



LIBERIAN  
COMMUNITY PROFILE

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This booklet has been compiled by the national office of the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs to assist state and territory governments, service providers and other key settlement stakeholders to settle new entrants under Australia's Humanitarian Programme.

Accurate information about the pre-arrival experiences of refugees, including environmental conditions in camps, can be difficult to obtain and verify. While every effort has been made to ensure this document is factually correct, it may contain some inaccuracies.

Refugee experiences can vary considerably between individuals. Readers should note that this document is intended to provide a general background of the possible experiences of arrivals under the Humanitarian Programme. Information presented here may not always be applicable to individuals within the community in Australia or to new arrivals.

Where possible, more detailed information on specific groups of arrivals will be provided to service providers as an adjunct to this and other Community Profiles.

Policies in relation to Australia's Humanitarian Programme change over time. For current information visit the department's website at [www.immi.gov.au](http://www.immi.gov.au).

The information provided in this document does not necessarily represent the views of the Commonwealth or its employees.

# Introduction

Liberia is situated on the Atlantic coast in West Africa and shares borders with Sierra Leone and Guinea to the north and Côte d'Ivoire to the east. The country is heavily forested and rich in natural resources such as minerals, rubber and timber.

Tensions between the socially and politically dominant Americo-Liberian minority (the descendents of freed U.S. slaves settled in Liberia) and indigenous tribal Liberians have characterised much of the country's history. A 1980 coup led by the indigenous Samuel K. Doe ended Americo-Liberian political ascendancy and saw the beginning of oppressive and corrupt administration of the country.

Liberia was plunged into civil war when Charles Taylor led a rebellion against Doe's Government in 1989; Taylor won the presidency, through duress, in 1997. A number of factions became involved in the fighting and the United Nations (UN) estimates that 150 000 Liberians were killed with a further 850 000 fleeing into neighbouring Côte d'Ivoire, Sierra Leone, Guinea and Ghana.

In response to mounting international pressure, Taylor resigned from office in 2003 and the country was administered for two years by a National Transitional Government. In November 2005, Africa's first democratically elected female president, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, won victory at the polls. However, Liberia's economy and infrastructure are decimated, and sporadic flare-ups of violence and lawlessness are still occurring. An estimated 80 per cent of Liberians live below the poverty line.

Numbers of Liberian refugees at present are estimated at around 51 000 in Sierra Leone, 34 000 in Côte d'Ivoire, 39 000 in Ghana and 59 000 in Guinea. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is encouraging the flow of Liberian refugees back into the country from camps in these nations. The process may take some time due to the considerable number of refugees in West Africa. The UNHCR expects that an estimated 101 000 refugees will return to Liberia from neighbouring countries under their guidance in 2006. Others are likely to return independently. There are a number of refugees for whom resettlement is the most appropriate option.

Internally displaced persons within the country are also returning to their places of origin, contributing to the massive flow of people.

# Community in Australia

The Liberian community in Australia is small - the 2001 Census identified only 124 Australian residents whose country of birth was Liberia.

The department's Settlement Database shows the number of Liberian entrants from 2000-05 to be approximately 1500 people, with numbers of entrants rising each year<sup>1</sup>. The overwhelming majority of these entrants have arrived under the Humanitarian Programme (Figure 1). There have been very small numbers of skill and family stream entrants ('Sub-class other'). Women and girls formed a small majority of these arrivals at 54 per cent.

In 2006-07, it is expected that a small number of visas will be granted to Liberian Refugees and other (Special Humanitarian Programme) entrants proposed by family and friends who have been resettled in Australia in recent years.

Liberian arrivals have settled in most states and territories across Australia (Figure 2). The initial settlement location for a significant number of Liberians was Melbourne, with more Liberian settlement here than in any other state capital. However, there are larger total numbers of arrivals in other states and territories.

The majority of Liberian entrants were single people (approximately 66 per cent); however some Liberian families would be considered large by comparison with Australian norms. The proportion of families constituted by five or more people was around 16 per cent, a significant figure when accommodation for families of this size can be difficult to access.

Reflecting age demographics in Liberia itself (due to the civil war among other factors) the majority of Liberian entrants were young people aged under 24 years (Figure 3).

Most Liberian entrants identified themselves as Christian (approximately 75 per cent) although there was a significant number of Muslim arrivals (around 20 per cent). Some Liberians held a combination of monotheistic and indigenous (animist) beliefs and practices.

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<sup>1</sup> Readers should note that data on country of birth is not always a reliable indicator of the social, cultural or ethnic background of humanitarian entrants. There is often a great deal of cross-border movement in world regions affected by instability, and conflicts between neighbouring countries can result in borders moving over time. Additionally, children born in one country may have parents who were born in a different country. These children are likely to share the cultural, ethnic or linguistic characteristics of their parent's country of birth rather than their own.

Figure 1. Visa sub-class of arrivals, 2000-05

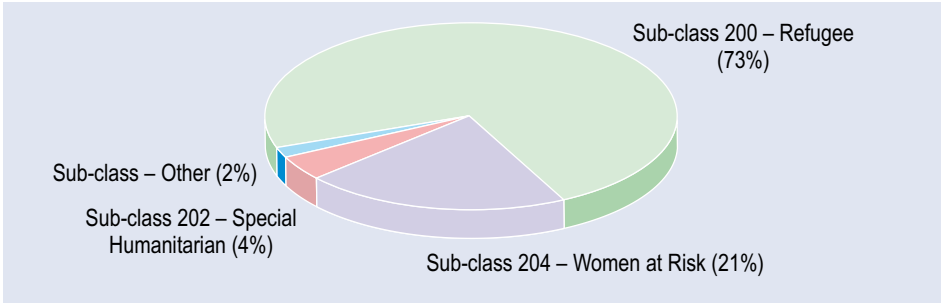
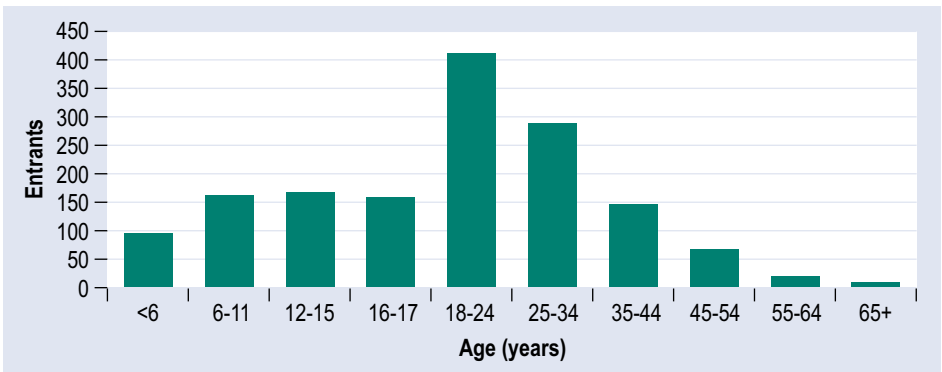


Figure 2. Arrivals by state and territory, 2000-05<sup>2</sup>

Location	NSW	SA	WA	QLD	VIC	NT
No. of arrivals	340	309	300	218	218	70

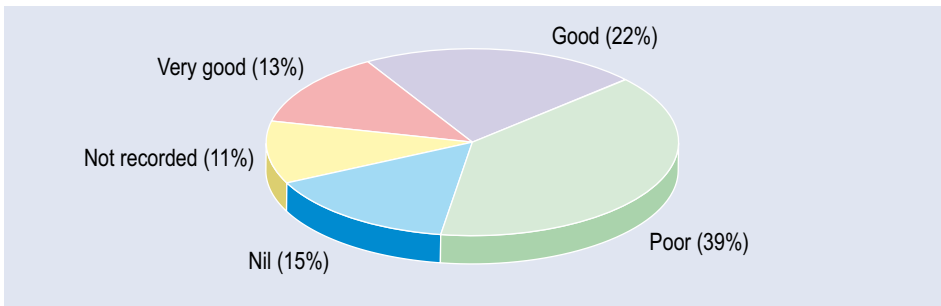
Figure 3. Age of entrants on arrival, 2000-05



<sup>2</sup> For privacy reasons, locations that settled fewer than 20 arrivals are not specified.

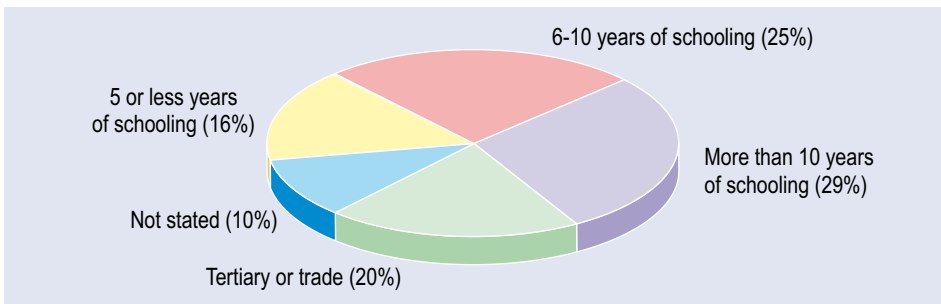
English proficiency amongst Liberian arrivals over the period 2000-05 was generally low. Approximately 35 per cent of Liberian entrants characterised themselves as having 'good' or 'very good' English proficiency, leaving a majority for whom communicating in English on a daily basis presents significant challenges and barriers to participation (Figure 4). Some Liberians are illiterate, or have low levels of literacy in their native language, as a consequence of the displacement they suffered for a significant number of years and a resulting lack of schooling.

**Figure 4.** Stated English proficiency of arrivals, 2000-05



The majority of adult arrivals reported that they have had six or more years of schooling (Figure 5). However, this schooling may have been disrupted by civil strife. Liberian schooling cannot be considered equivalent to the Australian education system: Liberian schools are generally under-resourced, inconsistently attended and focus on rote-learning rather than the interactive style and development of analytical skills characteristic of Australian schools.

**Figure 5.** Stated years of education on arrival (18 years and over), 2000-05



# Pre-arrival experiences

Liberia's civil war was bloody. For much of the country's recent history, theft, looting, extortion and assault have been commonplace. Arrivals may have experienced or witnessed the looting and burning of property, sexual assault, torture or the murder of family and friends, including children. Liberians have also experienced the protracted instability of political and judicial institutions.

According to the UNHCR, in 2004 Liberia was the ninth largest source country for refugee populations internationally. Most Liberian refugees entering Australia have come from camps in neighbouring countries such as Guinea, Sierra Leone, Côte d'Ivoire, and Ghana. The majority of these arrivals have come from two particular camps in South-West Guinea – Laine and N'zerekore. A large group of Liberians who arrived in Australia in early 2005 were female-headed households identified by UNHCR as being at risk in Laine camp; their spouses had either been killed or are missing.

Some refugees have lived in camps for many years and have children who were born there and have not known any other way of life. In some instances, Liberian refugees have moved between camps due to local strife and civil conflict. For instance, refugees in the Danane region of Côte d'Ivoire fled to camps in Guinea in 2002 following rebel attacks.

Some may have lived in urban environments in these countries. While more independent than refugees living in camps, they nonetheless have had limited access to health services, education and employment opportunities.

It is very difficult to generalise about camp conditions in West Africa as camps exist in a number of countries (including inside Liberia where they are populated by internally displaced persons and refugees from other West African states).



Wondekenema refugee camp, Guinea  
*United States Agency for International Development (USAID)*

Camps in Ghana are considered to be less exposed to political flare-ups and instability than those in Côte d'Ivoire and Sierra Leone, and camps in Guinea and Ghana are more likely to offer schooling to young people than those in Côte d'Ivoire or Sierra Leone.

Generally speaking, camp conditions are harsh. The heat is often exhausting and food, water and health care may be scarce. In some instances, women and girls are subject to sexual abuse and exploitation in camp environments. Disease and malnutrition are prevalent in camps, as they are in Liberia itself. Employment is scarce in many camps although some refugees are engaged in farm labour or in domestic work. Others may sell food that they have grown.

# Settlement considerations

In relocating from refugee camps in West Africa to Australia, it is likely that new arrivals will experience considerable culture shock. Adjusting to a new physical location and cultural framework will inevitably be challenging and many arrivals will need time to adapt to their new home.

Many entrants lack English language skills and some may find Australian accents and idiomatic expressions difficult to understand. In some instances, poor literacy or low levels of formal education may make the settlement experience even more challenging. This is particularly the case for women and for those children who were born and raised in refugee camps. The small size of the Liberian community in Australia and a lack of translators in West African languages may exacerbate feelings of isolation.

Some Liberian families are larger than the Australian norm and arrivals may need assistance to find appropriate long-term housing.

While some have experience of living in an urban environment, most Liberians have not had the opportunity to develop a range of basic life skills required for everyday life in Australia. Arrivals may be unfamiliar with using modern appliances and utilities, maintaining a Western-style home, banking or performing other day-to-day transactions typical in Australia.

Where arrivals have spent a considerable amount of time in camps, they may lack work skills and experience. Rural Liberians may have relied on subsistence farming to support their families. Even for those with transferable skills, often in trades or small-scale retail, the nuances of the Australian industrial landscape will be unfamiliar, and they may not understand Occupational Health and Safety (OH&S) and other workplace issues.

Many arrivals have experienced torture and trauma and this may manifest as post-traumatic stress or depression. Feelings of displacement, confusion, grief, loneliness, and a lack of control over life choices may also be present.

New arrivals may lack experience of legal processes or have a limited knowledge of their legal rights, the result of a historically weak and ineffectual judiciary in Liberia and the typically lawless environment of refugee camps. Entrants who have experienced the corruption and brutality of these groups in Liberia may feel distrust of authority, especially police.

A large number of new arrivals are young people who are unfamiliar with the Australian school system. Many have had limited educational opportunities and may need guidance to help them access education and training pathways and gain confidence and competency in these environments.



Flag of the Republic of Liberia

# Liberian country background

## Location

Liberia lies on the West African Atlantic coast. It shares borders with Sierra Leone and Guinea to the north, and Côte d'Ivoire to the east. The country is approximately 111 370 square kilometres – roughly the size of New Zealand's North Island.

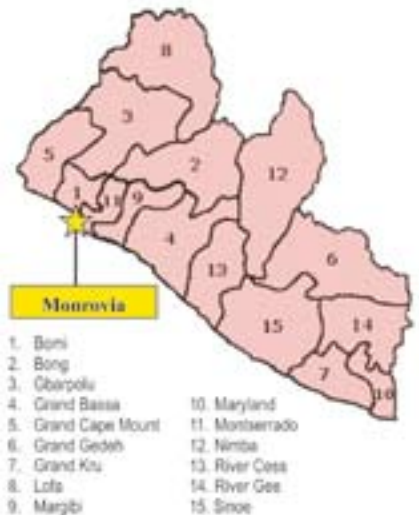
Liberia's capital, Monrovia, is situated on a peninsula and is the country's major port. Other major towns include Buchanan and Ganta. The country is divided into fifteen administrative counties.



## Climate and topography

Liberia lies in the tropics – only 6° north of the equator – and its climate is hot and humid; average temperatures are consistent throughout the year. Liberia has the highest rainfall in West Africa and it is heaviest from May to October.

Liberia's borders encompass 40 per cent of West Africa's rainforests. This dense terrain is found in the country's interior, and extends into wooded hills and grasslands further west. The coastline is 579 kilometres in length, and coastal regions contain mangrove swamps and lagoons.



Andrew Golbez/Wikimedia

The steamy climate has contributed to an extraordinary diversity of plants and wildlife in Liberian forests. They are home to West African chimpanzees, pygmy hippopotamuses and forest elephants, and are believed to have some of the largest remaining populations of these and other species. The region is a critical site for global conservation efforts.

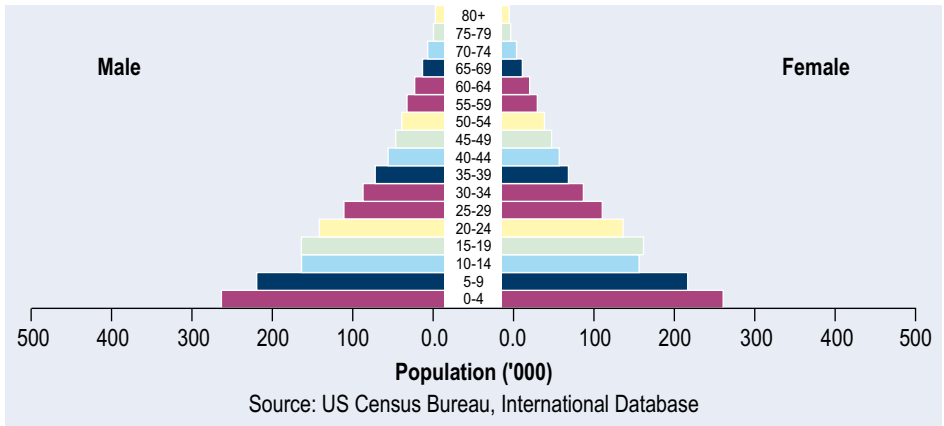
### Population

Liberia’s population is estimated at around three million people; the population growth rate is 4.91 per cent. Life expectancy is very low: in 2004, life expectancy was estimated at 39 years for men and 44 years for women.

Almost half of Liberians (approximately 46 per cent) live in urban areas.

A turbulent recent history, among other factors, has contributed to Liberian society having a very high proportion of young people (Figure 6). Liberians under 15 years constitute 43.1 per cent of the population (compared to 19.6 per cent of Australians under 15 years). Only 2.8 per cent of the population is aged 65 or over.

**Figure 6.** Distribution of age in Liberia, 2006 (U.S. Census Bureau)





## Ethnicity

Liberian society is made up of a number of ethnic groups, with 95 per cent of the population drawn from indigenous African tribes. These tribes include the Kpelle, Bassa, Gio, Kru, Grebo, Mano, Krahn, Gola, Gbandi, Loma, Kissi, Vai, Dei, Bella, Mandingo, and Mende. Some of these tribes may also be found in neighbouring countries such as Sierra Leone and Guinea.

Approximately five per cent of the population are known as Americo-Liberians and are the descendants of former US slaves who immigrated to Liberia in the nineteenth century. Other settlers to Liberia are descended from freed Caribbean slaves settling in the country and 'recaptives' – Africans captured for the slave trade but intercepted and repatriated to Liberia prior to arriving at the intended destination.

## Language

Liberia is linguistically diverse: there are approximately 30 languages spoken and, as with ethnic groups, most are indigenous to West Africa. These languages form part of the Niger-Congo family (Mande and Atlantic-Congo sub-groups). Some are also spoken in nearby countries with shared tribal ancestry including Sierra Leone. Bassa, Dan, Southern Kissi, Klao, Kpelle, Loma and Mann all have more than 100 000 speakers. While several of these languages have an accompanying alphabet or syllabary (developed mostly in the twentieth century) they are not widely used. Scripts have been developed for a number of indigenous languages using the English alphabet.

English is the country's official language, used in politics and administration, and has descended from the nineteenth century African-American English spoken by Americo-Liberians. Several kinds of Liberian pidgin (or creole) English – variants of standard English that have developed among the less educated – are widely spoken. They are used as lingua franca that enable people of different native language groups to communicate with each other.

Some Liberian refugees living in French-speaking neighbouring countries (such as Côte d'Ivoire) may have skills in this language.

## Society

In general, Liberian culture can be characterised by a division between Americo-Liberian society, which shares many Western attitudes and practices, and indigenous societies, which draw heavily on the traditional beliefs and customs of their region.

## Family

Family could be said to be the cornerstone of Liberian society. Most Liberians, particularly those from tribal ancestry, have living arrangements that are inclusive of extended family members. As well as parents and their children, an extended Liberian family may include grandparents, siblings, and cousins. Kinship networks include not only family members related by blood, but also relatives by marriage and adoption. Raising children is undertaken by the community as a whole rather than solely by the child's parents. Families generally build their own houses with most sharing sleeping space. Older members of the community are regarded with deference and respect.

While some Liberians choose their marriage partner independently of their family, for others, marriage is an important expression of broader social relationships. For these Liberians, marriages are arranged and may include providing payment to the bride's family (a 'bride-price'). The couple will often live close to the husband's family.

Story-telling, singing and dancing are important aspects of Liberian culture and are often methods of disseminating cultural knowledge.

## Gender

Some Liberians practice polygyny, where a husband may have more than one wife at a time (as distinct from polygamy which is not gender-specific). Others have monogamous marriages. Typically, Liberian men work outside the home in a provider role and are considered the head of the household, while Liberian women are responsible for the preparation of meals, child-rearing and housework. In some areas this may include gathering food and water and contributing to farming. Recently it has become more common, especially in towns, for women to work outside the home.

## Religion

Approximately 40 per cent of Liberians practice Christianity while 20 per cent are Muslim. The remaining 40 per cent follow traditional indigenous animist beliefs (which may include belief in spirits). Ancestors are sometimes worshipped in Liberian culture as they are believed to influence current events. A small group of Baha'i practitioners also exists. In some cases, Liberians draw on more than one of these elements in their religious practice.

## Dress

In urban areas, Liberians most often dress in Western-style clothing. People in rural areas are more likely to wear traditional West African dress. Generally, traditional men's clothing takes the form of either long or short pants and a round-necked 'vai' shirt. Women's dress is typified by a long cloth skirt tied at the waist, known as a 'lappa', and an accompanying sleeved blouse of loose fabric, called a 'bubba'. A large head-tie often using the same fabric is worn in addition.

Liberian attire typically utilises fabrics such as cotton that are light enough to be worn in Liberia's warm climate. They are very often patterned and brightly coloured.

## Health

Liberia has extremely poor standards of public health. Civil war has destroyed a considerable amount of health infrastructure and the proportion of health workers to patients is unworkably small. A lack of medical equipment and supplies further hampers efforts. Life expectancy at birth for Liberians is extremely low at around 42 years (Figure 7).

**Figure 7.** Australian and Liberian life expectancy (World Health Organisation)

	Liberia	Australia
<b>Female life expectancy at birth, 2004</b>	44	83
<b>Male life expectancy at birth, 2004</b>	39	78

Common diseases include diarrhoea, acute respiratory infections (such as tuberculosis), measles and malaria. Cholera, yellow fever and lassa fever also appear in sections of the population. Rates of HIV infection are high (5.9 per cent for ages 15-49 in 2003). A significant factor in the spread of HIV is a lack of education about the disease and preventative behaviour, and Liberian arrivals to Australia may need information on sexual health.

Many Liberians believe in witchcraft or supernatural influence in their lives and may attribute illness and death to the power of spirits or the harmful intent of other people.

### Diet and nutrition

The staple food for the majority of Liberians is rice and it is served at most meals. Cassava (also known as manioc), a starchy root vegetable grown in the tropics and sub-tropics, is also an important food. It is prepared in a variety of ways, including grinding into flour that is then used to make dough. Cassava, yams and plantains (firm starchy green bananas) are also used to make 'fufu', a sticky mash that accompanies a sauced dish.


Potatoes, okra, onions, and palm butter also feature in Liberian cooking and it is common for a variety of meats to be used in a single meal. Dishes are often very spicy and seasoned with ginger, chilli and pepper. Tropical fruits such as mangoes and avocados are eaten frequently.

Food is often scarce or inadequately nutritious and malnutrition is widespread in Liberia. The UN estimated that 46 per cent of the population was undernourished in 2000-02.

### Education

Liberian literacy rates have risen steadily since 1990. However, while adult male literacy is around 72 per cent, adult female literacy is very low with only 39 per cent of Liberian women being literate. Literacy is higher all round amongst Liberian youth (15-24 years old) and youth female literacy particularly is significantly higher than the adult average at around 55 per cent.

Schooling in Liberia consists of primary schools providing six years of study and junior and senior high schools that each provide three years of study.



While ten years of schooling is compulsory in Liberia (to age 16), this is not reflected in estimated actual attendance figures. The net primary school attendance ratio for boys is 59 per cent and for girls, 53 per cent. Secondary school enrolment is extremely low for both sexes: 23 per cent for boys and 13 per cent for girls. Primary and secondary schooling is conducted in English and secondary students may also learn French.

Disruption to school attendance because of the civil war has meant that some children (and adults) have much lower levels of education than would be typical for their age. Schooling is unaffordable for many Liberians families, some of whom rely on subsistence farming for survival. Schools are on the whole extremely under-resourced and some pupils are asked to provide their own equipment where there is none available. Classes are typically overcrowded and the number of teachers is small. Children in rural areas may have particular difficulty in accessing education.

Children from many tribes may also have informal schooling in traditional beliefs, skills and practices through local 'secret societies' ('poro' for men and 'sande' for women).

Several universities, colleges and technical institutions exist in Liberia and courses are conducted in English. The University of Liberia is a research as well as teaching institution, however, civil war has diminished its capacity with many academics fleeing the country.

## Economy

Liberia has a number of natural resources capable of creating considerable revenue. Historically timber, rubber and mineral exports underpinned the Liberian economy. However, two decades of political instability, government corruption and poor economic management have left the Liberian economy destitute; the unemployment rate stood at an estimated 85 per cent in 2003 and external debt totalled \$3.2 billion in 2005. Many business people fled the country during the violence and foreign investment was significantly reduced. Sources of overseas aid declined during the civil war and its immediate aftermath due to concerns about human rights abuses and bureaucratic corruption.

In recent times, timber and rubber exports have been significant inputs into Liberia's treasury. In addition, maritime registration fees are an important source of revenue with more than 1800 vessels registered under the Liberian flag. The Liberian Government has recently indicated that offshore crude oil deposits are being investigated as a potential source of income for the country. UN sanctions placed on the export of diamonds and raw timber (in response to President Charles Taylor's support of brutal rebel forces in Sierra Leone) have limited the country's economic capacity.

Liberia's labour force is comprised of a majority agricultural sector, 70 per cent, with 22 per cent based in services and 8 per cent in industry. Agricultural products include rice, sugarcane, palm oil, cassava, and rubber. Many rural Liberians rely upon subsistence farming for survival.

The Governance and Economic Management Assistance Programme (GEMAP), a multi-agency initiative, is working to restore administrative and economic capacity to post-conflict Liberia.

## History

The region of West Africa now known as Liberia was originally settled by tribes from other parts of the continent in the twelfth century. Europeans, including the Portuguese and Dutch, traded with locals and established settlements. Goods were sometimes exchanged for slaves.

In 1820, freed slaves from the United States began to arrive and settle in Liberia under the patronage of the American Colonisation Society (ACS), a group united in the cause of African repatriation. Former slaves from the Caribbean and 'recaptives' – Africans rescued from slave ships and returned to the continent – also settled. These settlers became known as Americo-Liberians and tensions between this group (who themselves had differentiations of status) and various indigenous tribal inhabitants date from this time. Independence from the ACS was declared in 1847 and the new nation was formally named the Republic of Liberia.

Post-independence, the Liberian Government drew on its American roots in developing its political systems and national symbolism; the Liberian Constitution is modelled on the United States Constitution and American influence is evident in the Liberian flag and the naming of towns.

## Political

Post-independence, the political and social dominance of Americo-Liberians became entrenched. While indigenous Africans made up 95 per cent of the population, they did not receive the right to vote until 1946, and even then it was contingent on levels of property ownership. The presidency of William Tolbert (1971–1980) was characterised by an increasing inclusiveness of indigenous Africans and it has been argued that this progress in fact further politicised tribal Africans. Following the harsh put-down of a food riot by Tolbert's Government, Samuel K. Doe (of Krahn tribal ethnicity) overthrew the government in a coup in 1980. Tolbert was killed along with other government officials.

Doe's rule proved to be corrupt and oppressive. In 1985 he won a presidential election widely believed to be rigged. In 1989, Charles Taylor led a rebel invasion of Liberia from Côte d'Ivoire and the country descended into civil war. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) established a Military Observer Group (ECOMOG) in 1990 and the United Nations Observer Mission in Liberia (UNOMIL) was established in 1993. Both worked to establish an unstable peace.

Taylor's success in the 1997 presidential election (believed to be in response to intimidation) saw Liberians once again become victims of violence and oppression. Taylor's atrocities, extending to supporting the infamously cruel Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in Sierra Leone, were manifold. Civil war resumed in 1999 when the rebel Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) rose up against the Taylor administration and fighting reached the capital. Refugees poured into neighbouring Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Sierra Leone and Ghana. The UN has estimated that, in all, the civil conflict has resulted in 150 000 deaths.

In 2003 after a series of failed cease-fires, Taylor capitulated to international demands to stand down. He was charged with war crimes by the UN (for his role in the Sierra Leonean conflict) and removed to Nigeria. In late March 2006 Taylor was captured at a Nigerian border crossing, attempting to escape into Cameroon. He has been indicted by the UN-backed Special Court for Sierra Leone in Freetown. At the time of printing, Charles Taylor was awaiting trial in The Hague.

The UN Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) deployed peacekeepers in Liberia and a peace agreement was signed in Ghana that facilitated a transitional government. The Disarmament, Demobilisation, Rehabilitation and Reintegration Program removed weapons from combatants, including some child soldiers.

The two-year transitional government was superseded by the election of President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf in a November 2005 run-off election (between the two leading candidates). Johnson-Sirleaf won 59.6 per cent of the vote and elections were characterised as generally free and fair by international observers. Harvard-educated, Johnson-Sirleaf has been described by her constituents as the 'Iron Lady' and is Africa's first democratically elected female president. Her government is now focussed on rebuilding the country's depleted infrastructure. UNMIL's mandate has been extended until September 2006 to ensure stability. A Truth and Reconciliation Commission has also been established in the country.



President Johnson-Sirleaf  
*United States Federal Government*

# Sources of information

The information compiled in this report comes from a variety of sources as follows:

- emails from relevant staff working with this caseload
- discussions with staff in the department's national office as well as state and territory offices
- the department's Settlement Database and
- the following references:

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