“BUILDING PEACE IN LIBERIA: TOUGH ASSIGNMENT OR A LOST CAUSE?”

Welcome and Keynote Remarks by

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1. **Introduction and Background to Current Situation:**

I would like to thank the organizers for inviting me to share some thoughts on this very timely and important topic: Building Peace in Liberia - Tough Assignment or Lost Cause? Before doing so, however, it is necessary to outline briefly the background to the current UN peace efforts in Liberia. In this regard, we may recall that between the breaking out of the civil war in Liberia in 1989, when then rebel leader Charles Taylor, head of the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), launched an incursion from neighbouring Côte d’Ivoire into Liberia, and 1995, more than 200,000 lives were lost, more than 700,000 people had to seek refuge outside the country and an estimated 1.4 million people were internally displaced.

The first response to the conflict was by a regional organization, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), that deployed an ECOWAS’s observer force, the Military Observer Group (ECOMOG) to Liberia in 1990. In 1992, however, the Security Council imposed an arms embargo on Liberia, and following ECOWAS’s brokered peace agreement in Cotonou, Benin, the Council established the United Nations Observer Mission in Liberia (UNOMIL) in 1993. It was tasked with supporting ECOMOG in implementing the Cotonou peace agreement. However, major delays in the implementation of the peace agreement and resumed fighting among Liberian factions made it impossible to hold elections in February/March 1994, as scheduled. In the following months, a number of supplementary peace agreements, amending and clarifying
the Cotonou agreement, were negotiated. With the ceasefire in force, the United Nations successfully observed the conduct of the elections in July 1997 and a peacebuilding support office was established (UNOL). The ceasefire led to the effective end of the war and to elections from which Charles Taylor emerged as president of the country.

However, Taylor’s administration was rife with corruption, as government officials regularly used state power for personal enrichment. Tensions and divisions in the country continued to mount, and a series of violent outbreaks ensued. In July 2000, Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD), a Liberian armed opposition group launched an incursion from Guinea into Liberia leading to four more years of civil war. Continued fighting between LURD and government forces finally set off a LURD offensive against Monrovia in 2002. Early in 2003, a new faction, the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL) broke off from LURD and began a simultaneous push toward Monrovia from eastern Liberia. On 1 August 2003, the Security Council adopted resolution 1497 (2003), authorizing the establishment of a multinational force in Liberia. On 18 August 2003, the Liberian parties signed a Comprehensive Peace Agreement in Accra. With the subsequent deployment of the ECOWAS Mission in Liberia (ECOMIL), the security situation in the country improved. Eventually, UNMIL took over peacekeeping duties from ECOWAS forces on 1 October. Some 3,500 West African troops who had been serving with ECOMIL
vanguard force were then provisionally “re-hatted” as United Nations peacekeepers.

While the history of Liberia’s conflicts is a tragic one, it also contains many crucial lessons for the future. A dozen peace agreements, elections, several peacekeeping missions (ECOMOG, UNOMIL, ECOMIL and now UNMIL), a peacebuilding office (UNOL) and millions of dollars invested by the UN, donors, NGOs and the international community have not been able to lead to durable peace in Liberia. It is easy then to dismiss Liberia as a hopeless case. However, peace is indivisible and the conflict and war in Liberia like in several African countries assumed regional dimensions. By deploying UNMIL, the currently second largest UN peacekeeping mission (UNMIL currently stands at a troop strength of 14,854 plus an additional 1,115 civilian police covering almost the entire country), the UN and the international community tried to learn not only from its previous engagements in Liberia but also from its other missions, notably UNAMSIL in Sierra Leone. Indeed, many of the newest innovations in UN peacekeeping such as the designation of the UN Resident Coordinator as Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General in peace support missions have been integrated into UNMIL’s structure.

Nonetheless, UNMIL faces many difficult challenges in its peace efforts and I would like to highlight a few major ones:
2. **Major Challenges to Peace in Liberia:**

(i) **Disarmament, Demobilization, Reintegration and Rehabilitation (DDRR):**

The disarmament and demobilization process has officially been completed in November of last year. In total 101,495 former combatants, including 22,370 women, 8,523 boys and 2,440 disarmed while 98% of former child soldiers have returned to their families. These impressive figures are a strong indicator of achievement for UNMIL in a very short time. However, the disarmament and demobilization exercise alone is not sufficient for building lasting peace for two major reasons:

(a) The relatively small number of heavy weaponry that was surrendered and the suspicions and indications that weapon caches may exist throughout the country are reminders that not all parties to the conflict might be fully committed to peace. Some ex-combatants might simply be holding out until the departure of the international community and then resume violent activities.

(b) Lasting peace requires more than just disarming combatants. If the expected peace dividend does not materialise many former combatants or other neglected
groups, such as unemployed youth, might readily (re-) turn to arms, either in their own country or in any of the other fragile neighbouring states faced with instability such as Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire.

It is therefore crucial to make the two Rs, reintegration and rehabilitation, priority in any peace consolidation effort, and to do so from the beginning. As the Liberian experience and many more before have shown it is dangerous to disarm and demobilize combatants without a fully funded and well-planned reintegration and rehabilitation programme in place that offers ex-combatants REAL opportunities to make a living and REAL incentives to abandon the track of destruction and turn to a rewarding civilian lifestyle. Meanwhile, it should be note that, as of March, only 25,591 ex-combatants are covered by current UNDP/USAID/EC reintegration projects. That leaves about 75,000 ex-combatants with no reason to commit to peace but many reasons to (re-) join one of the many conflicts in the region. While projects aimed at reintegrating another 44,502 ex-combatants have been planned, the shortfall in funding is obstructing this most pressing and crucial process. Adequate and more predictable sources of funding for RR activities are urgently required.
(ii) **Elections:**

Preparations for elections are currently underway in Liberia. As in any country emerging from conflict, elections are both the first major step towards peace consolidation and a truly risky undertaking in such a fragile environment. The next elections are expected to be fairer and freer than the fundamentally flawed elections of 1997, which put former warlord Charles Taylor (who was running on a campaign based on blackmail and repression “You killed my Ma, you killed my Pa, I'll vote for you.”) back in power. However, many grave doubts remain whether the elections that are scheduled to be held on 11 October 2005, will take place in an atmosphere of peace and will meet the expectations of Liberians by putting the country on the path of stability, development, peace and democracy. There are many signs that corroborate these doubts.

Meanwhile, preparations for elections are behind schedule, state authority and UNMIL deployment have not yet been fully consolidated throughout the country and the courts, prisons and the police are not fully operational and functional in all counties. In addition, political challenges - such as corruption and insufficient commitment to the peace process on the part of the NTGL – as well as other threats to stability – such as the reintegration of ex-combatants and refugees, the disaffection of unemployed youth, government workers and Taylor loyalists – put a dark shadow over the outcome and success of the election.
As elections alone are rarely able to buy back people’s trust in the state, the international community and the NTGL must extend their focus beyond elections working to seriously combat corruption and ensure a faster delivery of basic services.

(iii) **The Regional Dimension of the Conflict:**

History has shown that conflict can be contagious and spread to neighbouring countries if no measures are taken to resolve it. This is particularly true for Africa where insurgencies are often supported by neighbouring states. What started as a small incursion by the NPFL from neighbouring Cote d’Ivoire has drawn two countries, Liberia and Sierra Leone, into over a decade long conflicts and destabilized a whole region. In recent years, the international community has increasingly acknowledged the important regional dimensions of conflicts in West Africa. In order to better address these cross-border and regional challenges and enhance coordinated UN cooperation with ECOWAS in the region, a United Nations Office for West Africa (UNOWA) was established in 2002. More recently, an Inter-Mission Working Group has been established that complements regional meetings of SRSGs and Force Commanders of UN Missions in West Africa.

However, the task is huge and the frameworks and mechanisms available, usually outgrowths of inter-state relations, are often
inadequate to deal with the challenges. The fact that the region
still abounds in small arms and light weapons and is home to a
large pool of West African “migrating mercenaries” is
 alarming. In this regard, it is a sign of encouragement that
UNMIL started an investigation last week into recent
recruitments of Liberian ex-combatants for armed groups in
Cote d’Ivoire. Moreover, greater regional harmonization
between peace efforts like currently underway with regard to
DDR needs to be sought with respect to the whole peace
consolidation spectrum.

(iv) The Nexus Between Peace and Development

As I have tried to show, addressing the challenges of DDRR,
the upcoming elections and the regional dimension of Liberia’s
conflict are paramount to the success of UNMIL. However,
dealing with these matters is a necessary but not sufficient
prerequisite to bringing about lasting peace in the country.
Peace is only durable if it is accompanied by development and
vice versa. As the recent report of the SG’s High-Level Panel
on Threats, Challenges and Change has confirmed, peace and
development are inextricably linked. Hence, permit me to
indicate, with respect to the Liberian conflict, a few major
issues that must receive increase attention by the NTGL, the
UN, and the international community so as to ensure that
Liberia’s peace does not remain as fragile as it has been for the
last 15 years.
(a) **Natural Resource Management:**

Liberia’s wealth of natural resources has been inextricably linked with its tragic conflict that lasted over a decade. While the acquisition of wealth through the exploitation of natural resources was not the motivation for most fighters to take up arms, it had fuelled the conflict. With a small population and rich in both diamonds and timber, Liberia should have been in a position to fully provide for its people. However, ordinary Liberians continue to live in dire poverty and have never benefited from their country’s wealth. Decades of mismanagement, neglect and economic marginalization have only been exacerbated by the many years of conflict in which these resources fell prey to whoever was able to control them by force. Hence, post-conflict reconstruction efforts in Liberia must ensure that its natural resources are properly managed and used in the interest of and for all Liberians. In this regard, it is crucial to develop better mechanisms to promote and ensure transparency and accountability in revenue-generating ministries and agencies and to establish strong international oversight. However, transparency and accountability should not be limited to natural resources but should be applied to include all government activities and services. It is also vital that long-term development
and respective efforts be factored into reconstruction and national recovery plans from an early stage. Liberia and other countries emerging from conflict have reasons to join NEPAD’s African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM).

(b) The Centre-Periphery Dichotomy and Imbalance:

However, it is imperative that UNMIL and the NTGL learn important lessons from Sierra Leone and other countries that are also characterised by a sharp centre-periphery/urban-rural (hinterland) divide. Wars rarely start in the centre, they start in the periphery. And it is usually the people in the periphery that have been most neglected and marginalized by the state. In order to bring peace to Liberia, UNMIL as well as the NTGL should therefore focus their attention on bringing about a real difference in people’s lives not only in Monrovia and the major coastal towns but above all in the rural areas. Reconstruction should not be limited to urban areas but need to extend to the hinterland where most basic services and infrastructure such as hospitals, schools, churches, police and courts are minimal or not existent and government authority is weak.
(c) **Youth Unemployment:**

About half of Liberia’s 3 million people are 18 years old or younger. This number alone reveals the importance of addressing the grievances of the Liberian youth. Youth have often been marginalized in decision-making and political participation. In addition, Liberia has also offered its youth few if any opportunities to avoid economic hardship and lift themselves out of poverty. It is therefore imperative to strengthen our efforts to make suitable and profitable long-term employment opportunities available. It is not enough to offer short courses and vocational training if the skills acquired are not in demand in medium-term. In the end, only the revitalisation of the economy and the fair distribution of resources can lead Liberia’s youth out of poverty and offer attractive alternatives to living by the barrel of the gun or becoming preys for adults recruiting them as child soldiers.

(d) **Economic Recovery:**

Unfortunately, poverty remains the key root cause for conflicts and wars in Africa. Over 45% of Africans are living on less than $1 a day and income poverty rose by 40% between 1987 and 1993. Liberia is one of the poorest and inhospitable places for humans in the world;
while it currently does not rank in UNDP’s 2004 Human Development Index it would probably replace Sierra Leone at last place. At the same time, Liberia’s development is hindered by an extremely heavy burden of debt. Liberia’s current debt is estimated at $2.5 billion. While current efforts of the international community to bring about peace in Liberia are absolutely crucial it, peace is only durable if it leads to sustainable development. And development first and foremost means poverty reduction which entails economic recovery and debt relief especially for countries emerging from conflict. Therefore, serious and far-reaching economic recovery and debt relief programmes and opportunities should be central to Liberia’s peace consolidation and reconstruction.

3. **Concluding Remarks:**

We may now return to the sub-text of this Conference and the question before us: Is building peace in Liberia a tough assignment or a lost cause? The brief outline and analysis of the challenges to peace and security mentioned above demonstrate that Liberia is indeed a tough assignment. And they occur and must be addressed in the context of a tough neighbourhood, i.e. the regional dimension of the threats to durable peace and sustainable development. Hence, while there is no room for complacency, there are at least four reasons why for Liberia, hope is not lost and must be kept alive.
First, Liberia is a relatively small country (both in size and population) with some natural resources, a skilled elite and a history of prolonged peace. Its former leaders were also adept at promoting peaceful resolution of conflicts at home and in the continent.

Second, the regional dimension of the conflict and war in Liberia is increasingly recognised, hence the imperative of assisting the people of Liberia to consolidate peace.

Third, there is a growing determination by the leaders of the West African sub-region and the African continent as a whole to build a peace and security architecture in which good governance and development are key building blocks. This is clearly demonstrated through the efforts being made by ECOWAS, NEPAD and the African Union.

Fourth, the investments made in the process of peacemaking, peacekeeping, and peacebuilding in Liberia by ECOWAS, the United Nations, and the international community are simply too big to be simply thrown away or to walk away from.

Nonetheless, the primary responsibility for peace must belong to the Liberians themselves. The NTGL has a duty not to proceed along the path of business as usual; otherwise the result would be as usual. Then the leadership of West Africa and the continent as a whole would need to continue their efforts to assist Liberia to build peace there.
Finally, the United Nations and the international community would need to ensure, first, that UNMIL succeed in its objectives including through adequate and predictable funding for DDRR programmes and secondly, helping to lay the foundation for economic growth and sustainable development. These are undoubtedly tall orders but there are not impossible tasks if the political will and real commitment are there.

I thank you for listening.