

UNMIL FOCUS



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Elite Police Unit Takes Shape

Rice, More Rice?

Together as One

MARTTI AHTISAARI - Exclusive Interview





Message from the Special Representative of the Secretary-General

urgent security incidents, and to give operational support to the Liberia National Police.

The government of Liberia has taken commendable steps since the end of the civil war in spurring economic growth and improving public financial administration and better management of the country's natural resources. The Government of Liberia and the UN Country Team are working together to ensure the successful implementation of the Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS), the blueprint for the country's current development agenda.

Some progress has also been made in strengthening and rebuilding national security institutions. Efforts aimed at turning the Liberia National Police into a fully independent and operational institution are continuing and capacity-building initiatives are being implemented to tackle systemic logistical and management challenges facing the security sector. However, a lot still remains to be done.

Inadequate infrastructure, outdated legal frameworks, shortage of qualified personnel and other limitations in the country's judicial and correctional systems need urgent attention. Such limitations are often reflected in widespread public frustration, resulting in extra-judicial measures and mob violence. Further, gender-based violence, especially rape, continues to be disturbingly high and is often perpetrated on very young girls.

In her address to the General Assembly in September, President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf highlighted the critical role of UN peacekeepers and the international community in revitalizing the economy, rebuilding infrastructure and consolidating peace and security in

Liberia. She urged Member States to continue to support UNMIL until peace is properly consolidated in Liberia to prevent a relapse into conflict as has happened elsewhere in the world.

As Liberia emerges, slowly but steadily, as an inspirational story of how a shattered nation can put its troubled past behind and embrace a promising future, the international community must continue to assist the nation's development efforts as peace without development is unsustainable. Moreover, economic and infrastructural development is crucial for reducing the high level of unemployment, especially among the youth, who are most vulnerable and susceptible to detracting factions.

UNMIL remains committed to fulfilling our mandate to maintain peace and stability in Liberia at this critical stage in the country's peace building process. We will continue to support and boost the Government's rebuilding efforts, while enhancing the capacity of Liberians to take ownership of their nation's development.

During my recent visit to New York and Washington my message to the Council members and my interlocutors in Washington was that Liberia has come a long way in the past five years since the end of the conflict. There is, however, a lot more to be done in order to consolidate on the gains that have been achieved thus far. It is therefore not yet the time to declare victory and leave Liberia, rather it is time to redouble our collective efforts (Government of Liberia, UN and members of the international community) to ensure that the peace process becomes truly irreversible.

I briefed the UN Security Council in September on the Secretary-General's 17th progress report on Liberia, highlighting the achievements and challenges in delivering the peace dividend to Liberians, while preserving the gains made so far. I also seized the opportunity to visit Washington D.C. to meet with some US Administration Officials and members of Congress.

In late September, the Council unanimously adopted a resolution to extend the mandate of UNMIL for another year. It endorsed the Secretary-General's recommendation to reduce by 1,460 UNMIL military personnel, including troops, officers, observers, and engineering and administrative units. At the same time, it also approved the proposal to increase the number of police personnel from 605 to 845 to provide strategic advice and expertise in specialised fields, to react to

Ellen Margrethe Løj
Special Representative of the Secretary-General and
Coordinator of United Nations Operations in Liberia

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An elite special police unit is being trained to deal with violent crimes as part of strengthening the Liberia National Police (LNP). The Emergency Response Unit officers will also deal with riot control, engage in anti-crime patrol and provide assistance in major disaster situations.



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Rice, More Rice?

Despite plenty of rainfall and abundant fertile land, Liberia heavily relies on imported rice, its staple food. As the sharply rising food prices begin to bite ordinary Liberians, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) is assisting Liberian farmers to increase productivity of their rice farms.



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Together as One

As the UNHCR embarks on local integration in the West African region, Sierra Leonean refugees in Liberia have begun to live together with their local hosts. The pilot project in Low Cost village, on the outskirts of Monrovia, is becoming a model for local integration of refugees.

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Elite Police Unit Takes

By J. Wesley Washington

Amidst persisting concerns over armed robberies in Monrovia and its environs, an elite special police unit is being trained to deal with violent crimes in Liberia. Recently, the first group of 139 officers of the Emergency Response Unit (ERU) of the Liberia National Police (LNP) graduated after completing eight months of intensive classroom and physical training at the National Police Training Academy.

At the graduation ceremony, President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf reiterated her government's determination to build a professional security agency that will respect human rights while enforcing the law. She said those charged with enforcing the law must first obey the law themselves in order to win the trust and confidence of the people. "You are the ones to uphold the law; you are the ones expected to enforce the law; therefore, you yourself must obey the law so that when you stand to tell somebody that they had violated the law, you can say because I know the law and I'm

able to respect the law. I expect you as a citizen to do the same," she reminded the new graduates.

The ERU officers are trained to deal with crimes which may require the use of firearms -- specifically the arrest of armed criminals, violent crimes in progress, hostage situations and armed terrorist activities. They will also deal with riot control, engage in anti-crime patrol in crime prone areas and provide assistance in major disaster situations. By June 2009, the ERU is expected to reach its target of 500 trained personnel.



Newly graduated ERU personnel demonstrate their skills

Shape

Deputy Special Representative Jordan Ryan noted with optimism that every officer of the ERU would be ready, willing and able to provide security in a fair, professional, and just manner. “We urge you to respect the rule of law and uphold human rights,” he reiterated, adding, “You have trained long and hard, you have persevered and your commitment to serve and protect the Liberian people has been demonstrated during the last months of your training.”

Ryan pledged that the UN will work with the donor community to encourage

more support to the ERU and the LNP, noting that the UN understands the importance of training and equipment, but they are not the only ingredients for a successful future. “The successful future of the ERU depends on the success of the entire LNP which will bring a brighter future by improving security.”

The United States Chargé d’Affaires, a.i., Brooks Robinson, on behalf of her government, noted that the US is assisting in the process because security for all Liberians is essential for the country to end the cycle of violence, injustice and poverty, and move forward on the path of development. “Without peace and security, there cannot be development,” she noted.

The US Government has committed more than US\$7 million to the ERU project. It has provided specialized trainers, protective and tactical equipment, firearms and is now constructing the new ERU

of law, their conduct must follow standard operating procedures (SOPs) so that Liberians will not only feel safe and secure but also respect and appreciate them.

UNPOL Commissioner Henrik Stiernblad said he was very pleased with the progress being made by ERU personnel. He underlined that they are expected to live up to the highest professional standards, especially when it comes to use of force. “Very strict SOPs have been developed and agreed between the Justice Ministry, LNP and the UN, and the unit will be held accountable for all its actions as they will be carefully monitored by an UNPOL ERU Advisory Unit,” he said.

“Their weapons will be controlled, every weapon will be accounted for; checked in and out daily and will only be available when they are on duty. All weapons will be kept in our control until such time when we are ready to deploy the men basically only in emergency situa-

The US Government has committed more than US\$7 million to the ERU project. It has provided specialized trainers, protective and tactical equipment, firearms and is now constructing the new ERU headquarters complete with a command centre and communications capabilities near the James Spriggs Payne Airport which will be completed by July 2009.

headquarters complete with a command centre and communications capabilities near the James Spriggs Payne Airport which will be completed by July 2009. Robinson affirmed that the US will continue its strong support to rebuild Liberia’s security sector. During this fiscal year, the US will spend over US\$56 million in support of the country’s security agencies.

Also providing support is the Government of the Republic of Ireland which has so far provided 30 vehicles to the ERU and funding for police training related building projects.

Justice Minister Cllr. Philip A.Z. Banks vowed to spare no effort in ensuring that Liberians and foreign residents alike are secure in the country. “We are coming after you,” Banks warned criminals. He reminded the ERU personnel that as the first line to the justice system and the rule

tions,” says Thomas Sears, in charge of the training of the ERU.

At its full strength of 500 trained personnel, the ERU is to have its resources and capabilities available throughout Liberia by dividing the unit into three tactical operations groups - one in Monrovia and two strategically placed in the leeward counties. The exact location and timing of the deployment are yet to be decided by the Government of Liberia.

Training of ERU personnel began on 2 January 2008. Those selected are active LNP officers. Each candidate underwent a vetting process that included another background investigation by the UNPOL staff, medical and psychological screening, physical agility test and an interview process. ♦

On a Night Patrol

By Carly Learson

Terrified by a spate of armed robberies hitting the capital, Monrovia, the Liberian public has been eagerly waiting for Emergency Response Unit (ERU) to start patrolling the streets. Tonight they are stopping and searching vehicles heading to the suburbs around Paynesville and Red Light on the outskirts of Monrovia, where several armed robberies have taken place. They are accompanied by American UNPOL officers Dave Busch and Larry Mihalovich who have decades of experience working in the USA, Kosovo and Afghanistan.

Before they begin their night patrol, the ERU officers line up to be taken one by one into a secure room where the weapons are stored. Each officer is handed a pistol, while each team of five officers is also given two long-range rifles. Once they have their weapons they are taken to a separate room to collect their ammunition. By 10 p.m. the officers are ready to depart in a convoy of ERU-branded vehicles donated by the Irish Government.

A check point is set up on each side of the road, with blue flashing lights alerting drivers. The UNPOL officers advise on how to alert the cars approaching the checkpoint so they can be searched.

The drivers and passengers obey the instructions without any resistance. ERU Operations Commander Amos Williams is not surprised. "Of course people are happy to obey. They understand that we are trained, they understand that we carry weapons," he says. The officers thoroughly search each car, paying particular attention to places where potential armed robbers could hide their typical weapon of choice, a cutlass. "In the past they would not stop," Williams says.

When traffic dies down the teams set out to look for armed robbers. One patrol drives to a section of land between the beach and Monrovia city centre, notorious as a meeting point for drug dealers and users. Amongst burnt-out buildings and piled-up garbage dozens of men, many seemingly under the influence of drugs, are sleeping. The team searches the area for weapons and drugs and questions the men living in the area. Some of the inhab-

itants are sick or have wounds and infections which the UNPOL officers treat.

Some of the men resist, but most comply without question. Williams says it is about perceptions. "Everything speaks," he says. "We are being polite. We don't need to shout. We don't need to scream." He points to the weapons that are clearly visible on the outside of the brand new uniforms the men wear. "This speaks for itself."

At 6 a.m. the officers from different teams assemble at the Liberian National Police Headquarters to debrief with the UN Police and return their weapons. Without electricity they rely on flashlights and the rising sun. An UNPOL Officer from Nepal watches as each officer removes the ammunition from his gun. All weapons and ammunition are safely returned. The Commander of the ERU, Sebastian Farr, watches on. He admits there is a long way to go but thinks his officers are doing well. "The public really wants to see us out there," he says. "And so far these men are doing a fine job." ♦







Armed Forces Activ

By J. Wesley Washington

The restructured Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL) has activated the 1st Battalion of its 23rd Infantry Brigade. The fifth and final Initial Entry Training Class of 496 soldiers also has graduated, thus bringing the total strength of the Armed Forces to 2,133 officers, slightly above the initial target of 2,000. Of the total, 66 are female, 78 are college graduates and 19 are ex-AFL soldiers who were retrained and reinstated to active duty.

During the 14-year civil war, Liberia's armed forces had become factionalized, turning from protectors to predators. The 2003 Accra Comprehensive Peace Agreement that led to the end of the civil war endorsed the restructuring of the

army. With the assistance of the UN Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) and other partners, the AFL was soon demobilized and deactivated. In 2006, the restructuring commenced as the US Government contracted DynCorp and the Pacific Architectural Engineering (PAE) to train and equip the new army.

Speaking at the activation ceremony at the Barclay Training Centre (BTC) two years on, President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf said the activation of the 1st Battalion marks an historic change which represents the hopes and aspirations of the Liberian people. However, she cautioned the AFL to be lawful in order for them to win back the confidence of the public. "Lawful order is the foundation for military professionalism. You are citizen's soldiers. You must strive to maintain the confidence reposed in you by the Liberian people in

all your dealing and wherever duty may call," she reminded the soldiers.

President Sirleaf commended the soldiers and officers for the successes made so far and their patriotism to serve, and promised the government's continued support to do their job properly. She said the newly restructured army was expected to help contribute to the nation's reconstruction by engaging in civil works, outreach, clinical services and other community-based activities in addition to its core mandate to protect the country's national sovereignty and respond to natural disasters.

"I expect that by the end of 2011, depending on our revenue capacity, the strength of the AFL would have risen to more than the current 2,000 so that we have enough of a force of professionally trained military personnel," President Sirleaf said. It is expected that the



President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf inspects the first battalion of the new Army

ivate First Battalion

Engineering Company of the AFL will be developed and expanded to a full Engineering Battalion to assist in Liberia's reconstruction effort. Already plans are afoot to reactivate the National Coast Guard to protect the country's maritime shores.

The Guest of Honour, who is also the Commander of the US-Africa Command (US-AFRICOM), General William E. Ward, cautioned that the technical and tactical training they've received is only half of what makes them good soldiers. The observance of selfless-service, respect, duty, courage, integrity and loyalty is essential to the success of their unit, military and country, he added.

"Selflessness requires you to put the welfare of your nation, its army and your subordinates before your own. Respect for yourself, your counterparts and your lead-

ership is necessary. A sense of duty is a necessary quality of a soldier. An army runs on integrity. Integrity means standing up for what is right and setting the example for others around you to follow," said Gen. Ward.

For his part, Defence Minister Brownie J. Samukai stressed that the restructured army is geographically, tribally, and religiously balanced. "We are very pleased that all of the counties are represented in the AFL. There is no single county or group that dominates any segment of this present composition." Samukai praised the enormous efforts made by the US Government since the start of the AFL's restructuring process as well as other international partners. He cited the immense contributions made by ECOWAS Member States, notably, Ghana, Nigeria, Benin, and Sierra Leone, which

seconded mentors to assist in the training of the soldiers.

AFL's Command-Officer-in-Charge, Maj.-Gen. Suraj Alao Abdurrahman expressed his delight over the progress made so far; but acknowledged that more needs to be done. "There's still a lot of work to be done but I can assure you that this new AFL will not fail because of the competency, motivation and professionalism of the soldiers," he said, adding that they are the finest Liberia has to offer and they will do well in their upcoming missions.

The activation of the 1st Battalion of the restructured AFL is a boost to strengthening Liberia's security sector reform, a key benchmark linked to the phased draw-down plan of the UN Mission in Liberia. The activated battalion comprises of five companies. ♦



Weeding Out Marijuana

By Sulaiman Momodu

Liberia's marijuana traffickers are almost as ingenious as any in the trade. Stuffed in plastic containers sprinkled with palm oil, or in bags layered with charcoals, they ply *cannabis sativa*, known also by other names such as weed, grass, Indian hemp, and more. Instead of planting food crops in a country that depends heavily on importation of its staple food, rice, some parts of Liberia's fertile land are used for cultivating marijuana, obviously for better financial returns.

Marijuana has a more sinister history in the country. During its 14-year civil war known for heinous atrocities, many combatants, especially child soldiers and juveniles, are believed to have been riding high on drugs such as marijuana deliberately supplied by their superiors. Emerging from the devastating civil conflict and facing multiple challenges, effectively breaking the drug chain is an up-hill task, especially for the ill-equipped Liberia National Police (LNP) and Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA). In May this year, however, the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) launched a marijuana project in cooperation with the LNP and DEA during which thousands of marijuana plants and tons of dried marijuana were seized and

destroyed in six operations in Nimba and Bong counties.

"A lot of marijuana has been prevented from reaching the market and the users," says UN Police Commissioner Henrik Stiernblad, apparently pleased with the success of the operation. He adds that 440,000 plants and 920 kilos of dried marijuana, worth several thousands of dollars, were seized during the project. During 'stop and search' of vehicles, lots of marijuana was discovered being transported to Monrovia, some of which were packed in bags used for rice. Six single-barrel shotguns were also found during the operation and sent to court. Once seized, the drug is usually publicly burnt by the courts. The aim of the project was to map the extent of the problem of marijuana being cultivated, identify smuggling routes, and to train the local police to plan and coordinate operations, and to show how to treat people to willingly come forward with information.

During the country's civil war, smoking of "grass" became a way of life, especially among combatants. Although the guns have fallen silent, many former fighters are either reluctant or unable to quit the habit which has far-reaching health and social implications. Security personnel say there is a link between unemployment, drug use and crime. Many of those involved in violent crimes are known to be

habitual drug users.

The marijuana problem is particularly acute in Bong and Nimba counties where it is grown as cash crop. Although impressive gains have been made to curb the drug trade, mammoth challenges remain. "As you can see, there is nothing in this building: no doors, no windows, no chairs, no desks, we have no vehicles, no motorbikes, nothing," says Officer-in-Charge Col. Alphonso G. Rancy, presiding over the derelict DEA office in Gbarnga, the Bong County capital. DEA personnel say their efforts have, however, minimized the practice of people selling and smoking marijuana with impunity on the streets of Gbarnga - once a former rebel stronghold. "Now in our storage we have 5,380.4 kg of marijuana. If we have logistics, we will do more," says Col. Rancy, pointing to the bags of confiscated marijuana.



A major problem facing Liberia is lack of drug laws. “We are using the Public Health Law, so when we arrest and send people to court, they sign a 2,000 – 3,000 Liberian Dollar bail bond, get out, relocate, and continue trafficking,” says Nancy, disclosing that several times they had gone to court to report people released on bail who attack their building and pelt them with stones. “We are ready to fight against drugs but we also are not protected. We have nothing to fight back when attacked.” He reveals that they are advocating for drug trafficking crimes to be non-bailable.

DEA Officer-in-Charge in Grand Bassa County, Lt. Ericson M. Vaye, says without vehicles or motorbikes, sometimes they walk several miles or pay their own way when duty calls. County Superintendent Julia Cassell notes that they are bordered by the sea coast and Liberia does not have any coast guards. “Drugs and other criminal activities happen by the sea. There is need for the security to be beefed up and provided with logistics,” she says. Both the DEA and the LNP are under the Ministry of Justice, which itself faces many challenges.

If left unchecked, the consumption of drugs has the potential to ruin the future of many Liberian youths whose contribution is vital to the recovery of the post-war nation. DEA officials are appealing for anyone’s help to save Liberia’s future generation from becoming drug addicts. The marijuana project, which lasted about six months, ended in October and is being evaluated. In the meantime, UN peacekeepers continue to support the local police in law enforcement activities, including clamping down on drug trafficking and marijuana cultivation. ♦

Marijuana concealed in bags of cassava



LNP and UNPOL personnel in search of marijuana cultivations

I hope Liberians will maintain the peace...

The 2008 Nobel Peace Prize winner and former Finnish President, **Martti Ahtisaari**, was in Liberia on a two-day visit in late November. Staff Writer **Sulaiman Momodu** and UNMIL Radio's **Isaac Yeah** met with the Nobel laureate to discuss his visit and Liberia's challenges as the country consolidates peace after the long civil war. Excerpts:



What is the purpose of your visit to Liberia?

We have been discussing with the Liberian government for sometime on how we could cooperate in establishing a birth registry programme in the country because at the moment, as far as I have seen the statistics, less than six per cent of the births are registered. When we get that established, hopefully it will expand in years to come to the whole population. For development emphasis, it is of vital importance that government has statistics of the registry of birth. My visit is meant to start the preparatory work.

As this year's Nobel Peace Prize winner visiting a country which is emerging from a brutal 14-year civil war, what are your impressions?

It is long since I have been in Liberia. I have tried to follow the developments and I must say that I am impressed, first of all, by how people know what needs to be done, which is very important. When a country goes through a civil crisis period, many institutions are down... there is recognition that at the moment you have to somehow use stop gap measures that will attract those Liberians who have been living abroad to come back and also other nationalities to come and help in the meanwhile.

One of the reasons for your visit is to launch your pilot project, Government out of the Box. How will your project impact on the lives of ordinary Liberians?

Indirectly. It is easier to see how government plans and direct services. I hope it



will ease out planning so that services can be rendered. The good beginning is that census was carried out earlier this year. Hopefully through this exercise, the developmental inputs can be directed also to the right places.

There have been instances of the UN withdrawing peacekeepers precipitously from conflict-ridden countries and after a few years, we see the conflicts returning. How long do you think peacekeepers should remain in Liberia?

It is very difficult to put an artificial deadline. I think it is important that we should learn from the past, not only Liberia but other countries too. It is much better from everybody's point of view that the international community stays as long as the government feels comfortable that now is the time that we can take over some of the functions that the international community has been helping with. I am always on the side of caution on this. I would rather see that the international community stays a little bit longer than short. The problem is that there are other demands in other countries -- African continent and elsewhere -- but I would rather that the international community stays a bit longer.

As Liberia emerges from war, and as the UN mission gradually draws down, what would you say to Liberians is the most important thing they need to do to

sustain the peace?

From my long experience -- I have now worked for over 30 years. I started in the UN in 1977 -- I have worked with five UN Secretaries-General -- and I always say Ban Ki-moon is my last one because I am 71. I think the important thing is the cooperation between government and the international community starts producing results, people seeing the benefits of peace. Secondly, I think in any nation gone through war and military crisis, what you really need is reconciliation -- I know that it is taking place -- the people discuss among themselves. The outsiders don't have to come in. They can only facilitate the process but the work is done by locals. It is important for everyone to sit down, even those who have been in different camps during difficult times, and start discussing in all honesty: "How do we avoid this kind of situation so it cannot be repeated?" I have seen that it works, for example in Mozambique. So it requires reconciliation and that also takes time. We have seen it in South Africa. In some countries it has taken two years to find even the team that is acceptable to every group in the society. I have been following the planning in Northern Ireland. These are not only African issues and problems. I think it has to be done in every country where there has been conflict or gone through similar experience.

The Crisis Management Initiative was formed immediately after you left office as President of Finland in 2000. Was there any specific reason for coming up with this initiative?

Retired Presidents in my country get an office. I thought that it would have been much better that I try to bring young colleagues to work with me. I also have learned from my experience at the UN that there is a lot that we can do to make the UN operations more effective. We started working with the peacekeepers, civilians...and CMI was asked to mediate in Indonesia and that was the first peace agreement that I have been associated with. It did not take half a year and we have peace. The peace agreement is only the beginning. Then there is reconciliation, development activities start, and it is a long, long process.

Do you have any special message for Liberians as they rebuild their country?

I sincerely hope that Liberians will maintain the peace and work together with the President. Sometimes a country can be very lucky to get a President who has all the qualifications and background and is very determined to improve the living conditions of all Liberians. So I hope the country can move together. Unity now. I wish everybody good luck.

Thank you so much for your time.



More Liberians

By Sulaiman Momodu

As the Boeing 757 aircraft takes off on a regular UNMIL flight from the Kotoka International Airport in the Ghanaian capital, Accra, panic-stricken children on board break into screaming, amusing adult passengers. The Liberian refugee children, most of them born in exile, knew no other place as home but Ghana. Now, however, they were leaving their friends and school behind, as they returned to Liberia, the place their parents called their home. “I am happy to be going back. There is no place like home,” says Sarah, a mother of six.

Sitting rather pensively as the plane cruised towards her home country, Etta, another mother of six, says she left Liberia nine years ago. “I don’t have anything as I return, but I tell God thank you for sparing my life and my children,” says the single mother, with three of her children born in refuge sitting by her. Sarah and Etta are among thousands of refugees returning home in the ongoing repatriation of the so-called “residual caseload.”

The process started in April this year after demonstrations in Accra by the Liberian refugees demanding resettlement to a third country in Europe or America, or US\$1,000 per person to return home.

Tripartite meetings among the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Governments of Ghana and Liberia reached an agreement on repatriating the refugees to Liberia. The regular flights operated by the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) transport the refugees free of charge but the UN refugee agency pays for the expenses when the flight is chartered.

As the plane lands after a two-hour flight at Liberia’s main Roberts International Airport, they suddenly find themselves transformed from refugees to returnees. And as they step on Liberian soil, some of them, especially the children, are not impressed. They immediately draw parallels between Ghana and Liberia. “Is this the airport?” one queries.

On arrival, the returnees are welcomed back home by Liberian government officials, UNHCR and partners. They are then transported to the transit centre where they spend the night before heading to Monrovia and other destinations to start life anew.

Organized voluntary repatriation of Liberian refugees that lasted four years ended in June 2007. Most of the logistical support used for the repatriation exercise such as trucks has since been diverted to other countries facing emergencies. Deputy Executive Director of the Liberian Refugee Repatriation and Resettlement

Commission (LRRRC) John Saah Nyumah says throughout that repatriation process, the biggest operational challenge was Ghana with “only a very discouraging figure of about 5,000 refugees returning home out of a registered caseload of 35,000.”

There are also an estimated 15,000 unregistered Liberian aliens in Ghana, but Nyumah says this group will be looked into at the end of the return process. For the ongoing exercise though, as of October, more than 8,700 persons had returned from the West Africa sub-region, including 8,176 persons from Ghana, 237 from Nigeria, 170 persons from Guinea, and 102 from Sierra Leone. Return has also been facilitated from Côte d’Ivoire, The Gambia and Senegal. UNHCR Field Officer Henok Ochalla says so far the process is going smoothly, adding that they work in close collaboration with the UN mission’s Humanitarian Coordination Section, Office of the Director of Mission Support and Movement Control (MOV-CON).

Although the current return process was schedule to end in October lasting about six months, following another tripartite meeting to review the process, it has been extended to March 2009. “At the end of March 2009, there will be another review,” says Nyumah. During the large scale repatriation, refugees were given



Return

food rations but for the residual caseload, the food component is absent. “We used to take refugees to their communities of origin or choice. Now we give US\$100 per adult and \$50 for children below 18 years to facilitate their return from Monrovia,” explains the deputy LRRRC boss. The grant is given in the country of asylum and is the last thing that refugees receive before boarding the plane. Some of the refugees return home with skills acquired in exile and have been making meaningful contributions to the rebuilding process of Liberia. “I feel great that God has kept me up to this time to return to my country,” says James, who was schooling in Ghana. “We now have peace, but no one can build that peace, but us the Liberians.”

In September, a road convoy through Côte d'Ivoire, lasting about a week, was piloted. Unlike the flight which accepts only 50 kg of luggage, the road convoy enables refugees to return with 80kg luggage per person. In addition to air and land, return by sea is also being looked into. Some of the challenges of repatriation include jump-starting the reintegration programme. “For the return to be sustained, donors should assist with the reintegration programme. People need to have skills to earn a decent living. This is a security concern,” stresses Nyumah. According to UNHCR, since October 2004, more than 120,000 refugees have

voluntarily returned home but several thousands are still in exile. ♦

Together as One

By Sulaiman Momodu

Low Cost village, once a sleepy community on the outskirts of the Liberian capital, Monrovia, is gradually becoming a model for local integration of Sierra Leonean refugees who fled their country's civil war and sought asylum in Liberia. Although wars in the sister countries ended more than five years ago with UN peacekeeping missions contributing to the restoration of peace and thereby facilitating the voluntary return of refugees, thousands of Liberian and Sierra Leonean refugees still remain in asylum countries.

As the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) embarks on local integration in the West Africa region, Sierra Leonean refugees and their Liberian hosts, who had both experienced long years

of brutal conflict, have begun to live together as one community. Thirty-two new blue and white painted houses are currently being occupied by the Sierra Leoneans and their Liberian hosts as 50 others are being constructed.

Large-scale organized repatriation of Liberian refugees ended in June last year while that of Sierra Leonean refugees ended in December 2004. UNHCR and partners estimate that about 14,000 Sierra Leonean and 75,000 Liberian refugees remain in asylum in many West African countries. Reintegration Officer Henok Ochalla of UNHCR says 2,433 Sierra Leoneans have opted for local integration in Liberia with 70 per cent of them opting for naturalization.

In September this year, the first group of 16 Sierra Leonean refugee families consisting of 118 individuals moved into their new homes at Low Cost village

at a colourful ceremony. Prior to the relocation, "go and see" visits were organised wherein the refugees interacted with their future hosts. Cultural and sporting activities were also organized, and World Refugee Day on 20 June was celebrated in the community all in preparation for the relocation process.

After 18 years of nomadic life as a refugee, 75-year-old Kadaka now considers Liberia his home. "Wherever I can live in peace is my home," he says in fluent Liberian English, happy that he now has a roof over his head and his family. "We have a good relationship with our hosts. We thank God for everything," says Mawata, his wife, who is engaged in petty business.

The 32 buildings occupied by Kadaka and others is a pilot project. The houses were built by the Liberian govern-



ment in the 1980s but were vandalised and abandoned during the country's civil war. Sixteen of the houses were allocated to the host beneficiaries who were identified based on a community vulnerability analysis. UNHCR through its partner, the Christian Children Fund (CCF) is implementing various training programmes for

the 50 under construction at Low Cost village, another 60 are being constructed at Memeh Town on the Monrovia – Tubmanburg highway. “By December, we believe we would have completed all the 110 houses. Twenty of them will go to the host communities and 90 to the refugees,” says Ochalla. In Low Cost village, the

S. Stephen is all smiles for what is going on in his community. The father of eight, who is a beneficiary of the renovated houses, says the ongoing construction work is giving jobs to both skilled and unskilled labourers hired from among the host community and the integrated refugees. “Right now the community is very engaged,” he says. But all has not been smooth sailing with the integration process though. In Memeh Town, some institutions claimed ownership of parts of the land allocated for construction work, an issue that is being addressed by the Liberian Ministry of Land and Mines, Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Office of the Vice President.

In Low Cost village, the construction of a multi-purpose community centre is nearing completion. It will include a meeting hall, three classrooms for kindergarten, reading room for children, health clinic to treat minor ailments, a children's playground, among other facilities.

the former refugees and their hosts. They have been organized into four cooperative groups to undertake agricultural activities. They have also benefited from a business training workshop and each of the 16 refugee families integrated and vulnerable members of the host community has received US\$250 to start small businesses. Added to the 32 renovated houses and

construction of a multi-purpose community centre is nearing completion. It will include a meeting hall, three classrooms for kindergarten, reading room for children, health clinic to treat minor ailments, a children's playground, among other facilities.

Community Development Chairman Tamba

While local integration picks up in Liberia, Liberians in Sierra Leone are also going through the same process. Both Sierra Leoneans and Liberians are also integrating in Côte d'Ivoire, The Gambia, Nigeria and Guinea. Such local integration of refugees will contribute to regional peace and stability, experts believe. ♦



A New Chance

By Carly Learson

At Klay Town School, grade one students are arriving for the start of the school day. Dressed in blue tunics and white shirts, they run and shout, oblivious to the heat of the sun that burns even at 8 in the morning. Some queue to get a drink from a new hand pump, thirsty after the long walk to school.

A whole generation of Liberia's children and youngsters lost out on education due to the civil war that lasted 14 years. Most have had their schooling interrupted at some point, while many have never had any formal education at all. Now that

peace has arrived, these children are returning to school, anxious to learn after years of only dreaming about getting an education. In many schools it is not uncommon to see a grade one class with twelve-year-olds sitting beside their five-year-old classmates.

Among the 800 children at Klay Town School are several hundred who are part of a new programme run by UNICEF and the Ministry of Education designed to encourage older students who want to learn. This is their best chance to get some education. The Accelerated Learning Programme offers older children the opportunity to complete their primary education in three years, rather than the regular six.

Today is a special day for the Klay Town ALP class – the students are each getting a new UNICEF backpack with storybooks, writing paper and pencils inside. Some of the children rip open the plastic wrapping and dig straight into the contents, while others are very careful to keep the plastic intact to protect their new possession. Without further ado the teacher starts the class reading one of their new books together.

The programme is being run at schools in most counties in Liberia, with specially trained teachers engaging students ranging from 7 to 20 years. Klay Town School has seven special ALP teachers for grades one to five. The ALP students are divided into



two sessions, with younger children attending in the mornings and older ones in the afternoon.

The teachers are taught to focus on those aspects of the curriculum which will give older students the best practical ways to advance more quickly through the grades – skills like reading, writing and mathematics. With these skills the children will be better able to comprehend the more difficult work when they reach junior high level.

County Education Officer Amos Folley says the programme is working well at the school. “Somebody who is 12 will now be more likely to be ready to start junior high,” he says. “Before they would only be up to fourth grade.” He says the ALP programme makes it much easier to retain students. “The older children would feel embarrassed about being in classes with small children. This way they can move more quickly, meaning they stay interested and are more likely to keep

going with their education.”

Bendu Boakai is one of the students who began her schooling this year in the Accelerated Learning Programme. She is 11 years old, and is starting second grade. She spent many years dreaming of going to school but was never able to. “I wanted to cry,” she says. Now she is dreaming of not just finishing school, but going on to university. She loves all her classes, but her favourite is spelling.

The programme has been an overwhelming success in the school. Quaye D. Russell teaches 6th to 9th grade classes and he says he can generally see no difference between the ALP students and those who have gone through the regular primary school programme. “They do very well,” he says. “The students are very motivated to learn.”

Yet, challenges abound. Russell estimates that less than 5 per cent of the students he teaches go on to finish high school. The closest high schools are in

Tubmanburg, a half hour drive away, or Monrovia, even further. The lack of public transport makes it difficult for many students to get to school regularly. Social and family pressures to marry or start earning money also weigh on the minds of students. A shortage of qualified teachers is also a major challenge.

But UNICEF is supporting the government by providing training and incentive pay to teachers who participate in the Accelerated Learning Programme, and working with the Government to ensure salaries are paid on time and directly to teachers so that they don’t need to take time off work to go and collect their salaries.

In a country where the challenges to the education system can be overwhelming, the Accelerated Learning Programme is proving a valuable investment in the future of Liberia’s children. ♦



Liberians are more conscious of their rights...

As Liberia recovers from 14 years of civil war, entrenching the Rule of Law in the country has been a major priority of the United Nations Mission in Liberia. In an interview with Editor Mathew Elavanalthoduka, the Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General (Rule of Law), Henrietta Mensa-Bonsu, discusses Liberia's continuing transformation from a lawless society to one that adheres to the Rule of Law.

How would you describe Liberia's progress in the area of the Rule of Law during the last one year?

The Rule of Law sector has always been identified as the weakest part of our reconstruction efforts. This has meant engaging constantly with the Minister of Justice and with the Chief Justice or with the Ministry and the Judiciary. We have actively supported the Poverty Reduction Strategy pillar of Governance and Rule of Law to help the national partners to set out their immediate priorities as well as longer term rebuilding of the justice sector. A retreat of the Rule of Law sector in September brought the national partners together, leading to enhanced collaboration between the Judiciary and the Ministry of Justice.

A major challenge facing the Judiciary is capacity building. So we have enabled the Judiciary to launch a Judicial Training Institute which will train not just those on the job but also their potential recruits.

Rebuilding the Liberia National Police was always a major task of UNPOL. Unlike in the case of the Armed Forces, there was no assessed contribution devoted to rebuilding the police. This has meant that unless one has a donor to take on the responsibility of funding, whatever programmes have been drawn up do not happen. Under the direction of SRSJ Løj, an initiative has been launched to develop a strategic plan for the LNP and it's progressing quite well. We've had support from the Office of Rule of Law and

Security Institutions in New York. They've brought down a strategic planning team to help develop an implementation plan.

Personal security still remains a major concern among many Liberians and the LNP is yet to evolve as a professional outfit and stand on its own feet. What needs to be done to get LNP become fully professional and capable of offering a sense of security to the population?

The restructured LNP is only about five years old. There's the issue of maturity that faces every such new institution. It was important first to recruit enough people and train them and make the force operational. Before recruitment, these people had to be vetted, but we have since had a lot of complaints about the quality of the recruits. Admittedly, at the time of the original recruitment exercise there was still a lot of fear in the system and not many people challenged those who had stepped forward to be recruited. A recertification process is soon to be undertaken and this will again involve the public and so in the much improved security situation it is hoped that the public will assist in ensuring that the exercise will achieve what the original vetting may not have achieved. We have also now put in measures to make sure that people who are trained in the force are disciplined.

The Emergency Response Unit (ERU), which is an armed unit in the LNP, is also under training. Already 139 persons have

graduated and been deployed out of a target of 500. We do have challenges in recruiting women into it because apart from its higher standards of physical fitness and others, personnel in the ERU can only be recruited from the LNP, which has itself not achieved the 20 percent female benchmark despite arrangements for special recruitment of females.

We are conscious of the fact that it's from the police operations that the average person can feel a sense of security and so



we are working on enhancing people's sense of insecurity.

Many people do not still have faith in the Judiciary. That leads to mob violence, reconciling issues outside the realm of courts. For example, a rapist pays LD\$200 to the victim's father and goes scot-free. What are the things that the Judiciary needs to do to regain confidence among the population?

These are not just problems of the Judiciary but the judicial sector in general coupled with the effect of the civil war. Cases can be heard by the Judiciary only when they are put forward by the State. So we have had to help strengthen County Attorney offices and provide Defence counsel to enable trials to take place.

Currently ten new County Attorneys, who are all law graduates, have been appointed by the Ministry of Justice. Defence Counsels are also being appointed by the Judiciary. Before this time, there were many County Attorneys who did not have law degrees, and a few did not even have high school diplomas. We are helping to train the new County Attorneys and we should see some improvement soon.

The justice system is progressively

being rehabilitated and it is important for the public to be aware that judicial options now exist for them to use. The challenge is to attempt to change habits formed in 14 years of civil unrest within five years. We are hopeful that working with the Judiciary to develop its strategic plan and supporting the Ministry of Justice to develop a similar plan, a reversal of the fortunes of the Justice sector will occur.

We are also supporting the restructuring of the Corrections sector. Many existing Corrections facilities are warehouses or some other structure that was converted. UNDP is involved in a project with the Ministry of Justice to assess these facilities to determine their rehabilitation needs.

We are trying to use Quick Impact Projects (QIPs) funds to build detention centers particularly in the areas which have none, like Grand Kru, Rivercess, etc. The money available from QIPs is not enough to build a fully fledged correctional institution but we've been lucky to link up with a trust fund that is supporting us to build a correctional facility in River Gee. We also worked with the Government of Liberia on operationalizing the Palace of Corrections in Zwedru, which is now housing convicted persons from various prisons.

Rape happens to be the most frequently committed serious crime in Liberia. Do you think this high number is linked to the legacy of civil war? What can we do to reduce the incidents of rape which in many cases involve very young children?

We launched an anti-rape campaign in all of the 15 counties in conjunction with the Ministries of Gender and Justice. We are currently working on the second phase of the campaign. We formed the UN Response to Rape Group within the Mission and the Country Team, which was the moving spirit behind the anti-rape campaign. This group also has commissioned a research on rape to establish why rape incidents are high so that we could tailor the preventive measures appropriately. The data collection is over, data analysis is going on, and a preliminary report is expected in about four weeks.

We are also part of the sexual and gender-based violence project between the

Government of Liberia and the UN aimed at harmonizing all activities to counter sexual and gender-based violence. We are assisting the Ministry of Justice to establish a sexual and gender-based violence unit to speed up prosecutions. We also participated in a Ministry of Justice initiative to standardize the medical forms that have to be filled by medical personnel who first receive rape victims so that the report that they write can be tendered as evidence in court.

In the area of human rights, what progress has Liberia achieved since the end of civil war five years ago?

Once a war ends, people have to be re-educated on proper ways to co-exist in times when there is civil law and order. The Human Rights and Protection Section (HRPS) of the Mission has been very instrumental in doing this, not just by monitoring the human rights situation and bringing to the attention of those who can affect the situation but also by impacting the human rights culture through various programmes. It has set up human rights clubs in schools in order to educate them on human rights. No doubt, Liberians are more conscious of their rights now.

HRPS has also been working very closely with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to shape it and to get it to deliver on its mandate. TRC's public hearings have helped to alert the public as to how low people sank during the civil crisis and how unacceptable certain practices are which must be stopped.

HRPS has also embarked on a campaign to ensure that some harmful traditional practices are discontinued, in particular trial by ordeal and lynching based on allegations of witchcraft. There have been a number of convictions and not too long ago some of those were pardoned by the President on condition that they would do community service. HRPS has taken this up and has devised a programme for them to be advocates against the practice that sent them to prison. So the Human Rights and Protection Section is doing its bit not just to create public awareness but also to shape the culture of human rights for the present and for the future.



WFP Feeds Half a Million Children Daily

By Carly Learson

For years many Liberians have relied on food from the World Food Programme as a crucial backup. However, as the country moved out of conflict a major part of the WFP work in Liberia was focused on its school feeding programme. And with Liberia slowly getting back on its feet, WFP scaled back its feeding programme in capital Monrovia to focus on rural areas where food was scarce. But with the sudden surge in global food prices WFP recently announced that it would be bringing the school feeding programme back to Monrovia. More than half a million children across Liberia now have access to daily meals provided by the agency.

One of those schools is Imam Abdullah A Tunis Institute in Vai Town, Bushrod Island. Ibrahim F. Pusah, who manages the school, says he is relieved that the school feeding programme is starting again. "The majority of children are hungry when they come to school," he says. At around 8 a.m. the children start arriving. Even the tiniest girls wear brilliant white scarves on their heads, matching the shirts of the boys as they run around in the earthy courtyard of the school. It takes a full five minutes of yelling by the principal before the children quiet down and hurry off to their classrooms. For two hours they will work in Arabic, learning to read, write and speak. At the top of their lungs 400 children read from different sections of the Koran, the voices escaping from the twelve classrooms and echoing through the halls and around the courtyard.

While they are learning, a group of six of the children's mothers prepares the meal. Huge sacks of bulgur wheat have been donated by the Saudi Arabian

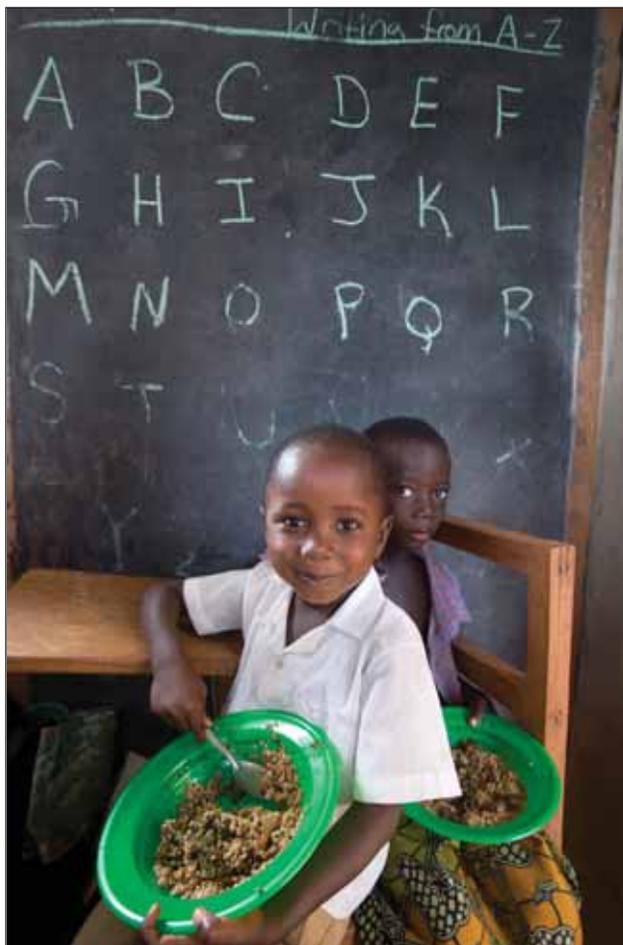
Government, and the slightly fermented smell of the wheat fills the courtyard as the grains are boiled in a huge pot. In a second pot the women prepare a sweet-smelling stew made from chicken and fish with onions, beans, Liberian peppers and palm oil. The pots sit above burning coals on a traditional Liberian stove. The women take turns stirring the pots and getting the

space on the ground to enjoy their food. There is also enough food for some of the local children who have been lingering shyly at the entrance to the school.

The school feeding programme has been a great success in rural areas of Liberia as well. In November Special Representative Ellen Margrethe Løj visited a school in Gbarnga, Bong County, which was chosen as a Quick Impact Project. The school is running an agricultural programme to teach the children how to grow food. "It's very important that the children learn early to farm the land," SRSG Løj said. "There is no reason to import all this food." She watched as the mothers cooked bulgur wheat and potato greens for the hungry children. They line up with their green plastic bowls before taking their food back to their desks. Saysay Tomah finishes his food in record time. "The food is fine," he says, before running to get second helping.

A recent Government of Liberia, UN and NGO assessment found that surging food prices have a greater impact in areas where there are high rates of poverty, and that programmes like school feeding can have a huge impact in preventing malnutrition. In areas where school enrolment is low, such as the south-eastern counties of Liberia, school feeding programmes can be the major attraction in attending school. In addition to daily meals older girls are given take-home food rations.

WFP West Africa Regional Director Thomas Yanga says the agency is focused on helping the Government of Liberia to get all children enrolled in school. "As the Government of Liberia responds to the impact of high food prices WFP remains in the forefront of efforts to lessen this impact, and to help children in the face of food insecurity," he said. ♦



Happy to be in school

bowls and cutlery ready.

Hadya Tunis is one of the cooks. She travels from Duala each day with her daughter to cook the food. She likes to stick to classic Liberian food – potato greens, cassava leaf, palm butter. "We work hard," she says. "We need many things, like spoons, dishes and pans. But we are happy to have the food here again. For many children this is their first meal of the day." At ten thirty the rush begins as the children take their bowls and find a



President John Kufuor inspects a guard of honour by UNMIL peacekeepers

Ghanaian President Pledges More Support

By Sulaiman Momodu

Ghanaian President John Agyekum Kufuor has assured senior United Nations personnel of his country's continued support to Liberia. "Ghana will provide whatever support it can to Liberia and we will do so, in the name of humanity, because that is what any Government should do," he said at a meeting with the UN officials at the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) headquarters in Monrovia on the sidelines of his State visit to Liberia in November.

During his two-day visit at the end of his second and final four-year term as President, the Ghanaian leader pointed out that the UN could learn from what transpired in Liberia to help the international

community tackle emerging conflicts in other parts of the world. "Besides political conflict, emerging global phenomena, such as climate change with its consequent cataclysms, have forced even the most powerful nations to accept that they are no longer insular islands," he said, alluding to the interdependence of the world's nations. "The UN can help make global governance work and it has shown this by providing leadership to trouble spots in the world," said Kufuor, who earlier inspected a guard of honour at UNMIL headquarters.

Ghanaian peacekeepers have played a crucial role during various stages of Liberia's civil conflict with a number of them sacrificing their lives in the cause of peace in Liberia. In 2003, Ghanaian peacekeepers were among the first to arrive in Liberia to bring the carnage to a stop and prepare the way for the deployment of the

UN mission. The West African nation also hosted the final peace conference in Accra that led to the Comprehensive Peace Agreement and provided support to the electoral process through provision of ballot papers. Currently, members of the Ghanaian military, police and civilians are contributing to Liberia's peace and recovery efforts. More than 700 members of the Ghanaian contingent are deployed in Grand Bassa and River Cess Counties with a mandate that also includes ensuring rule of law in the flashpoint Liberia Agriculture Company rubber plantation. "We never fail to acknowledge this immense contribution made by Ghanaians for the peace that Liberians enjoy today," said Deputy Special Representative for Recovery and Governance Jordan Ryan, expressing gratitude to the President and his Government for the support to the Liberian peace process and to peacekeeping in general.

Noting that the UN mission has come a long way, Ryan noted that many challenges lie ahead. "There are concerns over crime, especially armed robberies and rape – these will not be solved overnight...as UNMIL embarks on the next phase of its drawdown, the support of your Government is even more crucial in terms of Liberia's peaceful transition and development," he said.

"The greatest needs lie in strengthening Liberia's rule of law institutions and restoring public confidence in the justice system," said Ghanaian-born Deputy Special Representative for Rule of Law, Henrietta Mensa-Bonsu. She acknowledged Ghana's support to Liberia in diverse ways and highlighted trainings and meetings held in Ghana, including the recent UN-facilitated Judiciary Strategic Planning Meeting for the Liberian Judiciary in Accra. Mensa-Bonsu reiterated that the close collaboration between UN and the Ghanaian and international partners, as well as the Government and the people of Liberia, "is yielding a peace dividend."

During his visit, Kufuor received Liberia's highest national award for the role he played in restoring peace, democracy and stability in Liberia. Ghana is currently hosting the highest number of about 20,000 registered Liberian refugees in the West Africa sub-region. ♦

Rice, more rice?

By Carly Learson

Every week ships enter Monrovia's Freeport laden with sacks of Chinese rice. In 2007 Liberia produced 40 per cent of the rice its people needed. Why, when the country has so much rainfall, more than nearly any other in the world, good conditions and fertile land, is there such a dependence on imported rice? This question has become the focus of UN agencies, including FAO, WFP and UNICEF, as they try to help the government of Liberia address the issue of food security.

Surveys show that annual consumption of rice in Liberia is around 240 kg per person. For every hectare of land planted, an average of 815 kg of rice is produced. For upland areas the yield is even lower. The average size of a plot of land, which is farmed either by one family or collectively, is 0.9 hectares, enough to feed only three people. Thus, at current levels, there are few reasons for a family to start planting rice when it is cheaper to buy Chinese rice while growing other crops to sell.

Dependence on imported rice has made Liberia vulnerable to rising food prices. But when it doesn't make sense for

an individual farmer to grow rice, self-sufficiency on a national scale becomes difficult to achieve.

This is not a new phenomenon. President Tolbert was faced with a similar market dynamic. Almost every Liberian was buying imported rice while farmers were planting other crops which were subsidised by the Government to encourage exporting. The Government recognised the vulnerability of its position and intervened by applying huge import tariffs, effectively doubling the price of imported rice, in the hope that this would make it more viable for poor farmers to start growing their own rice rather than buying it. But the decision simply meant rural people couldn't afford to eat, a consequence that led to the 1979 rice riots believed to be the precursor of the civil war.

Now the sharply rising food prices are making many Liberians unable to afford enough rice for their families. Since December 2007 rice prices have risen by 60 per cent internationally. Given the failure of market intervention to force people onto the land, the Government, in collaboration with UN agencies, is instead focusing on increasing productivity. Liberia's yields are incredibly low at less than one tonne per hectare. The average yield in

sub-Saharan Africa is 1,500 kg per hectare. Worldwide, average production is 3,500 kg per hectare.

Chinese rice is cheap because it is efficiently produced. Liberian rice is grown in some of the most labour-intensive, inefficient environments in the world. Chinese farmers have state-of-the-art equipment such as tractors, processing mills and harvesting machines, so that rice can quickly be planted, harvested and processed. Processed rice is transported on high-grade roads through an established logistics chain to an efficient port where it is shipped in bulk. In Liberia most rice farmers don't have a road connected to their farm, they have problems with pests and work is mostly done by hand. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) is now working on implementing sustainable and effective programmes to increase the productivity of Liberian rice farms.

Rebecca Sumo and Lydia Flomo are two women who are trying to make rice farming work for them. Their 75-acre farm in Careysburg was bought for them by Oxfam. The rice is at harvesting stage, so they work by cutting the long stalks with a small knife.

Sumo, Flomo and the other women used to grow rice in Lofa before the war. When they fled as refugees they lost all their property. Now living in Monrovia, they got together to form the Gbarlin Women's Cooperative, and approached Oxfam to get help to start their farm again. "We started when we were in the refugee camp," Lydia says. "We begin to cry around for help. Farming is hard work – it takes a woman to do this."

Back in Lofa they used to thresh the rice manually, using their feet to separate the grain from the husk. On their new farm FAO has provided two threshing machines, built by local blacksmiths. For a farm like this the machines are ideal. There is no access to the farm by road, so tractors and large scale threshing machinery is impossible to transport. When the rice is packed into the 50kg sacks they will



carry it back to the road on their heads. The women at the Careysburg farm are dealing with huge challenges to make rice farming work.

Further into the country's interior the problems only increase. The poor state of the roads makes transport prohibitively expensive, so rice is generally grown for subsistence only. Even then the pre- and post-harvest losses add a huge burden. Pre-harvest losses include crops being destroyed by animals such as grass cutters (groundhogs), which eat the entire crop, and birds, which attack the grains. The main culprits of post-harvest losses are rats, which find their way into huts where the grains are stored. Estimates put average losses from rats at up to 19 per cent of the total harvest.

FAO has developed cheap and effective ways to tackle pre- and post-harvest losses. One farm that benefits from FAO belongs to Tamil Gortor. Until recently birds had been regularly attacking the farm located in the jungles of Bong County. Today however, the farm is eerily silent. That's because FAO has provided them with 352 metres of reflective tape, which have been strung across the crops. The tape, shimmering red and silver, seems to instil mortal fear in the birds, keeping them away from the farm since Tamil strung it up. A fence has been built round the perimeter and trap wires, also from FAO, installed to catch the groundhogs. The harvested rice is now stored in a structure up on stilts, with zinc sheets attached to the legs. The zinc is incredibly slippery, and rats cannot get past it to reach the rice. With tape costing just US\$4 per roll, FAO has been able to help 81,000 farmers across Liberia through the provision of pest management inputs and training.

"Already we have seen higher yields where the zinc, reflective tape and trap wires are being used," says J. Kanie Merfee from FAO. "It's great to be able to make such a difference for so little cost." Tamil is optimistic about her farm. "The help has been welcome," she says. With the help of FAO, Tamil and others like her may be able to move beyond subsistence farming and start growing rice for sale. And that may lead to fewer ships with Chinese rice docking at Monrovia's Freeport. ♦



By J. Wesley Washington

Mark Monjolo, originally from Gbarzon District in Grand Gedeh County, is an ex-combatant who fought for two different rebel factions during the civil war. As the war came to an end in 2003, Monjolo and several hundred other ex-combatants like him ended up at the Guthrie Rubber Plantation, deprived of any income and no skills to earn a living. All they wanted was to pillage the government-owned plantation, spread over 300,000 acres across the north-western counties of Bomi and Grand Cape Mount, as their new way of life.

Guthrie soon became a hotbed of economic crimes and human rights violations. Former combatants lay siege to the plantation, tapping and selling latex and terrorizing the local community. Opened in 1957, the plantation was last managed by a Malaysian company, Guthrie Rubber Company, from 1981 to 2000.

A national Disarmament, Demobilization, Rehabilitation and Reintegration (DDRR) programme launched by the United Nations Mission in Liberia soon after the end of the war successfully reintegrated tens of thousands of ex-combatants. However, a research conducted in 2006 by the UK-based NGO, Landmine Action, revealed that a sizeable number of combatants occupying Guthrie, having handed in their weapons to their commanders, were excluded from the DDRR process because their weapons had been reallocated elsewhere.

Though the negotiation process was long and tedious, with support from the UN Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) and other UN agencies, the government of Liberia managed to convince a majority of the hard-core former combatants to leave Guthrie while it gradually restored State authority around the plantation, after being occupied and looted for nearly three years.

While gradually curbing illegal tapping, the rehabilitation and reintegration component of the Government-UN Joint Rubber Plantation Task Force commenced a screening process to verify the eligibility of ex-combatants for the official reintegration programmes in formal education or



From Guthrie

vocational training. Over 350 other ex-combatants of Guthrie, who were not qualified for the formal rehabilitation programmes, were selected to receive six-month vocational skills training after concerns were raised that such individuals were vulnerable to militia re-recruitment in Côte d'Ivoire or Guinea, or were likely to pose a public order and criminal threat within Liberia.

Working in collaboration with the Ministry of Agriculture, Landmine Action designed and implemented the Tumutu Agricultural Training Programme (TATP). In early September 2008, 357 ex-combatants and a number of community members were proud graduates of a six-month agriculture and social integration training. The training provided graduates with livelihood skills in five agricultural areas: rub-

ber culture, rice, vegetable, tree crop (palm oil) production and animal husbandry. In addition, the graduates received formal and informal reintegration training, delivered by ex-combatants who have themselves been reintegrated. They also received business, literacy and numeracy training to enable them to perform competitively in the agricultural economy.

At the graduation, a proxy for Vice





Ex-combatants tending their vegetable farm

rie to Sinoe

President Joseph Boakai reminded them that they should take advantage of Liberia's vast agricultural resources and chart a bright future for themselves. He urged them to give agriculture a new image by pursuing it as a business. "Go back to your various communities and use your newly acquired knowledge to face the challenges of Liberia's recovery and reconstruction, especially in the area of

Graduates from the agricultural training programme



food security," the graduates were advised.

Each graduate received a start up kit to facilitate their reintegration process in their original community. In addition, the Ministry of Agriculture facilitated the allocation of a piece of land to each graduate, providing an incentive to invest in the development of their communities. The project recognises the centrality of community in the reintegration process and includes active measures to encourage community participation. Landmine Action is expected to do a follow-up on each graduate and based on their progress will provide a second package.

"I feel so proud going back to my community with skills that can feed me and my family for life. I will take advantage of what I've learned and share with others," said a proud Monjolo. "We were in that

bush (Guthrie) destroying ourselves, but thank God our brothers came and rescued our lives."

Christine Lang, the Country Manager of Landmine Action-Liberia, noted that although the TATP was originally designed as a security sector reform project aiding the peaceful dismantling and reintegration of ex-combatants, it has also facilitated other highly desirable developments. She highlighted the creation of a specifically designed training curriculum which has involved a partnership approach and engagement with various stakeholders such as the Agriculture Ministry, the Liberian Rubber Development Authority (LRDA), Central Agricultural Research Institute (CARI), community leaders and the ex-combatant trainees themselves. Working at a local level has also ensured community participation and ownership.

Lang notes that while Landmine Action's projects are aimed at addressing short and medium term needs and provision gaps as a method of ensuring continued peace and stability, its specific approach links directly to Liberia's long term economic strategy. "By producing highly skilled agricultural graduates, Landmine Action's programmatic approach will assist in creating a self sustaining and highly robust agricultural economy in Liberia."

The Sinoe Rubber Plantations (SRP) in Sinoe County is another hotbed of economic crimes and human rights violations. Following the successful intervention in the Guthrie Rubber Plantation and the TATP, Landmine Action will begin the construction of its second training site in Sinoe County in January 2009.

The Sinoe Agricultural Training Project (SATP), as it will be known, is a response to a request by the Ministry of Agriculture and UNMIL, and will include detailed research into the organization and demographics of the Sinoe Rubber Plantation to ensure an appropriate response to illegal activities and community concerns. The SATP intends to deliver the same standard of focused agricultural training that has been successful in TATP and will be designed to maximise the development impact upon the district in which the training is to take place. ♦

Battling for Survival

By Carly Learson

At the Sasstown Clinic, five-month-old baby Fatah clings on to her mother as she receives a vaccine that could save her life. Unlike Fatah, her mother grew up in very different times, and she hopes her little daughter will never experience the kind of brutality she witnessed as a child.

The civil war is over and the young Liberian children of today are spared the nightmares of their parents. Yet, Liberia's children face an uphill task as the legacy of the civil war -- such as poverty, lack of medical care, dilapidated infrastructure and hunger -- continues to haunt them. For every thousand babies born in Liberia, 157 won't live to see their first birthday. More than a quarter won't reach five years.

Children in Liberia are dying every day from illnesses that are easily prevented in other parts of the world. One of the biggest killers is measles -- a disease easily eliminated through routine immunisation. But without effective refrigeration and transport, vaccination programmes are far more difficult in Liberia than elsewhere. However, the UN's agency for children, UNICEF, is taking up the battle by rolling out an extensive immunisation programme using local expertise to give Liberia's children protection from measles and other diseases.

Sasstown Clinic is a small, freshly painted building behind the local marketplace on a quiet section of the Monrovia - Tubmanburg road. Inside are three private consultation rooms, a storeroom and a waiting room. Every Thursday new mothers and mothers-to-be leave their homes early in the morning to make the journey

to the clinic. They gather in the waiting room on chairs arranged in rows, watching short educational videos shown on a television at the front of the room. By 8 a.m. the chairs are all taken by mothers holding their babies on their laps. Children find spots on the ground or run around outside the building. Newcomers find a shady spot under a tree after they have registered their names with the nurse.

There is just one doctor at the clinic to perform the vaccination. He sits in a cramped corner of the waiting room, his supplies on a small table next to him. One by one he calls the women to him so he can quickly but gently slide the tiny needle, filled with measles, diphtheria and penta vaccines, into the chubby arms of their babies. The babies are sleepy after the long wait, and the unexpected jab puts them in a foul mood as they leave the clinic. The vaccines are stored in a refrigerator powered by kerosene which is transported from Monrovia regularly. There are plans to install solar panels to provide a cheap and reliable energy source to keep the vaccines at their required temperature. A deviation of just 2 degrees can make the vaccine unusable.

The program is managed by Shirley Kialen, an experienced nurse who moved from Buchanan in Eastern Liberia a year ago. She has been overwhelmed by the number of women who are desperate to get their children vaccinated. "We have up to 75 patients each day. There are many children around here who were not immunised as children and now their parents are bringing them so they can catch up." The clinic also specialises in anti-natal care, and administers treatment for malaria.

One in five deaths of children under five in Africa can be attributed to malaria. For those children who survive the endem-



val

The immunization programme is a huge step towards improving the survival chances of Liberia's children. The challenges are immense, and such programmes require extensive long-term investment. But as laughing mothers strap their weeping, freshly vaccinated children to their backs for the walk home, the glow on their faces is unmistakable.



ic disease there are complications, most prevalently malnutrition as a result of vomiting, anaemia, and loss of appetite. Liberia is one of the rainiest countries in the world. During the rainy season many homes become islands surrounded by water. The warm, stagnant water where children play and mothers wash clothing offers malaria-carrying mosquitoes a perfect environment to breed. Malaria affects most countries in sub-Saharan Africa. However in Liberia the combination of low standards of housing and lack of access to treatment result in high mortalities.

At Sasstown Clinic, UNICEF, in conjunction with the Global Fund, is providing treated mosquito nets as well as preventative drugs, especially for pregnant women. Kialen says the clinic is providing much needed help in tackling the two biggest threats to young children. "The relationship with UNICEF is very strong," she says. The clinic functions extremely efficiently given its limitations – the women are attending in droves, holding onto the cards the doctor gives them which outline the immunization schedule for their children.

The immunization programme is a huge step towards improving the survival chances of Liberia's children. The challenges are immense, and such programmes require extensive long-term investment. But as laughing mothers strap their weeping, freshly vaccinated children to their backs for the walk home, the glow on their faces is unmistakable. The fear of losing one's child is very real here, but every woman leaving the clinic knows she has greatly improved her child's chance of survival. ♦



It's not about us

By Sulaiman Momodu

For over eight years since he completed high school, John could not stop wondering about what the future holds for him. With a wife and two children to support, the 35-year-old has no regular source of income. For thousands of Liberians like John, eking out a living is a daily struggle.

“When a man lives from hand-to-mouth, even his own children will not be proud to call him father,” John says, hoping for better days as he recently graduated as a carpenter after attending a vocational training course conducted by United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL).

“With the skills I have acquired, I will no more go about begging in order to feed my family.”

Five years after the restoration of peace, UNMIL’s focus has shifted from winning hearts and minds to capacity building. “Liberians must and should be in the driver’s seat,” says Special Representative Ellen Margrethe Løj, stressing the need to involve Liberians more in all aspects of work in order to strengthen their capacity as the UN mission gradually draws down.

Since 2003, UN military personnel have been supporting relief, recovery, and development efforts under the aegis of Civil-Military Co-ordination (CIMIC). The peacekeepers collaborate with government ministries, agencies and local

authorities to render assistance in various humanitarian and development programmes.

“It’s not about us, it’s about them,” says Col. Christopher Holshek, Chief of CIMIC, noting that the catchphrase is the main theme of their programme. “The message is simple. Liberians should be in the lead as they build their future. We are here to help them build that future as long as we can, before we draw down to the point where we can’t.” CIMIC experts say their focus now is sustainable capacity development assistance in close coordination with County Support Teams (CSTs) and UNMIL’s Civil Affairs.

Liberia’s Poverty Reduction Strategy (2008-2011) has four pillars including Peace and Security; Economic

Revitalisation; Governance and Rule of Law; and Infrastructure and Basic Services. UNMIL is rendering support to all these areas. The UN mission is looking to get both the AFL and LNP involved in civil-military efforts, in order to bring them to the forefront of recovery and help them improve relations with their own people. One upcoming initiative involves public service train-the-trainer packages in road and traffic safety, public health education, first aid, sexual exploitation and abuse mitigation, and rape prevention. By training local security personnel in first aid for example, in the event of an accident, police officers could fill an important first response gap and save lives.

In order to improve collaboration and co-understanding, CIMIC organises training courses targeting UNMIL military and civilian staff, non-governmental organizations, Liberian National Police, and the new Armed Forces of Liberia, among others. From March to October this year, four such courses have been organized.

Post-war Liberia has witnessed a proliferation of commercial motorbike taxis, known as *penh-penh*. Yet there are not many skilled persons to repair and keep

them road worthy. To address this problem, interested persons are now being trained as motorbike mechanics. Other vocational training includes masonry, carpentry, welding, tailoring and designing, animal husbandry, computing, first aid and basic medical care, generator and vehicle mechanic, different types of agricultural capacity-building, and more.

More than 1,000 Liberians have so far been trained this year in various fields. CIMIC is also seeking to synchronize these efforts with others, align training standards, and link vocational skills training with opportunities for small business development and micro-financing. In Grand Bassa County, some peacekeepers today teach science subjects in one of the high schools in the absence of qualified Liberian teachers.

A major challenge to security and development in Liberia is the poor state of the road network. UNMIL's engineers have been doing repairs and maintenance of roads with about two-thirds of the work funded by organizations like the United Nations Development Programme, World Bank, and Africa Development Bank. As another dry season approaches, UNMIL

will be working in close collaboration with the Ministry of Public Works to train people in basic road construction skills. Currently, there are not many engineers in the country which has enormous work to do to recondition deplorable roads. "If Liberians are looking for their golden hour, this is it. Now's the time for them to use us as much as they can to help them be able to help themselves. Once we're gone, that window of opportunity closes," stresses Col. Holshek.

In the face of high unemployment and rising food prices, UNMIL's peacekeepers have been supporting various agricultural projects throughout the country, endowed with fertile agricultural land. In Bong County for instance, peacekeepers are supporting 400 ex-combatants and others cultivate some 25 acres of land. Rice, cassava, corn, pumpkins and other vegetables are some of the crops cultivated.

As UNMIL peacekeepers leave Liberia eventually, John the carpenter and many other Liberians will hopefully remember the blue berets who came from far away lands not only for restoring peace to Liberia but also for giving them skills to rebuild their lives. ♦

[Peacekeepers demonstrate ways of modern farming](#)





Training **Accountable** Leaders

By Sulaiman Momodu

As the people of Liberia continue to consolidate peace and begin taking ownership of the country's development, accountable leadership is emerging as a crucial element that would determine the nation's progress. A

It is not uncommon to hear of discontent in communities as a result of improper implementation of development projects and misuse of funds. Addressing the training workshop, Deputy Special Representative for Recovery and Governance Jordan Ryan urged Liberian local government leaders to be accountable to their people as they implement the

the training of county superintendents and their deputies drawn from all the 15 counties in the country.

Jointly organized by UN-HABITAT, the United Nations Mission in Liberia, the United Nations Development Programme, Liberia's Ministry of Internal Affairs and Liberia Institute of Public Administration under the theme "Recovery through Enhanced Local Leadership and Governance", the capacity building training is part of the efforts to make county administrations effective in delivering development to the people. Noting the important efforts undertaken by the UN County Support Team, including the collaboration with USAID, leading to the successful rehabilitation of 14 of the 15 county administrative buildings, Ryan said: "As county leaders, you need information, to know exactly what is going on in your counties – how you are meeting the goals of the Poverty Reduction

"A leader has to be accountable, focused, responsive and relentless about results that will make people's lives better," Jordan Ryan said at the training of county superintendents and their deputies drawn from all the 15 counties in the country.

leadership training for local government leaders held in October in Buchanan, capital of Grand Bassa County, has been part of the efforts to address this issue.

development agendas of their counties. "A leader has to be accountable, focused, responsive and relentless about results that will make people's lives better," he said at



Jordan Ryan opens the leadership training workshop

Leadership

Strategy; the pace of development in your counties, and reporting to your people about progress being made.”

UNMIL’s Chief of Civil Affairs Francis Kai-Kai says local leaders have been given resources but still require more training on how to use them for the good of the whole community. He said the training idea came out of a needs assessment of county administration, which identified capacity building of superintendents as crucial. “The objective is to improve the overall management of county development processes in Liberia. The training had to do with many fields, both human and material and also how to use power to mobilize people and resources,” says Kai-Kai.

Liberia’s Internal Affairs Minister Ambulai Johnson acknowledged that county administrators were facing serious challenges such as limited resources, broken-down infrastructure and lack of tech-

nical know-how. He urged the superintendents to use the training to acquire skills that will make them better planners and implementers of projects. In this respect, leadership competencies such as ‘Communicating’, ‘Decision-making’, ‘Negotiating’, ‘Managing Finances’, ‘Institution-Building’ and ‘Using Power’ were some of the relevant topics discussed at the training.

“The training was very interesting, rewarding and fruitful,” remarked Grand

the next 12 months.

But will the leadership training result in change of attitudes? The Civil Affairs chief, whose section will be involved in conducting more training, said the UN is in Liberia to support the government and expressed the hope that those trained, and who appeared genuinely satisfied and willing to change, will put into practice the knowledge gained. “We want the superintendents to translate to reality what they have learnt. We want to see real improve-

Liberia’s Internal Affairs Minister Ambulai Johnson acknowledged that county administrators were facing serious challenges such as limited resources, broken-down infrastructure and lack of technical know-how.

Bassa County Superintendent Julia Cassell, who hosted the training. “It gave us the opportunity to compare notes.” About 3,000 District Commissioners and Mayors, Legislative Caucus members, Paramount, Clan and General Chiefs, Project Planners, Line Ministries and Civil Society Organisation representatives could benefit from similar trainings planned for

ment,” he said, adding: “It is an enormous challenge, but this training programme will help enormously if people are open to making the most of the learning opportunity.” ♦

Faylene Woolley of Civil Affairs contributed to this report





Legislative Internship Set

By Sulalman Momodu

Some 62 Liberian University students are eagerly looking forward to the New Year as they have been selected for the first ever Legislative Internship Programme in Liberia, set to begin in January. “I wish we could start now. I can’t wait to start,” says final year student, Wilhemina.

The programme will introduce the young Liberians to the working of democracy in the post-war nation by acquainting them with legislative norms and processes. They will be assigned to the various Committees and will provide support in research and analysis, bill drafting, note taking and other related tasks. Wilhemina says she has been assigned to the Foreign

Affairs Committee and is very excited about it. “Sometimes we are outside here and we don’t know what is happening in the Capitol Building. This is an opportunity to know what happens inside the National Legislature and to know how democracy works,” she says, revealing that her dream is to become a diplomat.

The Legislative Student Scholarship Programme is sponsored by the UN Democracy Fund and is implemented by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) with technical support provided by the UN Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) and the National Democratic Institute. Pundits say it is a unique ‘win-win’ arrangement wherein student beneficiaries gain exposure to a learning experience in democratic governance, rule of law and public policy mak-

ing while supporting the work of the Legislature through its committees, whose work is impeded by inadequate research and documentation capacity.

The Liberian Legislature received a grant for the programme in October 2006 but the selection of interns was sluggish and marred by politicking forcing some students to march to the Capitol Building in protest. The rigorous selection process involved 400 applicants and took into consideration regional diversity and gender balance. The selected interns represent all the 15 counties of the country with about four from each. The students will be working with Legislative committees over a period of two years.

The Political Policy and Planning Section (PPPS) is UNMIL’s focal point for the Legislature. The section, in collabora-



Interns at their induction

to Begin

tion with members of the Legislature, designed the internship programme, which is now being handled by the UNDP as the entity for the disbursement of funds. UNDP's Policy Specialist Cleophas O.

the country's main University but will eventually expand to other universities and institutions of higher learning. Since committees meet on designated days of the week, the work of the interns will not significantly impact their university classes.

The Head of PPPS, Babafemi A. Badejo, is very positive about the programme. Even the smallest inflow of money is very significant for students who happen to be very good but having prob-

The support UNMIL has been rendering to the Legislature for a viable democratic process will continue. The UN mission has two staff based at the Legislature – the Senate and the House of Representatives – to follow the debates and engage individual legislators on legislative reform, constitutional changes and other issues without being intrusive.

Torori says the innovative programme will cover the full tuition of the students provided they maintain the academic standards set by the programme. At the moment, the programme is limited only to

lems in paying tuition, he says. The intention of the programme is much more in that the quality of the Legislature is expected to improve and the students themselves will imbibe democratic cul-

ture, Badejo adds. The programme is also a way of grooming potential leaders in different aspects of life such as compromises that are necessary in decision making.

“As the future leaders of Liberia, you will be in a position to better understand the checks and balances of government, the mechanisms for bringing a bill to the legislature and its passage into law, the negotiations that take place and how bills impact on the lives of citizens,” noted the Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary General, Jordan Ryan, at a two-day orientation programme held in October at the Capitol Building in Monrovia. The orientation was facilitated by legislators, the University of Liberia, UNDP, UNMIL and National Democratic Institute personnel during which a variety of topics covering legislative procedures and processes were discussed.

The Chairperson of the Joint Legislative Modernization Committee, Senator Blamoh Nelson, advises the interns to see themselves as technical “aides” primarily to facilitate the work of the Legislative Committees. Convinced that the programme will help improve the image of the lawmaking body, which is sometimes mired in controversy, the legislators have already allocated some funds for the programme in the budget for next year.

The support UNMIL has been rendering to the Legislature for a viable democratic process will continue. The UN mission has two staff based at the Legislature – the Senate and the House of Representatives – to follow the debates and engage individual legislators on legislative reform, constitutional changes and other issues without being intrusive. “We will continue to constantly interact with the students in terms of sharing ideas and explaining legislative processes. We will continue to be one of the resources that the students will count on for support,” says Badejo.

The Legislative Scholarship Grant Programme is part of a global project with similar internships programmes in other parts of the world. The UN Democracy Fund was established at the 2005 World Summit at the UN headquarters in New York and is funded for the promotion of democracy and human rights. ♦

Indian Female Police Reach Out

By Carly Learson

As the first ever all-female unit in a UN peacekeeping mission, the Indian Formed Police Unit made headlines all over the world when the contingent arrived in Liberia in January 2007. After a year, the first contingent has returned home and the second contingent of women is now well into their time in Liberia.

Apart from their regular duties of guarding the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, conducting night patrols and anti-robbery operations and guarding the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the female officers are assisting the local community in various ways. Commander Rakhi Sahi has been extremely active in encouraging her officers to become involved in their community and learn about the people and culture of Liberia. “Our camp here is divided into three locations, and in between there is a school, the Victory Chapel School,” she said. “When we opened up a hospital on our premises I noticed small children from the school coming and asking for help. That’s what inspired us to get into community policing.”

The contingent started a medical outreach programme welcoming children from the school and their families to the Indian hospital at any time to seek medical treatment. The success of this programme encouraged the contingent to explore other ways to support the children. The contingent has since developed self-defence training and dancing classes for the kids. “We are integrating ourselves with the community,” says the Commander. “Without doing that you can’t get the confidence of the country you are serving in.” The Principal of Victory Chapel School,





Jason Sargeor, is grateful for their help. “The Indian women established a friendship with our school, and help with things like medical treatment and water for the children,” he said. “The children like to see the Indian women.”

Twice a week the children are split into junior and senior classes for their training. In the morning heat they stand in rows divided by gender in the school’s forecourt. The Indian Officers position themselves at the head of each line while officer Kimnu Kipgen takes the microphone to start the warm-up. It’s important for the children to do star-jumps and stretches to prepare before they start their self-defence training with ‘Ninja’ Kim Lhingjakim. The officers demonstrate karate poses which the children emulate with varying degrees of success, but lots of enthusiasm. Nursery teacher Gloria Adjei says she is very grateful for what the Indian women are doing for her children. “Our girls need to be physically fit,” she says. “They need to be able to defend themselves. The Indian women are fine, they didn’t think them-

selves too big, they came to us and now we are one.”

Once the self-defence class ends the children run inside ready for their favourite part of the Indian FPU visits – dancing. Bhangra music blasts from a sound system at the back of the room. The Liberian children start shaking their hips as though they’ve been doing it all their lives. The Indian women in their pink t-shirts are swarmed by children shimmying and waving their arms in the air.

Commander Sahi says she is particularly keen about helping Liberian girls, who face so many challenges growing up including sexual violence. She is hoping to expand her programme to other girls’ schools in the area, and is working with NGOs to find ways for her officers to help more through self-defence training. But she also hopes to address the problem at its root – by getting through to boys. “It’s the outlook of the male child,” she says. “Boys should be comfortable to live with a girl child and should be able to view the girl child as one of his own, as a human

being.”

The meeting room of the Indian FPU is a container filled with sofas and a wide-screen television. A portrait of Mahatma Gandhi hangs on the wall. The women are part of an elite unit in India, chosen because of their abilities to deal calmly with any situation. The work can be difficult, particularly when the women go out on night patrol with the Liberian National Police. “Sometimes people can get aggressive with the LNP officers,” Sahi says. “When this happens we can only advise, not intervene. We do our best to assist them.”

The contingent has 125 members. 105 form the all-female FPU, while the twenty men are support staff such as cooks and drivers. The women have been in Liberia for nine months now, and are feeling like the country is their second home. “I am very excited to be teaching the children of Liberia, I have enjoyed being in Liberia,” Kim Lhingjakim says. Kalpana Sreeniwasa agrees. “I have really enjoyed it here, I am very happy here. I have a lot of friends now.” ♦

Will Liberia benefit from the election of the first black president?

Amos Harris
(Student – University of Liberia)

“Liberia will definitely benefit because both countries come a long way. President George W. Bush increased his country’s assistance to post-conflict Liberia and I do believe that his successor will do much more.”



Edgarlyn T. Freeman
(Student/Cuttington University)

“We hope and pray that Liberia benefits from the election of President-elect Obama. I don’t see that in the immediate future but as an optimist, his presidency will ensure that peace is consolidated as well as continue to lend more support to improving our educational and health system, our infrastructure etc.”



Samuel Swaray (Petroleum Inspector/Real International)

“My answer should be yes. Africa as a whole will benefit from the election of Barack Obama, not only Liberia. You know he has Africa at heart because that is where his roots come from. To ensure peace and stability in the country, we hope that he enhances his support to the security sector reform. Secondly, he should support education and lastly infrastructural development.”

J. Cole Bangalu (Assistant Minister of Labour / Trade Union Affairs)

“Well, I say yes. Indeed we will benefit. Let me just say that Liberia has come from 14-years of political instability as a result of our civil conflict attributed to tribal groups. As a country over the period, we did not appreciate each other. The election in the US shows that despite being a black man, the nation is above race, colour or creed. This should demonstrate to us that no matter your colour, tribe or where you come from, it is not important; rather what you can do to ensure that your country remains peaceful, stable and developed.”



George Barpeen
(President/Press Union of Liberia)

“I’ll like to just say that Liberia will continue to benefit from the US Government. I say that from the perspective that government is continuity whether it’s President-elect Barack Obama or anybody else, Liberia stands to immensely benefit from the American Government as it has continued to do. Whatever plans the US Government has for Africa and Liberia will continue. Though the US Government is undergoing a lot of financial difficulties, his concentration will be rebuilding his country’s economy but at the same time no matter the situation, it has a policy for Liberia and Africa that remains.”

Agnes Ayo Freeman (Student/Inter-digital Computer School)

“I believe that Liberia would benefit, being the first black to set that historical record in the United States. I believe he will assist Africa where his roots are. For Liberia, I’m of the opinion, during his administration, he will ensure that peace is consolidated in the country.”



Speak

Is the Election of the First African-American President Barack Obama?



Israel Akinsanya
(National Chairman/Liberty Party)

I don't think in the short term Liberia will benefit from the election of President Barack Obama. I don't think even during the first two years of his presidency Liberia will benefit. You have to understand that the economic crisis that he has inherited will have a great impact on how the country proceeds especially when the crisis besides affecting Wall Street is also affecting Main Street. For now, while the reforms are being put in place to give confidence to the markets, Liberia and other third world countries would be given little attention.



Massa Kallon
(Student/University of Liberia)

The late civil rights leader Martin Luther King said that one day blacks will not be judged by the colour of their skin but the content of their character. Look at what has happened today. The election of President-elect Obama might not bring immediate benefits; but in the near future considering our historical ties, there will be some benefits.

Dr. Laurence K. Bropleh (Minister of Information, Culture & Tourism)

I hope that Liberians will not have less than pragmatic hope when it comes to the election of an African-American in the United States. Let me draw the analysis from South Africa. When President Nelson Mandela came from prison and was elected president many South Africans had less than pragmatic hope. They believed that finally a black African was president so everything would be well for black South Africans. It doesn't work that way. We in Liberia, the Liberian Government for example, engage the US Government, not individuals. America's foreign policy will remain America's foreign policy. Presidents come and go, they bring a slant to the policy but it does not uproot that policy. However, what Liberians can say is that we believe that President Obama will have a special sensitivity towards Liberia's plight because he understands. He's never forgotten his parental roots coming from Kenya. He comes with a certain sensitivity that I think will play a role in the advocacy when it comes to Africa, especially post-conflict Liberia.



Professor Dr. Togba-Nah Topoteh
(2005 Presidential Candidate)

Liberians will benefit from Barack Obama's elections because his election has raised the consciousness of Liberians into believing that this country belongs to them and they have a right to work and benefit from their work. Certainly most Liberians don't feel a sense of ownership; no sense of nationalism amongst Liberians. Now, with his election as the US first African-American President, this has given Liberians a sense of belonging and ownership. Also someone who is coming along as a symbolism for peace is of great interest to Liberia, especially coming from a super power. Liberians now know that they have a responsibility for moving their country forward. Having said that, there are other benefits; but I should caution that we should not always think about benefits in a relationship. We have to think about what is it that we have to offer as well.



Mardia Mason (Contractor/UN Mission in Liberia)

Liberia will benefit because as most Democrats are black, they will favour Africa in general. Despite the change in administration, there will not be much of a policy change. Liberians expect to benefit through policies already set in motion by his predecessor.



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