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Liberia: Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD)

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This briefing paper is compiled from research carried out as the result of two field trips to Liberian territory under the control or influence of Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy, known as LURD. The first trip was completed in the period 1 June to 1 August 2002, and the second took place throughout October 2002. Additional information has been collected from visits to Guinea Conakry (henceforth Guinea) in the same period, and subsequent and prior communication with sources in the West African region. The purpose of these trips was to gather professional audio-visual material for international television broadcast. While much of the material is supported by archive videotape and recorded interviews, the nature of the conflict in Liberia and the personnel involved means that a substantial amount of this information is primarily anecdotal, derived from informal conversations and hitherto unrecorded observations. No attempt has been made to incorporate previous research and opinion about LURD in this paper, relying as it does solely on my own personal reflections and observations.

Who are LURD?

LURD are an irregular military and political organization based primarily in northern Liberia, with a strong presence in Guinea and representatives in Sierra Leone. Their stated objective is the removal from political office of the current Liberian president, Charles Taylor.

According to senior LURD military personnel, the movement was born in July 1999 in Freetown after a series of meetings between groups of Liberian exiles in Sierra Leone and Guinea. The name, Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy, was reportedly coined by LURD's current Senior Military Adviser (SMA), Gen. Joe Wylie, who is now based mainly in the United States.

LURD was formed by Liberian exiles in response to feelings of frustration and perceived exclusion from the implementation of the ECOMOG-sponsored 1997 Abuja Peace Accords that ended Liberia's 1989–97 civil war, initiated by Charles Taylor's bid to overthrow the then president, Samuel Doe.

Initially, LURD consisted of mainly disenchanted Mandingos and Krahns, ethnic groups from the north of Liberia that had long been opposed to Taylor and had fought him during the civil war. The dominance of these two tribes persists, though not to the exclusion of all others, owing to the fact that LURD's military hierarchy was, and still is, dominated by ex-combatants from Charles Taylor's old adversaries, the United Liberation Movement of Liberia for Democracy, or ULIMO (itself comprised almost uniquely of Mandingos and Krahns). The fact that the Mandingo tribe are predominantly Muslim and the Krahns are mainly Christian does not in itself influence or affect operational cohesion.

Splitting into two rival factions in 1993, ULIMO and Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) dominated the fighting that plagued Liberia in the mid-1990s. LURD's creation can be seen in essence as a reunification of the two former ULIMO factions, ULIMO-K, formerly led by Alhaji Kromah, and ULIMO-J, previously commanded by Roosevelt Johnson. ULIMO formally ceased to exist following the 1997 disarmament programme resulting from the Abuja Accords.

Withdrawing *en masse* from Liberia's political and military structures, ULIMO's fighters and political cadres claimed harassment, betrayal and assassination at the hands of Charles Taylor's NPFL forces. Citing evidence of a 'witch-hunt' against them, and consequently a breach of the Abuja Peace Accords that were supposed to incorporate their faction into the re-formed Liberian military, ULIMO personnel fled to neighbouring Guinea

(with whose population they shared ethnic Mandingo connections) and Sierra Leone. The death under suspicious circumstances of former ULIMO-J Brig. Gen. Mana Zeki greatly exacerbated this loss of trust in the Abuja Accords

The formation of LURD, however, embodied the important (at least theoretical) development that no former warlord from the previous civil war would be allowed membership, and that all the sixteen tribes of Liberia would actively be encouraged to join, thereby ending the dominance of the Mandingos and Krahns who are widely distrusted by many of the Southern tribes, and especially by the citizens of Monrovia. Although Alhaji Kromah has been accused by President Taylor of involvement with LURD, there is no direct evidence that this is the case in the field. However, at least one close family member of Kromah is currently serving as a colonel in the LURD forces.

Currently, LURD have within their organization a preponderance of former ULIMO fighters and representatives of other civil war-derived factions such as the Independent Patriotic Front (IPF) and even Taylor's own NPFL. There are also a number of former soldiers from the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL), itself effectively a separate faction in the initial civil war. A small number - probably around two to three hundred - of Sierra Leonian troops are also fighting for LURD: a mixed bag of Kamajors and former Civil Defence Force (CDF) irregulars can be found alongside a much smaller contingent of former Revolutionary United Front (RUF) fighters and even the remnants of the infamous West Side Boys (these last I discovered resting in the town of Gainkpai, Lofa County, after their withdrawal from Lofa Bridge in July 2002).

Three years after the organization was founded, a delicate balancing act continues: many of LURD's senior commanders, such as their deputy Chief of Staff Seeya Sheriff, are former ULIMO-K fighters, while their (now retired) Chief of Staff, Prince Seo, was a senior ULIMO-J commander. Initially, the Chief of Staff's position was effectively reserved only for former J faction combatants, formalizing the idea of balance and unity in the organization with predetermined field appointments.

Funding of LURD is mysterious and opaque. Senior LURD political figures claim that the organization is entirely financed by exiled Liberians, mainly living in the United States.

Political leadership, aims and objectives

Juggling the plethora of egos and ambitions that constitutes LURD is their National Chairman and Commander in Chief, Sekou Damate Conneh Junior, a 42-year-old businessman from Bong County, Liberia.

Formerly a civil servant in the Liberian Ministry of Finance, Conneh, an ethnic Mandingo, was elected to his position by LURD's National Executive Council (see below) in December 2001. Conneh is based in the LURD military headquarters in Voinjama, northeastern Liberia, and during times of instability or diplomatic activity in the Guinean town of Macenta.

His predecessor, Mohammed S K Jumandy, was elected chairman in 1999, on the strength of promises he made pledging to finance LURD with US\$1 million. Unable to fulfil this commitment, he was removed from office, and no longer plays any significant role in the organization.

Conneh's appointment was intended to bring impartiality, dynamism and international recognition to LURD. His lack of direct involvement in the pre-1997 war was thought to augur impartiality, enabling him to mediate between the ULIMO factions, while his Mandingo ethnicity would ensure the respect of the bulk of LURD personnel. Central to Conneh's election as National Chairman is the role played by his wife, Ayesha.

Ayesha Conneh, formerly married to Sekou Conneh's now deceased brother, became his wife according to west African traditions of marriage. A Guinean citizen, formerly a displaced person and one-time market trader, she has risen to pre-eminence in Guinea as the principal spiritual adviser to Lasana Conte, the president of Guinea. It was this direct and influential access that assured, and assures, her husband of his position. Based permanently in Conakry, the capital of Guinea, Ayesha Conneh is at the nucleus of LURD's headquarters there, effectively controlling external access to the organization.

Conflict between LURD's political representatives in Conakry and their military command in Liberia is a source of considerable mistrust and instability within the organization. All levels of LURD command personnel actively involved in frontline duties in Liberia either openly or discreetly criticize their compatriots in Conakry, correctly suspecting them of financial and diplomatic intrigue. Many senior military figures openly advocate a full-scale relocation of all LURD personnel to Liberia to end such divisions.

Conneh's mandate is both political and military in nature. Aligned closely to LURD's military forces on the ground, he takes his position of Commander in Chief exceptionally seriously, often to the dismay of émigré politicians based in Conakry. Whether he is espousing the primacy of one strategy over another, or lamenting the logistical problems that beset entire sections of the front, a conversation with Sekou Conneh is often more military discourse than political polemic.

Politically speaking, Sekou Conneh appears to be neither sophisticated nor overly intellectual. LURD are not in any sense characterized by political or ideological polemic or grandiose intentions. Conneh's political position, and that of LURD in general, is limited and succinct: Charles Taylor must be removed from power. This is the linchpin of the rebels' political programme: whether by force or of his own volition, Taylor must stand down.

Until this happened, Conneh stated repeatedly and emphatically, there would be no negotiation or compromise with Taylor whatsoever. Although he signalled his willingness to negotiate and cooperate with church-based non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Liberia and the wider region, as well as the United Nations, Liberian opposition parties and even members of the Liberian government, the precondition for any ceasefire or direct political engagement with the president remained unwavering: Taylor must first leave office.

Military gains by LURD in February 2003 appear to have modified this position to the extent that contact with Liberian government officials is no longer explicitly contingent on President Taylor's resignation. In practice, however, LURD's position remains essentially unchanged: many in the organization's leadership are now convinced that a rebel victory is inevitable, and that as such Taylor's removal is a foregone conclusion.

LURD initially seemed unwilling to contemplate meaningful negotiations with either ECOWAS or ECOMOG, which they claim are dominated and unduly influenced by Nigeria, a country they suspect of illegally supplying weapons to Charles Taylor's regime. However, as their military position strengthens throughout February 2003, this unwillingness has given way to inevitable *realpolitik*. Although negotiations with ECOWAS have been largely conducted through church-based intermediaries, LURD for the most part have seized upon regional talks as a means of helping to schedule fighting to their advantage, as well as making exploratory contacts with Liberian government officials. Their disapprobation of ECOMOG apparently remains intact.

LURD's attitude to the Liberian national presidential elections planned for 2003 is singular and specific: they will not happen. Not only does Conneh refuse to consider participating in such a ballot, LURD claim that President Taylor has already rigged the results nine months in advance. A ballot stage-managed by Charles Taylor, they claim, could not represent the true opinions of Liberia's citizens and should consequently be ignored. Given the fact that LURD rebels are currently surrounding Monrovia, and now directly control or influence more territory than at any time in their history, it would be difficult indeed to see how elections could proceed as planned by the Liberian government.

In the event of Taylor's removal from power, LURD

seem confused as to his possible future. Although it is widely (and probably correctly) assumed that he would flee into exile to Burkina Faso, Libya or Taiwan, the prospect of capturing Taylor alive leaves unanswered questions. Gen. Joe Wylie, LURD's SMA, claims that Taylor would be 'brought to justice', and handed over to the international community for trial. Other LURD personnel seem to think a local Liberian trial would be more appropriate. Sheriff Abraham, Press Secretary to Sekou Conneh, even suggested that Taylor might be allowed to re-enter politics in Liberia after a LURD victory, in the spirit of democracy. However, it seems that, if Taylor were captured, his potential fate is best described by Lt. Gen. Prince Seo, (former) LURD Chief of Staff, who announced that he would do to Taylor what Taylor had done to his troops. In this case, Charles Taylor would not be the first Liberian president to experience summary execution at the hands of his

If Taylor is removed, Conneh and LURD claim they will cease fighting and help the international community to oversee free and fair elections. Exactly how elections would take place is unclear. The official LURD position is that a non-elected interim government (comprised of LURD, current opposition parties and certain members of Charles Taylor's government) would oversee a transitional phase of political authority in conjunction with an international stabilization force, preferably provided by the United Nations. LURD would continue fighting in the country, it is claimed, only to eliminate pockets of resistance, especially RUF mercenaries and renegade army units. After any such resistance was eradicated, LURD would participate fully in a national disarmament programme, incorporating the bulk of their forces into a reconstituted Liberian army.

Following this interim phase, LURD claim that they would seek fully free and fair democratic elections, which would result in their underlying aim of achieving a government fully representing Liberia's diverse 'indigenous' tribal heritage. This, it is hoped, would emasculate the Kongo people, or the so-called Americo-Liberians, a social and political elite that has dominated Liberian politics since the country was first settled by former slaves from the United States in 1822.

Senior LURD military commanders, however, often express opinions widely divergent from this scenario. Deputy Chief of Staff Seeya Sheriff maintained that in the event of a LURD victory a 'military junta' would be established, and that there would be no elections, democratic or otherwise. Although he later went on to say that ultimately elections would have to be held, short-term military strategy and the mantra that 'Taylor must go' are clearly more important in the minds of the men who are likely to effect such a victory, rather than the slick political statements

espoused by politicians far from the front line.

LURD's National Chairman, Sekou Conneh, who speaks openly about himself and fairly representatively for LURD in general, claims that he and his organization will only take executive power if the Liberian people choose them to do so. Officially, Conneh himself has no confessed personal political ambition, representing himself as a figurehead, not a leader.

Many senior LURD representatives evidently see Conneh very much as a transitional leader to take them to victory in Monrovia, and who should then stand down – with a new leader being selected by the National Executive. Several LURD personnel have stated repeatedly that Conneh does not have the authority to make major decisions, and that the National Executive Council (NEC) – and especially its representatives in the United States – are the true power behind the throne.

Conneh's position has shifted subtly in this regard. Realizing his own limitations as a stand-alone player in the Liberian political field, and his vulnerability with respect to his own armed forces should he become isolated from them, Conneh has sought to strengthen his military credentials by taking direct control of the LURD army, and positioning himself close to those commanders who are most likely to facilitate victory. It seems to be very much the case that with the widespread respect of the LURD army, Conneh in fact is properly in charge of the organization, and can disregard certain elements of internal criticism. Significantly, however, not one Liberian citizen to whom I spoke in the villages of Bong and Lofa Counties could name Conneh as the National Chairman, or had ever heard of him.

Medical facilities, material circumstances, NGOs and human rights

Liberia is disintegrating rapidly. In LURD-held areas there are few viable roads, no electricity, no running water, and no proper medical facilities. Over 20% of the population are displaced or live in refugee camps. The hospitals and clinics of Zorzor, Voinjama, Bopolu and Fassama have been rendered completely useless, or destroyed. In Zorzor, civilians with multiple gunshot wounds are treated with paracetamol by sympathetic though untrained LURD medics. Antibiotics, drips and specialized medicines for children and the elderly are scarce to non-existent. The LURD's only functioning school, in Voinjama, has upwards of 300 pupils, many of whom show signs of malnutrition and associated illnesses.

Almost no houses at all have escaped either this war

or the previous one. With the exception of a few primitive village dwellings, I saw only perhaps a dozen buildings that were not either partially or completely destroyed. Owing to the fighting in LURD-controlled territory there has been no systematic planting of the staple rice crop in large swathes of Liberia. Many people, such as Tetema Howard, a 48-year-old mother of ten in the village of Garbi near Fassama, are now surviving on the remnants of the rice crop from 2000. This situation has been compounded by an inability to travel freely to areas with more food available, or to market areas, which are often located across front lines or national borders. The shortage of food has now reached crisis point in some areas, including Voinjama, with starvation now possible and in certain areas probable. Although foodstuffs naturally available in the Liberian forest will prevent famine as such, widespread deprivation is the common denominator for Liberia's much put-upon civilian population.

All sections of the LURD civil and military command enthusiastically embrace the idea of international humanitarian NGOs deploying in their controlled areas, specifically United Nations agencies and Médecins Sans Frontières. Although there is a genuine desire on LURD's behalf to ameliorate the condition of the civilian population under their suzerainty, NGO deployment would be used to their specific military advantage. A better-fed population with access to medical supplies would greatly improve LURD's standing in civilian estimations, improving local support and military conscription. Although LURD claims that the security of NGO personnel could be guaranteed by their forces, that is not the case. Even relatively secure areas under LURD control are subject to random and surprise attacks by government forces inserted by helicopter or taking advantage of Liberia's dense vegetation, which is difficult to patrol. LURD do not seem to appreciate that episodes such as the abduction of five Liberian UNHCR/Merci nurses and their ambulance from Sinje in June 2002 do not create an environment conducive to greater NGO involvement.

Food shortages account for the greatest amount of friction between LURD and the local population in their controlled areas, as LURD commanders requisition food for their growing army. Several villagers complained that what little they had to eat was routinely appropriated by rebel troops. Rebecca Koli, a farmer in the town of Fassama, complained openly that she had no food to eat after LURD soldiers had occupied the town and commandeered her supplies.

The worst point of contention between civilians and LURD is that of porterage. During fighting in Bomi Hills in June and July 2002, for example, every round of ammunition expended on the front line had to be hand carried by LURD troops and civilian porters

through dense and unforgiving forests for over 200km. The porters, exhausted and frightened, were initially paid for their services, in either salt or rice, and volunteered for the task. As civilians became unwilling to carry more *materiél* forward, some were pressed into service that a senior LURD spokesman described to me as 'slavery'. The threat of a breakdown in civil relations has reduced the use of enforced porterage. After the temporary loss of Bopolu in July 2002, many civilians volunteered to carry ammunition for LURD in a (successful) bid to retake the town as reports of systematic human rights abuses by the government army filtered through to them.

Generally, LURD seem to enjoy a high degree of cooperation and a reasonably strong degree of support from the civilian population. The much-publicized blind community in Tubmanburg, for example, were well treated by LURD, their only casualty resulting from indiscriminate government fire. Over 400 civilians voluntarily followed LURD forces retreating from Tubmanburg in July 2002 fearing government reprisals. Villagers in Bella Mballona, south of Bopolu, described their readiness to accept LURD soldiers in their village after government troops entered it in January 2002 and partially razed it.

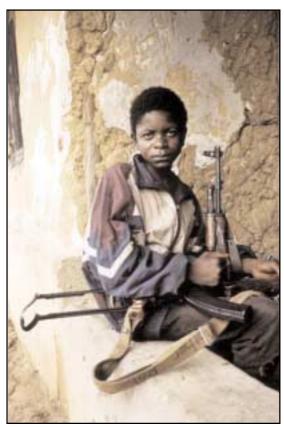
LURD commanders seem to take human rights abuses seriously and act upon their breach. For example, in July 2002, a young LURD fighter accused of killing a village elder near Bopolu was arrested and incarcerated by his commander, and later faced a field tribunal.

A more disturbing recent development in Voinjama (which, however, does not appear to be widespread) has seen a LURD colonel placed in command of what is, to all intents and purposes, an execution squad. As of October 2002, one public execution had taken place for certain, though on what grounds was unclear.

Funding, commercial logging and diamonds

Funding of LURD is obscure. The organization claims that the majority of its revenue is derived from Liberians in exile in the United States; the identities of these donors have not been revealed.

LURD claim to be opposed to President Taylor's commercial logging and diamond extraction programmes, claiming that they are used to finance illegal arms transactions. However, LURD claim that they will honour all legally signed contracts with the Liberian government if they take power. They do not appear to be physically involved in commercial logging, and have extensively disrupted or halted government concerns across their controlled area, specifically in the southwest.



Lurd Member, 2002

LURD do not yet appear to be financing their organization with illegal diamond sales. Apart from the apparent sense of moral disapprobation among certain commanders, with the fear that mining will 'lose them the moral high ground' vis-à-vis President Taylor, LURD forces, importantly, lost control the diamond-rich area of Lofa Bridge in Bomi Hills in July 2002. It has recently been reoccupied by LURD troops, though in the current climate it seems unlikely that any concerted effort will be made to exploit its resources. During LURD's initial occupation of this area, individual commanders and fighters reportedly sold stones on a personal basis, a practice which led to one colonel being ambushed by his own troops. Indeed, it is this fear that diamond wealth will split the organization with financial jealousy that has so far prevented any concerted effort to exploit mineral resources. Significantly, LURD lack the necessary professional equipment to exploit Liberia's mineral reserves: nearly all heavy industrial excavation equipment belonging to government and private mining concerns in rebel-controlled areas was destroyed or rendered useless in mid-2002.

LURD's eventual systematic exploitation of diamonds, gold and lumber cannot be dismissed, however. With a stronger command structure to prevent internecine fighting and the necessary equipment in place, mining and logging would provide LURD with vital structural investment, and it seems unlikely that they would decline to exploit this whether or not they were installed in Monrovia.

Strategic position and territorial gains

LURD first launched military operations in Liberia in mid-2000 from across the Guinea border. A group of around 70 fighters attacked and finally successfully occupied the northern city of Voinjama, which has remained their headquarters to the present. There have been no major battles over Voinjama since late 2001, with the last minor skirmish there fought in October 2002.

The extent of LURD's territorial acquisitions is in an almost constant state of flux. In December 2002, LURD controlled most of Lofa County and parts of neighbouring districts, in total around 30% of Liberia. LURD forces occupied Liberia from Voinjama and Zorzor and the Guinea border area south to Saint Paul's Bridge, southwest to the town of Bopolu, and east along the Sierra Leone border to the outskirts of Foya (including the town of Kolahun, recaptured in November 2002). Foya, a major strategic objective for LURD, passed in and out of their control for the last year. Foya was briefly retaken in November 2002, and then reoccupied by government troops supported by RUF mercenaries. in December 2002.

By mid-February 2003, LURD's military presence had expanded considerably, with the organization managing to reoccupy territory lost between May and December 2002. LURD military units now appear to be in control of Tubmanburg, Klay Junction, Foya, Robertsport and key strategic areas in the immediate vicinity of Monrovia. Strategically speaking, LURD's military position has never been better, although the key issue of logistical supply has only been partially addressed with the acquisition of motor vehicles in recent ambushes and attacks.

LURD are at a considerable advantage manoeuvring in northern and southwestern Liberia, especially in Bomi and Voinjama, as these areas were formerly ULIMO operational headquarters.

Prior to an assault on Monrovia, LURD military objectives were threefold: first, the consolidation of their hold on Foya and the eradication of its Sierra Leonian mercenaries fighting on behalf of President Taylor; second, the fortification of Tubmanburg and the southwest Bomi Hills sector; and, third, an assault on Gbarnga from the Saint Paul's Bridge area. Indeed, while fighting continues on three fronts, LURD's logistical capabilities remain weakened, and territorial gains are hard to consolidate. Without a permanent

victory in Foya, it is unlikely that LURD would consider an outright assault on Monrovia, as President Taylor would be able to seriously degrade LURD's western front by the insertion of troops by helicopter from Monrovia. However, the reoccupation of Tubmanburg, and especially Klay Junction, in significant numbers will now almost certainly result in at least a limited engagement of government forces based in the capital irrespective of the government's continued possession of Gbarnga. The seizure of Robertsport, if it proves to be sustainable, would allow LURD the option of a seaborne logistical supply route into Monrovia itself.

LURD military capability

One of the defining characteristics of the current Liberian conflagration is the very limited number of troops actually prosecuting the war. Judging by their own estimates of battalion strengths, LURD can have no more than three thousand men under arms. (Interestingly, the number of ex-ULIMO fighters who fled to Guinea and Sierra Leone in the late 1990s is estimated at around 2,800.) Crucially, the same limitation also seems to be true of the Liberian government army. Radio intercepts and captured classified documents clearly show that at the zenith of the struggle over Tubmanburg in July 2002, no more than five hundred government troops were or could be deployed in the field; at one point the government's total strength in the Bomi sector, staggeringly, numbered only 34 men, with a desertion rate of over 10%. Government troops only managed to retake Bomi after RUF mercenaries and government troops from Gen. Roland Duo's Navy Division were flown in by helicopter as reinforcements from Foya. Had LURD not accidentally destroyed over 40,000 rounds of their own ammunition in a vehicle fire, it is unlikely that they would have been dislodged at all.

Incredible though this may seem, these figures make surprising sense when viewed in the context of Liberia's faction-riven society: according to numerous independent testimonies by former government troops and prisoners of war, the Armed Forces of Liberia have been largely disarmed and have remained unpaid and unused for over two years. Even Taylor's infamous Anti-Terrorist Unit (ATU), commanded by his son 'Chucky' Taylor, reportedly worked without pay for a six-month period up to August 2002. On both sides the proliferation of child soldiers and the forcible recruitment of civilians indicates many things, though primarily a lack of men and women particularly eager to die for either side. The RUF fighters that Taylor pays to defend Foya close to the Sierra Leone border are employed for the simple reason that there are no

other troops to deploy.

Although LURD occasionally use child soldiers in a combat capacity, the tendency to do so is not without internal criticism. In addition, the majority of children exposed to warfare by LURD are not soldiers, but weapons porters for commanders known as 'pekins'. These children act as *de facto* servants in return for food and security, and are not deployed as fighting troops.

Despite dressing partly in military uniforms and partly like rap singers, LURD show higher than expected degrees of morale, discipline and training. Despite being unpaid and suffering perhaps 1,000 fatalities over the last three years, they display generally high morale, if occasionally boosted by copious amounts of marijuana. The singular cause of ousting Taylor from power is easy to grasp, and highly appealing to former ULIMO fighters who felt they were denied the benefits of the 1997 peace agreement. If nothing else, fighting with LURD offers prestige, excitement, food, and the possibility of employment in the event of a LURD victory. Recruiting heavily in refugee camps in Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire, LURD rely extensively upon the regional Liberian diaspora to swell their ranks. It seems that the current instability in Côte d'Ivoire prompted LURD to consider opening an additional front, a possibility that was apparently rejected owing to uncertainty surrounding the sympathies of local civilians.

Discipline in the LURD army is heavily dependent upon the quality and moral calibre of any given commander in charge, and supplemented by those fighters who have had regular training in the AFL, including some instruction by American military personnel. Troops under the command of Brig. Gen. Sekou Kamarra (AKA 'Dragon Master') and also the late Brig. Gen. Musa Donso (AKA 'Deku') in June and July 2002 showed a remarkable degree of military discipline, including regular salutes, the honorific reference to rank, and a willingness to carry out lifethreatening orders without question. Field discipline is enforced by a rigorous system of corporal punishment, and the very real threat of execution for mutiny. Around 90% of the LURD command structure is former ULIMO, and by their own estimates at least 60% of their fighters are also from a ULIMO background; commanders and troops often share common histories and operational experience.

In areas where senior commanders are not present, such as in Salayie in late July 2002, discipline disintegrates rapidly and almost completely. Firing becomes random and indiscriminate, the civilian population is harassed, and territory is quickly lost as government troops capitalize on their opponents' disorganization.

Training is administered chiefly in Voinjama, with

smaller towns conducting more limited programmes. Former AFL personnel are charged with training which covers basic rifle maintenance and weapons operation, ambush tactics and attempts to instil a sense of identity with songs, physical training and drilling. While this only barely prepares recruits for the front line, LURD fighters seem an able match for their Liberian government counterparts, in many cases outclassing them in the field.

While LURD do not bear any comparison with a trained African army, their apparent respect for (and dependency on) the civilian population, combined with a strong *esprit de corps* and a degree of basic military training, certainly elevates them above the level of other regional insurgents, specifically the RUF.



LURD contains a small contingent of former CDF troops and Kamajors from Sierra Leone, numbering perhaps 300, along with a smaller number of ex-RUF fighters and around 20 former members of the West Side Boys. These troops are apparently unpaid, and most have some form of Liberian parentage or family connection linking them to the conflict. These troops are integrated into LURD command structures and do not operate separately from them. Sierra Leonian troops fighting with LURD are in general more ruthless than their Liberian counterparts, occasionally torturing prisoners of war and even at times practising ritual cannibalism. It seems to be the case that LURD do not currently employ other paid foreign mercenaries, or military advisers, and do not have the financial capability or desire to do so.

Captured government soldiers who show remorse and compliance are frequently debriefed and incorporated into the LURD army after a period of retraining and political reorientation. Even experienced RUF mercenaries captured near Foya have been integrated into LURD ranks. Other prisoners, who are captured unwillingly in battle or who are not trusted by the LURD or are burdensome to them, are executed.

Interviews in the field indicate that the Liberian government seems to rely extensively on the forced recruitment of civil militias (including children and university students) and paid mercenaries. Testimonies



Lurd Members, 2002

from Sierra Leonian RUF prisoners of war captured near Foya indicate that the Liberian army's Chief of Staff, Benjamin Yetin, has personally paid RUF mercenaries in the town, who number several hundred. Estimates of the total number of RUF mercenaries in the region, who by their own account travel freely between Liberia and Sierra Leone, vary wildly, though they too possibly number several hundred.

When asked about the nature of their future intentions, senior RUF commanders have claimed to be planning fresh attacks inside Sierra Leone in order to further destabilize the border area. LURD have repeatedly and plausibly claimed that their forces were attacked near Kolahun by armed RUF units crossing the Sierra Leone border in mid-2002.

The Liberian army is known to rely on South African and Libyan military advisers, as well as employing two Ukrainian helicopter crews, and apparently retains two platoons of Burkinabe troops employed as President Taylor's personal security detail.

Military hardware and United Nations sanctions

LURD forces do not seem to have a shortage of weapons or ammunition, although their lines of logistical supply are at times fatally stretched. LURD defeats at Kolahun and in Bomi were almost uniquely due to failures of immediate supply, not to a lack of material or inferior fighting capacity *per se*.

LURD fighters are equipped with AKM assault rifles, RPG-7 rocket-propelled grenade launchers (firing mainly anti-armour grenades, with a limited supply of anti-personnel rounds), PKM light machine guns, and a

random and limited assortment of self-loading pistols. In addition, LURD have a very small number of RPK and RPD machine guns and up to 10 mounted Chinese M60-type 7.62mm medium machine guns. New recruits are often initially issued with ageing Czech-made SKS rifles.

Perhaps a dozen LURD fighters use captured government FN FAL rifles. A lack of 7.62mm x 51mm ammunition makes them undesirable issues. Although the PKM is widely prevalent and greatly favoured, PKM 7.62mm x 54mm ammunition is scarcer than the seemingly inexhaustible supply of 7.62mm x 39mm AK ammunition.

LURD possess approximately eight DSHK 12.7mm calibre heavy machine guns and at least two BZT 14.5mm anti-aircraft artillery pieces, with which they successfully destroyed a government helicopter outside Voinjama in 2001.

LURD forces also possess at least nine SAM-7 surface-to-air missiles, which they claim were captured from Liberian-backed dissidents invading Guinea in 2000. One missile has been fired to no effect in the field. LURD have at least two operators trained in the use of these missiles by the AFL. Though posing a threat to the Liberian government's air operations, these weapons do not yet appear to be a significant risk to civil aviation.

With respect to artillery, LURD are currently operating two British-made 81mm mortars, with a significant supply of bombs. Grenades and propellant for RPG-7s are available by the thousand. LURD also possess two or three RPO-type, probably Ukrainian-made grenade launchers, firing grenades by thermobaric means, which were captured from government troops in July 2002.

On the basis of personal observation, LURD do not appear to use any form of mines, set booby-traps, or engage in any form of suicide attacks, human bombing or urban terrorism. They have a limited number of all-terrain vehicles inside Liberia, most of which have been captured from government troops and converted to carry 12.7mm heavy machine guns. Gasoline and diesel are in short supply, and are also used to feed generators that help maintain radio communications.

LURD claim to use only weapons and ammunition captured from government forces. While a large number of the organization's weapons are procured this way, there are large weapons caches near the Guinea border containing several hundred newly packaged Chinese-made type 56 AKM assault rifles, hundreds of pallets of various 7.62mm calibre ammunition stamped 2001 and 2002, and possibly thousands of RPG shells. Although the provenance of these weapons is unclear, it seems unlikely that they were obtained from Liberian government stores, which are equipped with different supplies and material.

Weapons definitely captured by LURD from government forces also include over 100 probably Yugoslav-made AKM assault rifles. These weapons are consistently stamped with the dates 2000, 2001 and 2002, and provide evidence of the Liberian government's contravention of the United Nations arms embargo currently enforced against them.

Tactics and warfare

Maintaining communications with HF radios and Motorola field radios, which are often used to communicate with government forces, LURD fighters enjoy a high degree of mobility and inter-unit communication in theatre. Contrary to certain media reports, LURD are not comprised of isolated groups of loosely affiliated rebels, but are a coherent and integrated mobile irregular army.

Warfare takes four primary forms, namely attacking predetermined defended positions, defending urban or semi-urban possessions, ambushing government convoys and troops, and repelling ambushes set by government troops.

Contacts are always initiated with RPG-7 grenades, fired with limited collateral effect but inflicting substantial psychological damage, and followed by PKM and then AKM fire. Neither government forces nor LURD fighters will initiate major contacts without a substantial number of RPG grenades. Major fire-fights directed against defended positions usually last for a maximum of four hours before one side either succeeds or has to withdraw to replenish ammunition. Aimed shots are rare to non-existent in all contact situations, with casualties consequently very low. Major battles fought at close quarters will typically yield no more than a dozen casualties in total. Despite the enmity felt between the opposing sides, there is a keen appreciation that it is undesirable for Liberians to be killing each other under such circumstances. Sierra Leonian mercenaries are not treated with the same sympathy.

LURD military command structure

LURD's military structure operates along protocols established in the AFL, which in turn are loosely based on the US military model. There is a coherent system of ranks and titles, which are respected by the majority of fighters. Promotion and the award of rank are based upon longevity of service, ability in the field, and more especially previous military experience or affiliation. Former AFL and ULIMO fighters entered LURD with their existing ranks, and were quickly promoted to

senior ranks such as colonel and general to cement the former ULIMO's hegemony in the organization. While there is an abundance of very young generals and colonels, as well as private soldiers, there is a marked lack of a strong non-commissioned officer corps, which affects operational effectiveness.

Commander in Chief Sekou Damate Conneh Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Prince Seo (Retired) Deputy Chief of Staff Maj. Gen. A. Seeya Sheriff, AKA 'Cobra' Director of Staff Brig. Gen. Fexon Jackity (Acting CoS as of 10.02) Inspector General Vacant Defence Operations Chief Musa Kamarra, AKA 'Black Marine' G3 Training Commander Lt. Col. Prince Wylie Women's Artillery Command Masa Seo (Retd) Deputy Women's Artillery Mawata Tranaray, Command AKA 'Black Diamond' Brig. Gen. Joe Wylie Senior Military Adviser Executive Mansion Security Force Brig. Gen. Sekou Kamarra, Unit (EMSFU) Commander AKA 'Dragon Master' Military Adviser to National Brig. Gen. Abbas Kenneh Chair Provost Marshal Col. Lussene Musseneh 2nd Brig. Field Commander Col. Ofere Diah 2nd Brig. Battle Front Commander Lt. Col. Mohammed Dukely, AKA 'Nasty Duke'

Over the period July 2002 to November 2002 several significant changes in the command structure were under way, a process that is still in progress. The following is a reasonably accurate though necessarily dated characterization of LURD's military hierarchy battalion structure.

ı		
	National Chairman	Sekou Damate Conneh
	Deputy National Chairman	Ayesha Conneh
	Secretary General	Joe Gbalah
	Special Assistant to Sec. Gen .	Jaguar Sheriff
	Deputy Chair, Cttee for Security	Morris Dolley
	Deputy Sec. Gen. for Civil Admin	Alhaji Sekou Fofanah
	US Rep. of National Chairman	Mohamed Kamara
	National Spokesman	Hanson Williams
	Military Spokesman	Charles Bennie
	Press Secretary to the National	Sheriff Abraham
	Chair	

Initially, LURD battalions were known by colloquial names appertaining to geographical location. The following classifications are still represented by ad hoc uniforms, but are now largely redundant.

Bopolu	Cobra Movement
Gbarnga	Voltage Movement
Foya	University of Bullet

In September 2002, Inspector General Brig. Gen. Musa Donso, AKA 'Deku' (former UMLIMO-K Deputy Chief of Staff), was reportedly killed by government troops near Kolahun, near the Liberian border with Sierra Leone.

LURD's Chief of Staff, Lt. Gen. Prince Seo, has been retired, and is no longer active in frontline duties. His wife, Masa Seo, accompanied him into retirement. His acting replacement, Brig. Gen. Fexon Jackity, was the rising star of LURD's command structure. Formerly Inspector General of ULIMO-K, Jackity has been responsible for the recapture of Kolahun and the subsequent assault on Foya. Articulate and politically aware, Jackity, based in Voinjama, seemed cautious and well respected by his troops, over whom he exerted considerable personal influence. In the period October to December 2002, he and Sekou Conneh, the National Chairman, were the driving force behind LURD's military campaign. By mid-February 2003, however, Jackity's whereabouts had become unclear, with plausible information suggesting that former 2nd Brig. Field Commander Col. Ofere Diah had temporarily taken over as Acting Chief of Staff.

Former LURD Chief of Staff Charles Dent was killed on 2 November 2001. Suggestions that he was assassinated by his own troops appear unfounded.

The LURD army, in the period May–August 2002, was comprised of two brigades, the 1st Brigade and the 2nd Brigade.

The 1st Brigade is divided into two battalions, each of which contains three to four companies, each comprising around 50 men.

The 2nd Brigade follows the same structure, though it is considerably larger, and is divided into eight battalions.

Two battalions of Special Forces, each containing two companies of around 50 men, exist outside this structure: the Executive Mansions Security Force Unit and the Strike Force Commandos.

In June 2002, the official number of LURD combatants given by the organization was 14,000. By October 2002, this had fallen to 5,000. Taking into consideration battalion reorganizations subsequent to the above structure, new recruits and combat casualties, it seems reasonable to assume that LURD's total number of men under arms numbers around 2,500 to 3,000, with an additional 500 or so unarmed

logistical assistants.

LURD civilian political structures

Although avowedly a military organization, LURD also has a parallel political structure to administer its controlled areas and to represent itself diplomatically. Although some of these political cadres, such as former ULIMO-J member and current LURD Secretary General Joe Gbalah, are also militarily active, many do not engage in fighting.

The following is a selection of LURD's more influential political cadres.

LURD's general membership elects the National Executive Council. The NEC is the organization's governing body, and includes all LURD's senior political appointees. It is composed of two members representing each county in Liberia, though many of these representatives are in exile, either in the region or in the United States. The NEC in turn elects the National Chairman.

There are reportedly seven committees comprising 35 members to look after diverse matters including defence, national security, foreign affairs, finance and investment, public relations and propaganda, logistics and health, social welfare and civil administration.

Opaque and difficult to appraise, LURD's political infrastructure operates entirely secretively and without the open scrutiny of the military. With the possible exception of the NEC, the political framework is entirely subordinate to senior military command. This fact has been compounded since the election of Sekou Conneh as National Chairman. The exact role of his wife, Ayesha Conneh, within the political structure of the organization is unclear.

Conclusions: resolution, disarmament and factionalism

Whether or not LURD will achieve their military and political objectives is a matter of conjecture at present. While LURD forces still have to carry the vast majority of their ammunition by hand from secure bases near the Guinea border deep into the Liberian interior, it seems unlikely that a prolonged assault on Monrovia is credible in the immediate future. However, substantial amelioration of LURD's logistical capabilities, such as an increase in available vehicles and a greater level of accessibility to Liberia's limited road network in areas controlled by LURD, has created conditions conducive to a reoccupation of the territories they lost in July 2002, which in turn has directly and convincingly threatened the security of Monrovia itself.

During the intense fighting that erupted in and around Tubmanburg in July 2002, government troops seemed temporarily unable to halt the LURD advance, and withdrew substantial numbers of troops from frontline positions back to the capital. It should be clearly borne in mind that LURD were not straightforwardly defeated in Bomi during this period. Only environmental logistical problems and the accidental destruction of a major ammunition re-supply facilitated a government victory. Credible sources in Monrovia state that during this period President Taylor believed a LURD victory was close at hand, and prepared for his own emergency evacuation. If the fighting continues for the following weeks or months as it has done over the last year, a LURD victory is highly possible. Indeed, as more government troops desert in desperation, and more civilians are subject to human rights abuses by President Taylor's army, a LURD victory becomes increasingly likely.

If the United Nations arms embargo is policed to the extent that the Liberian armed forces are denied a redevelopment of their military air capacity, an outright victory for government forces appears virtually impossible. Lacking sophisticated military equipment and a disciplined, motivated army with which to fight, the government of Liberia could at best hope to prolong the conflict. So significant to both sides is the issue of conducting and repelling successful air operations that any development of either party's offensive air capability or defence would vastly change the character and outcome of the conflict.

However, the successful deployment of trained foreign troops with limited air support and the full cooperation of the Liberian government would in all probability effectively end this current phase of Liberia's armed conflict within several weeks. Both financially and politically, however, the prospect of this happening seems remote in the extreme.

Importantly, any form of government military victory, howsoever secured, would only temporarily end the LURD insurgency. Despite the limited political scope of their ambitions, LURD are commanded by committed and experienced fighters for whom there are few remaining options but to continue fighting.

In the event of an outright LURD victory, their fighters are likely to accept a total disarmament programme, based on the successful integration of their core military personnel into a reformed and tribally inclusive Liberian national army. In the event of a partial victory, which might theoretically see remaining pockets of resistance from loyalist troops or RUF mercenaries continuing to harass LURD fighters, disarmament seems implausible and unworkable.

Politically speaking, LURD remain wedded to a single idea, the removal of President Taylor, and it is unclear how their programme would evolve if that came

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about. There is a distinct possibility that a LURD occupation of Monrovia without the prospect of immediate international assistance would turn their military attentions inwards, reopening historical rivalries that are currently only barely suppressed in the fight against Taylor. The re-emergence of the former ULIMO factions as independent armed groups and the consequent expansion of the civil war is more than a theoretical possibility. This potential infighting could be compounded by disputes over the control of Liberia's considerable natural resources.

Without concerted international military participation in the implementation and development of post-conflict stability in Liberia, a lasting peace agreement cemented by fully inclusive elections will be impossible to achieve. It is ironic in the extreme that deployed in neighbouring Sierra Leone are sufficient numbers of professional military personnel to end the Liberian conflagration almost literally overnight. But such is the nature of diplomacy and the collective failure of the international community's imagination.

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The Africa Programme at Chatham House was launched in July 2002, kindly supported by the FCO, DFID, Shell International, BAE Systems, Lonmin and South African Breweries. The programme is made up of a number of thematic projects, including the Armed Non-State Actors Project. Projects on the Gulf of Guinea, Elections in Africa, and Foreign Policy and Africa are also under way. In addition to commissioning or conducting its own research the Africa Programme holds meetings and seminars. Topics covered to date include conflict diamonds and the Kimberley process, the political economy of São Tomé and Principe, and Kenya's Minister of Foreign Affairs talking about the challenges his country faces following the historic change of government in December 2002.

If you are interested in forthcoming events or research by the Africa Programme contact: Liz.horn@riia.org

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