

AFRICA

# Inquiry Faults Liberia Force That Fired on Protesters

By NORIMITSU ONISHI NOV. 3, 2014

MONROVIA, Liberia — Liberian security forces fired with “complete disregard for human life” into crowds of civilians protesting a blanket Ebola quarantine over the summer, killing one teenager and seriously wounding another young man, according to the first independent investigation of the deadly clashes.

The findings directly contradict repeated assertions by the security forces, including the American-trained Liberian Army, that soldiers fired shots only into the air to enforce the quarantine of residents, which had been imposed against the advice of international Ebola experts and the government’s own health officials.

A 15-year-old boy bled to death after suffering bullet wounds to both legs during the protest. The investigation — conducted by the Liberian Independent National Commission on Human Rights, but not yet made public — concluded that unless “it was a magic bullet,” a round “shot in the air cannot fall from above and shatter somebody’s legs.” A copy of the report was obtained by The New York Times.

Liberian and foreign critics say that the mishandling of the quarantine is one of several missteps that have deepened public distrust of the government, a rift that has helped fuel the spread of Ebola since the outbreak began months ago.

Tens of millions of dollars from international donors to help bolster Liberia's health system and other sectors in recent years remain unaccounted for, according to Liberian officials and diplomats here, weakening government services that then quickly buckled under the strain of the Ebola outbreak. In one case last year, \$13 million from the European Union earmarked for maternal care disappeared for months until reports appeared in the local news media.

Now, in the middle of the Ebola crisis, diplomats here say, critical supplies of health care equipment and food from overseas are often disappearing at the county level. As a result, clinics are often short of gloves, protective suits and other supplies, according to Liberian and foreign officials. Some Liberian health officials say they have had to buy protective suits on the black market at inflated prices to do their jobs.

Fearing the misuse of donations, some foreign governments and international organizations have resisted directing money into a government trust fund to fight Ebola, diplomats and local officials say, despite appeals from President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, a Nobel Peace Prize winner whose legacy is being tested by the crisis. Instead, donors often give directly to the international charities fighting the virus here.

"The intensification of the spread of Ebola is a failure of governance," said Tiawan Gongloe, a human rights lawyer who served as Ms. Johnson Sirleaf's labor minister and solicitor general. "The way President Sirleaf has governed over the years has caused people not to have trust in government. So when government says left, they go right. They don't believe that government means well for them."

Lewis Brown, the government's information minister, said that accusations of corruption against the government were exaggerated. All international donations have gone toward improving the country's health care system, he said, but he argued that they were no match against the worst recorded Ebola outbreak in history.

Despite the challenges, Liberian and international health officials say that new Ebola infections appear to be declining in Liberia.

The new report on the shootings in August, which has been submitted to Ms. Johnson Sirleaf, is based on interviews with 40 people, including witnesses

and officials present during the disturbances. Both defense and police officials refused to cooperate in the investigation, according to the commission, which was originally created as part of a peace agreement to end Liberia's 14-year civil war.

The inquiry comes as larger questions about the rule of law in Liberia are being raised, especially in the face of the Ebola crisis. Human rights groups and other critics have expressed growing dissatisfaction with government corruption and the human rights record of Ms. Johnson Sirleaf in recent years.

Human rights groups have expressed fears of an overreach of authority after Ms. Johnson Sirleaf declared a state of emergency in August, which has allowed her to restrict people's movements, impose curfews and shut down businesses. Last month, lawmakers rejected her request for more emergency powers.

Christiana Tah, who resigned as justice minister last month, said political interference had undermined Ms. Johnson Sirleaf's second term, which began in 2012. In an interview, Ms. Tah said that the executive branch had increasingly stripped the Justice Ministry of its authority over the country's security forces, including the police.

Ms. Tah said that progress after the civil war in strengthening the rule of law was being rolled back.

"It's like you're building a sand castle," she said. "When we were little kids, we lived by the beach and we built a sand castle, and someone, just as you put that little star at the top, someone comes and kicks the whole thing down."

Mr. Brown, the information minister, said that the country's current record on human rights must be measured against that of the past.

"At no point have we strengthened human rights protection" more than "we have today," he said.

In the early months of the Ebola outbreak, many Liberians said they believed that the government was exaggerating the scale of the epidemic, or making it up altogether, to collect money from international donors. Many did not take necessary precautions against Ebola as a result.

In this atmosphere of deep skepticism, residents of West Point, a vast slum in the capital, Monrovia, vandalized an Ebola holding center that the government had opened in their neighborhood without warning in mid-August. A few days later, residents reacted with fury when the government imposed the quarantine, throwing rocks at soldiers and the police.

Shakie Kamara, a teenager who was caught in the riot, was shot in both legs after going to buy tea and bread for his aunt. He bled to death several hours later after receiving minimal treatment at two major hospitals that had been buffeted by the Ebola outbreak.

A board of inquiry, established by the president and made up only of officials from the security forces, issued a report a few weeks later that absolved the security forces in the West Point shootings. It said that soldiers had fired only into the air, though it acknowledged that Shakie most likely died of gunshots. Despite promises to do so, the president has not released the report to the public.

The injuries of another resident, Titus Nuah, 22, who suffered bullet wounds to the abdomen, were “as a result of a ricochet from warning shots fired” by soldiers, the report from security officials found, without explaining how shots fired in the air could ricochet in such a way.

In a separate interview, Mr. Nuah said that a “soldier man fired straight” at him during the disturbances.

Human rights groups have said that a thorough investigation was impossible given the makeup of the board. Brig. Gen. Daniel D. Ziankahn, the Liberian Army’s chief of staff, said in an interview that disciplinary boards were now looking into the West Point episode and that their reports should be completed in two to three months.

“I’m embarrassed by what happened in West Point, and every good leader should be embarrassed by such things,” he said. “But that’s not just the end of the Armed Forces of Liberia. Those are just one of the bends in our rails.”

In West Point, a group of young people has been organizing protests demanding justice for Shakie. About 30 members of the group recently gathered in the Capitol Building, waving thin pieces of cardboard with handwritten slogans that declared Shakie’s life as valuable as anyone else’s.

“The president promised us justice, but we haven’t seen anything yet,” said the group’s leader, Abraham Keita, 16.

Shortly after the shooting, Ms. Johnson Sirleaf visited Shakie’s uncle and aunt in West Point. A presidential aide handed the couple \$2,000 in an envelope containing new \$20 bills, they said, adding that they later divided the money among a dozen relatives.

That was a good start, they said, but added that the family wanted \$2 million in compensation. Eva Nah, Shakie’s aunt, said that the damages would directly improve their lives, and that seeking justice seemed like a fantasy.

“I don’t got money to fight the government,” she said outside the family home in West Point.

Mr. Keita, the leader of the young activists, was listening to the conversation. “The family should be seeking justice because there is something called precedent,” he said.

Shakie’s uncle, Emmanuel Aballo, grew visibly annoyed. “You people want justice,” he said, “but to the family, whether we get justice, that boy will not come back out of the ground. The family, we only need damages. We don’t need that other thing.”

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