Lessons of Liberia

ECOMOG and Regional Peacekeeping

Long-standing ethnic, geographical, and religious conflicts continue to ravage significant sections of the developing world. Wars in Cambodia, Liberia, El Salvador, Afghanistan, and Rwanda have inflicted massive human suffering and economic destruction. Other countries, including Iraq, Nigeria, Burundi, and several former Soviet republics may soon erupt into large-scale violence.¹

States often lack adequate military and police forces to control many of these conflicts. Western nations, especially since the recent intervention in Somalia, hesitate to help police conflicts which do not threaten their own vital interests. The West and the United Nations have argued that subregional organizations and individual states should assume increasing security responsibilities. Yet when Boutros Boutros-Ghali, Secretary-General of the United Nations, recently called upon sixty non-African states to form a standby peacekeeping force for Burundi, only one state (Bangladesh) agreed.

If individual states lack the capability and if Western states lack the willingness to control third-world conflicts, what other options exist? This article examines the possible effectiveness of subregional military groupings by analyzing ECOMOG (Economic Community of West African States Cease-fire Monitoring Group), a combined West African force, in the Liberian conflict of 1989–96.

Advocates of subregional forces argue that these groupings, when compared to nonregional intervenors, have both political and military advantages.² Subregional forces understand the conflict better, enjoy greater political accep-

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distance by the combatants, will demonstrate a stronger and more lasting commitment, and can deploy relevant (and often cheaper) equipment and personnel. This article, by using ECOMOG's six-year Liberian involvement, disputes these claims and argues that an inadequate peacekeeping force may instead prolong a war and weaken regional stability. The lessons of ECOMOG, generally negative, are important for any future subregional force.

ECOMOG entered strife-torn Liberia in late August 1990. Initially composed of soldiers from five West African states, ECOMOG has lost about seven hundred men in combat while trying to establish a cease-fire. Its major opponent has been the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) headed by Charles Taylor. A cease-fire agreement in August 1995, "the Abuja Agreement," brought together all major combatants into a transitional government. ECOMOG still remained in Liberia in mid-1996, but fighting between various factions prevented ECOMOG from having a cease-fire to monitor.

The Liberian conflict is symptomatic of a growing number of third-world conflicts in countries where state legitimacy has eroded or disappeared, where poorly disciplined insurgencies of dispossessed and alienated rural youth acquire cheap modern weaponry and, with the aid of foreign business interests, loot the nation and rob it of its chances for development. Liberia's struggle illustrates the need for, but also the difficulties facing, foreign intervention forces.

While the Liberian war reflects several common problems, ECOMOG's intervention established several important precedents. ECOMOG became the first subregional military force in the third world since the end of the Cold War, and the first subregional military force with whom the United Nations agreed to work as a secondary partner. Liberia was one of the first conflicts where both the United Nations and the major regional organization, the Organization of African Unity (OAU), redefined traditional ideas of sovereignty in order to permit external intervention.

This article presents the background to the Liberian struggle, and outlines the creation and participation of ECOMOG in the conflict. It then reviews ECOMOG's successes and failures to derive lessons for subregional peacekeeping or peace enforcement forces.

**Background to the Liberian Struggle**

When ECOMOG arrived in Liberia in August 1990, it entered a country with a challenging geography, exploitable natural resources, and strong ethnic and
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historical divisions. Liberia is about the size of Tennessee and has a low coastal plain that merges into forested hills and mountains. Much of the interior is impassable by automobile, especially during the rainy season. The country has seventeen ethnic groups, none of which comprises more than 20 percent of the population. Among these groups, besides the “Americo-Liberians” who ruled Liberia until 1980, are the Mano and Gio in the north, the Mandingo in the west, and the Krahn in the northeast. Liberia’s pre-war population was slightly over two million. Considerable amounts of iron ore, timber, some gold and diamonds, and rubber constitute Liberia’s major resources.

Scholars such as Gus Liebenow and Christopher Clapham have documented the historical roots of Liberia’s present conflict. The American Colonization Society, assisted by the U.S. Navy, resettled freed slaves on “Liberia’s” shores in the 1820s. These “Americo-Liberians” never comprised more than five percent of Liberia’s population but gained national political control. Liberia became independent in 1847 and the Americo-Liberians’ “True Whig Party” soon began a continuous rule that lasted until 1980.

Political domination, economic exploitation, and the lack of widespread education prevented a common Liberian nationalism. Many observers believe that the Americo-Liberians soon displayed some of the worst traits of the antebellum U.S. south. Victims of American slavery became the victimizers of “the natives.” Economic exploitation of natural resources and labor without adequate compensation were common.

Future governments did begin political reform, but two trends in the 1970s sealed the True Whigs’ fate: a major drop in the terms of trade (higher oil prices and lower commodity export prices), and the government’s underbudgeting of the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL).

On April 12, 1980, indigenous non-commissioned officers successfully toppled Americo-Liberian rule. The coup enjoyed widespread initial support. But Samuel Doe, who promoted himself from Master Sergeant to General, drove


the country into deeper ethnic hostility and economic ruin and paved the way for Liberia's civil war.

The Doe government began its rule violently by publicly executing leading officials of the ancien regime. During the 1980s, Doe heavily politicized—"ethnicized"—the AFL, making it essentially a Krahn Presidential Guard. In 1985 the AFL killed as many as 3,000 Mano and Gio civilians following a coup attempt. Widespread corruption and the flight of Americo-Liberians brought economic chaos.

The United States and Nigeria supported the Doe government. Ever since World War II, the United States had viewed Liberia as having some strategic importance. Liberia allowed various U.S. strategic installations, e.g., radio transmission stations, and strongly supported the United States in most foreign policy debates.

During the 1980s, the Reagan administration poured about half a billion dollars of aid into this nation of 2.5 million people. The United States did press Doe to hold national elections in 1985 but, despite gross election irregularities, Washington continued to support the Doe regime. Oil-rich Nigeria, by far the most powerful West African state, sought expanded political influence. It competed vigorously against continuing French influence in the subregion (as well as becoming black Africa's leading opponent against South Africa's apartheid regime). Nigeria used economic assistance to strengthen its ties with neighboring Anglophone states, and Doe's Liberia was one of the leading examples. Nigeria's President, Ibrahim Babangida, provided Liberia with debt relief and some road and educational financing. But several French-speaking nations, notably Cote d'Ivoire, intensely disliked the Liberian government for a variety of personal and political reasons.

Having survived numerous coup attempts, Doe initially paid little attention to the small National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL)—one hundred or fewer men— which entered Nimba county from neighboring Cote d'Ivoire on Christ-

5. An interesting article on this period is Reid Kramer, "Liberia: A Casualty of the Cold War's End?" CSIS Africa Notes, No. 174 (July 1995). Kramer argues that the U.S. supported Doe as part of its strategy to topple Libya's Muammar al-Qaddafi.

6. Traditional colonial rivalries and present Anglophone suspicion of continuing French influence played the major role. But personality also figured prominently. President Houphouet-Boigny, the octogenarian ruler of Cote d'Ivoire, disliked the youthful and semi-literate Samuel Doe, who violently seized power and then executed former Liberian officials. Doe condemned to death A.B. Tolbert (the brother of President William Tolbert). His widow, Daise Tolbert, was Houphouet-Boigny's god-daughter; she later married Blaise Campaore, president of Burkina Faso. Not coincidentally, both Houphouet-Boigny and Campaore helped Charles Taylor, Doe's major opponent.
mas Eve, 1989. Charles Taylor, a former Doe official and alleged embezzler of $900,000 from the government, led the largely Mano-Gio NPFL.\(^7\) Libya had trained a core of his fighters, Burkina Faso had supplied them with Libyan weaponry, and Cote d’Ivoire had allowed them free transit across the border into Nimba county. Taylor’s force espoused no ideology beyond “democracy” and opposition to Doe, but drew significant support from Liberians united in their opposition to the Krahn (and Mandingo) rule of Samuel Doe.

The threat by Charles Taylor’s NPFL was real. Doe belatedly rushed a battalion of the AFL to Nimba county. The troops created more hostility against the already unpopular Doe by further brutal treatment of the Gio and Mano ethnic groups. Taylor took advantage of this anti-Doe backlash, and his NPFL force quickly spread through much of Liberia. By July 1990, it had reached Monrovia’s outskirts. Although Taylor’s forces numbered perhaps 10,000, they lacked substantial military training, and about 30 percent of its fighters were under the age of 17.

Taylor’s onslaught, and its counter-reaction, created significant savagery. On July 2 Taylor began his attack against Monrovia. NPFL forces singled out Krahn and Mandingo civilians for terminal retribution; the AFL, ostensibly a more disciplined unit, committed such atrocities as a massacre in St. Peter’s Lutheran Church on July 29.\(^8\)

By August, Doe’s government had clearly lost control of Liberia, as his shrinking regime hunkered down in government buildings. Mediation efforts by religious and other organizations (Liberian and non-Liberian) failed: Doe refused widespread demands—including one by Charles Taylor—that he resign.

A new faction, the INPFL (the Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia), split off from Taylor’s NPFL. The INPFL, led by Prince Yormie Johnson, fought both the AFL and the NPFL. Combatants from all three groups were destroying Liberia’s economic infrastructure. The fighting killed many more civilians than soldiers. Monrovia’s refugee-swollen population feared

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7. Charles Taylor had been Director-General of Liberia’s General Services Agency shortly following the 1980 coup. After some two years, Taylor left Liberia for America and began criticizing the Doe government. The Liberian government subsequently accused him of embezzling $900,000 and requested extradition. Taylor was imprisoned, awaiting extradition hearings, but managed to escape and travel back to West Africa, where he created the NPFL.

8. AFL personnel killed about 250 civilians seeking sanctuary in St. Peter’s, wounding several hundred others (the bodies rotted on church pews for three months). The AFL pursued survivors to a vacant USAID compound, where it killed several hundred more.
mass starvation and an incipient cholera epidemic. After July 2, relief ships
dared not enter Monrovia, since Lloyds of London refused to issue insurance.

The member states of ECOWAS, the Economic Community of West African
States, had been watching the nearby devastation with growing trepidation.
ECOWAS, founded in 1976, was the only West African organization that in-
cluded all sixteen of the region's states (nine Francophone states, five Anglo-
phone, and two Portuguese-speaking). Its mission was economic: to increase
trade and self-reliance through trade liberalization and currency convertibility.
It also called for the free movement by West Africans through the region.
ECOWAS had never fielded a military force, although it had two defense
protocols for mutual self-defense.

Some ECOWAS states feared that the war would increase refugee flows and
political instability in their already impoverished states and further persuade
already hesitant foreign investors not to invest in West Africa. Several ECOWAS
states worried about significant numbers of their citizens trapped in Liberia.10

No major power had expressed a desire to intervene militarily. Although the
United States had vastly more ties to Liberia than did any other African
country, it limited its involvement. Washington assisted initial mediation efforts
but never seriously considered military intervention to end the conflict.11 The
Soviet Union—a major reason for U.S. involvement in Africa after 1960—had
cessated to exist. Iraq's invasion of Kuwait (and the possibility of U.S. interven-
tion) was capturing U.S. attention by late summer 1990. Additionally, the
American media—especially television—had not significantly covered Libe-

9. The major Anglophone countries involved in the Liberian war were Nigeria, Ghana, and Sierra
Leone. The major Francophone states were Côte d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso, both of which sup-
ported the NPFL, and Guinea and Senegal, which contributed troops to ECOMOG. Most authori-
ties agree that among the reasons for ECOWAS' failure was that states placed their own needs
(and finite resources) above those of the region, and that national and regional instability also
lessened ECOWAS' effectiveness. In 1990 Ruby Ofori wrote that its "15 year history has been
rocked by border disputes, mass deportations, and mini wars, not to mention the personal
animosities between rival heads of state and deep seated rifts in anglo-francophone relations."

10. Significant numbers of Guineans, Nigerians, and Ghanaians were living in Liberia. Guinea
alone had perhaps 30,000. At one point Taylor held 3,000 Nigerians hostage within the Nigerian
embassy's grounds. Nigerian individuals held significant investments in Liberia; specific figures,
however, are lacking.

11. The United States staged three limited military interventions, in 1990, 1992, and 1996, to
extricate American and other foreign nationals from the fighting. The United States supplied $500
million of relief to Liberians and gave about $75 million in military assistance, mostly to individual
ECOMOG countries. The United States also supported, both financially and politically, several
major peace conferences. Critics accuse the United States, especially after the 1993 Cotonou and
1995 Abuja agreements, of delaying delivery to Liberia of needed logistical equipment.
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Liberia’s conflict and the civilian suffering. The United States had no desire to save its former client Doe, and Washington disliked both Taylor and Johnson.

The Organization of African Unity (OAU) and the United Nations paid scant official attention to Liberia’s suffering. The OAU, Africa’s major continent-wide organization, has always opposed military interference without invitation in the internal affairs of a fellow African state. In July 1990, Liberia’s UN ambassador tried but failed to have the Security Council consider the crisis. Not until January 1991—thirteen months after the war’s start and five months after the establishment of ECOMOG—did the Security Council publicly comment upon the war.12

ECOMOG’S BIRTH

Anglophone Nigeria was the leading supporter of a West African force for Liberia. In April 1990, at the urging of Nigeria’s President Ibrahim Babangida, a group of five ECOWAS members established a Standing Mediation Committee (SMC) to resolve Liberia’s conflict peacefully.13 For three weeks in July an all-inclusive grouping of Liberian movements attempted and failed to obtain a peace settlement leading to elections. By August, no peace settlement existed. Seeing no alternative, and believing that any further delay could result in a final bloodbath in Monrovia, the Committee on August 7 created the ECOWAS Ceasefire Monitoring Group, ECOMOG. Still hoping for a political resolution, it also called for a broadly-based interim government of Liberians to rule until elections occurred under international supervision.

ECOMOG received a broad mandate that encompassed both peacekeeping and peace enforcement.14 ECOMOG was “to conduct military operations for

13. Three Anglophone states (Nigeria, Gambia, and Ghana) and two Francophone states (Mali and Togo) comprised the SMC. The three Anglophone states would become heavily involved in ECOMOG, whereas the two Francophone states did not.
the purpose of monitoring the ceasefire, restoring law and order to create
the necessary conditions for free and fair elections to be held in Liberia," and to
aid the "release of all political prisoners and prisoners of war."  

Other more implicit and less Liberian-oriented goals helped prompt
ECOMOG's creation. Chike Akabogu of Nigeria's Concord Newspapers wrote
that a successful ECOMOG intervention would strengthen a largely moribund
ECOWAS and create a precedent of regional cooperation that the rest of Africa
could follow. Additionally, "it would signal to the rest of the world that African
nations were also ready and capable of responding to the critical economic,
political and security challenges of the new world order, without prompting
from erstwhile colonial powers." 

ECOMOG faced immediate problems of political unity, military capabilities,
and uncertain funding. ECOWAS itself was badly divided—mostly between
English and French-speaking states—throughout ECOMOG's existence. France
had continued close political and economic links with its former colonies, most
of whom feared Nigerian dominance of the region. Nigeria's gross national
product and population matched that of the combined fifteen other ECOWAS
members. While Nigeria was the strongest Anglophone power in the region,
Cote d'Ivoire was the leading proponent of Francophone Africa. During the
Nigerian Civil War (1967-70), Cote d'Ivoire had actively assisted Biafra's seces-
sionist attempt against Nigeria. The different colonial legacies, continuing
disparities, and the domestic needs of the individual members continued to
impede regional cooperation in the early 1990s.

Demonstrating ECOWAS's disunity was the fact that most of the ECOMOG
contributors came from Anglophone states: Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone, and
Gambia (Guinea initially was the only Francophone state). Nigeria would
supply about 70 percent of ECOMOG's men and matériel over the next five
years. Although its name (ECOWAS Cease-fire Monitoring Group) suggested
ECOWAS approval and sponsorship, only the Standing Mediation Committee

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15. "ECOWAS Standing Mediation Committee," Decision A/DEC, August 1, 1990, on the Cease-
fire and Establishment of an ECOWAS Cease-fire Monitoring Group for Liberia, Banjul, Republic
of the Gambia, August 7, 1990; cited in Mark Weller, ed., Regional Peace-Keeping and International
Enforcement: The Liberian Crisis, Cambridge International Document Series, Vol. 6 (Cambridge:
members had decided to create the force. By the time of ECOMOG’s August embarkation, ECOWAS’s supreme body had not officially sanctioned ECOMOG and its “Operation Liberty.” \(^{17}\) Several Francophone states in ECOWAS, notably Burkina Faso and Côte d’Ivoire, supported the insurgent Taylor. Blaise Campaore, President of Burkina Faso, warned of ECOMOG’s hostile reception. \(^{18}\)

ECOMOG also faced internal political divisions. Contributing members to ECOMOG disagreed about its goals and methods; e.g., should ECOMOG act only as a peacekeeper or, if necessary, also as a peace enforcer against Taylor’s NPFL? Nigeria’s dominance within ECOMOG was a continual concern, although this was rarely expressed publicly.

Partly to lessen tensions between contributors, ECOMOG diversified its command structure: despite Nigeria’s status as the major supplier of men, matériel, and money, Ghana was to provide the Force Commander, Guinea the Deputy Commander, and Nigeria the Chief of Staff. All five countries received some command positions. Nigeria provided economic incentives such as concessionary oil for nations to join and remain in ECOMOG. \(^{19}\)

ECOMOG could not call upon a strong history of regional military cooperation. It was an \textit{ad hoc} creation. Previous joint military activities had been intermittent, low-level, and not notably successful. \(^{20}\)

Funding was a problem. The SMC established the Special Emergency Fund, whose initial goal was for $50 million from African states and any other donors. But international passivity toward the conflict and the parlous financial state of most ECOMOG members resulted in incomplete funding for the new force.

\(^{17}\) ECOWAS did give formal approval in November, 1990.
\(^{19}\) Nigeria supplied concessionary, or possibly free, oil to President Jerry Rawlings of Ghana before Ghana’s 1992 presidential elections.
ECOMOG’S ENTRY INTO LIBERIA

In mid-August 1990, the ECOMOG force of about 2,700 men arrived in Sierra Leone; Liberia’s western neighbor would serve as ECOMOG’s forward staging base.

General Arnold Quainoo of Ghana, ECOMOG’s Force Commander, believed that the NPFL would lay down its arms once ECOMOG made clear both its determination and its armed capability. General Quainoo was wrong. On August 25, ECOMOG landed on Monrovia’s beaches amidst hostile fire.

The three factions split in their reaction. Prince Yourmie Johnson’s INPFL eagerly offered cooperation, as did the AFL, while Charles Taylor’s NPFL artillery quickly zeroed in on ECOMOG’s forces. The INPFL and the AFL cooperated with ECOMOG for two self-serving reasons: each was too weak to challenge ECOMOG directly, but each could benefit from ECOMOG’s protection and from any destruction ECOMOG inflicted upon Taylor. The INPFL’s initial aid to ECOMOG gave it special privileges, which included unhindered armed access to ECOMOG headquarters.

ECOMOG’s overall strategy was for its conventional military force to intimidate the three factions while an interim government tried to resolve political differences and prepare Liberia for peaceful elections. On August 27 the Standing Mediation Committee convened the “All Liberia Conference” of seventeen Liberian political groupings and parties. The Conference endorsed the SMC’s peace plan and elected an interim president, Professor Amos Sawyer, and a legislature. ECOWAS hoped to limit its political responsibilities and thus avoid ECOMOG being perceived as “an army of occupation.” The interim government of Liberians, rather than ECOWAS or ECOMOG, was to exercise sovereignty over Liberia.

Although ECOMOG established a beachhead, at first it moved slowly against the NPFL. ECOMOG’s Force Commander, General Quainoo, considered his role that of peacekeeper, rather than peace enforcer.

Problems mostly caused by ECOMOG’s inexperience quickly arose. A surprise NPFL attack caught ECOMOG unawares and almost overran its headquarters. On September 9, INPFL forces murdered seventy Doe bodyguards—at ECOMOG’s headquarters—and then murdered Doe himself nearby. The AFL suspected ECOMOG connivance, and AFL soldiers torched sections of Mon-

21. Quainoo, a three-star general, was ECOMOG’s only Force Commander. Subsequent ECOMOG commanders, all of them two-star generals, have had the title of Field Commander.
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rovia. Soon afterwards, the INPFL detained a platoon of Nigerians until ECOMOG swapped two 105mm howitzers for them.

A close observer of these events says that “Quainoo was rattled; he simply wasn’t capable.” Quainoo reportedly called a meeting where he called for ECOMOG withdrawal from Liberia. Nigerian Brigadier C.K. Iweze, Quainoo’s second-in-command, acknowledges that “most of the soldiers welcomed the thought of the said withdrawal.”

Nigeria worried that ECOMOG, which Nigeria had largely created, might not survive. Nigeria asserted its dominance of ECOMOG by having Dawda Jawara, who was Chairman of ECOWAS’s Authority of Heads of State and Government, replace Quainoo with the more aggressive Major-General Joshua Dogonyaro of Nigeria.

Nigeria also persuaded ECOMOG to shift temporarily from peacekeeping to peace enforcing. Nigeria and Ghana supplied 3,000 additional men, more offensive weaponry and some offensive air capability. ECOMOG now took the offensive. By October, Dogonyaro was using Nigeria’s 77th Airborne Battalion and the two Ghanaian battalions to outflank the now-retreating Taylor.

The military pressure forced Taylor to sign a cease-fire at Bamako, Mali, on November 28. ECOMOG member states had had little previous knowledge of Taylor and assumed (or hoped) that he signed the cease-fire in good faith. Between August and the end of November 1990, ECOMOG had moved from peacekeeper to peace enforcer; with the Bamako cease-fire, it moved back to peacekeeper. ECOMOG controlled Monrovia, whereas Taylor controlled what he termed “Greater Liberia”—practically all of the rest of Liberia.

ECOMOG’s offensive certainly saved thousands of lives by preventing a factional battle for Monrovia and by restoring peace that allowed food and medical supplies to enter Monrovia. The offensive also provided breathing space for subsequent negotiations. The cease-fire, although increasingly shaky, lasted for two years. Joshua Iroha of Nigeria served as ECOWAS’s Special Representative in trying to reach a lasting peace settlement.

However, the relative peace also allowed all sides to rebuild themselves militarily. Burkina Faso resupplied the Taylor insurgency’s limited needs. Taylor also built his own resource base by extorting resources from several large

24. Sir Dawda Jawara was also president of The Gambia from 1966 until a 1994 military coup.
businesses and by selling gold, diamonds, and hardwoods to commercial middlemen.

The prolonging of the war also allowed new factions to form. Johnson's INPFL, having split from Taylor's NPFL, would fight until late 1992. Taylor spread the war beyond Liberia by creating and arming a spin-off faction, mostly composed of dissident Sierra Leoneans called the Revolutionary United Front (RUF). He hoped to tie down ECOMOG troops from Nigeria, Guinea, and Sierra Leone, and to pressure the Sierra Leonean government into withdrawing support of ECOMOG. RUF invaded Sierra Leone in March 1991.

Many anti-Taylor refugees, mostly Krahn and Mandingo, had fled to Sierra Leone. These refugees, among whom were many former AFL soldiers, reacted to the RUF invasion by forming ULIMO (United Liberation Movement of Liberians For Democracy) around May 1991. Soon ULIMO was skirmishing with RUF and by February 1992 had crossed into Liberia. ULIMO later split into two forces: the mostly Mandingo ULIMO-K and later the mostly Krahn ULIMO-J. The AFL lost many of its soldiers, who joined ULIMO-J or another Krahn faction, George Boley's Liberian Peace Council (LPC), which operated in southeast Liberia.

The Krahns' armed power far exceeded their numerical strength. They comprised only 4 percent of Liberia's population and therefore feared for their survival, given their close identification with the repressive Doe regime. Not surprisingly, the Krahn had then equipped themselves heavily, from AFL armories or from covert ECOMOG deliveries.

Few, if any, of these groups took ideological positions; most voiced instead some ethnic defensiveness or personal dislike of an opposing faction leader. Self-enrichment was often a major goal; all of these factions helped support themselves by looting various resources which they then sold to international middlemen. Human Rights Watch/Africa said the factions' human rights records ranged "from suspect to abysmal."

ECOMOG at times provided ULIMO-K, ULIMO-J, and the LPC with arms, ammunition, intelligence, transport, and free passage to help press the war against Taylor. For example, in 1990 it provided ammunition to the INPFL and to the AFL. Though documentation is sparse, ECOMOG at the unit level apparently provided troop transport and protection and transport for the

25. The Nigerian, Guinean, and Sierra Leonean troops did not fall under ECOMOG's command since they were stationed outside of Liberia.
factions’ loot. Such shipments raised capital for these groups. Guinea supported the mostly Mandingo ULIMO-K. Nigeria first supported ULIMO-K, but later switched its support to the breakaway ULIMO-J.

ECOMOG had first realized the usefulness of factions when it employed Prince Johnson’s INPFL for combat and intelligence during ECOMOG’s first several weeks in Monrovia, when the INPFL guided ECOMOG troops through the baffling swamps of Monrovia. Later, ECOMOG air-transported ULIMO into Monrovia, and ULIMO guided ECOMOG through the swamps.

Most ECOMOG and Nigerian contacts with the factions occurred for two reasons. Some ECOMOG officers had become frustrated with ECOMOG’s political and military limitations—adherence to a peacekeeping mandate, fear of high body counts and escalating financial costs, and scant counterinsurgency capability—and saw the factions as an effective force to realize ECOMOG’s military goals. The Liberian factions knew the countryside better, cost less to operate, and if killed did not cause political problems back home in ECOMOG countries. Basic greed was a second reason. Individual ECOMOG officers assisted the factions in their looting by providing armed protection and transport.27

Peace talks, notably those at Yamoussoukro, Cote d’Ivoire, between July and October 1991, vainly attempted to bring a more lasting peace. The Yamoussoukro accords provided for a cease-fire, disarmament, encampment, an interim government and various steps towards elections. To increase non-Nigerian presence in ECOMOG, Senegal, with U.S. financing, sent two battalions to ECOMOG in late 1991.

The Liberian conflict exacted wider political casualties. Sierra Leonean soldiers, mostly ECOMOG veterans, fought RUF in early 1992. The war was destroying the country’s economy, and the ECOMOG soldiers suffered from missing paychecks, irregular supplies, and minimal logistics support. In April 1992, these soldiers overthrew Joseph Momoh, Sierra Leone’s president.

The Yamoussoukro cease-fire between the NPFL and ECOMOG continued throughout much of 1992, despite the growing fighting between ULIMO and the NPFL. ECOMOG soldiers began dispersing throughout much of Liberia, as called for by the Yamoussoukro accords, in late April 1992.

Yet events on the battlefield were undermining conference agreements. Citing the spread of ULIMO—by August, 1992, it had captured much of north-

27. A 1995 example offered by diplomats in Liberia was that of a Nigerian colonel who traded timber rights in his command sector for a monthly payment of five hundred dollars.
western Liberia—Taylor refused to disarm and continued to fight ULIMO and also to mistreat some ECOMOG peacekeepers.28

On October 5, 1992, the NPFL irrevocably broke the cease-fire by mounting “Operation Octopus,” a two-month siege of ECOMOG-held Monrovia. Burkina Faso soldiers may have led the NPFL’s offensive.29 ECOMOG’s departing Field Commander, General Ishaya Bakut, reflected ECOMOG’s, and especially Nigeria’s, disenchantment with Taylor: “I now realize that I was wrong about Taylor’s intention. It is quite clear that Taylor is not sincere about disarmament nor is he willing to let anything stand between him and the Executive Mansion.”30

Taylor’s aggression had again pushed ECOMOG into peace enforcement. ECOMOG began some five months of fighting, its first peace enforcement actions in almost two years. (Between ECOMOG’s August 1990 landing and October 1992’s Operation Octopus, the worst single day of casualties had occurred when twenty-seven ECOMOG officers died from drinking wood alcohol marketed as Scotch whiskey or gin). By late December, ECOMOG’s General Adetunji Olourin had pushed the NPFL out beyond Monrovia’s suburbs. By April, ECOMOG had taken the major towns of Harbel and Kakata and then the port of Buchanan, 90 miles from Monrovia.

By mid-1993, Taylor was retreating throughout much of Liberia and was losing his economic base. Africa Confidential observed that Taylor “is in the difficult position of leading a guerrilla force which has to hold vast swatches of territory on a sharply declining revenue base.”31 ECOMOG had captured major revenue sources such as the Firestone rubber plantation and the port of

28. In one case, the NPFL surrounded a Nigerian contingent that ECOMOG had ordered to withdraw to Monrovia. Following intervention by former U.S. President Jimmy Carter, the NPFL released the Nigerians, but only after stripping them of their uniforms, weapons, and personal effects. This and other Taylor humiliations, e.g., the NPFL killing of three Nigerian journalists, further embittered ECOMOG, and especially Nigerian officers, against the NPFL. Carter and the International Negotiations Network of the Carter Center (Emory University) worked for a Liberian cease-fire. Carter visited Liberia and met with Taylor in late 1991. Many Liberians felt that Carter was too accepting of Taylor, especially when Carter proposed that ECOMOG remove all of its offensive weaponry from Liberia during the cease-fire. See “Report: AFP Report On Jimmy Carter’s Proposals at Yamoussoukro Summit,” November 1, 1991, cited in Weller, Regional Peace-keeping, p. 217.


Buchanan. Those French and Lebanese trading interests which had been aiding the NPFL fled.

ECOMOG’s aggressive peace enforcement once again forced Taylor to negotiate. A July 1993 meeting in Cotonou, Benin, saw the combatants agree to another cease-fire, a coalition interim government, and free elections within seven months of the cease-fire. The Cotonou agreement attempted to assuage continuing worries about a biased, Nigerian-dominated ECOMOG by incorporating United Nations involvement and by sanctioning the inclusion of east African troops into ECOMOG.

Cotonou marked the first time that the UN had ever agreed to cooperate with a non-UN peacekeeping force. The UN dispatched UNOMIL, the United Nations Observer Mission in Liberia.32 In early 1994, 368 UN observers arrived in Monrovia. About the same time, a battalion each of Tanzanian and Ugandan troops, under ECOMOG command and financed by the United States, also arrived in early 1994.33 The factions, however, began working against ECOMOG’s aims. Just as ULIMO had helped scuttle the Yamoussoukro talks, so in late 1993 another ECOMOG-supported faction, the Liberian Peace Council (LPC), threatened Cotonou. The LPC quickly began fighting the NPFL. Supporters of ULIMO member Alhaji Kromah also began disregarding ECOMOG; in mid-December at Kakata they blocked food aid intended for NPFL areas. ECOMOG, and Nigeria in particular, grew increasingly angry at Kromah’s independence and aided, if not incited, a split. In March 1994 ULIMO officially split into the two factions, with the original, mostly Mandingo, ULIMO becoming ULIMO-K and the Krahn group becoming ULIMO-J. Continued fighting forced the UN to reduce its observer mission drastically to about sixty in mid-1995.

Fighting continued in mid-1994, despite a Cotonou-decreed new government (the Council of State) and ECOMOG attempts at demobilizing the factions. In July, a Coalition of Forces, comprising the Krahn’s AFL, LPC, and ULIMO-J,

32. UNOMIL had the following responsibilities: “to monitor the ceasefire, to monitor the UN and ECOWAS arms embargo, to assist in the disarmament and demobilization of combatants, to observe and verify the election process, to help with coordination of the humanitarian aid effort [and] to report on human rights violations.” “UN Observer Mission In Liberia,” full-page UNOMIL advertisement in The Eye (Monrovia), June 23, 1995, p. 6.
33. The United States provided $32 million, which paid for transport to and from Liberia, eleven five-ton trucks and 14 “Humvee” vehicles, tents, and battalion-level radio equipment for the two battalions. The United States had also discussed with Zimbabwean and Egyptian officials the possibility of financing troops from those two nations. Some U.S. officials claim that Zimbabwe initially wanted $100 million in cash and equipment from the United States before Zimbabwe would provide two battalions to ECOMOG.
captured Taylor’s headquarters at Gbarnga with ECOMOG’s blessing. Taylor recaptured Gbarnga in September.

The Liberian conflict claimed another political casualty. Gambian soldiers in ECOMOG (about 30 at any given time) had complained that they had not received their extra pay for serving in ECOMOG. On July 23, 1994, the Gambian military overthrew Sir Dawda Jawara.

Mid-year meetings in 1995 between Taylor and Sani Abacha, Nigeria’s Head of State, in Abuja, Nigeria, paved the way for a peace settlement on August 19. By early 1996, a fragile peace floated above Liberia, and there was some hope that if ECOMOG controlled its former allies, the elections scheduled by the Abuja accord for August 1996 would occur. Charles Taylor might win national elections and thus come to power peacefully under the eyes of ECOMOG soldiers.

However, ECOMOG did not control the factions. In early January 1996, the two ULIMO factions fought at Tubmanberg and an attempt to quell the fighting resulted in about fifty dead ECOMOG soldiers. Then in April 1996 the NPFL, temporarily aligned with ULIMO-K, attacked the three Krahn groups (the LPC, ULIMO-J, and the AFL) in Monrovia. The fighting killed an unknown number of Monrovians and destroyed sections of Monrovia. This upsurge in violence prevented the August 1996 elections from taking place. Elections are now scheduled for late May 1997, with a new government to be installed by mid-June. Thus, by mid-1996 Liberia appeared as lacking in hope as it did almost six years earlier, when ECOMOG soldiers first landed in Liberia.

**Analysis of ECOMOG**

The world in 1990 welcomed ECOMOG, hoping that it could become a model for future subregional forces which might exhibit political and military advantages over Western military units. Such a force could enjoy greater political acceptance among the combatants, display more knowledge about the contested country’s political issues and physical geography, and maintain a greater commitment to ending a nearby struggle whose suffering could affect neighboring states. Additionally, it could employ more suitable military capabilities. These four factors—acceptance, knowledge, commitment, and military suitability—could, it was hoped, quickly resolve regional conflicts. In this section I examine how well ECOMOG met these hopes.
POLITICAL ACCEPTANCE
Will Africans accept other African peacekeeping forces more willingly than those from outside the continent? The Liberian experience suggests that existing subregional (and bilateral) differences could pose several serious problems.

First, new subregional forces will reflect existing political tensions. For example, subregional cleavages—Francophone vs. Anglophone; Nigeria’s status as West Africa’s economic and military juggernaut—created difficulties for ECOMOG. Robert Mortimer notes that “the multilateral, but Nigerian-dominated, force is more a classic study of competing national interests in the West African subregion than . . . a case study in regional peacekeeping.”

Burkina Faso and Cote d’Ivoire supported Taylor, while Guinea and Senegal supported ECOMOG. Most other Francophone states favored ECOMOG as a peacekeeper rather than a peace enforcer and, at least by 1992, were seeking a stronger UN presence to lessen Nigeria’s influence.

Serious Anglophone-Francophone divisions also occurred within ECOMOG. The Guineans, “being asked to fight was a deliberate attempt by the Anglophones to eliminate the Francophones.” During Operation Octopus, as Nigeria and Sierra Leone pursued a major offensive against Taylor’s NPFL, most of the Francophone participants in ECOMOG resisted, believing that a peaceful UN involvement would lessen antagonism between ECOMOG and the NPFL. Nigeria’s effective control over ECOMOG’s operations frequently irritated numerous non-Nigerian officers: “Big Brother” was a term used frequently to refer to the Nigerian contingent.

Second, national aims of the contributing states may collide with those of the subregional force. The immediate result—increased tension within the multinational force and a corresponding drop in efficiency—could prompt a contingent to abandon the alliance.

Several examples of national desires aggravating ECOMOG tensions appeared in the war’s first few months. For example, Nigeria had agreed that a Ghanaian should always command ECOMOG but, following General Quainoo’s apparent incompetence, Nigeria pushed to have him removed; since late 1990 only Nigerians have commanded ECOMOG, a fact resented by non-Nigerian officers.

ECOMOG had ordered in August 1990 that fighting vehicles should be the first to land on Monrovia’s beaches but, Iweze recalls, “some countries decided [otherwise] and started bringing in their five and ten ton trucks loaded with fish and rice. . . . We were lucky that the opposing forces did not meet us with a higher degree of opposition. . . . We would have been sitting ducks.” ECOMOG suffered from numerous other examples of independent decision-making.37

The political background of a subregional force’s governments will affect the force’s political legitimacy and probably also its acceptance. ECOMOG’s mandate included “creat[ing] the necessary conditions for free and fair elections,” a novel function for most of ECOMOG’s forces.38 Few of the governments contributing to ECOMOG had been democratically elected; most, indeed, had gained power through military force, like Taylor himself was attempting, and few of them tolerated much domestic dissent.

Existing political baggage may limit Western support. U.S. “decertification” of Nigeria for involvement in the international drug trade hurt ECOMOG’s already serious financial plight. As a result, the United States provided bilateral assistance to all nations except Nigeria until late 1995. ECOMOG officials correctly claim that bilateral funding contributed to disparate military capabilities and jealousy among its members.

A regional force’s conduct will, ipso facto, affect the force’s acceptance. A major worry for an intervention force is that a prolonged presence may change public perception of the force from an army of liberation to an army of occupation. ECOMOG largely avoided this by wisely not assuming sovereignty for Liberia. ECOWAS’ Standing Mediation Committee had encouraged a Liberian interim government and ECOMOG publicly cooperated with local authorities. Yet many Monrovians were of two minds about ECOMOG: a heartfelt—sometimes tearful—appreciation for its saving Monrovia in 1990 and 1992 was often balanced by anger about suspected widespread corruption and high-handedness.

37. Iweze, “Nigeria,” p. 222. Soon after landing, the Guinean battalion was to capture territory around Spriggs-Payne airfield and wait for a linkup with the Ghanaian battalion. But, perhaps on orders from Conakry, the Guineans, without notifying ECOMOG headquarters, decided to leave the captured territory in order to liberate their embassy. The NPFL surrounded them and the Ghanaian battalion finally rescued them with losses of men and matériel. The Ghanaian battalion landed with a well-stocked mobile hospital, but disregarded a common pooling policy. Therefore, writes Iweze, “only Ghanaian soldiers were being given attention in terms of surgery.” Iweze, “Nigeria,” p. 237.

38. Weller, Regional Peace-Keeping, p. 68.
Alliances with local factions, while offering an outside force some military advantages, may lessen the intervenors’ political standing. In particular, a subregional force’s acceptance of, and by, some factions will lessen its acceptance by others. Torture, rape, pillage and even examples of cannibalism by ECOMOG-supported factions hurt ECOMOG’s general political acceptance. A subregional force has less control over factions—and their misdeeds—than over its own troops.

ECOMOG’s African composition, by itself, did nothing to gain Charles Taylor’s acceptance. He distrusted ECOMOG before it landed, and ECOMOG’s quick military cooperation with the AFL and INPFL cemented his anger. Taylor called for Liberian unity against purported Nigerian hegemony. The AFL and INPFL welcomed ECOMOG, not so much as fellow African peacekeepers, but as possible allies against the NPFL.39 Taylor’s NPFL and its regional backers, Burkina Faso and Côte d’Ivoire, opposed ECOMOG, in part, because of Nigeria’s support of Doe, its dominance within ECOMOG, and its perceived regional intentions.

A respected external organization with no direct interest in the conflict, other than seeing it resolved, can bestow needed legitimacy and acceptance, but the subregional force may dislike and work against such an organization. UNOMIL could have acted as a watchdog for ECOMOG, yet UNOMIL had little independent authority. ECOMOG cooperated, grudgingly, at best, with UNOMIL. Several UNOMIL officials complained that ECOMOG did not want UNOMIL observing activities relating to arms flows, human rights abuses, and food shipments. The overall result was that ECOMOG lost a chance to restore some of its desired neutrality and public acceptance.40

GREATER KNOWLEDGE
The West’s limited knowledge of the developing world can endanger military interventions, as the United States and the UN realized in the case of Somalia. Will countries from the same subregion necessarily have superior or even adequate knowledge? Not necessarily, according to ECOMOG’s experience.

39. Surprisingly, ECOWAS may not have anticipated this challenge to its neutrality. Iweze writes that, at the creation of ECOMOG, “we asked the ECOWAS Secretariat for our anticipated reaction to the leaders of the warring factions should we meet them. Unfortunately, the leadership could not provide an answer.” Iweze, “Nigeria,” p. 219.

40. General John Inienger, ECOMOG’s Field Commander in 1995, vigorously disputed allegations about corruption, human rights abuses, and aid to the factions. General Inienger also argued that the UN should “come to Liberia’s aid by providing resources [to ECOMOG]. We can perform the job.” Interview with General John Inienger, June 29, 1995.
Despite geographical proximity, neighboring states in Africa often have surprisingly limited knowledge about each other. Ignorance about Liberia hurt ECOMOG’s military operations and the framing of a precise mandate.

West Africa has a wide range of ethnic, linguistic, and cultural groupings as well as a lack of regional transport and communication and political-economic cooperation. West African states knew Liberia better than did any other state (with the exception of the United States), but ECOMOG’s initial understanding of Taylor and his motives proved negligible. It certainly misjudged Taylor’s willingness and ability to resist the multinational force. ECOMOG officers note that ECOMOG lacked substantial understanding about Taylor’s organization and the strength of his domestic support. These officers acknowledge that ECOMOG initially assumed that the superior firepower of their conventional, professional force would \textit{a priori} intimidate the ragtag NPFL.\footnote{Interview with Ghanaian diplomat, June 16, 1995; discussions with ECOMOG/ECOWAS personnel.} This fatal assumption encouraged the broadness of ECOMOG’s mandate; the assumption was that it could quickly achieve the cease-fire it was to monitor. Furthermore, both ECOWAS and the United States underestimated the willingness of Burkina Faso, Cote d’Ivoire, and private businesses to assist the NPFL and thus prolong the conflict. Lack of intelligence hurt ECOMOG’s tactical capabilities. Iweze writes that ECOMOG based its initial planning on a “tourist map of Monrovia.”\footnote{Iweze, “Nigeria,” p. 221.} ECOMOG lacked adequate topographic maps until the United States provided them.\footnote{The United States withheld some intelligence from ECOMOG but did furnish maps. No country, including the United States, had 1:50,000-scale maps of all of Liberia, which ECOMOG officers wanted even though, as one U.S. military analyst noted, “this was the part of Africa we knew best.” Interview with a U.S. military analyst, October 15, 1995.}

ECOMOG and ECOWAS compounded their initial ignorance about the conflict by not adequately supporting their political Special Representative. Ambassador Joshua Iroha, who later became Nigeria’s ambassador to Liberia, did serve as ECOWAS Special Representative, but a lack of funding, disagreements over areas of responsibility, and personality differences led to his withdrawal after about two years.

Knowledge, along with military capabilities, is crucial for specifying whether the intervenors should pursue peacekeeping or peace enforcing. ECOMOG’s ignorance encouraged the new force to seek numerous—and contradictory—goals. ECOMOG first assumed that it would be a peacekeeper, an interpositional force between armed but peaceful forces as in Cyprus. It believed that the NPFL would cease fighting when confronted by ECOMOG, and that ECO-
MOG’s conventional strength would quickly defeat Taylor’s forces if the NPFL did choose armed resistance. Until 1992’s Operation Octopus, much of ECOWAS believed that Taylor would settle for a power-sharing agreement. Only after that did ECOWAS and ECOMOG fully realize Taylor’s unqualified political ambition.

The uncertain mandate—interpreted differently by contributing nations—weakened ECOMOG’s initial military capabilities. Iweze writes that “because the structure of the Force was not clear from the onset, many troops arrived without personal weapons . . . Some contingents comprised . . . para-military forces [having] essentially those [weapons] of customs and immigration duties.”

ECOMOG’s mandate—“to keep the peace, restore law and order and ensure respect for the ceasefire”—was, as one leading Western diplomat in Liberia concluded, “way too mushy.” It simultaneously attempted impartial peacekeeping (without a peace to keep) and biased peace enforcement. ECOMOG’s title—“Ceasefire Monitoring Group”—suggests the former interpretation, but the active NPFL antagonism sometimes forced the latter.

COMMITMENT

A subregional force may exhibit greater resolve toward solving the conflict, but this commendable goal could produce unfortunate results which would prolong the hostilities. A war’s prolongation can sap the will of the force’s contributors. The ECOMOG states clearly did not expect the war to last very long: a top Ghanaian Foreign Ministry official thought of six months as the absolute maximum period. Yet all of the original contributors remained, despite the financial costs. The reasons ranged from humanitarianism to a concern for regional stability to fear of losing political face. Nigeria has suffered perhaps six hundred killed in action and spent perhaps a billion dollars, above normal operating costs, on a conflict that did not directly affect its own security, at a

46. Interview with American diplomat, June 23, 1996. Ibrahim Gambari, Nigeria’s ambassador to the UN, concurs that the mandate, “at least at first, was ambiguous. Neither the diplomats nor the soldiers charged with implementing it knew what to make of it. They did not know whether they were a peacekeeping or a peace-enforcing body. . . Consequently, ‘complications, dissensions and dissonance’ were rife in their interpretation of the ECOMOG mandate.” Ibrahim Gambari, “The Role of Foreign Intervention in African Reconstruction,” in I.W. Zartman, ed., Collapsed States (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 1995), p. 231.
47. Interview with Ghanaian diplomat, June 16, 1996.
time when its 1995 foreign debt stood at $35 billion. No Western nation, especially following the Somalian intervention, could match such commitment. Yet while the original five ECOMOG contingents remained in Liberia, they did not actively attempt to end the war militarily.

Rather than acknowledge failed commitment by withdrawing from a prolonged conflict, the subregional force may alter its strategy; this, paradoxically, may further prolong the struggle. It might take on a more conservative strategy, with the use of surrogates and adoption of peacekeeping rather than peace enforcement.

ECOMOG states remained in Liberia only by lessening the force’s involvement and aiding the factions which, in turn, prolonged the war and looting. By not carrying the war outside of Monrovia, except when attacked in late 1992, ECOMOG allowed Taylor to recover from his defeats in 1990 and 1992, and to loot much of the Liberian countryside.

ECOMOG increasingly supported the surrogates who demonstrated more commitment to fighting Taylor than did ECOMOG. Since these factions operated out of ECOMOG’s sight and because their goal—containing Taylor—aided ECOMOG, they generally had carte blanche in their everyday operations. Abuse of human rights became the norm. Taylor increasingly could not engage ECOMOG because of multi-front pressure from ULIMO-K, ULIMO-J, and the LPC. But this led to the growth of quasi-independent factions, a loss of ECOMOG neutrality, and greater devastation of rural Liberia. ULIMO’s fighting against the NPFL helped undermine the Yamoussoukro Accords; the LPC’s attacks against the NPFL hurt implementation of the Cotonou agreements. When ECOWAS and ECOMOG finally gained a peace settlement with Taylor in 1995, the factions began to oppose ECOMOG.

Deciding upon, and then maintaining, a mandate is often difficult: regional, domestic, and local politics affect the process. Nigeria and Ghana strongly disagreed about Charles Taylor. For most, although not all, of ECOMOG’s first three years, Nigerian officers considered Taylor the main impediment to peace and hoped to pursue him vigorously, sometimes with air strikes and assassination attempts. Ghana, however, felt that the powerful Taylor was essential to Liberia’s peace, and that demonizing and actively pursuing him would only prolong the war.48

48. A top-ranking Ghanaian diplomat felt that “Guinea, Sierra Leone, and Nigeria saw the NPFL as the enemy. This preoccupation was not helpful—it drove the NPFL into a corner.” Ibid.
Changing politics within contributing nations may alter the mandate. Nigeria's concerns about the political and economic costs of a possible Vietnam-like quagmire increasingly weakened that nation's peace enforcement strategy. Herman Cohen notes that "Nigeria worried about its participation in ECOMOG becoming a domestic issue . . . and worked to keep it from becoming one." Field commander appointments fluctuated between aggressive leaders such as Dogonyaro and Olourin who pressed the war but caused more casualties, and the more passive generals such as Kupolati and Bakut, who only maintained the stalemate but incurred less cost and fewer casualties.

Local political realities will also affect the mandate. Taylor's popularity (and Doe's unpopularity) weakened ECOMOG's solidarity. The AFL had committed most of the atrocities by August 1990. At least until Doe's death, Taylor did not appear clearly as the enemy to some ECOMOG members. Taylor had started and led the crusade against the despotic Doe, he had a substantial following of Liberians and, at least until Doe's death, he claimed to abjure personal political gain.

**SUITABILITY OF MILITARY CAPABILITIES**

Does a third-world subregional grouping enjoy some military advantages over a Western force? It could field equipment and personnel well-suited for the terrain, an adequate intelligence capability, and a strong strategic sense at a reasonable cost.

ECOMOG, however, lacked much of the equipment, maintenance, manpower, administration, and intelligence required for counterinsurgency in Liberia. ECOMOG's Order of Battle was not suited for counterinsurgency. Modern counterinsurgency warfare almost invariably requires significant use of helicopter and spotter aircraft; in mid-1995, however, ECOMOG's only helicopter was for the Field Commander's personal travel (previously one Nigerian helicopter was in Monrovia and two were in Sierra Leone). Other equipment was often costly and ill-suited for Liberia's heavily forested interior, e.g., main battle tanks.

Inadequate maintenance, often a serious problem in third world militaries, plagued ECOMOG. Several countries did have helicopters, yet much of the

49. Interview with Herman Cohen, October 1995. Ambassador Cohen served as Assistant Secretary of State for Africa under President Bush.

50. ECOMOG's potential Order of Battle (OB) was impressive at first glance. Nigeria alone had 257 tanks, 95 combat aircraft, an 80,000-man army, artillery, and a navy with several frigates, corvettes and missile craft. But Order of Battle is often deceiving about military capability.
equipment was not battle-ready, or else the countries preferred to hoard it for their own domestic defense. Defense analysts in late 1995 noted that most of Ghana’s eight helicopters and Nigeria’s fifteen armed helicopters had not flown for several years, owing to the expensive maintenance—generally, four hours of maintenance for every flying hour—that helicopters require.51

Communications posed a basic problem. For too long ECOMOG lacked lateral (within national contingents) and horizontal (between contingents) capability. ECOMOG’s forward checkpoints in October 1992 lacked radios to inform ECOMOG headquarters of Taylor’s start of “Operation Octopus.”52

Incompatibility of equipment hampered ECOMOG, albeit decreasingly. National contingents arrived in 1990 with various mixtures of Western and Eastern bloc equipment.53

A possible selling point of ECOMOG was its low cost, relative to the more sophisticated first world forces. Pay scales and logistical support certainly are less expensive. Yet ECOMOG’s matériel, which often was not especially suited to counterinsurgency, and its inadequate maintenance restricted ECOMOG’s military capabilities.

ECOMOG’s manpower—a maximum of about 12,500 but sometimes as low as 2,700—was too small for peace enforcement or even for effective peacekeeping. Several West African officials speculated that ECOMOG would need 20,000 men for peace enforcement, rather than the 6,000–10,000 it usually had. Some of ECOMOG’s checkpoints were as much as twenty-two kilometers apart. ECOMOG’s size (and amount of equipment) was large enough to prevent a final battle for Monrovia, but the force was not large enough to push the factions into successful peace talks. Prolongation of the war was the result.

Inclusion of non-regional forces may provide mixed results. The addition of Tanzanian and Ugandan soldiers in February 1994 provided more men and “de-Nigerianized” ECOMOG, a long-standing Taylor and Francophone de-

51. Apparently for the same reason, Nigeria used only two of its twenty-one Alpha ground attack fighters in Liberia (reportedly none flew there during 1995). Nigeria rarely committed any of its approximately twenty-two MiG-21 fighters; only two of its fifteen Jaguar reconnaissance fighters have seen even limited use.
52. ECOMOG’s communications capability improved, but even in mid-1995 ECOMOG officers (including General Inienger) and Western observers quickly commented upon ECOMOG’s lack of radios. Communications with the ECOWAS Secretariat in Lagos, Nigeria were, at least initially, problematic: quite early in the operation, an important ECOWAS decision did not reach ECOMOG headquarters for a month. Iweze, “Nigeria,” p. 238.
53. During the 1990-92 cease-fire, Nigeria provided compatible radio equipment at the battalion level, but even then, companies in different contingents could not communicate with each other, often because of different frequencies.
mand. What limited information is available on the Tanzanian and Ugandan ECOMOG experience, however, suggests that these two non-West African forces displayed even less commitment than did the West African contingents. The Tanzanians and Ugandans rarely saw combat, and when they did they sometimes performed inadequately. In a 1994 situation, the NPFL confronted several Tanzanian companies—a total of about 300 men—which decided not to fight but to surrender all their equipment, including U.S. radios as well as their personal weapons and kits. While the Tanzanians may have been stretched too thin, the episode lowered morale by angering other ECOMOG officers.

A subregional force will require, beyond sheer numbers, an effective joint command (a major challenge for multinational forces), strong administrative and intelligence capabilities, and suitable training. ECOMOG generally lacked these capabilities and therefore relied increasingly upon anti-Taylor factions, with resulting problems.

Lack of administrative skills and of effective oversight of possible corruption are especially likely within an ad hoc multilateral force, and will lower morale. Initial problems may have been unavoidable, given the speed of ECOMOG's creation. For example, Iweze reveals that ECOMOG's logistical planning unit did not contain any logistics officers.

The junior officers in the Nigerian and Sierra Leonean contingents often did not receive their pay for several months. Partly as a result, soldiers within these units resorted to the black market or theft from humanitarian relief shipments. Poor payroll administration within the Sierra Leone contingent apparently helped topple the Momoh government. Crime by ECOMOG soldiers (who certainly were not the only, and probably not the worst, plunderers of Liberia) drained or diverted material and manpower resources, while alienating many previously welcoming Liberians. Non-Nigerian forces sometimes privately complained that Nigerian dominance of ECOMOG resulted in the lack of prosecution of Nigerian officers for alleged improprieties.

An external force will often lack basic tactical intelligence. Despite their geographic closeness to Liberia, ECOMOG contributors lacked sufficient tacti-

54. The two contingents, a battalion from each country, had all their expenses paid by the United States (which also allowed them to retain U.S.-supplied equipment).
55. One high-ranking Nigerian intelligence officer bitterly complained that "the Tanzanians were here just to satisfy their country, not because of any commitment. The Ugandans were worse: they didn't want to work with anyone." Interview with Nigerian intelligence officer, July 1995.
cal intelligence. (Language incompatibility was a relatively minor problem. Few ECOMOG officers knew Liberian languages, but this would have been a serious problem only if ECOMOG had conducted intensive peace enforcement).

Regional forces may not have experience even with nearby physical geography. African forces had not fought previously in terrain similar to Liberia’s (their recent peacekeeping experiences had been in Chad and Lebanon). ECOMOG members had little counterinsurgency experience, and in 1990 only Ghana and Senegal had any jungle warfare training centers. 58

Finally, few if any of ECOMOG’s pilots had previously flown in combat situations. They did succeed in harassing supply lines and lowering troop morale within the NPFL when counterattacking during “Octopus.” Yet too often, ECOMOG planes accidentally hit relief convoys and medical facilities. Ensuing protests, along with inadequate maintenance, led to curbs on ECOMOG’s air power.

ECOMOG faced difficult problems inside Liberia beyond those of equipment or personnel. The traditional advantages of an indigenous irregular force against a conventionally-trained foreign force often reasserted themselves. Liberia’s vegetation, its often mountainous terrain, and its long rainy season from July to December posed natural impediments to any major mechanized operations. “It’s good ambush country, almost anywhere outside of Monrovia,” notes a Western military analyst. 59 The lack of interior roads, coupled with the complete lack of transport helicopters, presented obvious logistical difficulties.

Distinguishing between combatants and noncombatants proved difficult, especially since the NPFL had no uniforms and often employed children as soldiers, as in Taylor’s “Boys Own Unit.” 60 ECOMOG’s morale plummeted when its soldiers had to fire in self-defense upon child soldiers.

57. Iweze characterizes the ECOMOG operation as “a classical case of launching troops into a theatre of operation without any form of intelligence.” Iweze, “Nigeria,” p. 240. Major-General Rufus Kupolati acknowledged that “definitely we had problems at the start of the operation. You need good intelligence of where you are going to operate. That was definitely lacking. And to get good intelligence you need very good maps and [we] found these were just not available.” Kupolati, quoted in Jimmi Adia, “ECOMOG Force Commanders,” in Vogt, The Liberian Crisis, pp. 256–257.
58. Some ECOMOG countries, notably Nigeria, subsequently gave their Liberia-bound troops jungle warfare training.
59. Interview with Western military analyst, September 3, 1995.
60. Fleischman and Whitman, Child Soldiers In Liberia. Human Rights Watch/Africa estimates that ten percent of the some 60,000 fighters are under the age of fifteen.
Even by the time of Operation Octopus—two years after ECOMOG’s arrival—Western observers noted glaring limitations within ECOMOG. U.S. State Department cables stated that “ECOMOG [since October 15] has not acquitted itself with distinction; with the notable exception of the Senegalese and Guineans, some elements have been worse than useless.” The cables described Nigerians as “unmotivated and poorly-led” prior to the arrival of ECOMOG’s new Field Commander, Adetunji Olourin.61

A multilateral force reflects the existing ethos of each of its contributors. The record of the ECOMOG forces has been mixed. Most observers give high marks to the Ghanaians while criticizing others, especially the Nigerians. The Strategic Studies Institute of the U.S. Army War College contends that “during the decades of military rule, the Nigerian armed forces have lost nearly all semblance of professionalism and become thoroughly corrupted. Senior officers all become immensely rich through theft, while junior officers and enlisted men live in poverty.”62 The high level of corruption drained significant resources from ECOMOG’s military capabilities; pilfering within Liberia angered Liberians who previously had been grateful for ECOMOG.

A weak subregional organization can create only a weak military force. Faced by pressing domestic concerns and generally moribund economies, West African states had never supported ECOWAS sufficiently. ECOWAS’s failure at achieving most of its economic goals between 1976 and 1990 further lessened subregional support. Limited institutional allegiance can cause unkept promises, financial shortfalls, and lack of effective enforcement for the military force, especially over a prolonged conflict.

The weak ECOWAS lacked an enforcement mechanism to assure effective agreement, even after November 1990, when all ECOWAS members—even Francophone Burkina Faso and Cote d’Ivoire—belatedly endorsed the SMC’s peace plan. ECOWAS took no disciplinary action against these two states which, despite their endorsement, continued to aid the NPFL against ECOMOG.

Local allies could aid or diminish a regional force’s military (and political) capabilities. Many of the same reasons suggested for a regional force’s creation—greater knowledge and commitment, lower costs, and less political fall-

out over casualties—explain why ECOMOG supported the anti-Taylor factions. Certainly the factions understood Liberia’s topography, terrain, languages, and customs much better than the foreign ECOMOG force. They were, moreover, much cheaper, requiring only limited support; they often had much stronger reasons for fighting and their deaths did not place a political burden upon the foreign force. Moreover, individual ECOMOG officers had economic incentives: they benefited by acting as the conduit for looted goods via ECOMOG-controlled ports and airfields. While initially militarily useful, the irregulars increasingly threatened the peace process and, along with ECOMOG’s unclear mandate, lack of acceptance within the region, and mediocre military capabilities, probably prolonged the conflict.

ECOMOG’s cooperation with the factions weakened its desired neutrality. Furthermore, the factions constantly tried to use ECOMOG for their own purposes. For example, the INPFL ransomed Nigerian ECOMOG soldiers for weaponry, and the LPC wanted ECOMOG to garrison areas around Buchanan captured by the LPC so that the LPC could use as many of its troops as possible for forward operations. Factions sometimes attempted, through the use of false intelligence, to provoke ECOMOG attacks against other factions. “Every faction comes here to use us—we can’t trust any of them,” complained a highly placed Nigerian intelligence officer.63

By supporting the factions, ECOMOG risked creating Frankenstein monsters that could threaten any peace settlement. A diplomat in Liberia said that “the factions at various points [in time] have been uncontrollable.”64 Looting and smuggling have provided the factions with some independent financing, and in the summer of 1995 ECOMOG troops fought ULIMO-J, after ULIMO-J had secured and begun exploiting a diamond field. All the factions have skirmished with ECOMOG forces and several times have engaged them in significant firefights. Prolongation of the war risks devolution of faction power away from any central command and to smaller units.65 Lack of clear command and control will allow faction “soldiers” to switch sides.

Factions lack a clear command-and-control system. Individual fighters do not receive standardized military training or the political indoctrination that helps mold espirit de corps. Individual, or perhaps small unit, gain may be the

63. Interview with Nigerian intelligence official, July 1995.
64. Interview with diplomat, July 5, 1995.
65. A UNOMIL representative worried that “regional commanders are becoming local heroes. . . . They make independent statements, [and] chang[el] sides. . . . Everyone wants to be president.” Interview with UNOMIL official, June 15, 1995.
guiding \textit{raison d'etre}, rather than sacrifice for a desired ideology. Without a centralizing ethos or control of communications, a faction's leader runs the risk of losing control to local commanders.

This diffusion of power will pose a policing problem to the subregional force. Lack of control may lead to localized actions which trigger international reaction. Another possible result of the decentralized, somewhat apolitical forces is a concerted rebellion against a political settlement that tries to close down their pillaging operations.

Factions may prolong their struggle by linking up with private businessmen. This external support not only aids the groups' military capabilities but may make them reluctant to settle for political negotiations which would end their pillaging.


Prolongation of a conflict allows such networks to grow. Taylor developed a parallel economy in "Greater Liberia." Reno writes as late as 1995 that "Taylor's 'Greater Liberia' boasts a vigorous trade in timber, agricultural products and minerals, and hosts numerous foreign firms and regional trade networks."\footnote{67. Reno, "Global Commerce," p. 12.} Taylor sold timber concessions to foreign companies; indeed, he sometimes sold the same concessions several times over.

\textbf{Lessons for Subregional Forces}

The failures of ECOMOG, many of which ECOMOG was powerless to affect, are just as significant as ECOMOG's successes as lessons for future subregional peacekeeping or peace enforcement forces.

Intervenors should have a strong knowledge of regional affairs and should be able to judge whether their own political and military capabilities are equal
to the proposed task. The difficulties of ECOMOG’s attempts at peace enforce-
ment suggest strongly that states should not enter an ongoing conflict without
a clearly adequate force. ECOMOG’s experience demonstrates an obvious but
important lesson: it is infinitely easier to enter than to leave a conflict. The
hastily assembled ECOMOG lacked the acceptance, knowledge, and military
capability to act as effective peacekeepers or as peace enforcers. Its six-year
commitment has continued largely through the use of undisciplined surro-
gates.

Temporary coalitions, especially of relatively poor states, should limit their
mandate to that of peacekeeping rather than peace enforcement. Any subre-
gional force should hesitate about an emotional decision to intervene for
strictly humanitarian reasons before assessing the possible military, political,
and economic pitfalls.

ECOMOG could have avoided many of its pitfalls if it had been an experi-
enced standing force. But various political and economic considerations rule
out permanent forces throughout the third world. An alternative could be
much greater cooperation, such as combined field exercises between national
units so that an ad hoc force could begin operations more effectively.

Countries which expect to participate in any future temporary or permanent
forces should work towards greater standardization of equipment and greater
cooperation in subregional training. Defense expenditures should emphasize
relatively low-cost counterinsurgency items such as spotter planes and radios
rather than jet fighters and main battle tanks. (It is noteworthy that since late
1994, the Chiefs of Staff of the ECOMOG forces have been meeting with some
regularity to discuss greater coordination of national units.)

Any subregional force would probably need to increase its support system,
or “logistical tail.” While several ECOMOG countries had aircraft, all too often
a lack of maintenance grounded these planes and helicopters. Efficient admin-
istrative procedures, including fair payroll disbursal, are necessary. Adminis-
tration within most individual ECOMOG militaries was mediocre at best: a
hasty amalgamation of these systems only multiplied the problems.

A subregional military force should have a centralized structure whose
authority would lessen the influence of a major contributor on ECOMOG’s
strategy and tactics. Several ECOMOG officers agreed that centralized funding
and disbursement could lessen the dominance of a single contributor like
Nigeria by financing greater participation by more countries.68 It could also

68. Nigerians are divided about the wisdom of future regional forces. A permanent force under
the ECOWAS Secretariat would, according to Iweze, “eliminate the possibility of mis-conceptual-

Lessen the payroll fraud that plagued several of the national contingents. External aid on a regional, not bilateral, basis could increase the compatibility and the equality of equipment.

Perhaps a subregional peacekeeping force could be a “First Reactor” that could enter quickly upon agreement of the warring parties, and then step aside for, or operate alongside, a better-equipped UN peacekeeping force. A major advantage that ECOMOG had over typical UN peacekeeping forces was its ability to form and begin operations quickly. Three major disadvantages—which a stronger UN force could have addressed—were ECOMOG’s lack of suitable military capabilities, its loss of its initial neutrality, and apparent corruption by numerous personnel. Admittedly, the UN’s present difficulty in fielding new forces makes this suggestion less likely to be carried out.

All of the above points are moot if a regional force lacks a high degree of professionalism, which includes the abstention of officers and enlisted men from profiteering. There is no easy solution to ending this corruption. As the major force within ECOMOG, the Nigerian contingent apparently operated with few constraints.

Prompt blessing of the force by the United States, or by outside organizations such as the OAU or the UN, could aid the subregional force’s credibility. Several observers felt that the involvement of a neutral outside organization should start concurrent with the regional peacekeeping force and that the organization should have some independent power. UNOMIL entered Liberia several years after ECOMOG and had, at best, only monitoring powers, most of which ECOMOG effectively controlled (e.g., checkpoint control over nighttime travel). A regional force must be willing to cooperate with the UN. ECOMOG’s general disdain of the UN’s capabilities elsewhere, resentment about the UN’s late arrival—two years after ECOMOG’s—in Liberia, and its looking-over-our-shoulder attitude strongly influenced ECOMOG’s attitude towards UNOMIL.

Cooperating with local factions offers some short-run tactical advantages to a peacekeeping force but threatens its necessary neutrality and poses longer-run political problems.

izing the situation from a military angle.” Iweze, “Nigeria,” p. 239. When asked if Nigeria should participate in a future regional force, Ambassador Iroha replied, “I doubt it, if we have to pay for our own troops.” Interview with Ambassador Iroha, July 2, 1995. The Nigerian government claims that ECOMOG has cost it over four billion dollars. Non-Nigerian forces dispute this figure but still place the sum at around one billion dollars.

A subregional peacekeeping force should consider an overt political presence. An in-country political representative could assist negotiations between the warring parties, as well as the ad hoc negotiations that arise between the forces or with the relief agencies. "We had to do these talks, but that's not what we were trained in," mentions a high-ranking Nigerian officer. "We would have welcomed a professional negotiator." A Special Representative could also oversee the regional force's adherence to human rights, which would strengthen the force's neutrality and acceptance. A future force should also consider a civic action program: well-publicized initiatives in basic health and education will offer a more benign image of the foreign intervention.

**Conclusion**

The nations of ECOMOG richly deserve credit for trying to end Liberia's carnage, and for creating ECOMOG so quickly while the rest of the world stood by. These African states allowed serious humanitarian concerns to erase their traditional hesitation to interfere in another state's internal affairs.

However, ECOMOG's efforts largely failed. It entered a contested situation with inadequate resources. It did not enjoy wide political support; it lacked detailed knowledge of Liberia and the conflict; its military capabilities and mandate were ineffective; and its commitment to remain had some destabilizing effects, notably the aiding of surrogate forces.

Furthermore, ECOMOG's participation appears to have prolonged the conflict. This encouraged a spillover into Sierra Leone, the toppling of the Gambian government, and an increase of refugees into several countries. Subregional stability was a goal of ECOMOG, but greater subregional instability was the result. As a result, the precedent and record of ECOMOG might not discourage future insurgencies, while ECOMOG's six years of sacrifice might discourage future subregional forces.

Poorly-policed third world conflicts can rapidly spin uncontrollably, toppling governments and mortgaging a nation's human and physical potential. Control of these conflicts is essential. ECOMOG's record is, at best, uneven, but both its successes and failures offer valuable lessons for future subregional military forces.

70. Interview with Nigerian intelligence officer, July 1995.