

**Visit of the Chair of the PBC Liberia Configuration and the ASG for Peacebuilding
Support to Liberia, 5-9 June 2022 and to Côte d'Ivoire, 10 June 2022
Report**

1. As part of my mandate as Chair of the Liberia Configuration of the Peacebuilding Commission, I (Ambassador Anna Karin Eneström, Permanent Representative of Sweden to the UN), undertook a visit to Liberia on 5-9 June 2022 and to Côte d'Ivoire on 10 June 2022. I was joined by the Assistant Secretary-General for Peacebuilding Support, Elizabeth Spehar. We were accompanied by our Peacebuilding Advisors, Kadi Doumbia from the Permanent Mission of Sweden to the UN, and Vincent Kayijuka from the UN Peacebuilding Support Office.

2. In Liberia, we met with key stakeholders including government representatives, national and local authorities, and civil society. Our visit focused on the Peacebuilding Commission and the Peacebuilding Fund's support for Liberia's peacebuilding priorities, including the promotion of social cohesion and national reconciliation efforts, the promotion of women's empowerment and gender equality, and preparations for the organization of peaceful, transparent, inclusive free and fair presidential and legislative elections in 2023. We met with H.E. George Manneh Weah, President of Liberia, and Ministers of his government including Mr. Dee-Maxwell Saah Kemayah Sr., Minister of Foreign Affairs of Liberia, Mrs. Williametta E. Saydee-Tarr, Minister of Gender, Children and Social Protection, Mr. Varney A. Sirleaf, Minister of Internal Affairs, Counsellor Frank Musa Dean, Minister of Justice and other senior Government officials, as well as local actors and United Nations representatives in the country. We met H.E. Josephine Nkrumah, Representative of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and H.E. Medina A. Wesseh, Secretary General of the Mano River Union (MRU). We also undertook a field visit in Bong County where we met women members and leaders of the Women Peace Hut and visited a PBF supported project promoting women's leadership and participation in civic and political life.

3. We are grateful to the government of Liberia for its hospitality during our visit to the country, for the fruitful discussions with the President, Ministers and Government senior officials, and for providing a very able and kind protocol assistance during our visit. We also wish to thank the Resident Coordinator and UN colleagues for facilitating a comprehensive programme during our visit and for sharing insightful analysis and support. In our discussions with the country's leadership and senior government officials, we underscored the positive peacebuilding trajectory of Liberia since the end of the civil war in 2003, and we discussed the opportunities to consolidate gains and address outstanding and emerging peacebuilding challenges. We encouraged the government to increasingly contribute to PBC discussions, including in terms of sharing lessons learned and advising countries that come to the PBC.

4. We concluded our visit impressed by the commitment of Liberian people to build and sustain peace and the sense that Liberia is at a crossroads. The country has achieved important progress in building peace and undertaking macro-economic reforms; it remains, however, fragile due to internal risks such as the legacy of the civil war and extreme poverty. The Ebola outbreak of 2014 in Liberia and in the subregion has reversed socio-economic gains and slowed down

progress. The departure of the UN Mission, UNMIL, in 2018 has left a certain vacuum in key peacebuilding areas such as financing and security for elections as well as a culture of dependency on the UN and the international community more broadly in sustaining peace and delivering public services. The socio-economic impact of the recent global COVID-19 pandemic and the secondary effects of the on-going conflict in Ukraine are still being felt and will continue to affect the progress and exacerbate the country's fragility risks.

5. The UN enjoys excellent relations with the Liberian Government; this facilitates greatly PBF support and the PBC's engagement. There is an opportunity for further collaboration between the UN and other key actors such as ECOWAS, the Mano River Union and the EU, with a view to ensuring a consensual approach and coherent support to the 2023 presidential and legislative elections. In this regard we were very encouraged by the ECOWAS Representative's vision and the opportunities she highlighted to increase collaboration between ECOWAS, MRU and the UN on good offices and political dialogue as well as efforts to prevent electoral violence, and with the International Financial Institutions (IFIs) in supporting the development agenda and strengthening the peace-development nexus. We were also very encouraged to hear the President reiterate his commitment to reforms aimed at peaceful, transparent, inclusive, free and fair presidential elections in 2023, including the realization of the 30 percent quota of women representation.

6. In Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire we met Ms. Bajabulile Swazi Tshabalala, Senior Vice-President of the African Development Bank (AfDB), and other senior Managers of the Bank. We discussed opportunities for further collaboration in support of resilience and peacebuilding efforts in Liberia and in the countries of the Mano River Union. We noted a strong interest on the part of development partners, reiterated by the AfDB leadership in Abidjan, to work more closely with the UN on analysis, policy dialogue and operations. We also met Mr. Philippe Poinot, UN Resident Coordinator in Côte d'Ivoire to discuss the PBF support to peacebuilding initiatives in Côte d'Ivoire and opportunities for further cross-border and regional programming.

7. In the following lines we share our impressions and reflections on specific peacebuilding areas that were discussed with interlocutors.

Gender equality and women's empowerment

8. During our visit, we had the opportunity to congratulate a number of women for the crucial leadership role they played in bringing peace to Liberia and in building and sustaining peace over time. We were able to witness the impact of PBF long-term support, particularly in support of women's peacebuilding work. Our field visit to Bong County served as a strong illustration of the leadership and empowerment achieved by women and the impact of the PBF contribution. The Peace Huts, such as the one we visited in Totota, Bong County, have made a positive contribution to local peacebuilding. We were truly inspired and impressed by the leadership role played by women in contributing to peace and social cohesion in the communities. It is worth considering the replication of the Peace Hut model in other communities and incorporating the lessons from this experience in other local peacebuilding mechanisms.

9. Outstanding challenges mentioned by women we met include a) how to sustain the progress achieved, including helping other communities; b) how to achieve economic empowerment as a tool to support their peacebuilding role and to elevate their status in their communities, c) how to fight violence against women, including domestic, sexual violence, female genital mutilation and political violence, and d) how to strengthen women's political participation, including achieving the 30 percent quota of women's representation in political life and institutions. These two latter challenges were discussed in extenso with, inter alia, the President, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, and the Minister of Gender. Aspects discussed included how to dedicate enough resources to support women's political engagement, how to build an enabling environment for women in rural areas to engage in politics, how to remove the stigma and prejudice affecting women's political participation; address the violence that specifically targets women during the electoral period, online abuse and harassment on social media and addressing sexual and gender-based violence targeting women. The President, the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Minister of Gender are passionate champions of gender issues. We congratulated the President for his role as self-proclaimed Feminist-in-Chief; we strongly believe that addressing these issues of gender equality will contribute towards a more peaceful, prosperous and sustainable society. We also noted the encouraging trends and efforts within political parties to ensure increased women representation in parties' leadership and broader participation in elections.

Social cohesion and reconciliation

10. In our conversation with interlocutors, we were reminded that reconciliation efforts need to be adapted to the specific needs and context of Liberia. International practice includes a range of different options from truth-telling to institutional reform to accountability, amnesty and memorialization. It is important to close the violent chapter of Liberia's history. In the Government's Pro-Poor Agenda for Prosperity and Development for 2018-2023 (PAPD), reconciliation is recognized as central to improve civic trust, co-existence and overall social cohesion, including through the implementation of the Strategic Roadmap for Healing, Peacebuilding and Reconciliation. Most County Reconciliation Plans pursue similar objectives, including restoration of trust, land reform and resolution of land related conflicts.

11. The Peace Huts mechanism has proven to be a worthy agent of change and a major actor in the promotion of social cohesion at the community level. We welcomed the Government's decision of 2019 by which Peace Huts are registered as a Community Based Organization and are firmly embedded in the Liberian peacebuilding infrastructure. As such, we expressed the hope that the Peace Huts' sustainability could be ensured over time with basic contributions to their functioning through the national budget.

12. We were reminded that it is imperative to reduce the potential for a resurgence of violence and to sustain the trust between the population and the government. In this regard, we encouraged the Government to step up efforts to tackle issues related to corruption and social inequalities, a main obstacle to social cohesion. Addressing the land issues, including using local mediators, was mentioned as part of the prevention strategy.

Dialogue and preparation for the elections of 2023

13. The presidential and legislative elections scheduled to be held in 2023 represent an important milestone and an opportunity to consolidate democracy and the peace that Liberia will then have enjoyed for 20 years. The electoral process, however, also brings with it a risk of being a source of political polarization and for heightening social tensions. In our discussions with the main stakeholders involved with the elections, we detected an increasing polarization in the political landscape, with entrenched positions on key issues pertaining to the preparation and holding of the elections of 2023, including voter registration, the capacity and independence of the National Electoral Commission (NEC) and state capacity to maintain law and order. While some foresee the risk of violence around the electoral period, all reiterated their commitment to ensure that the country does not return to violence.

14. Overall, we saw the urgency of addressing the deepening polarization and mistrust surrounding the electoral process through greater transparency, communication and dialogue - the latter, in particular, among political parties and between the political parties and the NEC. A shared understanding and consensus on how to move forward with electoral preparations will be critical in order to instil confidence in and build the credibility of the process. This would include addressing issues such as, inter alia, the voter registration process, biometric identification and security to help address the key vulnerabilities related to the electoral process.

15. Reports about possible misuse of youth for partisan politics are worrying as this has the potential to escalate into violence. In meetings with government representatives, political party representatives, the NEC and the international community, all stakeholders and particularly political parties and their supporters were urged to exercise patience, remain calm, and address any outstanding grievances through established legal frameworks in a peaceful and transparent manner. All parties were urged to reject the use of violence and avoid making statements that could further increase tensions; the need to ensure accountability for any violations that may occur during the electoral period was underscored.

16. Voter registration remains one of the most contested parts of the electoral process in Liberia. While we sensed broad agreement, especially among political stakeholders, on the relevance of biometric identification as the solution to the shortcomings of the voter register, we noted with concern that the issues of time, technology and resources remain serious challenges. The challenge related to funding was discussed with the NEC. The initial budget of US\$90 Million presented by NEC for the conduct of the elections has been reduced to US\$41 million, in response to concerns expressed by the government, international partners, and civil society, in view of the country's difficult economic and financial situation. There remain important funding gaps and delays in disbursements of funds, a situation that will likely significantly impact NEC's ability to launch timely procurement processes, especially those for the Biometric Voter Registration equipment. We were encouraged by the calls for, and positive response to, the idea of regular dialogue between political parties and NEC on one hand, and regular updates by NEC to international and regional partners on the preparation process, on the other hand. Such dialogues and updates are important to ensure a level of trust and to help secure the funding needed for the conduct of the elections.

Youth and peacebuilding

17. Youth represent approximately 60% of Liberia's population, and capturing the opportunities offered by youth remains fundamental to development and peacebuilding in Liberia. Despite significant progress, youth in Liberia continue to be impacted by root causes of the conflict, including socio-economic inequalities and marginalization, high levels of unemployment, and limited access to education.

18. We received accounts of two particularly concerning developments reflecting the fragility of young people: a widespread use of drugs and youth militancy that is being instrumentalized for partisan politics. Youth militancy mobilized by the political parties, potentially leading to physical violence, poses a major risk to peaceful elections. The women civil society representatives we met lamented the impact that drug and substance abuse are having on youth, and they indicated that they are committed to help young people overcome this "drug epidemic". The Minister of Gender called for resources dedicated to helping to remove young people from the street, helping with the rehabilitation of those already involved with drug abuse, and bringing them back to school or skills development programmes. With regard to the risk of youth involvement in political violence, we were encouraged to hear about increasing opportunities to engage in dialogue and to use the spaces offered by youth communities to protect them and help them engage in more constructive approaches, including "youth positive participation" in political life during and beyond the election period.

19. Addressing unemployment and social, economic and regional disparities, while promoting intra and inter-group harmony and empowerment of women and youth, including young women and men in rural parts of the country, remain essential in addressing the root causes of fragility and violence and promoting social cohesion and peaceful co-existence in Liberia.

Rule of law, justice and security sector

20. We discussed the situation of the rule of law, justice and security sector as they pertain to peacebuilding and to the elections of 2023 in particular.

21. It is to be recalled that Liberia's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) issued its final report on 1 December 2009. The report argued that in order to dismantle impunity and set Liberia on the path of healing and reconciliation, a mix of criminal accountability, national healing through a truth-telling "Palava Hut" system, reparations, memorialization and institutional reform to promote good governance and human rights was urgently needed. The TRC process has been subject to political tensions and has polarized Liberians, particularly with regard to the accountability aspects. So far, the country has not prosecuted war criminals from its 1989-2003 conflict, which left around 250,000 people dead. During our meetings, we reiterated the long-standing position of the United Nations regarding the need to fight impunity and bring justice to victims.

22. We received updates on some Rule of Law reforms under way, including efforts to enforce the law on sexual and gender-based violence and working on alternative dispute resolution mechanisms. We discussed specific measures being put in place to protect women against (political) violence in the context of the 2023 elections. The security and law enforcement institutions reassured us that these institutions will play their role in contributing to peaceful and fair elections, noting also that the political parties had a big role to play in mitigating the risk of violence.

23. We were told that the size and the capacity of the Police, a key institution for sustaining peace and security, were still limited. Following the withdrawal of the UN Mission in Liberia, UNMIL, in July 2018, Security Sector Reform has focused on restoring the army's autonomy and increasing the total strength of security sector forces, particularly that of the Liberian National Police. While UNMIL helped with security during previous elections, securing the elections of 2023 falls under the responsibility of national security institutions. We noted with concern the limited capacity of the Police in this regard.

24. We also noted with concern the trend of re-arming civilians through the resurgence of vigilante groups and neighbourhood watches and the risk for increased violence that this practice carried, particularly during an electoral period.

Regional dynamics and Cross-border opportunities and challenges

25. We discussed cross-border issues relevant to peacebuilding with the government, the ECOWAS Representative, the Secretary General for the MRU, the UN both in Liberia and in Côte d'Ivoire, and the leadership of the AfDB.

26. We noted a strong awareness of the opportunities to address peacebuilding challenges at cross-border and sub-regional levels, including building on the early investments of the PBF.

27. With many of the interlocutors we discussed the recently concluded MRU Fragility and Resilience Assessment, whose objectives are to identify subregional root causes and drivers of fragility, and sources of resilience, with a view of better aligning the AfDB, MRU Secretariat and UN around shared priorities. There was a clear expression of interest in building on the outcome of this assessment and in engaging in a coordinated response. We will explore the possibility of organizing a PBC meeting to this end once the report of the assessment is available, and for the PBF to consider more cross-border and sub-regional programming upon advice by the Resident Coordinators and UNOWAS.

Partnerships with IFIs and development-peace nexus

28. The update we received pointed to the macro-economic improvements that took place over the last four years: inflation is down to a single digit (from 31 percent four years ago); the exchange rate is stable, and the Country Policy and Institutional Assessment shows an improvement from 3.9 to 3.0 [*Note: The World Bank's Country Policy and Institutional Assessment, done annually*]

for all its borrowing countries, is based on a set of performance criteria, grouped in four clusters: (a) economic management; (b) structural policies; (c) policies for social inclusion and equity; and (d) public sector management and institutions]. We were informed that, based on this assessment, Liberia no longer fell in the category of fragile countries of the World Bank Group (WBG) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). We acknowledged the significant macroeconomic progress achieved by Liberia, while also underlining the importance of the country continuing to benefit from critical resources usually allocated to fragile and conflict-affected countries, given current circumstances. It was confirmed to us that much of the progress Liberia had made after the civil war had been undone by the Ebola outbreak of 2014, and that recovery efforts and progress in economic reforms were being undermined by the socio-economic impact of COVID-19 and the global economic implications of the on-going war in Ukraine, notably increasing food and fuel shortages. We noted that this situation had affected and would continue to impact the socioeconomic fabric of the country and its prospects for sustaining peace.

29. The IFIs Managers in Liberia expressed their appreciation for the political analysis they receive from the UN and the Ambassadors in Monrovia and underscored the importance of the development-peace nexus, as well as the opportunities for further collaboration with the UN. We were appraised of a World Bank Group (WBG) project on Women Empowerment (expected to be approved by the Board on 22nd June¹) that has the potential to improve the country GDP by up to 50 percent. We were informed that the UN had been consulted in the planning of this project, and that the WBG was open to further collaboration with the UN on its implementation

30. We were encouraged by the AfDB's determination to accompany Liberia and other African countries affected by fragility, conflict and climate change, and we discussed the opportunities for further collaboration in support of resilience and peacebuilding efforts in Liberia and in the countries of the Mano River Union. Both the WBG and the AfDB expressed their willingness to work with the UN on assessment, policy dialogue, programming and operations. The PBC will continue to support these efforts for strategic partnership, and PBSO will continue to provide technical advice and support, and further explore opportunities for more collaboration between the PBF and the IFIs' funding windows for fragile and conflict-affected countries. In this regard, we were pleased to note that the three IFIs have dedicated strategies for contexts of fragility, violence and conflict. We were also very encouraged by the IFIs' intention to focus on issues of gender and youth engagement, including with specific projects as indicated above with the new WBG project on Women Empowerment.

31. In the following points, we identify opportunities and actions for follow up to our visit.

PBC engagement

32. We will debrief the PBC during our next meeting of the Liberia Configuration, based on the report of the visit shared with members of the Commission.

¹ Update: The project was approved on 22 June 2022 with a budget of US\$ 44.60 million. Visit [Liberia Women Empowerment Project](#) for more information on the project.

33. In coordination with the Government of Liberia, we will convene follow-up meetings on Liberia in 2022 and 2023 to discuss the peacebuilding priorities that have been identified jointly between the country and the PBC, including preparations for peaceful, transparent, inclusive, free and fair elections, the promotion of gender equality and women's empowerment, youth empowerment, and peace dividends. We will aim to undertake another visit to Liberia in 2023 ahead of the elections scheduled to take place in November of that year.

34. We will recommend to the Chair of the PBC to explore the holding of a meeting on the Mano River Union (MRU), focused on the Fragility and Resilience Assessment and the opportunities for collaboration with the AfDB on cross-border and regional peacebuilding initiatives. The preparation of such a meeting would include engagement of the Permanent Representatives in New York of the four countries that are members of Mano River Union.

35. We will undertake a visit to Washington D.C to engage the Headquarters of the WBG and the IMF on issues of fragility, resilience, peace dividends and collaboration with the UNCT in the context of Liberia.

DPPA/PBSO, UN system support

36. PBSO will continue to work with the UN system, including DPPA-Africa and the Electoral Assistance Division (EAD), UNOWAS and UNDP to discuss coordinated support to Liberia in addressing the key vulnerabilities related to the electoral process, as identified in several recent UN electoral needs assessment missions and confirmed during the June visit to the country. Urgent considerations are support to pre-electoral preparations such as the voter register, biometric identification and security arrangements and, above all, support for regular dialogue among political parties and between the parties and the National Electoral Commission to ensure transparency, build confidence in the electoral process and lower political tensions.

37. PBSO will follow up with the RC/UNCT on issues underscored during the visit as key for PBF investment: national ownership, results, impact, sustainability and communication.

38. Based on the visit and upon the Liberian Government's confirmation of these priorities, the PBF will aim to support/continue to support Liberia in key peacebuilding areas such as: an inclusive and peaceful electoral process, access to justice, reconciliation, and strengthening the existing infrastructures for peace and local dispute resolution mechanisms including Women Palava huts. Given the threat to sustaining peace represented by socioeconomic inequalities and lack of sufficient service delivery, particularly in rural areas, PBF-supported initiatives will look to include clearly defined peace dividends addressing some of these vulnerabilities.

39. Regarding inclusive elections and a peaceful electoral environment, PBSO will ensure that PBF support is made available to address key concerns such as countering the instrumentalization of youth for partisan militancy purposes and preventing violence, countering incitement and hate speech and ensuring women's safe and meaningful participation.

40. Further opportunities for PBF support to peacebuilding initiatives in cross-border areas and communities will be explored, including with the relevant UN Resident Coordinators on possible new initiatives in vulnerable areas of Côte d'Ivoire-Mali, Côte d'Ivoire-Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire-Liberia, engaging UNOWAS and supporting its role in cross-border programming and collaborating with the MRU Secretariat and the AfDB. Regarding the MRU and AfDB, PBSO will follow up with those and other relevant institutions to finalize the Fragility and Resilience Assessment of the Mano River, distil recommendations and identify possible follow-up, particularly cross-border initiatives.
41. PBSO will seek enhanced collaboration with the AfDB, which could include sharing analysis, exchanging on both institutions' programmatic approach to peacebuilding and resilience, on implementation strategies and on collaboration with NGOs and CSOs, identifying possible cooperation on regional initiatives and helping to bring the UNCT closer to the AfDB in areas of resilience, peacebuilding and peace dividends, and community-based projects. PBSO will also further help to socialize the AfDB Fragility Strategy within the UN.
42. On the policy and partnership fronts, PBSO will further endeavour to update knowledge and analysis of economic dynamics and the interaction of those dynamics with peacebuilding and resilience, and the links between macro-economic reforms and community resilience, to better inform policy dialogue with the Government and IFIs and to inform appropriate program interventions.

Conclusions

43. Once again, we wish to reiterate our gratitude for the excellent collaboration that we enjoyed with Liberia, in Monrovia and in New York through the Permanent Representation of Liberia to the United Nations, for the preparation and undertaking of the visit and we look forward to our continued joint engagement.

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