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## All-female unit keeps peace in Liberia

**In Monrovia, the first women-only UN peacekeepers join the 15,000-strong force, inspiring local women to become police.**

**By Tristan McConnell** | Correspondent of The Christian Science Monitor

### MONROVIA, LIBERIA

Behind rows of razor wire, a machine gun peeking over the sandbags is trained on the road below. This is just one of many fortified compounds in the Congo Town suburb of Liberia's war-ravaged capital, Monrovia. But this compound is different, because everyone inside – from the armed guards to the cooks responsible for the inviting scent of curry that wafts around at lunchtime – is female.

The 103 Indian women who have called this compound home since January make up the United Nations' first-ever all-female peacekeeping unit. The women have quickly become part of Monrovia's urban landscape in their distinctive blue camouflage fatigues and flak jackets. They guard the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, patrol the streets day and night, control crowds at rallies and soccer games, and respond to calls for armed back-up from the national police who, unlike the Indian unit, do not carry weapons.

Liberian and UN officials hope their presence will help inspire Liberian women to join a fledgling police force struggling to recruit female officers. The all-female unit also signifies a revolution in UN peacekeeping, which has been rocked by rape and abuse scandals in recent years, notably in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Haiti. Analysts say an increase in female peacekeepers will help limit abuses perpetrated by the very people sent to safeguard the rights of those already traumatized by conflict.

"You get [these abuses] not just with peacekeepers but with soldiers in general, and it gets worse the further they are from home and the more destitute the local population," says Richard Reeve, research fellow at the Chatham House, a London-based think tank. "The UN will never get rid of the problem, but they are really dealing with it and putting changes into practice."

In the past three years, 319 peacekeepers worldwide have been investigated for abuse; of those, 179 were repatriated or dismissed. Yet the UN cannot prosecute troops. That must be done by the contributing country.

### Force may deter attacks on women

Commander Seema Dhundia says that her unit is there primarily to support the embryonic Liberia National Police (LNP), but she recognizes that the presence of her officers will also help raise awareness of and respect for women in Liberia, and in peacekeeping. "Seeing women in strong positions, I hope, will reduce the violence against women," she says.

Earlier this month UNMIL stated that in 2006 there were 30 reported cases of rape by UN personnel, who number more than 15,000 in Liberia, down from 45 in 2005.

Alan Doss, head of the UN Mission in Liberia (UNMIL), says the UN is committed to tackling the issue. "What we're talking about is very much the exception to the rule, but if the presence of [the Indian unit of] women helps to make the point that this is not acceptable behavior, then, quite frankly, anything we can do beyond what we're doing now is welcome."

The women-only unit will also help redress the acknowledged gender imbalance in peacekeeping missions: At the end of 2006 only 4 percent of UN police deployed worldwide were female officers. Trailblazing has its challenges, and, Ms. Dhundia admits, there can be some prejudice when her unit arrives on the scene. "Initially

there might be some apprehension as to the professional competency of the females," she says, "but when the troops prove their worth, then they are accepted, and there are not any problems."

### **But many women remain vulnerable**

In 2005, Liberia elected Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, Africa's first female president. Women head the justice system, the department of home affairs, and the domestic police force. With the UN's first-ever female-only peacekeeping unit, Liberia should be a leader in women's rights and sexual equality. But this is not the case: rape and sexual violence are pervasive.

A report published this month by the South Africa-based development agency ActionAid says that, "in the post-conflict context, rape is on the increase and indeed rape is currently the most reported serious crime in Liberia." In 2006, there were more than 350 reported rapes, but the real figure is likely to be far higher, because many attacks go unreported or are dismissed by village elders or police, according to the report. Refugees International estimates that up to 40 percent of Liberian women were raped during the 14-year civil war that ended in 2003.

The presence of the all-female Indian unit, it is hoped, will also help encourage Liberian women to join the police force. "Women see us out on the streets every day putting on uniforms, carrying heavy [weapons], and performing our duties," says Dhundia, "It will definitely get them inspired and motivated to come forward."

### **Recruiting females can be difficult**

Although all-female units are nothing new in Dhundia's native India, where they have existed since 1986, in Liberia the LNP is struggling to recruit women. More than 2,000 new police officers have so far been trained. The target is for 20 percent of the force to be women, but today only 5 percent are.

Encouraging women to join is difficult, as it challenges prevailing stereotypes. More to the point, female candidates often lack the necessary higher education. "The tradition is that, if there is not enough money, you educate the boys, not the girls," explains UN Police spokesman Gabriel Tibayungwa.

To combat this, a program of accelerated learning started in recent weeks for 150 Liberian women. One of the new participants is Wachten Beh, a slim 31-year-old with a mop of short dreadlocks. Ms. Beh is glad for the opportunity to complete her higher education and looks forward to serving in the police force. "I believe that everybody has a right – a woman has a right – to be what she wants to be," she says.

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