

Liberia: Progress Made and Challenges for the Future

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From War to Hope: 1989-2003

As Liberia reaches almost eight years of unbroken peace since the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) deployed in 2003, I had the opportunity in March 2011 to brief the Security Council on the remarkable progress the country is making, and highlighted Liberia's need for continued support from the international community. Amid its numerous challenges, and as the country strives to consolidate peace, the support of the international community is paramount to consolidate the outstanding achievements of the Liberian people.

When we think of Liberia, both great expectations and great responsibility come to mind. In terms of expectations, Liberia offers the United Nations an opportunity to show that peacekeeping can work if we get the approach and the ingredients right from the start, and if we remain engaged throughout the process. Liberia also represents a great responsibility for the United Nations, insofar as we cannot afford to fail. If we fail in Liberia—a small country with strong political will for reform—then what chance do we have in other post-conflict environments?

It is important not only to think about where Liberia is today, but to ponder on where Liberia has come from since 1989. War in Liberia, between 1989 and 2003, not only stole the soul of a nation, but killed at least 250,000 people and uprooted an estimated two million more. The conflict also destroyed the economy and vital infrastructure, reducing Liberia's GDP by 90 percent and pushing 75 percent of the population below the poverty line. People fled from the countryside to the cities, creating urban slums and social upheaval. The Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), reached in Accra, Ghana in August 2003, put a line in the sand between war and peace and has slowly enabled Liberia to begin again.

Picking Up the Pieces: UNMIL from 2003 to 2006

When UNMIL deployed in October 2003 in the wake of 15 years of war, mismanagement and destruction, Liberia was a completely failed state. Though a peace agreement had been signed, the magnitude of what the country faced was overwhelming. In line with the CPA, and as mandated by Security Council resolution 1509 (2003), UNMIL helped to start the process of rebuilding by gradually securing the country's territory, disarming the warring factions, assisting the return of refugees and the internally displaced, and preparing for democratic elections. UNMIL's security umbrella ensured that economic, social and institutional recovery could take root, and the complex process of building peace could begin. Within UNMIL's first two years, 101,000 fighters were disarmed, almost all the

displaced had returned to their communities, local government had been restored in all of Liberia's 15 counties, and presidential and legislative elections were held and deemed free and fair. Although these were massive accomplishments for the country, the work had only just begun.

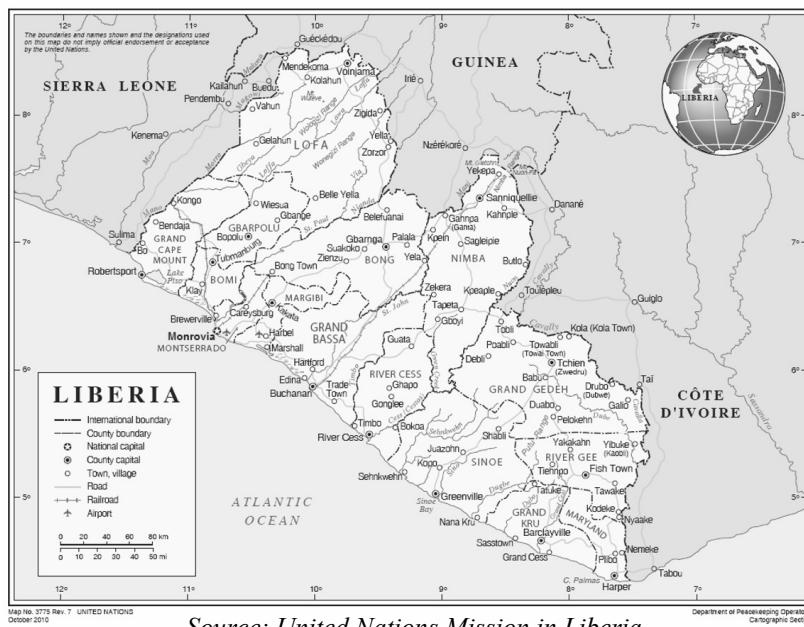
President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was inaugurated into Office in January 2006 facing

huge challenges and high expectations. The new government sought to consolidate the progress made thus far, while outlining its path towards a complete economic, social and institutional rebuilding. Priorities included broad reform of the security and rule of law sectors, extending state authority throughout the territory, improving management of natural resources and rebuilding the country's infrastructure, among many others. Building peace in Liberia would entail rebuilding the country from scratch.

Securing Development: 2006-2010

As far back as 2000, the United Nations Brahimi Report noted the need to emphasize peacebuilding in the transition from war to peace in complex peace operations. In the case of Liberia, this meant starting with reform of the security sector. Policy to reform the security architecture was developed, and a number of partners began to address aspects of reform, with the United States taking the lead in recruiting, vetting and training a new army, and UNMIL taking the lead in rebuilding the Liberia National Police, both operationally and institutionally. The new government also prioritized security institutions along with a number of other critical issues in Liberia's Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS), while attempting to address them with an extremely modest national budget and the available international assistance. The UN family and other donors aligned their programs to the PRS priorities to ensure coherence, and UNMIL focused in particular on reintegration programs for former fighters; police and justice reform; the improvement of management of the country's natural resources; monitoring human rights throughout the country; and building the capacity of local government.

It is important to note that reform of the security sector in Liberia—while prioritized by the government, international partners and the UN alike—proved itself to be a complicated task for a number of reasons. Firstly, the limited size of the Liberian national budget meant that many reform initiatives had to be directly financed by outside partners,



Source: United Nations Mission in Liberia

which brought the challenging issue of sustainability into question. Secondly, capacity on the government side was depleted after the war, sometimes making it difficult to keep national partners at the forefront of the reform process, and thirdly, the rapid results that Liberians urgently called for were not easy to deliver. That being said, enormous progress was made, with a National Security Strategy developed and significant reforms achieved within the Liberia National Police, Armed Forces of Liberia, justice system, corrections and border management.

Economically, Liberia faced an uphill battle. Extremely high rates of unemployment or underemployment, and a devastated infrastructure, made providing the peace dividend to the larger population extremely difficult, especially in the short-term. Also, large numbers of former fighters entered an economy that could not absorb them, causing many to concentrate in natural resource-rich areas, where they would engage in illegal activities far from the reach of the state. Liberia has, however, showed impressive growth rates, even through the global economic crisis, as a number of large international concession agreements have been signed in iron ore, rubber and oil palm, and the relaxation of timber and diamond sanctions has allowed some formal trade. Ensuring the revenue from these growing sectors is reinvested in the communities will be the major challenge for Liberia's growing economy, as well as a major part of ensuring peace in the long run.

Liberia also started to take steps to heal some of its war wounds, with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission releasing its report in December 2009. However, the Commission's recommendations, covering everything from prosecution of perpetrators, reparations for victims and wide-reaching constitutional and other legislative reform, have not yet been addressed. Some of the elements are highly charged, and there is little middle ground on how the country should move the recommendations forward.

Between 2007 and mid-2010, UNMIL reduced its military strength by half, from about 15,000 to 7,900, reflecting the increasing stability that the country was enjoying. Also, it was important for UNMIL's military presence to occupy less space in society, to become less visible, while still providing a backdrop of security. The Liberian public was comforted by UNMIL's overt military presence, seeing it as a deterrent to instability, making drawdown a sensitive and complicated issue to navigate.

2011 and Beyond

The next general elections, which will be held in either October or November 2011, depending on the outcome of a national referendum in August, could be an important opportunity to consolidate Liberia's progress, or potentially reverse the gains that have been achieved. The conduct of the elections themselves will be a test of institutional capacity, as the National Elections Commission will have far more on its shoulders than in 2005, but also of the country's political maturity to ensure peaceful debate and competition. Because of the importance of these elections for Liberia's peace process, the rate at which UNMIL further draws down will be contingent upon their success, and especially their aftermath. UNMIL's specific mandate related to electoral preparation is

focused on logistic support and donor coordination, but the Mission also plays an important good offices role to facilitate an environment conducive for the conduct of peaceful elections. Recent events in neighboring Côte d'Ivoire are a wake-up call to what could go wrong, and UNMIL is working with political parties to ensure productive inter-party dialogue and an understanding of electoral dispute mechanisms.

Liberia's progress since 2003 has been significant, especially considering the low level where it began. However, truly addressing the root causes of conflict, a weak justice system, ethnic tensions, dispute over land and resources, corruption, and drastic inequalities in the distribution of wealth, among others, will be a long-term venture, far outliving the peacekeeping mission. The challenge is to effectively measure when the progress made in these areas, balanced with the progress in developing the country's security architecture, is sustainable enough for the Mission to move out.

UNMIL and the government have begun detailed work to plan the transition of security responsibilities from the Mission to state institutions, in hopes that advance planning will help to ensure a seamless transition. Part of that planning involves identifying remaining gaps in vital security institutions, the filling of which depends heavily on bilateral and other donors, and is largely out of the hands of the Mission.

If Liberia can weather the complexities of the next year, not be negatively impacted by instability in its neighborhood, and ensure that the progress it has made is not reversed, with careful planning, Liberia will be a success story in the making.