

CAROLYN NORRIS AND MARK L. SCHNEIDER

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Liberia's small steps on reform

By Carolyn Norris and Mark L. Schneider | September 13, 2007

LIBERIA IS appearing to have turned a real corner. President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf has shown impressive progress on reforms since she was elected in 2005. In the fight against endemic corruption, she has forced her ministers to follow her lead in disclosing their assets, and she is renegotiating sweetheart contracts in rubber, timber, and mining. To keep her government on the level, she has agreed to have international experts cosign with ministers before major expenditures are approved. And in a make-or-break test for a historically weak and corrupt judiciary, the attorney general is prosecuting her predecessor.

Measured against the past, these steps are notable, and part of the benefit is boosted tax revenues - up nearly 50 percent over last year. In the past, too often revenues went into private pockets rather than the treasury.

Of course, measured against the goals of a functioning state and economy, Liberia has a long way to go. Those within the administration suspected of wrongdoing have been removed but are yet to be prosecuted. Key commissions for fighting corruption, for postconflict truth and reconciliation, and for human rights are pending legislative approval or only just getting started.

This week, the head of the UN peacekeeping force in Liberia will present the Security Council with a phased drawdown strategy for the mission's 14,000 peacekeepers but with a strong "hold and review" warning after each phase. He also argues that even when the peacekeeping force ideally drops to 9,000 in 2010, a strong force will still need to see the country through its 2011 elections.

In short, then, Liberia has taken a few promising steps toward recovery, but it still faces a long road ahead. The international community will need to remain there for many years.

Given this, it was unwise for the United States to propose a sharp reduction in its funding of the peacekeeping effort in the budget request for 2008. Fortunately, congressional appropriators have thus far seen through the wildly unrealistic reasoning that Liberia's own forces would be up and running quickly and are rejecting the proposed cut.

The United States, which has outsourced the job of training the proposed 2,000-person army to businesses, can point to a lot of barracks constructed and equipment purchased, at a total cost of about \$20 million over the past two years. But only 165 troops have completed basic training, with another 525 in the process.

A similar lag exists on deploying police. While visiting the capital of Monrovia recently, we could see some of the country's newly trained police, including women, directing traffic. Overall, however, this is a drop in the ocean. The UN mission targeted basic training first, and by June it had 3,522 police on board. But the mission had passed on building the police stations, setting up communications networks, and buying police vehicles, partly because its funds come from slow-to-arrive voluntary contributions. A week ago, only 676 police had been deployed to the country's 15 counties.

These delays in the security sector are disturbing in a country still shattered by civil war. Charles Taylor, the country's president from 1997 to 2003, repressed Liberians while supporting massacre-prone forces in nearly every one of Liberia's neighbors. They in turn financed anti-Taylor rebels. Liberia has now demobilized an estimated 30,000 former military and former rebels, but several thousand former combatants have yet to demobilize and represent a destabilizing force.

Liberia needs the international community to stay engaged. The United States should pony up the needed funding to train the country's new, vetted military. It could also challenge others by making a grant to the UN mission trust fund aimed at improving rule of law - to deploy the police, reform the judiciary, and clean up overcrowded jails. Halfway help, just as the country is making progress, would be a tragic invitation for the chaos to return.

Carolyn Norris is West Africa Project director and **Mark L. Schneider** is senior vice president of the International Crisis Group. ■

