

Source: United Nations Security Council

Date: 14 Apr 2008

SC/9297

Liberia place of hope after four years free of conflict, but security situation remains fragile, Security Council told

Security Council
5864th Meeting (AM)

Special Representative Says Government Still Heavily Reliant on UN Military, Police; Challenges in Security, Rule of Law, Governance, Development Interlinked

Free of conflict for the past four years, Liberia was a place of hope, but that hope was tempered by a tenuous and fragile peace, with security still heavily reliant on United Nations military and police presence, the Secretary-General's Special Representative and Coordinator of United Nations Operations in Liberia, Ellen Margrethe Loj, told the Security Council today.

Briefing on the Secretary-General's latest report on the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) (document S/2008/183), Ms. Loj of Denmark, who assumed her post three months ago, said that, despite the 'good news coming out of Liberia', Liberia was still a place where one could wake up in the morning and learn that an argument between fish sellers had degenerated into an ethnic problem with a threat to burn down a house of worship, where rumours about ritual killings could suddenly lead to the burning down of a police station, or where Liberian and UNMIL security forces and United Nations vehicles could still be attacked.

'This is clear evidence that peace has not taken firm root and it is not yet time to declare victory and leave the country,' Ms. Loj stressed.

She noted that, in compliance with Council resolution 1777 (2007), UNMIL's drawdown process had commenced and was being implemented, taking into account developments in the immediate subregion. By 30 September, 2,450 troops would be repatriated, leaving the Mission's troop strength at 11,691, and before the end of this month, 498 police advisers would be departing in seven stages, bringing the police strength to 742 personnel by December 2010. Appropriate adjustments were also being made to the civilian staffing.

The Mission's drawdown was being carried out in a well-planned manner, so as to minimize threats to State security. The process would also ensure that UNMIL was able to assist the Government in dealing with any serious disruption of civil disturbances, she explained. The drawdown plan was intended to provide the time and space needed for Liberia to build up its own police and military forces and progressively assume full responsibility for national security.

Significant progress had been made since the Council was last briefed on the situation in September 2007, Ms. Loj said. The report before the Council provided an update on major developments and the progress made in meeting the core benchmarks for the consolidation phase of UNMIL's consolidation, drawdown and withdrawal plan. On the basis of those and the progress achieved, benchmarks for the drawdown phase had been developed in close consultations with the Liberian Government and international partners.

She said that what had been accomplished in the two years under the dedicated leadership of President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and her Government was 'truly amazing and highly commendable'. But, nowhere was it illustrated more clearly how closely peacebuilding and peacekeeping were linked. Nowhere was it illustrated more clearly than in Liberia that there would be no sustainable security without development and that there would be no development without sustainable security.

Steady progress had been achieved during the last two years, and the overall situation remained stable, she continued. But, the security situation remained fragile, and further progress was needed in several areas to truly solidify it. The challenges related to security, rule of law, governance and economic development, all of which were closely interlinked. Those challenges had guided the formulation of the drawdown benchmarks, which had

been presented in the report. At this juncture of Liberia's recovery, three critical areas required special attention: reform of the security sector, not least the reform of the Liberia National Police; reform of the rule of law institutions; and effective implementation of the new poverty reduction strategy and the priority task of addressing the high unemployment rate.

She said that the security situation along Liberia's borders with its three neighbours had been calm during the reporting period, but the situation on all three borders was closely monitored by UNMIL. Unrest in any of Liberia's neighbours would have immediate negative consequences for the security situation in Liberia, and vice versa. It was not only the political developments that should be closely monitored, but the potential negative consequences of the increasing use of some countries in the subregion as transit points for international drug trafficking. That was in addition to the occasional civil unrest, due to sharp price increases of rice and gasoline.

Internally, she noted, there continued to be occasional violent incidents on rubber plantations and in diamond-mining areas. The crime rate, both related to armed robberies and rape, remained high and, in many of the reported rape cases, the victims were young girls or children. In addition, there had been an increasing number of incidents of mob violence and attempts to administer mob justice, including attacks on police personnel and police stations by angry crowds that wanted to assault and even kill crime suspects being detained by the police.

That was a clear sign of lack of trust in the security and justice system and a readiness — as during the years of conflict — on the part of citizens to continue to fend for themselves, she added. UNMIL itself had recently been a target of such action, when former UNMIL individual contractors carried out violence protest, during which three staff members had been injured and two UNMIL vehicles had been set ablaze.

She said those security incidents highlighted the need for the Government to finalize the national security strategy and the reforms of the security institutions. Those efforts were ongoing, but at a slower pace than originally planned. Progress was being made in the training and restructuring of the new armed forces of Liberia, and she hoped that that tempo was sustained. Any further delays would make it impossible for the new army to be fully operational before late 2009 and would impact directly on the timeline for UNMIL's drawdown plan.

The reform of the Liberia National Police (LNP) was a bigger challenge now, she went on, explaining that LNP still needed to gain the trust of the Liberian population. As of 30 June 2007, the quantitative benchmark of providing basic training for 3,500 police officers had been achieved. However, the focus should now be on improving the quality and professionalism of the individual police officers, enhancing the management structure and providing LNP with the necessary equipment and resources to perform effectively. Recent disciplinary problems within LNP had also raised the issue of the effectiveness of the vetting procedures. The Government and UNMIL were now looking at ways to review the process, including through verification.

Meanwhile, the development of the Emergency Response Unit within the police force was progressing, she noted. The training of the first batch of 90 officers had commenced. That process, however, was encountering some delays and funding gaps, which should be addressed soon. Additional funds were needed from international partners to ensure both a more effective functioning of LNP and for the Unit to be operational by July 2009.

Despite efforts by the Liberian Government to enhance the rule of law, deficiencies in the justice system continued to pose serious challenges to the administration of justice countrywide, she said. Those included: the lack of adequate funding; a shortage of qualified judicial officials; a lack of infrastructure, including courts and prisons; inadequate numbers of qualified judicial and legal officers; poor case management; low salaries; and corruption. As a result, many Liberians had little confidence in the justice system.

The lack of confidence in the rule of law institutions, and especially in the Liberia National Police and the judicial system, deserved urgent attention, she stressed. That would require improvements not only in the performance of law enforcement and judicial institutions, but, also a reorientation in the mindset of the population that was too quick to resort to extra-judicial measures. The Government had held a Cabinet retreat in March, during which the problems in the rule of law sector, particularly the police and judicial institutions, had been discussed, and it had been agreed to address them as a matter of priority.

She said that UNMIL was cooperating with the Government to examine those problems and come up with solutions. A rule of law retreat was being planned to bring the Executive and Judiciary together at the national level to address the problems. Also, UNMIL and the Government had recently held a joint forum to discuss the disturbing phenomenon of attacks on police and police stations. UNMIL was encouraged by the Government's plan to address those problems holistically. The Mission had also undertaken a funding gap analysis to identify the resources, both recurrent and capital, which would be required over the next five years for the full

development of LNP.

The incidence of gender-based violence in Liberia, particularly rape, was simply unacceptable, she emphasized. She was pleased to report, however, that with UNMIL's support and that of the country team, the Government was in the process of finalizing the national gender policy. It had also developed a national action plan against gender-based violence to deter and prosecute rape cases. A special court created to prosecute rape cases would hopefully give teeth to the new rape law. Again, plans alone could not do the trick — the mindset of Liberians committing those crimes — often against young children — must change. The Government, and all other groups working to bring about positive change in that matter, deserved international support. She was also glad to report that the public hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission were going well.

She went on to report that Liberia's national poverty reduction strategy had been finalized. That plan had been based on a grass-roots participatory process, with ordinary citizens providing input for the country's development agenda. While that exercise had been 'very positive', she stressed that it had also raised the expectations of Liberians, who now wanted to see tangible results. That said, the implementation of the strategy would not be easy, especially given the limited national capacity available for the task. Moreover, economic growth was urgently needed, especially to reduce the high unemployment rate, which also constituted a serious security concern.

In addition, she noted that, even if revenue collection could be enhanced and if the ambitious economic growth projections could be achieved, a significant funding gap would still need to be covered by external contributions. The Government would, therefore, need all the support it could get from international partners and, in that regard, she noted that the upcoming Partners Forum, set to be held in Berlin at the end of June, would be a critical milestone.

She went on to say that March had been a historic month for Liberia, not only because it had completed its poverty reduction strategy, but also because it had reached the decision point under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative. Liberia's next step would be to reach the HIPC completion point. For that to happen, it would be critical to ensure successful implementation of the poverty reduction strategy and the Governance and Economic Management Assistance Programme (GEMAP), she said, adding that progress already made within the GEMAP framework had been encouraging.

She said that UNMIL and the United Nations country team were continuing to strengthen efforts to penalize and prevent sexual abuse and exploitation, through preventive measures that included, among others, extensive training and prompt investigation of cases and implementation of disciplinary measures when allegations had been substantiated. While she was proud to say that the efforts had been yielding good results in significantly reducing the number of cases of sexual exploitation and abuse that were reported during the last period, 'We will, however, not rest on our laurels,' she asserted.

The latest report on Liberia is contained in document A/2008/183. The meeting convened at 10:11 a.m. and adjourned at 10:36 a.m.

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