United Nations Police Reform Support in Post-conflict Liberia: @PKO Now! No.108

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17 years have passed since civil wars in Liberia ended in 2003. To date, the country has not experienced a relapse of conflict as it gradually moves to consolidate peace and stability. Following the conflict, the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) supported the reconstruction of Liberia in many ways. Particularly, in the reform of the Liberia National Police (LNP), UNMIL assisted with organizational restructuring using innovative approaches, which contributed to increasing police legitimacy and capabilities to provide citizens with better security services. This column provides an overview of UNMIL's support to police reform.

Civil Wars and Oppressive Police

A civil war broke out in 1989, when the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), led by Charles Taylor, would-be president of Liberia, invaded Liberia from Côte d'Ivoire to overthrow the Samuel Doe regime.[1] After six months of fight, the NPFL occupied 90% of Liberian territory. Although the fight between armed groups continued for a few more years, in 1996 a peace agreement was reached in Abuja, Nigeria, which concluded the first civil war.[2] In 1997, Taylor was elected as the president of Liberia. However, just like the former regime, the Taylor regime was highly corrupt and authoritarian. This motivated rebel groups to initiate an anti-government campaign, leading to the second civil war in 1999. In 2003, after four years of armed struggle, the war came to an end with the signing of the comprehensive peace agreement (CPA) in Accra, Ghana.

Historically, the security apparatus in Liberia functioned as tools to protect the government at all costs.[3] This led to a great deal of oppression, causing citizens to fear security actors. During the Taylor presidency, LNP contained the members of NPFL and oppressed citizens, especially anti-government figures.[4] There was even a notorious unit called Anti-Terrorist Unit, which conducted killing, torture and rape by orders of Taylor or high-ranking government officials.[5] As a result of the previous regimes establishing their own security forces to protect themselves, there were 16 different security forces at the end of civil wars. Additionally, since most of the security actors were concentrated in the capital, there was a serious security vacuum in rural areas.[6]

The other issue unique to ethnocentric African countries was that those who belong to the same ethnic group as high-ranking government officials were favored and offered senior positions in the security institutions. This seriously undermined accountability and resulted in poorer performance.[7] Because LNP did not properly function at all, crimes like theft and sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) were widespread, and there was even a serious concern of potential resumption of conflict.[8]

UNMIL's Support to Police Reform

UNMIL's support to police reform was grounded in the CPA which stipulated the need for the reform of LNP and UNMIL mandate that included support to restructuring and capacity building of LNP.[9] The following sections outline UNMIL's initiatives and approaches, especially through UN Police (UNPOL) to address issues LNP faced.

UNMIL started off by disbanding the existing police force and creating a new LNP from scratch. The main application criteria for police determined by UNMIL and the Government of Liberia included 1) hold Liberian citizenship, 2) age 18~35, 3) must have completed at least high school education and 4) no record of crimes punishable under international law.[10] To prevent politicization of the police, applicants were required to abandon all positions held in any political entities. Additionally, the government advocated for ethnic equality on screening of application and promotion of police officers,[11] so that certain ethnic groups

would no longer be favored. After undergoing a rigorous background check and a two year of probation period, they were finally hired as police officers. Overall, it is fair to say that the vetting process was thorough.

As part of capacity building assistance for police officers, UNPOL, supported by several donor states, established the National Police Training Academy (NPTA) in 2004. At NPTA, the police officers studied the curriculum developed by UNPOL, such as leadership, management, human rights, chain of command, communication, crime investigation, community patrol, among others. As part of field exercises, they conducted joint patrolling with UNPOL officers.[12] Since 2007, LNP has conducted the training without UNPOL support, which is a good example of local ownership and inspiring from the perspective of sustainability.

UNPOL also assisted LNP in institutional reform. Even before civil wars began, impunity of human rights abuses by LNP officers was rampant, which led to decreasing popular confidence with the police. To improve accountability of police officers, the Professional Standard Division (PSD) was set up as an internal control body.[13] PSD receives reports and claims from citizens regarding police officers' misconduct, investigates the cases and can impose penalties on alleged police officers accordingly. In 2009, UNPOL supported introducing the system in which each police officer's record of misconduct can be managed through an online database.[14] As PSD strived to decentralize to rural areas to help local people access to the office and present cases, the number of cases reported increased, and based on the investigations, the alleged police officers received strict penalties, such as dismissal and suspension of duties.[15] PSD has thus contributed to restoring public confidence in the police.

Gender-Sensitive Approaches in the Reform

SGBV had been one of the main crimes committed in Liberia since the civil wars period, and many women and girls were sexually abused and humiliated.[16] Most of the victims of SGBV are reluctant to report to the police as they are afraid of social stigma, discrimination and potential retaliation. The police officers were not trained how to handle an SGBV case either.

The lack of female police officers also contributed to the underreporting of cases since the victims of SGBV are often uncomfortable speaking to male officers about details of the incidents.[17]

In 2005, to strengthen LNP response to SGBV, UNMIL assisted in establishing the Women and Children Protection Unit (WCPU), dedicated for SGBV, domestic violence and child abuse.[18] UNPOL and UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) trained police officers who were to be assigned to WCPUs. Completing the trainings, the officers were deployed to police stations in all 15 counties, where they were expected to perform such duties as protection of women and girls, collection of information, investigation and coordination with the judiciary.[19] In addition, through school visits, participation in community meetings and dissemination of posters and leaflets by UNMIL and LNP, local people started to realize that SGBV is a reportable crime. This should be continued by LNP as the primary local security provider to transform Liberian social and cultural norms.

In the same year, the gender policy developed by UNMIL and UNPOL set the goal of 15% of female officers in the LNP (elevated to 20% in 2008).[20] However, most of the females interested in working as police officers did not meet the application criterion of completion of high school education because they were deprived of opportunities to attend schools due to civil wars. In 2006, to eliminate such barriers, LNP initiated the Educational Support Programme (ESP) that helps women obtain a high school diploma, so that they would become eligible applicants. Consequently, the number of female officers began to rise,[21] and as of March 2018, they accounted for 19% (959 out of 5053 officers).[22] ESP thus pushed the gender-mainstreaming agenda forward.[23]

UNMIL's another important contribution to gender mainstreaming was the deployment of the all-female Formed Police Unit (FPU), consisting of Indian female police officers. Besides regular FPU tasks,[24] taking advantage of their unique role as female, they organized seminars and sensitizing events on prevention of rape to act as a deterrent for SGBV.[25] Many women appreciated that because of the presence of the unit, they can now go outdoor without fear, and a number of girls became interested in a career with security institutions after they were inspired by Indian female police officers at the recruitment events. The

Indian FPU not only served as role models for Liberian women, but are also remembered as an excellent example of putting into practice Security Council Resolution 1325, which calls for more active participation of women in UN peace operations.

Establishment of the Justice and Security Regional Hubs

As mentioned earlier, security institutions in Liberia were overtly concentrated in the capital, whereas functioning security apparatus was limited in rural counties. In 2011, UNMIL and the Government of Liberia decided to establish five Justice and Security Regional Hubs aiming to decentralize and strengthen security services in the counties.[26] This is an unprecedented initiative in which police officers, prosecutors, public defenders, prison officers, probation officers, human rights officers, SGBV victim support and case liaison officers and public outreach officers work in the same compound to strengthen coordination between security and justice sectors and simplify the previously lengthy and frustrating procedures. In 2013, the first Hub opened in Bong County, and other Hubs are also expected to contribute to restoring public confidence in the Liberian security and justice institutions.

For Further Improving the Quality of Police Services

In the support to police reform, UNMIL focused on addressing existing challenges LNP faced, including preventing politicization of the police and ethnic favoritism, strengthening internal control to maintain discipline of police officers, establishing WCPUs to protect victims of SGBV and improving access to security and justice services in rural areas. Nevertheless, many challenges remain today. Unfortunately, people are still suspicious about LNP because corruption of police officers is not yet fully addressed.[27] In terms of operations, chronic lack of budget, personnel and equipment prevents police officers from providing quality services, hindering restoration of popular support. As lack of resources in the counties has also been a serious issue, the police rely on informal security providers to fill the gap.[28] UNMIL withdrew from Liberia in March 2018 upon completion of its mandate. Building upon accomplishments UNMIL made in 15 years of operation, UN agencies such as the UN Development Programme (UNDP) continue to support police reform from the development perspective.

End Notes

[1] Nilsson, Desirée, and Kovacs, Mimmi Söderberg. 2005. "Breaking the Cycle of Violence? Promises and Pitfalls of the Liberian Peace Process." Civil Wars 7(4): 396-414, 398. The Doe regime was criticized because it was authoritarian, corrupt and had been a cause of recession.

[2] Renda, Luca. 1999. "Ending Civil Wars: The Case of Liberia." The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs 23(2): 59-76, 62.

[3] Zanker, Franzisca. 2015. "A Decade of Police Reform in Liberia: Perceptions, Challenges and Ways Ahead." SSR 2.0 Brief Issue No.4. Centre for Security Governance.

[4] Ebo, Adedeji. 2005. "The Challenges and Opportunities of Security Sector Reform in Post Conflict Liberia." Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces (DCAF). Occasional Paper No.9, 20.

[5] Bacon, Laura. 2015. "Liberia's Gender Sensitive Police Reform: Improving Representation and Responsiveness in a Post-Conflict Setting." International Peacekeeping 22(4): 372-397, 373.

[6] Zanker, "A Decade of Police Reform in Liberia," 2.

[7] Podder, Sukanya. 2013. "Bridging the 'Conceptual-Contexual' Divide: Security Sector Reform in Liberia and UNMIL Transition." Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding 7 (3): 353-380, 360.

[8] Friedman, Jonathan. 2011. "Building Civilian Police Capacity: Post-Conflict Liberia, 2003-2011." Innovations for Successful Societies, Princeton University, 3.

[9] UN Security Council resolution 1509 (S/RES/1509).

[10] Friedman, 5. The application criteria were subjects of critiques. Some argued that submission of a high school diploma was highly difficult as many schools were destroyed during civil wars and the enrollment documents were lost. Since criminal records were not kept within the police, there was no way to check applicants' criminal records. And it was disrespectful to fire even veteran police officers to restructure the organization.

[11] Blair, Robert and Karim, Sabrina and Gilligan, Michael J. and Beardsley, Kyle C. 2019. "Policing Ethnicity: Lab-in-the-Field Evidence on Discrimination, Cooperation, and Ethnic Balancing in the Liberian National Police," 16.

[12] UN Mission in Liberia. 2018. "Establishing Policing to Serve Communities: Simon Blatchly, Police Commissioner" Accessed 18 May 2020. (https://unmil.unmissions.org/establishing-policing-serve-communities-simon-blatchly-police-commissioner)

[13] International Security Sector Advisory Team (ISSAT). 2018. "Liberia SSR Snapshot"

Accessed 18 May 2020. (https://issat.dcaf.ch/Learn/Resource-Library2/Country-Profiles/Liberia-SSR-Snapshot)

[14] United Nations. 2010. "Twenty-first progress report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Missions in Liberia" (S/2010/429). New York: UN Security Council.

[15] International Security Sector Advisory Team (ISSAT). 2018. Lessons Identified from United Nations Mission in Liberia Support to Rule of Law in Liberia. Accessed 18 May 2020. (https://issat.dcaf.ch/Learn/SSR-in-Practice2/Countries-Regions/Liberia/Lessons-Identification-on-the-Work-of-UNMIL-s-Rule-of-Law-Pillar)

[16] Bacon, "Liberia's Gender Sensitive Police Reform," 373.

[17] Ibid, 376.

[18] UNMIL OGA, 34.

[19] Bacon, 378. It is not enough to strengthen police capabilities to deal with SGBV as the system and capacity to punish the perpetrators is needed as well. In this regard, the Ministry of Justice established SGBV Crimes Unit, which was tasked with coordination between police and prosecutors office and training of prosecutors on how to deal with SGBV cases. Furthermore, the special court for SGBV cases (called Criminal Court E) was established, in which victims and witnesses can give their testimony in a separate room from the one with suspects.

[20] United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) Office of the Gender Adviser (OGA). 2009. "Gender Mainstreaming in Peacekeeping Operations in Liberia 2003-2009: Best Practices Report," 19.

[21] Ibid, 21.

[22] United Nations. 2018. "Final progress report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Mission in Liberia (S/2018/344)." New York: UN Security Council.

[23] Bacon, 381. ESP did help increase the number of female officers. Yet, because it was obsessed with increasing the number of female, LNP placed less importance on securing individuals with matching skills and capabilities. Some criticized that as men were also deprived of their educational opportunities due to civil wars, only providing women with such opportunities was unfair.

[24] FPU is one of the UNPOL's units deployed in the field. A unit consists of roughly 140 armed police officers and is typically tasked with maintaining public order and protecting UN staff and facilities. For more information, please refer to @PKO Now! No.102 The Overview of the United Nations Police (UNPOL) and its Roles in UN Peace Operations.

[25] UNMIL OGA, 43.

26 Ministry of Justice Republic of Liberia. 2016. Justice and Security Joint Programme (http://moj.gov.lr/about/jsjp/). Accessed 22 May 2020.

27 Zanker, "A Decade of Police Reform in Liberia," 5.

28 Podder, "Bridging the 'Conceptual-Contextual' Divide," 364.