
PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF SECURITY IN POST-CONFLICT URBAN LIBERIA AND SIERRA LEONE

PART I – LIBERIA: CAUGHT BETWEEN INTERNATIONAL, STATE AND NON-STATE ACTORS

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Introduction

In the aftermath of violent conflict leading to state failure in countries throughout the world, international organisations or coalitions of countries are increasingly engaging in 'post-conflict reconstruction'. In Liberia and Sierra Leone, such efforts have been under way for some time, with strategies focusing on (re)installing the state's monopoly on the use of force and 'de-privatising' the security sector. However, there continues to be a lack of empirical evidence about actual community needs in terms of security. This two-part briefing focuses on such needs by examining the public perceptions of security in both countries, presenting some insights about the impact of an international peacekeeping force on the security sector as well as pointing to some practical lessons to be learned.

Liberia is emerging from a protracted era of violent conflict. After the end of the civil war in 2003 and the general elections in 2005, the

country is now at a critical stage of its peace process. Relative security has been achieved with the help of international peacekeepers, but the overall situation remains fragile. While many initiatives are under way at all levels by national and international actors to address the sources of conflict in Liberia, resolving them sustainably will take time, commitment and resources. Moreover, a functioning national security sector is still under (re-)construction, thus creating many opportunities for private forms of security provision.

This part examines public perceptions of security and security actors in Liberia in 2005 and early 2006. Focusing on actual community needs, the inquiry asked: How do Liberians perceive general and personal security? Who provides protection and who poses threats? What lessons can be learned from these findings for the future role of the security sector in Liberia?

The findings are based on a multi-method approach combining unique empirical data from a survey poll and focus group discussions (FGDs) carried out in urban Liberia as well as semi-standardised interviews with elites and local and international experts. The research team comprised three core members and 25 local interviewers. In November and December 2005, they conducted a survey poll in the capital, Monrovia, and the cities of Tubmanburg and Buchanan, and four in-depth FGDs on security perceptions covering issues such as the security actors involved and the relationships between the security actors. A key goal of the project was to identify those actors whom ordinary people perceive as providers of and threats to their security.

Results confirm that general and personal security have improved substantially since 2003, though many concerns persist. It comes as no surprise that the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) is perceived to provide the bulk of 'security

as a public good', while ex-combatants and street gangs are perceived as the biggest threats. Since the completion of the fieldwork, Liberia's security arena has hardly changed; understandably so, since a security sector cannot be rebuilt within such a short space of time. Hence the findings remain relevant for both Liberia as well as for other post-conflict countries, pointing the way for further research as well as for practical policy.

Security and Violence Actors in Post-conflict Liberia

Liberia has witnessed civil unrest since 1989, when Charles Taylor waged war against the military regime of Samuel Doe. It was only with the elections in 1997 that Taylor finally established himself firmly in Monrovia. In 1999, his forces fought the rebel Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) backed by Guinea, and later the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL), a rebel group supported by Ivory Coast. The civil war lasted until 2003; the rebels took most of Monrovia and Taylor sought exile in Nigeria. During the most intense moments of the war, all state agencies that ought to have delivered security as a public good either disappeared completely or served only partisan interests. Rebels undertook quasi-state functions temporarily in their areas of command, while vigilantes tried to maintain order in confined areas.

Following the 2003 peace agreement, the United Nations Security Council created UNMIL with an authorised strength of 15,000 peacekeeping soldiers. In addition to providing security, this force is also assigned the task of training new Liberian security forces. Elections in October and November 2005 were judged free and fair. They filled the benches of two houses of parliament and brought in Africa's first woman president, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf.

At the grassroots level, trust has yet to be rebuilt between communities, particularly

in the melting pot (and arena of combat) of Monrovia and between a generation of ex-combatants and their elders in the countryside. Numerous local conflicts all around the country, usually concerning land or land use, receive less attention. For the time being, UNMIL is trying to guarantee security and a basic functioning of a (re-)nascent state, but the mission will not stay forever. Across the border, the final withdrawal of the UN mission in Sierra Leone, UNAMSIL, in December 2005 may not lead to renewed unrest; however, the newly formed army and police force have yet to prove their ability to deal with security threats. Sierra Leone's situation is hardly stable and the country will remain reliant on external support, particularly in view of the elections due in July 2007; this may well have implications for Liberia, too.

Community Perceptions of Protection and Threat

From January to March 2005, Tufts University's Humanitarianism and War Project conducted a study on security perceptions among three sets of actors – the military contingents of peace support operations, international assistance agencies and local populations – in countries in or recovering from crisis. Among the countries studied was Sierra Leone,¹ where key findings were that perceptions differed not only between the three sets of actors, but also within each group, and that perceptions evolved over time. This also applied in the other two country case studies, Afghanistan and Kosovo. Although the study offered no details about the constellation and interactions between the relevant security actors, it highlighted a key issue that also guided our research in Liberia: policymakers, international donors and NGOs must take account of local perceptions of security, be it physical, human or other security. This not only increases the acceptability of these actors, but is also crucial if any strategy for peacebuilding and development is to be sustainable.

In the survey we conducted in Liberia, a combination of quantitative and qualitative methodologies was used to capture the public perceptions of security in urban areas. The survey results illustrated that a majority of urban Liberians considered the country as a whole to be relatively safe (Table 1). More than 60% of respondents rated the situation as ‘okay’ or ‘very safe’; just over a third felt differently; and 10.5% still thought the country was not safe at all. A related question about personal safety attracted a more positive response: 69.3% of the respondents felt personally secure and only 6.2% not safe at all.

These results were confirmed during the FGDs, where all respondents agreed that Liberia had become a fairly safe country to live in, although the threat of renewed unrest could still not be ruled out. The discussions revealed that there were two levels at which particular actors were expected to provide security: at the national level, UNMIL, the Liberian National Police (LNP) and other state actors were generally expected to provide for security; at the local level, many agreed that the individual should provide for his or her own security: ‘You yourself provide security...if there is small trouble.’ In interviews with local and international experts, the prevailing belief was that the security situation had improved but remained unpredictable.

Liberians have little doubt about whom they deemed the most important actors for

Table 1: Perceptions of general and personal safety in urban Liberia

	Public safety (%)	Personal safety (%)
Not safe at all	10.5	6.2
Fairly unsafe	26.9	23.5
It's okay	40.1	43.7
Very safe	20.3	25.6
No answer/ Don't know	2.2	1.0

N = 698 (out of a total sample of 700)

their personal security. Respondents had a highly favourable perception of UNMIL peacekeepers. As many as 87.4% rated them as being very important. In contrast, an overwhelming majority of 86.8% perceived ex-combatants to be a threat or a ‘big threat’ to their personal security. Similar clear-cut results were obtained for the LNP on the one hand and Street Boys (whom 78.6% considered to be a threat/big threat) on the other (Table 2).

However, perceptions of other groups proved to be ambiguous. The fairly favourable assessments of the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL) can hardly be attributed to their actual performance, given their current reorganisation. This is partly reflected in the finding that while some 20% believed the armed forces had no impact on their security, almost two-thirds regarded the AFL as important for their personal security. This seemed to reflect a wish among the respondents for the AFL to play a prominent role rather than a rating of their actual performance.

Vigilantes or neighbourhood watch teams could claim to have filled a need for security and attracted relatively favourable perceptions. Partly reflecting a heated electoral campaign, political party militias elicited a negative reaction, but their perceived performance did not seem to register with many respondents. While secret societies’ role appeared to be highly disputed, private security companies (PSCs) were generally awarded a positive rating. More importantly, a majority of respondents felt unaffected by PSCs, which points to the fact that they provide security mainly for wealthier segments of society.

Findings from the FGDs further demonstrated the prominence of UNMIL in the perceptions of the population. In the mapping exercises that were conducted as part of the discussion, participants were asked, among other questions, to identify the various security actors as either positive or negative, i.e. whether they provided security or condoned violence (Table 3).

Table 2: Perceptions of security actors in urban Liberia

	Security actors	Very important to personal security	Somewhat important to personal security	Doesn't affect my personal security	Somewhat a threat to personal security	A big threat to personal security
International actors	UNMIL	87.4	7.5	2	0.7	0.7
State actors	Liberian National Police	59.9	32	4.6	2.2	0.7
	Armed Forces of Liberia	24.5	40.3	23.8	5	4.3
International/commercial non-state actors	Private security companies	17.2	21.1	52.2	2.9	0.9
Domestic non-state actors	Vigilantes/area teams/neighbourhood watch	24.9	31.7	17.9	9.9	5.6
	Poros/secret societies	7.7	8	46.4	7.6	18.5
	Political party militias	2.6	4.6	36.3	18.2	24.6
	Street Boys	0.3	0.1	6.3	15.8	62.8
	Ex-combatants	2	1.3	6.9	16.5	70.3

N = 698 (out of total sample of 700); percentages of 'Don't know' and 'no answer' responses not shown.

UNMIL featured prominently in all four mapping exercises and was identified as positive in three, with only the fourth group marking the peacekeepers as 'disputed'. The ex-combatants, as in the survey, were viewed as mostly negative. In cases where discussants could not agree, these actors were declared as 'disputed'. Moreover, the discussions confirmed that a number of actors besides the state play a role in security-related matters in present-day Liberia.

The results indicate that in late 2005 and early 2006 urban Liberians favoured official or state actors over non-state actors. Liberians may welcome privately produced security, be it through communal self-organisation or by commercial actors, but they have a clear preference for a well-functioning state security sector.

Although the same survey could not be conducted in 2003 prior to the signing of the peace accord, the research team tried

to grasp the dynamics of security provision before and after, by asking respondents to compare the current situation with the one before the peace agreement. The results of the survey revealed a significant shift, both in perceptions of the country's security as well as at the level of personal safety (Table 4). However, only 28.4% of the respondents said their personal safety was 'very much better' than before the end of the last war. This certainly falls short of the expectations that some UN administrators may have about the impact of the UNMIL mission.

As with the survey poll, the team also asked FGD participants, in a final step, to compare the current situation with that of three years ago, before the end of the last civil war. FGDs offered more comprehensive insights. Though these cannot be dealt with in detail here, suffice it to say that discussants in all four groups agreed that the security situation had improved dramatically since the signing of the peace accord.

Table 3: Classification of security actors by focus groups

Positive	Disputed	Negative
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> UNMIL*<input type="checkbox"/> Liberian National Police<input type="checkbox"/> Armed Forces of Liberia<input type="checkbox"/> Private security companies<input type="checkbox"/> Zone leaders<input type="checkbox"/> Agents Against Rape<input type="checkbox"/> Market superintendent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Special security services<input type="checkbox"/> Monrovia City Police<input type="checkbox"/> Vigilantes, area teams & community watch teams<input type="checkbox"/> Secret societies:<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Poro/Sandee- Kendewo/Sendewo/Bodio	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ex-combatants• Political party militias• Yanna Boys/Street Boys/Shoeshine Boys• Car Loaders/Wheelbarrow Boys

* Disputed only once, therefore on average positive. Individual perceptions of UNMIL in one-on-one interviews confirm the suitability of this categorisation.

Towards a Functioning Security Sector in Liberia

Four major and interrelated conclusions can be drawn from the findings:

First, the overwhelming importance accredited to the UN mission highlights the need to promote the sustainability of Liberia’s own security sector, so that the inevitable gap that is left when the UN mission eventually withdraws its forces can be effectively compensated for.

Second, the most remarkable finding was the relatively favourable perception of state security actors given their current reorganisation and history of violence against citizens in the past. Only by putting up reliable and trusted national security institutions through strategies that take into account local needs and perceptions will there be long-term and effective security provision for all Liberians.

Third, efforts in the field of security sector reform (SSR) are therefore crucial for the future of Liberia. The SSR programme aimed at rebuilding the AFL as a small professional force of 2,000 – which is being implemented by the private security company, Dyncorp – as well as the training of the local police by the UN are key components of international peacebuilding efforts. Dyncorp, a private security company which has already worked with the United States on such

programmes in Iraq and Afghanistan, has already begun implementing the \$35 million programme in Liberia.

However, the survey results concerning private security agencies do not automatically qualify them to play a leading role in SSR. Several civil society organisations (CSOs) have raised concerns about the efficacy of employing private security companies to train the national army, citing the lack of transparency and accountability in terms of the training procedure.

Non-commercial efforts may therefore be preferable: UNMIL’s training of local police recruits is in full swing and some are already deployed with the international teams of civil police operating throughout the country. The work of the Governance

Table 4: Perceptions of changes in security since before the end of the last war

	Public safety (%)	Personal safety (%)
Much worse	2.6	2.4
Worse	4.4	4.6
No change	6.3	5.6
Somewhat better	51.3	57.7
Much better	33.7	28.4
No answer	1.7	1.3

N = 698 (out of a total sample of 700)

Reform Commission, which is charged with setting up a 'national integrity framework to promote transparency, accountability and the rule of law', may successfully foster a security dialogue that takes into account security concerns of both state and non-state local actors. The Commission recently initiated nationwide consultations with key players, including district commissioners, chiefs, representatives of security agencies in the counties, UNMIL and CSOs.

There is little doubt that ordinary people in urban Liberia prefer functioning state structures, equivalent to a well-equipped and mandated UN mission, to local non-state actors. However, local non-state violence actors should not be ignored. Some self-help solutions may be difficult to channel, but a good number of these actors, especially neighbourhood watch teams, have good records in terms of providing security and should therefore not be excluded.

Finally, the broader social background conditions pose an issue of crucial concern. The fact that ex-combatants and 'street boys' – terms sometimes used interchangeably – were mentioned as the main threat by respondents both in the survey poll and during FGDs points to the unresolved issues of reintegration and/or the unemployment of young males. The structural bases of armed conflict will most likely remain intact as long as there are no sufficient employment opportunities for this demographic group. Efforts to address this problem are under way, e.g. employment of ex-combatants in donor-funded government road construction and other labour intensive projects. However, an overall economic take-off is imperative and will require the rehabilitation of businesses and the effective management of state resources (e.g. those stemming from the export of conflict resources such as timber and diamonds).

Thus, the major recommendation for the international community is to assist in the building of a societally owned state security sector that is embedded in sound economic development.

The transition from an oligopoly – a fluctuating number of competing and cooperating security actors – to a monopoly of force is expected to be particularly difficult when some security actors protect some groups among the population while presenting a threat to others. Ongoing research will reveal whether certain non-state security actors should be involved in Liberia's security arena and whether others must be left out. A number of these actors will remain relevant for some time. If those organisations spearheading SSR keep this in mind and look beyond the border to the approach undertaken in Sierra Leone, Liberia may well be on the right path.

Endnote

¹ 'Mapping the Security Environment: Understanding the Perceptions of Local Communities, Peace Support Operations and Assistance Agencies', available on the Tufts University website: www.famine.tufts.edu