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UNMIL Ready to Support Government

BITTERSWEET FAREWELL FOR
IVORIAN RETURNEES

LIBERIA LAUNCHES
AGENDA 2030

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Message from the Special Representative of the Secretary-General



In less than four months, Liberia will assume full responsibility for its own security. This will be a milestone for the country and the United Nations. It will be a testament to the progress achieved since the end of the civil war in 2003, and to the resolve and readiness of Liberians to manage their own security. I am heartened by the increasing awareness by Liberians about the important role they also play in ensuring peace in their communities. UNMIL continues to work hand-in-hand with national authorities to ensure that the security transition is smooth.

As part of that commitment, the Liberia National Police is expanding its recruitment. Along with other security agencies, it is also strengthening the capacities of its personnel. Training has included community policing to improve the relationships between security agencies and the communities they serve. Plans are also underway to deploy additional personnel outside Monrovia. More than 350 police officers have been deployed to border counties since December 2015, and immigration personnel deployed outside the capital now totals more than 1,500. In addition, efforts are ongoing to establish and maintain functioning security councils at district and county levels to prevent and manage conflict and security incidents.

Once the Mission completes the handover of residual tasks to national security agencies on 30 June 2015, 1,240 UNMIL military and over 600 police personnel will remain in Liberia, along with over 1,000 civilian staff to continue supporting the people of Liberia to create the conditions for lasting peace and stability in the country. In December 2016, the UN Security Council will decide on the future of UNMIL, including the possible withdrawal of the Mission and the transition to a future United Nations presence. United Nations agencies, funds and programmes will stay in Liberia to support Liberia's development agenda.

The situation in neighbouring Côte d'Ivoire also continues to improve. Since the voluntary repatriations

of Ivorian refugees restarted in December 2015, 7,300 have returned to their home country. From the peak of approximately 240,000 refugees in November 2010, less than 30,000 remain in Liberia today. The United Nations will maintain its support for their voluntary repatriation.

Efforts by the Governments of Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire to maintain peace along their common border continue. A second Joint Council of Chiefs and Elders Meeting (JCCEM), with representatives from both countries, was held in Côte d'Ivoire in January 2016 to discuss security, conflict resolution and reconciliation issues.

In January 2016, the Government of Liberia and the UN hosted the national launch of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) - 17 ambitious goals to address economic, social and environmental challenges, as part of a global partnership to foster peaceful, just and inclusive societies, free from fear and violence. Liberia played a central role in the international negotiations on the SDGs since President Sirleaf was appointed co-chair of the United Nations Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on the Post-2015 Development Agenda and the Chair of the African Union's High-Level Committee of Heads of State and Governments on the Post-2015 Development Agenda. In light of Liberia's ongoing considerable challenges, the Government's commitment to the SDGs is especially important and should help set the country on a path to economic transformation, social inclusion and sustainable development, which is also essential for the country's long-term peace and stability.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Farid Zarif'.

FARID ZARIF
Special Representative of the
Secretary-General and Coordinator of United Nations
Operations in Liberia

UNMIL Ready to Support through Security Transit



PHOTO: UNMIL/EMMANUEL TOBEY

Deputy SRSG Waldemar Vrey addressing

BY CLEMENT TULEZI

Liberia is set to assume responsibility for all aspects of national security by June 30, 2016 taking over the residual tasks performed by the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL). UNMIL is supporting the government to

strengthen its security capacities and processes fundamental to long-term peace and stability, including security sector reforms and national reconciliation.

“Liberia’s job, with support from UNMIL and many other partners, is to deliver on the priorities over the remaining days,”

Government ion



a townhall on security transition in Sanniquellie, Nimba County

said Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General (DSRSG) for Rule of Law Waldemar Vrey at a press briefing on the security transition in November at the Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism. “This will require sustained commitment until the finish line.”

The UN Security Council in April 2015 authorized the resumption of UNMIL’s drawdown, suspended since September 2014 due to the Ebola outbreak, and requested the Secretary-General to continue to streamline the mission’s civilian, police and military components and to consolidate its presence in line with the security transition.

“The UNMIL drawdown is nothing new. The mission’s uniformed presence, which once numbered 17,000 military and police personnel, has been reduced by about 12,000 over the past decade – yet no significant security incidents have taken place in areas from where we have withdrawn,” said the DSRSG.

Vrey expressed confidence over commitment of the Government of Liberia to put in place the necessary structures and mechanisms to effectively take over security responsibilities from UNMIL come June 2016.

“The good news is that Liberian government, at the highest levels and across ministries, is fully committed to the comprehensive security transition plan,” he said.

“I want to reaffirm to you today that Liberia indeed has the potential to maintain internal peace and security,” Justice Minister Benedict F. Sannoh confirmed. “We have disaggregated the UNMIL plan and identified all the activities that UNMIL is now engaged in, as key priority areas that we must take over come June 30, 2016.

“What the UN Security Council has called upon the government to do is to fill in the gaps that will be created when UNMIL leaves. This is not a totally new responsibility that this government has not handled,” said the minister. “Direct responsibility for peace and security has actually been in the hands of the Liberian security forces, with UNMIL providing mentoring, training, and direct support or intervention only when required.”

DSRSG Vrey said that the security institutions do not operate in a vacuum;

therefore they need the support, cooperation and goodwill of communities to effectively serve and protect.

“Security is every community’s responsibility. Every Liberian has a role to play to help the Government provide a safe and secure environment that we all want to see. We saw this great potential during the Ebola response. When communities were given the resources and decision-making authority, Liberia united to beat back Ebola” he pointed out.

Minister Sannoh revealed that the government is focusing on three tracks, namely, operational effectiveness, which requires training of officers, deployment of officers throughout these counties; institutional strengthening, to ensure that appropriate legal framework, policies, and regulatory frameworks are in place and that appropriate institutional arrangements and structural reforms are put in place; and working effectively with the communities at all levels through community partnerships, country and district security committees, and close collaboration with the local leadership to overcome challenges in the counties and assume control over activities initially undertaken by UNMIL.

“We must strengthen the capacity of the relevant security agencies, provide the appropriate support, and work closely with local people, and collectively as with county elders, chiefs, superintendents and elected representatives,” said Minister Sannoh.

The DSRSG cleared up misunderstandings about the UNMIL drawdown that had some Liberians apprehensive about security.

“Any decision about UNMIL’s eventual departure or a follow-on mission will be made by the Security Council towards the end of 2016. “Come 1 July 2016, UNMIL will still have 1,240 military and 606 police on the ground. These forces would only be used in a very extreme situation – one that threatened a strategic reversal of the great progress Liberia and its Partners have made over the past 12 years.

“Even after the eventual withdrawal of UNMIL, the UN County Team will continue to support processes that are fundamental to long-term peace and security,” noted Vrey.



SRSF Farid Zarif speaking at the official commemoration of Human Rights Day in Monrovia

Respect Rule of Law to Promote Human Rights

BY CLEMENT TULEZI

Mass violations of human rights were a pervasive aspect of Liberia's 14-year civil war.

The commemoration of the 2015 Human Rights Day on 10 December was an opportunity to take stock of how far Liberia has progressed since the end of the civil conflict in 2003 in upholding fundamental rights and freedoms, and empowering the masses.

“There is a whole lot of capacity, more superior to any other centre of power - the people themselves. People can make a lot of difference with regards to who they are, who they want to be and where they want to be in the future,” observed Special Representa-



PHOTO: UNMIL/EMMANUEL TOBEY

tive of the Secretary-General (SRSG) for Liberia Farid Zarif at the official ceremony in Monrovia.

UNMIL is currently drawing down and the government has expressed confidence that it is ready to assume full responsibility for the country's security by 30 June 2016 based on its security transition plan that is closely linked to ongoing drawdown of UN peacekeepers. The UN envoy therefore called on every citizen to support the government's plan by creating a safe and secure environment.

"We have to galvanize the people on the side of the law, and let them drive the change that is needed in society; a place where criminals have no space. Then we will not need more police officers, because each one of us would have turned into an officer of the law, by protecting what is in the law," said Zarif.

For a while now, there has been growing concern in the country over increasing number of incidents of mob violence, resulting in injuries, loss of lives and destruction of property. Ahead of the Government taking over security responsibilities, mob violence poses a threat to law and order in the country.

"We should allow the police to do proper investigation before we draw conclusions. Our laws and the constitution say that we must not convict somebody before investigation. Remember, human rights are linked to justice," said Conmany B. Wesseh, Senator, River Gee County. "The vast majority of Liberians believe that this country can be rebuilt, strengthened and ultimately be an example to the world."

Rampant sexual violence against women and girls is yet another major problem facing the country. In 2014, even in the heat of Ebola, a total of 1,139 gender-based violence cases were reported nationwide, of which 720 reported cases were rape, and 657 involved victims under the age of 18 years.

"Our commitment on sexual and gender-based violence should be that it is criminal and we have to fight it wherever we are. We also have to fight human trafficking," said Senator Wesseh.

Human Rights Day is celebrated every year to commemorate the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The theme for the 2015 celebrations was "Our Rights, Our Freedoms, Always."

"Respect for diversity and rights of people, particularly women and children, is important for growth and development in Liberia. Despite the challenges after the civil conflict, Liberia has enjoyed a stable democracy. We must ensure that going forward, people's rights are not denied," said the Special Representative of the Economic Community of West Africa States (ECOWAS) in Liberia, Ambassador Babatunde O. Ajisomo.

"The coming days are so crucial to the destiny of Liberia. With the drawdown of UNMIL and the crucial presidential elections in 2017, which will bring forth a new democratic dispensation, eyes are on Liberia. Every effort should be made to ensure that Liberia does not return to the dark years," said Ajisomo.

Liberia established an Independent National Commission on Human Rights (INCHR) in 2005.

"There are people in Liberia who do not want to hear about human rights. Some joke about human rights. But it's not our own invention. Human rights are universal," concluded Justice Gladys K. Johnson, Chairperson of INCHR.

Senator Conmany B. Wesseh delivers the Keynote speech at Human Rights Day Celebrations



PHOTO: UNMIL/EMMANUEL TOBEY

Combating Proliferation of Illicit Weapons

BY EUGENE K. MYERS

Illicit arms continue to be smuggled into Liberia on a regular basis according to the Liberia National Commission on Small Arms (LiNCSA).



PHOTO: UNMIL/EMMANUEL TOBEY

Deputy SRSV Vrey hands over a vehicle to LiNCSA Charman James M. Fromayan

Now, the government, with technical assistance and training from the United Nations Regional Centre for Peace and Disarmament in Africa (UNREC) and the United Nations

Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) has embarked on a national arms-marking exercise to create a database of legal arms in the country.

“We have seen the successful marking of arms. Already, many national security weapons have been marked,” Deputy Spe-



Staff from Liberia security agencies being trained in arms marking

cial Representative of the Secretary-General (DSRSG) for Rule of Law Waldemar Vrey said recently in Monrovia as he handed over a vehicle on behalf of UNMIL to LiNCSA.

The arms-marking exercise is part of the process of Liberia preparing to assume full security responsibilities by June this year. The exercise includes registering and tracking of arms used by Liberia's security forces. Marking and registering weapons will further prevent the diversion of arms into the illicit market. The DSRSG commended LiNCSA's efforts in combating the proliferation and illicit trafficking of small arms in Liberia in line with Article 24 of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons.

"Discussions that LiNCSA has with the police will see them comply with the ECOWAS standards as well. This is a good step forward. We have been partnering with you and together with other UN agencies we will continue to support this work," said Vrey.

"We are mindful of UNMIL drawdown and the role each security institution is required to play. We will ensure security if arms are only in hands of those authorized

to carry and the process of moving arms is transparent," said LiNCSA Chairman James M. Fromayan. "We intend to conduct public awareness across Liberia to encourage individuals that are in possession of fire arms to turn them over. Thereafter, police will begin searching for arms."

A total of 27 Liberian security sector officers have been trained on marking, registering and record-keeping of arms, with an emphasis on government-owned weapons. Over 40 weapons collected during the Liberia Disarmament Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) programme were marked, registered and destroyed during practical exercises at the training.

"We have marked all the weapons in the hands of our military. This is a breakthrough for us. It has strengthened accountability among the largest arms-bearing group," said Fromayan. "In addition, we have signed a memorandum of understanding with the police, the Executive Protective Services and the National Security Agency on arms-marking. We hope to complete the exercise before June."

Liberian law prohibits private security and private individuals from bearing fire arms, except hunters. But this ban is

normally flouted. The Liberian legislature is crafting new legislation to give LiNCSA power to regulate movement of arms.

"As of now we do not have the legal rights to go after firms and individuals transporting illicit arms through our borders. We are expanding the Liberia Immigration Act to allow officers to bear arms and tighten illicit trading of arms across borders," Fromayan noted. "We are also creating a national database system for all weapons, including those in the hands of hunters. Already, specialists have been assembled, and equipment and space are available – all covered under the UNMIL drawdown plan."

LiNCSA is currently establishing sub-offices in Bong, Lofa and Grand Gedeh counties to decentralize its activities to combat illicit arms and light weapons in Liberia.

Local chiefs and elders are being mobilized into networks to watch over ownership and movement of arms in communities. In addition, communities that return illicit arms will be given development grants to fund projects such as health clinics, schools and markets through funds from the European Union and ECOWAS, managed by United Nations Development Programme.

JCEM: Liberia, Côte d'Ivoire Improved Security at Commo



Ivorian and Liberian leaders, elders and partners at the Joint Council of Chiefs and Elders Meeting in Cavally, Côte d'Ivoire

BY NAPOLEON VIBAN

Most delegates sounded pretty upbeat when the curtains fell on the second Joint Council of Chiefs and Elders Meeting (JCEM) between Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire.

The meeting in the Cavally regional capital of Guiglo was convened January 16 through 18 to review progress on recommendations from the first JCEM that was held in Zwedru, Liberia in October 2013. Discussions, centred on border security, youth empowerment, the voluntary repatriation of refugees, and the establishment of cooperation mechanisms between the two countries.

ire Hail n Border



PHOTO: UNMIL/NAPOLEON WIEAN

At the closing plenary, Deputy Special Representative to the Secretary-General for Liberia, Antonio Vigilante, seized the occasion to reiterate the 30 June 2016 deadline for Liberia to take full responsibility for the country's security. Vigilante stressed that this benchmark was rather "a demonstration of the international community's confidence in Liberia's progress."

Similarly, United Nations Operations in Côte d'Ivoire (UNOCI) Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) Aïchatou Mindaoudou said the UN operation in Côte d'Ivoire remains committed to sup-

porting mechanisms such as the JCEM that offer a platform for "constructive dialogue."

The Presidents of Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire spoke at the closing ceremony, with Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf noting a considerable decrease in attacks on Ivorian border towns since the first JCEM. A year before [June 2012], in one of several attacks, seven members of an UNOCI patrol team had been ambushed and killed in Tai. A court in Monrovia eventually handed down life sentences to some 13 Liberians accused of involvement in the attack.

President Alassane Ouattara echoed the sentiments, affirming significant improvement in security at the border, thanks to support from UN peacekeeping missions in the two countries. Ouattara maintained that instability still stalks the border areas, citing an attack on a military garrison in the southwestern town of Olodio as recently as last December.

But the Ivorian leader was upbeat about progress on the refugee front. From some 200,000 at the height of the 2010 post-election crisis in Côte d'Ivoire, he observed that the number of Ivorian refugees in Liberia was now down to just a little over 30,000. Ouattara further noted that about half that number would be repatriated this year.

Sirleaf, too, hailed the dramatic decline in the number of Ivorian refugees in Liberia. In the aftermath of the 2013 JCEM, the numbers in a voluntary repatriation programme jointly run by UNHCR and the Liberia Refugee Repatriation and Resettlement Commission (LRRRC) surged. "About 23,000 have since returned," she observed. That momentum, though, was stalled midstream by the Ebola outbreak the following year.

To keep the epidemic at bay, Côte d'Ivoire sealed off its borders with Guinea and Liberia. And although the Ivorian authorities acquiesced late last December to a humanitarian corridor for returning refugees, the border remained officially closed.

At the meeting in Guiglo, the issue of allegations of encroachment on community forests in Grand Gedeh County was of utmost concern to the delegation from Liberia.

The delegation consisted of government officials and community leaders from the four southeastern Counties bordering Côte d'Ivoire – Nimba, Grand Gedeh, River Gee and Maryland. Notable, too, was a five-strong delegation from the National Council of Chiefs and Elders led by its Chair, Chief Zanzan Karwor.

A joint communiqué signed by the two countries made no direct reference to the continued border closure, but the resumption of cross-border traffic appeared imminent. As hinted by President Ouattara at the closing ceremony, the Government of Côte d'Ivoire was contemplating reopening the border sooner than later.

By contrast, it could be a while before the vexing issue of alien and illegal land occupation is put to rest. The joint communiqué did urge the two sides to address the matter promptly, and it is likely to be high on the agenda of the next session of their Joint Commission on Bilateral Cooperation, expected in the coming months.

On the sidelines of the meeting in Guiglo and at a briefing with the press, Grand Gedeh Superintendent Peter L. Solo spoke of simmering tensions in the Liberian border district of B'hai. Burkinabe farmers in Ivorian border towns are alleged to have overshot land leased to them by the hosts, penetrating deep into Liberian territory and establishing cocoa and coffee plantations.

His counterpart in the Ivorian border Prefecture of Toulepleu also confirmed receiving reports about the illegal incursion into Liberia.

"We are facing a new phenomenon, which we now call agricultural immigrants. They're mainly Burkinabe, who come in and are allowed by locals to acquire farmland under lease, but who eventually bring in more people and, without consulting anyone, extend their farms beyond the borders into Liberian forests," the Prefect of Toulepleu, Diarra Abdoul Karim, conceded to *UN FOCUS*.

It might be a complex issue to deal with, but it is precisely community contentions of this kind that make the JCEM a very valuable forum.

Exclusive Interview

Ivorian Officials Urge Return of Refugee Compatriots

SRSF Farid Zarif tours the refugee camp in Zwedru

In an exclusive interview in Guiglo with Napoleon Viban, the Senior Divisional Officer (Prefect) of the border County of Toulepleu echoed calls for the return of Ivorian refugees still living in southeastern Liberia. Diarra Abdoul Karim also suggested that the Government of Burkina Faso should be involved in talks to resolve contentions arising from illegal cross-border farming in the Liberian border district of B'hai.

UN Focus: As Prefect of a border County, you're one of the most strategic participants at the JCEM in Guiglo. What's your appraisal of the forum?

D. A. Karim: I think that it provides a great opportunity for the two peoples who share not only a common border but also the problems that arise from this proximity. Hence the need for us to come together to discuss and consolidate activities that foster peace and security at the borders. The meeting is therefore a great opportunity and we must congratulate the two Heads of State for working to consolidate security along our common borders. As administrators in the border regions, we have to support these



PHOTO: UN/MIL/EMMANUEL TOBEY

efforts given the strategic role we play.

UN Focus: *One of your preoccupations as a Prefect in western Côte d'Ivoire is the plight of your refugee compatriots still across the border in Liberia. Given the chance, what would you want to tell them?*

D. A. Karim: They're all fellow compatriots who left the country in difficult circumstances. But I'd like to say that we are progressing and things are returning to normalcy. Much has evolved in Côte d'Ivoire at large and the Prefecture of Toule-

But we can't resolve matters of this kind from abroad. I urge them to come home so that together we could find lasting solutions to these problems. It is my fervent wish that those still in Liberia return before the end of this year and join us in the reconstruction of Côte d'Ivoire.

UN Focus: *There have been reports about people crossing from your area and illegally setting up cocoa and coffee farms in forests deep inside Liberia. Would you be aware of this development?*

indigenous. However, they end up bringing in more people, without consulting anyone, and penetrate deep into the forests, extending their farms beyond the borders. Yes, what the Superintendent of Grand Gedeh said [at the JCCEM] is true, and I think that we need to work together with UNOCI, UNMIL and community leaders in Côte d'Ivoire and Liberia to find a solution to the problem. But we also need the support of the Consulate of Burkina Faso, since it is our Burkinabe neighbours who are believed to be the cause of the problem.



The refugee camp in Zwedru where many Ivorian refugees are accommodated

pleu in particular. More than 25,000 persons have returned. For those that are still hesitant, I would like to assure them that there's no need any longer to stay away from the country. All conditions, including security, social services, schools and school equipment are now in order. Peace has returned to the country and we are all working towards reconciliation. True, there are some hiccups and areas of misunderstanding especially concerning the question of land ownership.

D. A. Karim: Yes, I'm aware of this phenomenon, if I may put it that way. It was even the subject of a presentation [at the JCCEM] by the Honourable Peter Solo, Superintendent of Grand Gedeh, and I must say it was an excellent exposé. All the issues raised by this colleague were real, and we're aware of them. We're dealing with a flow of what I'd call agricultural immigrants. They are mainly Burkinabes who come into our region and lease farmland from the

They're all fellow compatriots who left the country in difficult circumstances

PHOTO: UNMIL/EMMANUEL TOBEY



Refugees cross the Cavalla River on 18 December to start new life back in Côte d'Ivoire

Bittersweet Farewell as Ivorian Refugees Return

BY DIANA DIAZ AND CLEMENT TULEZI

With Liberia's Ebola outbreak over and normality returning to Côte d'Ivoire, many refugees are now opting to return to their former homes.

It's 6.30 a.m. The orange sun guides refugees to the distribution centre at the Little Wlebo refugee camp. In the crowd, a blue cap stands out. Brégui Ziki, 46, a teacher, accompanied by six family members, is beginning something he has been waiting for the last

In November 2010, around 240,000 Ivoirians fled to Liberia as violence flared up in their country following the presidential elections. Many of them have returned home voluntarily over the years but thousands still remain in Liberia.

five years: a journey back home.

“We will miss life here. My children will miss their friends; but as hard as departing is, we have to go home, for our own good,” said Ziki, holding his daughter who was crying in her father’s lap.

Friends and neighbours wave and sing, and slowly trucks full of Ivorians sneak out of the camp. And throughout the one-hour bumpy journey, refugees sang the bitter-sweet melody of goodbye to Little Wlebo.

The voluntary repatriation of tens of thousands of Ivorian refugees from Liberia resumed on 18 December, when 645 persons returned home from the Little Wlebo and PTP refugee camps. These were the first Ivorian returnees from Liberia since the suspension of voluntary repatriation over a year ago due to the Ebola outbreak. Although the borders remain closed, the Government of Côte d’Ivoire opened humanitarian corridors to allow their entrance.

“The war is over in my country. If we stay here we risk losing so much back home - our farm land. We have to return to resume our everyday activities and lives,” said

Nicolas, a medical practitioner. “It’s a joy to return home.”

After crossing on the ferry to Côte d’Ivoire and the medical and immigration screening at the border, refugees accompanied by Liberian government and United Nations officials were received by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Representative in Côte d’Ivoire, Mohamed Toure, Ivorian government officials, led by the Secretary-General of the Ministry of State, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Claude Beke, and the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General in Côte d’Ivoire, Aïchatou Mindaoudou Souleymane, among others.

During the official ceremony in Prolo, Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Liberia, Farid Zarif, reiterated UN’s commitment to facilitate the repatriation of the refugees and their reintegration back home.

“These people were refugees an hour ago. They are no longer refugees. They are home. They are on their own soil. They are here to take charge of their own destiny in their country,” said Zarif in Côte d’Ivoire. “This would not have been possible without the political goodwill of the Government of Côte d’Ivoire.” He thanked the Government of Liberia, represented by Executive Director of Liberia Refugee Repatriation and Resettlement Commission (LRRRC) Abba G. Williams, the UN Refugee Agency in Liberia and Côte d’Ivoire, and donors for

supporting the exercise.

“This is a very important day,” said UNHCR Representative in Liberia Ndeye Ndour. “These returnees will resume normal lives in their own homes after several years in exile and help in rebuilding their country.”

Mohamed Askia Toure, UNHCR representative in Côte d’Ivoire, underscored the agency’s commitment to work with the Ivorian authorities to find durable solutions for the returnees. He called on development and humanitarian actors to support the government’s national development programme. “It is only through collaboration that we can have a real impact in terms of promoting peace and reconciliation,” said Toure.

“The Government of Liberia is delighted to be part of the convoy of the voluntary repatriation of refugees to Côte d’Ivoire,” said Abba G. Williams. “The government would like to convey its gratitude to the UN for supporting this process.”

Before they were taken back to their towns or villages, the returnees were given food rations for three months by the World Food Programme (WFP) and kitchen utensils, mattresses, mosquito nets and other basic aid items by UNHCR to help them rebuild their lives.

UNHCR will also help the returnees reintegrate in their homeland with income-generating programmes, training and start-up aid. The Côte d’Ivoire government has also put in place a number of programmes to help the returnees regain access to their land and for children to access education.

“We have really waited for this day. Now we are home,” said Ziki, taking one last look at the Liberian side soon after crossing the Cavalla River.

Late February, 1,201 Ivorian refugees (665 from Little Wlebo camp in Maryland County, 142 from Bahn Camp in Nimba County, and 394 from PTP camp in Grand Gedeh County) were assisted to return to Côte d’Ivoire. Since the resumption of voluntary repatriation on 18 December 2015, a total of 8,521 refugees have returned to Côte d’Ivoire. Over 30,000 Ivorian refugees still remain in Liberia, waiting for their turn to go home someday.

n Home

SRSZ Zarif with Ivorian Secretary-General of the Ministry of State, Claude Beke, at the official ceremony in Prolo following voluntary repatriation of Ivorian refugees



Ivorian Refugee Family Embarks on a New Beginning



Marc and his family prior to relocation to the United States

BY DIANA DIAZ

Marc, 36, and his wife Joelle, 32, have been refugees in Liberia since the first Ivorian Civil War in 2002. His body bears marks of the war, but the spirit is intact. He has a burning desire to build a new future for his family - his wife, two sons and two daughters.

"I just want a better future for my wife and children," says Marc. "I do not want to think about the war in Côte d'Ivoire. I really want to work."

Marc and Joelle were farmers back in Zouan-Houein, Côte d'Ivoire. Produce from the farm was enough to feed the family. They sold surplus in the local market. "We did small agricultural work and we were buying and selling goods to earn some petty cash too," recounts Marc. "I used to work hard in my farm."

It was a day like any other back in 2002. Joelle remained at home as Marc sold goods at the local market. Suddenly, as street vendors went about selling their wares, the sound of gunshots started to ring in every corner. "The war started. I ran leaving my goods," says Marc. But he was not fortunate. "A bullet hit my arm and ripped it," he recalls, pointing at the scar that still remains.

In the mid-1990s, Côte d'Ivoire saw three decades of peace and stability being shattered as ethnic divisions, radical nationalism and violence related to power struggle took root. It culminated in the first civil war in 2002.

"When Marc came to the house, he was bleeding profusely. I was scared," remembers Joelle. "I took off my lappa and wrapped it around his arm. We then set off towards Danané." For almost 40 km they walked, before finding Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) along the way.

Marc had gone too long without proper medical attention. He had bad news on arrival at MSF's health post in Donleu. "I was bleeding a lot. MSF staff said they had to cut my arm to save my life," recounts Marc.

"The rebels were all over. They were planning to steal ambulances. MSF staff were not sure what to do with me; so they released me from the clinic. Joelle and I walked from Donleu in search of a safe place to live in Liberia," said Marc. Since then, Marc and his family have not set foot on Ivorian soil.

For nine years, Marc and Joelle lived in the Liberian town of Gbehvonwea until the renewed wave of violence forced thousands of Ivorians into Liberia. In 2011, Marc and his wife, then with three children and expecting the fourth requested asylum. They were then recognized as refugees. The family was sheltered in the Bahn refugee camp,

in Saclapea, Nimba. "UNHCR gave us a tarpaulin and a lamp, I have only one arm so I could not properly secure the shelter," he said. "Someone cut through the shelter and stole our lamp. I could not sleep at night thinking about our shelter being torn and I had to protect my family."

Though Marc and his family have lived in Liberia for over 12 years, they still do not feel fully integrated. Previous events are always playing in his mind. He is also frustrated by the physical disability. "When I go to look for a job, they tell me they only have jobs for people with two arms. I think about home and that war all the time," says Marc. "I would like to return home but I don't want to experience war again."

In spite of a series of unfortunate events, Marc and his family have something to look forward to: resettlement in another country.

"Many refugees hope to be resettled to a third country but the slots are very few. However, in assessing cases for resettlement,

UNHCR considers refugees with serious protection concerns and whose situations can be better supported in the particular resettlement country," says Lisa Quarshie, Senior Protection Officer, UNHCR Liberia.

"I believe we will be ok in another country. My children will have a better future," says Marc. "And if I get an opportunity, I will work to sustain my family."

Finally, Marc, Joelle, Odilon, Flavienne, Gervino and Evodie have embarked on a new journey after resettlement in the United States of America. To date, 22 Ivorian refugees have successfully been resettled in the U.S.

Liberia currently hosts some 30,000 Ivorian refugees. Many of whom have chosen to return home. Voluntary repatriation resumed in December 2015 with the return of 645 persons from the Little Wlebo and PTP refugee camps after being suspended for over one year due to the Ebola outbreak.

Children play in Bahn Refugee Camp



Liberia Launches Agenda 2030

BY CLEMENT TULEZI AND EUGENE MYERS

The Government of Liberia launched the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in January, setting the stage for the domestication of the shared global vision over the next 15 years.

PHOTO: UNMIL/EMMANUEL TOBEY



SDGs, officially known as “The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”, are an intergovernmental set of 17 ambitious goals with 169 targets, addressing economic, social and environmental challenges facing the world today.

“We have to unbundle these targets and see how they fit our own circumstances. The work that will fall on the shoulders of all of us is to begin to craft our processes and programs to implement SDGs consistent

with our own aspirations,” said President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf at the official launch in January. “We will look to all of you to make sure that our own goals are clearly defined.”

President Sirleaf reminded stakeholders of the need for government to setup structures to track progress so as to provide quality, accessible and timely data at the local levels on the implementation of SDGs. “We must measure what we do and how we are changing. Every year there may be new global things happening and new circumstances nationally that need to be

addressed, but we have to keep our mind on the main targets. We want to make sure that as we reach the end of the SDGs, we can all proudly say we've done well to eradicate poverty to a good extent," she said.

Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSg) Farid Zarif said Liberia, like other countries, should address structural factors that impede or delay poverty

"Security will only be sustainable in Liberia when its people and communities perceive themselves as secure, with equal access to justice, services and opportunity," said Zarif. "All branches of government, agencies and commissions must work effectively together and hand-in-hand with the communities towards sustained peace.

"The Ebola Virus Disease crisis has

our implementation," the minister pointed out. "We propose to establish a special inter-agency task force with direct responsibility to the Office of the President to coordinate the domestication of the SDGs and to monitor, evaluate and report on progress and impact, and ensure that significant progress is seen as much in the rural areas as in the urban areas."

"The UN agencies will provide continued support to the domestication of SDGs, whereby national stakeholders will decide on priorities and the sequence of the goals and their incorporation in the national development strategy, policies and budgets," Deputy SRSg and United Nations Resident Coordinator Antonio Vigilante assured. "Also, a good dose of innovation will be needed to try to leapfrog and identify development accelerators."

The two-day event was characterized by a series of interactive dialogues on the Agenda 2030, Addis Ababa Action Agenda, African Union's Agenda 2063 and Liberia's Agenda for Transformation (AfT), to draw synergy for effective implementation of the SDGs in Liberia. The launch was supported by UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network (UN-SDSN), private philanthropist Dr. Betsee Parker, United Nations Country Team and other partners. The Agenda 2030 replaces the Millennium Development Goals which expired last year.

Meanwhile, the Director of UN-SDSN and Special Advisor to UN Secretary-General on the Sustainable Development Goals, Prof. Jeffrey Sachs visited Liberia prior to the national launch of the 2030 Agenda. He held talks with President Sirleaf, the leadership of the national legislature and the UN country team.

"Young people who can read and write are a huge resource for Liberia. So, use this ability to promote ways that can get the community out of poverty," said Prof. Sachs addressing students at the University of Liberia. "We need new creative solutions that are born and bred by Liberians themselves. This is what will help us to get financial support."



Deputy SRSg and UN Resident Coordinator Antonio Vigilante speaks at the national launch of SDGs

eradication, inclusive growth and sustainable development.

"Liberia cannot afford to leave any of its citizens behind," said SRSg Zarif. "Too many people are suffering and facing huge challenges. This year has to mark the beginning of turning global promises into reality."

The SRSg cited the ongoing process of UNMIL handing over full security responsibilities to national security institutions as outlined in the Government of Liberia's Transition Plan as a good starting point for the inclusion of all in key processes.

shown us that our collective strengths at the regional, national and, most importantly, communities at the local level can be mobilized to overcome the most daunting challenges," observed Zarif.

Finance and Development Planning Minister Amara M. Konneh underscored the importance of prioritizing implementation of SDGs based on the country's capacity. "Liberia will not be able to implement all 17 goals at a go. We don't have financial resources; we do not have the human capital. This means we need to focus and sequence



PHOTO: FAO/JOHN T. MONIBAH

Rice plantations supported by FAO Food and Income Security project

Farmers Buoyed by Rice Harvest

BY JOHN T. MONIBAH

Thirteen farmers' groups, predominately women, in Nimba, Bong and Lofa Counties in late 2015 harvested more than 12 hectares of Suakoko 8 and NERICA L-19 lowland rice varieties grown under the "Post-Ebola Livelihood Recovery through Women's Association Food and Income Security Empowerment" project. The Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

(FAO) and local implementing partners are supporting 200 women's groups comprising 6,000 households in the three counties with lowland rice and vegetable production, cash injection to village savings and loan associations (VSLA) and training in crop production. The project is funded by the Swiss Agency for International Development and Cooperation (SDC).

While part of the harvested rice will be consumed at the household level, some will form seed for the next season and the

surplus will be sold in the local market.

From the inception of the project in 2015, each of the 200 farmers' groups - in the hard-hit Ebola counties - was earmarked to cultivate a minimum of half hectare of lowland rice. However, groups such as Kponmah with 0.6 hectares, Kwageh with 0.7 hectares, Kergeamah with 0.8 hectares and Dordealah with 1.5 hectares have exceeded their required hectare quotas, thus boosting total production. Other groups

Salala, Bong County, during a joint FAO and SDC field visit. "We will continue on this path. After harvest, we will save for next planting season and not wait for seeds again."

In Kporyor village, jubilating members of Dordealah Farmers Group couldn't hide their joy. They broke into "Kpokolo-kpakala" song in the local Kru dialect in praise of the rice variety, FAO and implementing partner Green Revolution Promoters (Green

They have short growth duration (about 100 days), are disease resistant (Suakoko 8 is also toxic resistant), have high yielding output potential, have good palatability and contain high protein content, thus substituting costlier protein sources.

Speaking to farmers recently during the joint visit, SDC's Regional Director of Cooperation Franziska Voegtli and FAO Representative Marc Abdala praised the farmers for the bold steps they took. "I am happy



PHOTO: FAO/JOHN T. MONIEAH

Rice farmers and SDC officials during a field visit

that have surpassed the initial quotas are Kwakeseh Rural Women's Group and Liberia Rural Women Network, with 2.5 hectares each. Buoyed by their success, farmers say they are not looking back after embracing the new varieties and farming methods promoted by the project.

"Before you came, we were crawling. Now we are about to walk and grow up. The tools, training and type of rice you gave us to plant were very good," said Priscilla Sackie, the chair of a 30-member group in

Pro). Farm Manager Emmanuel Sandolo reveals that their 1.5 hectares lowland site has a good water source that can support farming three times a year.

Meanwhile, farmers say that while they are ready to do more, they need agro-machinery like power tillers, rice mills and rice threshers. In Ganta, members of the Concern Women Farmers Group were seen threshing rice with their bare feet.

The two rice types - Suakoko 8 and NERICA L-19 - are tested lowland varieties.

about the good result in the field. Actually, after the first year, we realized that lowland farming is the future of Liberia. The SDC is interested in supporting lowland rehabilitation to help farmers start up and then it will gain momentum by itself," said Voegtli.

"It is impressive to see what you've achieved. You did not keep the inputs you received but multiplied in the interest of food security," said Abdala.

New Agenda to Empower Liberian Women



Head of WONGOSOL Marparie M. Speare speaks at The Global Open Day in Monrovia

Civil war in Liberia ended in 2003 but Liberian women continue to be subjected to discrimination and violence and their rights denied. Now, in an effort to redress their plight, women are galvanizing themselves and demanding recognition of their rights.

BY CLEMENT TULEZI

Recently, Liberian women presented a common agenda of empowerment to the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Liberia Farid Zarif following two days of deliberations at the Global Open Day forum in Monrovia.

“This is from all women of Liberia,” said Gender Minister Julia Duncan-Cassell while handing over the document. “All that is stated in this document is not by mistake, especially looking at our own gender policy and

its review, the national action plan, our programs on 1325 [the security Council resolution on women, peace and security], the on-going constitutional review, the draft domestic violence act now before the legislature, the coming 2017 elections, the drawdown of UNMIL.”

The common agenda is the output of representatives of 60 women leaders drawn from all the 15 counties. It contains recommendations on the way forward on five broad issues for women’s emancipation. Among the key issues are enhanced participation of women in governance, conflict prevention and peace-building, access to justice, national reform processes and climate change.

“Women have a big role in peace and security, but they can’t do it alone. They need empowerment, capacity building and awareness to accomplish what is listed in this document,” said Duncan-Cassell.

“I commit to work with you to develop a plan of action for implementation of all aspects of this document,” responded SRSZ Zarif. “The United Nations and others have made a contribution towards empowerment of women,” he pointed out.

“I admire your commitment to improving the lives of all Liberians. It’s clear that if your rights are excluded and violated, or if there is any type of exploitation or abuse in the society, the country will remain behind others, regardless of technological and economic progress,” said the UN envoy.

“The other is economic empowerment, that women will have the economic means to stand on their feet and argue their case. Imbalance in the distribution of power impacts on relationships between men and women.”

Sexual violence against females is currently one of the most frequently reported forms of violent crime in the country. Perpetrators of sexual violence and domestic violence are generally considerably older than their victims.

“Women in Liberia have been subjected to double violence, especially in recent history – violence that everyone else has experienced and pain brought to them by men,” said Zarif. “Everyone will have to accept

that women cannot be treated differently from men; that they deserve equal respect and recognition in the society as men. Head of the Women NGOs Secretariat in Liberia (WONGOSOL) Marpri M. Speare singled out gender-based violence as an impediment to women’s participation in national development and called for more focus at the national level. “Women’s peace and security should be treated as an important national agenda and should be allocated adequate resources,” she said. She also noted that women in Liberia have devised a strategy for better representation of women in political leadership. “We have identified potential women leaders in the community who will be encouraged to vie for positions in the 2017 elections.”

“The government wants to intensify awareness on sexual and gender-based violence to schools, churches, mosques and at community level so that men and women can openly speak against it. Currently, we are reviewing the gender policy and the

national action plan in partnership with civil society organizations,” said Minister Duncan-Cassell.

Global Open Day facilitated assessment of progress by Liberia in implementing Security Council resolution 1325 on women, peace and security. The resolution calls for increased participation of women at all levels of decision-making, protection of women and girls from sexual and gender-based violence, improving intervention strategies in the prevention of violence against women and advancement of relief and recovery measures to address international crises through a gendered lens.

“We have formed partnership with the Government of Liberia through the Ministry of Gender to accelerate implementation of the resolution,” said UN Women Liberia Country Representative Awa Ndiaye Seck.

SRSZ Zarif receives common agenda paper for women in Liberia from Gender Minister Julia Duncan-Cassell



PHOTO: UNMIL/EMMANUEL TOBEY

Nationwide Campaign Against Sexual Exploitation Kicks Off in Liberia

As the observance of the 16 Days of Activism against gender-based violence concluded, Liberia kicked off a new national campaign against Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (SEA).

Girls in a procession through the streets of Monrovia to mark the 16 days of activism against gender-based violence

BY CLEMENT TULEZI

The campaign, a partnership between Government of Liberia and the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL), will strengthen national efforts in the fight against SEA and reinforce zero-tolerance for the menace among UN personnel.

“We call on individuals, institutions, communities, boys and girls, traditional and religious leaders, politicians, civil society, educators and everyone to embrace this campaign, and actively engage in combating sexual exploitation and abuse, including becoming an anti-SEA champion,” said Minister of Gender, Children and Social Protection Julia Duncan-Cassell at the official launch in early December. “Everyone here, I believe, has pledged to stand up and fight SEA.”

The campaign theme, Together We Stand



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against Sexual Exploitation and Abuse, emphasizes the collective and joint commitment to combat SEA. There is concern of widespread occurrences of sexual exploitation and abuse in schools and communities in Liberia despite efforts by the government, civil society organizations, the UN and other international partners to address SEA.

“In order to make these efforts successful, the people, especially in the communities need to be involved in taking decisive actions to stop sexual abuse and exploitation, even before it happens,” said the Spe-

cial Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) and Coordinator of UN Operations in Liberia, Farid Zarif. “Bringing the perpetrators to justice is necessary, but making it harder for this crime to happen is the first step. This can only be possible when all of us act to ensure that no one will even dare think of committing this crime.”

“We should never give room in our classes, offices and communities for anyone to engage in such a crime. Let us speak up. It must be stopped right from the police to the judiciary,” said Zarif. “This crime is worse than murder. It kills the soul of the victim. It incapacitates, and the emotional scar results in the victim not being able to achieve what she aspired in life.”

These sentiments were echoed by Ansumana Garsah, Speaker of the National Council of Chiefs and Elders of Liberia, who called for stiffer punishment for offenders. “I think laws in this country are not strong enough. If murder attracts lifetime sentence, rape should be the same.”

“Criminals are going unpunished. This is unacceptable,” lamented Dr. Fazlul Haque from Unicef. “Please report these incidents to Unicef or any relevant government institution for appropriate action.”

The UN is committed to a zero-tolerance policy on SEA for its personnel and employs a three-pronged approach that calls for an integrated approach in prevention, enforcement and remedial action. The United Nations in Liberia has taken measures to prevent, report, and investigate SEA cases, and to impose sanctions against the perpetrators.

“The Secretary-General has strict policy of zero tolerance on SEA. No single case will be accepted within the UN. We have no patience with this kind of behavior,” said UN envoy Zarif. “The system provides very severe punishment. The UN is very committed and has taken action towards any case that has been known to us. Let us know if there is any case involving any UN official.”

“Measures are in place to ensure that the military personnel exhibit the highest code of conduct and necessary disciplinary action is taken when a complaint is substantiated,” said acting Force Commander, Brig.-Gen.

Dirk A. Faust. “The military has established a task force to deal with SEA in terms of awareness raising, refresher trainings and investigations where military personnel are involved. SEA focal points have also been appointed.”

“Sexual abuse and exploitation is abuse of human rights. Internal and external measures are in place to curb SEA within the UN police,” said UNPOL Deputy Police Commissioner Ingrid Dagestad.

“The Religious Council of Liberia recently signed a document committing to fight sexual and gender-based violence,” said Rev. Stephen Tour of World Harvest Church, Gardnerville. “Religious leaders interact with members of the society daily. This is an opportunity for them to be champions of this campaign – by preaching and teaching in our institutions against sexual exploitation and abuse in every part of Liberia.”

The leaders present led a whistle blowing session as pledge of their support and to officially mark the launch of the nationwide year-long campaign against SEA in Liberia.

UNMIL Conduct and Discipline Unit in collaboration with the Ministry of Gender is currently training Anti-SEA Champions at the county level to monitor, advocate against sexual abuse and exploitation and facilitate victims to access justice.



PHOTO: UNMIL/EMMANUEL TOBEY

The UN is committed to a zero-tolerance policy on SEA for its personnel and employs a three-pronged approach that calls for an integrated approach in prevention, enforcement and remedial action.

Campaign to Curb Teenage Pregnancy Launched in Liberia

Liberia is among the developing countries with the highest rates of adolescent pregnancy in the world.

BY ROMEO JUWLE TOGBA

According to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the current rate of teenage pregnancy in Liberia stands at 38 per cent. Many young girls in Liberia are exposed to sex by age nine, and about three out of 10 Liberian girls get pregnant before the age of 18.

“A lot of my friends have missed the opportunity to pursue education due to teenage pregnancy,” remarks 21-year-old Hannah Dorwee, a senior high school student at



Lango Lapaye High School, Kakata, Margibi County. She has witnessed at least six of her childhood friends drop out of school as they became mothers in their teens.

"I recall some bright friends my age who shared dreams of developing into progressive women," Dorwee recalls while fighting tears from her eyes. "They are now mothers with no time for school. They are now single parents and have to fend for their children every day."

The United Nations Population Fund and World Health Organization (WHO) are currently undertaking a national campaign to promote safe sex practices in a bid to stem the tide, in partnership with the Ministry of Health.

"We have waited for this for a long time. This will go a long way in helping us stay in school," noted Dorwee at the launch of the campaign in Kakata late last year. The campaign promotes the use of condoms to avoid

teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases.

Liberia's Maternal and New Born Health Ambassador Miatta Fahnbulleh has been on the road with a team of local musical artists to promote the safe sex campaign.

"It hurts that our children are dying while giving birth. Every day, four women, mainly girls between the ages of 15 and 19 fall victim to maternal mortality," says Fahnbulleh. "This is troubling when one thinks about the future of Liberia."

"We will traverse all communities in Liberia to talk to students and young people about the use of condoms to avoid unwanted pregnancy and prevent sexually transmitted diseases," says Ambassador Fahnbulleh.

"Our future professionals are likely to drop out of schools because of unwanted pregnancy. Maternal mortality is a serious threat to this generation and it must be tackled head-on."

Liberian musicians too have joined the battle. A number of them are using their vocal skills to support the safe-sex campaign. Soulfresh duo Joseph Dean and Marvelous, aka JB and Shining Man are all part of the initiative.

"For us this is a moral and national obligation to save our society from teenage pregnancy, as well as to prevent maternal mortality and sexually transmitted infections," says Joseph Dean. "We are in this together to save our society and our future."

The initial campaign has been rolled out in Kakata and Harbel in Margibi County, Buchanan in Grand Bassa County and at public schools in Montserrado County.

"The economic implications of teenage pregnancy are very visible. Children are turning into bread winners at a very early age," says Joshua Kolie, 50, a father of three in Grand Bassa County. "This is definitely a potent catalyst for poverty. We must support every effort to stop this menace."

UNFPA Assistant Country Representative Philderald Pratt says that the agency will continue to work with partners to improve the health and wellbeing of women and girls.

"Women and girls need adequate reproductive health services. We are committed to working with partners to make sexual and reproductive services available across the country," said Pratt. "Our daughters and sisters need to be in school, learning and preparing for future leadership responsibilities. And we must help them realize their dreams."

Ambassador Fahnbulleh stresses that collective action in creating early awareness on the harmful effects of teenage motherhood is a crucial step in curbing the rate at which girls drop out of school. "We need to start the awareness right from the elementary class. A clear message should be delivered to children before they become teenagers," says Fahnbulleh.

A highlight of the campaign is the maternal health promotion song which asks: What will it take to end maternal and new-born mortality? That is a question that faces Liberia's population of nearly four million.

Artists take part in the launch of campaign against teenage pregnancy in Liberia



PHOTO: UNMIL/ROMEO JUWILE TOGBA



PHOTO: UNICEF

UNICEF U-Report Coordinator J. Pascal Wilson mobilizes students to enlist as end-users

Sexual Exploitation Rife in Schools

Sex for grades in Liberian educational institutions is an open secret. Unicef in November last year tested whether it's an issue among youth in Liberia using the U-report SMS social monitoring platform. It showed that 86% of youths in Liberia consider sex for grades as a major problem in Liberian schools.

“**W**e know sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) exists in our schools. It's no longer sex for grades, but sexually transmitted grades,” Assistant Minister Fecilia Sackey Doe-Sumah of the

Ministry of Education admitted recently during the launch of the campaign against sexual exploitation and abuse in Monrovia.

Statistics from “Passing the test - the real cost of being a student”, a research into school-related gender-based violence in 2012 by a consortium of government and non-government agencies working in

BY CLEMENT TULEZI

Liberian schools shows that almost 18% of school girls reported having been asked for sex to get a better grade.

“When I was in junior high I got a lot of pressure from teachers for sex,” says Nunugirl*, 11th grade student. “I was promised grades as high as eighty, ninety and even higher, but I resisted.”

“Some people say that teachers are abusing us because we do not dress appropriately. But sex for grade is not about the way we dress. It is purely about teachers taking advantage of students who are looking for someone to help them understand hard subjects like math, chemistry and physics,” says Mardea*, a 12th grade student in Monrovia. “I recall, in 10th grade I could not understand math and chemistry and needed help. But everybody I consulted, including teachers and boys in my class and those in the community, wanted sex in exchange. I did not know where else to turn.”

The report by the consortium shows that in many cases the victims keep quiet out of shame, or fear of being blamed or stigmatized. Only 34% girl students, who had experienced gender-based violence, said that they had reported it.

“Nobody wants to talk about it because you will be targeted by the specific teacher.

I know some students find sexual relations with teachers an easier way to better grades, but many are simply forced into it by teachers,” says Sumo*, a high school senior student in Monrovia.

Sex for grades has major consequences on the lives of those suffering it, including stigma and a whole range of physical and psychological health issues such as low self-esteem, social withdrawal, risk of sexually transmitted diseases including HIV&AIDS, sterility and unwanted pregnancy. It can lead to inability to concentrate, absenteeism, dropping out or demotivation.

“Boys are usually demotivated because after studying very hard the teacher’s girlfriend will always be the brightest,” says Sumo. “She gets the highest grade.”

“We want students to be graded based on their performance,” says Fecilia Sackey Doe-Sumah. “I urge girls to speak out. Such teacher’s should be named and shamed.”

“I told my father about my problems in school. He confronted teachers who tampered with my grades,” says Nunugirl. “Girls should also confide in parents if one thinks that reporting to administration will get them into more trouble. And parents should stand up for their girls in school. Teachers fear parents,” she advises.

A Code of Conduct for Liberian Teachers and School Administrators has also been written and a curriculum is starting to be developed around gender-based violence.

“The Ministry of Education is working on the national education policy. The code also has provisions for those who fall victim. Our institutions need to be free of violence. For example, we recently set up a joint committee with schools in Sinkor, Monrovia, to address sexual abuse,” says Assistant Minister Sackey Doe-Sumah.

“Allegations mostly surface at the end of semesters and the end of the academic year,” says Alassis N. Goldore, Principal, William V.S. Tubman High School. “In some schools where I had served also as principal, I have asked teachers to resign because teacher-student sexual relation is against the teaching handbook from the Ministry of Education.

“We started this academic year with over 1,000 students. We are in the first semester, and that number is nearly half. Our investigation shows more boys are dropping out than girls, but girls often leave because of pregnancy. We have not established whether these pregnancies are related to sexual exploitation by teachers,” says principal Goldore.

“Teachers, students, school administration and government need to address this issue,” says Hawa Kettor from Potential Youth in Need for Development organization and an end-user of the U-Report platform. “Police should take action when a case is reported because it is gender violence.”

David D. Wiah of Youth Coalition for Education in Liberia organization thinks steps currently being taken are not deterrent enough. “There should be stringent measures taken against perpetrators such as dismissal of such teachers,” he recommends.

“Girls, compromising sex for grades is unacceptable. Don’t compromise for anything,” advised Gender Minister Julia Duncan-Cassell at the launch of the SEA campaign in December 2015.

** Names changed to protect the subjects’ identity.*

Assistant Minister Fecilia Sackey Doe-Sumah at the launch of the campaign against sexual exploitation and abuse



Does Liberia Need

**Annie Tengbeh, 77 Community, Paynesville**

I am a victim of Sandi. Poro and Sandi secret societies have negative effects that are enormous. Women who go through the Sandi Bush risk barrenness. Body parts that are given us by God should not be mutilated for any reason, not even culture.

**Jeremial D. Karbehl,
New Matadi Estate**

Secret societies like Poro and Sandi are not needed in Liberia. They are evil. They are highly secretive and their agenda is always hidden. They use fear, force and threat to achieve their agenda. People who go through this culture come out less productive, traumatized and hardly think with an open mind.

**Helena M. Watson, Red-Light, Paynesville**

I have not been to the Sandi Bush. My mother did everything to keep us away from the wicked culture. My family lacks education and is financially poor due to participation in the secret societies. The children need to go to school. It's a modern world with competition on ideas not secrets.

**Fatumata M. Sheriff, Clara Town**

Poro or Sandi Bush may have played a role in the past but society has changed with better ways of solving social problems. Women who go through these cultural practices suffer many health risks. Culture should not stand in the way of development and opportunities

Having Poro and Sandi secret societies is against what God requires of us. We cannot go to zoes [sic] in the night, then run to God in the morning. Secret societies are cults. Our forefathers knew little about their world.

**Moses G. Geelor, II
New Kru Town****Matenneh H. Nyei, Gardnersville**

We need to continue the practice because it has been the way of life of our parents. We must not allow formal education to change our society. We learn things that are also taught in formal education such as good behavior and respect for elderly people.



Secret Societies?



**Abdul A. Kromah,
Bomi County**

These are norms and practices that define the Liberian culture. They have huge followers. Our forefathers practiced these traditions. Women and men who have been to the Bush exhibit a high level of respect. Western countries want to impose their culture on us. We must defend the ways of our forefathers.

Sanford P. S. Wokpeh, Paynesville

The Poro and Sandi societies are gifts from God that we must cherish. That was the culture that helped our ancestors to establish Liberia. It established laws, regulations and orders.



Tina Tokpa, St. Paul Bridge

We do not need Poro or Sandi societies. For example, hundreds are cut with one instrument. Yet one cannot seek medical assistance. You are taught cannibalism and how to keep secrets of bad things. My children will never go through it.



We get nothing in return from practicing them. Poro and Sandi take away our future, rights and opportunities and create stress and stigma.

**Albertha M. Adams,
GSA Road**

Fatumata B. Sow, Jamaica Road

We need Poro and Sandi Bush. This is tradition handed down by our forefathers. What we do in the Sandi Bush and Poro distinguished us from the western world and give us identity. The world is advancing but we do not need to be like everyone else.



Gilbert N. Lewis, Sinkor

Our ancestors made no mistake establishing this culture. I am a member of Poro. I learned the essence of life and society from Poro. My university education is valuable, but what I learned during my years in Poro is invaluable. Poro and Sandi are our African education systems.



