Liberia – back on its feet?

by Bram Posthumus*

In July, Liberia celebrated its 150th birthday – a year late! The proper party could not be held last year because of the presidential and parliamentary contests. But now, with an elected government in office and the shooting wars behind them, Liberians may celebrate, without losing sight of the fact that the country has very difficult tasks before it. Among the priorities are national reconciliation, restructuring the security apparatus, returning people to their homes and physical reconstruction. Initiatives have sprung up everywhere to achieve these aims. However, Liberians cannot be expected to do everything on their own. Welcome assistance from the outside world, including the EU, has been coming in.

On 21 July, close to 1500 delegates gathered at the Unity Conference Centre in Virginia, Monrovia for the opening of the National Conference on the future of Liberia. President Charles Taylor addressed those present. He called on all Liberians to forget their differences and unite in nation-building, seizing the opportunity to reconcile and discuss their common future. The Reverend Jesse Jackson, who during his previous visit in February had proclaimed: ‘It’s morning time in Liberia’, attended as President Clinton’s special envoy. The conference provided an opportunity to those who do not visit Monrovia regularly to air their views and concerns, and this they did in large numbers, according to the accounts of the reportedly chaotic proceedings.

Just the drive from the mangled remains of the terminal building at Robertsfield International Airport to the Liberian capital, some 65 kilometres away, will tell you how much physical reconstruction remains to be done. The landscape is dotted with the shells of rural homes. Only the walls remain, testimony to the looting that took place not so long ago. Much of Monrovia’s centre gives the queer impression of a city divided – but not in geographical terms. Rather, it appears to have a lower half and an upper half. On the streets, there is an incessant bustle as yellow taxis (all second-hand from EU countries) file noisily past the crowds. Market women and children sell just about anything you will find in a European supermarket. Pavement services thrive. You can have your hair cut, your documents photocopied, your US dollars changed and your shoes polished. But look upwards and what you see, more often than not, is akin to a ghost town. The upper floors of the buildings are skeletons. Exceptions are the office blocks where some ministries and businesses are located, and the shell-damaged high-rise buildings that are home to tens of thousands of internally displaced persons (IDPs).

The towns in Lofa County, one of Liberia’s densely-forested inland provinces, have been extensively looted and burned. Once thriving places like Zorzor and Konia are bustling again – under improvised mud and thatch shacks next to the remains of the original buildings. Zorzor’s large regional hospital has been reduced to an overgrown labyrinth of single walls, but the clinic next door is operating. Voinjama, which The Courier visited in 1997, still has no electricity. The once famous Multilateral High School is deserted; the school bus has been burned and the classroom windows smashed. The town’s mayor, who fled to Guinea during the fighting, bemoans Voinjama’s fate: ‘I am deeply saddened by all this. Everything we had is lost.’ But though it will take years to put things back into place, he remains optimistic about the future. ‘We have never given up hope for better times. The people I work with are honest and hard-working, so I don’t despair.’

Arguably more difficult is another long-term process, reconciliation. This involves politics at the highest level. Charles Taylor, confident winner of last year’s election with 75% of the vote, has problems with some of his old rivals from the war, including Roosevelt Johnson and Alhaji Kromah. Johnson keeps flitting in and out of the country, claiming to fear for his life. Alhaji Kromah remains abroad, from where he

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hurls accusations at the government. It makes for an unstable political environment: In early August, Defence Minister Daniel Chea went so far as to accuse Guinea of hatching destabilisation plans, which the Guineans felt obliged to deny during an impromptu visit.

The security forces have been at the centre of highly public disputes between President Taylor and the commanders of the West African peace-keeping force called ECOMOG. ECOMOG has made remarkable progress since the 14th peace accord was embraced by all fighting parties in 1996. Its popularity on the streets of Monrovia is not in doubt, but there have been major disagreements with the government about who should be in charge of restructuring the Liberian army.

Incessant bustle on the streets

Now the peace-keepers have all but withdrawn from the streets and not all Monrovians are happy about this. The general view was that ECOMOG checkpoints were the only ones you could pass without fear of harassment. This may sound exaggerated, but people have good reason for their caution vis-à-vis local security personnel. Given the unstable political and regional climate, legitimate criticism of government action is often mistaken for full frontal assault. On many occasions, the security apparatus has been called in to deal with ‘dissenters’, when dialogue would have been more appropriate. No less an authority than Archbishop Michael Francis told the National Conference in July that the security apparatus, and those responsible for it, must understand the concept of human rights. The record of law-enforcement and security agencies in this area has been less than encouraging. Journalists, civil rights lawyers and members of the public have been threatened, held in custody without charge, or attacked. Some have disappeared without trace. A Human Rights Commission is in place but its mandate remains unclear and not much has been heard from it.

All this underlines the need for an alert civil society. Samuel Kofi Woods, director of the Catholic Justice and Peace Commission (JPC) says: ‘This is the critical period for Liberia. How can we keep peace, democracy and stability? How do we work with a young and inexperienced government to get a stable society?’ LWI spokeswoman Massa Washington holds a similar view of the project of rebuilding Liberia: ‘People must be taught their civil rights, and their responsibilities. They must know what they can expect from the government and how they can help it. It works both ways.’ JPC and LWI are among several civic groups that are organising workshops to bring about this sense of civic responsibility. Another player here is the press. As Abraham Massaley of the Press Union of Liberia puts it: ‘We have a crucial role in the process of national reconstruction and healing. For most Liberians, it is a way to clarify to the government what the people want in the reconstruction programmes. And of course, the government can explain its agenda and position.’

45,000 people are ‘living dangerously’ in high-rise blocks

The people, meanwhile, are trying to go about their business. For many, this involves going home. The conflict displaced two-thirds of the country’s population of an estimated 2.5 million. In February, the UN High Commission for Refugees in Liberia put the number of people still adrift outside the country at 600,000. It has registered close to 100,000 requests for repatriation. Just who goes where is sometimes difficult to establish. As Alexander Kulue, director of the government-instituted Liberian Refugee Repatriation and Resettlement Commission (LRRRC) explains: ‘People who are in Guinea can just walk across the border. [But] we also have about 150,000 IDPs living in recognised shelters and 45,000 living dangerously.’ This last is a reference to the crowded high-rise blocks in Monrovia. Earlier this year, LRRRC tried, with significant assistance from the EU, to get as many people as possible home in time for the planting season, but Kulue concedes the task has proved difficult: ‘Some people don’t intend to return. They have reasons for not wanting to go back. Bad memories as victims. Their own actions. The
perception that there are no longer opportunities there. People will gravitate to where they feel comfortable.’ For many that means remaining in Guinea, or Monrovia, where the population has at least tripled to about 1.5 million.

There are many local initiatives to help war-affected children – and that means virtually all of them. For example, a small religious-based organisation called My Brother’s Keeper is caring for a small group of war orphans in the Old Road/Sinkor part of Monrovia. They ‘live’ in a bombed-out building, next to a popular watering hole, where they receive some basic education and sleep under a tarpaulin. The Liberia Opportunities Industrialization Centres (LOIC) help to detraumatisé former child-soldiers and to rehabilitate them socially. Susuku, an old organisation run by veteran politician, Dr Togba-Nah Tipoteh, has sourced funds for an education scheme for ex-combatants. These are young, ambitious men and women, who want to make the best out of the rest of their lives. But they are not confident of the future. ‘If the money runs out, some of us will go back into the bush’, one of them says. ‘I am afraid of that.’ In spite of the Susuku/ECOMOG weapons hand-in exercise, Liberia is still awash with arms. LOIC director Dillon puts it at 16,000. ‘Guns have been used by people who have involved themselves a career of armed looting.’ They could choose that path again if the situation deteriorates. Indeed, this is precisely what happened in early May when former soldiers went on the rampage in Monrovia over pay. ECOMOG had to intervene to restore peace to a justifiably jittery city.

By any estimate, reconstruction will be hugely expensive. Pledges worth US$ 220 million were made at a donor conference last April, and another meeting is planned for later this year. It would, of course, be wonderful if some of that money could be made inside Liberia. The national economy used to generate some US$ 800m a year, principally from mining iron ore, logging and rubber tapping. But the war severely disrupted the national infrastructure, needed to bring the iron ore from Yekepa on the Guinean border to the port of Monrovia. The same is true for the gigantic Firestone rubber plantation whose production is a lot less than it used to be. Traders have reappeared, repair workshops and small, but excellent, local restaurants – all run by women – are all around, but there are not enough signs that primary production is picking up. Some people have managed to settle into agriculture, a relatively risk-free venture since Liberia has largely escaped the scourge of landmines. One finds people selling palm-wine by the roadside and working a small rubber plantation on the side. But they are a minority. Street trade and transport appear the only really thriving sectors, besides the work that is available in the bloated security apparatus. Banks are working at a fraction of previous capacity. Most currency trading takes place on the streets, where the Liberian dollar has staged a recovery of some sorts since The Courier was here (up from 60 to 40 to the US$). Plans for a unifying single currency have been announced by the government.

Another major factor slowing down any meaningful economic resurrection is the fact that the brains that could be in charge of this revitalisation are mostly abroad. Given the current levels of pay – if any at all – Liberian professionals are unlikely to return soon.

This country is fabulously fertile and should need no food aid. But let us briefly return to Voinjama and take a short 45-minute walk to a town called Malamai. It was all but destroyed in the fighting. It lost fully a third of its population. The once thriving gardens are overgrown. But the people who have returned are ambitious to revitalise it. As Chief Kpadeh puts it: ‘We want to grow our kola nuts again, our cocoa, coffee and bananas. All that has to come again. But we cannot do it without machetes.’ Or indeed, without food. The people here survive on one bowl of rice with bush leaves each day, and have no tools to do the work, because everything was looted. This is a tragic situation and efforts by the international community are desperately needed here.

The EU provides help to small-scale projects in various areas, as well as assistance on the national scene in Liberia. The EU Field Representative, Alois Lorkers, explains: ‘We have had our second plan approved, with a total value of ECU 27m. This will pay for resettling and rehabilitat- ing people, and also the health care programme (rehabilitating health centres), electricity, the port, roads and bridges. In addition, we have begun institutional strengthening and capacity-building. We will help some of the crucial ministries in Liberia with technical assistance.’ The Ministry of Planning stands to benefit.

On August 12, the National Conference was concluded, much later than planned, with a flurry of well-meaned closing speeches – which, on paper, looked very much like the opening ones. There were also more concrete proposals on political reform, security, education and health. The meeting proposed decentralisation, and the election of local leaders – rather than the presidential appointment – of local leaders. Will these fine words be turned into reality? In all areas, there are clearly a lot of long hard struggles ahead. But JPC Director Woods is optimistic: ‘There is something specific happening in Liberia.’ The press, human rights groups and civilians are testing the promises the government has made. We are making progress.’ The mayor of Voinjama is also upbeat. ‘Come back in a few years,’ he told us, ‘and you will find it like it used to be.’

B.P.