

Liberians arrested for defiance to disarmament

Religious conflict between Muslims and Christians has also contributed to the fighting and destruction

BY JONATHAN PAYE-LAYLEH
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

MONROVIA, Liberia — Armed U.N. troops arrested dozens of men Sunday in a sometimes-bloody conclusion to a countrywide disarmament program, days after a fresh burst of violence in the war-battered West African nation.

In one neighborhood, about 80 men and boys lay on the ground surrounded by U.N. Ghanaian and Nigerian peacekeepers after one of several U.N. raids. Their ragged clothes were blood-stained and their wounds were bleeding from what they said was the

violence of their arrests.

U.N. forces said the men had been firing weapons and intimidating residents. Gunfire blasted across the area, at least some of them warning shots from U.N. peacekeepers sweeping sites for arms.

Bangladeshi U.N. troops searched vehicles for weapons at checkpoints across the capital, Monrovia, while Nigerian U.N. forces patrolled in vehicles with mounted machine guns.

Sunday stood as the deadline for civilians to surrender weapons under a U.N.-supported disarmament program, launched in December 2003

after the end of the latest of nearly 1 1/2 decades of civil wars here.

The project collected guns from 90,000 ex-combatants, who gave up their weapons for \$300 and access to U.N.-backed rehabilitation programs, according to U.N. figures.

Authorities promised prosecution for those found with weapons after Sunday.

"The deadline is still today. What we have planned to do after today is still in force," a U.N. military official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said by telephone from U.N. headquarters.

Monrovia is still on edge after a surprise outbreak of Muslim-Christian fighting Friday, marking some of the worst violence since last year's peace.

The confirmed death toll in Friday's fighting remained at five, with

five churches and an undetermined number of mosques burned. The U.N. mission on Sunday denied police accounts that three of the victims died when they were run over by a U.N. armored personnel carrier.

It was unclear what sparked the mayhem. Religious violence is rare in Liberia, a nation founded in the 1800s by freed American slaves, where about 40 percent of the country's 3.3 million people are Christians and 20 percent are Muslims.

A few churchgoers ventured out for religious services Sunday morning under a newly eased curfew that allows Monrovia's citizens to leave their homes from 7 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Elsewhere, Muslims surrounded a burned mosque, guarding it against further attack.

Peacekeepers had placed a 24-hour curfew on the city after Friday's violence.

Residents reported ex-fighters roaming the streets with rifles and machetes in Friday's attacks, heightening suspicions that many weapons are still being held.

Liberia is struggling to recover from fighting that began in 1989 and claimed at least 150,000 lives. A three-year war ended last year when rebels shelled Monrovia, forcing President Charles Taylor into exile in Nigeria, and paved the way for an interim government with top rebel officials in ministerial posts.

A 15,000-strong U.N. peace force is now stationed in the country, which is expected to hold elections in October 2005.

Study: Oregon turning its back on homeless youth

Portland's Citizens Crime Commission aims to rescue abandoned foster children through legislative reforms

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

PORTLAND — A report to be issued in November says at least one-third of downtown Portland's "street kids" are current or former foster-care children who have been dumped by the state, and says the state is abdicating its responsibility.

The report by the Portland Citizens Crime Commission says the abandoned children have no jobs or stable homes and must fend for themselves and may number about 2,000 in the Portland area. Many

gravitate toward downtown.

"We believe the state of Oregon is abdicating its responsibility by not providing needed services that would help adolescents either currently or previously involved in the foster care system transition to a more productive and stable future," a draft of the report obtained by The Oregonian states.

"Youth are dumped on homeless youth providers, thus transferring responsibility from the Department of Human Services to the homeless youth system and Multnomah

County," the report says.

Last year, more than 3,900 teens 13 years and older lived in foster care — substitute, state-supervised care for neglected, abused or abandoned kids.

In recent years the Outside Inn, Janus Youth Programs and New Avenues for Youth have tried to develop a system that includes assessment services, emergency shelter, education, job training and housing for homeless youth.

But the agencies have grown alarmed by the high numbers of help-seekers who are current or previous wards of the state.

Commission Chairman James B. Jeddloh said his group would fight for legislative reforms to prohibit

DHS from abandoning foster children until they are ready for independent living and wants the state to pay for foster children who wind up in Portland's homeless-youth facilities.

Ramona Foley, Department of Human Services assistant director for Children, Adults and Families, said her agency "owns some of the problem."

"I regret that historically it has not been clear to all our staff that we have a responsibility to these youths," Foley said. "I've tried to get staff to realize that we don't have an option under the law. Once they're in our custody, we have a commitment."

Many on Portland's streets are fleeing foster homes or have reached

the age limit and have nowhere to go. Many have mental or substance abuse problems and most have histories of abuse and lack high-school educations or job training.

Another group showing up at Portland's homeless-youth agencies are foster children who grew up in the system and recently turned 18, but are not prepared for life on their own.

Homeless-youth workers say even the most troubled youngsters can succeed with appropriate support.

"People think, 'To hell with those kids — they're lost, nobody is going to be able to do anything with them,'" said Kenneth Cowdery, executive director of New Avenues for Youth.

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