



# CSIS AFRICA NOTES

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## A Conversation with Liberia's Interim President

*Over the past several years, the CSIS African Studies Program has hosted a series of "conversations" with African heads of state and other senior officials. These two-hour meetings, chaired by Director of African Studies Helen Kitchen, feature brief opening remarks by the visiting leader followed by a lively question-and-answer exchange with a broad spectrum of invited guests from the executive and legislative branches of government, the media, corporations, academia, and other elements of the Washington community.*

*This issue of CSIS Africa Notes shares with our subscribers an October 9, 1991 "conversation" between Dr. Amos C. Sawyer and 96 invited guests. Dr. Sawyer returned to Liberia in 1990 following a period of exile in the United States to serve as head of an "Interim Government of National Unity" pending elections now projected for 1992. He was chosen to fill this transitional role at an extraordinary meeting of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and various Liberian groups convened in Banjul, Gambia in August 1990. (For background, see "Some Key Dates in Liberia's Political History" on page 3.)*

*Dr. Sawyer earned his B.A. in History and Government at the University of Liberia in Monrovia and received his M.A. and Ph.D. in Political Science from Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois. In 1973, he joined the faculty of the University of Liberia as assistant professor (1973-1978) and subsequently associate professor (1978-1984) in the Department of Political Science, and from 1980 to 1984 was concurrently acting director of the University's Institute of Research and dean of the College of Social Sciences and Humanities. He served as chairman of Liberia's National Constitutional Commission from 1981 to 1983 and in 1984 became chairman of the Liberian People's Party. Following the controversial elections conducted by the Doe government in 1985, Dr. Sawyer left Liberia to serve (from 1986 to 1989) as resident scientist for the Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis in the Department of Political Science at Indiana University. From 1988 to 1990 he was executive director of the Association for Constitutional Democracy in Liberia, Washington, D.C.*

*The following is a somewhat abbreviated account of President Sawyer's responses to questions and comments from participants in the discussion following his opening remarks:*

- **Q** [Africa News Service]. One of the things I found impressive in Monrovia a few months back was the rehabilitation effort under way, which at that point was a largely volunteer effort since no one was being paid. I am wondering whether this process of return to normalcy is proceeding and how far you have been able to go. Given the fact that you have an abnormal situation with a divided country, how much have you been able to restore commerce and other forms of daily life and how much progress do you hope that you can make in the months ahead?



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**A.** Our major effort is still focused on the reunification of our country and the search for peace. In the meantime, we have tried to restore the hope of people and their confidence in themselves. We know that our people are ultimately prepared to put the pieces together once again and that the spirit of volunteerism you referred to still exists, and we are heartened by the fact that Liberians are organizing themselves at the community level in trying to rebuild. We have been able to restore some basic services, communications have improved, telephones are working, and international lines and telexes are now operational. We have done some work to restore the water supply beyond emergency capacity of one-third normal capacity. The water system is now up to 70 percent of capacity. We have restored some power, but there is much more to be done to normalize our seriously damaged electric power facilities.

Schools are now operating in shifts in partnership with mission and private facilities, with the first two months devoted to psychological counseling. Health facilities are improving in the Monrovia area, and we now have around 300 beds for hospital care. In this area, we have had help from several international relief organizations and owe much to the courageous efforts of a group of Liberian doctors who never left the country, working throughout the crisis. They are now plugged into the Ministry of Health, which helps them get supplies from abroad. Malnutrition has gone down to under 5 percent; people are more energetic and no longer speaking in a whisper from weakness. We hear reports from behind Mr. Taylor's lines, where there is also progress as a result of efforts of the relief agencies. In sum, except for three areas where malnutrition and cholera remain problems, I think that we are making progress toward recovery.

- **Q** [Catholic Relief Services official]. You mentioned in your introductory remarks that the differences between the anglophone and the francophone blocs within ECOWAS had finally been resolved. Could you elaborate on that point—who gave up what? Second, could you tell us something about the plans of the interim government for reconstruction? It seems to me that you have got a bit of a race against time in the humanitarian area and are handicapped by such matters as the large number of people who are living outside the country, the low level of agricultural production, and the fact that there is no one government whose writ runs across the whole country.

**A.** Let me answer your last question first. As long as the country is divided, there will be problems in getting relief supplies through checkpoints in various parts of the country. We have had one assessment mission by the United Nations and its report has just been published. Reconstruction will require resources and time, and, in the sequence of things, will be the priority of the elected government. The immediate goal is to put society on a democratic footing, on a footing where we hope security and stability can be maintained within the framework of a dynamic democratic process. Elections are important as the ultimate means of ending this phase. So, once that is

done, then the reconstruction phase becomes most important. As for now, we are focusing on facilitating the elections and solving immediate human needs—food, shelter assistance, getting people back to their villages, outfitting them with tools and with seeds. The UN people tell us that we are looking at a bill of some \$65 million for repatriation, resettlement, giving people the wherewithal to put shelters up for themselves. The bigger costs, of course, will come later on.

As far as the anglophone-francophone thing is concerned, this is an area that may be exaggerated. Nigeria has been the country that has provided the largest numbers of troops for the cease-fire. It should not come as a surprise that Nigeria, given its economic capabilities, could do a bit more than other West African countries. We have seen in the past decade Nigeria's increasingly active role in Africa as a whole and in West Africa in particular. Of course, there is a francophone cluster of neighboring states that have maintained a stable relationship with Paris, and one may see some subtle underlying tension or rivalries. But it also could be argued that the role of the Liberian crisis in bringing the francophone countries and the anglophone countries together was an important contribution to the future of the region. I do not think that anybody gave up anything. Liberia certainly has benefited, and the region may be strengthened. And so we will all come out looking much better.

- **Q** [Mobil Corporation official]. As a director of our company in Liberia, I am glad to report that our assets are in pretty good shape. We have a couple of service stations open in Monrovia and are obviously anxious to have stability and prosperity return to your country. I have two questions: First, given the fact that democracy is messy, what makes you think that having free elections

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## Some Key Dates in Liberia's Political History

**1847.** On July 26, the Republic of Liberia is founded by freed American slaves of diverse African origins whose return to the continent had been organized beginning in the 1820s under the protection of the United States and the private sponsorship of an organization known as the American Colonization Society with assistance from six other philanthropic organizations. The Americo-Liberians subsequently organize in a dominant party, the True Whig Party, which governs continuously for more than a century.

**1944+.** Developments in neighboring West African colonies during World War II lead newly elected President William V.S. Tubman to (1) give increased attention to the issue of gradual integration of Liberia's indigenous "tribal people" into a national society, and (2) open up the country to overseas investment and trade aimed at developing the economy beyond subsistence agriculture and rubber production.

**April 1980.** President William R. Tolbert, Jr. and over a score of his associates are killed in an April 12 army coup led by Master Sergeant Samuel Kanyon Doe, a member of the indigenous Krahn ethnic group. Doe becomes chairman of a People's Redemption Council made up of noncommissioned officers and enlisted men. One of the first acts of the new regime is an announcement that Independence Day will henceforth be celebrated on April 12 ("the day the majority of Liberians gained their independence for the first time") instead of July 26.

**December 1981.** Doe announces a target date of April 1985 for a return to constitutional rule.

**1985+.** Following controversial October 1985 multiparty elections involving questionable procedures and significant tension (including an April 1985 attempt to assassinate Doe), the governing process is marked by frequent changes of personnel.

**1989.** Armed insurrection by the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), led by former government official Charles Taylor, begins in the northeastern region of Nimba County on December 24 and develops into a conflict between alliances of various ethnic groups.

**January-August 1990.** As NPFL forces advance toward Monrovia, mediation efforts by the Liberian Council of Churches lead to an unproductive mid-June meeting between government and NPFL representatives in Freetown, Sierra Leone. When the NPFL offensive begins its siege of the capital on July 2, Taylor demands Doe's resignation as a precondition for a cease-fire. On July 19, a breakaway NPFL faction led by Prince Yormie Johnson gains control of parts of Monrovia.

**August 24, 1990.** A five-nation military force of some 5,000 operating under the name ECOMOG (the Economic Community of West African States Cease-fire Monitoring Group) arrives by sea in Monrovia from Sierra Leone to undertake establishment of a cease-fire in the city and evacuate some 7,000 West African nationals. The ECOMOG force is comprised of battalions from Nigeria (2), Ghana, Sierra Leone, and Guinea and a company-size unit from Gambia.

**August 27-September 2, 1990.** A meeting of Liberian political parties and interest groups (which Taylor does not attend) is convened in Banjul, Gambia under ECOWAS auspices. Senior-level representatives of most of the 16 ECOWAS member-states (Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Togo) take part. The conference elects an interim government headed by Dr. Amos Sawyer as president to administer Liberia and hold general elections in October 1991 (subsequently rescheduled to 1992). Under the terms of the ECOWAS peace plan, the interim president and vice president are not eligible to run for office in the elections.

**September 9-10, 1990.** On September 9, Doe is wounded and captured when he leaves the fortified executive mansion for the first time in several months to meet with the commander of the

peacekeeping force at ECOMOG headquarters in Monrovia.

According to BBC reports, Prince Johnson arrives unexpectedly with a heavily armed force that kills some 60 of Doe's entourage before carrying the wounded president off "to put on trial." After being tortured, Doe is killed on September 10.

**November 21, 1990.** Sawyer arrives in Monrovia. On the following day he is inaugurated as interim president.

**November 27-28, 1990.** At an extraordinary summit of ECOWAS heads of state in Bamako, Mali, leaders of the three main armed factions (Taylor's NPFL, Prince Johnson's Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia [INPFL], and remnants of Doe's Armed Forces of Liberia) join the interim government in endorsing the ECOWAS peace plan and sign a cease-fire declaration. Some fighting continues, but the worst of the civil war now appears to be past. The NPFL holds 90 percent or more of the country. The Sawyer administration governs Monrovia but has no army of its own.

**December 20-22, 1990.** At a meeting in Banjul, Gambia, the three military factions issue a joint statement announcing that an "All Liberia Conference" will be held in the near future to broaden the composition of the interim government.

**March 1991.** The All Liberia Conference opens in Monrovia on March 15. An NPFL delegation (not including Taylor) arrives, but walks out on March 28, charging that the conference is ignoring Taylor's call for the establishment of a three-person ruling council (Taylor, Sawyer, and a neutral figure) to govern until elections can be held. The delegation returns two days later, but refuses to take part in the deliberations.

**April 19-20, 1991.** The All Liberia Conference elects Sawyer as president of an Interim Government of National Unity (IGNU). The conference establishes two vice presidential positions—one for each rebel group. Taylor refuses to name a vice president or recognize the legitimacy of the IGNU. Prince Johnson names Peter Naigow to the INPFL vice-presidential slot.

**April 29, 1991.** Sawyer swears in the new Interim Legislative Assembly.

**June 3, 1991.** Sawyer is seated as Liberia's representative at the Organization of African Unity's annual Assembly of Heads of State in Abuja, Nigeria.

**July 1991.** According to the U.S. Department of State's Bureau for Refugee Programs, most of the more than 750,000 Liberians (out of an estimated total population of 2.5 million) who fled the civil war since 1989 are still in neighboring ECOWAS countries—an estimated 227,500 in Côte d'Ivoire, 342,000 in Guinea, 10,000 in Sierra Leone, 6,000 in Ghana, and smaller numbers in Nigeria, Gambia, and Mali.

**August 1991.** Naigow and other senior INPFL members withdraw from the interim government following the latter's condemnation of summary executions carried out by the INPFL.

**September 10, 1991.** Senegal's President Abdou Diouf, in Washington on a state visit, informs President Bush that his government has undertaken to contribute up to three battalions of troops to the ECOMOG mission as part of an effort to accommodate pressure from Taylor's NPFL for a more balanced anglophone-francophone monitoring force. The first contingent of Senegalese troops arrives on October 26.

**Mid-October 1991.** Although the cease-fire is generally being respected, economic and governance links between Monrovia and the hinterland remain minimal. A growing number of exiled Liberians and U.S. analysts with on-the-ground experience are counseling that realization of genuine nationhood and the significant economic potential inherent in Liberia's coastal location, rubber, timber, coffee, minerals, and other resources can only be achieved by a government of new-generation apolitical technocrats.

*J. Coleman Kitchen*



is going to solve the problems in Liberia? In all due respect, with the exception of Namibia, free elections are not the trend in Africa. Second, to bring democracy, you have to bring the economic climate forward quickly, in parallel, if not sooner. What steps are being taken in that regard?

**A.** We are happy that more than relief teams are engaged in Liberia and pleased to report that gasoline prices are as competitive as anywhere else on Africa's west coast. I agree that democracy is a messy business and that elections could well breed controversies, but let us look at some of the alternatives. We have tried quite a number of them and they have only resulted in greater chaos. The idea is not necessarily to institutionalize a democratic system that is a replica of anybody else's, but to build on our own methods and ways in utilizing the election process to help us negotiate the terms and conditions of governance for our pluralistic society. I cannot think of a way to do this satisfactorily other than going through processes in which parties, interest groups, the act of just voting itself represent the kinds of accommodations that people will have to make, based on their own realities. We are groping for direction and this alternative, which we see flourishing elsewhere, is the most viable alternative that we have been able to come upon. Our agenda includes empowering such social, economic, and political institutions as the press and trade unions to become stronger and more involved in national life, raising questions and issues and feeling that they have a stake in the nation's stability and the course of events. It is a difficult process and one has to muddle through.

In response to your second question, we agree that the interim government must put down the markers that will enable an elected government to stimulate economic development. Some priorities should be to streamline the public sector, develop a code of conduct and ethics for public officials, make financial and other transactions more predictable, streamline economic management, and build efficiency. Some of these measures we are trying to take now, so that they can pay off when an elected government can move in. Also down the road is the need to renew Liberia's creditability where international agencies, especially international financial institutions, are concerned. We have been making token payments to show that we really mean business and that Liberia wants to go in the right direction. It is, as you say, these kinds of measures that should go parallel with the political—the democratic—processes, so that we can get somewhere at the end of the day.

• **Q** [*West Africa* magazine (London)]. As you have explained, the ECOWAS peace plan as originally formulated specified that the interim president and vice president cannot run in the ensuing elections. Do you think that subsequent negotiations may have changed the earlier concepts of the peace plan, and, if so, would you consider running for president? As I recall, one of the questions raised was that you have been an academic for most of your life and have never held an elected post. Now that you have been president for almost a year,

could you give us a personal assessment of what being president has been like for you?

**A.** Well, it has been a lot of headaches. There has been the problem of holding together a coalition of powerful constituencies that have not always cooperated. It has been challenging, because what is at stake is not just a game but weaving together a delicate fabric that will get our country on the road not only to peace but to democratic development. The peace plan precludes the interim president from running in the election. I knew that before I accepted the position and I have no intention of running for president. As soon as we can get through this interim period, I want to get back to my real work in the university, do some research, and perhaps write about some of these experiences.

• **Q** [Participant from American University]. Looking at the situation realistically and given the considerable nuisance value of Mr. Taylor's forces because of their control of a good portion of the country, how would you assess realistically the chances of the ongoing democratization process, leading up to the elections within six to nine months, being able to run its full course without any hateful hindrance from these other forces? I also would like to know how you see the long-term future of the Liberian society in terms of political and economic developments.

**A.** I wouldn't refer to Mr. Taylor's role and position as having only a "nuisance value." I think initially Mr. Taylor's efforts were hailed by Liberians across the spectrum, because many people had reached the conclusion that the old regime was not only out of touch and insensitive to the people's wishes, but was also prepared to use any means necessary, no matter how harsh, to maintain itself in power. The problem is that it became evident over time that the course unleashed seemed to create a situation where the solution would have not been terribly different from the problem. Two important facts today are that there is a consolidated position among the West African states and the Liberian people do not want to fight anymore. There has been a mass exodus of people from behind Mr. Taylor's lines. . . . We think that, if you put all of these factors together, this period of strife will help us to become a bit more self-reliant, to be sensitive one to the other, and to have a better appreciation for our role as a West African country and our relationship with our neighbors. We have to look, especially in view of the decline of the Cold War, toward our subregion to find our bearings. We have to encourage cooperative subregional approaches to economic problems.

• **Q** [AID desk officer for Nigeria and Liberia]. It gives me a little heartburn, and I am sure that it must give you a big heartburn, to contemplate a costly repatriation program. To what extent, and in what circumstances, might it be possible for Liberians to repatriate themselves? And do you think it might be possible to bear down harder now, before the elections, in the areas



of economic policies, commercial codes, and the whole range of problems that were clearly identified throughout the 1980s but were left hanging?

**A.** You have made a very good point. Let me start in with the question of repatriation. The repatriation package worked out by the interim government in collaboration with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees was not only designed to bring people home but was part of a reconstruction program that takes into account not only the physical movement of people but also assisting them in restarting the agricultural, craft, or other economic activity in which they had been engaged. Another priority, given the vast devastation of shelter and other physical facilities, is to get them rebuilding on their own. This involves giving people access to tools and seeds and helping them to acquire some of the materials necessary for reconstruction. This kind of package, if left to a contractor, would cost much, much more.

Another point to be emphasized is that we intend to approach repatriation as one of those areas in which we can envisage a collaborative effort with [Mr. Taylor's] National Patriotic Front—just as we have quite recently worked together on the formation of an elections commission. . . . Some other priorities of the interim government include putting our business codes in order and trying to reduce the loopholes for graft and corruption in public service management.

• **Q.** Could you tell us what sort of assistance you are receiving from the United States at this time?

**A.** We are seeing considerable improvement in the United States involvement. We have seen in the last few months a clear and unequivocal endorsement of the ECOWAS peace plan, backed up by an initial contribution of \$3.75 million to the peacekeeping effort. We have recently learned that the United States may make another contribution of roughly the same size. We are also urging that Washington encourage European countries that have been involved in the subregion, such as Britain and France, to make a contribution to the peacekeeping efforts, which are placing a heavy burden on our West African neighbors. We are discussing assistance for the electoral process with former President Carter's International Negotiation Network, the National Endowment for Democracy, and other groups that have some experience in helping to set up and monitor elections. We are pleased with the response both from Capitol Hill and the State Department, and we would like to see U.S. involvement grow.

• **Q** [Joseph A. Davies, senior NPFL representative in the United States]. We thank CSIS for extending us the invitation to participate in this meeting with Mr. Sawyer and we hope that the Center will extend an invitation at some future date to the National Patriotic Front of Liberia to present our case. We take the view that there are three sides to a story—the truth, your side, and my side. . . . Mr. Sawyer, how can you sit here as head of an interim government in Monrovia, comprising a very

small territory, and make all of these elaborate projections and statements regarding the entire Republic of Liberia, when in fact 95 percent of the Republic is controlled by another sphere?

**A.** Well, you know, one can be standing on a space that is perhaps the circumference of this water glass in front of me and make statements for peace and democratic elections. Even if I had just enough space to put one toe down, I would continue to speak for peace through democratic elections. If that is offensive, I think the problem is with those who are offended. Our people are all weary, especially those who are there on the ground—who have a problem finding food, who have been running from bullets here and there, whose perspective is that this war has not brought any victor. I do not want to get into an argument as to who is legitimate or who is not legitimate. It is true that the Patriotic Front has 95 percent of the country under arms, but that is not the way that I think a country ought to be run. I do not think that Liberians want a country that is a police state, where people are held behind checkpoints, and over 90 percent of the land does not contain any more than 30 percent or so of the people.

The Liberian people are showing where they are headed and where they feel safe and where they assess their positions of legitimacy. They are not running to Gbarnga [the location of Mr. Taylor's headquarters]; they are running to Monrovia. When they leave Gbarnga, because their crops have been pillaged and plundered, they cross over into Sierra Leone or into Guinea and work their way into Conakry or into Freetown. And if they get homesick enough to want to take a boat, it is not to go to Gbarnga but to come to Monrovia. If we get into the game of numbers, unless holding 95 percent of the land translates into concern and governance of people, then I have a problem with an analysis that ignores the wishes of the people, the well-being of the people, and boasts only of keeping people behind barricades and under conditions that look like duress.

That is not where we are now, Mr. Davies. Those of us who work on this problem daily have gone beyond the games of power, beyond the stage where there were efforts to reduce the Liberian problem, as tragic as it is, to a personality conflict. Mr. Taylor says he wants to be president. I do not want to be president. I want elections. I want the Liberian people to have options, to choose and to begin to rebuild their lives. I have no personal problems with Mr. Taylor. We would like the NPFL and whomever else to get the attitude of those people from Gbarnga who come to Monrovia, live in a villa at the OAU conference center, villas for which rental fees are paid by the interim government, and work with us in the effort to find a solution. There has been nothing that I have said here or in any other forum that emphasizes division. I am trying to show where we are trying to make progress and to encourage Mr. Taylor and others to join with us in focusing on issues such as money for elections, the repatriation of refugees, and the end of war.

