



Liberia - Researched and compiled by the Refugee Documentation Centre of Ireland on 12 August 2009

Liberia: Organized criminals and general security in Monrovia

Under the heading 'Violent crime and vigilantism' an International Crisis Group reports:

The most discussed threat to everyday security, especially in Monrovia's poorer neighbourhoods – Paynesville, Red Light and on Bushrod Island – is of armed robberies, which sometimes result in murder. A rising crime rate in a post-war environment of high unemployment is not unique to Liberia, but the question is whether it also poses a threat to national security. An individual with access to intelligence on the subject suggested there were some signs the rash of robberies might be linked to a coordinated attempt to destabilise the government and prompt violent mass reactions. There are some indications that truckloads of young men have been transported between Kakata and central Monrovia to become involved in the crime spree. There is also growing concern about large-scale cultivation of marijuana in the interior, especially in Nimba County. A police officer said, 'the robbers spend the day smoking marijuana, and so at night they need to find the money to pay for more'. Fears thus centre on the perception that the level of organisation behind armed robbery and other crimes may be increasing. In addition, there is worry that the public, in the face of police ineffectiveness, has started to take matters into its own hands. Citizens, angry at police and justice sector failures, stormed or burned down police stations in Lofa and Maryland Counties in early 2008. In Monrovia, many neighbourhoods have organised self-defence patrols, with orders to kill thieves when they catch them. Examples in West Africa and elsewhere show such vigilantism may become a security threat in its own right. In Nigeria for instance, groups such as the Bakassi Boys and the Odua People's Congress that began as law-and-order vigilantes, sometimes with a measure of ethnic nationalist politics, have become criminal elements, preying on ordinary citizens and serving as judge, jury and executioner to those who run afoul of them." (International Crisis Group (ICG) (13 January 2009) *Liberia: Uneven Progress in Security Sector Reform, Africa Report N°148*, p. 7)

A UN Mission in Liberia report states in the Executive Summary:

"The justice sector institutions remain weak as a result of several factors including the absence of key personnel in the justice system and inadequate resources to essential rule of law institutions including the judiciary, Liberian National Police (LNP) and the corrections services." (UN Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) (3 December 2008) *Report on the Human Rights Situation in Liberia, November 2007 - June 2008*)

This report also states:

“23. The LNP often complained of delays in payment of salaries, poor logistical support and lack of transportation to facilitate their work. This sometimes resulted in LNP officers abandoning their duty stations and members of the communities turn to local authorities to handle criminal cases. In November 2007, the salaries of LNP Officers in Rivercess County were reportedly 3 months in arrears. Almost half of the LNP officers assigned to the County abandoned their duty stations in order to go and collect their salary arrears in Monrovia. In Grand Kru County, 9 LNP officers did not report for duty in January 2008 due to non-payment of salaries and 13 others complained of non-payment of salaries for several months in 2007. In Maryland County, LNP officers in Harper and Karluway districts reported on 17 January that they had not received their salaries for three months and no explanation has been given for this delay. A similar situation prevails in Konobo district in Grand Gedeh County, where in January 2008, HRO found only 4 LNP officers, as most officers had left their duty stations due to the delay in payment of their salaries. In this regard, steps are being taken for LNP officers to be paid in the Counties on time. LNP supported by UNPOL have engaged in a validation exercise to account for all deployed LNP officers in the field. The Ministry of Justice working in collaboration with the Ministry of Finance are developing a system whereby LNP officers would have direct deposit in their bank accounts which would limit the need for officers to collect their salaries outside their County.

24. The inadequately resourced law enforcement sector resulted in the inability to ensure LNP presence throughout the country and more especially in the outlying districts. The situation risks undermining the rule of law and could result in mob justice. In Nimba County, there were no law enforcement officers in Bain Garr and Yarwein-Mehnsohn districts in December 2007. In March 2008, the Magistrate in Sanoyea district, Bong County reported that there was no LNP presence in the entire district which has about 40,000 inhabitants. As such, investigations into incidents are delayed as they have to wait for LNP Officers from other areas.

25. In order for the criminal justice system to function properly and for the public to have confidence in the law enforcement mechanisms, it is important that law enforcement officers perform their policing functions with integrity, and in accordance with ethics in compliance with international human rights standards. It is also important that law enforcement officers reported to be engaging in corrupt practices are held accountable for their actions. During the reporting period, police officers were allegedly engaged in corrupt practices and it appeared that no action was taken against the offending police officers for their actions. In other cases, action was taken only after HRPS addressed the issue...

26. Law enforcement officials are to apply non violent means while carrying out their duties and may use force and firearms only if other means remain ineffective or without any promise of achieving the intended result. Police brutality violates the bodily integrity and dignity of the person, and amounts to criminal behaviour for which the individual police officer should be held accountable and punished. During the reporting period, HROs received

reports of police brutality but in several cases, no action was taken against the LNP officers even where HROs brought this to the attention of their respective Commanders.” (Ibid, sections 23-26)

The second paragraph of the 2008 US Department of State Country Report states:

“The government generally respected the human rights of its citizens; however, problems continued. Mob violence and land disputes resulted in deaths, and ritualistic killings occurred. Police abused, harassed, and intimidated detainees and citizens. Prison conditions remained harsh, and arbitrary arrest and detention occurred. Lengthy pretrial detention and denial of due process and fair public trial were problems. Some incidents of trial-by-ordeal were reported. Corruption and impunity continued in most levels of the government.” (US Department of State (25 February 2009) *2008 Country Report on Human Rights Practices - Liberia*)

Under the heading ‘Role of Police and Security Apparatus’ this report states:

“The Ministry of Justice has responsibility for enforcing laws and maintaining order within the country and oversees the LNP and the National Bureau of Investigation. Approximately 12,000 UNMIL peacekeepers and 1,100 UNPOL officers had primary responsibility for maintaining security. Initial training of new AFL recruits was completed during the year with the provision of basic and advanced training to 2,133 soldiers; trainees were scheduled to assume duty in 2009. Approximately 600 UNPOL officers and UN Formed Police Units (armed foreign police detachments assigned to UNMIL) assisted with monitoring, advising, and training the LNP. Since 2004 UNPOL has recruited, screened, trained, and deployed 3,500 LNP officers; most were deployed in Monrovia, but 1,200 had deployed to the counties by year's end. The LNP operated independently and retained arrest authority; however, the SSS, which is responsible for presidential security, UNPOL, and armed UN Formed Police Units accompanied LNP officers on joint patrols around Monrovia. The LNP Women's and Children's Protection Section (WCPS) continued to establish offices outside Monrovia during the year.

Members of the Emergency Response Unit (ERU), which was established during the year, received specialized training and were armed, unlike other LNP units. The ERU has 139 officers and is charged with conducting special police operations in antiterrorism, hostage rescue, internal security, tactical anticrime, and search and rescue.

LNP officers were slow to respond to criminal activity and often ineffective, which resulted in an increase in armed robberies during the year. LNP salaries were low and not always paid on time, contributing to widespread corruption. Police had limited logistics, communication, and forensic capabilities and did not have the capacity to adequately investigate many crimes, including murders.

During the year the LNP investigated reports of police misconduct and corruption, and authorities suspended or dismissed several LNP officers. For

example, in December a grand jury indicted the deputy commissioner for criminal investigations and the chief of narcotics for theft and false statements; both cases were ongoing at year's end." (Ibid)

The UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office state in their online document 'Liberian Travel Advice' under the heading 'Travel Summary':

"We advise against all but essential travel to areas of Liberia outside the capital, Monrovia. You should be aware that the ability of the national authorities and the UN to provide emergency assistance outside Monrovia is limited and it is recommended that you do not travel overnight outside Monrovia. You should not travel to Liberia unless you have made adequate security arrangements with a reliable organisation in advance of your arrival. You should also check the security situation before travelling to any part of the country.

Violent crime is prevalent in Monrovia, particularly after dark. We recommend that you do not walk anywhere in Monrovia at night." (UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office (27 July 2009) Liberian Travel Advice)

This document also states under the heading 'Crime':

"There is a significant level of crime in Monrovia - including violent crime. The Liberian National Police has very limited capability to prevent or detect crime, or to provide emergency response in any part of the country. Levels of crime are much higher after dark, and we recommend that you do not walk anywhere in the city at night. You should avoid walking alone at any time.

Most crime is opportunistic theft, although there are some more organised criminal gangs. Thieves are often armed with knives or machetes, but occasionally also carry firearms. While Liberians are the main victims of crime, the relative wealth of international visitors makes them an attractive target for criminals when the opportunity arises. You should avoid carrying valuables in public and be vigilant at all times, especially at night.

There have been incidents of muggings of foreigners in the Mamba Point and Sinkor areas of Monrovia, where most international visitors stay. Criminals also operate in other areas frequented by foreigners, such as nightclubs and beaches. Accommodation occupied by international workers has occasionally been targeted by burglars. Thefts have occurred in taxis, and you are advised not to use local public transport.

There is a high incidence of rape in Liberia and there have been a number of rapes and attempted rapes involving expatriate women...

Breakouts from prisons around Liberia are a regular occurrence and the escapees rarely caught. On 16 May 2009, some 25 prisoners escaped from Monrovia central prison. Visitors should be aware that such people will be desperate to avoid capture and are likely to be armed; take extra care when

approached by strangers and when driving through high density areas or off the main roads.

You are advised to consider your security arrangements carefully before your arrival in Liberia. You should ensure that you are supported by a reliable organisation with a comprehensive and adequate security plan. You should stay only in reputable accommodation with adequate guarding and other security arrangements, and arrange for transport for the duration of your stay, including travel to and from the airport.” (Ibid)

The US Department of State Bureau of Consular Affairs states in their Country Specific Information for Liberia under the heading ‘Threats to Safety and Security’:

“The Department of State urges U.S. citizens to plan proposed travel to Liberia carefully and to exercise caution when traveling in Liberia. Neither public transport nor taxis are available at the international airport, which is located 40 miles outside of Monrovia; therefore, before traveling to Liberia, Americans are urged to make arrangements for transportation from the international airport into the city center...

Americans who travel to or reside in Liberia should realize that Liberia's police force is in the process of being rebuilt. There is a UN Mission in Liberia (UNMIL), but its mandate is to ensure political stability in Liberia. Americans who travel around Liberia must realize that the role of UN Police (UNPOL) officers is to serve as advisors to the Liberia National Police. Accordingly, they do not have the authority to arrest or detain, and they are unarmed. The Liberia National Police, for its part, has a limited presence in Monrovia, and even less of a presence outside of Monrovia. In addition, police officers can be a source of problems for visitors as well as a source of aid or assistance. Although problems with corruption have improved, travelers may be detained by police officers who solicit bribes.” (US Department of State Bureau of Consular Affairs (10 August 2009) Country Specific Information for Liberia)

This document also states under the heading ‘Crime’:

“The crime rate in Liberia is high, and is exacerbated by the high rate of unemployment. Theft, assault, sexual crimes, and murder are problems, and they occur more frequently after dark. Foreigners, including U.S. citizens, have been targets of street crime, robbery, and sexual assault. Women have been attacked on deserted beaches. Residential armed break-ins have occurred. The police are ill equipped and largely incapable of providing effective protection or investigation. Criminal activity has been reported in both urban and rural areas.

Perpetrators of business fraud often target foreigners, including Americans. Formerly associated with Nigeria, these fraud schemes are now prevalent throughout western Africa, including Liberia, and pose a danger of both financial loss and physical harm. An increasing number of American citizens have been the targets of such scams...

Petty corruption is rampant; poorly paid government officials are not immune from the temptation to collect fees for doing their job. The result is that travelers may be asked for bribes and inconvenienced for not paying them.” (Ibid)

The Overseas Security Advisory Council states in the Liberia 2009 Crime & Safety Report under the heading ‘Overall Crime and Safety Situation’:

“Monrovia is rated as high threat for crime, much of which can be attributed to desperation, although there are a few criminal gangs whose activities are relatively organized....The Liberia National Police (LNP) is a force of 3,500 officers and serves a total estimated population of about 3.5 million, over 1.5 million of whom live in Greater Monrovia. The LNP, trained by the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL), is not well-managed or well-equipped, and is not effective in deterring crime. Except for a few small special units, the police are generally un-armed and operate without basic equipment such as vehicles and radio communications.

UNMIL has 12,000 troops deployed, as well as several formed police units. UNMIL shoulders the primary responsibility for safety and security in Liberia.

Road conditions in Monrovia are extremely poor. Many are paved, or were paved at one time, but now are full of large potholes. The heavy rains contribute to rapid deterioration of the roads, both paved and unpaved. Traveling outside the city requires four-wheel drive, and during the six-month rainy season many roads are impassible and many small towns and villages inaccessible.” (Overseas Security Advisory Council (27 January 2009) *Liberia 2009 Crime & Safety Report*)

Under the heading ‘Police Response’ this report states:

“The Liberia National Police (LNP) is being retrained under UNMIL supervision. The former members of the LNP, many of whom have been demobilized and provided pensions, were predatory, often paying themselves through extortion, and were generally undisciplined and unreliable. The new LNP personnel are making progress and leaders are taking proactive roles in law enforcement training. Training is ongoing against a backdrop of inadequate resources. The LNP is making strides toward becoming more professional, but the learning and resource curves are steep. The ability of the LNP to take proactive intervention is limited. Nonetheless, victims of crime are encouraged to report incidents to the LNP as well as to the Consular Section at the embassy.

An armed LNP Emergency Response Unit (ERU) now numbering 130 officers has been formed and is operational. This unit is intended to be a quick reaction force able to respond to criminal activity and low-grade insurgency with advanced tactics similar to Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) teams in the United States. More officers are being trained and the force is expected to grow to nearly 500 officers. The LNP also has a Police Special Unit (PSU) that is trained in crowd control and other operations. The PSU is lightly armed, and less trained and equipped than the ERU.” (Ibid)

Global Integrity describe law enforcement in Liberia in their 2007 report as “very weak”. (Global Integrity Report (undated) *Liberia: Integrity Indicators Scorecard 2007 Assessment*)

The UN News Service reports:

“Five years after the peace agreement that ended its civil war, Liberia has made accelerated progress on several human rights issues, but there are still serious concerns about the rule of law, according to a United Nations expert who has just completed a two-week visit to the country.

"The installations of a new democratically elected government which took office in January 2006 has witnessed the acceleration of progress on a number of human rights and development issues including economic and social rights," Charlotte Abaka, the UN Independent Expert on the Situation of Human Rights, Technical Cooperation and Advisory Services in Liberia, said in a statement released today...

‘Serious concerns remain with regard to the rule of law,’ Ms. Abaka added. “The continued increase in armed robberies and rape cases is a security issue. Therefore there is an urgent need for far-reaching reforms in policing, judiciary and correction sectors.” (UN News Service (18 July 2008) *UN expert praises rights progress in Liberia raises concern at crime levels*)

The UN Security Council reports:

“Drug trafficking in the subregion remained a serious concern. There were several seizures of large quantities of marijuana, and there are indications that marijuana cultivation in Liberia is exceeding domestic consumption. In addition to drug-related crime, particularly armed robbery, the possible trafficking of drugs to neighbouring countries points to the existence of cross-border networks that could be utilized for other purposes, including trafficking in light weapons. The limited capacity of national authorities to control the sea and land borders leaves the country vulnerable to international organized crime networks.” (UN Security Council (10 February 2009) *Liberia: Eighteenth progress report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Mission in Liberia [S/2009/86]*)

A UNMIL press release states:

“UN Envoy Ellen Margrethe Løj has assured Liberians that Security and Rule of Law reforms will remain the central thrust of the support of the UN Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) to the Government of Liberia. The Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General (SRSG) said the Mission must also assist in dealing with crime, especially armed robbery, rape and drug trafficking while enabling the Government of Liberia’s own security institutions to develop the capacity to independently deal with security, law and order.” (UN Mission in Liberia (8 August 2009) *UNMIL to continue assisting Liberia tackle security and rule of law reforms, says UN Envoy as she awards UN peacekeeping medals to military and police officers*)

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This response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Refugee Documentation Centre within time constraints. This response is not and does not purport to be conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum. Please read in full all documents referred to.

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