

ARTICLES

January 25 Press Briefing



Ms. Ellen Margrthe Loj, Special Representative of the Secretary-General of the United Nations Near Verbatim

Good morning to all of you.

I should start by saying Happy Belated New Year because I do not think I have seen you since we turn into the year, and thank you all for being here. As the Chief of Public Information said, this will be my last time I address you as the Special Representative of the Secretary-General in Liberia since I have now entered my last week of service.

I have been here for four years, and it has been a privilege to serve the United Nations, and the people of Liberia, as they travel along the road to lasting peace.

As I prepare to leave the country, I want to express my heartfelt gratitude and appreciation for the warmth and generosity bestowed upon me by all Liberians.

When I arrived in January 2008, it was clear that the Liberia and its people had started to move away from an immediate post-conflict phase towards a climate of peace and development. And a lot has happened in the last four years. Buildings were rising along Tubman Boulevard, new shops are opening almost daily and classrooms are overloaded with students eager to learn. Roads have been paved and we even have traffic jams in Monrovia. I think in 2008, there was a positive spirit of hope which has only become stronger over these four years. The country has surely made significant progress despite several challenges still remaining.

Last year, Liberia passed an historic milestone in conducting its second democratic elections since the end of the conflict. This was an important undertaking which, once again, demonstrates the will of the Liberian people. And I congratulate them on the peaceful conduct of these elections.

However, peace cannot be complete without reconciliation. Experiences from around the world have shown us that an incomplete peace is often a prelude to renew conflict. Through dialogue and inclusion, I am highly confident that Liberia will continue its work towards lasting peace.

Liberians have demonstrated that they can be in the driver's seat and that they have chosen the path to sustainable development. And progress is reflected in the way UNMIL supports Liberia today. From being first in line with a robust military and police presence, the mission is today standing second in line focusing on providing advisory support to security and rule of law institutions.

Changes will continue and we cannot rely on business as usual. Accordingly, in the years to come, UNMIL's transitions will be carried forward with national institutions taking on greater responsibility. While phasing out certain areas of support, the mission will at the same time intensify its efforts towards capacity development. However, I would like to reassure Liberians that the UN not leave a security vacuum that will put Liberia's at risk.

This being said, I want to reinforce once more that ensuring peace is a shared responsibility; it is not something to leave for the Government or UNMIL alone. We all have to work to ensuring peace. Throughout my stay here, I have seen tremendous potential in the Liberian people.

With their unflinching support and resilience, we all managed to keep Liberia moving forwards. The international community will continue to stand by the Liberian people side. Their hard won, well deserved peace and democracy require vigilance and most of all to rise above partisan and communal divisions. While many challenges are still ahead, I am confident of the Liberia's ability to meet these challenges.

For the last few years, the children entering school have never known war; my hope is that they never have to witness such trauma again. They deserve a peaceful tomorrow build with respect for rule of law, gender equity, proper education and sustainable development for all.

Thank you.

Questions and Answers

Q: Samukai Dukuly. (Power TV)

What have been some of some major challenges since you took over as SRSRG?

A: Ms. Ellen Margrethe Loj (SRSRG)

It is very hard looking back over the last four years to say what was the greatest challenge because every day is a challenge if you get a report of something happening around the country that's threatening the peace but it is clear that some of the communal disputes we have had around the country, mob violence situation have been challenging for us to deal with because whenever two groups of civilians Liberians are at odd it is a challenge for the military force to deal with civilians.

We all recall the unfortunate events we had in Lofa sometime ago for instance. Secondly, it is also clear that the spillover from Ivorian crisis has been a challenge for the Liberia security forces including UNMIL-especially to deal with the situation which came right before the Liberian elections. One challenge also was catering and providing services to the huge number of Ivorian that sought refuge in Liberia. Yet another challenge was dealing with the former combatants and those that that came into Liberia with weapons and we had to be on the alert that nothing disturbs the peace in Liberia. Then Elections in itself was a challenge for us to work with Liberian institutions to encourage them to take responsibility for the conduct of the elections which they did amicably.

However, we monitored and supported them as best as we could so they are more capable next time to so it on their own. As I said this is the second democratic election since the Liberian civil war but the elections last year was the first one truly run by Liberian institutions themselves and that should not be forgotten.

Q: Boima J.V. Boimah (New Democrat Newspaper)

I would like to know what the drawdown plans of UNMIL are. Secondly, when should Liberians expect to see the first batch of UNMIL security personnel leaving the country? Finally how do you foresee the Liberian political landscape after President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf

A: Ms. Ellen Margrethe Loj (SRSRG)

On draw down plan I would only say that I don't know the details to the plan yet at the end of February beginning March we will have what we call in UN terms the technical assessment mission coming to Liberia to discuss with the mission the Liberia Security Institutions they will then report to the Security Council which will take the decision ultimately... I expect them to do that sometime in spring so I cannot answer your question as to when reduction of our force will take place. It depends on the decision of the Security Council. Let me say we are not talking about the first drawdown of the mission... I think you may recall in 2003 when UNMIL was established we had a military strength of 15,000 soldiers. We have gone through one drawdown phase over a three year period where we reduce the military strength from 15,000 to 8,000. So we are talking about the second exercise.

The second question about political landscape... listen that is not for me. We had a tense political discussions and I spend many hours, many meetings bilateral and with political actors around this table trying to use our good offices in ensuring that everybody kept their disagreement at the verbal level and not take to the streets during the elections period. The elections took place and we now have a Government that was inaugurated on January 16 and she is in the process of forming her new cabinet and we have a new Legislature with several new members... I think we move forward Executive and the interaction between the Executive and Legislative Branch.

Q: Joseph Taryon (United Methodist Radio)

You stressed that the UN will continue to support Liberia's security sector and there will be no vacuum. My question is do you have confidence in the Liberian security sector as UNMIL gradually draws down?

A: Ms. Ellen Margrethe Løj (SRSO)

The final question whether we have confidence in the security sector in Liberia ... I think it's fair to say if everybody had full confidence in the security agencies in Liberia the mission would be gone over night. The reason why I am talking about the reduction of the mission but not leaving a security vacuum is to make sure that it is a gradually process where we continue to build the capacity of the Liberian security agencies . There is still work to be done but they are certainly much better than in 2003. Progress has been made and we have to continue to work with them and build their capacity and their ability to deal with threats to the peace in Liberia.

Q: Mae Azango (FrontPage Africa and a fellow of New Narratives)

You stressed peace and security in the country. How secure is the country with UNMIL still providing security during the elections and not the police or the National Army. Thank you.

A: Ms. Ellen Margrethe Løj (SRSO)

It is not correct to say we provided security during the elections and not the Liberian National Police. The Liberian National Police provided security in each and every polling station. Yes we were around but not at every polling station. We were on call and were ready to come and support the Police if anything arose but it was the LNP that was in the front. We were ready if something had occurred but it didn't luckily. That credit goes to the Liberian people.

There have been a lot of discussions during the elections period about this primarily among political leaders but this is politics to have political disagreement. But there is one day in Liberia that I will never forget and that is the first Election Day in October. I don't know whether you remember that day... I don't know whether you were around. That day it rained...it was pouring down from early morning to late morning. I went around to numerous polling stations and was impressed by Liberian voters standing in long queue from early morning standing in the rain happy and smiling and ready to cast their votes.

They were not pushing or shuffling they were happy looking forward to exercise their democratic rights. Furthermore, I noticed that a lot of voters and after casting their votes were still hanging around happy and joyous of this occasion and were not arguing with each other no matter what party or candidate they had supported. That I took as a tremendous sign of the Liberians people will to move forward to build a democratic and peaceful society. That whole atmosphere told me a lot about where the Liberian people want to move their country in the future. That spirit is crucial for achieving what everybody wants to achieve and it has to be built upon.

Q: Omarska Mark (Liberian journalist)

Now that you are leaving... What do Liberian journalists stand to benefit after closely following the mission's activities in the Country.

A: Ms. Ellen Margrethe Løj (SRSO)

I am not sure I understand the question but I want to say that me leaving the mission has no consequences whatsoever for UNMIL's continuous engagement with the media and I will even say that I hope our Public Information Office will continue to work with the Liberian media in terms of training and building your capacity. I do believe that the media is very important in a democratic society but it is also important for the media to play the proper role to provide objective and accurate information and is not misleading the public. So I think that active participation of training and so from the mission side will continue. The media has a great responsibility... A free media is important but it is freedom under responsibility but sometime the euphoria of getting the free press is so large that you forget the responsibilities part of it but I am hoping that things will move forward also in that direction.

Q: Kaiser Porte (Voice of Rural Montserrado)

You said that peace is incomplete without reconciliation. How far are we in terms of reconciliation? What mechanism have the mission put in place to ensure we have reconciliation in Liberia.

A: Ms. Ellen Margrethe Løj (SRSO)

Well I think the last six months of 2011 have shown us and probably yourself that you are not as far as you had hoped. There is still a lot that needs to be done in terms of reconciliation. There is still a lot that needs to be done to ensure that the future Liberia that is being built is an inclusive Liberia with room for everyone. Also disenfranchise youths. We heard the President talked about youths in her inaugural speech and we heard her talked about it during her State of the Nation address to the National Legislature. I think however that Liberians need to be supported by the international community in their effort to reconcile. I have said it many times that true reconciliation has to be home grown. It cannot be imposed from abroad. I cannot tell three or four of you Liberian how to reconcile...you will not even listen to me. You have to get together and talk and be willing on how to reconcile and deal with what has to be dealt with for that reconciliation to take place. So reconciliation presupposes the active participation of all Liberians who have something to grumble about. So a lot more need to be done but you have to definitely be in the driver's seat. I said also when the Truth and Reconciliation Commission report came out and there are lots of recommendations in that report that hasn't been followed through. I hope more impetus will come on that... I have seen there are plans for having the Palava Hut mechanism rolled out all over the Country and create that forum to discuss grievances and trial and reconcile and move forward but it does presuppose active participation from all Liberians.

Q: Sam Zota (News Newspaper)

I want to know what's your view on the human rights situation in Liberia.

A: Ms. Ellen Margrethe Løj (SRSO)

The human rights situation in Liberia... well you have to be a little more specific for me to answer that because you ask it in very broad terms and I am sure there is something specific you are thinking of. I am sure there's room for improvement. I am very worried about the slowness of the Rule of Law Sector. That is why we still need to work with the police but also with Justice and the Judiciary so that cases can be heard quicker, so that we can reduce the number of people detained in prisons who have not been presented in court. I think it is worrisome that a high percentage of the prisoners down at the Monrovia Central Prison have not been brought to court yet. If that is what you call human rights but it is important to move on as there are many things like that. I am terribly worried about rape against young girls... children I think that is a tremendous abuse of their human rights when a five year old is raped, I was at a Youth Center in Bomi County recently and they were happy to tell me about the campaign and how they talk to the girls to avoid becoming pregnant and how to avoid rape if you can. A five-year old girl cannot understand that much. I told them to talk to the boys and men about it. You have to change that mentality so that they respect girls and women. The high teenage pregnancy is also worrisome in Liberia and it takes away the possibilities for those girls forever.

Q: Sallu Swaray(Analyst Newspaper)

You spent four year of service as the Head of the UN Mission in Liberia. How can you now describe Liberia coming out of war to peace, transition and to democracy? Can you also say that Liberia is no more in a fragile state as compare to previous SRSO's statement.

A: Calvin Gray (Liberty Radio)

What are some challenges confronting you as SRSO of UNMIL?

Q: Dexter Tokpa (United Methodist Radio)

I have guessed you had a predecessor. What would you say are those things that you did that Mr. Doss did not do during the four years and what is the legacy you think you have left behind that the person will developed?

Q: Mae Azango (Front Page Africa)

To every good thing sometimes there are bad things that come along. My question has to do with rape against children as young as five years. What can of investigating are you conducting on UNMIL Personnel who sexual engage in girls at entertainment centers around the country.

Q:You said peace without reconciliation; you may not have genuine peace and reconciliation. And certainly it has become the issue now. You have been here for four years now and us Liberians; we are a peculiar set of people. We have our own unique culture. And the word reconciliation and the application in our own

situation moves from the issue of palava hut , talking about our grievances. The Truth and Reconciliation had their own settlement. But we still find ourselves taking about genuine reconciliation since 2003. You have been here for the past four years, have you ever seen any peculiar situation that could add a little twitch to our own pursue of genuine peace and reconciliation in term of economics and social? Have you seen or observed any unique thing? What recommendation can you give?

Q: Darlington Poka (Reality Newspaper)

I am concerned about the babies that have been left behind by you UNMIL forces all around Liberia. If you go into communities the people are crying, there nothing to be done about that. I wonder if reports ever reached you about that. To be precise, inGbpolu, a little girl complained that your forces assigned there continue to harass then sexually. Are you aware of that?

A: Ms. Ellen Margrthe Loj (SRSG)

To the first question to how far are we in Liberia; it is always very difficult to say if you want to talk about the glass that is half full or half empty. Let me say that I came to Liberia as the SRSG in January 2008 but I had actually visited Liberia two years before in early 2006. And that was the first time I was in Liberia but certainly not the first time in Africa. And I still remember vividly that in 2006 I was shocked by the total destruction of the country. Not only in terms of the human damage to the minds of the people who had gone through the civil war, not in terms of the talented people that had fled Liberia but also in terms of the physical destruction of the country.

In the peace agreement in 2003 it was very clear that you really had to start building the country from scratch also in terms of physical structure. So there was a lot to do. And my point is that you have come a long a way but you are certainly not there yet. We are talking about reconciliation; there are still things that need to be done to get the humans to reconcile and certainly a lot to be done in building the physical infrastructure building the economy, ensuring that there is job opportunities and education for everybody.

My point is that I feel very strongly that there is a concerted willingness amongst the Liberian people to move forward in that direction and that is what needs not only the Government support but also the international communities. I am struck by the eagerness of small kids to go to school and learn and their parent eagerness to allow the kids to go to school. That I thing is building the future capacity of the country.

Are you are still a fragile state? I do not know the definition of what a fragile state is. You do have a temper ever so often; you do have the tendency to use your fist if you disagree. That is why I was happy on Election Day in October, because even though you disagree politically, you did not use your fist. So I hope that by moving forward supporting and building the whole rule of law sector, from the police, over to the justice and judiciary, the confidence you have in the legal system, the rule of law system will increase so you keep your hands in your pocket if you have a disagreement. It is really you men and women of Liberia who have to demonstrate that you do not want to spoil your country. There is no reason for this country not doing better also economically. Compared to many other countries, you have resources, climate that you would be food producing country and exporting country. So it is really for you to demonstrate that you are not fragile anymore and do not want to go back to the terrible past you remember and have bad memories about.

What did we not succeed while I was here, it is clear that it would have been good if we go further ahead in building the rule of law sector, but sometimes things take time and you Liberians are impatient, they want quick results after the peace but sometimes a take time. You do not educate a doctor overnight or an engineer overnight, you cannot construct roads overnight, and it cost money to pave road. You have to get the economy up and going. You have to make sure the resources of the country benefit the people of the country. Sometimes patient is needed but we can all hope that this speed will increase in the years to come.

As for what I did that my predecessor did not do, my advice to my successor, it so happened that my predecessor and I knew each other very well and had a fruitful handover and agreed on many things. I think he had the same philosophy as I had that a mission grew older and the Liberian democracy was being built, it was very important that we gave sufficient room for the Liberians to take charge and we show the patience in terms of advising and mentoring for instance the Liberian security agencies, and we did not sort of push them aside and say we deal with it. It was really for us a question of building the capacity of the Liberian institutions to be able to stand on their own feet. We are still not there. We have things to do. But I think Alan Doss and I had the same philosophy in working and that is the only way peace can be sustain in Liberia. I will leave with my successor to continue to focus on especially building the capacity and assistance in whatever way we can to build the capacity of the rule of law sector and to also support the Liberia National Police in case a threat to security occur.

Two questions to our peacekeepers behavior in relation to the Liberian population; women and girls in particular. Let me say if you have any information whatsoever about misbehavior of our soldiers or staff, please inform us. And have a system where people can come and inform us without us revealing where we get the information from. I take it very seriously and attached a lot of importance to it. You would not like to hear me scolding the military contingent if I hear misbehavior. Each individual case that we hear about is being thoroughly investigated. So if you have any information, give it to me and we will be investigated. I do not want it hanging out there generally that the peacekeepers are misbehaving. We heard for instance about things happening with young girls in entertainment centers on the Airfield Road, we send over an extensive period of time, anonymous investigator around in the evening to try and ascertain what was going on in that community we could not verify from the people we talked to and that talked to us that there were peacekeepers. But is very clear that in any of those places a lot of unfortunate activities with young girls is taking place; not necessarily with peacekeeper but with other people and we shared the information we gathered about those place with the Ministry of Justice. I think it is a general problem. But if you have any concrete information about any of the peacekeepers, tell me and it will be thoroughly investigated and action will be taken. I am talking about all the time. It is simply not acceptable because we are here to assist and support the Liberian people and not to destroy their own confidence. It happens but we have to follow through. So I can only ask to cooperative with us in giving us information we can build on in our investigation.

What is genuine reconciliation? It entails many things. It entails dealing with the past, it also entails in dealing with the future. And I think many will also say if could get a chance in the development of Liberia then we have not had real reconciliation. I think there are a lot of young people who need to be trained to contribute whatever talent they have to society. That is also a kind of reconciliation. Reconciliation in terms of dealing with the past, there is reconciliation in terms of ethnic dispute there is reconciliation in terms of land issues. But there is certainly reconciliation in terms of the economy opportunities. I think it is very important that young people get a chance to develop their talent and I have stressed that it is not only becoming a University graduate, I would hoped that Liberian will put a lot of emphasis on vocational training. Sometimes when I see all those new building going up on Tubman Boulevard, I wonder how the electric wire are in those building? Are they safe, do we have good electricians and carpenters? It is quicker to be electricians and carpenters then to be a medical doctor, so genuine reconciliation is also about fair economic opportunities.

UN babies, I do not really know what you are talking about. If a Liberian woman and an UNMIL staff have a consensual relationship I can not intervene into that. If it is a Liberian grown woman and they have a child, I can not intervene. I would hope that the father and also the mother would take good care of the child. I know there were some cases about some soldiers back in 2003 and 2004 and they were been dealt with. I would honestly have to appeal to the Liberia women if they want a consensual relationship with an UNMIL staff member; they know that the UNMIL staff is not staying here forever. I cannot forbid my staff member from talking to the Liberian people, I can only ask them to act responsible. And that is what we are trying to do. I am always telling the Force Commander that in my next life I want to be a Force Commander because a Force and give order to his soldiers. I cannot issue an order to the civilians.

Q: Zoom Donso(RFI)

UNMIL has been very instrumental in employing Liberians from the first day of its presence in Liberia. It is now known that UNMIL will soon be leaving. What is the fate of Liberians in your employ given the lack of a strong private sector?

Q: Joseph Taryon (Methodist Radio)

During your stay in the Country did you notice an equitable distribution of the Liberia's wealth? I'll also like to know whether there are still poor people in Liberia and if that is so what is the percentage of poor people in Liberia?

Q: Boima J.V. Boimah (New Democrat Newspaper)

What are some of your unfortunate experiences during your four years of service?

A: Ms. Ellen Margrthe Loj (SRSG)

We have many staff member who unfortunately we have many staff members who are drown in the sea. They did not know that the sea was rough and it was dangerous to swim. You can tell the UN soldier it is dangerous to swim in the sea of Monrovia; I cannot do it to the civilian. I can tell the civilians to be responsible. I am trying my very best. But I also need the Liberia to work with and share information so that we can investigate.

National staff members future; we are putting a lot of emphasis in training activities and efforts to enhance their capacity. For example we have a program with Stella Maris to improve their skills and get certificate for their skills. All is aimed in improving their competence and skills so that when the private sector start moving our employees will be attractive for the private sector. So we hope that we can do so that they can have a future in their country. We are very dedicated in intensifying those efforts in the years to come.

Liberia has a lot of resources and a lot of those resources are not benefiting anybody and that is a huge challenge and that is why the UN Secretary Council had sanctions until the legislature was passed to ensure that the resources could benefit the people and Government of Liberia so that they could pursue development activities to for the benefit of the country. Much too many people are poor in Liberia and I hope as private investment and businesses are growing people will have jobs to earn an income. Liberian should develop their skills; pursue opportunities for getting education and increasing their skills and thereby getting a job.

Finally, everybody has said that it not of my business; I think Liberia has a tremendous possibility in the agriculture sector and I cannot understand why. I think it is a tremendous opportunity to grow your own rice and pepper. I do not understand why the eggs I eat here in Liberia have to be imported. I do not understand I have to eat imported tomatoes. I do not understand why you do not grow on you own land; you have much of it. I can only tell that when I go on retirement and go to my own country, and my county does not have the same climate you have in Liberia, but I will be growing my own vegetables in my garden. So if the SRSRG can grow vegetables, any Liberian can grow vegetables.

Let me conclude with that appeal. Thank you very much.

Article List

<< Previous Article Next Article >>

