



January 2008

country summary

Liberia

Throughout 2007 the government of President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf made tangible progress in rebuilding Liberia's failed institutions, fighting corruption, and promoting the rule of law. However, longstanding deficiencies within the judicial system and security sector continue to undermine basic human rights. Meanwhile, there have been few efforts to pursue justice for the egregious human rights violations committed during Liberia's 14 years of armed conflict that finally came to an end in 2003.

Ongoing Insecurity and Abuses in Law Enforcement

The 2003 Peace Agreement was followed by the deployment of 15,000 United Nations peacekeepers. In 2007 this force, along with some 1,200 international civilian police, appeared to have little impact on Liberia's escalating rates of violent crime including armed robbery, rape, and murder. Lack of funding for transportation and for essential forensic and communications equipment severely undermined the effectiveness of the national police, especially in rural areas. Of the over 3,500 police vetted and trained by the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL), fewer than 700 have been deployed outside the capital, Monrovia. Liberian police have also continued to engage in unprofessional and sometimes criminal behavior including extortion, soliciting bribes from detainees, and excessive use of force. There were several reports of detainees being subjected to physical abuse by policemen, including torture and male rape. While a few of these cases resulted in internal police investigations and suspension from duty, there was little effort to hold those involved accountable for their alleged crimes.

Performance of the Judiciary

Persistent deficiencies within the judicial and corrections systems also resulted in human rights abuses. Some weaknesses were attributable to insufficient judicial personnel including prosecutors and public defenders, and limited court

infrastructure, particularly outside Monrovia. However, unprofessional and corrupt practices by judicial staff, such as chronic absenteeism and the release of criminal suspects in exchange for bribes, also occurred. Lack of public confidence in the judicial system led to incidents of vigilante justice, resulting in at least one death.

Even so, some improvements were evident including the deployment of state prosecutors to most courts outside the capital and the renovation and reconstruction of several court houses and detention facilities. UNMIL in particular has trained judicial and corrections personnel, improved judicial infrastructure, and subsidized the salaries of prosecutors and public defenders.

Prisons and detention centers nevertheless remain severely overcrowded and lack basic sanitation and health care for detainees. In 2007 hundreds of people were held in prolonged pretrial detention, including some children, who were held with adult detainees in violation of international standards. Of the some 1,000 individuals detained in Liberia's prisons at this writing, fewer than 50 had been duly tried and convicted of a crime. Insufficient numbers of and unprofessional conduct by corrections officers led to numerous jailbreaks and disturbances in prisons and detention facilities.

Harmful Traditional Practices

Serious abuses resulting from harmful traditional practices continued to occur in 2007, due in part to the absence or distrust of judicial authorities. These included the killing of alleged witches and "trials by ordeal," in which suspects are forced to swallow the poisonous sap of the local sassywood tree or endure burning or other forms of pain—their alleged guilt or innocence is determined by whether they survive. These local practices often involve extortion, extracting statements under torture, and other forms of physical and sexual assault. In February 2007 then-Minister of Justice Frances Johnson-Morris instructed all county attorneys to arrest and prosecute anyone caught engaging in "sassywood" ordeals, but the practice has continued.

Women's and Children's Rights

According to government figures there were some 1,000 recorded female rapes in 2007, up from 568 in 2006. The 2006 Rape Amendment Act, which imposes heavier penalties for the most serious cases, appeared not to reduce the incidence of rape, prompting calls by Liberian civil society and others to establish specialized police units and a dedicated rape court.

Poor working conditions and child labor on rubber plantations were reported in 2007. Substandard conditions within dozens of Liberian orphanages—including inadequate food, water, bedding, clothing, and health care—continued, yet resulted in few closures by the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare.

Corruption

Corruption involving public monies has long been endemic, and is widely recognized as having contributed to Liberia's political instability and failure to provide the country's most vulnerable with basic services such as education, water, and health care.

Throughout 2007 the government and its international partners took concrete steps to reduce corruption and improve economic governance. President Johnson-Sirleaf had numerous senior government officials dismissed for corrupt practices, and some 7,000 "ghost workers" removed from the payroll. In addition, Liberia's attorney general brought charges for the embezzlement of several million dollars against two former high-ranking public officials, one of them Charles Gyude Bryant, the former chairman of the 2003-2005 National Transitional Government of Liberia.

The Governance and Economic Management Assistance Program (GEMAP), a three-year anti-corruption plan drafted and imposed by key donors as a condition for development aid, continued to make progress in economic governance despite resistance from some government officials. Meanwhile, in July Liberia became the 14th African country to join the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI).

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission and Accountability

Since its creation in 2006 the Liberian Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) has been plagued with leadership and operational problems including lack of transparency and proper process in hiring staff, awarding contracts, and other fiscal matters; lack of strategic leadership by the commissioners; and an inadequate workplan and budget. In January 2007 these problems led to the suspension of funds and grounding of operations, including public hearings scheduled to commence that month. In October, after a joint working group comprising members of the International Contact Group on Liberia and the TRC drew up a revised workplan and budget, approximately US\$100,000 of pledged donor funds were released. However, at this writing the work of the commission remains extremely hindered by lack of funds and it remains unclear whether donor confidence will be fully restored.

The TRC is mandated to investigate gross human rights violations and economic crimes that occurred between January 1979 and October 14, 2003, and is empowered to recommend for prosecution the most serious abuses of human rights. For a variety of reasons including the 2006 surrender of former Liberian President Charles Taylor to the Special Court for Sierra Leone (where he is currently on trial for war crimes and crimes against humanity committed during Sierra Leone's armed conflict), debate was much reduced in 2007 within Liberian civil society and among Liberia's partners about the ongoing need to hold accountable perpetrators of war crimes and crimes against humanity committed during Liberia's wars. Yet questions remain about whether prosecutions should take place during or after the completion of the TRC's work; whether TRC commissioners would act on their power to recommend individuals for prosecution; and whether the Liberian judicial system would be able and willing to try these crimes.

Liberian Army

Since 2004 the United States has taken the lead in recruiting and training a new Liberian army of some 2,000 soldiers, all of whom will be vetted for past abuses. However, the exercise is running months behind schedule, and by late 2007 only 600 recruits had completed basic training. Local human rights groups expressed concern that excessive expenditures on army barracks and equipment may be occurring at the expense of civic and human rights education for recruits.

Disarmament of Former Combatants

Since the end of the war in 2003, 101,000 former combatants have been disarmed. All but 9,000 have received vocational training or education but most remain unemployed. During 2007 disgruntled ex-combatants staged several demonstrations protesting inadequate reintegration opportunities. Fears about the potential risks posed by unemployed ex-combatants were raised in July when two former commanders were arrested and charged with planning to destabilize the government.

Key International Actors

Throughout 2007 the top priorities of Liberia's international partners were the creation of mechanisms to fight corruption and ensure proper management of Liberia's natural resources. Donors are also helping to rebuild Liberia's judicial system and strengthen the rule of law.

The United States, Liberia's leading bilateral donor, committed \$252 million for 2006-2007 to support democratization, security, and reconstruction efforts. In February 2007 the US announced the cancellation of \$391 million in bilateral debt under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Initiative.

Since the end of the armed conflict, Liberia's government has also received support from the European Commission including almost €100 million for peace support operations and post-conflict rehabilitation and institution building. China is also increasingly involved in Liberia's development and reconstruction.

In April 2007 the UN Security Council voted unanimously to lift a ban on Liberian diamond exports. The ban, imposed in 2001, was intended to prevent the export of "conflict diamonds" whose proceeds were fuelling the civil war. In May 2007 Liberia was admitted to the Kimberly Process Certification Scheme and in September the first consignment of diamonds was shipped abroad. UN and European Union arms and travel bans on associates of former President Charles Taylor, and an asset freeze against Taylor and his top officials, remain in place.