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EYEWITNESS:

The Challenges of Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration in Liberia

WOLF-CHRISTIAN PAES

The UN Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) succeeded in disarming and demobilizing more than 100,000 former fighters between December 2003 and November 2004. The disarmament, demobilization, reintegration and rehabilitation (DDRR) process played an important role in stabilizing Liberia after 15 years of civil war. However, some elements of the programme were unsatisfactory. For example, fewer than 28,000 guns were collected, raising severe doubts about the qualification criteria for admission to the process employed by UNMIL. Even more worrisome for regional peace and stability was the fact that UNMIL failed to provide reintegration opportunities for the demobilized fighters in an adequate and timely manner, creating a dangerous disconnect between the disarmament and the reintegration phases of the DDRR process.

At the close of 2004, Liberia's 15 years of agony and bloodshed finally seemed to have come to an end. Following the signing, on 18 August 2003, of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) between the government of Charles Taylor and the two armed opposition groups, Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) and Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL), and Taylor's departure into exile in Nigeria, Liberia became temporary home to the world's largest and most expensive UN peacekeeping mission. With an annual budget of US$846 million, in November 2004 the UN Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) consisted of some 14,100 military personnel from 47 countries, as well as 750 civilian police officers and 607 international civilian staff operating under a robust Chapter VII mandate.[1]

Disarmament and Demobilization

One of UNMIL's primary concerns was the disarmament, demobilization, rehabilitation and reintegration (DDRR) of former combatants belonging to all armed groups. In this task it was to be supported by the National Commission for Disarmament, Demobilization, Rehabilitation and Reintegration (NCDDRR) established under the auspices of the CPA and comprising representatives of the armed groups. However, most of the actual planning and implementation of the programme was left to UNMIL's Joint Implementation Unit (JIU). The JIU sub-contracted many of the technical and educational aspects of the cantonment process to local service providers, usually Monrovia-based affiliates

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of international humanitarian organizations, such as UNICEF and the Norwegian Refugee Council. UNMIL originally estimated that about 38,000 combatants would register for demobilization benefits, though the basis for this calculation remains unclear. Alternative estimates of the total number of combatants in Liberia were provided by the International Crisis Group, which estimated 48–58 thousand.[2]

The DDRR process was to consist of a three-week (later reduced to five days) disarmament and demobilization period under the auspices of UNMIL at a cantonment site. In the absence of registers kept by the armed groups, eligibility for DDRR benefits was based on the willingness of a combatant to hand over a firearm. After disarmament by UNMIL peacekeepers at the so-called D1 site, former fighters were transported to the D2 site, where they were registered, received medical attention, human rights and peace training, as well as career counselling. During this period, fighters were separated from the civilian population and not allowed to leave the camps. At the end of the camp period, former fighters received food for one month as well as a cash stipend of US$150, along with free transport to a location of their choice within Liberia. Foreign nationals were to be transferred to their country of origin or could opt for refugee status within Liberia. The second – rehabilitation and reintegration period – was to begin immediately after the arrival of the ex-combatants in their settlement areas, with available options including formal education, vocation training and job creation. During this period a second instalment of $150 was to be paid to the former fighters as a sustenance allowance.

The first phase of the DDRR programme was launched on 7 December 2003 at Camp Scheffelin in the vicinity of Monrovia, mostly targeting former government soldiers and paramilitaries. However, this first phase lasted only a few days because UNMIL was overwhelmed by a higher than anticipated response from former combatants. Compounded by organizational and resource problems, this led to riots at the camp site that left several people dead, and led to rioting and looting in Monrovia.[3] Despite these adverse conditions, UNMIL managed to process 13,123 former combatants, and to collect 8,679 weapons and more than 2.7 million rounds of ammunition during this phase.

After these chaotic first days, the programme was suspended for four months and UNMIL re-designed the process. During this period the qualification criteria were expanded to include people who could not produce a weapon, but could present 150 rounds of ammunition instead.[4] The second phase began on 15 April 2004 with the opening of four cantonment sites at Gbarnga, Buchanan, Tubmanburg and Monrovia (at the site of the old Voice of America transmitter, the area therefore being known as VOA). While these sites covered only a fraction of Liberia's territory, unlike the aborted process in the first phase, their geographic dispensation targeted members of all armed groups. As during the earlier phase, it quickly became evident that the caseload exceeded the expectations of UNMIL, forcing the JIU to change certain programme elements. Though originally the combatants were expected to remain for three weeks in the camps in an attempt to separate the fighters from their commanders and to provide initial

training, this period was reduced to five days. More significantly, the number of reintegration programme slots did not grow in tandem with the number of demobilized fighters, forcing discharged ex-combatants to wait for months, often in destitute conditions in greater Monrovia. Things were further complicated by the fact that only the first instalment of $150 was paid immediately after discharge, while payment of the second instalment started only in September 2004. During the second phase 51,466 people went through the camps and a total of 9,417 weapons and 2.29 million rounds of ammunition were collected and subsequently destroyed by UNMIL.

The third phase of the DDRR programme began in early July 2004 with the opening of new camps in Zwedru, Ganta and Vonjama, following the deployment of UNMIL military contingents to these areas. While this should have been concluded by 31 October 2004, the deadline was extended by three weeks because of logistic difficulties in disarming pockets of combatants in remote northwestern and southeastern Liberia. When the programme finally ended in late November 2004, a total of 102,193 people had been processed, and 27,000 guns and more than 6.15 million rounds of ammunition had been collected.

Out of this total caseload 69,236 (67 per cent) were adult males, 22,400 (22 per cent) adult females, 8,792 (9 per cent) male children and 2,561 (2 per cent) female children. Throughout the DDRR process UNMIL took great care to separate male and female, underage and adult combatants, by housing them in separate sections of the camps. These precautions acknowledged that female and/or underage combatants would be prone to abuse by other camp inmates and required special reintegration assistance. Underage combatants were usually processed on the date of arrival and then discharged from the demobilization camp to an interim care centre run by a child protection agency such as UNICEF.[5] However, the system was open to abuse because women and children were sometimes accepted into the DDRR programme under a special clause without the need to surrender arms or ammunition. According to several child protection officers interviewed by the author in August 2004, adolescents from neighbouring communities were recruited by rebel commanders to be processed by UNMIL with the cash reward being split between the commander and the family of the young 'combatant'. This 'commercialization' of the DDRR process was made possible by the lack of reliable data on who actually served

TABLE 1:
NUMBER OF EX-COMBATANTS BY FACTION

Faction	Phase I	Phase II	Phase III	Total
AFL	4,164	6,830	1,252	12,246
LURD	48	19,717	13,720	33,485
MODEL	11	2,855	10,283	13,149
GoL	11	5,107	10,471	15,589
Others	8,889	16,957	1,878	27,724
Total	13,123	51,466	37,604	102,193

Source: 'NCDDRR/JIU DDRR Consolidated Report', 24 Nov. 2004.

with the armed groups and the instant cash reward available to 'ex-combatants'. Unlike their adult counterparts, they did not even have to stay in the cantonment sites for five days, as discharge from the interim care centre was possible immediately after contact with a relative had been made. While some child soldiers might not have been affiliated to fighting forces, child protection agencies in Monrovia stress that substantial numbers of underage boys and girls remain with their former commanders and are exploited as a source of cheap labour on rubber plantations and in gold and diamond mines in areas outside of effective UNMIL or Liberian government control. They also point out that original estimates by UNICEF had put the total number of children affiliated to fighting forces at 15–25 thousand before the start of the DDRR process, while only 11,353 had been processed by UNMIL by November 2004. However, in the absence of proper identification certificates and given the fact that the international threshold of 18 years of age for maturity does not match the post-war context of Liberia, it seems likely that substantial numbers of adolescents affiliated to fighting forces preferred to participate in the 'adult programme'.

The most striking aspect of the DDRR programme is the ratio between combatants and weapons. During the exercise 27,800 guns and some six million rounds of ammunition were collected, about one gun per four fighters. The picture is blurred further by the fact that heavier weapons were largely absent, with less than 100 120mm mortars and a similar number of anti-aircraft guns collected – the vast majority of surrendered arms were assault rifles, with a few machine guns, pistols and shotguns. Many observers claim that the armed groups used heavier equipment during the civil war, raising the worrying issue of arms retention by officially disbanded factions. Another possible explanation is that heavier weapons were transferred to neighbouring Côte d'Ivoire, itself embroiled in a bitter civil war, where sophisticated equipment is likely to fetch a better price than that paid by UNMIL.[6]

Discounting the question of heavier arms, the ratio between combatants and surrendered arms is strikingly low even if compared to similar operations elsewhere. Interviews with NGO workers employed at cantonment sites during August 2004 seem to confirm that this was the result of widespread abuse

TABLE 2:
WEAPONS SURRENDERED TO UNMIL AS OF 19 SEPTEMBER 2004

Weapons name	Serviceable	Unserviceable	N/A	Total
120 mm mortars	83	2	38	123
AK-47 assault rifle	17,445	389	925	18,759
Anti-aircraft guns	72	1	8	81
G3 assault rifles	319	47	19	385
7.62 mm machine guns	477	30	59	566
Pistols (all caliber)	524	69	38	631
RPG launchers	943	28	99	1,070
Shotguns	521	498	103	1,122
Grand Total	20,384	1,064	1,289	22,737

Source: 'NCDDRR/JIU DDRR Consolidated Report', 19 Sept. 2004.

within the DDRR process. Many people have confirmed that weapons and ammunition were being obtained by civilians for cash in order to allow registration as a former fighter. Some sources claim that up to 60 per cent of the total caseload consists of people who were not affiliated with fighting forces. UNMIL peacekeepers report that 'former fighters' often do not know how to handle the weapon they are carrying to the disarmament site.[7] Camp workers report that it is common practice for commanders controlling a cache of weapons to distribute them to civilians and to split the cash reward after the civilians are discharged as 'ex-combatants'.[8] This practice is motivated by the fact that the grant of US$300 is substantially higher than the market price for firearms in most parts of Liberia. This is especially true for the vast majority of people in the camps who have secured a slot in the DDRR programme by surrendering 150 units of ammunition. UNMIL officers also report that in some instances spent cartridges are filled with sand and then presented as live ammunition. A secondary indication of fraudulent claiming is the fact that about a quarter of the total caseload were registered as 'other' during the DDRR process, rather than as a member of one of the armed groups.

UNMIL's political leadership, including the Secretary-General's Special Representative Jacques Klein, steadfastly refuses to recognize that non-combatants are abusing the system.[9] But there is little doubt that UNMIL's own disarmament policy is responsible for the inflated caseload, by having lowered the threshold from one firearm per person to 150 rounds of ammunition. The comparatively high cash reward of US$300 and the lack of social stigma attached to being a registered ex-combatant provide powerful material motivation. Incentives are further perverted by five days of isolation in the comparative luxury of the disarmament camps (complete with satellite television provided by UNMIL) – a small price to pay in one of the poorest countries in the world.

An alternative explanation for the low ratio of firearms to combatants is that the armed factions retained substantial caches as 'life insurance' in case the peace process fell apart. This would be consistent with experience from DDRR operations elsewhere and it seems likely that some weapons are purposely held back by the commanders. However, it does not explain the enormous discrepancy in surrendered weapons, which seems to be the result of UNMIL's questionable practice of accepting people into the process solely on the basis of surrendered ammunition. UNMIL is facing the challenge that nobody knows for certain how many weapons are currently at large in Liberia, making success difficult to measure in the absence of a suitable yardstick. Nevertheless, UNMIL is making an effort to track the serial numbers of the guns collected and to compare them with the available data for imports to Liberia in the recent past. This has resulted in some interesting findings: 3,175 out of 5,000 illegally imported Serbian Zastava M70 AB2 assault rifles (63.5 per cent) had been collected and destroyed by August 2004. In the case of the Serbian RPG 7, out of 791 imported launchers, 459 (58 per cent) had been surrendered during the DDRR process.[10] This high rate of return for the comparatively modern Serb equipment seems to suggest that the programme succeeds in eliminating modern as well as derelict weapons.

Rehabilitation and Reintegration

During the DD period, the former combatants were asked about their preferred area of settlement. About 45 per cent of the total caseload opted for transfer to the greater Monrovia area. It seems certain that many preferred Monrovia to their places of origin, either because they were afraid to go home, or because they expected better economic opportunities in the capital. This preference created massive problems in an area that is already home to some 350,000 internally displaced persons living in camps scattered around Monrovia, an 'overwhelming concentration' that 'without job opportunities poses a threat to national security'.[11]

During registration at the D2 camp, combatants were also asked what kind of RR assistance they were interested in. The options presented to them included agriculture, employment, formal education and vocational training.

This urbanization problem is exacerbated by demand for RR assistance outstripping available slots provided by international organizations. By November 2004, only 11,212 former combatants were registered in ongoing projects, with another 4,681 registered for formal education at various junior, secondary and tertiary institutions. Taking into account UNMIL's reasonable assumption that two per cent of the total caseload would 'spontaneously reintegrate', i.e. not request RR assistance, this left more than 82,000 former combatants unaccounted for. Consequently there is a dangerous mismatch between the DD and RR phases of the programme. Several thousand people have been waiting since April 2004 for RR benefits and as the caseload has grown, so has the waiting period for the few programme slots available. With the initial enthusiasm for peace fading away quickly and the cash stipend often spent on alcohol and consumer goods, a melange of alienated and destitute people was emerging. It led to riots and roadblocks, and it would have been easy for an enterprising warlord to tap this reservoir of experienced combatants to recruit new troops. Indeed, rumours persisted in Monrovia about new training camps in the border areas with Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire. During late November 2004 intelligence sources indicated that former combatants were actively recruited by pro-Gbagbo militias in Côte d'Ivoire and that there might even be plans to use Liberian territory for an attack on the *Force Nouvelles* which controlled the north of Côte d'Ivoire.

These supply problems were partially the result of the much higher than expected turnout of so-called fighters during the DD process. While

TABLE 3:
EDUCATIONAL PREFERENCES OF FORMER COMBATANTS AS OF 19 SEPTEMBER 2004

	Percentage	Male	Female
Agriculture	3.88	2,237	574
Employment	0.72	476	45
Formal education	39.97	23,634	5,328
Vocational training	55.43	31,218	8,539

Source: 'NCDDRR/JIU DDRR Consolidated Report', 19 Sept. 2004.

Jacques Klein celebrated the high number of participants, the caseload presented a major burden for the DDRR programme. Festus Aboagye and Alhaji M.S. Bah note that US$13.5 million had been budgeted by the UNDP for the DDRR Trust Fund, out of which $10.2 million had already been spent on the first two phases of the DDRR process, leaving only very limited funds for the final phase. They argue that the funding shortfall stood at about $44 million during the third quarter of 2004. It seems likely that the funding gap has been narrowed by early 2005, even though no firm financial information was available at the time of writing (late 2004).[12]

However, difficulties with the RR programme were not exclusively a result of that funding gap. It is evident that UNMIL would not have been able to offer sufficient RR slots even if the total caseload had fallen in the lower predicted range of 40–50 thousand. While the DD component of the programme was coordinated and financed by UNMIL, RR activities were supposed to be financed through a tendering process in which the UNDP (responsible for the RR component) invites project proposals from interested parties (usually international humanitarian organizations based in Monrovia). UNMIL depended therefore on the interest and ability of third parties in designing and running these programmes. The funding decisions were taken during a weekly stakeholder meeting, involving UNMIL and donor representatives. International diplomats interviewed in Monrovia during August 2004 were extremely critical of the efficiency of this process, arguing that there had been substantially more money available than suitable projects. It is difficult to understand why the UNDP did not play a more active role in this process, given the urgency of the issue.

The perceived weaknesses of the DDRR Trust Fund led other donors, most notably USAID and the European Commission, to seek other channels for RR assistance. By far the largest bilateral programme was conducted by USAID,

TABLE 4:
RR CASELOAD ANALYSIS

Total number of eligible ex-combatants	100,000
Spontaneous reintegration (2 per cent)	2,000
UNDP Trust Fund	
Ex-combatants enrolled in formal education (UNDP Trust Fund sponsored)	4,681
Ex-combatants in other UNDP Trust Fund sponsored RR activities	11,212
Parallel Programs (Target Group)	
UNICEF – Children	5,000
UNICEF/USAID – Children/Adults	2,000
World Vision/USAID – Adults	2,000
IRC/USAID – Women (Children)	1,050
Save The Children - Children	2,500
USAID/DAI Labour-based, education and agriculture program – Adults	20,000
EC Program Phase I – Adults	2,940
EC Program Phase II – Adults (Planned)	4,222
Grand Total	42,395
Shortfall	57,605

targeting in excess of 20,000 former combatants (as well as some non-combatants). The basic approach taken was to create a labour-intensive infrastructure rehabilitation and to combine it with limited educational and counselling activities. While the sustainability and the long-term developmental impact of this programme seem questionable once USAID funding runs out, it has succeeded in 'getting people off the streets' and engaging them in meaningful activities. Another 9,500 slots were planned for children affiliated to fighting forces, both by UNICEF and Save The Children, partially with USAID funding. The European Commission funded some 4,000 slots in parallel programmes. However, the actual status of many of the RR activities remains unclear because there is no reliable data on how many projects are operational, rather than approved but still in the pipeline. Even if UNMIL's optimistic estimates are correct, this would still leave some 57,000 ex-combatants without RR coverage.

Conclusion

UNMIL had achieved and run a comprehensive DDRR programme in Liberia. However, it would be self-deceiving to subscribe to Klein's view that the turnout marked a success. The lax qualification criteria employed by UNMIL during the second and third phases of the programme invited abuse and commercialization of the programme. Worse from a security point of view, it became virtually impossible to distinguish between genuine and fraudulent 'combatants', with the risk that in the absence of RR opportunities former fighters might drift to other hotspots in the region to re-enlist. With regard to the RR component, the UNDP played a passive, reactive and neglectful role in administering the Trust Fund. Waiting for non-governmental organizations to step forward with proposals, rather than actively designing a programme was a major management flaw in a situation where most locally-active development organizations work in the field of humanitarian assistance, rather than on training and income generation. The few RR programmes in existence seem to favour formal and vocational training. Given the weak absorption capacity of the labour market, it was important to steer ex-combatants away from the narrow confines of a formal job (such as car mechanic) and towards a more comprehensive curriculum featuring 'life skills'. The latter should also have included mandatory modules on farming, as experience from Sierra Leone shows that a substantial number of former combatants will have to rely on subsistence agriculture to complement an income from other sectors. However, in order to make the agriculture sector more attractive, a land reform process needed to be initiated in Liberia. Generally, it seems important to enable former combatants to take their economic future into their own hands. In this context, advanced formal education and vocational training is arguably of a more limited importance than the provision of opportunities for income generation. In this context, micro-lending could play a very important role in Liberia, but was notably absent.

Beyond the confines of the DDRR process, the main challenge for the international community will be to overcome the legacy of bad governance in Liberia. There were indications that the interim government was keen to postpone

the elections scheduled for 2005, in order to extent opportunities for rent-seeking for its members. This dangerous trend, which found expression in mid-2004, when a fleet of modern 4 × 4 vehicles for members of parliament and leading bureaucrats were imported from the meagre tax revenue, seriously damaged the image of the interim administration both at home and among the donor community at a time when school teachers and medical staff in government installations were still waiting for their salaries since the end of the old regime. The massive international presence in Liberia stabilized the country for the time being. The next challenge is to overcome the structural causes of conflict, which were responsible for the region's crisis in the first place, the ruthless plunder of Liberia's natural riches chiefly among them. This issue urgently needs to be addressed if Liberia (and arguably the sub-region) is not to slide back into civil war after UNMIL pulls out.

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NOTES

1. Festus Aboagye and Alhaji M.S. Bah, *Liberia at a Crossroads: A preliminary look at the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) and the protection of civilians*, Pretoria: Institute for Security Studies (ISS Paper No.95), 2004, p.7.
2. International Crisis Group, *Rebuilding Liberia: Prospects and Perils*, Freetown/Brussels: ICG Africa Briefing No.75, 2004, p.1.
3. Ibid., p.5.
4. The precise reason for this policy change remains unclear. Some people interviewed suggested that this resulted from problems encountered during the first phase; while the ICG claims that this is based on the DDR experience in neighbouring Sierra Leone, where 'camp followers' were often excluded from the process because they did not have a weapon to surrender. International Crisis Group, *Liberia and Sierra Leone: Rebuilding Failed States*, Dakar/Brussels: ICG Africa Briefing No.87, 2004, p.10.
5. In August 2004, UNICEF claimed that 85 per cent of the 5,800 children processed at this stage had been reunited with family members, while 970 were still living at Interim Care Centres waiting for their families to be traced. Updated statistics were unavailable at the end of 2004, *Integrated Regional Information Network* (OCHA, NY), 26 Aug. 2004.
6. The International Crisis Group states that LURD weapons were moved to Guinea and MODEL weapons to Côte d'Ivoire between November 2003 and February 2004 before UNMIL was fully deployed in the border areas (see n.4 above), p.11.
7. *Integrated Regional Information Network*, 28 July 2004.
8. Interview in Tubmanburg, Aug. 2004.
9. *Integrated Regional Information Network*, 28 July 2004.
10. Interview with UNMIL personnel, Star Base, Monrovia, Aug. 2004.
11. *Integrated Regional Information Network*, 1 Nov. 2004.
12. Aboagye and Bah (n.1 above, p.9). The financial aspect of the DDRR process was unclear at the time of writing. UNMIL staff interviewed in Monrovia said that the DDRR process was funded through the general UNMIL budget, whereas numerous other sources referred to the UNDP Trust Fund. A possible explanation is that the RR part of the programme was funded through the trust fund, which for much of 2004 showed a substantial shortfall. *The Analyst* (Monrovia), 17 Sept. 2004.