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Building Peace and Security through Ex-combatant Reintegration in Liberia

A major factor that will affect peace building and reconciliation in Liberia is how effective ongoing efforts to reintegrate some 103,000 disarmed ex-combatants into regular society will be. Disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) has both a short-term focus on achieving stability and security and a longer-term aim of rebuilding post-conflict societies and laying the foundations for sustainable development. Reintegration is essentially a social and economic process with an open timeframe, primarily taking place in communities at the local level.

The Rehabilitation and Reintegration (RR) Programme began in Liberia in June 2004. Its key components are agriculture; vocational skills training, apprenticeship and job placement; small enterprise development; labour based activities; and formal education, funded by UNDP and parallel programmes. The RR programme can point to the fact that 29,872 ex-combatants had successfully completed RR training and another 28,248 were currently enrolled in programmes as of 1 September 2006 but it has been marred by a number of shortcomings and irregularities.

A large-scale survey assessing the progress of ex-combatant reintegration was conducted for the UN Mission in Liberia between August and September 2006. It comprised a standardised questionnaire, administered to a representative sample of 944 ex-combatants and focus group discussions in 10 of Liberia's 15 counties. Findings were analysed in three areas: livelihood prospects (economic reintegration), social reintegration, and governance and security.

High self-reported unemployment, particularly in urban areas, and among reintegration programme completers, common dissatisfaction with the programme and the perceived pre-occupation of ex-combatants in illegal economic activities reinforce the idea that economic reintegration has been slow going. This is somewhat offset by the finding that communities visited appeared largely to have reconciled, accepted and admitted former combatants into their socio-economic settings.

However, increased levels of crime and criminality are indicators that reintegration problems still exist. In addition, continuing instability in neighbouring Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea introduce the possibility of cross-border recruitment and present a threat to regional stability.

If reintegration is to be a successful in Liberia, a number of issues must be addressed. Among them, are shortcomings of the programme and giving more consideration to those ex-combatants who did not have the opportunity to take part in the UNDP programme. National labour creation and employment opportunities must be developed, in coordination with a nationwide information referral system to give ex-combatants a realistic idea of their prospects. Stronger government involvement in accumulating national, disaggregated statistics against which to measure progress, and in mediating problems between host communities, ex-combatants and private companies, relating to land use expansion and raw material expectation is also necessary.

Community reconciliation and transitional justice measures need to be tied with externally-led initiatives such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. They should also address inter-community conflicts, which are historically rooted but were exacerbated by the conflict.

Special attention also needs to be paid to strengthening the justice and corrections system, in order to restore public confidence and maintain some semblance of law and order, particularly in such situations as the ex-combatant occupations of potential income-earning rubber plantations.