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Liberia's Streets, Spirits Brighten

Four Years After War's End, Battered W. African Nation Begins a Slow Reawakening

By Craig Timberg
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MONROVIA, Liberia -- So brazen were the robbers in parts of [Monrovia](#)'s Paynesville district that they often sang a terrifying serenade, "I Hear My Blessing Coming," in the moments before they lifted their victims into the air, rifled through their pockets and ran off into the night.

Then in September -- more than four years after warlord [Charles Taylor](#) stepped down as president, ending the country's disastrous civil war -- a pair of diesel generators no larger than tool sheds rumbled to life in one of Paynesville's most lawless neighborhoods. Operated by the national power company, they produced just enough electricity to operate streetlights. The robbers retreated. The singing stopped.

The excruciatingly slow pace of reconstruction frustrates many Liberians as they try to navigate a postwar world of high unemployment, rising food prices and ruined national infrastructure. But small victories such as the restoration of power in some sections of Monrovia, the capital, have allowed Liberians to begin restoring the frayed fabric of their society.

Schoolchildren trying to make up years of lessons lost to war now do their homework outside under streetlights. Market women earn another dollar or two by trading late. Teenagers play midnight soccer on the street. A bar wired into the steady flow of power offers a new treat: soft ice cream.

There is still crime in the most notorious part of Paynesville, a neighborhood known as Red Light for its traffic signals, which remain darkened. But the robbers have moved away from the main roads and now behave far more cautiously, residents and police say. Every major category of crime has fallen since the lights went on, official statistics show.

"It has a limit now," said Musu Mulbah, 32, sitting in the orange glow of a streetlight as she speared chunks of marinated meat onto metal rods and set them on a charcoal grill.

Her modest business now stays open until midnight, hours later than she considered safe when the singing robbers roamed without fear of detection. "There used to be no lights, so they were floating all around," she recalled.

Chief Inspector J. Alexander Kollie, of the Zone 5 police station nearby, confirmed the decline with a parody of the robbers' infamous song. "No more blessing coming," he said with a smile and the hint of a melody.

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Thirteen years of almost continuous war, ending with the exile of warlord-turned-president Taylor in 2003, left [Liberia](#)'s once-extensive power grid devastated. The biggest blow came early in the conflict, when terrified technicians abandoned the controls of the Mount Coffee hydroelectric dam as Taylor's rebel army advanced. The St. Paul River rose and destroyed a crucial earthen dam -- a blow from which Liberia's electrical supply has not yet recovered.

President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, elected in 2005 on pledges of bringing technocratic competence to the battered nation, arrived in office without any public power generation in her seaside capital. Only people with the means to pay for expensive private generators had lights.

"There was nothing at all," said Harry J. Yuan Sr., managing director of Liberia Electricity Corp., recalling the frustration.

Former American slaves founded Liberia in 1822, and the United States long has played an outside role in Liberia's national dramas, much as the British and French have in their former African colonies. Monrovia is named for U.S. President [James Monroe](#). Aid from the United States helped the power company restore the first pieces of the public system in 2006. [Ghana](#) and the [European Union](#) also contributed.

But for now, the country's generating capacity remains a tiny fraction of prewar levels. Rebuilding the hydroelectric plant will take a minimum of three more years and cost tens of millions of dollars.

Even collecting payment for the electricity that's generated is difficult; of the \$250,000 worth of power produced each month, about \$40,000 is stolen by thieves who simply attach their own wires to public lines, Yuan said. Lights illuminating one of Liberia Electricity's generators were among the sources for electricity theft until they were relocated within a security fence.

Johnson Sirleaf has repeatedly urged patience from Liberians as she attempts to cultivate a culture in which the government is seen as something more than just a source of jobs and largess. She trimmed the civil service by thousands of jobs and has made a priority of tax collection, often a neglected art in countries such as Liberia where much of the national budget is paid by international donors.

Billboards across Monrovia feature an illustration of streetlights shining on a road at night. To the side, in a separate image, a girl is pictured drinking water from a communal tap, another slow-moving success story as some neighborhoods get what Liberians call "Ellen water" in affectionate homage to their president.

"The Process is On," the billboards declare. "Your Taxes At Work."

But for every freshly painted shop and smooth new stretch of pavement, there is a building in advanced decay and a piece of roadway where potholes require drivers to navigate a perilous slalom. Many walls still bear the pockmarks left by bullets.

[U.N.](#) checkpoints, marked with coils of barbed wire and sentries toting automatic weapons, are another reminder that war raged across Monrovia not long ago. As a warning to any force that would consider renewing hostilities, white-painted U.N. tanks on some nights still cruise Monrovia's streets, their treads rattling on the pavement.

Red Light is essentially a dusty, dense market sprawling along one of Monrovia's busiest, smoggiest highways.

Some of the most established merchants here sell their wares from the open fronts of rusty shipping containers. Other traders display goods in rows of battered wheelbarrows -- typically rented for the equivalent of 30 cents a day -- that make it easy to roll inventories home at closing time.

The bustle here speaks of an economy that, however much it falls short of the prosperity of the nation's heyday in the 1960s and 1970s, is visibly alive. Among the items easily available in Red Light: cellphones, bluejeans, compact discs, cigarettes, fabric, leather shoes, handbags. The horns of passing taxis and the banter of traders combine in a cacophony of commerce.

Before Taylor left, the staccato pops of automatic-weapons fire often broke through the din, sending merchants and customers scurrying into nearby woods. Yet with stable government, the U.N. force and Taylor on trial at an international court in [The Hague](#), Liberians say they are confident peace has come to stay.

"We had almost 15 years of war. Every time you started something, the gunfire began," said Prince Avery, 38, owner of Gracee's bar not far from Red Light. "Fifteen years went down the drain."

He added, "War will never come back here."

Now Liberians worry about the routine frustrations of citizens of poor but peaceful nations anywhere. The price of rice has spiked. Jobs are far too few. Taxes are high. Road construction has caused traffic jams and kicked up a mess of dust that irritates eyes and chokes throats.

But there also is something to celebrate.

"Light has something to do with life," said Sarah Barpolu, 42, a mother of seven who sells ice and water by the soft radiance of the streetlights. "If there wasn't light, we couldn't be sitting here. Everybody would be afraid."

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