Treaty and Mutual Assistance on Defence Protocol respectively...pushing for the transition of the organization from purely an economic into a military sub-regional organization" (Ajibewa 1997, p.47).

The Community, from the onset, addressed political issue but the convergence between political and economic matters informed the signing of the two broad protocols. The organization discovered its relevance in peacekeeping in the face of such appalling and denigrating human condition. Having sought to step in, legal barriers stared ECOWAS in the face; there was also legitimacy issue and the legal impediment of "Non-indifference" but both protocols cleared the hurdles. The organization and the protocols provided legitimate forum for the action of the coalition. ECOWAS Heads of State held meetings, formed ECOMOG, held various peace conferences, for ceasefire, and the proceedings with ECOWAS success in establishing an Interim Government in Liberia (Ajibewa, 1997).

### III. CONCLUSION

The facts are there to show that foreign intervention or humanitarian intervention conceived as peace enforcement mechanism has its attendant costs. Politically, the effects of foreign intervention in Liberia were visible because of the realist perception that states unrepentantly pursue their national interests. And though, foreign intervention secures ceasefire and armistice, it leaves the process half-way. Oftentimes, foreign intervention does not end in peace. Where it appeared peace will be achieved in the wake of a ceasefire or armistice, a wearied intervener quickly exiting the process leaves the fragile national government to deal with it. That was the case in 1997 where ECOMOG had supervised a 'special election' in Liberia which produced Mr. Charles Taylor as president. By 1999, Taylor and the ECOMOG commanders were already debating where the authority of each other ends. In 2000, when the LURD emerged, ECOMOG presence in Liberia if it existed at all was rarely felt.

Thus, an abandoned peace-building project has produced politically, regime change, failed political

institutions, internationalization of local conflict and sub-regional peace initiative like ECOMOG and ECOMIL in Africa. Though the latter being a plus to Liberia’s experience with foreign intervention, however, does not take wholly the credit for the enduring peace in the country which is more of construction than enforcement. War ravaged states should thus look beyond foreign intervention and construct post-intervention peace-building regimes where domestic parties to the crisis resolve the causes of conflict.

#### REFERENCES

- [1]. Ajibewa, A.I. (1997). *Ethnic dimension of the Liberian conflict*. In *Nigerian Journal of International Affairs*. Lagos: NIIA
- [2]. Albert, I.O. (2011). *Pinched, ditched or jinxed? The mantra of African solutions to African problems*. An inaugural lecture of University of Ibadan. Nigeria: Ibadan University Press
- [3]. Dennis, A.B.(1999). *Roles of ECOWAS, OAU and UN in restoring peace to Liberia*. In *New Liberia* (Monday July 26, pp. 4-7)
- [4]. Ekwe-Ekwe, H.(1990). *Conflict and intervention in Africa: Nigeria, Angola & Zaire*. London: MacMillan Academic and Professional Ltd
- [5]. Government of Liberia(2003). *Comprehensive Peace Agreement between the Government of Liberia and the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) and the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL) and Political Parties*, Accra, August 18, 2003. United States Institute for Peace www.usip.org (Accessed 10/02/2019)
- [6]. Government of Liberia(2005). *Truth and reconciliation commission (TRC) of Liberia Act (Approved June 10, 2005)*. Monrovia: MFA
- [7]. Government of Liberia(2009). *Truth and reconciliation commission final report (Unedited) volume II: consolidated final report*.
- [8]. James-Allen, P., Weah, A. and Goodfriend, L. (2010). *Beyond the truth and reconciliation commission: Transitional justice option in Liberia*. In *International Centre for Transitional Justice* www.ictj.org (Accessed 30/07/2018)
- [9]. Oche, O.(2000). *Contemporary conflicts in Africa and the role of the OAU and sub- regional organisation in conflict management*. In *Nigerian Journal of International Affairs* (Vol. 26, No. 1), Lagos: NIIA
- [10]. Pugh, M. and Cooper, N. (2004). *War economies in a regional context: challenges of transformation*. USA: Lynne Rienner Publishers
- [11]. Nwolise, O.B.C.(1992). *The internationalization of the Liberian crisis and its effects on West Africa*. In Vogt, M. (ed.). *The Liberian crisis and ECOMOG: A bold attempt at regional peace keeping*. Lagos: Gabumo Publishing Co. Ltd