

Liberia Police News

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The current police force in the Liberian capital Monrovia is unable to combat an increase in violent crime, according to a recent independent report and many of the city's residents have created their own civil defence groups. "Armed robbery is on the increase in Monrovia and we are not convinced that our police force can handle this type of crime," said Eric Stewart, a community leader in the crime-prone suburb of Paynesville in the east of Monrovia where locals have formed patrols. In another Monrovia suburb, New Kru Town, Nyononti Darbgeh, who supervises a civilian night patrol team there, said the situation is so bad, "We have no choice but to provide security for ourselves." The UN and Liberian police officials in Monrovia confirmed that crime has been steadily increasing in recent months with 47 reported cases of violent assault and theft from March to April. The UN peacekeeping mission in Liberia (UNMIL), which has been overseeing security in the war-ravaged country, started a programme in 2004 to train 3,500 police by June 2007 and police officials told IRIN that that number has since increased to 6,000. However, in a March 2008 report published by the US Army Institute of Strategic Studies titled "Security sector reform in Liberia: Mixed results from humble beginnings" author Mark Malan said results of training have been poor. "The biggest problem with the Liberia National Police at present is low morale and poor discipline on the one hand and extremely poor leadership and management on the other", he said in the report. He added, "There are no authoritative statistics to measure crime trends over time and there is no coherent national security policy, never mind a national crime prevention strategy." Community leaders said they are particularly concerned once UNMIL downsizes its 15,000-strong force which is planned to start in September 2008. "I can imagine how the crime rate especially armed robbery would be worse," Stewart said. Liberia's justice minister and chairman of joint security Philip Banks said many logistical problems with the new police force had now been resolved. "Right now things are moving the way they should be for the police force," Banks said. "We are ever more vigilant and prepared to deal with armed robbery. In fact, a select number of our police officers have now been armed to conduct night time patrols with UN peacekeepers." Training of an elite team of 500 police officers will soon be undertaken by DynCorp, a private American security contractor, Liberia's Chief of Police Beatrice Sieh said. The Quick Reaction Unit [QRU], as the team will be called, "will be trained by leading international police trainers to handle armed threats," she said.

She said that by the time UNMIL pulls out the police will be capable of handling violent crime. "We respect the views of the public but the police are going through a rigorous training process and, for example, when this QRU completes their training they would be fully prepared to handle all violent crimes."

Editorial, [The Analyst \(Liberia\)](#), May 2, 2008.

Just last week, we wrote that the Liberian police, without the basic logistics such as transportation and communication could hardly be force to combat crime. With mounting criminality, especially armed robberies, the police, in the absence of social and economic solutions, are the last resort to fight crimes. My argument then was based on our bold perception of the police as well as sporadic contacts and

conversation with police officers I offered rides to from time to time. An accident brought me into a police station last week and I saw officers at work and was able to document. The accident occurred on Sunday afternoon when Emmanuel Dolo with whom I was riding on Tubman Boulevard to pick up Winsley Nanka, near the junction of Catholic Hospital decided to make a U-Turn and we were hit by a taxi that could not stop because of its speed. While we waited for the police to arrive, Emmanuel put the seven passengers in a taxi that drove them to the emergency room at the JFK Hospital. The police arrived in a pickup truck and inspected the scene. By the time we got to the Zone 3 police station in Congotown for the report, it started to get dark and we had all but forgotten about going to the beach. We followed the police officer into the traffic office, a small room with a padlock on the door. When we entered, I was taken aback by the state and small size of the room. There were two broken armchairs, with their upholstery worn out, with a yellowish sponge exposed through the torn plastic cover of undeterminable color. Emmanuel, as the driver, took a seat in a chair facing the policeman. After looking at each other and at the armchairs, Winsley and I felt safer to take seat on a small wooden bench against the wall. The floor in the room was cover with some plastic tile. Piece of the same tile covered the desk. A yellowish light bulb hung from the ceiling in the middle of the room. Given the state of the wire and cardboard ceiling, it would only take a spark to set the whole place at blaze. On the floor, three old car batteries that seemed to have been out of service since the last days of J. J. Roberts while five tires piled up behind the desk. I asked the officer if they had light because the night was setting in by the minute and he was squinting to read his own notes from an old school notebook. He said there was no electricity at the station. "Our generator broke down almost three weeks ago." He reached in his drawer and pulled out a two-inch burned out candle, and said "this is my source of light." He sat behind the desk and proceeded to interrogate Emmanuel. Once we were done, he said we needed to go to the hospital to see the passengers of he other car. He asked if he could ride with us in the taxi we had hired since they had impounded Emmanuel's car which had lost one eye and its front fender. I asked him if he could get back there in the police car. He said they only had one vehicle that took officers to various emergency locations and return to base. So if you are victim of a crime, you have to hire a taxi, go to the police station, bring an officer or two with you and then ride with the police and the person who victimized you to the station. He finally took a taxi. On Monday morning, we reported to the police station at about 8:30. We got there early and waited outside, watching the surrounding. There were at least six cars badly damaged by accident. Three of the damaged jeeps were government vehicles, judging by their license plates. These were expensive late model jeeps, costing in the high US \$40,000. It seems that a great part of the government budget goes into buying expensive cars and providing gasoline to officials. It is hard to fathom the logic behind paying someone \$12,000 a year and putting in their care a \$45,000 car and give them 200 gallons of gasoline a month? Why not pay them well and allow them to buy their own car through a credit system? At least government could make some money collecting duty fees on the cars imported by merchants. And officials would take better care of their own car they paid for. When the commander arrived, the young lieutenant drew a very precise diagram of the scene of the accident and a blackboard hanging by a thread to the ceiling. He used bits of chalk of different colors that he fished in a small basket. They went through the motion of questioning and finally, the taxi driver admitted going well above the speed limit and was charged with the responsibility of causing the accident. Nanka and I sat quietly and listened to

the whole exercise. It was certainly the most professional display of police work. From the diagram to the questions and to the reasoning behind every step, the commander left nothing to chance and I felt that I was taking a driving lesson. Then when time came to write the report, the commandant left his office and brought a manual typewriter, a relic of the 1960s. I took a walk in the corridors and there was another such machine in another office where a woman was giving a deposition. It was very apparent that the officer knew what they were doing and talking about. But here is the problem: how could they fight crime, or simply do their job under these working conditions? This is what we wrote about last week: we can have the best trained police in the world but if they don't have the basic logistics, they cannot work. How can a police station in the city of Monrovia not have a small generator to light the building at night and provide current? How does an entire police station function with one vehicle? How do we expect police officers to be typing reports at candlelight? These people did not even have chalk to write with. In the morning, police officers fight like everyone else to find a seat in the overcrowded taxis that ply the dangerous roads of Monrovia. Minister of Justice Philips Banks was on the air and in the newspaper declaring war on crime. He cited the highlights of a great program that looks wonderful on paper and in the air. But as former US Defense Secretary said, "you go to war with the army you have and not you expect to have. How much does the Minister know about the moral of his troops? Did the tough talk of Minister Banks convince the public? Did he scare the criminals? Do our men and women in uniforms have enough incentives to fight crime in its multiple forms? It is too early to draw any conclusion. However, as Minister Bropleh always speaks of change, we must change our attitude towards the police and their role in our society. We cannot train a professional police force and relegate it to the old status. In our candid conversation, one officer told us that they only receive one uniform per year. How many times a person can wear the same shirt every day to go to the same job? In the end, you start to lose respect for yourself. Fighting crime is not just a law enforcement issue, it has several components that all need to be in place for it to be successful. But if we have to rely on the police in the immediate future to deal with the emerging social fear, it must be given the ammunitions to fight. There is fear in certain quarters about arming the police, because of our recent history of conflict. But we must start at some point to trust them. We cannot wait until UNMIL phases out before giving guns to our police. Sooner or later, the police will be armed. It may be better to try them now while we still have UNMIL than later we are left on our own. Beyond the issue of arms, revamping the police means also providing them with adequate working and living quarters, transportation, uniforms and other logistics needed to protect society. If our police stations continue to function under the current conditions, if our police officers have to stand at street corners and beg for ride or hustle taxi drivers to get home, if the stations lack the basic necessities such as chairs, electricity, computers and chalkboards, we can hardly expect them to fight crime. Fighting crime can only be successful if law enforcers are well trained and well equipped in this world where criminals have access to the deadliest weapons. If we take our security seriously, we must take the police seriously. Using very graphic images, some legislators called for stiff penalties for arm robbers. There are talks about forming a special armed unit in the police. All that is good and well, but the first line of defense is the community police. And to "hang" someone, as people are saying, you must first arrest them. To arrest a criminal, you must have a strong and determined police, with the adequate logistics and working conditions.

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With a nearly 15000-strong, robust, UN inter-positional intervention security force (UNMIL) in place, with the Security Sector Reform program well in its third year and nearing completion, and with the concession of the UN that Liberia's peace and security is key to global and regional peace and security. Liberia's security is still fragile and seemingly deteriorating. Violent criminals have literally swarmed the capital and other large urban centers across the country and launch a war of despondency, death, and mayhem.

There are suggestions that the swarm is no doubt undermining the peace process and government's effort to revive the economy through the revitalization of the private sector. The question many are asking is, "Where all this does leave the security concern of the international community, the government, and the security operations of UNMIL and LNP?" The Analyst Staff Writer has been looking at some recent incidents of violent crimes in light of this reigning question. Monrovia and other large cities in the country are in a state of war with armed robbers taking over nightlife, raiding vulnerable homes, and dispossessing of and/or harming innocent people, victims and observers said here over the weekend. In the midst of this upsurge of violent crimes, there are indications that the United Nations inter-positional force (UNMIL) that is mandated by the UNSC to ensure public safety by assisting the government of Liberia establish security grids across the country is a shadow of its former self and so is the nation's police, LNP. The Analyst has learnt that as vulnerable Liberians flinch in numbing fear of armed robbers and wish the police were up to their statutory obligation to the people and as UNMIL passes the buck of security to the Liberian government, there are indications that the revitalization of the private sector is in danger. Prospective investors are reportedly folding their briefcases and reconsidering their decisions to invest in Liberia. Reports say the situation has become so grave that residents mainly of the nation's capital, Monrovia, have resorted to self-imposed curfew as early as 8pm-9pm. "The situation is so grave that if you are not home by 8-9 p.m. depending on where you live or how far you are from home you may not get a vehicle to get home. Or if you do, you have a 9 out of 10 probability of being waylaid and robbed and/or harmed," says Logan Town resident Emmanuel Walker who said he works as attendant at a downtown Monrovia nightclub. Emmanuel may sound too exaggerated to be believed, but Police Chief Col. Beatrice Sieh and the Acting Commissioner of United Nations Police (UNPOL), Mr. Henrik Stiernblad, suggested last week that he may not be too far from grasping the point of how far security has declined over the last few months. "For April 2008, we have already noted 47 cases of armed robbery in the country and this has to be dealt with," UNPOL Chief, Henrik Stiernblad said during a press briefing at the UNMIL Headquarters, April 16, 2008. Stienblad said the security of Liberia's communities and business squares was the responsibility of its security forces but conceded that it was also the responsibility of UNMIL to support the Liberia National Police (LNP) to deal with the upsurge of crime in the country. He did not say what form and shape the support should take or why it was not forthcoming at this crucial time, but he noted that combating crimes was not about carrying weapons but using experience, intelligence, and in a timely way taking steps to prevent the criminals from doing their deeds. There, in his view, is no lack of expertise in this regard in Liberia as there are over 600 armed formed police units in the country which can be deployed for any operation that will be conducted by the LNP. Again the UNPOL Chief came short of saying why UNMIL or UNPOL has not

urged or mandated the deployment of the so-called armed 600-strong formed police units but chose to keep quiet as LNP complains about logistics, cash, and arms to launch an effective crackdown on the new wave of armed robbery.

He disclosed that UNMIL and LNP have increased the number of joint patrols to about 41 patrols across the city of Monrovia, but decline to say what impact that increase was having on night time violent crimes in Monrovia. "We will be gathering information on exactly who these robbers are, where they are located and other details. Once we come to the stage when we are ready to do search and arrest, the LNP will take the lead with backup provided by the UNPOL," the Acting Commander of UNPOL chief said. According to him, this was a parallel to night patrols around the city that was being put into place by the LNP in collaboration with UNPOL. LNP Inspector General Sieh was in agreement but implied that the police have inherent drawbacks that were likely to hamper their community policing and the overall national security agenda. "I know that the government is going through a lot of constraints and it has been difficult; however, since the 14th April 2008, the police has only received 450 gallons of fuel from the Minister of Justice for night patrols," Inspector General Beatrice Munah Sieh during the April 16 press briefing at the UNMIL Headquarters. She said despite the limited logistics, the police and its partners managed to put into place what she called "Operation Thunder Storm" that is intended to support vigorous clampdowns on armed robbery. "We are going after these people, we are arresting them and they are going to be processed which is ongoing; but in the end they will be bailed," Inspector Sieh said, suggesting to observers that she was either dissatisfied with or found the criminal justice system too cumbersome as part of the fight against crimes in post-war Liberia. She said the operation which coincided with President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf's concern about increasing armed robbery in the city, has so far netted 18 armed robbers three of whom were lynched by community mobs on Bushrod Island. Inspector General Sieh then warned the communities against using mob justice against suspected armed robbers in the same breath that she conceded that communities would remain vulnerable because some "3,000 trained and competent police officers who are willing to do their work" were unlikely to be deployed due to the lack of logistics. She did not say what effect the troop shortage is likely to have on the so-called "Operation Thunderstorm", which some say is nothing more than a white-washed model of the failed operations "Spider Web" and "Sweeping Wave". It may be recalled that President Sirleaf, during a recent state of the nation address, called for a step-up in security patrols and intelligence gathering to put a lid on the rising insecurity and armed robbery in the country. "There is nothing that pains me more than to see innocent citizens who are trying to rebuild their lives fall victims to these criminals," the President said. She then requested UNMIL to be more vigilant and proactive in patrols and ordered the Minister of Justice to do more in terms of logistical support for the police and the strengthening of the effective system of justice. An LNP source told The Analyst over the weekend that neither has the Justice Minister provided the needed logistics, nor has it done anything to ensure that criminals are speedily prosecuted to prevent people bailing them out only to be found back on the streets and in the community visiting havoc upon innocent Liberians. Inspector General Sieh and UNPOL chief Henrik Stiernblad may be diplomatic about what is hampering police patrols and giving incentives to armed robbers to raid vulnerable communities, but insiders told The Analyst over the weekend that deep-seated mistrust and in-fighting were to blame. According to

police and Justice Ministry sources, LNP has no budget of its own and that all procurements for police operations were being made by the Ministry of Justice, which often act on its own without the input of the police authority. "Whatever they think the police need that's what they buy. If the police needs something and they thought it was not necessary even though it was, they would not purchase it. Plus the fact that most of the patrol vehicles are down, the police get only 2.5 gallons of fuel for a night patrol," the insiders said. The insiders who are close to the leadership of the LNP and the Justice Ministry said as the result of the lack of logistics, police patrols were poorly-motivated, making response to distress call painstakingly slow and most often meaningless. "I mean the police is strangulated," the insiders said, prevailing on the media to publicize the police's plight for quick action. They did not say why the LNP authorities were not speaking out and making their case, but they disclosed further that the Justice Minister has appointed his own security advisor who runs separate police operations without consultations with LNP authorities. The insiders, implying that pecuniary interest was superseding the success of police community operations, then claimed further that even though "Operation Thunderstorm" was launched few months ago, the Justice Ministry has re-launched it because "some money is coming in for the operation". The Analyst was unable to verify these claims. The fight and mistrust, naturally, should be between the Justice Ministry and the LNP, but there are suggestions that it has expanded to include some operatives of UNMIL responsible for security. "UNMIL, for its part, has expressed lack of interest in the leadership of the LNP and is calling for changes," an UNMIL insider told The Analyst over the weekend. The insider quoting an UNMIL communication said the mission believes the performance of the LNP leadership was not only poor and weak but that there was also a lack of trust within the police. "The communities have no trust in the police; instead, they fear the police because of weak leadership. Then there is rising corruption. All of this calls for a big shake-up to put in qualified Liberians or foreign nationals, like in the case of AFL, to take charge and improve conditions," the UNMIL insider who refused to be named "because I'm not the spokesman" said. When it was put to one Liberian security officer whether he thought putting foreign nationals at the helm of the LNP as part of the solution of increasing LNP's performance was a good idea, he said "No." "We will not sit here to allow what happened to the AFL to happen to the police; the present Chief of Staff of the AFL is a Nigerian. If this is the only way they will give the police assistance then we beg to differ," he said, citing what he called foreign indifference to Liberia's immediate compelling peace and security as the reason for finding their placement at the helm of administration appalling.

Meanwhile reports say increased public outcry against the increase in armed robbery in Monrovia in recent weeks has forced the police to begin holding strategic dialogue with community leaders across the city. A community-police strategy meeting involving some 20 communities in Monrovia and its environs agreed to pool their efforts in order to end the wave of armed robbery by proffering intelligence information, reporting criminal incidents and movements, and organizing vigilante and community-watch groups. The meeting, which was facilitated by Grand Kru County Representative in the National Legislature Gbenima B. Slopadoe, hopes to improve the free movement of commuters in the capital by proposing speedy trials for suspected armed robbers and petitioning the National Legislature to enact laws that will make armed robbery a non-bailable offense punishable by life sentence for offenders. The five-hour meeting with the community leaders also agreed to set up a

5-man task force with the mandate of demarcating Monrovia into five security zones and organizing vigilante or watch groups in the within communities in each zone. Community watch or vigilante groups had been used in past situations of upsurge in violent crimes in Monrovia without noticeable success and observers are worried that it may not be success this time. "Vigilante or community-watch groups can be useful in fighting crimes, especially where the state police is impotent. But experience shows that it will not be too long before the same criminal take over the watch teams and begin intimidating and harassing the same people that are intended to be protected. We saw that before. So we are just going back to square one.

The solution is the police must be armed so that they can fight crimes and criminals," said community leader Zarwolo Norman of Paynesville. He said UNMIL and the LNP were shadows of their former selves and all that was required now was for UNMIL to go back to its original mandate and stop shifting blames. "As it shifts blames on the Liberian government and saying that the government should deal with the security situation even though it knows the government does not have logistics to arm and move the police in vehicular patrols, UNMIL is relegating Liberia's security and undermining its own presence in the country," Zarwolo claimed further.