



[\[Back \]](#)

[USIPeace Briefing](#)

Liberia's Peacebuilding Effort: One Year after Transition

By [Dorina Bekoe](#) and [Christina Parajon](#)
December 2006

- [Fitful Progress in Peacebuilding and Reconciliation](#)
 - [Security Sector Reform and Disarmament](#)
 - [The Rule of Law, Justice, and Reconciliation](#)
 - [The Media and Peacebuilding](#)
 - [The International and Regional Communities](#)
- [The Way Forward](#)
- [Notes](#)

The November 2005 elections in Liberia marked the end of a two-year transition period and ushered in a democratically elected government led by President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf. She faces the enormous task of consolidating peace after fourteen years of conflict.

To help this process, the U.S. Institute of Peace created the Liberia Working Group. Through a series of public meetings, the Liberia Working Group will address the major topics in Liberia's peacebuilding efforts, with a view to maintaining international interest, support, and engagement in Liberia to ensure a durable peace. The first meeting of the Liberia Working Group, on [November 13, 2006](#), took stock of the progress the country had made over the last year in consolidating peace and fostering reconciliation. Dr. J. Peter Pham, director of the Nelson Institute for International Affairs at James Madison University, and John Kollie, democracy fellow at the National Endowment for Democracy, led the panel discussion and presented recommendations for effective support from the regional and international communities. This USIPeace Briefing highlights the central points of the meeting and panelists' recommendations for the way forward.

Fitful Progress in Peacebuilding and Reconciliation

While Liberia remains peaceful, its grim social and economic conditions present formidable obstacles to its reconstruction and reconciliation efforts. Participants lauded Liberia for its efforts to reform the security sector, the establishment of the truth and reconciliation commission, and strong support from the United States. On the other hand, they raised concerns about the incomplete disarmament process, persistent bias in the media, lagging legal reform, and the continuing fragility of the sub-region.

Security Sector Reform and Disarmament

Liberia has taken an innovative approach to national security. After the war, the challenge lay in how to restructure the role of the national army in the country, while adequately addressing internal and external security needs. Many policymakers were reluctant to build a large army—given the negative role played by military forces in Liberia's past political turmoil. Some members of the new government favored an

elimination of the military entirely and advocated only the creation of a police force. Others argued that without an army, Liberia could not protect itself from external threats in a sub-region that remains volatile. In the end, the Liberian government decided to create a relatively small army of 2,000 that would be supported by a hybrid police force, one with a stronger-than-average capacity that would allow it to assist the army in cases of internal or external security emergencies. Even with this additional capacity, the police force would remain a separate entity from the military.

While the formal security forces are being assembled and trained, the former combatants in the civil war still have the potential to threaten the peace. At the close of the civil war, the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) demobilized approximately 100,000 combatants. But the combatants relinquished only 27,000 weapons to UNMIL, a fraction of what many thought to be in circulation. The missing weapons point to a worryingly incomplete disarmament process.

The Rule of Law, Justice, and Reconciliation

Speaking on the transition process that preceded the Johnson-Sirleaf administration, Pham noted the need for constitutional and legal reform to create a more conducive environment for democratic development. Liberia's constitution, designed for former President Samuel Doe¹, does not contain many of the provisions of those found in liberal democracies. Specifically, Pham recommended that the constitution be reviewed to consider the inclusion of term limits, strengthening of the legislative and judicial branches, and decentralization to foster the "building of democracy from the ground up." Similarly, some laws, particularly as they relate to land tenure, are antiquated and enshrine ethnic divisions. For example, the code of laws declares that when indigenous people reach a "sufficient level of civilization," they can petition the government for their land. The repatriation of refugees also poses problems regarding land tenure rights. Kollie noted that tensions arise when Mandingos, who are perceived as Doe supporters, attempt to reclaim land in areas that are inhabited mainly by Gios and Manos, perceived as Charles Taylor supporters.² The Gios and Manos claim that they "gave" the land to Mandingos, but that they retain ultimate ownership. Without clear rules on land tenure and transfer, the Mandingos remain unable to return to their former homes and restart their lives.

Justice and reconciliation has not been sufficiently addressed. Many human rights abusers and other perpetrators of war crimes seem to have escaped punishment. Moreover, many community-based efforts at reconciliation have been superficial and short-sighted. While the transfer of former President Taylor to The Hague to face charges of war crimes is a victory for justice, it is problematic that he is not being tried for the crimes he committed in Liberia, but only for those he committed in Sierra Leone. Furthermore, others who committed war crimes and atrocities or provided support to warlords—such as Senator Prince Johnson, formerly the leader of the rebel group Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia; House Speaker Edwin Snowe, who is under United Nations travel sanctions and accused of having provided funds to Taylor while in exile; and Senator Adolphus Dolo, who is also under United Nations travel sanctions as a former Taylor supporter—do not face commensurate charges. Indeed, the sole mechanism in place to address war crimes is the truth and reconciliation commission. While its establishment in June 2006 is a positive development, it will hear cases of abuse suffered by war victims for only two years and have no powers to convict those accused. In addition, the country continues to struggle with the administration of the rule of law. Earlier this year, according to Pham, of the twenty-two circuit judgeships in place, only thirteen were filled; out of those thirteen, four judges were on sick leave and four were on the verge of retirement, leaving only five to administer the law.

The Media and Peacebuilding

Throughout the civil war, Liberia's media was partisan and subjective. At the onset of Taylor's insurgency in 1989, many members of the media openly supported his movement. Through the Liberian Communications Network, which Taylor established in 1992, the media worked to propagate his message. Similarly, working under Amos Sawyer, the interim president from 1990 to 1994, the media wrote reports

against Taylor. As the insurgency began to splinter, the media followed suit. By continuing to report along factional and ethnic lines, the media facilitated the exacerbation of the conflict. Although the war is over, Kollie said that the media had yet to transform itself into a reliable, objective source of information. As a result, the media is jeopardizing the peacebuilding efforts of the Johnson-Sirleaf administration.

The International and Regional Communities

As many scholars have observed, countries are most vulnerable to a resurgence of war in the period immediately following a conflict. Many in the audience echoed the panelists' appeal that the international community, especially the United States, remain committed to peace in Liberia. Many in Liberia argue that the United States has a unique responsibility to support Liberia's recovery and reconstruction, due to the historical links between the two countries.³ In this regard, Pham noted, the restructuring and training of the new army is nearly completely funded by the U.S. government. Moreover, the UNMIL mission received 27 percent of its funding from the United States.⁴ One participant suggested that the international community could further support Liberia's peacebuilding efforts through the cancellation of its foreign debt—freeing up assets to focus on reconstruction.

Liberia needs international development assistance to succeed, but it also needs peace in West Africa. During the height of Liberia's conflict, Sierra Leone and Guinea were also experiencing political instability and war. While those two countries are not currently engulfed in war, Pham noted that the political situation in the broader sub-region continues to be fragile and uncertain. In Sierra Leone, while the peacebuilding efforts continue to move steadily forward, the underlying factors that led to civil war remain unaddressed. In Guinea, the potential for instability in the event of a presidential vacancy remains a possible threat. Liberia's eastern neighbor, Cote d'Ivoire, has experienced political instability and intermittent fighting since a failed coup in September 2002. Liberia and Cote d'Ivoire share not only a border, but common ethnic groups such as the Krahn that may be tempted to provide assistance to their ethnic kin across national borders.

The Way Forward

Participants outlined recommendations on the way forward for the international community, regional and national policy makers, and the media:

- International attention, engagement, and support to Liberia—especially from the United States—must continue. Liberia's infrastructure and governing bodies suffered great losses during the civil war. Only through continued international assistance can Liberia successfully provide basic services to its citizens.
- Peacebuilding must take account of the region's political situation and the cultural and ethnic ties between states. Ethnic groups assisted their kin as they crossed borders or provided support as they identified with their grievances, thus spreading instability across states. Hence, understanding how neighboring countries view ongoing political issues will help to reduce regional tension.
- Reconciliation efforts must address the divisions in society more directly. Currently, reconciliation programs do not focus on such deeply rooted issues as land tenure and ethnic grievances, which prevent groups from successfully rebuilding their lives. Similarly, the constitution and legal structure must be reviewed to assist in the reintegration of refugees and the promotion of ethnic equality in order to facilitate reconciliation. Legal mechanisms should also be developed to address the need for accountability for the most serious crimes during the civil wars.
- The media can play a key role in building peace by adopting a more objective approach. Despite the absence of war, the media still produces unbalanced reports and heightens ethnic divisions. Instead, the media must play a more proactive approach in reconciliation efforts.

Notes

1. Former President Samuel Doe was killed in 1990 by Prince Johnson's Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia.
2. Former President Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia sparked the civil war in 1989. The interventions of the Economic Community of West African States and the United Nations paved the way for elections in 1997, which Taylor won. The war resurged in 1999. Taylor's exile to Nigeria in 2003 ended the war and ushered in the interim government that organized the November 2005 elections.
3. The Republic of Liberia was founded in 1847 by freed American slaves, who were "repatriated" to the West African nation beginning in 1822.
4. "United State Assistance: From the American People...to the Liberian People," Address by U.S. Ambassador Donald Booth, November 3, 2006, Monrovia, Liberia. (<http://monrovia.usembassy.gov/liberia/SpNov032006.html> accessed: November 30, 2006); 2006.

Of Related Interest

- [Managing Natural Resource Wealth](#)
Special Report, August 2006
Jill Shankleman demonstrates a higher than average risk of naturally resource-rich countries experiencing and returning to conflict, including Liberia, Iraq, Sudan, and more.
- [Liberia's President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf Visits USIP](#)
Event, March 2006
  (Audio and Photo Gallery Available)
- [USIP Grants Related to Liberia](#)
- [Achieving Peace in Liberia](#)
USIP Event, February 2004 (Audio & Video)
- [Eye of the Hurricane: Liberia and Instability in West Africa](#)
USIP Event, December 2002 (Audio)
- [Responding to War and State Collapse in West Africa](#)

This USIPeace Briefing was written by [Dorina Bekoe](#), a senior research associate in the [Center for Conflict Analysis and Prevention](#), and [Christina Parajon](#), a program assistant in the [Center for Post-Conflict Peace & Stability Operations](#), at the United States Institute of Peace. The views expressed here are not necessarily those of the Institute, which does not advocate specific policies.

The United States Institute of Peace is an independent, nonpartisan, national institution established and funded by Congress. Its goals are to help prevent and resolve violent international conflicts, promote post-conflict stability and democratic transformations, and increase peacebuilding capacity, tools, and intellectual capital worldwide. The Institute does this by empowering others with knowledge, skills, and resources, as well as by its direct involvement in peacebuilding efforts around the globe.

[See our complete list of USIPeace Briefings.](#)

United States Institute of Peace - 1200 17th Street NW - Washington, DC 20036
(202) 457-1700 (phone) - (202) 429-6063 (fax)