Liberia

Country Overview

Politics

Liberia is a presidential republic with a bicameral National Assembly comprised of the Senate and the House of Representatives. The judicial system is a mix of common and customary law.\(^1\)

The current administration has been in power since 2006, and won its most recent reelection bid in 2011.\(^2\) President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf is near to completing her second and final term in office. The elections in late 2017 will see a new president in power for the first time in over a decade.\(^3\) The UN Security Council extended the mandate of its mission to Liberia until 2018, and has called for the elections to be “free, fair, peaceful and transparent, and [to] include the full participation of women.”\(^4\)

Economy

Liberia is classified by the World Bank as a low-income country. The Liberian economy has struggled in recent years, and over the period of 2014-2016 economic growth completely stagnated, with a growth rate of 0 percent. The stagnation has been attributed to the Ebola crisis and falling commodity prices.\(^5\) Public expenditures were cut significantly in response.\(^6\) The Liberian economy is projected to grow 2 percent in 2017, and 5 percent over the medium term, with growth tied to the mining sector, infrastructural improvements, and increased agricultural productivity.\(^7\)

Social/Human Development

Poverty rates are high in Liberia, with the majority of the population living on less than a dollar a day. A 14-year conflict that ended in 2003 left the country with a deficit around development indicators, particularly health care, education and child and maternal mortality. However, child mortality rates have declined by over five percent each year in recent years. Access to health care is still low and infrastructure in general is weak.\(^8\) 41 percent of the population is food insecure.\(^9\) Over 5,000 Liberians were killed by an Ebola outbreak that began in 2014.\(^10\)
The vast majority of Liberian citizens are young people, and more than 60 percent of the country’s population is under 25. Almost half (49.7 percent) of the Liberian population lives in urban areas, and a quarter of the country’s entire population resides in the capital of Monrovia alone.


U.S. Department of State TIP Ranking: Tier 2 Watch List

According to the Trafficking in Persons Report, trafficking and trafficking risk was noted in potentially exported supply chains including alluvial diamond mining and rubber.

Read the full TIP report at: https://www.state.gov/j/tip/rls/tiprpt/countries/2017/271227.htm

Migrant and Other Vulnerable Populations

The top five countries sending migrants to Liberia include Cote d’Ivoire, Guinea, Sierra Leone, Ghana, and Nigeria.
The top destination countries for migrants from Liberia include Côte d’Ivoire, the United States, and Guinea. ¹⁴
Exports and Trade

The top exports from Liberia include ships, gold, cocoa, rubber and mineral fuels.\textsuperscript{15}

\textbf{Top Commodity Exports (USD/Thousands)}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Commodity</th>
<th>Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ores</td>
<td>82,781</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electrical Machinery</td>
<td>118,260</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ships</td>
<td>253,723</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rubber and articles thereof</td>
<td>106,396</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cocoa</td>
<td>113,941</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The top importing countries from Liberia include Poland, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Germany, and the United States.\textsuperscript{16}
Liberia’s top exports to the United States are rubber and diamonds; Liberia was the United States' 148th largest supplier in 2015.  

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Trafficking in Persons Risk Factors Analysis

Legal/Policy Risk Factors

Level of Legal Protection for Civil Liberties and Workers’ Rights

Freedom of Association

Workers in Liberia are legally permitted to freely join or form independent labor unions, except for those employed in the public sector or by state-owned companies. Unions are able to operate without the interference of the government or employers, and they are permitted to draw up their own constitutions and collectively bargain without restriction. Workers are permitted to strike as long as they inform the Ministry of Labor of their intent to do so before the action takes place. Workers who participate in strike are not protected by law against retaliation by their employers.

The law governing workers’ right to free association does not go far enough in ensuring that workers’ rights are guaranteed, as penalties are often inadequate in deterring violations. These labor laws also only apply to the formal sector of the Liberian economy, and over 80 percent of workers in the country work outside of that sector without any legal protection.18

Working Conditions

The “Decent Work Act” of 2015 is the primary guidance on working conditions, including conditions of work, health and safety, compensation and industrial relations. The Act set up a Minimum Wage Board to review and adjust minimum wage rates.19 No minimum wage is set for agricultural workers.20

Discrimination

Liberia outlaws all forms of forced/compulsory labor, but these laws are not effectively enforced in practice, due to limited resources.21

Forced Labor

The law prohibits forced labor, but the U.S. Department of State reports that resources, inspections, remediation and penalties are inadequate.22
Child Labor

The minimum age for employment is 15; children ages 13-15 are only permitted to engage in “light work.” That work must not conflict with school hours and must not be harmful to the child’s physical health. The Child Labor Commission is responsible for enforcing child labor laws in Liberia, but has not effectively done so. Child labor is reportedly prevalent in almost every sector of the Liberian economy. In urban areas, children worked as street vendors, and in rural areas children were employed in the agricultural, mining, and rock crushing industries.23

Civil Society Organizations

Non-governmental organizations concerned with human rights are able to operate freely in Liberia, and governmental officials are reported to be generally cooperative and responsive to concerns raised by such groups. There are reports that investigations pertaining to atrocities committed during the Liberian civil war can be slow-moving and meet resistance from those within the government.24

Ratification of ILO Conventions Related to Human Trafficking or Rights of Workers and Migrants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conventions</th>
<th>Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ILO 29 Forced Labor</td>
<td>In force</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ILO 87 Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organize</td>
<td>In force</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ILO 98 Right to Organize and Collective Bargaining</td>
<td>In force</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ILO 100 Equal Remuneration</td>
<td>Not ratified</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ILO 105 Abolition of Forced Labor</td>
<td>In force</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ILO 111 Discrimination</td>
<td>In force</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ILO 138 Minimum Age</td>
<td>Not ratified</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ILO 181 Private Employment Agencies</td>
<td>In force</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ILO 182 Worst Forms of Child Labor</td>
<td>In force</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ILO 97 Migration for Employment</td>
<td>In force</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Political Risk Factors**

**Political Instability or Conflict**

Liberia scored a 95.5 in the 2016 Fragile States Index (FSI), placing it firmly in the “alert” category. The FSI scale goes from 0 (indicating a “sustainable” political system), to 120 (indicating a political system on “high alert”). Liberia ranked 27 out of 178 on the index.

There is some apprehension in the runup to the 2017 elections that the country was becoming increasingly politicized, and the U.S. Department of State notes that “there is potential for sporadic and isolated political violence, given the country’s history of politically motivated violence.”

**Level of Crime and Violence**

The U.S. Department of State rates the crime threat in Liberia as “high.” Liberia had a homicide rate of 3.2 homicides per 100,000 people in 2012, a rate lower than the average for other African countries.

**State Persecution**

Homosexuality is illegal in Liberia, and persecution of LGBTQ individuals remains a rampant problem. LGBTQ individuals face discrimination in housing, employment, healthcare, and education.

**Level of Corruption**

The Transparency International Corruption Perception Index scores Liberia as a 37 out of 100, where a 0 signals “Highly Corrupt” and 100 signals “Very Clean.” Liberia ranks 90 out of 176 on that index. The World Economic Forum rates corruption as the third most problematic factor for doing business in Liberia, and corruption remains a problem in the judicial system, state security forces, and in the awarding of contracts within the extractives industry.

**Socio-Economic Risk Factors**

**Level of National Economic Development**

Liberia’s Human Development Index (HDI) value for 2015 was 0.427, positioning the country at 177 out of 188 and in the low human development category. When adjusted for inequality, Liberia’s HDI value drops to 0.284 - a loss of 33.4 percent.
Level and Extent of Poverty

In 2016, Liberia had a high and systemic level of poverty, with 70.1 percent of the population deemed to be living in multidimensional poverty according to the United Nations.\textsuperscript{36} The entrenched nature of poverty in Liberia has been attributed to the civil war and the outbreak of Ebola.\textsuperscript{37}

Degree of Gender Inequality

Legally, married women can inherit land and property, but in practice, customary law is followed and women are often prevented from inheriting. Women cannot appear before traditional courts unless escorted by their husbands.\textsuperscript{38} While women have access to credit and financial institutions by law, in practice they may be prevented from accessing financial services due to a lack of literacy or collateral.\textsuperscript{39} Women held 11 percent of seats in the national parliament.\textsuperscript{40}

Landlessness or Dispossession

Land disputes in Liberia have been noted as a key threat to stability.\textsuperscript{41} Both customary and statutory land systems are followed in Liberia, although customary tenure systems are typically prevalent.\textsuperscript{42}

When refugees returned to Liberia following the cessation of conflict in 2003, land conflicts erupted due to disputed land tenure.\textsuperscript{43} The Liberian Land Commission – an autonomous government body formed in 2009 – has worked to set up a land registration system.\textsuperscript{44}

Thousands of hectares of land were purchased for palm oil development during the Ebola crisis, drawing criticism from local communities and civil society.\textsuperscript{45}

Environmental factors

The main environmental issues in Liberia are tropical rain forest deforestation, soil erosion, loss of biodiversity, and the pollution of coastal waters from oil residue and raw sewage.\textsuperscript{46}
Documented Trafficking in Persons Risk Factors in Key Commodity Supply Chains

Gold

Gold Overview

Switzerland imports nearly all of Liberia’s exported gold. Artisanal mining is widespread. Liberia’s first large-scale production mine (New Liberty) began full commercial operations in March of 2016. There are over 100,000 artisanal miners currently working in Liberia, and an estimated 95 percent of the mining workforce is operating without a government license.

Documented Trafficking in Persons Risk Factors in Gold

Many of the richest gold deposits exist in remote areas that make government oversight and monitoring difficult. Land rights around developing commercial mines have been contentious.

Rubber

Rubber Overview

Liberia is home to the world’s largest rubber plantation, the Firestone Rubber Plantation, which spans 200 square miles. There are an estimated 30,000 people employed in the commercial rubber industry, while an additional 60,000 people cultivate the product on smallholder farming operations. The rubber industry in Liberia is currently rebuilding after the end of the 14-year civil war and the collapse of rubber commodity prices on the international market in the early to mid-2010s.

Documented Trafficking in Persons Risk Factors in Rubber

The U.S. Department of State has reported that workers from within the country are trafficked on to rubber plantations. Rubber tappers responsible for extracting liquid rubber from trees receive low wages and must meet high quotas which require assistance from family members, including children. Verité conducted research on two large, foreign-owned rubber plantations in Liberia (LAC and Cocopa) in 2010 and found several potential indicators of human trafficking. The majority of workers on the rubber plantations are employed as tappers who manually extract rubber from trees and transport it to field stations. Tappers are paid by production and have a quota of how many trees they must tap per day. Those who do not reach the quota are subject to financial penalties. Additionally, wages may vary from month to month as paycheck deductions are made for services such as compulsory, subsidized bags of rice, school fees and voluntary savings programs. Researchers found that although the LAC
plantation gave out loans to its employees, indebtedness was not a factor in keeping workers on the plantation. On both the plantations, child labor was observed. Because of the quota system, many families employ their children in order to reach the daily quota. Additionally, because of the poor quality of education and high school fees, many parents prefer to have their children working on the plantation rather than attending school. Researchers found that plantation workers, including children, face significant health risks. In 2011, a collective bargaining agreement provided for lower quotas and higher wages, although a report from Fair Rubber Association found poor health and safety standards and a lack of monitoring.

Palm Oil

Palm Oil Overview

Palm oil represents a small percentage of Liberia’s economy, but the sector is growing and is reported to be a key element of Liberia’s poverty reduction strategy. Four international palm companies have been awarded concessions on area totaling over one million acres.

Documented Trafficking in Persons Risk Factors in Palm Oil

Over half of Liberia’s population lives in forested zones and is reliant on forest and forest products for livelihoods. 40 percent of the remaining Upper Guinean forest is in Liberia but international investments in palm oil plantation development may threaten forests. Land deals thus far have faced criticism from civil society, particularly concessions granted during the Ebola outbreak.

This report was funded by a grant from the United States Department of State. The opinions, findings and conclusions stated herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the United States Department of State.
Endnotes

52 Financial Times. “Bridgestone nurses heavy losses in Liberia as rubber price falls.” https://www.ft.com/content/9b2b54a2-dbbb-11e5-a72f-1e7744c66818

