



INNOVATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL SOCIETIES

BUILDING CIVILIAN POLICE CAPACITY: POST-CONFLICT LIBERIA, 2003 - 2011

SYNOPSIS

As Liberia began to emerge from civil war in 2003, the warring sides agreed to overhaul the discredited national police service. In the Comprehensive Peace Agreement signed in Accra, Ghana, the parties designated the United Nations as the lead body in rebuilding and reforming Liberia's civilian police capacity. In a joint effort between Liberian and U.N. police, led initially by U.N. Police Commissioner Mark Kroecker and Liberian Inspector General Chris Massaquoi, reformers vetted and trained a new police service of more than 4,000 officers, established specialized units to combat gender-based violence and high-risk threats, improved internal accountability mechanisms, and began to reverse the sordid reputation for unlawful killings and rape the police had earned during Liberia's civil war. This case offers insights into the development of the Liberia National Police, one of the successes in post-war Liberia and an uncommon example of successful post-war police reform.

Jonathan (Yoni) Friedman drafted this case study based on interviews conducted in Monrovia, Liberia, during June and July 2011, and on the basis of interviews conducted by Arthur Boutellis in Monrovia in May 2008 and text prepared by Christine MacAulay. Case published September 2011. A separate case study, "Building an Inclusive, Responsive National Police Service: Gender-Sensitive Reform in Liberia, 2005-2011" describes efforts to increase gender diversity and respond to high rates of sexual and gender-based violence in Liberia.

INTRODUCTION

As a tense political stalemate in neighboring Ivory Coast turned increasingly violent between January and April 2011, more than 150,000 people fled into neighboring Liberia, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, including an unknown number of combatants loyal to embattled strongman Laurent Gbagbo. To weed out the combatants from the

refugees, the Liberian government deployed the Emergency Response Unit (ERU), an elite 300-member unit of the Liberia National Police. The ERU proved itself up to the challenge. John Nielsen, deputy police commissioner with the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL), recalled that the "ERU patrolled the 800-kilometer border, mostly jungle. They patrolled in canoe in some places. You had 100 people

show up with machine guns against 10 ERU. ... It was amazing that they managed to pull it off and keep their cool and that nobody got hurt.” Reflecting on the incident in the context of the relatively brief history of the newly reconstituted Liberian police, Nielsen concluded, “It was a growth moment.”

Liberia began to emerge from civil war during the summer of 2003 as President Charles Taylor resigned from office in advance of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement negotiated between the various rebel groups in Accra, Ghana. Roughly 250,000 Liberians were killed and more than a million displaced during the 14-year civil war, during which government services collapsed and security services were compromised.

The 2003 peace agreement designated the United Nations as the lead body in rebuilding and reforming Liberia’s civilian police capacity. The parties agreed to dissolve security units that had developed reputations for corruption and predation, including Taylor’s infamous Anti-Terrorist Unit, known for committing unlawful detentions and killings, torture and rape. Instead, they planned to deploy an interim Liberian police service made up of 400 officers, supported by more than 1,100 U.N. Police (UNPOL) while the U.N. trained a new national police service. Though UNMIL did not have an executive policing mandate and lacked the authority to arrest criminals, UNPOL supported the Liberian police through training and mentoring while a 15,000-member peacekeeping force maintained a stable environment in which the police could develop. UNMIL Police Commissioner Mark Kroeker and Liberia National Police (LNP) Inspector General Chris Massaquoi guided reforms initially through a Rule of Law Implementation Committee, and reforms continued under their successors.

Although doubts remained in 2011 about the future of a Liberian police service that was undermanned, continued to lack basic equipment, and struggled to eradicate petty corruption, the

organization was one of the stronger Liberian institutions developed after the civil war and made progress in reversing the shoddy reputation earned by the security services during the fighting. Between 2003 and 2011, Liberian police leaders, with U.N. support, vetted and trained a new police service of more than 4,000, established specialized units to combat gender-based violence and high-risk threats, improved internal accountability mechanisms, and developed middle-management capacity to build on the gains.

THE CHALLENGE

Ibrahim Idris, former operations coordinator with UNMIL, recalled that Liberia’s policing situation was “totally in disarray” in 2004. Post-war Liberia lacked any effective rule of law. Many police stations had been abandoned, destroyed or taken over by rebel forces, and rebels manned roadblocks and controlled economic holdings throughout the country. Police stations that still functioned lacked basic equipment, vehicles, fuel and communication systems. Many police officers had fled the country. Those who remained resorted to petty corruption and bribe taking in the absence of regular wages. Heavy politicization had eroded the professionalism and the basic operations of security institutions.

Devastation in Liberia extended beyond the country’s security institutions. Government had not functioned effectively in recent memory. The United Nations placed sanctions during the war on Liberia’s primary export commodities, timber and diamonds, which caused massive government debt and inhibited internally financed development and reform efforts. The CIA World Factbook estimated unemployment in 2003 at 85%. Ex-combatants represented an estimated 3.2% of Liberia’s post-war population of more than 3.1 million, including many youth, according to U.N. and World Bank figures. Psychological trauma, drug abuse and depression resulting from the war presented a potentially volatile

combination—and security threat—among a young-adult population that lacked the skills and opportunities to participate in the post-war economy. Widespread gender-based violence, armed robberies and the potential for renewed insurgencies by disaffected ex-combatants posed threats to citizen security.

By the end of the war, Liberia had 15 different security agencies with overlapping functions and mandates, a combination of legitimate units such as the Drug Enforcement Agency and the Bureau of Immigration and Naturalization, redundant intelligence agencies and groups created as the personal forces of various Liberian leaders. Mohammed Thatha, former head of reform and restructuring for UNMIL, added that because of widespread politicization during the war, some political appointees with senior positions in the police had “no police background at all and received short training after their appointments about democratic policing [and] human rights.”

In accordance with the peace agreement, Kroeker and Massaquoi faced the challenge of recruiting, vetting, training and deploying a new national police service responsible for the maintenance of law and order throughout Liberia, with a full range of capacities. The task would require the development of highly-skilled officers and specialized units to combat specific threats, communications and transportation infrastructure that could support a national force, the refurbishment of the National Police Training Academy and police stations and barracks across the country, and the training of senior managerial staff to assume greater responsibility for law and order as UNMIL forces began to redeploy.

Kroeker and Massaquoi would have to begin the reform process by deciding on standards for recruitment and determining whether or not the nearly 5,000 police and so-called “volunteers”—citizens in the rural areas who performed policing functions without state sanction—would be permitted to join. They needed to attract

qualified Liberians while initially offering salaries below Liberia’s minimum wage, vet recruits in a post-war context in which many had committed violent crimes that were not recorded, and train and deploy a police service with the skills and integrity to overcome the public’s fear and disdain for the security services.

FRAMING A RESPONSE

UNMIL’s Kroeker formed a Rule of Law Implementation Committee in late 2003 to jointly guide reforms. Members included other significant decision makers such as Massaquoi, the minister of justice and the minister for national security.

Both Kroeker and Massaquoi had extensive policing experience. Kroeker, a retired police officer from Los Angeles with previous U.N. policing experience in Haiti, Bosnia and the Great Lakes region of Africa, joined UNMIL in 2003. Kroeker said that in Liberia, compared with his previous missions, he received greater support from the Department of Peacekeeping Operations at U.N. headquarters in New York. The department had an established police division with a police adviser, mission manager and mission team dedicated to providing support and guidance to the Liberia mission.

“I think it marked a significant change in the way police leaders were being handled as they went out to the field,” Kroeker said. Among the tools he had at his disposal were binders with different police-training curricula from other countries.

Massaquoi had served in the Liberian police before leaving to spend much of the war in the United States. He earned a certificate in police training from the University of Central Missouri (formerly Central Missouri State University) in the U.S., studied police science in Sweden and held a law degree from the University of Liberia.

The Rule of Law Implementation Committee made decisions required to launch reforms regarding the size of the force to be

trained, standards for recruitment and vetting, and the content of training. Based on U.N. standards that recommend 2.5 police officers per 1,000 residents in peaceful countries, and an assessment of what the Liberian government could support financially in the long term, the committee established a target to train 3,500 officers by 2007. That amounted to just under one officer per thousand residents, based on Liberia's expected population of more than 3.6 million in 2007. For comparison, post-conflict Sierra Leone was targeting a ratio of 1.69 officers per thousand in 2009,¹ Nigeria had a ratio of 2.46 (as of 2008)² and South Africa had a ratio of 3.06 (as of 2010).³ Differences in geography, infrastructure, and the roles of other security services affect police-population ratios. Also using international policing guidelines, and at the insistence of President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, the U.N. set a target of 20% female officers for the new Liberian police by 2014. The U.N. also set a goal to draw down its troops by 2010, though this deadline was later pushed back. It was imperative that UNMIL not only establish a domestic security force but also provide the mentoring and capacity building to ensure that a vibrant domestic security capability existed upon its exit.

Joseph Kekula, former deputy director for administration and Massaquoi's successor as inspector general from 2004 to 2006, promoted reforms to the ranking system as well. Kekula had served in the Liberian police for 20 years until 1997, when he fled the country amid renewed hostilities. He returned in 2003. Because the military and the police had become intertwined during the war, the ranking system was confusing and overly militaristic. Kekula said military ranks had the potential to make Liberian officers feel and act like they were soldiers. Changing and standardizing ranks "helped us demilitarize the police," he said. In addition to eliminating military ranks such as colonel, Kekula sought to standardize ranks with other West African police

services. "We decided that in order to harmonize our system with the entire region or the subregion, it was better that we change the nomenclature." There would no longer be a director of the police, but rather, as in many other African countries, an inspector general.

GETTING DOWN TO WORK

As UNPOL numbers increased to 518 by the end of the first quarter of 2004, the U.N. began to reclaim police stations throughout Monrovia, Liberia's capital and largest city. Idris recalled meeting beneath a tree outside the German Embassy, which housed UNPOL's first offices, to brief officers leaving on patrols "just to show some police presence and try to bring some sense of normalcy back to the city."

In accordance with the peace agreement, Kroeker led the recruitment of 400 former police to serve as an interim local policing presence. In early 2004, the United States government provided US\$500,000 to refurbish the National Police Training Academy. Kroeker sent them to the training academy for just a few weeks before deploying them to the Firestone rubber plantation and other key economic holdings to prevent businesses from forming their own private security forces. Others were sent to support UNPOL at stations throughout Monrovia.

As the security presence in Monrovia expanded and rebels from the rural counties streamed into demobilization camps—part of a disarmament program in which more than 100,000 ex-combatants participated—interim police increasingly deployed outside Monrovia. U.N. forces drove ex-rebels from police stations and began work on "quick impact" projects such as reopening the facilities and building new ones.

Idris recalled, "We were able to open up most of the police stations that were closed for virtually some 10 to 15 years during these conflicts. We sent our officers there. Then, gradually, some of these volunteer officers, some of the former, old

LNP officers ... started to come in to render some assistance at the police stations. This is prior to the time we started ... basic training.”

Recruitment and vetting

Before general recruitment could begin in early 2004, Kroeker and the Rule of Law Implementation Committee had to decide whether to allow the thousands of former police officers to maintain their positions. The committee decided to deactivate all former police and invite them to apply to join the new police service, undergo a vetting process, give up their former ranks and go through basic training. Idris explained that the thinking was that most “genuine” police probably had fled their stations during the war, and that the ones who remained likely had ties to rebel groups. The U.N.’s Restructuring and Recruiting Section conducted the vetting. Of the nearly 3,000 officers who registered, only 756—or about one of every four—qualified to participate in the new police service.

People who were close to the process differed over the merit of the decision to deactivate former officers. Peter Zaizay, former deputy minister for national security, said the mass deactivation was unfair to experienced officers. “It means that all of your training, your first training you had to work with the organization and your experience you accumulated over the years, are given no consideration,” Zaizay said. “So some of the guys, most of the experienced guys, felt that was humiliating or demeaning.” Assistant Minister of Justice Asatu Bah-Kenneth, who was Community Service Chair with the Liberian police at the time of deactivation, thought the process posed “a major challenge,” and she indicated that one result of the decision was that “there was no institutional memory.” Cecil Griffiths, president of the Liberia National Law Enforcement Agency, a civil society organization that promotes professionalism in law enforcement agencies, lamented the fact that some officers with 30 or 40 years of service were dismissed without a retirement package or

honoring ceremony, and he said the mass deactivation contributed to a lack of discipline and insufficient respect for officials who previously had held higher ranks. A 2009 study by the International Crisis Group found that some observers were critical of the vetting process for being too lax and not weeding out enough human-rights violators, while others criticized the process for eliminating too many officers with valuable policing experience.

After the Restructuring and Recruiting Section had vetted the former police, the committee set out to establish standards for new recruits. Rather than imposing outside standards, he sought to build on Liberia’s police practices from before the war. “I could see that there was a remnant of the golden age of policing in Liberia where they had standards, and there was once a police academy and you had these ranks and there was pride,” Kroeker said. “That pride didn’t go away, the pride of being a professional police.”

The standards the Rule of Law Implementation Committee set for new recruits were similar to those used in other post-conflict contexts. All recruits were required to have a high school diploma, to have a good reputation in the community, to be physically fit, and to have no record of war crimes, though few records existed of war crimes in Liberia. Recruits had to pass a written exam that tested basic arithmetic skills and scenario-based essay writing. For example, one essay question asked recruits to assess the performance of a senior policeman shot in the leg after intervening to defuse a riot. Recruits also underwent interviews during which they were asked to describe why they wanted to join the police service, to list the basic duties of officers, and to identify facts about Liberia including the significance of the national seal and flag. Individuals under the age of 18 or over 55 were ineligible to apply, as were ex-combatants.

To entice applicants, the Recruiting Section launched a marketing campaign aimed at overcoming concerns about the service’s poor

reputation and meager initial wages. Helicopters dropped leaflets stressing the importance of the police and encouraging individuals to sign up. Police representatives sponsored community forums and went door-to-door and visited schools. The U.N. showcased police vehicles such as helicopters and motorcycles during these recruitment campaigns.

In vetting recruits, Recruiting Section officials verified recruits' personal information and tried to uncover any past disqualifying activities. Officials sent high school certificates to the West African Examinations Council to verify their authenticity. They published the names of recruits in newspapers for approximately a week, asking readers to come forward with information that might disqualify applicants. They analyzed what few criminal records remained from before the war and sent names of recruits to village leaders in the recruits' hometowns, to human rights groups and to Liberia's intelligence agencies. Complaint boxes were set up for people to submit their concerns in writing.

Although Idris considered the vetting process to be "aggressive," when compared to the vetting process for Liberian military recruits carried out by U.S. contractor DynCorp International, the Recruiting Section appeared vastly undermanned and under-resourced. In a 2008 study written for the Strategic Studies Institute entitled "Security Sector Reform in Liberia: Mixed Results from Humble Beginnings," Mark Malan, a former South African military officer and lecturer at the South African Military Academy, found significant differences. Whereas DynCorp officials were expected to vet one recruit per day, Recruiting Section officials were expected to vet five. Additionally, DynCorp officials were given the time and resources to visit recruits' hometowns whereas Recruiting Section officials lacked means of transportation to do the same.

The vetting process had other shortcomings. Aaron Weah, of the International Center for Transitional Justice, a nonprofit human-rights organization based in New York, remarked that the use of newspapers as a primary means of vetting was shortsighted in a context in which large segments of the population were illiterate and lacked access to printed news sources, particularly in rural areas. Further, there was no large-scale information dissemination about what the vetting process entailed. Many Liberians did not understand it.

Zaizay, the former deputy security minister, thought the requirement to provide proof of high school completion was too stringent in light of Liberia's recent history. "Peoples' homes were burned, peoples' documents were destroyed," he said. "Now the insistence was that you must produce documents. ... Some of the schools that people went to no longer existed. They had either been destroyed or in ruins. Now most institutions did not have records to trace, no records of these students."

William Mulbah, deputy director for training and development at the National Police Training Academy, thought the Recruiting Section's lack of any Liberian staff hurt its effectiveness. Many citizens had assumed different names during the war, and thousands had been displaced. Some recruits might have given vetting officials false or incomplete information about their identities or hometowns to mislead officials and hide information about their pasts. Mulbah said Liberians, better acquainted with Liberia's history of war and geographic and ethnic makeup, were better suited to assess the veracity of recruits' claims.

Training

The first recruiting class began training at the academy in July 2004. Trainers relied on a basic

curriculum similar to those the U.N. had used in other post-conflict contexts. The training included nine weeks of academy training followed by 16 weeks of field training and a four-week academy capstone program.

Dag Dahlen, a Norwegian police officer with more than 30 years' experience, including duty in Lebanon, Kosovo and Afghanistan, arrived in Liberia in 2006 as UNPOL's Training and Development Coordinator. Among Dahlen's initial suggestions was to update the academy's curriculum based on new revisions to U.N. police training protocol in post-conflict contexts, drawing from the training format used in Kosovo and later in East Timor. He felt that the curriculum being used at the time emphasized producing officers quickly and was better suited for training interim police officers than training a viable long-term force, or, as in the case of Kosovo, where local police had a strong UNPOL presence to support them in the field.

Shortly after the first round of recruits began their official duties, public complaints emerged about brutal and unfair tactics. Zaizay said that important issues—ethics, discipline and specialized training—were not adequately covered during early trainings. Dag Dahlen agreed. “The problem we see in peacekeeping missions from professional police officers' point of view is that we [were] putting quantity before quality,” Dahlen said. “It is important to deploy people as soon as possible to enforce security. ... But it only comes back to you later if you have poor police officer training.”

In order to maintain continuity, UNPOL decided that the academy would continue to use its original curriculum until it reached its goal of training 3,500 officers. However, the UNPOL commissioner, Mohammed Alhassan, approved Dahlen's proposal to develop a training curriculum that would include six months of academy training and six months of field training. The revised curriculum would incorporate new national legislation on democratic policing and

reflect best practices in other West African countries such as Ghana and Nigeria. Overall, Dahlen said, the goal was to develop “an African standard training program” that reflected the West African context and that was in line with how other West African countries conducted police training. The new curriculum would be more scenario-based and would incorporate more practical exercises than the previous curriculum.

The academy also aimed to increase the number of Liberian trainers. Initially, most trainers at the academy were international police officers, but since 2006 attempts had been made to build a stronger indigenous training capacity. Problems hindered the effort. Deactivation had eliminated some of the academy's most senior and experienced officers. New officers lacked the practical experience to serve as effective trainers and relied on the assistance of their international counterparts.

The academy brought in several UNPOL technical advisers from West Africa to provide mentoring and monitoring support to Liberian officers. Capacity building was a central aim. Typically, said Dahlen, UNPOL civic-matter experts took the lead in developing curriculum, including in areas such as criminal investigation and community policing. UNPOL taught the first course. A designated Liberian officer assisted in teaching the second course and thereafter was responsible for teaching and sustaining courses.

The academy inaugurated the new training curriculum in January 2008 for a class of 123 students. Every student received five new training manuals, with topics including general policing, crime investigation, defensive tactics, national legislation and general administration. Manuals covered policies and procedures and emphasized a greater degree of report writing and statement taking than previous curricula.

After the classroom component, recruits were sent for in-service training with field officers at different police posts around Monrovia. These officers were assigned eight recruits apiece, on

average—a relatively workable ratio of trainers to recruits. Recruits rotated through police stations, working on topics that included procedures, criminal investigations, community policing, traffic control and patrol duties. The training officers reported recruits' progress each Friday to the academy. In order to pass the field training, recruits were required to pass three of five exit examinations. Originally, questions had been multiple choice, and the exams did not test recruits' reading and writing skills. Though English mastery and a high school education were recruitment requirements, many recruits faced problems meeting the new testing requirement.

Citing report writing as a critical but underdeveloped skill, the academy attempted to bring officers trained under the previous curriculum up to speed. In March 2008, UNPOL sponsored in-service training for police academy graduates that included topics such as report writing, statement taking, and interview techniques, important skills in gathering evidence and conducting police investigations. Although the initial aim was to hold workshops throughout the country, problems with transportation, limited training infrastructure, lack of accommodations for officers, and logistical considerations posed challenges to broad implementation.

Dahlen said that while management training for middle- and senior-level officers required additional attention and investment, Liberia had a promising model in place that involved nine weeks of senior management training. After four weeks of training at the academy, the commissioner or other senior manager worked with a UNPOL technical adviser who provided coaching and assisted with project work for the remaining five weeks. Rather than culminate in a traditional examination, the training finished with a service delivery project in which the commissioner had to identify ways to deliver a specified task and then justify his or her performance. Some senior Liberian officers were also sent for a 10-week command and control

course in the U.K. and received training from the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation on intelligence gathering, human and drug trafficking, and international terrorism.⁴

Specialization

Planners set up two specialized units to counter high-risk threats. The Emergency Response Unit (ERU) was to take the lead in countering threats that did not warrant the domestic use of the military but were beyond the capabilities and mandate of the police. The idea came from a 2007 RAND Corporation report⁵ that highlighted the risk of renewed insurgencies and recommended a hybrid force that could fill this security gap, a cheaper option than training additional standard police and military.

Although some U.N. and Liberian officials envisioned a role for the ERU similar to that of a gendarmerie—a force with military capabilities that typically is responsible to a defense ministry—John Nielsen, deputy U.N. police commissioner and senior policy adviser at the time, recommended that the ERU receive training with a general policing orientation. He said the ERU “went from a paramilitary—(the) list of equipment initially included heavy weapons—to a unit of the police with a public-service mentality.” The U.N. and Liberian police agreed on a target to train 500 ERU members. The unit would be a part of the police, which answered to the Ministry of Justice, rather than a part of the military, which answered to the Ministry of Defense. Nielsen explained that ERU leadership positions would rotate to prevent the emergence of a “big man” that could threaten stability, as Samuel Doe, Liberia's leader from 1980 to 1989, had decades earlier. ERU recruits, who came from the regular police ranks, had to have more than 1½ years of Liberian police experience and had to pass physical and psychological exams. The first ERU class graduated in October 2008. The Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL) of the U.S. Department of State

provided US\$5 million to train and equip the ERU, and the U.S. contractor DynCorp led the training, which lasted three months and covered hostage rescue and small-scale counter-insurgency activities.

Nielsen recalled some immediate difficulties for the new force. “We [had] about 300 trained ERU, but because they had cars and fuels and weapons, they were being called on to do all high-risk or long-distance missions, because they could,” he said. “The ERU had not gotten the exotic training they were supposed to have [received] because we just hadn’t had the time to give it to them. They were too valuable in Liberia.”

The other specialized unit of the Liberian police was the Police Support Unit (PSU), which began as a group of 300 officers recruited from the police and trained in crowd control in Nigeria in preparation for Liberia’s 2005 presidential and legislative elections. After the elections, there was a reduced need for crowd control, and the unit shrank in terms of both headcount and equipment. When U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited Liberia in 2009, U.S. officials were considering what to suggest for her support. “We suggested PSU enlargement,” said Nielsen, “because it was necessary. It would allow the ERU to get back to what they’re supposed to do, and it would help prepare for elections.” The United States, through the INL, supported the training of additional PSU officers, with help from France, Germany and other donors.

The police under Inspector General Marc Amblard in 2009 set out to train 600 PSU members prior to an August 2011 referendum, including the 150 PSU already in service, and to reach 1,000 PSU officers by presidential elections later that year. France provided trainers for the first three PSU cohorts and trained Liberians to lead thereafter.

Members of both the PSU and the ERU received bonuses for the higher risk their jobs entailed. Although both groups’ officers were

specially trained for specific duties, Nielsen said both groups received a thorough education in standard policing ethos and procedures. “ERU and PSU are police officers, [with the] same responsibilities towards human rights as every other police officer,” he said. “They have the single added advantage of being trained with a weapon ... this, and crowd control training, and they’re getting good at it.”

Prompted by the establishment of new units including the ERU and the PSU and the desire to raise the profile of other units, Liberian police leadership in 2008 began to revise the police organizational chart. The police leaders started with a weekend conference for 36 senior officers to discuss issues of how to integrate new units, and the desired command structure connecting rural areas to Monrovia. The organizational chart is “one of their accomplishments they are most proud of,” said Nielsen, “they developed this structure and so have a strong sense of ownership.”

Oversight and public legitimacy

Considering the terrible reputation the Liberian police had earned during the war, reformers knew they had to take measures to build trust and open lines of communication with the public. Making citizens feel comfortable reporting crimes, confident in police capacity and integrity, and generally aware of the roles and authorities of police was especially important in the Liberian post-war context.

Beginning in November 2004, the U.N. and the Liberian police’s Community Policing Unit established nearly 200 Community Police Forums, approximately half in Monrovia and the rest in rural counties. The purpose of the forums was to educate the public about the role of the police, and, conversely, to sensitize local police to the needs of the communities they served. By bringing the police and the local population closer together on important local issues, the forums aimed to empower the public to monitor police

activity more closely and to discourage citizens from vigilantism. Zaizay said the forums aimed to show the public that it could trust the police to maintain law and order. “They [the forums] try to encourage them [the public] to stop taking the law into their own hands, but be able to seek justice through due process,” he said.

Communities elected members to represent them on the forums, and each police station designated community-policing representatives to serve on local forums as well. The police representatives underwent an advanced community-policing training course at the training academy. Forums set their own schedules, some meeting weekly and others monthly depending on the issues they had to discuss. In some areas, forums joined together in loose networks to share ideas about combating crime and police impropriety. Successive inspectors general and other senior police leaders attended forums regularly, as part of a program called “Taking Police to the People.”

The forums had an impact. At one forum, community members complained that local fishermen were using dynamite. The community-policing representative relayed the complaint to the Coast Guard, which intervened to stop the practice. At another forum, community members complained of excessive noise at night. The police investigated and uncovered an illegal settlement adjacent to the community.

The Community Policing Unit aimed to educate the public about the roles and authorities of the police through sensitization campaigns. The unit organized a School Outreach Program in which officials from the Professional Standards Division, Women and Children Protection Section, and Traffic Section accompanied Community Policing officers to schools twice a week, on average, to teach students what their units do and what services they provide. Officials from these sections attended Community Forums as well, in addition to various workshops and sporting events.

To complement the efforts of the Community Policing Unit, the police set out to build the public’s trust through improving police discipline, the subject of frequent complaints at forum meetings. When Nielsen arrived in 2007, he identified the overall lack of discipline among the Liberian police as one of the service’s most pressing issues, and he conducted an evaluation of the police’s internal-affairs capacity. He recommended several changes in personnel and the chain of command, in addition to other reforms already being put in place.

Initially, a Board of Inquiry oversaw complaints of misbehavior by police. The board consisted of five high-ranking police officials and a staff of 10. The board’s findings and recommendations moved through the long chain of command, finally ending up on the desk of the director of police. The time-consuming handling process “encouraged impunity,” according to Prince Mulbah (no relation to William Mulbah), who worked as an investigator for the board from 2005 and led its successor, the Professional Standards Division (PSD). “In the past, cases would die out in bureaucracy.”

In 2006, the new inspector general, Beatrice Munah Sieh, encouraged sweeping reforms. The PSD replaced the Board of Inquiry. The new division consisted of three sections: Internal Affairs, which dealt with internal police complaints about harassment or misconduct; Public Complaints, which investigated complaints from the public about abuse or extortion by police; and Inspection and Control, which carried out internal audits of human resources, logistics, fleet management and finances. The head of the division, Mulbah, had the rank of deputy commissioner and reported directly to the inspector general. The heads of the three sections were assistant commissioners.

To ensure the new division was not viewed as an extension of the ineffectual Board of Inquiry, all five officials on the board were retired and new staffers were recruited from within the police.

Beginning in 2007, PSD investigators received specialized training in professional standards using a curriculum prepared by the U.N. Topics included administrative and criminal investigation, report writing and statement taking. In 2008, Munah Sieh changed PSD leaders at the recommendation of Nielsen and others, who praised her willingness to take a critical perspective on affairs at the division.

Mulbah described some of the tactics he and others at the PSD introduced to monitor police behavior, including random inspections at police stations and traffic stops, sometimes using undercover officers. “Our inspections are irregular and unannounced,” he said. “If we see police loitering at a station, we ask the head of the station who is supposed to be at the station and who should be elsewhere and then those police will be under investigation. We’ve found police drinking alcohol, and then as well we take serious action. ... When we hear about checkpoints on roads that are not sanctioned, we inspect.”

Mulbah took steps to make the Public Complaints Section more accessible to the public, including making complaint forms available at all police stations and with citizen heads of community policing forums, publicizing his phone number over the radio for those who could not fill out forms, and making frequent school visits with the Community Policing Unit to educate the public about their rights. Mulbah said he received at least 100 calls per day from around Liberia, but as many Liberians were still learning their rights and the rights of police under the law, many calls were of little consequence. “But we give credence to all,” he said. “We’ll call them and tell them this is where you went wrong.”

The division overall conducted between 10 and 25 investigations per month, according to Mulbah, aiming to conclude each inquiry in 15–24 days and to submit findings and recommendations to the inspector general for immediate action, as required by policies set by the minister of justice in 2010.

New policies also curtailed political interference. Mulbah said it had been relatively common to receive letters or phone calls from politicians asking for the reinstatement of police officers fired for misconduct. Although in the past several had been reinstated, Inspector General Amblard halted such reinstatements after he took office in July 2009. “We cannot go against our own policy,” said Mulbah, “because we believe policy implementation strengthens institutional development.”

One case from 2011 highlighted the PSD’s potential to improve the public perception of the police. A public uproar ensued after a policeman shot a civilian under ambiguous circumstances in Maryland County, in Liberia’s rural southeast. Mulbah went personally for 10 days to investigate the case and invited the leaders of the local women’s group, the acting president of William V.S. Tubman University located in the county, the head of the local council of churches, and the head of the local youth department to join him in the investigation. “We included everyone to show the transparency of our investigation,” Mulbah said. “What we’re trying to dispel here is that people feel police investigations always are secret and they are not made public to concerned citizens. ... It was meant to ensure transparency.” Mulbah concluded the investigation with a joint press briefing. Nielsen praised Mulbah for his initiative in the case.

OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

From the beginning of reforms until 2008, low pay and a poor system for delivering payments contributed to a culture of absenteeism and bribery among the police across Liberia, and particularly in rural counties. In 2004, Liberian officers received salaries below the minimum wage of US\$52 per month (according to the World Bank’s Doing Business indicators), and officers who were posted in rural locales far from their homes had to pay for their own housing.

Robert Perito, an expert on police reform at the United States Institute of Peace, said, “We found that these [Liberian] officers would wear their new uniforms when they were on duty, but if they had to resort to petty corruption, they would take off the new uniforms and put on their old uniforms,” Perito said. “They didn’t want to sully the new uniform by wearing it at a time when they had to go out and shake down motorists in order to survive.” He noted that many other countries faced similar challenges related to the lack of consistent, regular police wages.

The government raised the salaries incrementally as budget resources grew, and by 2011 entry-level police officers received US\$100 a month. Although this rate far surpassed the national minimum wage, police pay remained near the threshold of what was considered a living wage. Additionally, the system for delivering wages remained problematic, requiring officers in some rural areas to abandon their posts for days at a time to travel to Monrovia to collect their pay.

New officers also encountered problems when they entered a deployment context in which they often did not have the basic tools and equipment to perform their jobs. Even police headquarters in Monrovia lacked electricity for the entire year from October 2007 to October 2008 because there was no money to fuel the generator. Nielsen said, “No electricity, lights, running water... That’s a cave, not a national police headquarters.” Additionally, some roads in rural areas were nearly inaccessible during the rainy season. As the government did not necessarily provide transport to police officers stationed outside of the capital, the U.N. had to provide cars and helicopters to support police deployment.

In 2008, police Inspector General Munah Sieh took on the issue of absenteeism by improving conditions in the field and threatening consequences for continued misconduct. In April, she ordered a review of time records and found

500 officers had missed work more than half a month in the previous six months. She randomly selected 70 and fired them, though she allowed most of them to return on probation, according to Nielsen. “But the message was loud and clear,” he stressed.

In order to improve the timeliness and regularity of wage payments, in 2008 Munah Sieh set out to implement a national direct-deposit system. With the help of American advisers, she first implemented a verification exercise to locate the new Liberian officers and identify how many were still performing their responsibilities. With a better headcount of current officers, the police could develop the system and produce a more accurate budget for officer salaries.

The police selected the bank with the widest reach in Liberia, Ecobank, and worked together to train officers in how to use the system. Because banks had a generally poor reputation, with stories circulating of Liberians unable to recover their assets from before the war, some officers had to be persuaded of the banks’ trustworthiness. Additionally, although Ecobank had the widest reach, it was still limited in some of the rural counties. In Sinoe County and others, police still had to walk five or six hours to reach a branch office. The system was completed in 2009 and according to Nielsen was “one of the successes of the mission.”

Nielsen recalled when he came to Monrovia in 2007, “LNP was six months in arrears on salaries. Now they all get direct deposit. ... The officers get paid the full amount, the same day.”

To further support officers in the rural areas and cut down on absenteeism, the German government agreed to build accommodations in rural counties so that officers stationed there would not have to pay for their housing out of their wages. Some headway was made in improving police infrastructure as well. The U.S. provided funding for new police uniforms, and the

Netherlands, Belgium and Norway provided support to build new police stations and equip stations with radio communications.

ASSESSING RESULTS

The Liberian police service built capacity in many areas, expanded its reach in the rural counties and worked to improve its public reputation. However, in mid-2011 the service remained undersized and short of resources, bribe taking continued to be a problem, and layers of political appointees at the top echelons had the potential to undermine the independence of the police and stymied the professional development of talented officers.

As of July 2011, the police had recruited, vetted and trained an estimated 4,200 officers, including 723 women, 324 ERU members and nearly 1,000 PSU officers. Liberia had slightly more than one police officer per thousand residents, below most international standards. Nielsen, the deputy UNMIL police commissioner, said he thought the police possessed “a significant level of capacity and promise,” including a group of mid-level managers with six or seven years of experience that had the skills and integrity to step into the role of inspector general. However, he was critical of the high-level political appointees because such appointments raised the possibility of political meddling and because several appointees had little policing expertise. He said, “It’s a contradiction to try and build police capacity when the top level has no police capacity.”

Police presence in rural counties stabilized with the creation of the direct-deposit payroll system and the construction of new stations and barracks. In many places, Nielsen said, the police were the only government officials that citizens could depend on to be present at a consistent location. He said, “When it comes to rural counties, like Sinoe or Maryland or Nimba, many of the [non-police] officials live in Monrovia. A

lot of the government officials, you go to the county headquarters, it’s empty, because they are in Monrovia. They aren’t there. Police are there. You go to police stations, the police are there.”

Although the police built new stations and deployed officers throughout the country, police professionalism and accountability remained key concerns. Paavani Reddy, of the United Nations Development Programme, noted that rural areas continued to suffer from limited police presence and oversight.

“Police do take a lot of bribes in the counties because they don’t have any logistics,” she said. “You have to pay them to come to your house to investigate a crime. You need to pay them in order to go and arrest someone.” Reddy stressed that creating a fully functional police force is a long-term endeavor.

With U.N. peacekeepers expected to begin withdrawing after presidential elections in late 2011, the Liberian police faced a tough job trying to fill the void. Numbering just over 4,000, the service was less than half the size of the police organization in neighboring Sierra Leone, a country of similar size and population and in which the military supported the police in maintaining domestic security. Scaling up the police would require additional resources and likely an expansion of the training academy from its capacity to train just 600 new officers per year.

Despite the progress made by the PSD and the Community Policing Unit, the Liberian police had not taken the opportunity to bolster its public legitimacy in two important areas. First, while the PSD developed, there was little traction in establishing an external oversight mechanism to supplement its work. A 2009 RAND report⁶ analyzed different options based on models in Ghana, Nigeria and South Africa, and recommended a hybrid government-civil society oversight board with a broad mandate to consider every aspect of police policy and performance and whose recommendations government would be

obligated to address. However, despite ongoing discussions, the police did not move forward with this plan.

Second, no substantive action was taken to address the high number of political appointees in top police positions. The inspector general and the next seven highest-ranking officials were appointed directly by the president, compared with the West African norm of one to two political appointments in police services. Critics noted that some of the appointees had little policing experience, arguing that this showed that the president continued the nepotism and cronyism of her predecessors. Additionally, Nielsen pointed out that the number of political appointees hindered the ability of the PSD to investigate police leadership, as even the inspector general lacked the authority to remove political appointees. Nielsen said the PSD “system has to have teeth, and the purpose of those teeth is to bite.”

REFLECTIONS

Although the Liberia National Police in 2011 deserved criticism on many points, overall the development of the service was an example of successful post-war institutional development in the country, and globally a relatively successful case of post-war police reform from a global viewpoint. Observers made several points about Liberian police reforms and about police reforms in general in post-conflict situations.

Although the United Nations and Liberian police met the target of training 3,500 officers by 2007, creating the service quickly may have come at the expense of professionalism and credibility. New officers entered an environment without clearly defined policies and procedures, and in some cases they lacked basic equipment or proper stations. Dag Dahlen, head of UNPOL’s Training and Development section, said, “There [was] no rush to get 3,500 deployed by June 2007. It [didn’t] make any difference if you delayed that six months or maybe a year.” To provide

sufficient time for high-quality police training, suggested Dahlen, the training schedule should have been extended.

Several observers pointed to weaknesses in the U.N. stewardship of reforms. Bruce Baker, an expert on police reform at Coventry University in the United Kingdom, said the “rules of the game” were largely developed by UNPOL with limited input from the Liberian police, and that this had “enormous negative consequences” for the formation of the police service. He noted that the lack of consultation was not entirely intentional.

“On the one hand, I think sincerely that UNPOL felt that they had undertaken consultation and that they hadn’t just launched in on their various projects of reforming the curriculum at the police academy and the rest,” Baker said. “But when you spoke to the actual academy director, or when you spoke to the senior officers in the Liberia National Police, their actual perception was so, so different.”

Additionally, the diversity among UNPOL officers at times caused confusion among Liberian police, in particular during training. UNPOL members represented 38 different countries, and trainers came from diverse policing cultures with different techniques and philosophies. In the absence of uniform procedures and guidelines for what comprised a U.N. policing culture, local officers sometimes received conflicting guidance and cues from their international counterparts. Nielsen pointed out, however, that considerable mentoring occurred between UNPOL officers, an aspect of U.N. policing missions that is generally a substantial, if overlooked, benefit.

Despite shortcomings, Liberia’s police reforms made considerable progress in a relatively brief period of time. Though many of its gains were not irreversible, and potentially destabilizing tensions remained ahead of presidential elections in 2011, former Deputy Minister for National Security Peter Zaizay was confident the Liberian police would continue to develop. “It takes a long time; it is a [matter of] perception,” Zaizay said.

“But gradually, I think with all these efforts together, I think people will be able to change their perception of the police and know that these are our officers.”

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- ¹ Robins, Simon. “Policy Brief: Addressing the Challenges of Law Enforcement in Africa.” *Institute for Security Studies*. October 2009. <http://www.iss.co.za/uploads/NO16OCT09.PDF>. Accessed 9 August 2011.
- ² U.S. Library of Congress Research Division. “Country Profile: Nigeria.” *U.S. Library of Congress*. July 2008. <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/profiles/Nigeria.pdf>. Accessed 9 August 2011.
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- ⁵ Gompert, David C.; Olikier, Olga; Lawson, Brooke Stearns; Crane, Keith; and Riley, K. Jack. “Making Liberia Safe: Transformation of the National Security Sector.” *RAND National Defense Institute*. 2007. http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/2007/RAND_MG529.pdf. Accessed 3 August 2011.
- ⁶ Gompert, David C.; Davis, Robert C.; and Lawson, Brooke Stearns. “Oversight of the Liberian National Police.” *RAND National Defense Institute*. 2009. http://www.rand.org/pubs/occasional_papers/OP230.html. Accessed 3 August 2011.

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