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Liberia

U.S.-Liberia relations are close, based on a unique shared history: the country was established in the 19th century by Black Americans who resettled in Africa, and the United States has historically been Liberia’s top development and diplomatic partner. Liberia has been a leading recipient of U.S. aid in Africa over the past two decades—with influxes of funding to help the country recover from back-to-back civil wars (1989-1997 and 1999-2003) and a large Ebola outbreak (2014-2016)—though annual U.S. aid levels are on the decline. There is a sizable U.S.-based Liberian diaspora, and surveys suggest that Liberians’ views of the United States in Liberia are among the most positive in Africa. Corruption by Liberian elites has been an enduring point of friction; U.S. authorities have sanctioned several senior Liberian officials for corruption since 2020.

The U.S. Role in Liberia

Present-day Liberia was founded by emancipated and free-born Black Americans who resettled with the support of the American Colonization Society, a U.S. group that aimed to relocate Black Americans to Africa as an alternative to integration in the United States. “Americo-Liberians,” descendants of this population, controlled the state until a 1980 coup. Abuses by the ensuing regime spurred unrest, culminating in the onset of conflict in 1989. Liberia’s wars killed hundreds of thousands, displaced millions, and caused tens of thousands to seek asylum in the United States. The United States was the lead donor to the relief effort and committed extensive funding to restructure the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL) and support stabilization and governance reform after the wars. More recently, the United States provided roughly \$600 million and deployed U.S. military personnel to Liberia in response to a 2014-2016 Ebola outbreak that killed nearly 5,000 Liberians.

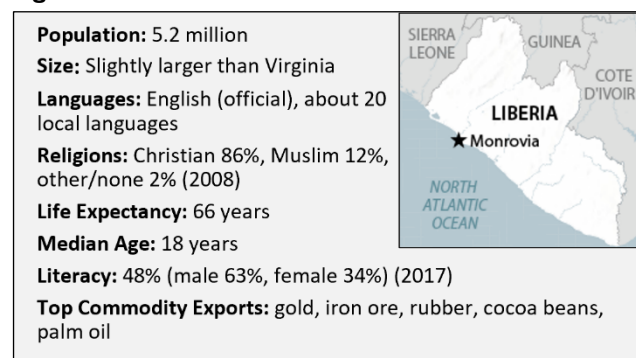
Politics

President George Weah, a former international soccer star, took office in 2018. He succeeded President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Africa’s first elected female head of state, who oversaw a transition marked by general stability and robust economic growth until the Ebola outbreak. The epidemic curtailed travel, commerce, and economic output, disrupted education, and decimated the health workforce before being largely controlled by early 2015. Citing governance gains, the United States and U.N. Security Council ended their Liberia sanctions regimes in 2015 and 2016, respectively. A long-running U.N. peacekeeping mission withdrew in 2018.

President Weah has championed new laws to improve state administration, strengthen anti-graft agencies, and permit dual citizenship, a key diaspora demand. Global economic headwinds arguably have stifled Weah’s development agenda, however. Public discontent has mounted over the

cost of living and alleged corruption and mismanagement by his government, prompting sporadic protests.

Figure 1. Liberia at a Glance



Source: CRS graphic, with population data from Liberia’s 2022 census and all other data from *CIA World Factbook*, 2023.

Liberia is scheduled to hold presidential and parliamentary elections on October 10, 2023; President Weah is running for a second six-year term. Opinion polls suggest support for Weah has waned since the start of his tenure: in a 2022 survey, roughly three in four Liberians polled stated that the country was moving in the wrong direction, and that corruption was on the rise. At the same time, Liberia’s opposition remains fractured after the collapse of an opposition coalition in 2022. Whether opposition leaders unite behind a single challenger in the event of a runoff between the top two candidates—required if no candidate secures 50% of votes in the first round—is a key question.

Foreign Affairs

United States. U.S. and Liberian observers have described U.S.-Liberia ties as a “special relationship,” and the United States arguably remains Liberia’s most influential partner. Among African countries, Liberia regularly has the highest rate of alignment with the United States on U.N. General Assembly (UNGA) votes that the State Department classifies as “important,” including those related to Israel.

U.S. firms play important roles in Liberia’s economy. Firestone Natural Rubber Company, a subsidiary of Bridgestone Americas (the U.S. subsidiary of Japanese firm Bridgestone), operates the world’s largest rubber plantation in Liberia and is the country’s top private sector employer. (Rubber regularly accounts for over 95% of U.S. imports from Liberia.) Liberia’s ship registry—the largest registry in the world by tonnage, and a key source of government revenues—is headquartered in Virginia.

Russia. The Weah administration has described Russia’s invasion of Ukraine as “condemnable, unprovoked, and unjustified,” and expressed support for Ukraine’s military

response. Liberia is among a small minority of African states to vote in favor of all six U.S.-backed UNGA resolutions related to the Russia-Ukraine war.

People’s Republic of China (PRC, or China). China is one of Liberia’s top trade partners, and PRC state entities have financed several large infrastructure projects in the country, including the construction of government office buildings, roads, and other infrastructure. PRC-based firms also are active in Liberia’s economy, particularly in the mining, forestry, and fishing sectors.

Security and Human Rights Issues

Security and human rights conditions have vastly improved since the end of Liberia’s civil wars. Elections and protests have spurred sporadic unrest, but the country has not seen a return to conflict. The AFL is small by regional standards, with around 2,000 troops, according to a 2022 International Institute for Security Studies estimate; roughly 160 AFL personnel are deployed in U.N. peacekeeping missions, most to Mali. Surveys indicate the AFL is one of Liberia’s most trusted state institutions, while the police are widely seen as corrupt. The State Department reports that police abuses, harsh and life-threatening prison conditions, gender-based violence, and attacks on sexual minorities are among Liberia’s top human rights challenges.

Impunity for wartime abuses has been a point of contention. A postwar Truth and Reconciliation Commission made recommendations related to accountability, including the establishment of a tribunal to prosecute wartime abuses. Weah initially appeared to endorse such a tribunal, but later disavowed the proposal, and no court has been convened to date. Some alleged war criminals remain active in Liberian politics. Others have faced prosecution abroad, including in the United States, where several have faced fraud or perjury charges linked to nondisclosure of wartime abuses in applications for U.S. asylum, residency, or citizenship.

The Economy

Liberia’s economy is reliant on exports of raw agricultural products (rubber, timber, and palm oil) and minerals (iron ore, gold, and diamonds), and is highly vulnerable to global price swings. Several foreign firms operate in Liberia via concessions—large, long-term leases to natural resources, estimated to cover at least 25% of Liberia’s territory—but “negotiating these agreements with the government often proves to be a lengthy, politicized, and byzantine struggle for those companies who do not pay bribes,” according to the State Department. Outside of these industries, most Liberians depend on subsistence agriculture and small-scale trading. The International Monetary Fund projects annual growth to average 5.2% between 2023 and 2025, reflecting a favorable outlook for iron ore, gold, and rubber exports.

Poverty has been a chronic challenge. The World Bank estimates that, as of 2022, 36% of Liberians lived under the international poverty level. Liberia ranked 113th out of 121 countries on the 2022 *Global Hunger Index*, a measure of undernourishment. In its *Investment Climate Statement* for 2023, the State Department reports that Liberia “relies heavily on imports even for most basic needs like fuel, clothing, and rice,” the main staple food. Infrastructure

gaps, expensive and unreliable electricity access, and corruption are major barriers to business activity.

U.S. Engagement and Assistance

U.S.-Liberia relations came under strain following the 1980 coup until the end of Liberia’s civil wars. Ties markedly improved during President Sirleaf’s administration (2006-2018), amid a surge in U.S. aid. A U.S.-Liberia Partnership Dialogue was launched in 2013. Liberia’s legislature is one of 18 House Democracy Partnership partner legislatures.

Corruption Sanctions. In 2020, the Trump Administration sanctioned Liberia’s former director of passport and visas for fraud and a sitting senator, Varney Sherman, for bribery. The Biden Administration has publicly sanctioned four Liberian officials for corruption to date: Senator Prince Johnson, a former rebel leader and influential senator, and three top Weah administration officials, including Weah’s chief of staff. President Weah suspended the three officials, all of whom resigned, though none has faced prosecution.

U.S. Aid. Since the end of Liberia’s civil wars, the United States has provided over \$2 billion in State Department- and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID)-managed aid to support stabilization, security-sector reform, governance, and development. Liberia has received additional funds under global and regional programs, aid provided by other U.S. agencies, and emergency funding (e.g., Ebola- and COVID-19-related support). Liberia is a focus country under the President’s Malaria Initiative and Feed the Future, and partners with the Michigan National Guard under the State Partnership Program.

Nonemergency U.S. assistance for Liberia peaked in 2010 and has since declined. State Department- and USAID-administered aid for the country totaled \$129.6 million in FY2022, about half of which was health aid. Funding for education and social services (\$23.0 million); economic growth (\$18.0 million); democracy and governance (\$15.9 million); and peace and security (\$4.8 million) composed the balance of FY2022 aid. The Biden Administration requested \$115.0 million for Liberia for FY2024.

In 2021, the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) closed out a five-year, \$257 million Compact in Liberia focused on expanding access to electricity and improving roads. A previous \$15 million MCC Threshold Program (2010-2013) focused on improving girls’ access to education, enhancing land rights, and promoting trade.

Diaspora. Roughly 100,000 foreign-born Liberians reside in the United States, according to U.S. Census Bureau data, the largest Liberian diaspora in the world. Liberians in the United States received Temporary Protected Status in 1991, during the first civil war. Successive Administrations extended immigration relief for eligible Liberians amid continued conflict and, later, the 2014-2016 Ebola outbreak. A provision in the FY2020 National Defense Authorization Act (P.L. 116-92) enabled eligible Liberians and their family members to obtain lawful permanent resident status.

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