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# The United Nations Mission in Liberia

BY LANSANA GBERIE

## Key Messages:

- Liberia has been the focus of intrusive regional and international peacekeeping and enforcement efforts for 25 years and has been a laboratory for peace missions, but it is unclear today whether the Government of Liberia can take on the security responsibilities assumed by the UN;
- UNMIL was effective at stabilizing Liberia 2003-05 but was not effective at state-building or security sector reform.
- The process of UNMIL exit and the handing over of security responsibilities remains unclear, and its success uncertain. Liberia may be a case of rehating a UN operation to a West African one.

The United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL), the longest-living UN peace operations in West Africa, is currently in the process of transitioning to a smaller Peacebuilding or UN Country Office, but the prospect of a successful withdrawal is far from certain. In its anticipation, the Government of Liberia in March 2015 issued a plan to take over all security responsibilities currently performed by UNMIL by 30 June 2016. The UN, however, clearly maintains a rather dim view of Liberian government's capabilities in this respect. Eventual UNMIL withdrawal and a transition to a future UN presence are contingent upon "security conditions on the ground" in Liberia. Given the evident lack of security preparedness by the Liberian government, and the urge to divert UN's peacekeeping resources elsewhere, Liberia could also make history in Africa as the country where serving UN troops are rehatted into a regional force under ECOWAS

In its origin and trajectory, the UN involvement in Liberia has been ground breaking in a number of important ways. Liberia was the first experiment in regional peace operation in Africa, with the intervention of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) established ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) in 1990. The operation in turn marked the first time that the United Nations ever deployed its military personnel to actively support an already established regional peace initiative, abandoning a foundational policy that tended, despite its Article VIII, to keep such regional initiatives at arm's length. The UN would later acknowledge that the dynamics of this interaction and support for regional peace initiatives in Liberia offered important early lessons that helped establish the principle of complementarity and subsidiarity which has now been accepted as the key underpinning of the Security Council's relationship with the African Union with respect to maintenance of peace and security in Africa.

A walk through of the history of UNMIL reveals a succession of peace missions, interventions, mediation efforts with overlapping conflicts. UNMIL was established by UN Security Council resolution 1509 of 19 September 2003 as a 'multidimensional' mission with what is derisively known in some UN circles as a "Christmas Tree Mandate": to accomplish a mix bag of the aspirations and sentiments of key global constituencies that influence Security Council decisions, ranging from stabilization, security sector reform, governance, humanitarian assistance and human rights, gender protection, transitional justice, and preparations for national elections within two years – but without the tools to do so effectively.

At the beginning UNMIL's military comprised entirely West African troops deployed through a UN Security Council-backed regional initiative, ECONOMIL, that were rehatted pursuant to Council resolution 1509 of 19

September 2003. UNMIL's centrality with respect to establishing stability in the sub-region is acknowledged in both its mandate and this long duration. Its considerable assets have been used to support other UN operations in the region. Its forces were deployed at

the Special Court of Sierra Leone's offices in Freetown to provide security when UNAMSIL was withdrawn at the end of 2005; and its air assets were deployed against forces of former President Laurent Gbagbo in Côte d'Ivoire following the post-election violence in that country in 2011. Successive resolutions of the UN Security Council have emphasised Liberia's centrality to regional peace and security. Yet initially this involvement was anything but enthusiastic and even clearly articulated; and opinion within the UN remains sharply divided about whether after 13 years UNMIL has accomplished its key goals, or whether indeed its initial mandate as set out in resolution 1509 was appropriate for Liberia's geopolitical and socio-economic realities in 2003.

Senior UNMIL officials, always in a defensive mode, often argue that Liberia's circumstances were so dire when the mission was established, and UNMIL's mandate so attenuated in relation to the task, that for at least the first five years it was preoccupied solely with "stabilization" – which amounted to little more than disarming the rebel forces and creating a secure environment for elections in 2005, and after that, in securing the new government. Given Liberia's abject state, some UN officials, as well as outside commentators, advocated an executive mandate for UNMIL akin to what the Security Council granted to the missions in Kosovo and East Timor, but this was rejected for political concerns.

The rebuilding of state institutions, which was entrusted to the transitional government, was stymied by the crippling corruption into which that government was sucked. It turned out that the early UNMIL itself had a significant graft problem, as revealed by several audits whose reports, initially deemed confidential, were leaked by Wikileaks after the US mission to the United Nations under the mercurial Ambassador John Bolton had them posted by the US State Department. These audits show dysfunction from top to bottom, from the mundane (stealing generator electricity and bags of rice) to the extremely serious (SRSG Jacques Klein misusing UNMIL's assets, including its air assets, to entertain or

facilitate travel for his girlfriend, Linda Fawaz, an associate of Taylor and his associates who was given access to sensitive information that she passed on to Taylor and his associates).

Successive UN Security Council resolutions since 1509 have emphasized security sector rebuilding efforts in Liberia without mapping a conceptual approach to the issue. Liberia security sector rebuilding was not an obvious priority for UNMIL. The result is that the Liberian National Police remains an ineffective and corrupt institution, and a major drawback on the security transition. The creation of a new AFL through U.S. assistance has produced far better results, though the process was somewhat flawed and remains incomplete. The first real test of the AFL came during the Ebola crisis when in August 2014 the army was deployed across the country to enforce a state of emergency and quarantine measures the government had announced. The UN Panel of Experts later reported that AFL and police personnel harassed civilians across the country, and, in the most dramatic incident on 20 August 2014, the AFL fired live rounds at stone-throwing demonstrators in a poor area of Monrovia, killing a young man and seriously injuring two others. “That troubling incident,” the Panel noted, “is likely to reinforce the perception of many Liberians that the current armed forces are little different” from their predatory predecessor.

Other serious gaps in the security sector reform program, relating mainly to what should have been foundational legislations, were highlighted by the Government of Liberia’s Plan for UNMIL’s transition of March 2015. It states that the new police act, a uniform code of military justice, firearms and ammunition control act and an amendment to the Defence Act remain drafts awaiting enactment. These necessary components of a fully functional security system have been overlooked by UNMIL officials and UNMIL mandates. The UN Security

Council has tended, throughout its engagement with Liberia, to consider Liberia’s stability as a matter of disarming unruly combatants and helping create robust security forces for the government, which would then presumably enjoy monopoly over force and access to

arms – hence the emphasis on security transition and the continuing need for the arms embargo on non-state actors.

Overall, UNMIL’s mission remains a work-in-progress: the UN cannot declare victory just yet and withdraw from the country in triumph, as it did in Sierra Leone at the end of 2005. Yet the UN cannot remain in the country in its current form indefinitely; and as Landgren noted, the task of addressing the root causes of Liberia’s fragility is properly a task for Liberians, not the UN. The progress in Liberia since 2003 when UNMIL was established, both in terms of security, obvious signs of economic and infrastructural development, and by some measures of governance, has been impressive. But the remaining tasks of consolidating these achievements are less assured, particularly if UNMIL is phased out before an appropriate arrangement is made to ensure overall security and continuing mentoring of Liberia’s nascent security institutions.

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