

Liberia: critical time to end the violence

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Summary

An uneasy peace reigns in Monrovia, the capital city of Liberia. Yet most civilians in Liberia still face ongoing attacks on a daily basis. The UN stabilisation force in Liberia (UNMIL) and the regional multinational force that preceded it, the Economic Community of West African States' Mission in Liberia (ECOMIL), have been crucial in establishing security. But sources from UNMIL admit that their 4,500 peacekeeping troops currently deployed are currently covering only 5 to 10 per cent of the country. For Oxfam and many other humanitarian actors, delays to full deployment of UNMIL are costing lives in the countryside. Fighting, indiscriminate attacks, rapes, killings, looting, and displacement will continue until UNMIL is effectively deployed throughout Liberia.

Urgent humanitarian assistance is also vital. Donors must now fund the UN's Consolidated Appeal (CAP) for Liberia in 2004, which sets out some of Liberians' urgent humanitarian needs.

Sufficient support for the process of disarmament, demobilisation, rehabilitation, and reintegration (DDRR) will be another litmus test of Liberia's peace. This is where the last peace accord broke down in 1999, and combatants who never fully disarmed went back to fighting for another four years. Liberia cannot afford an incomplete DDRR process again. The peace of the entire region depends upon it.

The funds required from the international community are not large amounts. The UN CAP appeal and DDRR plans together represent less than one per cent of what donors have offered for Iraq. If donor governments and UN member states invest in robust peacekeeping and thorough DDRR plans, and support humanitarian operations *and* development and justice, Liberia could be a real success story.

Oxfam's key recommendations:

- The Accra Peace Accords must be fully implemented. The international community must support and press all signatories to fulfil their obligations under the peace agreement, including the ending of abuses against the civilian population.
- UN Security Council members should take the lead among UN member states to increase logistical assistance that will enable the UN Department of Peacekeeping to get UNMIL up to its full strength of 15,000 troops more quickly. This is the key to turning the Security Council's resolutions into a reality.
- Donors must respond urgently both to the UN Consolidated Appeal, committing funds for urgent humanitarian operations, *and* the DDRR programmes, which must in turn be linked to long-term development plans to create strong incentives for peace.

Background

More than fourteen years of civil war in Liberia came to a head recently with the violent confrontation over Monrovia in June, July, and August of 2003. At least 2,000 people were killed in the capital alone during this fighting. In response to regional and international pressure, as well as a growing chorus of local civil society groups demanding peace, the warring parties signed the Accra Peace Accords on August 18 2003. This binds the Government of Liberia (GoL), the Liberian United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD), and the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL) to a ceasefire, and specific measures of power sharing and transitional governance.

On August 1 2003, the UN Security Council passed resolution 1497 authorising a regional multinational force for Liberia - ECOMIL- to support peace in Liberia. Between August and September, a vanguard of 3,500 soldiers from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) deployed to Monrovia and was able to stabilize the capital. From August to October, the United States positioned more than two thousand Marines off the coast of Monrovia, but fewer than 200 US troops were actually on the ground at any given time. However, US helicopter patrols conducted during the period when Marines were deployed did prevent some abuses from occurring. Although the US force was limited and temporary in nature, the deployment of both forces sent a signal to Liberia's people that the international community would invest in ending the civil war in Liberia.

On September 16 2003, the United Nations Security Council passed resolution 1509 establishing a new United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL). This resolution calls for the mobilisation of 15,000 UN military personnel as part of a stabilisation force, taking over from the earlier multinational force, ECOMIL. The mission is endowed with a strong Chapter VII mandate to support the

implementation of the peace agreement, to develop plans and assist in disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration programmes, protect civilians and humanitarian workers, and support security-sector reform. On October 1, ECOMIL forces handed over their responsibilities to UNMIL.

Violence continues despite ‘peace’

As in many wars, peacetime continues to be a very violent experience for most civilians. UNMIL’s reach beyond Liberia’s capital has, so far, been limited. The majority of the country is still out of reach to most humanitarian agencies because of insecurity. Oxfam has gathered some deeply alarming testimony about suffering and deprivation from people who have been recently displaced and who are now seeking shelter in the camps where Oxfam works. Sporadic fighting continues across the countryside. For example, in Bong county, 150km northeast of Monrovia, skirmishes between LURD and government troops around the capital Gbarnga sparked off a movement of thousands of displaced people in early September 2003. Around 80,000 people fled to Totota town, 109km north of Monrovia, and to nearby camps for internally displaced people (IDPs) to escape the fighting. While 90 per cent of these people have now returned following the deployment of the peacekeepers, continued harassment of civilians by armed groups around Sinoe, close to Totota, and elsewhere is creating new displacements in the area.

From Lofa county in the north of the country, thousands of Liberians have fled into Guinea and further south in Liberia to escape the threat of rebel incursions, after government forces pulled out of their towns.

In Nimba county (in the northeast, bordering Côte d’Ivoire and Guinea), clashes between government and MODEL forces in early November forced civilians to flee to Scaclepea town ahead of the rebel offensive.

These attacks are characterised by extensive violations of human rights and humanitarian law. Forced labour, forced conscription, sexual enslavement, lootings, beatings, and killing of civilians have occurred and continue to occur on a widespread basis. Looting and violence are often accompanied by the rape of displaced women. Individual incidents, as well as patterns of abuse, have been documented by Oxfam and other organisations.

An estimated 250,000 people have lost their lives in the fighting since 1989.¹ All sides have been responsible for abuses. The parties principally responsible are the warring factions – the fighters and their leadership. Whether the Accra Peace Accords falter or succeed depends largely on which tactics they choose next. The international community has a critical role to play in pressing all

¹Report of the Secretary-General to the Security Council on Liberia, 11 September 2003 (S/2003/875)

parties to abide by the Accra peace accord and to uphold their obligations under international humanitarian law, including ceasing abuses against civilian populations.

Lorpu, a 38 year-old woman from Gbarpolu county in western Liberia, spoke to Oxfam in October in Salala camp, in Bong county.

When her community was attacked in May, Lorpu fled with her seven children. 'We ran as soon as we heard the guns,' she said. 'You just run; you don't look back to see what is happening.'

There was nothing to eat in the bush, she said. 'We had no water for three days. We cut a vine and squeezed the moisture out. It just makes your throat a bit wet, but it's not the same as drinking.'

Along with many other families from Gbarpolu county, Lorpu and her children sheltered wherever they could along their route south. But daily life grew more and more perilous, with constant harassment by armed men.

'They would grab your child and beat him unmercifully,' she said. 'They would force the women to sleep with them; they would molest them in any kind of way.'

'So we just walked and walked ... we stopped near Gbarnga. There was some food and clothes for the kids, and some shelter. But after that there was an attack on Gbarnga and the town was captured. We heard the sounds of fighting and we left ...'

It took more than four days walking to get to Salala camp, where she stays now.

Lorpu has a small hut in the camp, which now houses around 26,000–28,000 registered IDPs. Oxfam's emergency teams and other agencies provide them with clean drinking water, latrines, and training on how to prevent the spread of disease.

Lorpu goes out into the local community and looks for contracts for casual labour that pays 25 Liberian dollars per day (about 50 cents US). 'It is very hard work,' she said. 'One day a pregnant woman came back and collapsed and died.'

Most of all, Lorpu wants to go home. 'What I want is to be able to pay my way so I can go home. I just want some help to get back on my feet. But we need UNMIL troops there. When they are there and take the guns from those people that's when we're going home.'

Humanitarian situation

The war has displaced nearly one million people, about one-third of Liberia's population. Of these displaced, some 500,000 people remain internally displaced, and another 300,000 Liberians are registered as refugees in neighbouring countries. In addition, some 50,000 refugees from Sierra Leone and Côte d'Ivoire remain in Liberia, despite the insecurity.²

Even before this latest round of fighting, only 25 per cent of the population had access to safe drinking water and 36 per cent has access to minimum

² Report of the Secretary General to the Security Council on Liberia, *op. cit.*

standards of sanitation.³ Many people are living with very few resources; most displaced people report that nearly all their personal belongings have been left behind or looted.

The most vulnerable populations are those behind the rebel lines, where only limited access by humanitarian agencies has been possible, or displaced people who have been uprooted many times in recent months. The IDPs are not only weakened by their successive flights, but those who return to their regular camps are often put into transit facilities for extended periods of time. (Transit camps are temporary shelters with no adequate facilities such as water and toilets.)

People who have sought safety in Monrovia's unofficial shelters during the fighting (such as schools, hospitals, old factories, stadiums, and other public buildings) now face relocation once again, as the schools are needed to restart education. Tens of thousands of IDPs fled to abandoned buildings around Monrovia this summer to escape fighting in the Monserrado camps and in outlying areas of the city. They have been surviving in extremely squalid conditions. However, many are reluctant to leave because of legitimate fears for their security, or because they have no shelter in the camps or communities from which they fled.

Full deployment of UNMIL is the key to security

Although there is still much debate around the implementation of the peace process and the composition of the transitional government, there is near universal agreement that UNMIL has been critical in establishing security, and must be deployed throughout the country. At the time of writing, there are 4,500 UNMIL troops in the country, made up of contingents from Nigeria, Guinea Bissau, Guinea, Ghana, Togo, Benin, Mali, Senegal, Bangladesh, and Nepal, as well as administrative support from the Philippines. Troops are promised from Ireland, Ethiopia, and Pakistan and should be deployed in the next eight weeks.

UNMIL sources admit that they are currently covering only 5 to 10 per cent of the country. For Oxfam and other humanitarian actors, delays to deployment are costing lives in the countryside; until UNMIL is effectively deployed throughout the country fighting, attacks, rapes, looting, and displacement will continue.

There has been a significant delay in providing logistical support, including helicopters, mine detectors, and engineering equipment to allow for faster extension of UNMIL forces. UN member states must work with the UN's Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) to address any obstacles to

³ UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance (UNOCHA) Consolidated Appeal for Liberia 2004.

getting the full UNMIL force deployed without further delay. Assertions that the force will be up to strength by early 2004 do little to help people now at risk from violence and insecurity.

In addition to peacekeepers, the speedy deployment of the UNMIL's 1,115 civilian police officers will be critical to ensuring that violence is brought under control. Currently, civilians have no redress for crimes committed against them, since the judicial system has ground to a halt. A civilian police presence is an essential step in re-establishing law and order. Female civilian police are particularly needed to investigate cases of rape, forced prostitution, abduction, and other abuses.

While the peacekeeping troops are at only quarter strength and covering only one-tenth of the countryside, the lives of thousands and the prospects for a durable peace remain at risk. Peace, demobilization, and reconstruction all hinge on establishing basic security.

Oxfam spoke with Mallie in November 2003. A mother of four children, she is from Bomee, near Tubmanburg. She was captured by rebel fighters when the town was bombarded by the government militias. She was with the rebels for six months. They forced her to pound rice and prepare food, to carry their ammunition, and many other tough jobs. Her husband had run away earlier, and she believes he is in Freetown.

Many women are forced to be wives to the soldiers, Mallie says. She will not say what was the case for her. She does say, however, that even though she was six months pregnant, that when a soldier demanded anything – labour, food, sex, ‘no one is allowed to say no.’

She was rescued by government soldiers and brought back to Bomee, but she soon had to flee again. She walked four days to get to the Jah Tondo camp, one of the Montserrado camps. She and her children had to hide in the bushes all along the route, scared of being captured again. There was little food to eat, and they subsisted only on a bit of cassava and water. They were travelling with her mother and many people from the village. Her mother died en route, however.

She is scared sometimes; the security in the camp is good now that UNMIL is present, but she is still haunted by her ‘imagination’ – the nightmares of what she has seen and lived through.

‘I pray to God that no more fighting comes,’ she says. ‘If UNMIL stays, then I think the fighters will stay away...’ She continues, ‘I don’t know if I’m happy, but I sleep better now because they are here.’

She wants to go home with her children, but is not convinced that it is safe to do so. She has to know that disarmament has happened before she will take that risk and travel again with her family. ‘When I hear that they are finished with their arms, when they really finish holding their arms, I will go home.’

DDRR and establishing dividends for peace

The current plan for disarmament, demobilisation, rehabilitation, and reintegration (DDRR) has been presented to a range of experts and stakeholders in Liberia and across the world. The plans call for a cantonment system with centres for each of the factions that should be able to process identified fighters in two to four weeks. Special facilities will be provided for female fighters and child soldiers, with expedited procedures to process these cases. Disarmament and demobilisation will be linked to food-for-work programmes and reconstruction projects, as well as access to training, supplies, and support for return to home communities. This process should commence before the end of January 2004. The plans are for 38,000 fighters, but with provisions for up to 45,000. The process is estimated to cost about \$US50m.⁴

Disarmament and demobilisation will help immediately to pacify areas of the country where violence is still widespread. However, information dissemination, communications, and sensitisation are critical if the process is to be a success. In addition, full demobilisation must address the needs of the thousands of people who were – willingly or, more likely, unwillingly – part of the war effort. This includes abductees, such as porters, child soldiers, cooks, and ‘wives’. DDRR cannot be focused on combatants alone. Donors should ensure that the DDRR programme coincides with strong support for other vulnerable groups, such as displaced people returning home. Otherwise, people could have the impression that the international community is only rewarding the perpetrators of violence.

Participation and sensitisation:

Lessons learned from previous experience in Liberia and Sierra Leone show that for the DDRR process to be successful in meeting its goals, the participation of and feedback from people associated with the fighting is key.

Some Liberians are sceptical about DDRR and the role of the international community. Oxfam spoke with a former fighter who had been through the process in 1996. After handing in his gun, he had to wait in line for most of a day. ‘All I got,’ he reports, ‘was half a bag of rice, a hoe, and a slip of paper telling me that I would get more farming tools when I went home. I still have that slip of paper; I never saw any more tools.’

Another lesson from past experience in Liberia is that the international community must begin early sensitisation efforts for communities receiving returning ex-combatants, to encourage understanding and co-existence. Without this support reintegration could prove to be very difficult. A third lesson learned is that reintegration programmes tend only to address the impacts of a conflict (both human and physical), and neglect the causes of the conflict.

⁴ Liberian Disarmament, Demobilisation, Rehabilitation and Reintegration Programmes, Draft Strategy and Implementation Framework. 9 October 2003

It is critical for all Liberians to see a strong peace dividend soon. Humanitarian assistance is important for saving lives in the short term, but plans are also needed for long-term projects that support reconciliation, development, training, and provide technical support to build the judicial system. Sustained donor support is key; if donors do not come up with steady support for the long-term aspects, DDDR could be set up to fail.

DDRR is the litmus test of Liberia's peace. This is where the last peace accord broke down in 1999, and combatants, never fully disarmed, went back to fighting for another four years. Liberia cannot afford an incomplete DDDR process again. Peace in the entire region depends upon it.

Regional implications

West Africa has been experiencing waves of conflict for over two decades. Liberia's first civil war (1989–1996), Sierra Leone's brutal conflict, and the instability in Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire are intimately linked. Politicians have pursued personal agendas by supporting rebel fighters across their borders. Corruption and mismanagement are able to thrive in conditions of chaos and war.

Although the specific historical experiences vary across the region's states, Liberia has been the epicentre for the spread of violence. Unfortunately, the tactics of the fighting groups, including forced conscription and the use of child soldiers, exacerbated by a real lack of economic opportunities for young people in rural areas, have led to the formation of a diaspora of fighters whose allegiance lies not with a country but with a way of life. There are thousands of fighters willing to cross national borders to continue earning a living by fighting in ways that include looting, attacks on civilians, and constant movement.⁵

The fighting in Nimba county, on the border with Côte d'Ivoire, is particularly worrying. Clashes between government troops and MODEL continue. Although very little information is available, local agencies report widespread human rights abuses.

ECOWAS and the French government, given their role in West Africa, should work with the governments of Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea to prevent instability from spilling over and igniting the still simmering tensions in Liberia. Coordination between UNMIL, the French forces, and the UN Mission in Côte d'Ivoire (MINUC) could cordon off the fighting in Nimba, and effectively disarm any fighting factions.

⁵ See 'Liberia: Security Challenges', International Crisis Group, Africa Report No. 71, 3 November 2003.

Donors have a critical window for action

With the launch of the 2004 Consolidated Appeal (CAP) for Liberia, donors have a real opportunity to invest in Liberia's peace. The UN is asking for \$US137m for non-food items, and for another \$US40m for food aid for Liberia, as part of the West African Appeal. The humanitarian crisis and the beginning of the process of DDRR will require funds to be made available swiftly. Yet, ensuring full funding of the CAP and the DDRR programme is also critical. The country cannot afford an incomplete DDRR process, leaving people with no training and mounting frustration at the international community breaking its promises once again.

Even before this recent escalation of fighting, Liberia was one of the poorest and least developed countries in the world. Less than 50 per cent of children of primary school age were enrolled in school. As of 2002, more than 75 per cent of the population lives below the poverty line. Eighty-five per cent of the population is unemployed.⁶

It is essential that donors provide sufficient support for all aspects of Liberia's transition to peace. It is vital that urgently needed humanitarian assistance does not come at the expense of logistics for UNMIL, or of planning the large-scale vocational training needed in a few months time. Donors must coordinate among themselves to see that all critical aspects are funded. Liberia will be a test case for the UN in Africa. If the international community cannot muster up the political will to truly deliver what is needed in Liberia, it is likely that the country will continue to be a force for instability and conflict in the region. However, if the donors and the UN invest in robust peacekeeping and thorough DDRR plans, and provide support for humanitarian operations *and* development and justice, Liberia could be a real success story. The funds needed are not large amounts for the international community. The UN CAP appeal and DDRR plans together represent less than one per cent of what donors have offered for Iraq. This one per cent could make a vital contribution to bringing lasting peace to the region.

Recommendations:

- **The peace accords must be fully implemented across the country.** Fighting, displacement, and abuses must come to a full stop. Faction leaders have the clear responsibility to control those under their command and to communicate the details of the disarmament and demobilisation process to all their fighters.

⁶ Report of the Secretary-General to the Security Council on Liberia, 11 September 2003 (S/2003/875)

- **The international community must support and press all signatories to fulfil their obligations under the peace agreement.** ECOWAS has a strong role to play here, especially those with a historical connection to the fighting parties. The USA, France, the EU, the UK, and the International Contact Group for Liberia should ensure that the Accra Peace Accords are fulfilled.
- **UNMIL must be effectively deployed across the country.** The international community must immediately provide financial support and logistics to the mission. UN Security Council members should take the lead among UN member states to increase logistical assistance that will enable the UN Department of Peacekeeping to get UNMIL up to its full strength of 15,000 troops more quickly. This is at the core of turning the Security Council's commitments and resolutions into a reality.
- **The UN Consolidated Appeal for a total of \$US 177m for Liberia must be fully funded with pledges confirmed** early in the cycle to deliver humanitarian assistance in this critical window. Humanitarian aid is essential for saving lives in the short term. Donor support for long-term projects for development, training, and providing technical support to build the judicial system require additional assistance.
- **The DDRR plans must be fully funded with up-front and transparent funding procedures.** Liberia cannot afford a partial demobilisation.
- **Donors must fund the full range of activities to save lives, build peace and enable Liberians to rebuild their livelihoods and communities.** At the proposed donor conference for Liberia, due in December 2003 or January 2004, the link between poverty alleviation and conflict reduction must be made, with a strong tie between DDRR and development programming.
- **The international community should adopt a regional approach to war and poverty in West Africa.** The conflicts in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea are intimately linked; much death and destruction has ensued over the past two decades because the wider region and international community insisted on treating each country in isolation, or neglecting some countries altogether.

Oxfam has been operational in Liberia since 1995. Our programmes have grown to about \$US2.8m (£1.8m). In response to high levels of need for humanitarian assistance in the country, Oxfam is carrying out large-scale projects in water, sanitation, and hygiene promotion for over 180,000 people in IDP camps. In addition, Oxfam has long-term programmes in girls' education, adult literacy, job creation, and civil society involvement in transitional justice.