



Perspectives on Peace & Stability Operations

Title: Security Sector Reform in Liberia Part I: An Assessment of Defense Reform

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Overview:

Monrovia, Liberia is on the front lines for security sector reform (SSR) in nations devastated by extended, violent conflict and civil war. SSR initiatives in Liberia are among the most comprehensive in the world in the context of post-conflict reconstruction. As such, these efforts represent a critical opportunity to assess SSR as an element of U.S. and international approaches to post-conflict peace-building. The program in Liberia has broken new ground for SSR in several different areas. This first of two reports on SSR in Liberia focuses on the Liberian defense sector. Part II of this series will address SSR in the law enforcement and justice sectors.

DISCUSSION

MOD AND THE AFL: CURRENT STATUS

The Defense component of SSR in Liberia includes the reconstitution of the AFL and the restructuring and training of the Liberian Ministry of National Defense. Together these two programs represent one of the most ambitious and best-resourced SSR initiatives ever undertaken in the African region. As of the spring of 2008, both programs have enjoyed some remarkable successes, but have also demonstrated some fundamental shortcomings.

Training for the MOD civil service staff was completed in April of 2007, with 91 graduates of the MOD training program assuming duties as the new MOD work force. A proposed mentoring program for the new civil servants was cancelled due to U.S. funding shortfalls. As of the summer of 2008, the new Ministry had been operating for more than a year. It remains the best-trained and most functional ministry in the Liberian executive branch, and continues to be the only ministry to benefit from a complete restructuring and reform program. It also remains the only ministry whose civil servants are paid regularly at a level approximating a living wage.

As of the summer of 2008, roughly half of the 2,000-strong restructured AFL had completed individual training, despite a seven-month suspension of the AFL program, from December of 2007 to July of 2008, due to funding shortfalls on the U.S. side.

Collective training has been much more problematic, suffering from both lack of resources and from the challenges of creating a professional officer and non-commissioned officer corps from scratch. ECOWAS has made available company and field grade military officers from several member states to serve with the new AFL, providing professional leadership to the Liberian forces until Liberian replacements are adequately trained to assume duties at those levels. The first reconstituted AFL infantry company is expected to become operational in the fall of 2008, with the entire force to be fielded by December of 2009.

MOD AND THE AFL: THE GOOD NEWS

Positive lessons may be drawn from Defense and military SSR in the areas of demobilization, recruiting and vetting. Incorporation of rule of law and human rights components into training programs for both the MOD and AFL elements contributed directly to SSR program objectives, as did the oversight and accountability components of the MOD program. The initial entry training provided to military recruits by contracted trainers was without precedent in a major SSR program, both in duration and quality. Mechanisms for establishing host nation ownership were especially important to the success of the overall MOD and AFL SSR effort.

Demobilizing a civil war-era defense sector that had lost all legitimacy in the eyes of the Liberian people was a critical element in the reform of the AFL and MOD. The newly recruited AFL and MOD are broadly representative of all geographic areas and ethnic groups, due largely to an expensive but crucially important recruiting outreach program that extended into every Liberian county, no matter how remote. Transforming the face of the Liberian military in this way is helping to rehabilitate the AFL in the eyes of the Liberian public.

The rigorous, “zero tolerance” vetting program for AFL and MOD may offer some of the most valuable lessons for future SSR programs. The program reduced the initial pool of volunteers from about ten thousand potential candidates to less than three thousand “recommended yes” recruits, from whom the initial pool of AFL and MOD civilian trainees were drawn. The vetting program included visits to each individual recruit’s home village, interviews with family members, neighbors, teachers and employers, and a careful screening of each recruit by local and international human rights organizations. Pictures of all potential recruits were posted in prominent locations in Monrovia, with members of the public invited to contact the SSR program with any negative information on any potential recruit. Vetting also included mandatory drug testing and literacy testing. Any negative information emerging from the vetting investigations resulted in the individual involved being disqualified as a candidate.

The senior Liberian political leadership underwrote the entire vetting process by scrupulously refraining from interference with the investigations, and by accepting, in every case, recommended disqualification of potential candidates, regardless of how “well connected” that candidate might have been, politically or economically. To say that this was a radical departure from previous practice and experience in Liberia is an

understatement. In the MOD and AFL SSR programs in Liberia, “the fix was not in” – a key contributor to program success.

Training for both MOD civilians and military recruits emphasized respect for human rights, primacy of rule of law, and civil-military relations in a democratic state. Instruction for the MOD civil servants emphasized civilian control of the military, and the mechanisms and processes by which that control is affected. The curriculum itself was shaped by the Liberian rule of law framework, including the Comprehensive Peace Agreement and the Liberian Constitution.

The quality of the initial entry training provided to the AFL’s new recruits by U.S. State Department contractors has been one of the most impressive aspects of the U.S. SSR program. Generous funding of the Defense SSR component by the U.S. Government (roughly \$120 Million by the summer of 2007) has supported an AFL training program roughly comparable to the Basic and Advanced Individual Training provided to U.S. Army soldiers and U.S. Marines. Contracted AFL trainers are former U.S. Army and U.S. Marine Corps senior non-commissioned officers with Drill Instructor experience. The program was developed and overseen by retired U.S. military officers and NCOs at the senior colonel and Command Sergeant Major levels, who commanded the respect of Liberians and U.S. Department of State officials alike. The impact of fifteen weeks of continuous, demanding training was immediately evident following graduation of the first class of recruits from basic and advanced individual training.

Host nation ownership provided the foundation of the U.S. SSR program. That ownership was clearly established through an SSR Memorandum of Agreement between the U.S. and Liberian Governments, and was implemented through the Defense Advisory Council that the Agreement established. The need for host nation ownership was articulated clearly and forcefully by U.S. Ambassador Booth to U.S. program implementers at every opportunity, leading to close consultation with the Liberian Government in the design and implementation of SSR program elements.

MOD AND THE AFL: THE BAD NEWS

Despite the remarkable accomplishments noted above, some serious shortcomings have emerged from the U.S.-led Defense reform efforts. Most of these shortcomings are a consequence of intermittent and inadequate funding. Others relate directly to the difficult challenges of creating an entire host nation military from the ground up.

As a result of U.S. Government funding shortfalls, the MOD Reform program was terminated following completion of civil servant training but prior to the implementation of a planned five-month mentoring and “on the job” training phase. Consequently, new civil servants had no source of advice or assistance as they assumed their official duties in the newly restructured Ministry of National Defense. The failure to follow through with the mentoring component of MOD Reform missed a valuable opportunity to shape the operation of the new MOD as an institution. It also deprived the Ministry’s political leadership—Minister of National Defense Brownie Samukai and his Deputy and

Assistant Ministers—of a valuable tool in asserting control of the Ministry and effectively overseeing its assumption of responsibility for guiding the Liberian Defense sector.

Funding shortfalls have likewise resulted in the truncation of the individual training for new AFL recruits by several weeks. Much of the human rights and civil-military relations training for the new Liberian soldiers has been eliminated as a result of this truncation. The priorities reflected in this decision, while they may have preserved the quality of combat skills training for individual soldiers, did not support the objective of restoring legitimacy to a Liberian military stained by decades of misconduct in Liberia's bitterly contested civil wars.

The high quality of individual initial entry training provided by the U.S. SSR program has not been followed by a comparable program of collective training at the squad, platoon, company and battalion levels. This is in part a function of limited funding: almost all of the roughly U.S. \$140 million spent on the program through the fall of 2007 was consumed by the individual training program, leaving little funding to support collective training of individual training graduates. It is also, however, a function of two other factors: the much greater complexity of the collective training mission, and the lack of experienced Liberian officers and NCOs.

Collective training at the squad, platoon, company and battalion levels is an order of magnitude more difficult than training basic individual combat skills. Collective training requires much more elaborate and sophisticated doctrinal support and progressively more complex unit training plans than training individual combat skills. The challenges of effectively blending functional skills in a combined arms setting require professional soldiers—both senior noncommissioned officers and veteran commissioned officers—who have extensive tactical experience at the squad, platoon, company and battalion levels. The U.S. SSR program in Liberia has not yet been successful in mobilizing the necessary training expertise to adequately address this demanding task set, whether with contractors or with uniformed military advisors. The program has also suffered from the lack of effective “reach back” to U.S. military institutions and organizations that might have provided badly needed support in program design and implementation. The shortfalls in the collective training programs have been exacerbated by the lack of a professional Liberian officer or NCO corps.

SSR doctrine and practice have yet to develop an effective means of accelerating the development of professional officers and NCOs. Very few former AFL officers and NCOs have successfully negotiated the recruiting and vetting process, and those that did have been required to proceed through basic training, followed by NCO and officer training courses. No provisions have been made as yet for accelerated promotion of those individuals. The practical impact of this situation has been the organization of Liberian infantry squads, platoons and companies without their required complements of Liberian sergeants, lieutenants and captains.

The Government of Liberia and ECOWAS have attempted to ameliorate AFL officer and NCO shortcomings by seconding a small number of experienced company-grade

officers from other ECOWAS member states. These officers will join the AFL Chief of Staff—a Nigerian Major General—in providing needed leadership to the AFL until Liberian officers are able to do so. To help meet the requirement for leaders above the company level, the Government of Liberia has recalled five former senior AFL officers with experience at the field grade level. It remains to be seen how successful this approach will be in reconstituting an effective military force at the company, battalion and brigade levels.

CONCLUSION

The sustained impact of Defense SSR in Liberia is as yet unclear. Several important lessons are emerging from the Liberia programs, however. Individual donor nations remain the critical element in the SSR equation where the defense sector is concerned, and you get what you pay for (or, more to the point, you don't get what you don't pay for): SSR is expensive. It incurs very high startup costs, and sustained funding at high levels is an essential component of successful programs. The relatively lavish funding provided by the U.S. Government for the AFL has not been sufficient to support the comprehensive reconstitution of the Liberian defense sector, even at a modest force level of only 2,000 soldiers. The Liberian AFL and MOD experience suggests that “lead nation funding” may not be an adequate approach to resourcing comprehensive SSR programs.

Host nation ownership has been a key element in establishing the legitimacy of the AFL and MOD programs in the eyes of Liberians themselves. That ownership is established most effectively when program design and implementation mechanisms are created that incorporate the host nation political leadership at the outset of SSR planning. To be fully effective, however, the mechanisms created must be used consistently and in meaningful ways to sustain host nation participation. Robust host nation ownership of SSR in Liberia has yielded valuable benefits in building governance oversight capacity, in reinforcing civilian oversight of the defense sector, and in supporting the legitimacy of the democratically elected post-conflict Liberian Government.

Legitimacy and functionality are the essential elements of a reformed security sector. The use of non-Liberian nationals in the AFL officer corps may provide needed functionality, but the use of foreign officers has a checkered history in Liberia. It is unclear how much legitimacy the Liberian people will accord to a military that continues to be led by foreign officers. The Liberian case suggests that a badly needed area of improvement in SSR doctrine and practice is the accelerated development of a host nation commissioned officer and NCO corps.

Another area of concern emerging from the Liberian case—and one that has received very little attention in the community of practice—is the use of private sector, for-profit companies as military trainers. Dyncorp International and Pacific Architects and Engineering are the two companies that have provided the vast majority of the defense sector SSR training in Liberia. As Mark Malan pointed out in a recent study of U.S. military training programs in Africa, use of contractors in this role raises important

questions about the “cash-work nexus” that is a feature of privatization.¹ Entirely aside from personal contractor motivation, private contractors lack the legitimacy and the evidence of national political commitment that accompany uniformed military trainers. In Africa in particular, the role of mercenaries in past African conflicts, combined with the discrediting of state security forces that has typically accompanied the failure of African states, raise questions about the advisability of privatizing core military functions like military initial entry and collective tactical training.

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¹ Mark Malan, *U.S. Civil-Military Imbalance for Global Engagement: Lessons from the Operational Level in Africa*, 24 (Washington, D.C.: Refugees International, 2008).