

The Nigerian Factor in the Liberian Peace Process, 1990–1993

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Abstract

The outbreak of civil war in Liberia in 1990 put pressure on the stability of the West African subregion. In an attempt to manage the crisis and curtail the contagious effect of the war, Nigeria and other West African nations embarked on a peacemaking process which led to the establishment of the ECOWAS Monitoring Group, ECOMOG. Apart from this, Nigeria contributed more than 10,000 troops to the ECOMOG mission and gave other financial and material support to the war-torn country. A refugee camp was also established at Oru, a suburb of Ijebu-Ode, in Ijebu North Local Government area of Ogun state. This paper examines the role of Nigeria in the Liberian peace process. Drawing from its findings, the paper argues that Nigeria's involvement in the Liberian peace process was motivated primarily by Nigeria's traditional interest in peace building and the need for the ruling military junta to attract external credibility. This was achieved at a very great cost in terms of human and material resources.

Keyword: Nigeria, Liberia, war, peace process, intervention

Introduction

Historically, the friendship between Nigeria and Liberia was anchored on “promotion of African integration and support for African unity (Akindele, 2000), which is one of the fundamental objectives and directive principles of Nigerian foreign policy. Liberia, like Nigeria shared conservative and moderate political philosophies of the western powers. The two West African nations became the toast of each other during the charter negotiations that heralded the birth of the Organization of African Unity, OAU, which has now metamorphosed into the African Union, AU. Although at the height of the OAU Charter negotiations, Nigeria was very diplomatic by not taking sides with either the Monrovia or Casablanca group, the country worked hard toward reconciling the different positions of the two groups (Vogt, 1993).

At the subregional level, both nations worked together to make sure that the establishment of ECOWAS was a reality in 1975. Of a fact is that at the 1968 Monrovia Conference, when the absence of the *entente* states of Ivory Coast, Benin, Togo and Niger, was going to threaten the formation of ECOWAS, it was at the insistence of Nigeria that Liberia was commissioned to placate them (Onwuka, nd, 65). Like Nigeria, Liberia's integrationist efforts in the subregion are absolute. In this regard, Nigeria has never failed to acknowledge such efforts

at every opportunity. For instance, in 1974, Nigeria, while requesting Liberia to host the Second Ministerial Meeting of the yet-to-be formed ECOWAS, acknowledged Liberia's unflinching faith in economic cooperation, which was crucial to the economic independence and advancement of the subregion (Onwuka, nd; 65). In fact, it was at the 1974 Monrovia meeting, which Niger and Mali had refused to host, that the virtual breakdown of the Nigeria-Togo initiative on the creation of ECOWAS was repaired.

The violent change of government in Liberia in 1980 brought about a kind of stormy relationship between Nigeria and Liberia. The civilian Shagari administration condemned the coup because the act was seen as capable of having multiplier effect on the political situation in other parts of the subregion including Nigeria. In fact, Shagari's government went on a diplomatic offensive against Doe. An instance was Nigeria's move against Doe's admission into the ECOWAS summit meeting held in Lagos in 1980. Even after Shagari was removed via a coup, his successor, Gen. Mohammed Buhari, followed Shagari's steps by expelling illegal aliens—including Liberians—from Nigeria. The protracted border closure by the Buhari regime also strained relations with Liberia as crossborder traffic and commercial exchange in the subregion became extremely difficult.

However, the mid-1980s saw Nigeria working to reinstate the Liberian state, under Samuel Doe, once more as a respectable state in Africa (Vogt, 1993). When in 1985, Liberia's relations with her Mano River Union (MRU) counterparts deteriorated over the accusations that they supported anti-Doe rebellion, it was Nigeria that mediated the diplomatic crisis which brought about fence-mending between Liberia and other MRU member states. Trade relations between Nigeria and Liberia were basically dominated by two important commodities—crude oil and iron-ore. While Nigeria supplied Liberia with oil, the country also reciprocated by supplying Nigeria with iron-ore for the development of its steel mills. At the level of educational development, Nigeria founded a school of international diplomacy in Liberia (Vogt, 1993). While the school had most of its important academic staff as Nigerians, it was equally funded absolutely with Nigerian money. Doe himself was a student of the school.

On the Liberian crisis, Nigeria's initial reaction was to see the crisis as an exclusive internal affair of Liberia and therefore did not take urgent steps to evacuate its nationals so as not to create the impression that Doe had lost control of the state. Quite a barrage of criticisms accompanied Doe's hurried visit to Nigeria, evidently to request for assistance in the area of supply of arms and ammunitions to be able to repel the mounting rebellion. Doe's visit became so controversial that some of the parties in conflict in Liberia believed that Nigeria responded actively to Doe's quest for assistance and that a cargo load of arms and ammunitions successfully flew into Liberia in early April 1990 and delivered such items (*The Guardian*, 1990; Barret, 1997: 467).

It was also believed that besides the cache of arms and ammunitions, the Babangida government also offered financial assistance to the tune of \$25 million to Doe (Barret, 1997; 467). General Babangida also honoured Doe with Nigeria's highest national award, the Grand Commander of the Federal Republic – GCFR (Osaghae, 1996, vi). These developments initially gave ECOMOG credibility problems in its Liberian peace mission.

The Liberian Peace Process: The Nigerian Factor 1990– 1993

The profile of ECOMOG as Nigeria-dominated did not go well with some of neighbors in the subregion. There were in fact scathing remarks among some West African states that such dominance actually undermined the willingness and readiness of other member states to participate in the operation, as well as the enthusiasm of regional and international organizations to provide financial and logistical support. The reasons adduced may be far from the truth. In reality, most West African states that demonstrated their unwillingness towards the whole peace process in Liberia were French speaking. Therefore, their opposition or lack of excitement to ECOMOG peace plan in Liberia remained the product of age-long suspicion they have always had for Nigeria's power, wealth and of course influence in the subregion and by extension across the continent. In view of this suspicion, the Nigerian government embarked on shuttle diplomacy to convince other West African states, particularly those in the Francophone club, to physically lend their support for ECOMOG. They were also assured that the ECOMOG mission was not conceived by Nigeria to dominate any nation in the subregion, but to halt the despicable horror going on in Liberia. The diplomatic talks paid off initially, but at the point of contribution of forces and other logistics support for successful operations, most Francophone nations who had earlier pledged their support for ECOMOG operation, except Guinea, opted out for lack of financial power. Nigeria had to carry the greatest burden, with the support of Guinea, Ghana, Gambia and Sierra Leone.

Having cleared such dangerous insinuations, it must be emphasized that going by international relations practice, Nigeria's dominant role in the subregional peace process, particularly in Liberia, may not be unprecedented, as it is inherent in the nature of such multinational operations that there should be a lead country. A good example is the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, NATO, in which the US, for her size, wealth and influence, has always remained the supreme commander of the organization. In the same manner, with the unfolding scenario in Southern African region, there is little doubt that the natural power broker in the region is South Africa. Therefore, Nigeria, with all its attributes of natural resources and size, is equally and naturally expected to take the lead in the peace process of its geopolitical zone. Consequently, Nigeria's principal role in ECOMOG operations is a natural geopolitical development.

In view of this clarification, Nigeria's intervention in the Liberia peace process through ECOMOG machinery was in line with her foreign policy objectives of promoting global peace. It was also part of Nigeria's responsibility as a member of the UN. Put differently, Nigeria's Liberian mission had great national and sub-regional implications to the interest of Nigeria.

At the national level, Nigeria believes in the protection of lives and property of Nigerians anywhere in the world. At the time the rebels reached Liberia, Guinea had the largest number of foreign African residents in Liberia. Ghana had over 6,000 of its nationals, while Nigeria had a little below the Ghanaian population (Vogt, 1993). The Nigerian residents included private citizens, embassy staff, journalists, lecturers and other businessmen. They constituted one of the largest foreigner resident in Liberia, that were trapped in the conflict. Thus, the Nigerian state needed to come to their aid by way of evacuation.

Having rescued the larger percentage of its nationals by way of satisfying national interest, Nigeria also needed to safeguard the subregion from anarchy. The security of the subregion was and still is part of the country's concentric circles policy. It is a fact that Nigeria's position in the subregion gives it leverage to show concern for the region's wellbeing. The country commands 65 percent of the subregion's population and she is a formidable military power. In this regard, she could not afford to sit idle while the region is in trouble. What is more, the Sub-region, as part of the Nigeria's strategic interest, should not be in crisis, as the multiplier effect may engender insecurity which may spill into other parts of the region. The attendant effects may include development of dissident groups across the region and refugee problems of great proportion that may put pressure on existing utilities in the host countries, leading to another round of international problems.

More importantly, Nigeria's homegrown solution to the Liberian crisis was a product of its experience in the global diplomatic game. In historical terms, Nigeria had always made genuine efforts to play mediatory roles in trouble spots in Africa, but such efforts often fizzled out to the advantage of extraregional mediatory arrangements. For instance, in 1976, Nigeria tried to mediate in the East African Community (EAC) crisis, but Kenya remained adamant, until Henry Kissinger, the US Secretary of State intervened. Within 48 hours of Kissinger's intervention, Kenya lifted the blockade it had placed on Uganda (Bukarambe, 2000). Also Nigeria's views were not respected by Ethiopia and Somalia during the Ogaden War, but when the non-African powers intervened, the war came to an end (Bukarambe, 2000). Therefore, when the Liberian crisis came up, the position of Nigeria was that if the subregional leaders did not intervene on time and be decisive too, extraregional powers would intervene, giving them the opportunity to infiltrate other states in the subregion and subsequently under-

mine their security. These and other humanitarian considerations ignited Nigeria's desire to intervene in the Liberian crisis.

Amidst wanton destruction of lives and property in Liberia, Nigeria proposed at the May 30, 1990, 13th summit meeting of the ECOWAS Heads of State, in Banjul, the Gambia, the establishment of an ECOWAS Standing Mediation Committee (ESMC) to look into the disruptive conflicts and disputes in the sub-region (ECOWAS, 1990, 24, Vogt, 1993). Nigeria's thought on the proposed ESMC was discernible. For one thing, security situation in Liberia was at its lowest ebb, leading to destruction of lives and property, while the international community was busy elsewhere. The global community was much more interested in the Gulf-war occasioned by the Iraq's occupation of Kuwait. For another, the proposal was influenced by the absence of operational defence mechanism within both the ECOWAS and the AU treaties for immediate inter-summit discourse and management of conflict in the subregion. On the strength of Nigeria's argument, the very first Extraordinary Summit meeting of the Authority of ECOWAS, was held in November 1990, to discuss the Liberian debacle. Thus, the idea of an ESMC was informed generally by the need to empower the organization and its secretariat with greater powers of initiative in delving into problem situations without the problematic procedure of convening a meeting of all heads of government (Vogt, 1993).

Having accepted Nigeria's proposal, the ESMC was established, with Nigeria, Togo, Gambia, Ghana and Mali as pioneer members. The membership of the committee could be renewed every three years. The ESMC right from the start, decided to carry along all the interest groups in the conflict. Therefore, the ESMC meeting that held in Freetown, Sierra Leone, included the following Liberian interest groups:

- i. The Liberian Interfaith Mediation Committee;
- ii. Liberian Peoples Party (LPP);
- iii. Movement for Justice in Africa (MOJA);
- iv. The National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL);
- v. The United Peoples Party (UPP) and
- vi. Representatives of the Liberian Government (Vogt, 1993).

The meeting's agenda for peace included:

- i. Acceptance by all parties of the Mediatory role of ECOWAS;
- ii. A ceasefire agreement between the warring parties;
- iii. Monitoring of ceasefire by ECOWAS;
- iv. Agreement by all parties to stop destruction of lives and property;
- v. Unbanning of all political parties;

- vi. Release of all political prisoners;
- vii. Agreement to establish an interim administration and
- viii. Holding of elections as soon as practicable (Vogt, 1993).

The first meeting in Freetown could not achieve its terms of reference and so at the time the second meeting of the committee met the key warlord still in Freetown, it had made up its mind to impose a ceasefire on all parties to the conflict, not minding Charles Taylor's position or reservation. Therefore, the meeting resolved as follows:

- i. That the parties should observe immediate ceasefire;
- ii. An ECOWAS ceasefire monitoring group (ECOMOG) be set up to keep the peace and restore law and order and to ensure respect for ceasefire;
- iii. A broad-based interim government be set up by Liberians through a national conference of political parties, warring parties and other interest groups;
- iv. Mr. Samuel Doe should withdraw from Liberia;
- v. Free and fair elections be held within 12 months to establish a democratically elected government in Liberia;
- vi. ECOWAS should observe the elections; and
- vii. A special Emerging Fund for the ECOWAS operations in Liberia be set up (Vogt, 1993).

Perhaps the most difficult to implement of all the ESMC's decisions, was the aspect that dealt with funding of ECOWAS operations in Liberia. While some member states like Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso and some other Francophone states outrightly showed their displeasure for the creation of ECOMOG, other ECOWAS states that had sympathy for and supported the course of peace in Liberia through the ECOMOG initiative, were not in good financial position to fully support the mission. With this development, it was clear from the outset that much of the burden of bringing peace back to troubled Liberia rested squarely on Nigeria, both in terms of human, material and financial resources. It was a price Nigeria had to pay being the most economically viable among the entire ECOWAS countries. This fact began to manifest when the first contingent of 2,500 ECOMOG force was assembled and Nigeria contributed 756 personnel. The remaining 1,744 troops were to be shared by six other contributing states at an average of 348 per state. But this was not to be as some of the countries like Togo and Mali, who were supposed to contribute troops to the force, withdrew from the arrangement, perhaps for financial reasons. As the mission continued with the execution of its mandate, there were constant requests for more reinforcement. In October 1990, Nigeria produced 5,000, about 84 percent, of the 6,000 troops sent to Liberia. Between 1991, 1992 and 1993, when the ECOMOG

troops standing rose to 12,000, Nigeria alone contributed 10,000, about 83 per cent (*West Africa*, 1990; 26-52, *West Africa*, 1993; 366; *African Guardian*, 1993; 11). Although the timeframe of this study is 1993, it is important to note that between 1993 and 1997 when Charles Taylor was sworn-in as Liberian President, Nigeria's contributions to ECOMOG troops stood at about 90 percent of the total number of the multinational force. Besides having the highest number of troops in ECOMOG operations in Liberia, Nigerian officers dominated the command positions of the force (Aboagye, 1991). It is interesting to note that out of all the Field Commanders (FC) of the force since 1990, only Lt. General Arnold Quainoo, the pioneer FC, was not Nigerian (Aboagye, 1991). Even when the national contingents were regrouped into ECOMOG infantry, group tactical and artillery task brigade formations as appropriate to allow for operational efficiency, the command and staff of the headquarters of these brigades remained absolutely Nigerian (Aboagye, 1991, 147). The table below shows how Nigerian officers dominated the ECOMOG Force Command.

Table 1: ECOMOG force commanders as dominated by Nigerians

	Rank	Name	Headquarters	Period
1.	Lt. Gen	Arnold Quainoo	Freetown/Monrovia	August–Sept. 1990
2.	Maj. Gen	J.N. Dogonyaro	Monrovia	Sept. 1990–Feb. 1991
3.	Maj. Gen.	R.N. Kupolati	Monrovia	Feb.–Sept. 1991
4.	Maj. Gen.	J.I. Bakut	Monrovia	Sept. 1991–Sept. 1992
5.	Maj. Gen.	A.I. Olurin	Monrovia	Oct. 1992–Oct 1993
6.	Maj. Gen.	J.N. Shagaya	Monrovia	Oct.–Dec. 1993
7.	Maj. Gen.	J.M. Inienger	Monrovia	Dec. 1993–Aug. 1996

Source: F.B. Aboagye (1999), ECOMOG: A Sub-regional Experience in Conflict Resolution, Management and Peacekeeping in Liberia, 147.

The successful military campaigns in Liberia cost Nigeria men and materials. A number of Nigerian soldiers died in action, journalists like Chris Imodibe and Tayo Awotusin, as well as other Nigerians resident in Liberia lost their lives in the bloody civil war (Nwabuikwu, 1999). Nigeria equally received about 6,000 Liberian refugees, with all its attendant social consequences on the host community of Oru-Ijebu, in Ogun state. At the diplomatic level, Nigeria took very active and noticeable part in all the peace talks on Liberia, between 1990 and 1993. The country chaired and hosted some of the peace talks. Some of the diplomatic peace talks with Nigeria as principal participant are:

- i. Mediation Committee Meeting of the foreign ministers, held in Freetown, July

- 1990, in which all warring parties and other interest groups were represented (Vogt, 1993);
- ii. The Banjul, Gambia, August 1990 Summit Meeting of the Authority of Heads of State and Government on Liberia, which recalled the ECOWAS Protocol on Non-Aggression adopted in Dakar, Senegal, April 22, 1978. The meeting also suggested the creation of ECOMOG (ECOWAS, 1990, (Vogt, 1993)
 - iii. The Bamako, Mali, November 1990 Summit Meeting of the Authority of Heads of State and Government which ratified the Banjul peace plan for Liberia, including the setting up of ECOMOG (ECOWAS, 1990, 24)
 - iv. The Lome, Togo, February 1991 Agreement on Cessation of hostilities and peaceful settlement of conflicts among AFL, NPFL, INPFL and other groups (ECOWAS, 1990, 24)
 - v. The Yamoussoukro, Cote d'Ivoire, June 1991 Summit (I), the Yamoussoukro, July 1991 Summit (II), the Yamoussoukro, September 1991 Summit (III) and the Yamoussoukro, October 1991 Summit (IV), all of the Committee of 5, where issues of ceasefire, reconciliation and disarmament, were fully discussed and some form of agreement reached (ECOWAS, 1990, 24).
 - vi. The Abuja June 1991, ECOWAS Authority of Heads of State and Government Summit, which agreed on ECOWAS Observer Group for the Liberian general elections and other related matter (ECOWAS, 1990, 24).
 - vii. The Geneva, Switzerland, April 1992 Consultative group Meeting of the ECOWAS Committee of 5 on Liberia, which reinforced the Yamoussoukro (I – IV) agreements (ECOWAS, 1990, 24)
 - viii. The Dakar, Senegal, May 1992, Ministerial Evaluation Meeting of the ECOWAS Committee of 5, with the ESMC, which evaluated the implementation of the Yamoussoukro Agreements (ECOWAS, 1990, 24) and
 - ix. The Cotonou, Bénin Republic, July 1993 Meeting, where the parties in conflict discussed encampment, disarmament, demobilization and time-table for general elections; (ECOWAS, 1990, 24)

In terms of material, Nigeria provided the bulk of the war machines and related support services. Indeed, Nigeria sacrificed so much to bring peace back to Liberia. In fact, the amount expended in terms of naira and kobo as well as the number of soldiers that paid the supreme price, had always been kept top secret by Nigerian officials until President Obasanjo made it open in 1999. According to Obasanjo, the amount Nigeria expended on the mission was in the neighbourhood of \$8 billion, about N759 to N800 billion. With the humongous human and material resources Nigeria deployed in the Liberian peace process, it is very easy for analysts to pontificate that it was stupid and idiotic for the government to commit such huge resources outside Nigeria, particularly at a time the country was grappling with its own economic and infrastructural problems. At the superficial level, this assertion may be right; however, international-relations pundits believe that no amount of money is too much to pursue a nation's

interest internationally. However, what is important is for Nigeria to reap both diplomatic and economic benefit of its investment. It was expected that Nigerian companies and other business concerns should have been part of the mission to rebuild Liberia after the war. This Nigeria failed to do and the Nigerian public, including foreign relations experts, score her very low in this respect. But this does not remove the fact that Nigeria took the lead in the process of restoring peace in Liberia, such that the country was commended for its brilliant regional approach to peace-making and peace-building. Nigeria has since remained a reference point in regional circles each time issues concerning conflict resolution are put on the table. As for the number of Nigerian soldiers who fell in Liberia, Nigerian officials, from Babangida to Abdulsalam Abubakar, had not been able to come out publicly with a number. This situation is however worrisome and dangerous to the already fragile corporate existence of Nigeria.

However, President Obasanjo in 1999 was able to put together some uncoordinated data/statistics of soldiers who fell in Liberia, at 1,000. Aside from the dead, thousands of Nigerians were wounded, with many of them permanently maimed. Quite a lot of Nigerian residents in Liberia were not spared in the crisis. In fact, ECOMOG soldiers who were taken prisoners of war (POWs) by the rebels, were not allowed to be seen, for the purpose of better care in medics and food supply which the ECOMOG High Command would have provided. However, in 1992 ECOMOG secured a line of supply to the POWs. A number of Nigerian soldiers, including top army officers, contacted full-blown AIDS and had since been receiving treatment at various Nigerian military hospitals, including the one located in Yaba, Lagos. It is believed that ECOMOG soldiers fathered not less than 25,000 kids while the war lasted (*The Guardian*, 1999: 1; *National Concord*, 1999: P.W 7; *Thisday*, 1999: 1; *The Punch*, 2001: 10; *Daily Champion*, 1999, 12).

In Obasanjo's words:

... we will never know the number of Nigerian civilians who lost their lives in the crisis in Liberia. The cost of this operation has been variously estimated. I will put the estimated cost of the operation to Nigeria at \$8 billion and the men and officers who paid the supreme price were between 500 and 1,000 (*National Concord*, 1990, 1).

Conclusion

By and large, Nigeria's involvement in the Liberian peace process was consistent with its avowed interest in peaceful resolution of conflict. It was also motivated by the need for the military junta to attract external credibility and forestall a tragedy of monumental proportions. This, however, was achieved at a very great cost in terms of human and material resources. And from the foregoing; it is clear that the difficulty in accounting properly for Nigeria's financial commitment and the number of Nigerian lives that were wasted in Liberia was due to government's lackadaisical attitude to issues of fiscal discipline,

accountability and love for fellow Nigerians. It is also due to the unusual ways by which government financed the operation, particularly by using dedicated accounts through the Ministries of Finance and Defence and extrabudgetary expenditure.

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