A Legacy of War?
Perceptions of Security in Liberia

Within a 14-year period, Liberia endured two consecutive civil wars in what one scholar has called a 'descent into anarchy' (Ellis, 1999). The first war—led by US–Liberian Charles Taylor—started in 1989 and ended with a peace agreement in 1996, only to be followed by the election of Taylor as president one year later.[1] The second war began in April 1999,

when a group of insurgents of the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) infiltrated Lofa County from Guinea. Another group of insurgents, the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL), subsequently attacked the Taylor government, entering the eastern part of the country from neighbouring Côte d'Ivoire in early 2003.[2]

The two civil wars claimed an estimated 250,000 lives, decimating the pre-war population of roughly three million people, and displaced as many as 1.5 million people, including 700,000 refugees who fled to another country (Foster et al., 2009, p. 247). Widespread collective violence in Liberia finally came to a halt with the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, signed in Accra in

Stallholders set up their stalls in front of a bullet-marked building in Fissebu, February 2008.   © George Osodi/Panos Pictures

August 2003. With President Taylor in exile, the National Transitional Government of Liberia was established to ease the shift from war to peace. Popular elections, largely deemed free and fair, were held in late 2005 and brought to power Africa's first female head of state, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf (Foster et al, 2009, p. 252). Together with the largest UN peacekeeping mission in the world, the Government of Liberia has made much progress on the path to peace and democracy.

Seven years after the end of the civil war, in 2010, the Small Arms Survey administered a nationwide household survey in Liberia to generate knowledge on perceptions of security and present-day patterns of victimization, respondents' exposure to violence, and responses to threats in communities. The study also considers how Liberians perceive the capacity of state institutions to respond to these risks and the types of activity undertaken by civilians to improve their own safety and well-being.[3] The household survey is complemented by more than 350 key informant interviews and thematic studies by Liberia experts as well as an extensive literature review and desk research. The results of this study will be presented in five *Issue Briefs*.

This first *Issue Brief* explores the general security perceptions and particular safety concerns of Liberians in 2009 and 2010. Key survey findings include:

- Respondents rate development concerns higher than safety concerns. In four-fifths of all responses (83.3 per cent), respondents raise concerns about access to clean water, health care, transportation, and education.
- More than two-thirds of respondents (67.5 per cent) claim that safety

conditions in mid-2010 improved over the previous year.
- Around 70 per cent of respondents describe their own neighbourhood or community as 'safe' or 'very safe'.
- The most pressing general safety concerns are crime and street violence (20.2 per cent), violence against women (16.9 per cent), land disputes (14.9 per cent), and attacks on households (14.5 per cent).
- Today Liberia witnesses a combination of violent post-conflict scenarios of varying severity which need close attention in terms of armed violence prevention and reduction. These include: remnants of political violence; economic and crime-related violence; informal policing and community justice; post-war displacements and property disputes; and violence against women.
- Although one in ten respondents consider armed groups a security threat (10.1 per cent), and ex-combatants a common perpetrator of crimes (8.8 per cent), it appears that wartime command structures have slowly dissolved and that criminals are most commonly singled out as perpetrators of violence and crime (28.1 per cent).

This *Issue Brief* is divided into four sections. It first presents a conceptual framework regarding post-conflict violence. The second section considers general concerns of Liberians today in terms of basic needs and explores the security perceptions as well as issues relating to safety concerns. The subsequent sections discuss two security concerns that are most directly related to the legacy of war: first, armed groups and ex-combatants and, second, land disputes and their current impact on peace-building in Liberia. The paper

concludes by summarizing key policy-relevant findings.

Violent scenarios in post-conflict Liberia

A post-conflict country is typically at risk of experiencing heightened rates of violence.[4] Indeed, general insecurity does not necessarily disappear with the formal end of a conflict. Instead, 'death and injury rates often remain comparatively high even after an armed conflict has come to an end' (Small Arms Survey, 2005, p. 289).

In the aftermath of war, predatory networks that are associated with the war economy tend to remain intact, while peacetime political constellations can leave military officers and politicians dissatisfied. In addition, violence that had previously been concentrated in limited rural areas can diffuse into urban slums with the movement of populations (Small Arms Survey, 2009, p. 219). Box 1 discusses these and other overlapping scenarios of post-conflict violence.

The incidents cited in the 22 detailed progress reports of the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) since 2004 can be categorized according to the violent scenarios described in Box 1. Though anecdotal, the incidents provide insight into the patterns of post-conflict violence in Liberia.

Reports on incidents of **political violence**—mainly *ceasefire violations* such as the establishment of illegal checkpoints—were frequent until 2004 (UNSC, 2004); later reports make no mention of such events. Instead, they cite relatively frequent incidents linked to the *discontent of ex-combatants*, who were disgruntled due to the slow progress made with respect to reintegration and rehabilitation benefits (UNSC, 2007b; 2007c). Incidents of violence

were also mentioned in relation to discharged army, police, and other security personnel (UNSC, 2007b).

Overall, the UNMIL reports reveal a decreasing incidence of political violence. It is worth noting, however, that the episodic eruption of political violence has not completely disappeared in Liberia. Several recent violent incidents served as reminders of potential volatility in pre-election Liberia. In 2010, for example, '[s]ome security incidents related to electoral preparations occurred, demonstrating the potential for small-scale incidents to rapidly escalate in the highly charged electoral context' (UNSC, 2011, p. 3).

None of the reviewed reports cites **routine state violence** such as extra-judicial killings or social cleansing, though some do identify a few violent incidents involving military and police personnel. For example, in February 2010, three soldiers of the Armed Forces of Liberia were investigated for the deaths of two men in Margibi County (UNSC, 2010b).

Economic and crime-related violence has been prevalent since the end of the war, though it has undergone significant changes over the years. In the immediate aftermath of war, *illegal extractions of resources* by ex-combatants were frequent, and UNMIL, together

with the Liberian government, intervened in several mines and rubber plantations (UNSC, 2005; 2007b; 2008c). Since then, the reports have increasingly mentioned illicit drug trafficking as a serious economically motivated security threat: 'Porous borders and the limited capacity of law enforcement agencies expose Liberia's vulnerability to drug trafficking, which continues to pose a threat to the stability of the subregion' (UNSC, 2010a, p. 5).

The United Nations has signalled that crimes such as robbery and theft are a growing security concern. For example, in 2007, UNMIL stated that a total of 370 *armed robberies* had been carried out between January and November in Monrovia alone. Around one-third of these were reportedly perpetrated with firearms; the rest involved primarily bladed weapons, such as knifes and cutlasses (UNSC, 2007a, p. 31). Since 2007, every UNMIL report has highlighted armed robberies as a major security concern. A 2011 UNMIL report observes that an increasing number of these involve firearms (UNSC, 2011, p. 3).

Violence related to **informal policing and community justice**, as well as **post-war displacement and property disputes**, is reported periodically. Mob attacks and land disputes reveal a lethal potential that can well have a destabilizing effect, especially in the absence of strong law enforcement institutions; in combination, these incidents can lead to a spiral of violence. One UNMIL report asserts: 'Communal and mob violence also continued, often emanating from tensions between ethnic groups and communities over land disputes' (UNSC, 2009b).

In the run-up to the presidential elections in 2010, UNMIL observed how mob actions were taking on increasingly political dimensions:

Box 1 **Five violent scenarios at war's end**

The aftermath of war is often shaped by complex dynamics of violence. The most typical scenarios can be loosely grouped into the following five categories.

■ **Political violence** (such as riots, bombings, and kidnappings). After violent conflicts, the political power balance can be fundamentally realigned as various winners and losers emerge. Political elites may resort to violence to shape outcomes and agendas of the ceasefire and reconstruction phases; groups that claim victory after conflict may violently purge the security apparatus once in power. Furthermore, economic and political elites—as well as military and police personnel—may use violent intimidation techniques if they feel challenged in their positions.

■ **Routine state violence** (such as social cleansing and summary executions). In post-conflict environments, it is not uncommon for the state security apparatus to perpetrate acts of violence against the population. The progressive militarization of security institutions during conflict and years of violent practices by state security actors can survive the reforms after war, largely depending on the relative power position of this sector at war's end. In many cases, extra-judicial killings, as well as social cleansing activities, may continue beyond the end of the conflict phase.

■ **Economic and crime-related violence** (such as armed robberies and kidnapping for ransom). The groups involved in violent conflicts tend to operate within networks of patronage and illegal war economies, often based on smuggling legal or illegal goods. These particular systems can persist at war's end, especially as violent actors may remain entrenched in their former activities of resource generation. Violent forms of crime can proliferate in the absence of strong state institutions and a striving economy, yet governments and state security forces may pursue the continuity of illegal rent-seeking.

■ **Informal policing and community justice.** If a power or security vacuum takes shape during the transition to peace, vigilante activities and mob violence can replace formal state-led policing and justice. These forms of violence and the groups that perpetrate them may even benefit from official approval, especially if state-led law enforcement is contested or simply absent. Organizational structures inherited from the conflict period can thus perpetuate both predatory and protective functions.

■ **Post-war displacement and property disputes** (such as land conflicts and related ethnic clashes). Fragile equilibriums relating to land and resources can be a cause as well as the result of conflict. Armed conflicts typically result in displacements of large sections of the population; it is not uncommon for property or the land of displaced persons to be seized by others, including former combatants. When refugees return and find they no longer have access to their property, violence can erupt, not seldom with lethal consequences.

Source: Geneva Declaration Secretariat (2008, ch. 3)

On 11 July, the Deputy Speaker of the House of Representatives and his supporters allegedly assaulted and seriously wounded a police officer who, while fulfilling official duties, had earlier impounded a truck belonging to the Deputy Speaker. Approximately 200 armed partisans from his party, the Congress for Democratic Change, subsequently prevented the police from questioning the representative in a siege lasting several hours (UNSC, 2010b, p. 4).

While the five violent scenarios presented in Box 1 do not include a specific reference to **violence against women**, the issue remains a particularly pervasive one in the Liberian context. The reports of the Secretary-General emphasize serious concerns about the widespread incidence of sexual and gender-based violence, and especially the rape of very young girls. In fact, every revised UNMIL progress report since 2007 raises rape as a serious concern of human security in Liberia.[5]

The particularity of each post-conflict setting lies within the combination and relative prevalence of the different violent scenarios. Overall, the UNMIL reports reviewed for this *Issue Brief* show that five predominant violent scenarios are still present to different degrees in post-war Liberia:

- political violence,
- economic and crime-related violence,
- informal policing and community justice,
- property disputes, and
- violence against women (see Figure 1).

The five violent scenarios apparent in Liberia are also mirrored in the security concerns expressed by the respon-

Figure 1 **Violent scenarios in post-conflict Liberia**
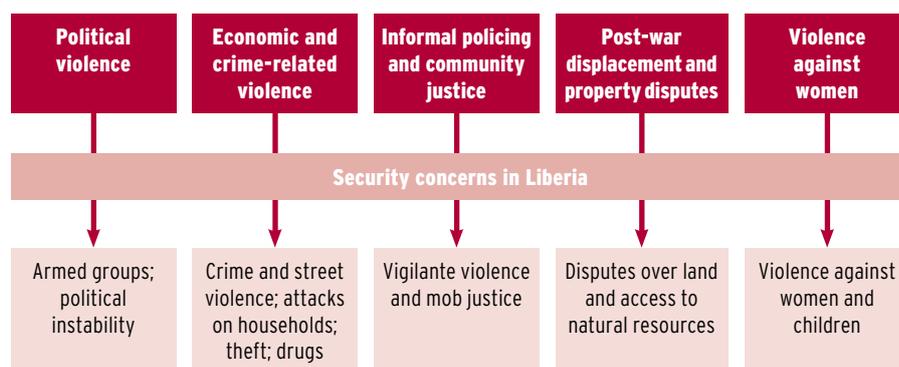
dents of the household survey (see below). At the same time, however, UNMIL acknowledges that, despite reported outbreaks of violence, the overall security situation has radically improved since the end of the war. A 2011 UNMIL report finds that the overall security situation is stable, but a number of issues remain a concern for the future:

Disputes over access to land and resources, as well as ethnic and communal tensions, continued to present significant challenges. Security risks are also posed by high unemployment, severely limiting livelihood opportunities for ex-combatants and high-risk youth, many of whom resort to illegal activities (UNSC, 2011, p. 3).

Popular perceptions of security

The findings from the household survey also convey an overall positive perception of security in Liberia. With the resumption of political stability, development-related concerns have become far more pressing than fear of insecurity. The survey findings reveal that four in five responses (83.3 per cent) indicate development-related concerns as the most pressing problems in the country (see Figure 2). Clean water

emerges as the major concern of respondents (67.7 per cent), followed by health care, education, transportation, sanitation, housing, and electricity.

Today, security generally ranks low on the list of concerns, marking a significant improvement in people's well-being since wartime. Popular perceptions of security are an important point of comparison to past and present experiences of threats to security. A survey conducted by the International Committee of the Red Cross in 2009 reveals that during the civil wars in Liberia the vast majority of respondents were forced to leave their home (90 per cent), lost contact with a close relative (86 per cent), had their home looted (83 per cent), or lost a family member (69 per cent). Liberians further reported that they were humiliated (55 per cent), tortured (45 per cent), had somebody close to them fall victim to sexual violence (51 per cent), and were physically wounded by the fighting (40 per cent) (ICRC, 2009, p. 10). Given these traumatic experiences, people's current outlook seems promising. A 56-year-old man speaks on behalf of many when he describes the state of security in Liberia: 'the situation is good now and much better than the way it was some six years back in our country' (Shilue, 2010).[6]

The general levels of concern also appear promising in comparison to

those encountered in other post-conflict countries, such as neighbouring Côte d'Ivoire. An analysis of the data acquired from a 2010 pre-election national household survey in Côte d'Ivoire highlights the fact that, unlike in Liberia, where security ranks low in terms of general concerns, it ranks second in the governmentally controlled southern and fifth in the rebel-controlled northern part of Côte d'Ivoire. The fact that southerners and northerners in Côte d'Ivoire perceive security threats differently does not reflect greater insecurity in the south, but rather underdevelopment in the north. The north 'has benefited far less from investment; public infrastructure there has suffered greatly from the partition of the country and the absence of any public administration' (Small Arms Survey, 2011b, p. 207).

Underdevelopment is also a major issue in Liberia, whose economic and social stability suffered tremendously during more than a decade of fighting. As the Government of Liberia reports:

Years of conflict and mismanagement have left Liberia one of the poorest countries in the world, with GDP per capita estimated at [USD] 190. Poverty is pervasive, and is particularly acute in rural areas and the most remote corners of the country (Government of Liberia, 2008, p. 24).

A nationwide consultation process was conducted between 2007 and 2008 to formulate Liberia's poverty reduction strategy. Respondents noted numerous shortages, including of safe drinking water and electricity; of educational facilities; of trained teachers; of trained medical personnel; and of health care facilities and ambulances (Government of Liberia, 2008, p. 46). They call atten-

tion to the fact that although significant progress has been made since the end of the war, only 25 per cent of all Liberians have access to safe drinking water (Small Arms Survey 2011b, p. 106). The findings of the household survey confirm that these issues are major concerns. In addition, key informant interviews reveal that Liberians understand the importance of development for reducing and preventing armed violence; a 59-year-old district education officer, for one, stated that violence can be reduced mainly by 'opening [a] corridor for employment' (Shilue, 2010).[7]

A comparison between Monrovia and the rest of the country brings to light a slightly more nuanced picture. Although security concerns of respondents living in the capital still score low in overall terms, residents of the capital are more worried about the safety of a family member than respondents living in the counties (11.5 per cent in Monrovia vs. 1.1 per cent in the counties). In the words of a 36-year-old banker living in Montserrado County (Monrovia and surrounding areas), 'security is still a problem in the city' (Shilue, 2010).[8] Monrovia's security profile differs from that of the rest of

the country, a finding discussed in further detail below.

Interestingly, electricity is mentioned as an issue of concern more frequently in Monrovia than in the counties (44.4 per cent vs 12.9 per cent, respectively). The near absence of electricity has been an issue for many years in Liberia. From about 1990 until the elections in 2005, electricity (except from small private generators) was not available anywhere in the country. In 2008, fewer than 2 per cent of rural residents and only around 10 per cent of urban residents had access to electricity, most of which was produced by private generators at prohibitive costs (Government of Liberia, 2008, p. 103). Electricity shortages can heighten the sense of insecurity, especially if public spaces are not lit at night. Indeed, research confirms that a lack of public lighting can enable criminal activities (Gompert et al., 2007, p. 9).

Figure 3 highlights perceived improvements in security from 2009 to 2010. Asked about the evolution of security in their neighbourhood or village, two out of three respondents (67.5 per cent) found that safety was 'much better' or 'better' at the time of the survey than it was 12 months

Figure 2 **The most serious concerns in Monrovia (n=990) and the counties (n=1,881)**
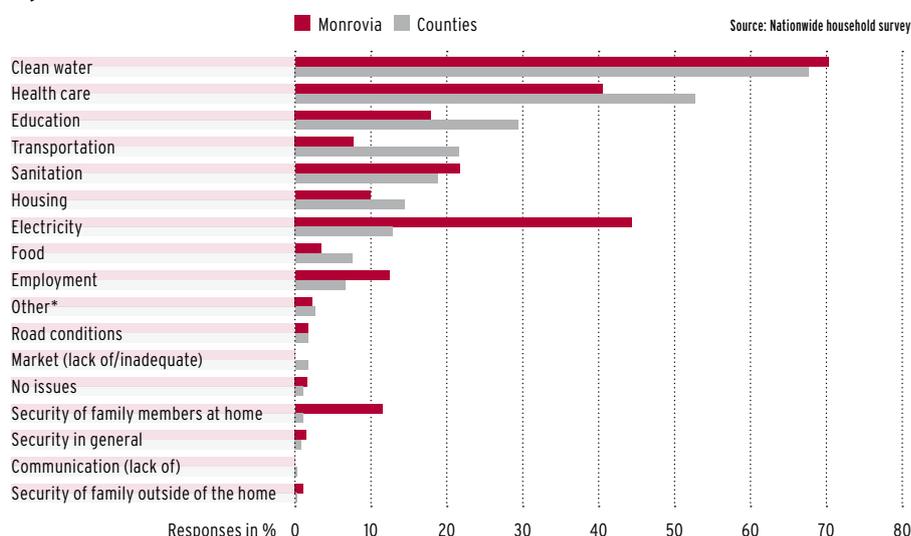

* Responses categorized as others include 'Agricultural Tools', 'Palawa Hut', and 'Lack of Zinc' as well as 'Lack of Government Schools', amongst others.

earlier. The finding corresponds with results of the key informant interviews, during which a majority of the respondents said that they had observed a relative decline in violent incidents (Shilue, 2010).

Similarly, almost 70 per cent of respondents find their neighbourhood or community 'safe' or 'very safe' (see Figure 4). These findings are in line with those of recent field research published by the Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces, which reveals that 60 per cent of Liberians report that general security is 'very good' or at least

Figure 3 **The security situation in mid-2010 compared to mid-2009 (n=2,880)**

■ Much better	21.5%	■ Worse	14.6%
■ Better	46.0%	■ Much worse	2.1%
■ The same	15.1%	■ Do not know	0.7%
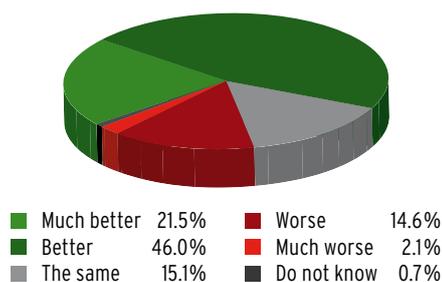
Source: Nationwide household survey

Figure 4 **Safety perceptions in Monrovia (n=979) and the counties (n=1,825)**

Source: Nationwide household survey

■ Very safe	■ Unsafe
■ Safe	■ Very unsafe
■ Neither safe nor unsafe	■ Do not know
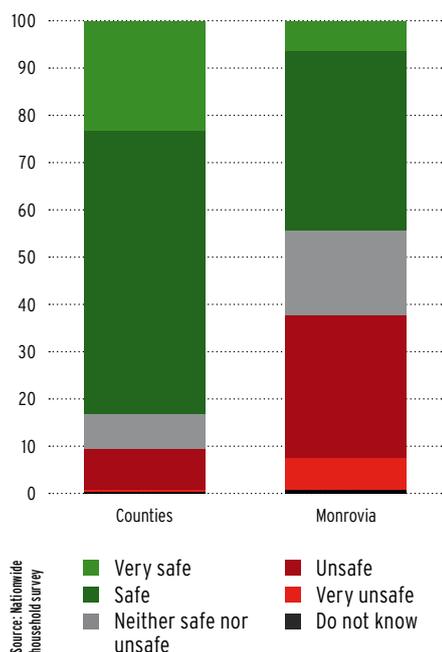
'okay', whereas close to 70 per cent describe their personal security as 'very safe' or at least 'okay' (Smith-Höhn, 2010, p. 87). Yet it must also be noted that a non-negligible minority of respondents call the situation 'worse' or 'much worse' compared to the previous year (16.7 per cent).

While the findings seem generally promising at the national level, significant variations emerge at the sub-national level. In the counties, four out of five respondents (83.1 per cent) say their community or neighbourhood is 'safe' or 'very safe'; meanwhile, in Monrovia, more than half of the respondents (55.6 per cent) describe the safety in their immediate surroundings in either neutral or negative terms. More than one-third (36.8 per cent) of respondents in Monrovia judge their neighbourhood to be 'unsafe' or even 'very unsafe'. The reasons for such differences in terms of safety perceptions remain to be studied.

With respect to security concerns specifically, more than one-third of respondents (38.9 per cent) nationwide say that they have no safety or security concerns at all in their community; this percentage is again much higher in the counties (45.7 per cent) than in Monrovia (27.5 per cent) (see Figure 5). The security concerns most frequently identified by Liberians are crime and street violence (20.2 per cent), followed by concerns about violence against women (16.9 per cent), land disputes (14.9 per cent), attacks on households (14.5 per cent), armed groups (10.1 per cent), and violence against children (9.2 per cent). Together, these issues constitute the bulk of safety concerns, or 85.8 per cent of the sample.

These specific security concerns relate to all of the five violent scenarios described above: political violence (armed groups), economic and crime-

related violence (crime and street violence, attacks on households), informal policing and community justice (vigilante violence or mob justice), property disputes (land disputes), and violence against women. The security threats that are most directly related to the legacy of war—armed groups and land disputes—are discussed in more detail in the following sections.[9]

Economically motivated forms of violence score highest among the identified security concerns. Together with attacks on households, crime and street violence covers a wide array of acts, ranging from petty theft at a rural market to armed burglaries. These crimes, although rather 'common',[10] can potentially have destabilizing effects on the overall peace-building process in a post-conflict environment. If left unaddressed, they can result in the loss of trust in public institutions such as the police and the justice system. A loss of confidence in state institutions may lead individuals to resort to parallel power structures, such as militias, and may trigger events of mob violence and lynching. Such developments can bring about a general disenchantment with political leaders and thus undermine the relationship between a society and the state in an already fragile situation (Rausch, 2006, pp. 3–15). The security concerns over vigilante violence and mob justice in Liberia speak to this risk. Results from key informant interviews confirm that community residents sometimes react with mob justice against armed robbers caught in flagrante delicto 'with dangerous weapons' (Shilue, 2010, p. 8).

Violence against women is another major concern in Liberia. It was pervasive and widespread during the Liberian war, with an estimated 60 to 70 per cent of all women falling victim to some form of sexual violence

(Nagelhus Schia and de Carvalho, 2009, p. 8). And still today, a sense of insecurity is part of the daily experience of many Liberian women. In a recent report, the UN Secretary-General signals that 'the high number of reported rape cases continues to be a serious concern, especially given that the majority of cases continue to involve victims under the age of 15' (UNSC, 2010a, p. 3). The extremely young age of these victims could also explain why almost one-tenth of respondents identify violence against children as an issue of concern (9.2 per cent).

The above findings reveal significant differences in security perceptions in Monrovia as compared to the counties. When asked about specific security concerns, one in every three Monrovians (33.7 per cent) ranks crime and street violence as the highest security concern (see Figure 5).[11]

Armed groups and ex-combatants

As highlighted in Figure 5, one in every ten Liberians remains concerned about armed groups (10.1 per cent). The figure is twice as high in Monrovia, where almost one in every five respondents considers armed groups a security threat (19.2 per cent). The concentration of security concerns around ex-combatants in Monrovia is not surprising. Since the war, the city has undergone a rapid overhaul. A large majority of youths—including ex-combatants—have migrated to Monrovia in search of employment. By the end of the disarmament, demobilization, reintegration, and rehabilitation (DDRR) process in 2006, 44 per cent of ex-combatants had chosen Montserrado as their preferred settlement location (UNDDR, n.d.). As one study finds:

In post-war Liberia, the population of Monrovia has surged to over 1.5 million (up from 500,000 in the pre-war years), and there has been an estimated 70 per cent increase in Monrovia's youth population (Ismail et al., 2009, p. 35).

This section considers ex-combatants and whether they still function within chains of command that developed during the war. It also examines emerging youth groups that are often associated with ex-combatants, in particular the Motorcycle Transport Union (MTU).

Critics of the DDRR process in Liberia—and elsewhere in the world— tend to cite poor planning and insufficient time for proper implementation.[12] Some argue that the reduced disarmament and demobilization period— to cope with the roughly 103,000 combatants as compared to the planned 38,000 to 45,000—meant that fighters could not be effectively separated from their commanders. This initial phase was also criticized for 'rewarding' ex-combatants for handing in arms and thus potentially hardening the ex-combatant group identity (Jennings, 2008). At the end of the disarmament and demobilization phase, fighters were supposed to enrol in a reintegration and rehabilitation programme in the settlement of their choice; however, upon arrival, many found that these programmes were not yet available. Those who finally went through the programme still faced difficulties in securing jobs due to the saturation of the job market or an inadequate educational background (Paes, 2005). One observer portrays Liberia's DDRR programme as marred by 'unfulfilled promises, disappointed expectations, unintended consequences, and associated instability' (Jennings, 2008, p. 23).

In view of these shortcomings of the DDRR process, there is a widespread perception that former fighters continue to use conflict-era organizational structures to make a living and engage in a range of illegal activities—from petty theft and armed robbery to illicit mining and the illegal exploitation of natural resources. An alternative point of view is advanced by studies pointing at the ability of West African ex-commanders 'to mobilize their wartime associates to make the transition to peacetime politician[s] and business leader[s]' by mobilizing networks that survive beyond the end of the conflict in a productive way (Reno, 2009, p. 316).

These command structures are often able to persist because the state is unable to provide basic services. A study of the Guthrie rubber plantation —which straddles Grand Cape Mount and Bomi counties—finds that the LURD command structure provided an organizational model that allowed the group to function relatively smoothly as a business operation since its takeover after the war in 2003. The businesses were managed by a LURD major, supported by sympathetic politicians (particularly during the National Transitional Government phase between 2003 and 2005), and assisted by approximately 3,700 combatants (Cheng, 2006). A similar situation arose at the Sinoe rubber plantation and, to a lesser extent, the Cocopa and Cavalla rubber plantations (McCormack, 2010, p. 7).[13] In each of these plantations, however, the government has been successful in re-establishing its control. Guthrie, for example, was reclaimed by the government in 2006 (Cheng, 2006).

Other privately administered sectors, such as mining for minerals and gems, have challenged the central government's control over its natural

resources. Today, mining areas are a melting pot of ex-combatants and 'normal' youths, including high school and college graduates in search of income opportunities (McCormack, 2010, p. 19).[14] They have all become involved in what a youth in Yekepa, Nimba County, termed the 'Ministry of Hustle'[15]—essentially just doing what they can, or hustling, to survive (McCormack, 2010, p. 10). Though relatively durable, conflict-related relationships among ex-combatants tend to become diluted through security- and job-related activities.

In 2008, a former LURD leader who 'still had command structure authority' was called upon in Voinjama, Lofa County, to convene a neighbourhood watch group in response to a spate of crime (Bøås and Bjørkhaug, 2010, p. 15). While this anecdote provides one example of the endurance of wartime command chains, it also reveals their complexity. Foremost, the neighbourhood watch group also incorporated ex-combatants who had fought with opposing forces. Likewise, former warlord Prince Johnson was elected to the Liberian senate, thanks to support from people who had fought with him as well as against him (McCormack, 2010, p. 8).

These examples indicate that wartime command structures seem to have become less relevant. Despite the shortcomings of the DDRR process, reintegration in Liberia was arguably easier than elsewhere, largely because many fought in defence of their communities and remained attached to their wider social networks throughout the wars (Jennings, 2008). As a result, many ex-combatants settled down with their spouses or continued to live with their families during the wars (Bøås and Hatløy, 2008; Bøås and Bjørkhaug, 2010).

Figure 5 **The most serious security concerns in Monrovia (n=937), the counties (n=1,571), and Liberia**

Nationwide ■ Monrovia ■ Counties   Source: Nationwide household survey
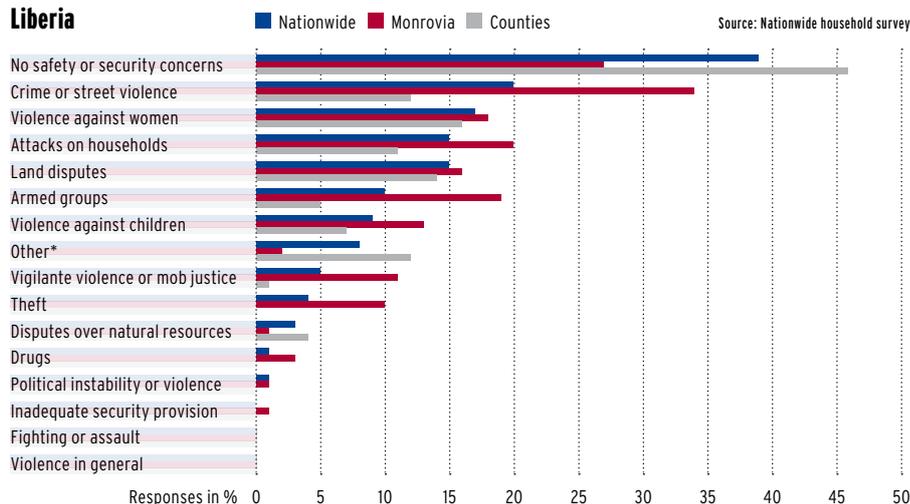
* Responses categorized as others include 'Heart Man' (linked to ritualistic killings), 'Money Problems', 'Drinking', and 'Lack of understanding', among other responses.

Figure 6 **Groups perceived as the most common perpetrators in Monrovia (n=956) and in the counties (n=1,857)**

■ Monrovia ■ Counties   Source: Nationwide household survey
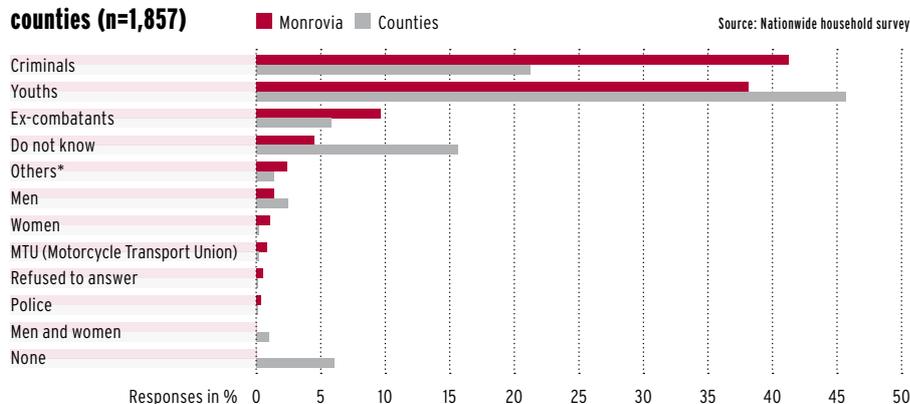
* Responses categorized as others include 'Men', 'Both Men and Women', 'Women', 'Elderly', and 'Husbands', among others.

Although armed groups continue to be a security concern (see Figure 5), ex-combatants are less frequently singled out as perceived perpetrators of crime and violence (see Figure 6). Nevertheless, criminals, as well as youths in general, are perceived to be perpetrators of violence, as revealed in key informant interviews. A 67-year-old town chief said that 'the most common perpetrators are the youth that are not working. Among them are the ex-fighters that usually come from the gold mines' (Shilue, 2010).[16] In Liberia, youths—defined by the government as 15–35-year-olds—account for 70 per cent of the population.[17]

Thus, while certain social groups may be perceived as perpetrators, the perceptions themselves may be influenced by definitional fluidity; 'youth' has a broader connotation than age and 'ex-combatants' and 'criminals' appear somewhat interchangeable. It is therefore difficult to establish whether perceptions clearly identify youths, criminals, and ex-combatants as distinct perpetrators.

The Liberia MTU, an organization that has emerged as a major social group for young people in general and ex-combatants specifically, is rarely identified as a common perpetrator of crime in the survey, although MTU members are occasionally accused of involvement in violent incidents (see Box 2). Respondents do not appear to define MTU members as a specific social group or group of perpetrators; however, as the number of young riders

Box 2 The MTU—a perpetrator of violence?

Motorcycle taxis have become an important informal business sector in Liberia—for young Liberians in general and for ex-combatants specifically. Consequently, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of motorbikes plying the streets of every major city in Liberia. The national president of the MTU estimates that there are close to 4,000 motorbikes in Monrovia area alone.[18]

The MTU emerged as a membership association that organizes the informal motorcycle taxi drivers throughout Liberia. It has a leadership comprising a national president and a secretariat in Monrovia, from where the association is managed. The MTU is not yet institutionalized at a national level; each county branch still has its own rules, regulations, and constitution (Bloh, 2010).[19] In many counties and cities, it is now mandatory for drivers to belong to the MTU (McCormack, 2010, p. 13). In other areas, membership is officially voluntary, but, in practical terms, mandatory. According to an UNMIL employee who requested to remain anonymous, in Gbarnga, Bong County, non-members are actively pressured to join the particularly close-knit and powerful union, which comprises more than 5,000 members (McCormack, 2010, p. 13).

During focus group discussions with members of the MTU, riders revealed that they pay an average amount of LRD 375 (USD 5) for the official registration of a new bike with the association at the county level. Upon payment of this amount, the rider's bike is assigned an identification number in case of an accident. Even though there is no official membership fee, bike riders usually pay the MTU a daily operating fee of LRD 20 (USD 0.30). A rider can earn approximately LRD 3,000 (USD 42) per month (Bloh, 2010).

In return, the association organizes parking areas where the members can congregate and wait for customers, facilitates loans to provide financial support to members who are looking to purchase a bike, provides a financial safety net in case of accidents, and 'liaise[s] with local police forces to provide training for members on road safety issues'. In addition, it offers 'support to members in negotiating with police and the legal system when accidents occur, and also provides financial support to widows and families when there is a death of a member' (SFCG, 2007, p. 2). Reports increasingly accuse MTU members of being involved in violent incidents. On 3 December 2009, for example:

a Government-registered vehicle carrying a Deputy Minister was attacked and set ablaze in Ganta, Nimba County, by members of the local motorcycle union

following a traffic accident in which a union member had been killed (UNSC, 2010a, p. 3).

On another occasion, in February 2009, the Bong Motorbike Taxi Union staged a five-day protest, involving roadblocks, the burning of a sub-station of the Liberian National Police, and a violent clash with UNMIL forces after one of their members had been murdered by an unknown assailant.[20] These incidents, which have been reported to varying degrees in other parts of the country, show the potential for a speedy mobilization of this group and for an increase in violence. Key informants also indicated that 'motorcyclists act as a collective group and do take mob action against presumed killers of any of their members' (Shilue, 2010).

Research suggests that MTU members may react in a violent manner when in conflict with the law or with law enforcement officials. For example, MTU members may react spontaneously with violent means when they seek instant justice, particularly so when they do not perceive the police to respond swiftly to violence perpetrated against other MTU members or regarding arrests of persons involved in fatal accidents (Bloh, 2010).

An ex-combatant sits on his motorbike in Voinjama, February 2008.   © George Osodi/Panos Pictures
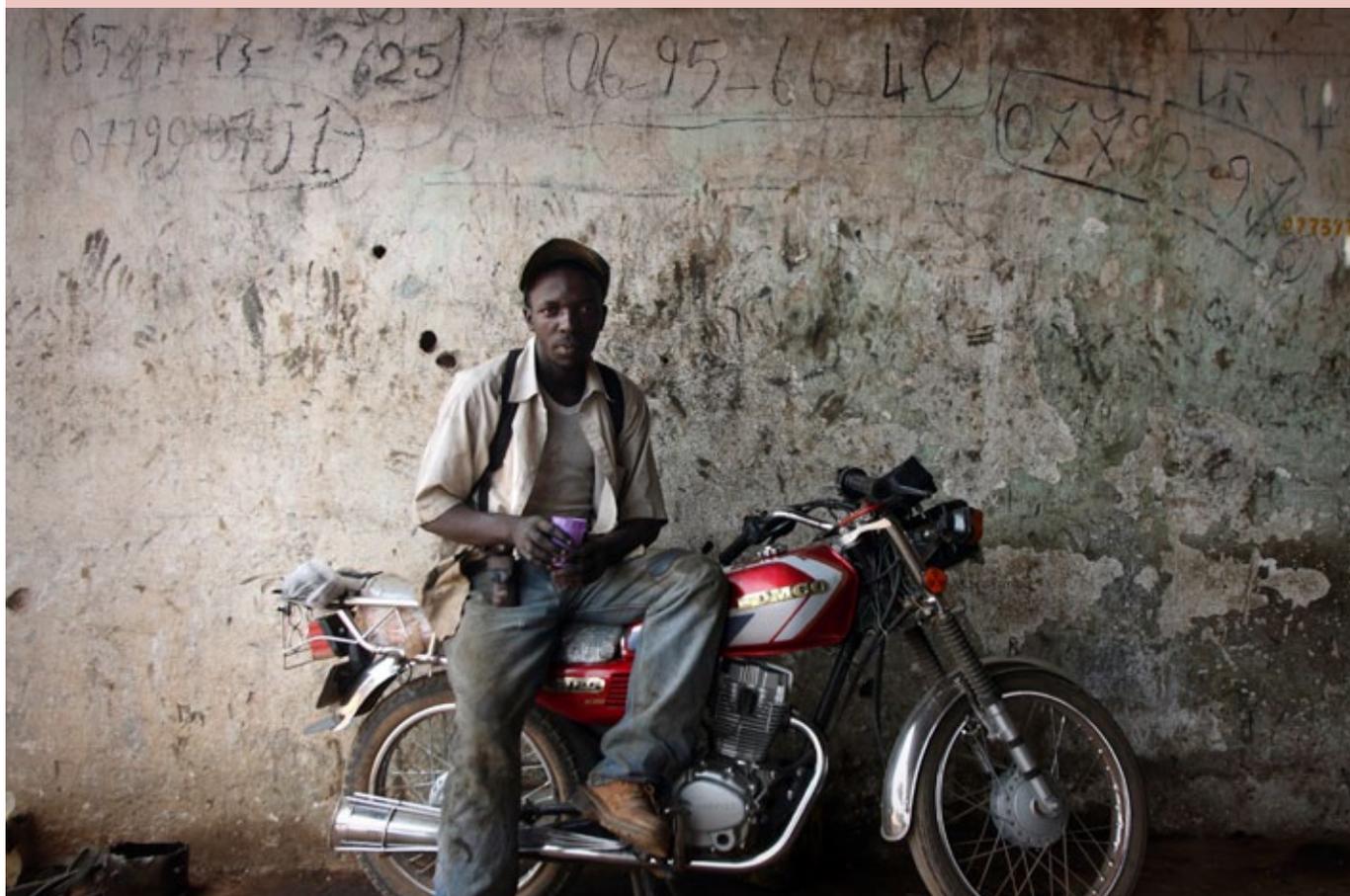
increases and their commercial activities evolve and expand, perceptions are likely to change. The MTU's capacity to deploy strength as a social movement was exhibited during a senatorial by-election in Montserrado County in November 2009. MTU members blocked traffic all the way from the airport into town and formed an unofficial motorcade when George Weah, a renowned football player who ran for the presidency against Johnson-Sirleaf in 2005, campaigned on behalf of his party's candidate. The union further distributed free petrol as part of the campaign strategy (McCormack, 2010, p. 14).

The property dilemma

Disputes related to property and war-related displacement constitute another important violent scenario. Slightly more than one in every seven respondents expressed security concerns related to land disputes (14.9 per cent, see Figure 5). A report by the Governance Reform Commission reveals that people admit openly that 'if we fight again, we will fight about land' (Blore, 2007, p. 15). Land conflicts have been described as part of the root causes of Liberia's descent into generalized violence:

> It is rare to talk to an individual who is not connected in some manner to a dispute over land, either as the main actor or through social networks, kinship alignments or the increasingly salient bonds of ethnicity or 'tribe' (Corriveau-Bourque, 2010, p. 5).

Up to 90 per cent of civil cases in Liberia involve land disputes, and the Ministry of Lands, Mines and Energy claims to receive 100 new complaints about land matters daily (Unruh, 2009; Blore, 2007).

Box 3 Customary vs statutory land tenure

Customary land tenure refers to a traditional system in which land is an inheritance bequeathed to succeeding generations by their ancestors. In this context, land is collective property and cannot be sold for commercial purposes. The chiefs have the authority to distribute this 'common property of the clan or tribe' among the people according to family size and labour needs (UNOPS, 2010, p. 22). Given this collective ownership, no single person may own—let alone sell—the land.

A statutory land tenure system, on the other hand, refers to a more modern procedure of land acquisition and ownership. The American Colonization Society introduced the system—which stipulates that land is owned by the state and can be acquired for private use—in an effort to resettle freed slaves in the region during the 19th century. The state issues a 'title deed' to grant an individual land ownership. A holder of a title deed has:

the right to possess the land in perpetuity; the right to exclude others from it; the right to use the land and retain the fruits of its use; the right to bequeath land to heirs by will [...]; and the right to sell, mortgage, lease or otherwise alienate rights over the land, temporarily or permanently (World Bank, 2008, p. viii).

Both systems are plagued by a number of challenges. For one, there is no land registry in which to record land ownership. Legitimate deed holders face problems in providing proof of their rightful ownership of land. Moreover, the courts are crowded with land cases in which two parties, using the two different systems of land tenure, claim rightful ownership of a piece of land. There is a conflict between local customary law and the national statutory law. The 1956 'Aborigines Law' states that all land that is not formally registered or demarcated as private land or concessions can be claimed as property by the state. The situation is further complicated by the fact that the government can legally assign large plots of land to concession areas unbeknown to or against the will of the rural citizens, who rely on customary tenure (Corriveau-Bourque, 2010).

Source: Panton (2010)

Land conflicts not only remain an issue of concern but also represent a potential source of violence in Liberia today. Time and again, land conflicts are identified as the reason behind killings. In 2008, for example, 15 people were killed in clashes on the border between Grand Bassa and Margibi counties because of tensions resulting from unresolved questions about refugees, population growth, and ongoing land tenure. Others have been killed 'in smaller-scale disputes' since then (IRIN, 2010). In November 2009, for example, the head of the Public Procurement and Concessions Commission was killed in Morrison Farm in Margibi County by nine employees of the farm (*Africa Confidential*, 2009, p. 3). The men were allegedly motivated by issues relating to an ongoing land dispute (AFP, 2009).

There are several reasons for the enduring nature of land disputes. First,

Liberia inherited a complex and contested land title system from the country's founding fathers (see Box 3). Consequently, and since the beginning of Liberia's history, land has been an unpredictable variable in the struggle for participation in national decision-making and equal distribution of societal wealth (Blore, 2007, p. 15). Clashes between statutory and customary property rights over the management, authority, and control of land resources persist in post-war Liberia today (Unruh, 2009, p. 427).

Furthermore, land disputes have become emblematic of identity conflicts and intergenerational tensions. The legacy of armed conflict has transformed the way people understand social hierarchy. During the civil war, young people (and, in many cases, children) played a dominant role in the warring factions. This experience of social roles changed the understanding

of the place of youth in society. Encouraged by this newly acquired social understanding, Liberia's youths soon demanded increased participation and access to resources. For example, youths started to buy land under statutory law, which created conflicts with older generations that still follow customary law. The term 'land conflict' may thus well be used by Liberians 'as a euphemism for other issues such as disrupted social hierarchies or generational conflicts'.[21]

Figure 7 shows the distribution of security concerns related to disputes over land or natural resources at the sub-national level in Liberia. In Lofa County, disputes over land and natural resources are listed as the most important threat to security, with half of all responses referring to these two issues as a security concern (51 per cent); the county is closely followed by Maryland (43.9 per cent). Both counties have been historically contested parts of Liberia in terms of access to land and exploitation of natural resources; they remain at the centre stage of land disputes. Several studies focus on the problems associated with land in these areas and how this relates to group dynamics during and after the war (Corriveau-Bourque, 2010; Hartman, 2010).[22]

As a result of the remarkable improvement in Liberia's security situation, internally displaced persons and refugees started to return to their places of origin. In many cases, returnees faced problems when attempting to reoccupy their homes or securing access to the land they once owned. Ex-combatants and neighbours who had taken over abandoned properties in their owners' absence were now claiming ownership (Alden Wily, 2007). Disputes between returnees and 'squatters' were also exacerbated by

the fact that demobilized fighters received financial benefits to ease the transition into civilian life after the war, while returnees lacked such financial resources. Former fighters thus received greater resources than returnees, which enabled them to purchase property or 'squatter rights' over properties abandoned during the conflict (Rincon, 2010, p. 8).

Worryingly, land disputes related to population displacement are often closely linked to ethnic divides that the war exacerbated. Ganta town, located in Nimba County on the Guinean border, is home to vivid examples of ethnic tensions coupled with land disputes between residents and returnees. At war's end, unlike the rest of Liberia, Ganta city remained under the control of government militias and former fighters of the National Patriotic Front of Liberia. Ex-combatants who fought against the Mandingo-dominated LURD in the area and successfully expelled them stayed in the region and felt righteous in their claim to land in the surroundings. With little or no other choice, local civil authority granted 'squatter rights' to some of the remaining National Patriotic Front combatants in Ganta (Rincon, 2010, pp. 16–17). Issues related to land and ethnic components of the conflict in Nimba County continue to spark vio-

lence between groups. During 2008, for example, returning Mandingos were expelled from the commercial areas of Ganta city, while some of them vowed 'to take the property back by force' (ICG, 2009, p. 8).

Disputes reflect not only ethnic divides, but also religious differences. In February 2010, clashes erupted in Lofa County when a 21-year-old woman was found dead near a mosque. This sparked revenge attacks between the Mandingo and the Lorma, some of which targeted businesses, mosques, and churches. In the end, four people were killed and at least 14 injured when the mosque in Konia was set ablaze (*New Democrat*, 2010). Although at first sight the incidents seem to stem from a conflict between Christians and Muslims, some argue that it was, in fact, a dispute over land that escalated (van der Kraaij, 2010).

In response to the challenge of land disputes, the Liberian government has implemented both traditional and formal dispute settlement mechanisms. Informal resolution mechanisms are very much based on traditional authority, including local chiefs, civil society organizations, and elders (Unruh, 2009, p. 431). Formal dispute settlement mechanisms have been receiving increasing attention; however, calling upon formal institutions to help settle

Figure 7 **Disputes over land and natural resources as a security concern, per county (n=2,508)**

Source: Nationwide household survey
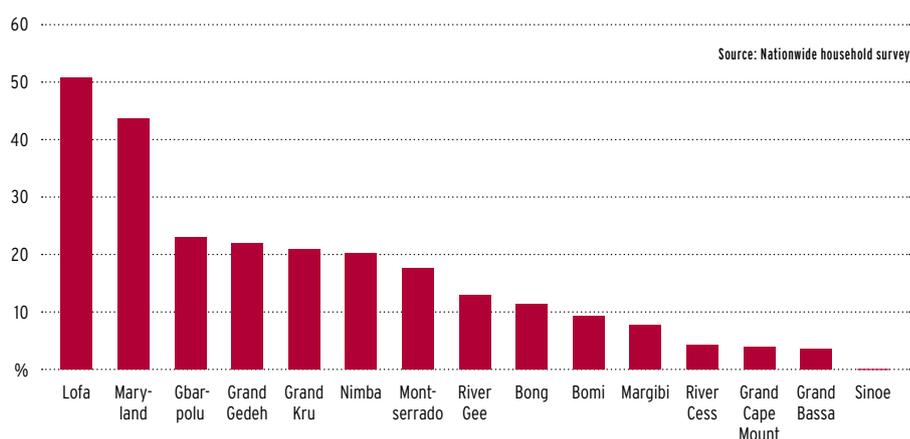
a dispute over land is a costly enterprise and rather inaccessible for the majority of Liberians. The official system also lacks authority in the case of disputes related to customary land tenure (Corriveau-Bourque, 2010, p. 27). National and international NGOs, such as the Norwegian Refugee Council, work on peaceful conflict resolution mechanisms to resolve land disputes in Liberia (NRC, n.d.).

Conclusion

This *Issue Brief* presents an overview of the security concerns and safety perceptions of respondents in a nationwide household survey, offering insight into how Liberians today assess their country's general security situation. Overall, people feel safer and describe the current climate as 'much better' than in the previous year. Together with the largest UN peacekeeping mission in the world, the Government of Liberia has increasingly been able to provide safety for its people. People in Liberia today are far more concerned about development issues than security threats, as the war and years of mismanagement have left the country one of the poorest in the world.

Despite this overall positive picture, certain violent scenarios continue to preoccupy Liberians. Apart from the widespread concern of violence against women, economic and crime-related forms of violence are perceived to be a common security threat. Common crimes in a post-conflict environment, even if not violent at first, run the risk of having a destabilizing effect on overall peace-building, as they can result in a loss of trust in the police and justice system. Such criminality thus needs close monitoring, especially since the loss of confidence in

state institutions may cause people to resort to parallel power structures. A case in point involves a wartime leader with remaining authority in the community who was called upon to form a neighbourhood watch group to guarantee security. Such militias, although beneficial, can trigger another violent scenario, namely mob violence. Such vigilante justice can jeopardize the still-fragile security situation and further undermine confidence in state institutions.[23]

Sporadic, yet violent, incidents of disputes related to post-war displacement continue to be a source of tension and conflict in Liberia. Conflicts over land are a product of multiple layers of legacies and newly arising challenges since the end of the Liberian war. Population displacement and ethnic tensions exacerbated by the conflict create an explosive cocktail of unresolved issues in Liberia's post-conflict environment. In addition to the challenges presented by access to land for a population of youths, ex-combatants, and returnees, the land tenure system of Liberia, which has often been identified as one of the root causes of the war, only contributes to the complexity of the problem of access to land.

Responses to security perceptions and the threats to peace and stability need to consider these distinct realities of post-war Liberia. The usual post-conflict instruments of disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration, security sector reform, and humanitarian assistance, need to go beyond the mere restoration of the state's monopoly over violence. Armed violence prevention and reduction initiatives, including development assistance, need to tackle the root causes and the identified risk factors in the proliferation of economically-

motivated forms of violence in Liberia today. With the adoption in 2008 of the *Poverty Reduction Strategy*, which integrates peace, security, governance, and development, the Government of Liberia has demonstrated its understanding of the cross-cutting nature of post-conflict violence. The strategy calls for an integrated approach to addressing the different violent scenarios—from political to justice-related and economically motivated violence (Government of Liberia, 2008).

The presidential elections scheduled for 11 October 2011 will prove a crucial test for Liberia. There is a risk that the incidence of political violence will increase. In fragile societies more than elsewhere, elections can easily catalyse conflict (Sisk, 2008); it remains unclear who will be able to mobilize youth groups that are increasingly politically influential, such as the MTU. Nevertheless, eight years after the war, and with the experience of a previous election, Liberia seems to be in a stronger position than countries just emerging from armed conflict. The UN has also noted this progress and, following the elections in October 2011, a UN assessment mission will evaluate preparations for the handover of security responsibilities from UNMIL to the Liberian authorities (Security Council Report, n.d.). ■

Notes

1 Charles Taylor's famous campaign slogan during the 1997 elections was, 'He killed my Ma, he killed my Pa, but I will vote for him' (Left, 2003).

2 Liberia's wars and its post-conflict context have prompted the research community to produce a substantial amount of literature. On the history of the Liberian state, see, for example, Ellis (1995); Liebenow (1987); and Sawyer (1992). On the country's political evolution and its descent into war, see, for example, Adolfo (2010); Bøås (2008); Conteh-Morgan and Kadivar (1995); Ebo (2005); Ellis (1999); Kieh (2009); and Sawyer (1992).

3 The Small Arms Survey works with national partners to conduct household surveys. In collaboration with the Liberian Institute for Statistics & Geo-Information Services (LISGIS) and Action on Armed Violence (AOAV), it administered a household survey in all 15 counties in 2010. Population levels were taken into consideration when administering the survey, and the sample was designed to produce both national-level and sub-national data, such as for greater Monrovia, urban and rural areas, and various county groupings. LISGIS conducted the survey in the counties, whereas AOAV covered Monrovia, providing enumerators, supervisors, and data entry persons. The enumerators and supervisors were trained by the Small Arms Survey and AOAV. Once the data was deemed clean and validated, weights were applied to individual cases, taking into account their (county) location, tribal membership, sex, religious affiliation, and age. These weights were created to obtain a representative proportion of the population that is commensurate with the proportions reported by the 2008 census data with respect to these five demographic traits.

4 The United Nations Development Programme defines a post-conflict country as 'lying somewhere along [peace-building] milestones'. These milestones include the cessation of hostilities and violence; the signing of peace agreements; disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration; and the return of internally displaced persons (UNDP, 2008, xviii).

5 See UNSC (2007b; 2007c; 2008a; 2008b; 2009a; 2009b; 2010a; 2010b; 2011).

6 Key informant interview, Margibi, April 2010.

7 Key informant interview, Grand Gedeh, April 2010.

8 Key informant interview, Montserrado County, April 2010.

9 A forthcoming *Issue Brief* will be dedicated to the insecurity of women and will analyse trends and patterns of violence against women in Liberia.

10 This study uses the term 'common crimes' to refer to theft, robberies, burglaries, fraud, and petty crime. Violent common crimes include armed robberies and attacks on households (van Dijk, 2008, ch. 3).

11 *Issue Brief* No. 2 focuses on crime and victimization patterns in Liberia, highlighting the fact that Monrovia suffers from significantly higher levels of crime and violence as compared to the counties (Small Arms Survey, 2011a).

12 For critical analyses of the DDRR process in Liberia, see Kantor and Persson (2010); Olanisakin and Alao (2005); Paes (2005); Pugel (2008).

13 This information is based on interviews with Cocopa and Sinoe rubber plantations' management staff, community members, and plantation workers, May 2010.

14 Interviews with UNMIL staff; miners in Henrytown; Forest Development Authority officials, April–May 2010.

15 Focus group discussion with community youths in Yekepa, Nimba County, 5 May 2010.

16 Key informant interview, Grand Kru, April 2010.

17 As explained by Adolfo (2010, p. 29): 'The Liberian government's rationale behind such a broad definition of youth is that 14 years of warfare have left "over-age youth" ill-equipped to cope in a post-war society. Therefore, the government has decided to focus resources on this age cohort.' In general, however, the term 'youth' partly serves as an indicator of social status, not necessarily empirical age. Consequently, it is not unusual to meet a 40-year-old who describes him- or herself as a 'youth'. Email communication with a researcher working in Liberia, June 2011.

18 Interview with the national MTU president by Oscar Bloh, Monrovia, April 2010.

19 Interview with the national MTU president by Oscar Bloh, Monrovia, April 2010.

20 The leadership of the Bong Motorbike Taxi Union and the chief of traffic of the police in Gbarnga provided this information independently (Bloh, 2010).

21 Key informant interview with a representative of Norwegian Refugee Council, Monrovia, 11 December 2010.

22 The report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission notes that the highest concentration of reported victimization and violations of rights are concentrated in Montserrado, Bong, Lofa, and Nimba counties, ranging from 22,094 to 12,794 violations per county (Cibelli, Hoover, and Krüger, 2009, pp. 6–9).

23 Militias have proven to be an enduring challenge to achieving peace in war zones around the world. For lessons learned from case studies in Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sudan, and Timor-Leste, see Alden, Thakur, and Arnold (2011).

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A former child soldier washes the floor of the room he shares with two other ex-combatants in an abandoned government building, Monrovia, June 2007.

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About the Liberia Armed Violence Assessment

The Liberia Armed Violence Assessment is an initiative administered by the Small Arms Survey, an independent research project of the Graduate Institute of International and Development studies in Geneva. In collaboration with the Liberian Institute for Statistics and Geo-Information Services (LISGIS) and Action on Armed Violence (AOAV), the Small Arms Survey administered a household survey in all 15 counties in 2010. The survey considered respondents' perceptions of security and victimization, exposure to violence, behavioural responses to threats in communities, and an analysis of instruments of violence. Key informant interviews, as well as background papers conducted by researchers and practitioners in Liberia, completed the research.

The Liberia Armed Violence Assessment will publish five *Issue Briefs* summarizing key findings of the research. The project will seek to consider some of the challenges faced by Liberia, with a view to supporting the development of appropriate justice and security strategies for 2011 and beyond. All publications will be made available online at www.smallarmssurvey.org.

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