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Liberia: Setting Priorities For Post-Conflict Reconstruction

Dr Thomas Jaye

Introduction

Liberia is 156 years old this year as the first independent republic in Africa. The country enjoys a unique historical experience because it was one of two African countries never formally colonised. According to the founders of Liberia, mainly freed slaves from North America and returned Africans from slaving ships, the country was established because of the 'love of liberty'. Quite on the contrary, this West African state has had a troubled history characterised by political repression, economic mismanagement and social deprivation. In this light, the issue of security and governance has been at the heart of the problems afflicting Liberia since independence.

It therefore came as no surprise that over the past 14 years, the country has been caught in the barbed wire of two civil wars. However, since June of this year, the country has gone through exciting experiences that have dramatically altered the political environment in the country and ushered in a sense of relief and opportunities for rebuilding the country and building a national polity that can sustain peace and security. Already, Charles Taylor, the man around whom the 14 years war has revolved has departed Liberia and is currently in exile in Nigeria; on 18 August 2003 'Comprehensive Peace Agreement for Liberia' was signed by the country's three armed factions, the 18 political parties and civil society groups; ECOMIL has been replaced with UNMIL, which is expected to have about 15,000 troops in Liberia; and finally, a transitional government has been inducted into office and the National Transitional Legislative Assembly (NTLA) has been seated.

With the above developments, can one now say that peace has finally dawned upon this war-torn society? If yes, what are the priorities that must be met in order to ensure that the gains made so far are not reversed? To answer these questions requires performing three cross cutting tasks. Firstly, there is a need to take a step backwards by providing a capsule analysis of the origins of the war; secondly,

there is a need to identify the problems caused by 14 years of war as the basis for determining the relevant priorities for post-conflict reconstruction and peace building. Finally, as a result of the second task, recommend key priority areas and their implications for policy intervention in Liberia by external agencies.

Origins Of War In Liberia

I wish to begin from the premise that much has been written about the origins of war in Liberia. Therefore, I do not intend to delve into this subject in any detail. Instead, what I intend to do is to provide a brief background to the conflict from a historical perspective within the context of the discourse on security and governance, the basis upon which the Working Group has been formed at King's College.

Historically, the Liberian state, which emerged in the 19th century has never served as 'watch keeper' of the security of its people. On the contrary, it served regime security. To reiterate a point raised earlier, Liberia was founded in 1822 for the 'love of liberty'. At least this much we learned from the country's motto, which reads: 'The Love of Liberty Brought Us Here'. This was a noble principle upon which the country was founded but its 156 years of history as an independent state tells us a totally different story. Rather than be guided by this principle, it seem like those who established Liberia were guided by a fervent belief in manifest destiny and divine rights. What dominated the thinking of the settlers was the belief that their mission was to 'Civilise and Christianise' indigenous Africans.

Over the years, despite pleas for national integration by enlightened Liberians like Edward Wilmot Blyden, Liberia's history has been dominated by the urge to assimilate indigenous African into western culture. This led to a false sense of superiority by the settlers over the indigenous Africans. Furthermore, the settlers imposed a westernised central administration upon the ethnic communities in which society remained traditional and where the people were loyal to local Chiefs and other forms of traditional authorities. In the process, a 'settler-representative' government was established in 1847, which co-existed with the traditional mode of governance, mainly in the form of Chieftaincy.

Since then, though Liberia has always sought to experiment with democratic governance, the country has been far from being a democratic one. The state that emerged in the 19th century reflected more of an American past than the complex African environment in which it was established. Significantly, from 1870 till 1980 when the military coup occurred, Liberia was uninterruptedly ruled by a single party- the True Whig Party (TWP). The single party rule nurtured patronage and personal rule, the bedrock for political control in Liberia. Moreover, the distribution of national resources was skewed in favour of a tiny stratum of society. For example, by the late 1970s only 3.4% of the population enjoyed 60.4% of the national income whilst 96.6% of the population enjoyed only 39.6% of the national income.

Some of the issues that caused tension in pre-war Liberia included land, taxation without representation and the relationship between the settlers and indigenous Africans. In the 1960s, President William V.S. Tubman put forward the unification and integration policy as a way of addressing this issue but his reforms remained half-hearted. By the time he assumed power in 1971, Tubman's successor, William Richard Tolbert, Jr. inherited a society engulfed by 'a distillation of all the problems that afflicted Liberia – the social (shifting away from core values), the economic (addressing inequities, even in a declining economy, between the few who seemed to have everything and the many who seemed to have nothing), and the political (ending or strengthening the political

pre-eminence of the core)'. Tolbert's way of dealing with this was to oscillate between a disposition for change and an urge towards maintaining the status quo. In the process, a vacuum was created, which was exploited by the Liberian military, when they intervened by staging a coup on 12 April 1980.

Far from ameliorating the problems afflicting Liberia, the Samuel K. Doe years were marred by political repression (trampling upon the rights of the people), corruption and economic mismanagement and increasing ethnic tension between his Krahn and the Gio and Mano ethnic groups. The Doe years never caused the war but triggered it.

As a consequence of this ugly history, by 24 December 1989 when the armed insurgency by the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) erupted, Liberia neither enjoyed democratic governance nor security. In what follow, I outline some of the problems engendered by the 14 years war.

Effects Of 14 Years Of War

Like wars elsewhere, whether Iraq, Sierra Leone, Cote D'Ivoire, Sudan or Angola, the 14 years of war in Liberia have left an indelible impact on the Liberian society. One of the first victims of the war was the Liberian state, which collapsed and the country was carved between rival armed factions. This made it almost impossible to enforce law and order in face of the lack of central authority. Approximately, 60,000 fighters fought in the war; there are more arms in the country than ever before; and the economy has been dislocated and effectively turned into a war economy looted by various armed factions with Charles Taylor believed to be the main beneficiary. Further, more than a million people became refugees and internally displaced persons as a result of the war; and the country's social infrastructure was destroyed beyond imagination. The country's health and educational system has also been badly affected to the extent that curable diseases and illnesses are killing people. In addition, there are young people today in Liberia who have never seen the classroom because of the war. Finally, war was exported into neighbouring countries from Liberia because the country contained a cesspool of fighters recruited from within West Africa.

Addressing these issues remains a major headache for Liberia and it will definitely take a long time to address some of them. This means that the reconstruction of the country will not be an easy task.

Contemporary Liberian Situation

After 14 years of war and efforts aimed at managing and resolving the Liberian conflict, ECOWAS and International Contact Group on Liberia (ICGL) managed to broker the Accra Peace Agreement, the constitutional pillar upon which Liberia's peace process rests. The Agreement offers an opportunity for Liberians to rebuild their country and put in place a viable and sustainable national polity but what is the current state of affairs? Already, the Chair and Vice of the National Transitional Government of Liberia (NTGL) was inducted into office on 14 October 2003.

Since 14 October, the interim leadership has been grappling with the task of making sure that all positions within the various Ministries and Parastatals are duly filled. On the one hand, the Agreement explicitly allocated certain Ministries and Parastatals to the Liberian stakeholders. On the other hand, it stressed that some of the positions should be allocated on the basis of consensus and consultation. Over the past two to three weeks, there have been a rift between the office of the Chair and the armed factions who are arguing that the Chair wants to usurp executive powers by appointing people into position outside the Accra

Agreement. In a recent showdown meeting between the Chair and the NTLA, the former backed down from some of his appointments. Disappointingly, elections to the NTLA have been marred by certain irregularities. For example, the Accra Agreement allocated 7 slots to civil society groups but 8 people were elected. Unfortunately one of the slots (Pro-democracy and Advocacy groups') was not accounted for in the Agreement. The confusion over this slot has not been resolved.

Other areas of immediate concern are water and electricity for the urban areas. Monrovia has grown from a city with a pre-war population of 300,000 to more than 1 million people. Inhabitants of the city are going through real hell to make a living.

In addition to the above, what are some of the main priority areas that must be addressed in order to successfully create the environment for sustainable peace in the short-term and long-term? Addressing this question is a difficult one because of the enormous problems facing Liberia but for the purpose of this occasion, I would limit myself to what I consider to be crucial.

Governance Reforms

As indicated earlier, one of the factors that caused war in Liberia was poor governance. Thus, by the time of the 2005 elections, there will be a need to implement comprehensive governance reforms. Such reforms must seek to strengthen and promote the independence of the national legislature whose primary task is to provide oversight over the government; and the judiciary, which provides for the rule of law. In the past, these two institutions have been undermined by the central role of the presidency. Moreover, the governance reforms should also seek to redefine and rethink democracy in a way that democracy means something more meaningful to ordinary people. The country can hold regular elections contested by a plurality of political contenders – parties or individuals but what does this mean for ordinary Liberians? Does it offer them security and good governance? In essence, certain structures can be put into place as a result of the governance reforms envisaged under the Accra Agreement. The key question is what about the people who will run these structures? Thus, the issue may not just be about structures but agents.

Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration of Ex-Fighters

One of the legacies of this war is the amount of fighters it produced and number of weapons lying in illegal hands. In this light, disarming, demobilising and reintegrating ex-fighters into society is a major priority. During the Civil War Part One (1989-1997), there were 60,000 fighters and we are told that in Civil War Part Two (1999-2003), there are 38,000 fighters. Many of these fighters have never seen the classroom because they were recruited as child soldiers. Now they must be trained in order to be useful to their communities and the larger Liberian society. If the UN agencies have not already done so, there will be the need to carry out a sort of needs assessment in order to put forward appropriate and relevant policies for the implementation of the DDR in Liberia. Such research could ensure that the usual 'cut and paste' approach is not applied to Liberia. It is one thing to learn lessons from other countries and post-conflict situations but it is another thing to mechanically apply such lessons to every post-conflict societies.

Security Sector Reforms

After the Civil War Part One, security sector reform could not be carried out as envisaged by the Abuja II Agreement largely because the Taylor government invoked Liberian sovereignty and this led to the premature departure of ECOMOG from Liberia. In the Accra Agreement, the task of security sector reform is highly envisaged and prioritised. The task is vital for peace and security

in Liberia because during the 14 years of war, the security sector was highly factionalised. Security agencies were deeply affiliated with factions whose fighters and non-qualified personnel wielded control over elements within these agencies. In fact, the history of this sector is not encouraging because of its repressive role in society. The Liberian public has lost confidence in it and the war years have made the situation even worse. In order to regain public confidence, the reforming of this sector should include training and thorough screening of the personnel for past records. Finally, the relevant mechanisms for civilian management of the security sector should be put in place.

Elections

The holding of free and fair elections is also a major priority for making war unattractive in Liberia and providing a secure environment for development. During the next two years, an Elections Commission, as envisaged under the Accra Agreement, will be established. Chairman Gyude Bryant has not appointed anyone to this very important Commission. The history of elections in Liberia is not encouraging and besides the 1997 elections, there has never had any proper elections. Contrary to the views of international observers, even the elections of 1997 were neither 'free nor fair'. It was held in an environment in which one candidate, who happens to be winner had an edge over the rest of the candidates in terms of resources and access to the remotest parts of the country because of the war. Like the other priority areas mentioned above, lessons from elsewhere will be useful in the running of the affairs of this Commission.

Social Reforms: Health and Education

The other priority area is social reforms in specific relation to health and education. As a result of the war, the entire social infrastructure of the country has been damaged beyond imagination. Hospitals in the counties are dilapidated and even those working do not have medical equipment and medicines to cure diseases. Just on the eve of the signing of the Agreement, there were no more than 30 medical doctors in Liberia for a population of 3 million people. In the 1980s there were 400 doctors and on the eve of the war there was one doctor to every 9,000 people and a nurse to every 1,400 people. Further, schools including the country's leading institutions of higher learning have been gravely affected. For example, the University of Liberia does not have any functioning library and such is the case with other high institutions like Cuttington University College. The Teacher training colleges have been closed and so are many high schools.

Economic Recovery

During the war, the economy contracted and was turned into a war economy looted by warlords. Apparently, Taylor enjoyed the lion's share of this war economy, which was characterised by excessive loot by both national and foreign business people. For example, of the \$46.2m made from logging between January and June 2001, it is apparent that the main beneficiaries were Taylor, his cronies and the Oriental Timber Company (OTC). Other sources of revenue declined and without the remittances from abroad from Liberians, there would be more disaster in Liberia today. Revamping the economy is a priority. The key sectors of the economy include rubber, mining, timber and maritime industry. The agricultural sector was badly affected by war because even small producers could not pursue any agricultural activities in face of the prevailing insecurity in Liberia. This involves improving agricultural production and establishment of agro-industries that can utilise agricultural products and make rural producers to gain access to the markets. A revamped economy will provide employment for a large segment of the 85% of Liberians currently unemployed including the ex-fighters.

Monitoring the Accra Peace Agreement

Finally, in order for the current peace process to succeed, it has to be monitored closely. This will involve monitoring not just the performance of the Transitional

Government but also that of the peace mediators on the regular basis. Thus a six monthly (or even three monthly) review of the implementation of the Accra Agreement will go a long way to see whether it is being adhered to or not. Currently, because of the gap in knowledge about the stipulations of the Accra Peace Agreement, the document is being subjected to twisted interpretations in Liberia depending who is using it. Many Liberians do not have access to this document and this gap can only be filled in by a timely intervention by external agencies by making it accessible to the people of the country. In this way, Liberians themselves can serve as watchdogs for the peace process through the Accra Agreement.

Conclusion: Significance Of Working Group

Given the above priority areas what is the role for the Working Group on Security and Governance? For most people caught in the Liberian conflict, thinking is a luxury. For most people, meeting everyday security needs is a major pre-occupation. The University of Liberia and other high institutions of learning have always been teaching institutions. Research has not been encouraged. Only social movements like the Movement for Justice in Africa (MOJA) provided alternative policy options in their advocacy but currently, there are no such movements. This signifies that the Working Group can help stimulate policy debates and I welcome the idea that a security and development centre be established at the University of Liberia. This could encourage research on issues relevant to sustaining the peace process and laying the foundation for sustainable development in Liberia. Any relationship that will be cultivated with local institutions should aim to strengthen their capacities in order for them to make meaningful contributions to security and governance.