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Military or hybrid solutions for border patrolling in Liberia?

By Colin Robinson

The Armed Force of Liberia (AFL) is one of a number of developing state armies that have been systematically reconstructed in the past few years. Liberia is in a very dangerous regional environment, with multiple problems in the surrounding countries: uncertain transitions in Sierra Leone and Guinea, and a small-scale war of succession having just ended in Cote d'Ivoire.

Border surveillance in Liberia, far from the capital Monrovia, is vitally important in regions where armed groups may be exploiting or smuggling natural resources or drugs.

As the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) continues its draw down from 15,000 to now 8,000 or less troops, the AFL has been being trained to take on some of the UN force's role. The training focus has successively moved from 10-strong sections on and upwards towards 40-strong platoons and 130-strong companies. The ultimate aim is to make the two 700-strong AFL battalions capable of manoeuvring in conjunction with each other.

The New National Defense Act of 2008 specifically tasks the AFL to defend the territorial integrity of Liberia against encroachment. Therefore one of the principal apparent tasks for the AFL is some sort of border patrol or surveillance duty. This kind of task would place an emphasis on operations in small sub-units such as sections and platoons. Such operations might rely upon and enhance skills that have already been implanted, rather than require large-unit manoeuvre skills that may not

be fully mastered yet. Moreover, sub unit drill and practice is the basis of good infantry operations. Thus, patrols along the borders would give the AFL the chance to practice basic skills.

The AFL's two battalions passed their U.S.-adapted Army Readiness Training Evaluation Programme in September and December 2009. They have thus been officially declared as ready to conduct operations. The AFL as a whole is not scheduled to be operational before 2014. But given the hostile regional environment and the arguments for further building soldiers' skills, there is a good case for the troops to be deployed to the border, even on some sort of trial basis. The troops have been repeatedly tested and trained at the small section and platoon level necessary for such operations.

Sending forces to the border would be both logistically difficult and expensive. The Liberian military does not yet have the kind of combat service support that developed-world armies have that could provide food, fuel, and other supplies from Monrovia to the border regions. Deploying a battalion-sized force to the borders would currently be a challenge for even a developedworld army; virtually everything required to support the troops would have to flow up from Monrovia in some fashion. There is little ability to supply, for example, fuel, unless it is moved by road in significant quantities, nor the numbers of sufficiently skilled maintenance personnel to keep the vehicles running. In addition, the expense would be prohibitive for the current military budget; even maintaining a small border force would probably consume most of the yearly annual AFL congressional appropriations. Research appears to indicate that the AFL even in its present condition does not have enough funding for proper feeding, housing, or soldiers' pay. President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf reported in February 2012 that 226 personnel had left the force, mostly through desertions.



Despite the challenges, the border patrol task is a major part of assuring the country's territorial integrity. Even if a significant deployment seems prohibitively expensive, there ought to be some way of trialling such a task on a small scale, potentially with UNMIL support. UNMIL has already assisted in the training of the AFL Engineer Company. The UN has also given much more significant support to a host country army in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Given this situation, the reasons why border patrols have not even been trialled can be questioned. However, it appears that there may be at least two potential reasons why the AFL battalions have not been assigned such a task. Both strike at some of the assumptions inherent in the international AFL reconstruction project. Firstly, on the borders, the Defence Ministry may not be sure of the steadfastness of their troops, spread out far from supervision and relatively lowly paid. In addition, while there are a variety of smuggling challenges and narcotics issues on the frontier, some analysts believe there may be little immediate threat to the Sirleaf government from the region.

Secondly, the main threat to the Sirleaf government currently may emanate from the capital. Monrovia remains overcrowded with underemployed and unemployed displaced persons from all over the country, who settled there during the civil war. Such potentially disaffected people might potentially be exploited by any one of the numerous political factions to stir up discontent. The January 2012 riots after vacation workers protested late payment of salaries is an example of the kind of problem that can occur. The two battalions are currently both located at the Edward Benyan Kesselly Barracks ('EBK'), some 50 miles from Monrovia on the airport road. They are relatively well placed to intervene in Monrovia if necessary to respond to some disturbance of civil order or other threat.

It may be difficult for the Sirleaf government to send its military forces to the border. With the incipient political threats posed in the capital, it might be difficult for any Liberian government to move troops out to the border on a large scale.

The problem of cross-border smuggling, crime, and potential insurrection remains, however. In Liberia, as in many other developing states, it may be impossible to police the country adequately using only the resources of the state. State institutions may simply, like the AFL, not develop to the full capacity required. Meanwhile, many areas are being policed without state involvement using local arrangements, sometimes based on traditional police or the equivalent. This is usually of very low effectiveness in Western terms, but at least offers something to build upon.

Policing the border more effectively may require challenging current thinking. At the very least it seems to be a task currently beyond both the army and the police's resources. The current problem can be viewed as stemming from lack of state capacity, and in its longterm absence communities have had to police themselves, with their own methods. Any eventual answer to the Liberian border challenge, and the other border issues of a similar nature in the Mano River region, may have to be a state/non-state hybrid. Additional support to the community's own policing methods from the state might allow more effective policing. Those who carry out traditional policing might be paid by the state and audited by state structures. The use of cell phones to pay demobilization stipends in the Democratic Republic of Congo, for example, points to a possible way to effectively transfer money to community policemen in the absence of sufficient bank infrastructure.

Liberia's borders currently constitute a security risk. But neither the AFL nor the Liberian National Police seem capable at this point in time of patrolling the border beyond the well-established crossing points. There are good reasons why this is the case. But these reasons do not remove the incipient threats to stability posed by an unpatrolled frontier. This absence of state capacity seems likely to persist, at least in the medium term. In response, hybrid state/non-state solutions using state resources to support community self-policing seem worthy of consideration.

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For further information on this publication, contact: funmiolonisakin@runbox.com

Conflict, Security & Development Group

King's College London

Strand, London

WC2R 2LS, UK

Tel: +44(0)20 7848 1984

www.securityanddevelopment.org