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Assessing UNMIL's Success in Liberia

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Introduction

In August 2003, the UN authorized the use of force and the creation of a humanitarian aid force in the failed state of Liberia. The decision was a momentous one – coming on the heels of the UN crisis over the war in Iraq and nearly a decade after the first UN mission in Liberia failed to put that nation on the path to recovery. Would a new mission bring the success that eluded the UN in 1993, or would history simply repeat itself? More importantly, could the UN bring about a peaceful resolution to a decades-old conflict and prevent the destabilization of West Africa, or would the international community be unable to enforce peace and stability, just as it had been unable in Iraq?

The following discussion analyzes the UN's experience in Liberia (UNMIL), examining the history of the conflict, structure of the UN mission, and discussing the successes and failures of that mission. The evidence suggests that UNMIL's success depended on the interests of the Liberian actors, which presented an opportunity for change. The UN exploited these opportunities by using new management processes, good coordination with relevant actors, and effective prioritization of key tasks. However, the initial successes have led to new challenges for Liberia that must be solved by a range of less coordinated and less powerful actors.

Background

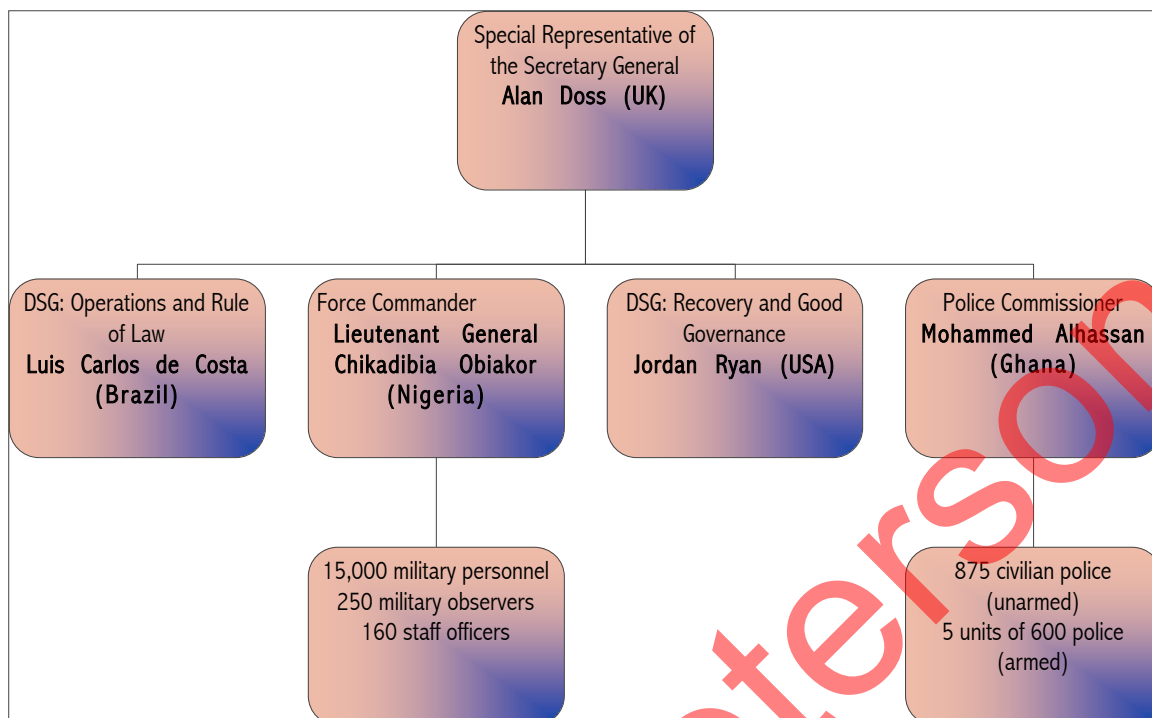
Liberia was founded by freed American slaves who established the West-African republic in 1847. These settlers maintained a monopoly on power and in controlled the country's significant natural resources until 1980, when a military coup ended the Americo-Liberians hold on power and ushered in a decade of authoritarian rule (CIA World Factbook, 2006). By 1989, opposition to the government's heavy hand erupted in a full-scale civil war. The Economic Community of West African States became concerned about the war and its seepage outside its borders, and sent a military observer force (ECOMOG) in an attempt to quell the conflict (UNOMIL, 1997).

By 1992, the Security Council passed an arms embargo to the region and authorized an observer mission which became known as the UN Observer Mission in Liberia (UNOMIL). The mission's mandate was to disarm the county and support elections (S/1992/813). By 1993, UNOMIL successfully mediated talks between ECOWAS and the rebel groups, creating a transitional federal government and scheduling elections for 1994.

Elections were not held until 1997, at which point the (former) rebel leader Charles Taylor was elected with 75% of the vote. While UNOMIL claimed that the election was "free and fair," Taylor repeatedly warned that he would continue the civil war if he lost, and for a war-weary population Taylor as their President seemed better than Taylor as their warlord (*The Guardian*, 23 August 2003). Taylor was unable to quell the incipient civil war, however, and by 2003 his former enemies had regrouped and (supported by Sierra Leone) conquered a significant part of northern Liberia. A new group, The Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL), thought to be supported by Guinea, battled government forces in the south of Liberia and made rapid gains. By May 2003, these movements held about 2/3 of the country, with Taylor's forces controlling only the capital and the surrounding territory (SR/2003/871). Again, ECOWAS acted first, deploying a vanguard force to stabilize the country. The United Nations again authorized force with Security Council resolution 1497 and created the UN Mission in Liberia, UNMIL. Taylor announced that he would resign and seek asylum in Nigeria, and by 4 August ECOWAS controlled Liberian sovereignty (CNN.com, 2003). By 18 August, a Comprehensive Peace Agreement was signed, ending the violence and creating a transitional government. The UN arrived on 1 October, "re-hatting" ECOWAS troops as UNMIL troops. The UN's second mission in Liberia had begun.

UNMIL's Mandate and Organization

In an interview with *Frontline*, The Special Representative of the Secretary General and head of UNMIL Jacques Klein stated that the mandate of Resolution 1497 was essentially "Disarmament, reintegration, the return of internally displaced persons, to support the election process, and to solidify Liberian civil society." UNMIL's mandate was thus military-dependant, but nevertheless required an integrated approach for its completion:



(Adapted from United Nations, Report on Liberia, S/2003/875, (2003))

The force commander was responsible for the lion's share of the mandate, including enforcing the cease fire, administering the humanitarian affairs work, and implementing the "Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration" (DDR) process. In these tasks they were deployed alongside the Recovery and Good Governance officers, who worked with the force commander to achieve its mission (United Nations, S/2003/875). Further coordination existed with the police commissioner, which was to reconstitute the local police force and assist it in re-establishing a criminal justice system in the country (Ibid.).

Analysis

While the county is by no means completely secure, the original mandate has largely been fulfilled. It was this coordinated effort that Doyle (2002), the International Crisis Group (2003, 2004), and the UN Peacekeeping Best Practices Unit (2006) identify as being fundamental to the mission's eventual success. UNMIL worked within its own organization to develop common strategies for the resolution of problems. It networked outside the UN, reaching other international organizations (ECOWAS being the chief one but also with significant support from the World Bank) that would support the mission's activities. Finally, the UN endeavored to create a "domestic authorization" so key to the success of an interim administration. That is, UNMIL worked immediately with the extant civil society and transitional government, developing their competency in administration and winning their ownership (and that of Liberia's citizenry) of the government. This coordination also enabled UNMIL's access to enough resources for the completion of the mission, which the International Crisis Group claimed was key to its success.

One cannot ignore the conditions that made the Liberian mission a success. Rebel forces in Liberia were composed of groups who sought control of the country's industry and levers of power for the purpose of enriching themselves. These forces were composed of groups of Liberians and supported by actors outside Liberia's borders. Indeed, the civil wars which plague the region have little regard for the official nation-state borders, and before UNMIL's mission rebel groups would enter and exit Liberia with impunity. Once UNMIL took over, however, their first task was to secure the country and the border (International Crisis Group, Report No.

75, 2004). With this completed, rebel groups lost a catalyst for the war as well as an opportunity to incite a broader conflict. And once security around the border was complete, UNMIL could work to neutralize spoilers by appealing to their self-interest. Since the rebels were interested in gaining power rather than in spreading an ideology, the IGC counseled that UNMIL should attempt to “buy off” them in return for their weapons (IGC, Report No. 65, 2003). UNMIL did just that, and was effectively able to demobilize the country by gaining the support of the former belligerents.

Finally, the UN itself implemented a number of management techniques which sought to improve the logistical deployment of its initial resources. These programs – Rapid Deployment Team, Pre-Mission Commitment Authority, and Strategic Deployment Stocks – provided that staff, money, and resources (respectively) could be more quickly allocated to UNMIL, shortening the time to deployment and creating the conditions for key initial successes (Department of Peacekeeping Best Practices Unit, 2006). UNMIL’s initial achievements in relatively benign tasks like developing a supply chain plan made more difficult tasks like the establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Committee far easier. While this process was clearly not perfect – the DPKO notes that the Strategic Deployment Stocks program is exhausted, and shipments to Liberia frequently arrived without load lists – its use undoubtedly improved UNMIL’s efficiency and overall performance.

In an opinion survey conducted after UNMIL had finished its principal work, Kraso (2006) found that UNMIL was generally highly regarded by Liberians. 96% said that security had improved since the start of the mission; 91% stated that this was due to UNMIL’s presence. But these rosy figures cover a more difficult problem. A full 29% of Liberians said they had “no confidence” in the local police, and despite that its mission is complete, 72% of respondents want UNMIL to stay in Liberia. 69% think UNMIL should have a broader mandate. These findings suggest that UNMIL has not yet transferred back its authorization to the Liberian government, and that the government must more aggressively assert its legitimacy over civil affairs. Moreover, the relationship between UNMIL and the Liberian government is unclear, and these two organizations are increasingly not speaking with one voice to aid donors and other international actors.

The Liberian government has far fewer resources to address Liberia’s challenges than had UNMIL. It faces a less-tolerant population whose expectations for success have been raised enormously high due to UNMIL’s success. And while the spoilers have been neutralized, it is unclear if they will remain pacified if international aid stops flowing to Monrovia or if the economy falters. UNMIL must work diligently with the Liberian government to give them the resources necessary for them to effectively address these challenges.

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