Assessment of United Nations Mission in Liberia: A Strategy for Successful Peacekeeping

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"The UN was not created to take mankind into paradise, but rather, to save humanity from hell"

- Dag Hammarskjöld, former Secretary-General of the United Nations

Abstract

The United Nations (UN) peacekeeping operations have faced significant challenges over the past two decades affecting its foundational principles, i.e., impartiality, the consent of involved parties, and non-use of force. The constraints of finances and resources, coupled with inadequate troop contributions, have significantly impacted the execution of stringent peacekeeping mandates. The intricacies of conventional peacekeeping initiatives are aggravated by the participation of non-state entities and armed factions, particularly in Africa. In light of this context, the UN Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) is acknowledged as one of the most effective and successful peacekeeping missions, demonstrating a strategy of regional collaboration with the Economic Community of West African States to promote peace and stability. UNMIL's comprehensive approach emphasised disarmament, demobilisation, rehabilitation, and reintegration, showcasing the UN's capacity to foster sustainable peace in Liberia. This analysis highlights that success in contemporary peacekeeping operations is assured when the UN Security Council undertakes prompt and adequately funded interventions with well-defined mandates to ensure robust supervision of the operations of non-UN peacekeeping organisations.

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Introduction

International peacekeeping is a prominent concept in the United Nations (UN) that illustrates progress in conflict resolution. Peacekeeping functions as an essential instrument for the UN to uphold peace, promote democratic transitions in failed governments, and protect fundamental human rights. Peacekeeping has now expanded to include a diverse group of non-UN participants, such as regional coalitions, non-governmental organisations, and private enterprises, and has developed to undertake complex operations. Peacekeeping has been extensively employed to resolve numerous international crises and remains a critical conflict management tool for the UN and the international community, despite its challenges.

The UN Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) stands as a remarkable achievement in the realm of UN peacekeeping, emerging from the productive collaboration between the UN and Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). Liberia and its people suffered greatly as a result of the country's two decades of prolonged civil war, which caused a massive number of deaths and displacement, a destroyed economy, and a lack of democratic governance. Liberia has now achieved lasting peace, and the country has experienced three peaceful transitions of power under free and fair elections, establishing itself as a model of political stability.

Three peacekeeping operations were established in Liberia: the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG), the Economic Community of West African States Mission in Liberia (ECOMIL), and the UNMIL, aimed at resolving the Civil War. Though there were both successes and setbacks from the operations, the experience gained from them can guide upcoming UN peacekeeping missions. This article evaluates the versatile peacekeeping operations in Liberia following the civil war, highlighting lessons for the international community to enhance its conflict management approach in the future.

Historical Context of Peacekeeping

The UN Charter is silent on peacekeeping as a method for resolving conflicts. An effective strategy for conflict management is the peacekeeping approach advocated by former UN Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjold, commonly termed as 'Chapter Six-

and-a-half' of the UN Charter.[1] Peacekeeping operates under the guiding framework of three essential principles: consent, neutrality, and the prohibition of force. It involves the maintenance of a truce between conflicting parties through the deployment of international military, civilian, or police forces. The primary objectives include the protection of civilians, the reduction or cessation of violence, and the enhancement of institutional frameworks. The main aim of peacekeeping is to prevent, contain, moderate, and end wars between or within states through internationally coordinated third-party intervention.[2]

Peacekeeping has a firm historical foundation in UN conflict management, as evidenced by the establishment of the UN Truce Supervision Organization to monitor the agreement between the Arab states and Israel in 1948. The Department of Peacekeeping Operations currently oversees eleven ongoing operations, and approximately 70 UN peacekeeping missions have been established worldwide.[3] The African continent has been consistently impacted by the challenges of long-term conflicts. Countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, and Liberia have experienced adverse effects on their security and well-being as a result of civil wars.

Even though the UN's political will and capacity have been under constant criticism since the Cold War, its peacekeeping operations continue to play a pivotal role in the continent of Africa. The premature loss of lives and the forced migration of vast populations have culminated in a significant rise of refugees across the continent. This has been accompanied by widespread devastation and destabilisation of fragile democratic structures, ultimately leading to the collapse of state systems due to such violent confrontations.[4]

An Analysis of the Liberian Civil War

The Liberian Civil War symbolises intra-state conflict and is regarded as one of the most violent in contemporary Africa. The first and second phases extended from 1989 to 1996 and 1999 to 2003, respectively. For the formerly peaceful and rising West African nation, the effects of this destructive period were profound and long-lasting. Throughout the war, rebel forces from several breakaway factions caused significant turmoil that resulted in over a 1,00,000-50,000 deaths and thousands of lifelong injuries.[5]

Additionally, approximately one million civilians were either internally displaced or compelled to seek refuge in neighbouring countries, including Sierra Leone, Côte d'Ivoire, and Ghana. The once-promising economy was disrupted, leading to considerable losses across both public and private sectors. In a short period, the humanitarian situation in Liberia underwent a rapid decline, prompting the need for external intervention from ECOWAS and later, the UN.[6]

The Initial Phase of the Liberian Conflict

On 22 Jul 1847, liberated slaves and indigenous ethnic groups established Africa's oldest republic, and for more than a century, the minority American-Liberians dominated the West African nation of Liberia. Their control was characterised by authoritarian measures, exerting influence across all sectors, including politics. In 1980, the more than century-old American-Liberian aristocracy that had caused deep division and discontent was overthrown by a coup d'état carried out by 28-year-old Sergeant Samuel Doe.[7] The assassinations of the president and several high-ranking government officials occurred during that period, and the American-Liberian domination came to an end with the subsequent killings of important government and ruling classes.

The new president pledged to uphold the dignity of the majority population and restore Liberia's prominence among the community of nations. However, Doe and his People's Redemption Council soon fell short of meeting the expectations, and the excitement surrounding the takeover was short-lived due to authoritarian rule. Many who opposed his government were killed or disappeared. To sustain his dictatorial administration marked by human rights abuses and summary murders, he rigged the 1985 elections to further justify his hold on power.[8]

On 24 Dec 1989, Charles Taylor led the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), a weakly organised rebel group, into the country from Côte d'Ivoire. As other rebel groups emerged, each with its aim of seizing control of the capital Monrovia, the conflict swiftly expanded across the nation. Prince Yormie Johnson and his rebels, who had split from the NPFL, killed President Doe and his fighters during the attack. The civil conflict continued, especially affecting Sierra Leone, in spite of attempts by ECOWAS, and later the UN, for intervention.
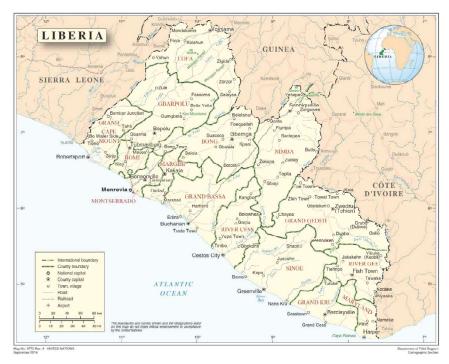
Figure 1: Map of the Republic of Liberia

Beginning in 1991, the factional war grew more intense, with the NPFL particularly controlling the trade of iron ore, diamonds, and timber. The conflict, which ended in 1996, was also prolonged due to outside intervention and backing for different factions. Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Party won the elections that were held in 1997. The use of child soldiers and the shoot-to-kill strategy used by all factions were two of the war's shocking distinct features in Liberia.

The Second Phase of the Liberian War

The Liberians for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD), another rebel group, attacked northwestern Liberia from their base in Guinea to start the next phase of the Civil War. President Taylor's specific omissions and his authoritarian rule—which was particularly noticeable in the repression of opponents—were the catalysts for these attacks. In addition, his involvement in Sierra Leone's internal issues fuelled the fighting. In reaction to the LURD attacks, Taylor mobilised his ex-NPFL cadres and participated in a conflict involving neighbouring countries. However, Taylor's government, already

weakened by UN sanctions, was unable to defeat the rebels, resulting in their retreat into Liberia and Sierra Leone.[9]

In early 2003, Taylor proclaimed a state of emergency and requested ECOWAS to deploy a military force to Liberia to assist in the fight against the LURD insurgents. Though the regional organisation intervened again, he was compelled to quit as the president on 11 Aug 2003. He was arrested when trying to escape to Nigeria and was convicted by the International Criminal Court (ICC) subsequently. There was a three-year break between the two Liberian civil wars, the first lasting seven and the second four years. The wars were caused by ethnic competition resulting from territorial disputes, dictatorial rule, discrimination, and the prolonged domination of the minority American-Liberian ethnic group.[10]

Peacekeeping Intervention by the United Nations and Economic Community of West African States

The UN and ECOWAS played a crucial role in the success of peacekeeping efforts in Liberia over the past nearly 20 years. Although these organisations were instrumental in the overall success, they are also accountable for the operational challenges and mistakes committed during the collaborative period. The initiatives implemented by the UN and ECOWAS in Liberia have significantly influenced the methodology for addressing such internal conflicts.

Peacekeeping by the United Nations

The UN involvement in Liberia occurred relatively late, despite initiating humanitarian activities from the beginning. UN Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 866 launched UN Observer Mission in Liberia (UNOMIL) on 22 Sep 1993, establishing the UN's active participation in Liberia. This mission was the first UN peacekeeping operation to work alongside a regional effort. In the domain of military operations, elections, transportation, logistics, and communication strategies, UNOMIL was tasked with supporting ECOMOG in the implementation of the Cotonou Peace Agreement. It monitored, disarmed, and demobilised soldiers, documented human rights abuses, and coordinated humanitarian aid efforts, all while overseeing the 1992 UN arms embargo in Liberia.

The difficult relationship between UNOMIL and ECOMOG, caused by different circumstances, hampered its functioning. UNOMIL staff was regularly harassed at ECOMOG checkpoints, hindering operations.[11] Notwithstanding the difficulties, the UN-ECOWAS partnership in Liberia yielded valuable insights. UNOMIL's mandate ended on 30 Sep 1997, and UNMIL was created to help the Liberian government consolidate peace and national reconciliation after the 1997 elections.

UNMIL was established in accordance with the UNSC Resolution 1509 (2003) after the Liberian government and opposition leaders could not reach an agreement. UNMIL was a comprehensive peacekeeping operation that included military, police, and civilian elements. The mission's main goals were to implement the Ceasefire Agreement and protect civilians, facilities, and UN personnel. It focused on delivering humanitarian aid, promoting security reforms to advance the peace process, and most importantly, disarming and demobilising various factions.[12] It aimed to arrest former President Charles Taylor upon his return to Liberia for transfer to the ICC, as mandated by UNSC Resolution 1638 (2005). UNMIL's successful and professional operations restored peace to a failed state, which is now a successful democracy.

Further, non-UN actors also contributed to the success story in Liberia. Their activities included peacebuilding, humanitarian aid, human development, election monitoring, diplomatic interventions, funding for government and private projects, and human resource training. The involvement of the United States (US) and the United Kingdom was significant, alongside the participation of the African Union, various UN agencies such as UN Development Programme, UN International Children's Emergency Fund, UN High Commissioner for Refugees, and the World Bank, as well as non-governmental organisations including Oxford Committee for Famine Relief, US Agency for International Development, Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere, and World Vision.

Peacekeeping by Economic Community of West African States

On 28 May 1975, 15 West African nations met in Lagos to form ECOWAS. Following a thorough evaluation of the situation in Liberia, ECOWAS initiated the deployment of ECOMOG during a summit meeting held on 23 Aug 1990. Initially, the mission

mobilised approximately 3,000 soldiers from Nigeria, Ghana, Guinea, and Sierra Leone. Subsequently, over 10,000 soldiers were deployed, with practically all member nations boosting this contingent by providing a further 20,000 troops to Liberia. The mandate focused on securing a ceasefire, peacekeeping, humanitarian aid, civilian protection, and preventing any side from seizing control by force.[13]

The initial mission failed due to financial and operational issues, hostile actions, the international community's non-interventionist stance, and the delayed deployment of the West African peacekeeping force. The truce was reached after various peace deals were signed by ECOWAS' Head of States. After UNOMIL was deployed, ECOMOG set up an interim administration under Amos Sawyer, which was followed by the formation of a coalition government in Aug 1993. ECOMOG stabilised the war-torn country for more than seven years. Following the 1994 Cotonou and Akosombo agreements, it also helped organise the 1997 democratic election, which was won by Charles Taylor.[14]

ECOMOG operated in phases and was fairly successful, but not perfect. Rebellion and domestic opposition from some ECOWAS member states hampered its early operations. In the second phase, ECOMOG's peace enforcement measures provided stability and peace, allowing many refugees to return to Liberia. Due to rebel rejection of successive peace treaties, the third phase was chaotic and stalled peace talks. Owing to human rights violations and the absence of neutrality among the peacekeeping contingent, the fourth phase transitioned to peace enforcement.[15]

In 1999, ECOWAS established ECOMIL in Liberia due to increased violence during the second Civil War. About 4,000 soldiers from Ghana, Nigeria, Senegal, and a few other West African nations were initially part of the mission. It monitored and demobilised rebels while protecting civilians and important military and political figures in accordance with UNSC Resolution 1497 of 2003. The operations were successful and built on the peacemaking activities of its predecessors. On 19 Sep 2003, ECOMIL personnel became part of UNMIL, following the establishment of UNMIL by UNSC Resolution 1509.

Lessons Learnt

The Liberian crisis emerged as a significant historical event, underscored by the effective peacekeeping initiatives implemented in the region. An in-depth examination highlights that peacekeeping operations under the framework set forth by the UN produced extensive lessons, derived from the challenges and actions of diverse factions and implementation strategies. The insights derived from the failures and successes of these operations by the UN and ECOWAS remain relevant and are shaping current peacekeeping operations.[16]

Conflict Prevention. The Liberian crisis underscored the possibility of unforeseen conflicts emerging in any region, even those deemed relatively stable. Therefore, initiatives focused on conflict prevention need to be improved and systematically structured. Conflicts that emerge, irrespective of their location or timing, must be acknowledged as a global issue necessitating prompt attention.[17]

Type of Peacekeeping. Intra-state conflict, like the Liberian Civil War, can be complex and persistent without proper conflict management. The international community's initial Liberian crisis interventions were flawed and ineffectual. Given the rebel's initial non-cooperation and the need for proportionate force, ECOMOG's ceasefire should have been followed by peace enforcement. Peacekeeping operations succeed when their functions match conflict dynamics.

Timely Deployments. The creation of a UN office dedicated to tracking trouble spots around the world and efficiently communicating with the UNSC is a prudent measure to facilitate timely and appropriate responses. The formation of ECOMOG was an unplanned decision by ECOWAS, which accounts for the inconsistent implementation of the initial mission and the mistakes that occurred during operations. The UN must intervene in conflict resolution early, and the force deployments must be completed as soon as possible. While it took three years to establish the UN's presence in Liberia, the ECOWAS intervention was put into action in one year. During this period, combatants engaged in extensive violence, leading to deaths, injuries, property destruction, and population displacement. The subsequent Civil War, which required a significant amount of time and resources, might have been prevented if ECOWAS had stepped in when Charles Taylor and his soldiers first attacked Monrovia.[18]

Commitment of United Nations. Peacekeeping success demands the UNSC's full commitment, but a lacklustre approach from the UN system and member states to conflict resolution will always generate poor results. The UN and member states must reaffirm their commitment to funding operations adequately. The UNSC should implement timely and appropriate interventions with clear mandates at the onset of conflicts. The UN's late participation in Liberia hampered the peace process as ECOMOG struggled to meet its goals due to budgetary and equipment constraints.[19]

Regional Organisations. In combined peacekeeping operations with regional organisations, the UN must have political authority. UNOMIL appeared to play a subordinate role to ECOMOG in local decision-making during Liberian joint operations, which hampered or halted peacekeeping in the besieged country. Since many parties involved in the final phases of the Liberian multifaceted intervention took inconsistent steps that harmed the peace efforts, effective coordination of non-UN organisations activities in peacekeeping is crucial.[20]

The Principle of Neutrality. This must be consistently maintained and demonstrated across all operations. The problem was made worse by the fact that some ECOWAS members, including Guinea, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, and Burkina Faso, supported specific groups during the Liberian crisis and provided financial assistance to them.

Implementation of Peace Accord. ECOMOG faced financial difficulties due to its limited resources and weak mandate, which adversely affected its performance. Within ECOWAS, a restricted number of member states offered financial, logistical, and military support for the collective cause, while the UN observed from a distance. The presence of 'Political Will' and a commitment to establishing peace in war zones by the relevant parties is crucial for the efficacy of peacekeeping operations.[21]

Constraints of Peace Enforcement. The limitations of employing military force to achieve peace were exemplified by ECOMOG's experience. While force can be employed to end violence and alleviate suffering, it cannot attain genuine peace, which is fully dependent on the agreements by the involved sides. Since the use of armed forces alone does not ensure the success of peacekeeping operations, alternative strategies, including negotiation and mediation, are beneficial.[22]

Sanctions on Warlords. The second Civil War in 1999 was caused by punitive actions taken by Charles Taylor, the principal warlord in Liberia, after he was elected president. This conflict could have been avoided if all warlords had been excluded from politics. Individuals identified as warlords exacerbating conflicts should be sanctioned to deter such behaviour. The majority of factions and warlords refused to work together or acknowledge Charles Taylor as the head of state appointed by the constitution.[23]

Child Soldiers. The subject of child soldiers in Liberia was not appropriately addressed by the international community. It took time for child soldiers to be reintegrated into their families and society. Many children had already been permanently affected by the time help was provided through educational support and career training.[24]

Violations by Peacekeepers. Peacekeepers, belligerents, and Liberia's government were blamed for operational errors. ECOMOG peacekeepers, notably Nigerians, committed illicit trade, sexual exploitation, looting, human rights violations, civilian deaths, and other crimes. Although there were numerous mistakes in the Liberian mission, these were analysed and disseminated to avoid the same errors of judgment in future peacekeeping missions.

Effective Leadership and Training. UN accomplishments are maximised when qualified special representatives are assigned to lead peacekeeping operations. The special representative's competence determined the mission's success in Liberia as poor leadership reduced performance. ECOMOG peacekeepers were hindered by insufficient training and equipment prior to the start of operations.

The success of the UN peacekeeping mission in Liberia can be attributed to the above lessons, which should be incorporated for UN operations in the future. The factors to be included for efficient execution of the mandate are as follows:

- The commitment of ECOWAS towards resolving the Liberian crisis was notable, as the organisation proactively engaged in the crisis even in the absence of UN involvement, departing from the typical approach of awaiting UN initiatives.

- The transition from peacekeeping to post-conflict democratic governance is attributed to the effective initiatives undertaken during the three primary missions.

● The comprehensive execution of operational peacekeeping initiatives in Liberia ultimately restored peace and revitalised the failed state.

● UNMIL oversaw the peaceful transfer of power through free and fair elections, positioning Liberia as a model of political stability.

● UNMIL was among the most well-funded missions, significantly contributing to its overall success.

● The peace process was greatly aided by the cooperative relationship between the UN, ECOWAS, the Liberian government, and donor nations.[25]

● Peacekeeping operations facilitated the reconstruction of Liberia's economy, infrastructure, and essential governmental institutions.

● The UN continued to maintain a significant presence in Liberia post-operations, providing funds, and support as needed to prevent a recurrence of conflict.

Conclusion

The prolonged crisis in Liberia and its resolution provide relevant insights and serve as an important foundation for future peacekeeping operations. It supports the assertion that Africa serves as a significant continent for global peacekeeping efforts. Although the joint UN and ECOWAS operations were prolonged, the necessary interventions ultimately revitalised a failed state. UNMIL also highlights a relevant strategy for managing international conflicts, with the UN continuing to play a pivotal role. The lessons bring out the immense potential for the UN and international community to improve future international peacekeeping operations. The Liberian model aptly demonstrates that the peacekeeping methods employed by the UN, when utilised as a framework, will enhance the effectiveness of international conflict management in the 21st Century.

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