

Liberia–Côte d’Ivoire Border Situation: June 2013

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1. Overview

In April 2013, the United Nations (UN) commended the government of Liberia for consolidating peace in the country. The UN peacekeeping mission in Liberia (UNMIL) has begun to drawdown its 15,000 troops in the country, but has said it will continue to promote greater cohesion in Liberia. 5,000 UNMIL troops will remain in the country, and the UN will support the government of Liberia to recruit and train 7,000 national troops in time for UNMIL’s final withdrawal in 2015.

The UN mission in Côte d’Ivoire (UNOCI) is working with the government on a national DDR process, with COMNAT (National Commission of Small Arms and Light Weapons) facilitating the process. Over 60,000 former fighters had to be disarmed. It is also estimated that around 3 million arms are in circulation in the country (IRIN October 2012). The proliferation of weapons and the presence of uncontrolled military and armed groups are the main challenges to personal security and national stability. In addition, many of the 46,000 internally displaced Ivoirians are still living with host families, while those who have returned home are struggling to rebuild their lives. Although many who had fled to neighbouring countries have returned to the country, they now face considerable uncertainty and insecurity in reintegrating.

The former president Laurent Gbagbo is currently awaiting trial for crimes against humanity at the ICC. In the meantime, his supporters still believe he will return to Côte d’Ivoire. There have been allegations of his supporters recruiting and training fighters to contest the government of Alassane Ouattara. Many of Gbagbo’s political supporters have been arrested and put into prisons in the northern part of the country without trial. Some of those arrested in Liberian forests have been handed over to the government of Côte d’Ivoire and are also being held in prison without trial.

Border officials in both Liberia and Côte D’Ivoire continue to be concerned about insecurity in the region. Both governments, in official meetings facilitated by the UN and the MRU (Manu River Union), have pledged to provide mutual support to ensure the stability of their countries and the region.

The African Development Bank (ADB), in support of the integration of communities in the Mano River Union, has funded an electricity project across Côte d’Ivoire, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea. The project also aims to promote trade and private sector development, thereby supporting the region’s transition out of fragility and instability.

2. Cross-border relations

Bilateral negotiations between the governments of Liberia and Côte d’Ivoire, facilitated by the UN, led to a peace agreement and the opening of the Liberian borders in April 2013. As part of the agreement, Liberian security forces arrested over 90 rebels along the Ivorian-Liberian border in Maryland County and handed them over to the Ivorian authorities. The Liberian authorities also arrested over 30 of their own citizens (mostly from the Krah ethnic group) alleged to have been recruited to fight in Côte d’Ivoire in support of Gbagbo. All those arrested are still awaiting trial in prison.

Border officials from both sides have had joint meetings, initially facilitated by UNMIL and UNOCI. These are monthly meetings in which each side presents security issues identified during the period and decisions are

taken as to how to manage and avoid tensions. At the Logatuo and Gbinta border, the Joint meetings (code named MAYO) are organised at either Ganta in Nimba County, Liberia, or at Danane in Côte d'Ivoire. Officials attending the meetings include:

Liberia	The County Development Superintendant, Police, Immigration (Border Patrols and Administration), National Security Agency, Customs, Drug Enforcement Agency, National Revenue Authority
Côte d'Ivoire	Prefet, Sub-Prefet, City Mayor, Commanders of Gendarmerie, Police, Customs, Force Nouvelle, Immigration, Drug Enforcement, Forestry Unit, Dozo (traditional armed hunters)

The meetings have yet to outline any real action points and are beginning to lose credibility. There are also continuing issues of tension. Liberian market women complain that Ivorian border officials are still extorting monies from them when they cross the border to access markets. Some Liberian officials also claim that criminal case procedures and laws vary across the two countries, which creates difficulties when they have to negotiate on behalf of their citizens. For example, if a citizen or foreigner crosses the border on the Liberian side and feels that a security official has wrongly extorted money from them, they can seek redress from the Liberian authorities, and that particular official may be penalised. This is not the case on the Ivorian side of the border.

3. Cross-border cultural relations

Those living in border communities in Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire, like other African countries, have historical ties of kinship. They sometimes have religious, economic and cultural ties. The people of Logatuo in Liberia and those in Gbinta and Danane in Côte d'Ivoire are directly related (Krah & Bete, Gio & Yakubas). They share customary traditions such as funerals and marriages. They also share economic markets. Border officials on both sides have commented that managing the flow of these communities can sometimes be challenging, particularly when "bad nuts want to use that opportunity to break the law". One official said, "We know the local people in these communities. They are not the trouble makers, so we work with them daily in a cordial manner, but when the troublemakers come the community people hide them in their homes and it gets difficult."

Security officials we spoke to during the border visit claim that the Krah ethnic group in Liberia are sympathetic to the Ivorian Bete community because of cultural and familial ties. The Bete are kinsmen of former President Laurent Gbagbo. On a number of occasions the Krah have allowed armed groups from the Gbagbo camp to recruit and train in Grand Gedeh forest. He stressed that these community members know the forest better than the security forces, which are mostly recruited from Monrovia. This makes it difficult to contain the security situation along the borders, as those with ties to the Bete will not cooperate with Liberian security officials. This further increases tensions between the Ivorian and Liberian government.

4. The Liberian Department of Immigration and the challenge of border management

The Department of Immigration in Liberia works with the police, customs, National Security Agency, Drug Enforcement Agency, military (particularly in trouble spots) and fire service to manage the borders of the country. The Department of Immigration is part of the Ministry of Justice and its responsibilities include patrolling the borders to prevent arms, human and drug trafficking and to stop contraband goods crossing the borders. The department also monitors the activities of criminals that may provoke insecurity in border areas.

During the crisis in neighbouring Guinea, the immigration department was deployed to patrol the country's borders and prevent spill over of the insurgence into Liberia. They were equipped and armed. As the country does not have a full army, immigration officials act as local security forces; and more so with the gradual withdrawal of UNMIL from Liberia's borders who previously provided support to the army. It was immigration officials who arrested 90 Ivorian political opponents. The Liberian Refugee Repatriation and Resettlement Commission (LRRRC) has treated them as special refugees until they were handed over to the Ivorian Government in June 2011 as part of the peace truce between the two countries.

The challenge for border management is how officials from the Liberian and Ivorian immigration departments can work together effectively. There are several challenges including language, but also the lack of logistics and agreement on how to organise joint patrols. Allegations of Ivorian officials extorting monies from traders, especially women, are widespread. The Liberian Immigration Department has patrol vehicles but little funds to run and maintain them. The Ivorian side does not even have means of transport.

5. UNMIL withdrawal from Liberia and its implications for security and peace

UNMIL began to withdraw from Liberia in May 2013. Each border team handed over to a national team. Some physical structures and equipment were handed over as part of this and a few Liberian national security officials have been trained. However, the exit strategy leaves Liberia with huge gaps in capacity and may heighten tensions in communities. For example, Liberian security officials complained that the Bangladeshi UNMIL contingent stationed at Logatuo border took with them two 30 KV generators and a water treatment plant when they withdrew in May 2013. They also dismantled a housing structure, which previously housed about 20 UNMIL officials and gave the materials to the Muslim community at the Logatuo Border post. This has led to claims that the Bangladeshi contingent has favoured its fellow Muslims. This may strain relations between the Muslim population and the rest of the community. The withdrawal should be carried out in a more conflict sensitive manner.

Liberia's Minister of Defence has allegedly appealed to UNMIL to re-consider the capacity they leave behind. One request made was that UNMIL remove the UN security code from the communication system and hand it over to Liberian officials to support their work, especially in the border region. UNMIL have so far refused.

The UNMIL withdrawal in Sinoe County comes at a time when there are increased tensions in the area. The Golden Veroleum Palm Company is due to lay-off about 510 workers, and in addition, the company is in dispute with communities over land concessions. In order to deal with these heightened tensions the Liberian Government has had to deploy its over-stretched police forces to the area.

There are also positive developments in the MRU region. The African Development Bank is funding an MRU link grid, which will supply electricity along the border towns in Nimba, Grand Gedeh and Maryland in Liberia. This grid links the four MRU countries of Côte d'Ivoire, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea. The project is to support trade, and the integration, border security and stability efforts of the four countries.

6. Voluntary repatriation

There is on-going voluntary repatriation of Ivorian refugees from Liberia. This programme was initiated by the UNHCR with the support of CARITAS and the Liberian Refugee, Repatriation and Resettlement Commission.

On a visit to Toe Town on 6 June 2013, 555 people were being repatriated (15 trucks with 37 people in each – women, men and children). Conciliation Resources spoke to some of these people who said that they were happy to return to their homes but were unsure about how they would be able to rebuild their lives.

Tiede Judith is a mother of 2 children. She had her baby Tiede Safura on her back and said she was going home to Cie Zemble near Toulepleu:

"I have been given four blankets and a mat. I hear my house was burnt down. My husband and I had to run away, the soldiers were looking for him. I will stay with my brother, while I find my feet. I am here with my mother and my two children. My husband left with the earlier group but he is still living with some family.

They told us that our communities will receive us and help us to get back to our feet. If they did not help us when the soldiers were after us I don't think they will now. We trust God and we will go back and see what happens. Before the war, my husband and I had a farm in Zie Zemble. When we came to Liberia we worked on people's farms and I fetched wood to sell so we could survive. I believe we can farm again if only our farmland is still there for us."

7. Governance in border communities

The border communities are endowed with rich natural resources including timber, herbs and agricultural land. Several extractive companies come into areas having signed concession contracts with the national government, and rural communities are uncertain how they benefit from these agreements. Most of the population are not mobilised and do not have the capacity to engage in dialogue. The border communities are geographically and politically removed from the capital, Monrovia. Logatuo is about 250km from Monrovia. The roads are in poor condition; even 4-wheel drive vehicles struggle. Schools in these areas are poorly equipped and lack qualified teachers. The nearest Hospital is Jackson F. Doe Memorial Hospital in Tapita which is about 57km on very bad roads, making access challenging. Transport is infrequent and communication networks get weaker as one gets closer to the border. Communities find it a challenge to be part of the development agenda of the country. One official said tax collection was difficult because citizens did not see any benefit to their communities. Elected politicians tend to visit these areas only when elections time approaches. There are large numbers of unemployed youth who move across the borders for illicit trade.

8. Policy recommendations

1. UNMIL should review its drawdown strategy in Liberia and support the people to build confidence in their national security apparatus. The UN should be more sensitive to how the composition of its peacekeeping missions impacts community relations. Troops with religious or cultural affinities with particular communities may result in increased tensions.
2. The consolidation of peace in Liberia goes beyond its sovereign territory; Liberia must also look at how activity in its border areas impacts on the stability of its neighbours (e.g. Bete access to the Liberian forest to recruit and train fighters against the Ouattara government).
3. Bilateral negotiations between Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire on the issue of border relations should be strengthened and sustained. A one-off dialogue will not enable parties to deal with the complexities of political tensions and build the necessary relations for improved integration and economic trade. Dialogue should be continuous and address the concerns of both parties.
4. There needs to be greater co-ordination between border agencies. At the moment operations are carried out separately and apply different regulations; there is also little information sharing.

5. Both Liberian and Ivorian governments should support the co-ordination of border patrols by improving logistical support to its border officials. With the arrival of the ADB-MRU electricity grid in border areas, supplying computers to border officials will enhance their work, particularly so that up to date information can be swiftly provided to the national level for effective policymaking.
6. Liberia should focus on strengthening public participation in governance, particularly in border areas where communities are marginalised from decision-making processes. Priority should be given to improving infrastructure, including roads and communication networks.

9. Potential role for Conciliation Resources and partners

- Conciliation Resources can support border communities to engage policy actors and border officials at district and national levels.
- Conciliation Resources and partners should engage national and international policy actors to promote the consolidation of peace in the region. In particular it should support sustained dialogue between the two countries.
- Conciliation Resources and partners should aim to influence bilateral border security meetings to promote a more results oriented approach and encourage officials to discuss challenges to implementing common approaches.
- Conciliation Resources and partners should advocate for the acceptance of a dialogue process to consolidate reconciliation and DDR processes in Côte d'Ivoire, and the national reconciliation process in Liberia.
- Conciliation Resources should continue to provide logistical and technical support to national partners in both Côte d'Ivoire and Liberia to enable them to work in marginalised border communities so that they can develop confidence and skills for dialogue with their governments.

Conciliation Resources is an independent peacebuilding NGO that works with people in conflict to prevent violence and build peace. We're there as long as we're needed to provide advice, support and practical resources. In addition, we take what we learn to government decision-makers and others working to end conflict, to improve policies and practice worldwide.

We publish the *Accord* peacebuilding analysis series, which in 2012 focused on 'Consolidating peace: Liberia and Sierra Leone' www.c-r.org/accord/westafrica