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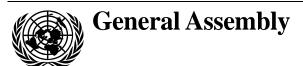
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**Strengthening of the coordination of humanitarian and
disaster relief assistance of the United Nations, including
special economic assistance: special economic assistance
to individual countries or regions**

Humanitarian assistance and reconstruction of Liberia

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report is submitted to the General Assembly in compliance with its request in resolution 61/218. It provides a status report and an analysis of the current challenges to the delivery of both humanitarian relief and rehabilitation assistance by the United Nations and its partners to Liberia.

I. Introduction

1.   The present report is submitted in compliance with the request made by the General Assembly in its resolution 61/218. It provides a status report and an analysis of the current challenges to the delivery of both humanitarian relief and rehabilitation assistance by the United Nations and its partners to Liberia. In particular, it looks at progress made in providing an environment conducive to the promotion of peace, socio-economic development and regional security; financial and technical assistance; and support for the return and reintegration of ex-combatants.

II. Review of major developments

2.   The presence of peacekeeping troops associated with the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) has stabilized the security situation in all 15 counties of Liberia, creating an environment conducive to the return and reintegration of refugees and internally displaced persons to their places of origin, supporting the re-establishment of a democratic government and resuscitating the economy. On the basis of an analysis by the United Nations of the current post-conflict situation and the need to bolster the hard-won peace with concrete and rapid supportive interventions, in October 2007 the Secretary-General deemed Liberia eligible to receive funding under the second window of the Peacebuilding Fund. The Peacebuilding Support Office subsequently submitted a priority plan highlighting three key peacebuilding focus areas, namely, fostering national reconciliation and managing conflict, addressing the needs of war-affected youth and former combatants and strengthening State capacity for peace consolidation. The priority plan has been endorsed for funding in the amount of $15 million.

3.   By the end of December 2007, 103,019 ex-combatants had been disarmed and 101,000 demobilized under the demobilization, disarmament, rehabilitation and reintegration programme. Subsequently, the focus shifted towards reintegration and rehabilitation with vocational skills training, formal education, apprenticeships and job placement. A total of 99,000 ex-combatants became eligible for reintegration assistance, of which 90,000 benefited from various reintegration programmes. Their full and sustainable reintegration remains to be completed and is part of the larger challenge of alleviating poverty in Liberia by increasing access to social services and economic opportunity. By January 2008, the final phase of reintegration assistance for the residual caseload of beneficiaries was launched. The overarching goal is to provide reintegration support to the remaining 9,000 ex-combatants who did not receive assistance in the earlier programme and who are still in need of assistance. By providing reintegration support, the programme aims to increase the possibility of employment in the market, which is expected to contribute to national development and reconciliation in Liberia and diminish the risk of threats to the relative peace and stability of the country.

A. Humanitarian assistance

4.   In 2007 there were more than 10 reported cases of flooding in five counties. In the same period, strong winds damaged 44 homes and other structures in two

counties. Fire destroyed 43 homes in two villages in two counties. Overall, more than 21,000 people were affected. While the destruction associated with those events is not on the same scale as that caused by recent natural disasters in other parts of the world, limited financial support for critical humanitarian needs, poor response and inadequate absorptive capacity had an extraordinarily negative impact on affected communities in Liberia.

5.   The National Disaster Relief Commission is working with partners to develop a comprehensive national disaster management policy. A capacity assessment has been undertaken, and a number of workshops and consultations have commenced with a view to generating an understanding of and support for disaster risk reduction policies and developing a risk reduction and response framework. Other initiatives to ensure short-term integrated disaster contingency plans are also under development.

6.   Despite the natural disasters, the overall humanitarian situation in Liberia has continued to improve since the issuance of the previous report (A/61/209). The Government of Liberia, with the assistance of the United Nations and the entire humanitarian community, maintained the focus on urgent humanitarian needs while at the same time engaging in efforts to ensure that Liberians enjoy the benefits of development in an atmosphere of peace and stability. A common humanitarian action plan was launched in 2007 to foster greater complementarity with the interim poverty reduction strategy. A total of $117 million in funding was solicited to address key humanitarian needs, including basic health care, water and sanitation facilities and food security.

7.   In expectation of a new poverty reduction strategy for the period 2008-2011, a more limited appeal was launched in 2008 to mobilize funds for the most critical residual gaps in the three priority sectors of health care, water and sanitation and food security. Funding for humanitarian assistance has been greatly reduced in the light of the progress made in development. Nevertheless, morbidity and mortality remain high. In this regard, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) ranks the under-five mortality rate in Liberia as the fifth highest in the world. Access to vulnerable and isolated populations, particularly during the long rainy season, remains a critical challenge. Access to basic health services, education and road infrastructure were all identified as top priorities in the recent country-wide development agenda consultations that were undertaken as part of the poverty reduction strategy development process.

8.   In addition, funding from the Central Emergency Response Fund enabled United Nations agencies and partners to provide urgent life-saving assistance to over 1 million vulnerable people across Liberia, especially in underserved communities, including mass vaccinations, safe drinking water and improved hygiene and sanitation facilities. An outbreak of yellow fever was tackled with a high degree of effective collaboration between the Government of Liberia and the United Nations.

9.   The process of return of internally displaced persons has been highly successful owing to the improved security situation in the country over recent years. The official assisted return process lasted from November 2004 to April 2006, when the Vice-President of Liberia declared it to be completed. During that period, more than 314,000 internally displaced persons were returned to their places of origin.

10.   In addition, there are ongoing efforts to repatriate Liberian refugees in the subregion. The official repatriation programme of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) ran from October 2004 to December 2007 and supported the return of 112,256 refugees. An additional 45,499 refugees returned by their own means during that period. In April 2008, another voluntary return exercise was launched following a tripartite agreement between Ghana, Liberia and UNHCR, primarily for the return of the 27,000 refugees remaining in Ghana by the end of 2008.

11.   Although the capacity to absorb returnees has improved since 2006, many internally displaced persons and refugees are returning home amid high unemployment and rising food and fuel prices. The Government of Liberia and the United Nations are exploring ways of helping returnees to resettle and to reintegrate into their former communities. These include providing support for growing food, training in income-generating activities and education. An estimated 72,000 registered Liberian refugees remain in asylum countries.

12.   The legacy of rape and other forms of sexual violence that were so pervasive during the 18 years of conflict continue to be felt today, with rape remaining the most frequently committed serious crime in post-conflict Liberia. Along with its impact on the human rights of those affected, sexual violence poses a serious obstacle to the consolidation of peace and the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals and needs urgently to be addressed. Indeed, the prevalence of gender-based violence has serious repercussions, including exposure to HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases, unplanned or unwanted pregnancy and the abandonment of victims by their husbands, partners and families, which, in turn, makes them increasingly vulnerable to further violence. Survivors are often unwilling to seek medical or psychosocial assistance or to report assaults to police because of the stigma associated with rape. Health facilities are ill equipped, lack adequate drugs and medical supplies and have an insufficient number of health professionals trained in the clinical and psychological management of victims. The weak judicial system and the lack of awareness and understanding of the legal system among the populace undermine the implementation of the national rape law. Moreover, owing to the culture of impunity that allows perpetrators of gender-based violence to go unpunished, victims are usually hesitant to seek assistance or to report such crimes.

13.   Against this backdrop, a nationwide campaign against rape and the signing in June 2008 of the joint Government of Liberia/United Nations programme to prevent and respond to sexual and gender-based violence, to be implemented over a four-year period, are important developments. During the first phase of the programme, from 2008 to 2010, support will target the following areas: psychosocial support, health care, legal redress, security and protection, and coordination, with an aggregate cost of $13,230,000. The key United Nations partners in this programme are the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Population Fund, UNHCR, UNICEF, the United Nations Development Fund for Women, the World Health Organization and UNMIL. The effective implementation of the programme will be critical in improving efforts to respond to and prevent sexual violence, including combating the impunity on which it thrives. Adequate and sustained funding from donors will be essential to its success.

14. In July 2008, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee Gender Standby Capacity, in coordination with the United Nations Action against Sexual Violence in Conflict initiative, a coalition of 12 United Nations entities, deployed a senior gender and gender-based violence adviser to initiate the joint programme and act as programme manager. The Gender Capacity Adviser is part of the Ministry of Gender and Development, which coordinates the programme with the support of Government line ministries and implementing partners. A joint programme steering committee has been formed. The development of effective coordination systems and structures and programme quality assurance mechanisms will be prioritized during the initial phase, from July to December 2008.

B. Transitional and recovery issues

15. The rule of law and corruption have been particularly pertinent issues. The Liberian Police Academy was re-established in July 2004 to train the country's new police force. To date, 3,500 new Liberian National Police (including 180 recruits of the newly formed Emergency Response Unit), 155 Liberia Seaport Police and 392 Special Security Service officers have graduated from the Academy. Security sector reform has been under way since before the inauguration of the Government on 16 January 2006. However, active recruitment of the new Liberian army began after the inauguration.

16. As reconciliation is a precondition for sustainable peace, legislation establishing a truth and reconciliation commission was passed in June 2005. Work began in earnest after the inauguration of the nine commissioners in February 2006, with the official launch taking place in June 2006. This was followed by a massive public awareness campaign and statement-taking process in the 15 counties of Liberia. The public hearings started in January 2008 and are continuing, with at least one diaspora hearing having taken place in the United States of America, in June 2008. The hearings are currently ongoing in the following thematic areas: youth, children, women and the review of the historical past of Liberia. The mandate of the commission ends at the end of 2008, but a request has been submitted for an extension.

17. The National Transitional Government of Liberia came to an end following elections in 2005 and the inauguration of Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, the first democratically elected woman president in Africa, in January 2006. Her administration has registered significant results in consolidating peace and security, restoring governance and the rule of law, rehabilitating infrastructure and providing basic social services, with the primary planning frameworks being the 150-day action plan, the interim poverty reduction strategy and currently the poverty reduction strategy.

18. After protracted negotiations with international partners, the National Transitional Government committed itself to the Governance and Economic Management Assistance Programme in September 2005. The Programme addresses revenue collection and stresses capacity-building and national ownership of the reform agenda. The United Nations is part of a technical team that helps to coordinate the implementation of the Programme by international partners and supports organization, monitoring and assessment, ensuring consultation with civil society and planning with the technical team and the Economic Governance Steering

Committee. The Steering Committee consists of representatives from Government, the international community and civil society, and it oversees the implementation of the Programme. As a result of the initiative, the Government is benefiting from the services of internationally recruited experts in strategic economic institutions to enhance transparency and facilitate the transfer of skills. An independent evaluation of the Programme has been undertaken, the results of which are expected to be used in formulating the Programmes' exit strategy.

19. The Government of Liberia, with support from its development partners, has finalized its first post-conflict medium-term development agenda, the "Lift Liberia" poverty reduction strategy. The strategy articulates the Government's overall vision and major development strategies for moving towards rapid, inclusive and sustainable growth and development during the period 2008-2011. The strategy, built on the lessons learned from the 150-day action plan and the interim poverty reduction strategy, includes four pillars: enhancing peace and national security, revitalizing the economy, strengthening democratic governance and the rule of law, and rehabilitating infrastructure and delivering basic services. The poverty reduction strategy will be implemented between 1 April 2008 and 30 June 2011, and has been formulated through broad-based consultations, with the participation of citizens in cities, towns and villages throughout the country, members of the business community, civil society groups, the Legislature and international development partners. With the German Government serving as host, the poverty reduction strategy was presented to partners (comprising foundations, private firms and bilateral and multilateral institutions) at the Liberia Poverty Reduction Forum, held in Berlin on 26 and 27 June 2008. The partners overwhelmingly endorsed the poverty reduction strategy and showed their firm commitment to align their programmes and funding commitments to it, with infrastructure projects, through the Liberia Reconstruction Trust Fund, listed as a key funding area.

20. Liberia is also on its way to finalizing its second Millennium Development Goals report, which is based on the latest indicators from the comprehensive food security and nutrition survey, the Liberia demographic and health survey and the core welfare and indicators questionnaire. The report is expected to be published and launched in the third quarter of 2008. The communiqué from the Liberia Poverty Reduction Forum underscores the significant need to accelerate reconstruction efforts and work towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals through the poverty reduction strategy. To effectively plan, monitor and track activities related to the Millennium Development Goals, the Government, with technical assistance from UNDP, has set up a steering committee headed by the Ministry of Planning and Economic Affairs.

21. Inspired by the Millennium Village concept, Liberia has launched its first Millennium Village in the central region of the country, targeting 23,826 rural-dwellers in the Kokoyah District of Bong County. The project aims to integrate interventions needed to achieve the Millennium Development Goals at the district level in a five-year time frame. It also provides a basis for scaling up and integrating best practices in the areas of agriculture, education, nutrition, health, energy, water and the environment. An assessment is under way to locate the second Millennium Village in the south-eastern region of Liberia, the most deprived and poorest region in the country.

22.   The emphasis on community-based recovery articulated by the United Nations joint action plan, which is supported principally by UNHCR, the World Food Programme, UNDP and UNICEF, mirrors the national development agenda. All development partners engaged in community-based recovery initiatives are now working in a coordinated and cohesive manner to promote rural reconstruction and development. Key focus areas include basic socio-economic infrastructure, livelihoods, and service provision, as well as the strengthening of local governance frameworks and mechanisms.

III.   Current challenges to peace consolidation and development

23.   Global increases in the price of essential commodities such as food and fuel threaten to destabilize Liberia's fragile peace. With price-related uprisings having occurred in neighbouring countries, including Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea, Liberia has not yet reached the point of civil unrest, but undercurrents of tension cannot be ignored.

24.   As a net food importer, Liberia has not been spared the global rise in food and fuel prices. The prices of rice, fuel and other basic commodities increased by 22 per cent between January 2007 and January 2008, which led to a 14 per cent increase in the consumer price index during that period. Economists estimate that prices are likely to continue to rise. Liberia produces less than half of its main staple food (rice). Judging from Liberia's recent past, food price increases have the potential of disrupting peace and security and should be addressed within national, regional and global perspectives.

25.   Several efforts have been made to address the food crisis at both the national and regional levels. A World Bank grant of $10 million to address urgent food needs in the country is a welcome initiative, as are efforts by the United Nations to support the Government's food security and nutrition strategy through a $140.2 million joint United Nations programme. Emergency funding from the Central Emergency Response Fund has also been received to support short-term food security interventions during the current planting season.

26.   Governments of the Mano River Union (Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire) have made proposals aimed at increasing food production and regional trade. The Government of Liberia plans to increase the minimum wages of civil servants in order to help them cope with the rise in food prices. There is now an increased national focus on improving food production as the most sustainable way of reducing the country's exposure to world rice supply and price shocks.

27.   Another key development challenge in Liberia remains security. Increasing waves of armed robbery in residential as well as corporate quarters are posing a challenge to the Liberian National Police. The exorbitantly high levels of unemployment, the recent influx of returning refugees and deported nationals and the high population density in urban areas are further facilitating the escalation of crime rates. The human and logistical capacity challenges of the national police force continue to hinder any real progress towards stopping crime.

28.   Despite the dedication of the Government and the progress that has been made over the past 30 months, severe institutional, material and national capacity constraints are hampering the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals.

This is particularly true for human resources in all sectors. With the help of UNDP, a 10-year development strategy is being developed to address human capacity development needs in the short, medium and long term. In addition, about two thirds of the population of Liberia is living below the poverty line, and when combined with the country's severely limited technical and financial capacity, significant underemployment and vast infrastructure deficit, the challenges in accelerating the reconstruction process are great.

29. The principal obstacles to the reconstruction and development process are inadequate technical capacity and lack of resources needed to drive reforms and the development agenda of the country. However, the Government has shown a high degree of political commitment to the development process. In response, its development partners have expressed their overwhelming support, as indicated by the tremendous debt waiver the country has received so far. At the recently held Liberia Poverty Reduction Forum, the partners welcomed the significant progress Liberia has made under its interim poverty reduction strategy, with key success areas including reaching the decision point, under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Initiative, qualifying for support under the International Monetary Fund Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility, creating the foundation for rebuilding the security forces, restoring services to 350 health facilities, increasing school enrolment by 44 per cent and reactivating the traditional growth sectors.

30. In support of the Paris Declaration principles on the harmonization and alignment of commitments to the priorities under the poverty reduction strategy, the partners agreed that the Government should develop a more detailed costing to facilitate the process and that a review would be done twice a year to provide input for the preparation of the national budget to ensure coordination and alignment. The partners also agreed to provide assistance to the Government in strengthening aid management. Some partners took the opportunity during the Liberia Poverty Reduction Forum to announce new financial and technical assistance commitments to Liberia. This is highly commendable; however, it must be signalled that any delays in disbursing funds would cause considerable delays in the delivery of basic services and the fulfilment of poverty reduction strategy priorities.

31. The recent development of statistical capacities and the conduct of the comprehensive food and nutrition survey, the Liberian demographic and health survey, the core welfare indicators questionnaire, the participatory poverty assessment and the national housing and population census have helped greatly to fill serious data gaps. It is critical to put in place a data and information management system that is well coordinated through a national statistical development strategy. Through the Liberia Institute of Statistics and Geo-Information Services, the Government has developed a draft national statistical development strategy, which is being validated. Reliable and comprehensive data, including statistics and geo-information, are crucial in supporting the national reconstruction and development agenda and the Millennium Development Goals, in conjunction with such United Nations tools as the common country assessment, the United Nations Development Assistance Framework and the cluster coordination framework.

32. The lack of basic social services and infrastructure is posing a severe challenge to economic recovery. Roads, where they exist at all, are in extreme need of repair, and large tracts of rural Liberia are accessible only by air during the rainy

season (April-October). There is no public power or water supply, and much of the rural population has no access to power at all.

33. Another key concern is the extremely high level of formal unemployment, estimated to be as high as 80 per cent, with youth being one of the worst-affected segments of the population. This complex situation is exacerbated by the high number of unemployed ex-combatants who have completed their reintegration training programmes and the former Armed Forces of Liberia soldiers who were discharged.

34. While the socio-economic situation in the country remains critical, regional security concerns are also widespread. Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea are not free from signs of unrest, and the security situation remains tentative in Sierra Leone as it recovers from 10 years of conflict. Contingency preparedness forms part of the plans of all United Nations agencies and many non-governmental organizations.

IV. Conclusions and recommendations

35. For the Millennium Development Goals to be achieved, or at least for substantial progress to be made, massive poverty alleviation and economic recovery efforts are essential. Substantial donor support is urgently required to help the new Government to begin to provide some services on a large scale and help to meet the expectations of the people of Liberia. The consolidation of the recent hard-won peace is dependent on this. Qualified Liberians must be attracted back to serve their country. It is of the essence that resources be available on a large scale and in a timely manner.

36. Data and information management is a central pillar of macroeconomic development and achievement of the Millennium Development Goals in Liberia, and support for building national capacity is crucial. Reliable data and data products are essential for the development of an effective development agenda and other national mechanisms and strategies aimed at reducing poverty.

37. Building the capacity of national institutions is also fundamental. The United Nations is in the process of launching county support teams to work with 15 recently appointed county superintendents in an effort to underpin sound decentralized governance with information and project management skills. The collaboration and support of all development partners would greatly increase the effectiveness of the endeavour.

38. As emphasized in the poverty reduction strategy, creating employment through the private sector is at the heart of recovery and sustainable development in Liberia. Development partners must focus on attracting investment into the country and stabilizing the economic environment in order to foster economic growth.

39. The implementation of the joint Government of Liberia/United Nations programme to prevent and respond to sexual and gender-based violence is essential, not only to meet the needs of those affected but also to consolidate peace and attain the Millennium Development Goals. In recognition of the gravity of such violence and the commitment of the Government to respond, development partners and donor Governments should ensure adequate and sustained funding for the programme.

40.   Education and health care, particularly regarding child mortality and maternal health, have similarly been identified by the Government as areas of critical concern. The United Nations system and other development partners need to increase support in those areas if any meaningful progress is to be made towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals in Liberia.

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