



University of Liberia

Voices on the Liberian Security Sector and UNMIL'S Withdrawal

Kofi Annan Institute for Conflict Transformation

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As the nation's oldest institution of learning the University of Liberia in 2006 established the Kofi A. Annan Institute for Conflict Transformation (KAICT) to serve as a center of excellence for producing the appropriate human capital required for national recovery and peace building in Liberia. KAICT envisions a future where public dialogue and rigorous research and analysis are endemic to policymaking and implementation in Liberia. It is a future in which a new generation of Liberians, endowed with abilities for critical and innovative thinking, lead in the definition, reconstruction, and administration of the Liberian state.

For more information please contact PPDforum@gmail.com

- ❖ *People's feeling towards national security and safety is depends on UNMIL's presence*
- ❖ *People expressed major distrust about the current security mechanisms and structures as well as the ongoing national peace process*
- ❖ *Ideally security sector reform (SSR) directs the transformation of a security system towards more consistency with democratic norms and principles – this is contradicted by increasing reports about security personnel being corrupt or even involved in criminal acts*
- ❖ *Raids, robberies, assault and domestic violence are leading the crime statistics and showing the strong relationship and interdependence between economic opportunities, poverty and building peace*
- ❖ *Regional security issues are a matter of concern for citizens especially with information on the activities of Liberian mercenaries*
- ❖ *The security apparatus is perceived as weak, not well equipped and lacking expertise*

The following policy brief is based on various Public Policy Dialogue Forums (PPDF)¹ discussing the Liberian security sector and UNMILs withdrawal as well as an Opinion Poll (OP)² executed at the University of Liberia campus. The cornerstones of the dialogue forums and the opinion poll were the interest of Liberians in the security sector and UNMIL's withdrawal and perceptions and feelings towards security and safety in Liberia. It further accommodated an exchange of experiences of corruption connected to security personnel and the experience of violence. The discussions and interviews further draw on opinions and individual assessments from citizens' perspectives of the expertise, strength and efficiency of the security sector and inquires about ways forward and the prerequisites for a successful withdrawal of UNMIL.

Introduction

The Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in August 2003 marked the beginning of a decade of relative peace and defined initial regulations of the security sector reform (SSR) in Liberia. It entailed a wide range of political assurances, proposed reforms and demobilization

¹ The Public Policy Dialogue Forum is a monthly gathering of policy practitioners and users as well as Liberian youth to meet and interact in what has been code named "Stepping back to do some thinking", discussing public policy development and implementation in Liberia

² The Opinion Polls are a main activity of the Public Policy Dialogue Forum and contribute to establishing knowledge and understanding of opinions and attitudes concerning public policies of the wider Liberian society. They represent a survey of public opinion from a particular sample, the University, representing the opinion of the Liberian population concluding generalities based on a series of questions.

procedures offering first details on restructuring the security forces, including the army, the police, and immigration forces. The Economic Community Of West African States (ECOWAS), the United Nations (UN), African Union (AU), the International Contact Group on Liberia (ICGL) and the USA were asked to provide advisory staff, equipment, logistics and experienced trainers for the security reform effort³.

Ideally, Security Sector Reform (SSR) denotes the transformation of a system towards more consistency with democratic norms and principles. The CPA further states: “[...] *These restructured security forces shall adopt a professional orientation that emphasizes democratic values and respect for human rights, a nonpartisan approach to duty and the avoidance of corrupt practices.*”(2003: Part 4, Art. VIII). Especially the latter point becomes more and more contested and criticized in recent reports and raised questions on the successes of SSR in general and the reliability of the Liberian security sector in particular. Up till now the capacity of Liberia’s legal, justice and corrective system appears to be limited with various shortcomings and shortfalls. In general, reports written over the last five years⁴ portray a picture of Liberia as being relatively calm and stable while at the same time continuing to be very fragile. A major sense of insecurity results from robberies and raids⁵, domestic violence and so called witchcraft⁶. Alarming, in all reports, trust in the security forces and also the performance of government as perceived by citizens is highlighted and remains to be major point of discussion and critique. Stories about corruption and human rights abuses especially from the police forces continue to be frequently mentioned in reports, whilst distrust in the security sector including judges and the justice system is widespread. Moreover regional security threats, also in connection with command structures of former fighting groups which remained intact within Liberia, are mentioned regularly and put the question on border security in the spotlight.

³ The USA was asked to reform and train the new Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL) and sub-contracted this responsibility to different private security companies.

⁴ Blair, Blattmann and Hartmann (2010): Patterns of Conflict and Cooperation in Liberia (Part1): Results from a Longitudinal Study, Yale University and Innovations for Poverty Liberia; Blair, Blattmann and Hartmann (2010): Patterns of Conflict and Cooperation in Liberia (Part 2): Prospects for Conflict Forecasting and Early Warning; Security Council - United Nations (2013): Final report of the Panel of Experts on Liberia submitted pursuant to paragraph 5 (f) of Security Council resolution 2079 (2012), S/2013/683; Paczynska, Agnieszka (2010): Liberia Interagency Conflict Assessment Framework Report, ICAF; Human Rights Watch (2013): “No Money, No Justice” Police Corruption and Abuse in Liberia; International Crisis Group (2011): HOW SUSTAINABLE IS THE RECOVERY? Africa Report N°177 – 19 August 2011; Vinck P, Pham PN, Kreutzer (2011): Talking Peace - A Population-Based Survey on Attitudes About Security, Dispute Resolution, And Post-Conflict Reconstruction in Liberia; University of California, Berkeley - School of Law, Action on Armed Violence (2012): Liberian Armed Violence Observatory – Second Report, July 2012; Action on Armed Violence (2011): MONROVIA – AN ASSESSMENT OF VIOLENCE AND INSECURITY IN THE LIBERIAN CAPITAL

⁵ This prevails particularly for Greater Monrovia. Nevertheless, it has to be noted that data frequency on crime in Monrovia and surroundings is supposedly much higher than in the rest of the country.

⁶ The concept of witchcraft is not a clear cut model of spiritual level but also seems to entail stroke of fate etc.

Knowledge and Interest on the Liberian Security Sector⁷

Knowledge and interest on the Liberian Security Sector and UNMILs withdrawal are mainly based on personal interest and concerns about personal security. Accordingly most participants showed knowledge about different security sector actors, how they work together and understood major responsibilities. Nevertheless, a critical number of people expressed difficulties in receiving reliable and relevant information on processes and developments within the sector. Women especially expressed this point of view during the OP.

Being Secure – Feeling Secure

People's feelings towards security and safety were very much dependent on the presence of UNMIL. Over half of the people interviewed during the opinion poll stated that they do not feel safe and secure with the current national security mechanism and structures in place. Only one

In general, respondents agreed that security structures that operate are somewhat in place in Central Monrovia while at the same time the security apparatus outside of Monrovia is perceived as rudimentary.

third of all interviewees said they would feel safe. Overall, a third of all interviewees indicated that they have experienced violence during the last six months. Raids and robberies, including armed burglaries by night and assaults, were mostly experienced. Violent demonstrations, also resulting in mob violence were specified which seem obvious given that all interviewees are students of the

University of Liberia and remember its recent past. Additionally, and in concordance with other statistics, domestic violence was described as occurring frequently. Another form of violence ascribed and already mentioned above is the abuse of power by security personnel, especially by police while performing traffic duties and visiting suspected crime scenes, and dealing with demonstrations.

Perceptions of Security, Safety and Security

Personnel Professionalism and work ethics especially of the police were questioned and criticized a lot. One argument made was that some high ranking officers who received extensive training either under the Taylor regime and/or under Doe were completely excluded from the new army and police, leaving behind a military and a

“The process of recruiting and vetting enlisted men, especially police, lacks credibility. [...] criminals are often employed.”
(Interview during OP)

⁷ In the following only results and data of the PPDF and the OP will be displayed.

police without any understanding of security services. On the other hand some participants argue that the security's behavior has improved since the war ended.

Additionally, due to day to day corruption, commonly named “cold water”, perpetuated by police but also by other security forces are not perceived as professional which makes it hard for people to trust the personnel themselves but also the system behind the people. Hence, distrust and rejection of police personnel was expressed widely and vehemently. Moreover the expertise of the security sector and personnel was seen as insufficient and this hampers the successful execution of tasks and responsibilities. Nevertheless, during the OP almost half of the interviewees stated to call the police in case of an emergency. Another 50% of all interviewees stated that they would call their neighbors should they experience violence and crime. Additionally a few participants also advanced the view that based purely on the presence of the police they would feel safe and protected. Moreover that the deficiency of trust would need to be build up from both sides, the security sector personnel and the citizens. More women than men showed distrust towards the police, with more women indicating that they have paid “cold water” (bribes) sometimes and more men stating never to have paid such a bribe. Nevertheless, the OP data also showed that almost 50% of all interviewees never were made to pay “cold water”.

Should Security Personnel
be armed?

Asked whether security personnel should be armed, half of all respondents would not agree. A critical number of people stated that it would be good for the AFL to be armed but not the LNP. Moreover it was said that security personnel should not be allowed to carry their arms visibly and that only a special group of security personnel should be trained to carry arms. Nevertheless, a number of people also were of the opinion, that in order to execute their full mandate and to protect people adequately, the police and the army needed to be armed but that due to the lack of trust people would feel threatened by police and soldiers carrying weapons. During the PPDF the question was raised if officers are psychologically stable enough to take the burden of carrying a weapon since security personnel can get under stress when they are

“The police should be paid at least 200 USD per month per officer.” (Discussion during PPDF)

armed and whether training conditions are equipped with psychosocial support for them. The regional security situation was a matter for concern and people stated that security forces are not well prepared to handle regional security

threats. Liberia's security sector continues to appear to be too dependent on UNMIL and

international support. The current situation with Ivory Coast was analyzed as alarming and constituted a threat to regional stability even more due to information on Liberian mercenaries and reports on training camps for fighters on Liberian soil. Joint training of security forces of all Mano River Countries was suggested as a way forward and one means of improving the situation.

Opinion and Assessment of the Security Sector The majority of all respondents assess the security sector to be weak and not well equipped while only a third of all OP interviewees see it as strong. The reasons given are mainly a lack of equipment and logistics as well as inadequate trained personnel and an insufficient number of personnel for both, the military and police. Moreover and as described above, a majority of people also do not perceive the security personnel as trustworthy and describe them as corrupt, rude and aggressive.

“Some departments do not monitor the operation of their men or where they go, do and when they come to work and whether they stay at their area of assignment.”
(Interview during OP)

Nevertheless, a connection between low salary and corrupt personnel was established as well, stating that if security personnel would be paid a reasonable salary, corruption and lawlessness would decrease. Furthermore, the inefficiency and slowness of the security sector also was interpreted as being due to the lack of sufficient logistics and provisions. The structure of the security sector itself is defined by most participants as being “good” while the implementation processes is described as an obstacle to efficiency and effectiveness. The main reasons given are that the structure in forms of departments etc. are in place and that only the implementation of the functions and assignments needs to be straightened. Additionally, many value the restructuring and training process by the international partners (UNMIL especially) and conclude that the security personnel is trained according to international standards and best practices while at the same time stating that this training needs to be prolonged and intensified. It is stated that even if some forces would have state of the art equipment they still would need to receive appropriate training in order to know how to use it. The main argument for ill-equipped personnel is the lack of arms and personnel.

Respondents are of the opinion that the budget allocation for the security sector basically does not allow for improvements of the sector. In that regard several interviewees would make the point of corruption within the government and the divestment of funding and budget.

Perceptions on UNMILs withdrawal

“[...] we have to learn to trust our own security in the protection of our nation, because we have to have control over our own security after 10 years of peace”
(Interview during OP)

The majority of all participants expressed concern about the withdrawal of UNMIL, main argument being the perceived weakness of the security sector. A strong point made was the fact that the AFL as well as BIN are still recruiting people and although they are still

trained in collaboration with UNMIL, it is perceived as a sector too inexperienced to be fully prepared to take over full responsibility. In the same line, people expressed concerns and showed distrust thinking about a fully armed security personnel not being accompanied by UNMIL. This also reflects the common view that the security sector lacks crucial training and requires longer “outside” support to foster the system and needs more financial backing to be well equipped. Widely stated was the support UNMIL forces are still giving in the rural areas where the Liberian security sector is described as the weakest. Another strong argument expressed against UNMIL’s withdrawal is the general mistrust in the national peace process and the current stability of Liberia at large. Nevertheless, some people would also argue that UNMIL’s mission in Liberia is fulfilled as widespread violence and fighting has stopped a long time ago. A respondent said: “UNMIL is for peace and comes in

“[...] the foundations of the Liberian security sector are not solid and even lacking basic principles. [...] if they are leaving now and do not give further training, our security sector will remain weak.” (Interview during OP)

“Liberia is not really safe and we are not enjoying peace. [...] there will be another civil war, [...] the country is still up for violence and the situation is fragile. If they [UNMIL] leave it is possible that Liberia will resolve into another civil war, we enjoy relative peace because of the presence of UNMIL.” (Interview during OP)

in times of war and hostilities and now there is no war here.”

On the contrary, there are arguments in favor of UNMILs withdrawal. Participants and interviewees for example expressed the opinion that especially now that Liberia is contributing forces to the African Union peacekeeping troops, it is time for Liberia to take charge for their own security sector. Furthermore some respondents articulated trust in the security sectors protection capacities mainly due to training received by international partners.

Additionally, the absence of UNMIL is also described as an opportunity to test and try the capacities and capabilities of the

newly trained and established security institutions as well as a big opportunity to enable Liberians and Liberia to depend on themselves and manage national affairs independently. As a major pre-requisite for UNMIL's successful withdrawal participants named an improved mentorship program for security personnel in order to make sure they learn the necessary skills and improve their performance in order to respond timely to situations. Thus it is important to analyze and understand the status quo and the legacy UNMIL will leave behind to correct lapses. Furthermore the security services need to be embedded in a comprehensive and cohesive framework, including performance and quality checks on a regular basis. This may include increased civilian oversight and monitoring.

Ways forward and prerequisites for an improved security sector

They ways forward include: improved relationship and established trust between the security sector, especially police, and the citizens. This is widely seen as a major pre-requisite for an improved security sector. Participants shared the view that the police need to understand themselves first and foremost as service providers for the Liberian people. That can best be achieved by educating them about their mandate but also by sensitizing civilians. It was suggested that the police give presentations of their work in communities and schools to enhance understanding of civilians about the role of the police. Furthermore it was advised for police to take part in community discussions to foster the concept of partnership. In general, civic education was identified as crucial in this process. Establishing trust in the police and the state was acknowledged as highly important in the process yet hard to achieve in an environment prone to corruption and abuse of placement and position. The recruitment process of police officers needs to be improved and the criteria revised. Furthermore human rights and civic education should be incorporated in the training of security personnel as basic tools. In the same regard, more and better training for the personnel is necessary to improve the security sector as a whole and should go hand in hand with appropriate salary and benefits for security personnel as well as an improvement of equipment and an adjustment of the gap between Monrovia and the rest of the country.

"The police is a service provider to the Liberian people." (Interview during OP)

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