

The Lost Honor. Ex-Soldiers Fighting for Their Rights in Post-Conflict Liberia

Andrea Kaufmann, PhD Candidate. University of Basel, Institute of Social Anthropology

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Introduction

Who are these infamous ex-soldiers that regularly fill the streets of Monrovia and request their benefits, even after the conclusion of the process of Disarmament, Demobilization, Reintegration and Rehabilitation (DDRR)? The present case study aims at providing an empirical contribution to the question if ex-combatants constitute a post-conflict challenge. It looks at a group of ex-soldiers of the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL) who have been deactivated in the course of the Security Sector Reform decided in the Accra Peace Agreement (2003). Though disarmed and demobilized, they have not been part in particular of the rehabilitation and reintegration components of the DDRR program. As some find their ways into new livelihoods, many find it difficult to reintegrate into society after having been part of the army for a long period of time. They made a commitment to be soldiers, and if the government rejects them, it should reward them according to their service - goes their claim. For this reason, they formed an organization, the Unconstitutionally Disbanded Armed Forces of Liberia (UDAFOL)¹ with a leadership and an organizational structure. They argue that they were deactivated in an unconstitutional way. Since their deactivation, they regularly organize street filling demonstrations, request dialogues with government, and have even launched a petition to unseat the president.

Their issue has created a discrepancy among society and the political sphere: some welcomed the act of deactivation because of the atrocities the AFL has committed during the conflict and before, and hence consider it legitimate; yet others argue that these atrocities were symptoms of a malfunctioning institution and individual failures.

Interestingly, the deactivated soldiers are becoming objective as a lucrative constituency in the forefield of the 2011 presidential elections, as they are a large group of around 16'000.

¹ Other synonyms used for this group are ex-soldiers, ex-AFL, or ex-servicemen.

The present case study focuses on the question of how the ex-soldiers assess the turning point in their life trajectories, and how they make their claim. The preliminary conclusion section raises open issues and leaves room for the analysis of the group of ex-combatants as a potential risk to sustainable peace.

This case study is part of a PhD project highlighting processes of claim making by various actors and groups in post-conflict Liberia. The empirical data was collected during one year's ethnographic field research in urban and peri-urban Liberia between October 2009 and March 2011. It was collected by applying a range of ethnographic methods, including a number of interviews and informal meetings with former soldiers, and triangulated with information from other actors from various realms of private and public sphere². Observations of events such as the Armed Forces Day or radio reports or newspaper articles added to rounding up the data.

The issue of the deactivated soldiers is contested in the Liberian context. In discussions with Liberians my interest in this issue was at times looked at with suspicion. It has to be made clear that this article does not intend to take a political standpoint nor opinion. In addition, judgments and recommendations are left with policy makers. Rather, the present paper aims at giving insight into a group and its agency that has so far not received much attention in scholarly debate.

Dimensions of agency and actors

This paper lays a focus on agency of ex-soldiers in post-conflict Liberia, a group that considers itself as having been left out in the peace negotiation arenas and tables (Hagmann and Peclard 2010: 550), and the process Disarmament, Demobilization, Reintegration and Rehabilitation (DDRR)³. Hence, this paper does not look into the peace process and results, but rather at the claim making ex-soldiers. I understand and adopt agency leaning on Emirbayer and Mische (1998: 970f) as *“the temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments – the temporal-relational context of action – which,*

² It is rather challenging to deal with a group that feels disadvantaged by the government. It requires cautious to remain at a neutral, researcher's point of view, in order not to be perceived as biased, not with the government nor with the soldiers - and not so much about the researcher's actual point of view or personal opinion, but more what the actors *perceive* the researcher's position to be.

³ This case study does not go into discourses of peacemaking, peacebuilding and peacekeeping. Interested readers are referred to Berdal and Ucko (2009) including case studies of reintegration of ex-combatants in other countries; Boas and Hatloy (2008), Jensen and Stepputat (2001) or Muggah (2009); on Liberia, including successes and critiques of the DDRR see Alusula (2008), Jaye (2003, 2006), Jennings (2008) or Munive (2010).

through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgment, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations.” Though three different, temporal elements, all components can be found in one empirical instance of action. The *habitual* component refers to past patterns of thought and action which contribute to stability and order. *Imagination* draws upon the capacity of actors to imagine future possibilities, which may be creatively reconfigured in hopes, fears or desires for the future. The last component refers to the present evaluation capacity to make practical and normative *judgments* among various trajectories of action. All aspects of agency are thus considered agentic, and actors are capable to shape their own responsiveness to problematic situations. Hence, even in most limited situations, actors find ways to cope with a given situation, and apply (tactical) agency (Utas 2003: 23)

The actors of this case study, as being former soldiers of a state's army, have acquired a specific habitus during their time of service. Soldiers in general draw their agency on knowledge and capabilities acquired in a military environment that would theoretically facilitate them a life in a civil environment. However, in many African contexts soldiers are often disadvantaged, and in case of demobilization after a war, their integration into civilian life constitutes a challenge: *“The typical veteran is semilliterate at best, is unskilled, has few personal possessions, often has no housing or land, and frequently has many dependants. Some veterans are also physically and psychologically handicapped by wartime experience. Many find it difficult to take independent initiatives and to cope with the ordinary demands of civilian life”* (Ball 1997: 86, c.f. Muggah 2009: 123, interview with the executive director of the Bureau of Veteran Affairs). However, actors do not only repeat past routines but invent new possibilities of thought and action. New projectives are interactively formed (Emirbayer and Mische 1998: 984, leading on Joas 1993).

Other ex-combatants have lived a “normal life” before the war, or have fought for a certain period of time, according to Ellis (2007: 133) or Boas and Hatloy (2008: 44), and have more or less found their way back into communities and “*hustling*” activities (c.f. Munive 2010). Berdal and Ucko (2009: 3) highlight the diversity of characters in armed groups, which applies also for the Liberian case, where ex-combatants joined groups for various motives, and actors also switched between factions. However, according to Boas and Hatloy (2008: 44) this practice was not as common as assumed. However, there exist many accounts of AFL soldiers deflected and joined or founded rebellion movements before and during the conflict.

Everyday of seemingly ordinary Liberians

Sheriff sits behind his booth of foreign exchange at Waterside Market⁴. The small wooden stand with wire protects the many bundles of Liberian Dollars. The money is visibly displayed, as well as the “scratch cards”, prepaid mobile cards that he is selling as well. People are passing, once in a while somebody stops to change a view US dollars to Liberian Dollars, as traders need US Dollars to travel to other regions and countries. What he earns from this business helps him to survive, he says and talks about his three children that all go to school. *“Ok, foreign exchange is, in Liberian terms, a hustling business⁵. You come, you sit down with your money, you go, come, you buy from them, you sell. When you're lucky, you get 100LD, sometimes 50LD, you compile. You get good capital, you get good money. But if you don't get good capital, it's hard for you to make good money. When you don't have good capital, you don't make good money. But if you have little, ah, good money with you, you can get something good.”* The more money you change and make, the higher the return of the business, and he roughly gains between one and two US Dollars of profit per day.

Sheriff originates from the country side. The son of a rather poor Muslim farmer went to school and graduated from a Christian mission high school. In the 1980ies, he came to Monrovia and staid with an older brother for a while. Before the Presidential elections in 1985, Sheriff was recommended as personal bodyguard of a renowned Liberian politician Edward Beyan Kessely, who was also the founder of the Unity Party. After the campaign, Sheriff returned to his home county and became chief security of Plan International there. After the outbreak of the war, he applied and got recruited into the army. As most of the former AFL soldiers, Sheriff makes no secret out of his service for the Armed Forces of Liberia, and he mentions a certain degree of pride to this service of the country: *“well, I would say, it was not bad, because I was doing it in the defense of my country [...], but it was not in my intention to get into the war”*, as Sheriff puts it, and how many other former soldiers would agree upon. He stopped at the rank of a Master Sergeant of the Armed Forces of Liberia. Sheriff was recruited after the outbreak of the conflict, and hence not a long trained soldier of the Armed Forces of Liberia.

⁴ Sheriff and Sumo are common family name in Liberia and not the real names of the persons.

⁵ Hustling in the Liberian context refers to hard work with unsecure or unpredictable (financial) outcome: One has to try, make efforts, and the outcome is not guaranteed. Unlike US American slang, hustling in a Liberian sense does not necessarily refer to illegal or immoral activities (c.f. Munive 2010: 208).

A similar story is the one of Sumo. He is a tall and slim man, wearing fancy looking sunglasses and brown shorts. He lives in West Point, a rundown quarter of central Monrovia. He too originates from a rather poor, rural Loma family and came to Monrovia in the early 1970ies. West Point is characterized as a congested community on government owned land, with bad sanitation and a series of social, environmental and health problems. Only a few houses are well maintained, and Sumo's houses are some of these few. Sumo came to West Point in 1971. In the 1980ies he had a few job opportunities, one of which with a "white man" who paid a good salary. With the money he saved he built three houses in West Point. The same year he started to construct his first house, and in 1987 he got married. Sumo has seven children. However, during the war, his wife fled to Guinea with the children. Later on, she left for the USA with two children. *"So they gone try, they leave, they go. But before time, I hear about repatriation of the American Government in Guinea. They carry my woman, and two children to the States. Thank God, they are there. We don't receive nothing here, but the American government support them."* While his family went to refuge, he joined the Armed Forces of Liberia. He explained that he was forced to join because of the hardship at that time. *"I joined by force, because the hard struggle what was coming, the war, I begun join with the government. I fight for government."* He too was a master sergeant in the army. Since he was *"put down by the government"*, as he names it, Sumo lives from the income he gets as a landlord from renting his apartments. At times, when there was a lot of armed robbery in the community, he joined night patrols. As former security personnel, people respect him and ask him for advice. He says that there are several former soldiers in the quarter, and if necessary, they go around protecting and watching the neighborhood. Rather disappointed, he says that he receives no support from his wife in the USA, because, as stated above, she does not have a paid job there.

Former AFL soldiers can be encountered in many spaces and economic activities, such as in quarters around the 2nd district of Monrovia, more precisely the "Buzzi"⁶ quarter, or around West Point, the 72nd barracks, a peri-urban quarter where I lived, or the "540", an area in Congo Town on "Peace Island", named after the benefit the "1990" soldiers received at their demobilization. They live mostly in run-down communities. A few former soldiers are found in public office such as the Ministry of Defense, or at the Bureau of Veteran Affairs, and some have established companies. However, the majority live at the margin of society, integration into a sustainable social and economic life has remained a challenge. A further challenge to the livelihood of a deactivated soldier is that some are disin-

⁶ "Buzzi" is an ethnonym for Loma or Lorma.

tegrated from the families “...*the women don’t respect us. If a man doesn’t bring money, they have no respect for you*” (06.03.2011)⁷.

The post-conflict environment of Liberia is characterized by manifold challenges. Formal employment is most desirable for many actors, however, well-paid job opportunities are rare. Most of the actors find a way by engaging in “*petty businesses*”, irregular or minor businesses, trading or services. A majority of ordinary Liberians undergo struggles comparable to Sumo and Sheriff. Other ex-soldiers, especially those who had served the army for a long time find it more difficult to reintegrate into society. An additional burden to the families constitute the consumption of cheap alcohol or drugs, as well as the health and psychological problems of some ex-soldiers.

What caused this change in their life trajectories? How do the ex-soldiers evaluate this turning point – from a master sergeant to a money changer? Briefly pointing at the role of the Liberian army before and during the war will help to show how arguments pro and contra AFL evolved⁸.

Contested actors and a contested past: AFL in a war-peace continuum

The relationship between the army and the civilians was always ambivalent in the Liberian history, as is the history of Liberian governments⁹. The coup d’état that brought Samuel Kanyon Doe to power in 1980 was meant to bring to an end rampant corruption, misuse of public office and violation of human rights of elite lead governments. The act was initially praised: after 133 years of elite rule and marginalization of the indigenous people, a Krahn man was now heading the state. In the course of Doe’s rule, however, internal frictions developed: Severe rivalry with Thomas Quiwonkpa, an AFL soldier of the Gio ethnic group, intensified and lead the latter to leave the country for Ivory Coast in 1983, accompanied amongst others by Prince Johnson. They returned for the Nimba raid (Ellis 2007: 58), brutalizing people including family members of Charles Julu, a Krahn AFL soldier who was deployed as security to the Swedish-American company LAMCO. Other government officials and citizens were killed. These incidents in the early 1980ies have lead to tensions

⁷ There exist a number of factors complicating relationships, and I witnessed many men accusing women or women accusing men for various reasons. Abandonment of women and children are a topic that many women’s organizations deal with. Although the quote refers to an often heard statement of men, it has to be taken with a pinch of salt.

⁸ For the broader context of the Liberian war, see i.e. Ellis (2007), Moran (2006) or Utas (2003).

⁹ According to TRC commissioner Konneh, there has not been a government in Liberia that has not violated human rights (25.03.2010).

and harsh ethnic divides within the AFL, as well as society, according to statements of an ex-soldier. After a failed coup by Quiwonkpa in 1985, the country was divided along pro-Doe and anti-Doe loyalty, and between Gio and Mano, loyalists of Quiwonkpa, and Krahn and Mandingo, who were pro-Doe.

Doe was officially elected President in 1985, an election that was widely contested, however certified as free and fair by the US government at that time (Moran 2006: 9). President Doe was a relatively young man educated at tenth grade¹⁰. A major challenge of the Doe lead regime was its inexperience and bad preparation. Nevertheless it received much financial and military support by the USA as well as from Nigeria, one of the most powerful West African states at the time (Howe 2001: 132-133). The 1980ies were characterized by series of coup attempts, many rooted in the Armed Forces, and hence by a climate of fear. Various sources including the Truth and Reconciliation Report (2009¹¹) published a long list of human rights abuses, for example the detention of journalists and political activists in the 1980ies, for which the Doe regime is responsible. President Doe was an ambivalent leader, responsible for ethnic tensions and other forms of human rights abuses. On the other hand, President Doe is also remembered as the President who has brought power to the “*native people*” who had been discriminated for so long, as many people recall. The era of “*normal days*”, e.g. the time when everyday life is memorized as characterized by daily routine, and a “*decent*” living standard, interestingly includes the presidency of Samuel K. Doe. Today, the name of the ambivalent leader is remembered in new constructions such as the Samuel Kanyon Doe Stadium or the Samuel Kanyon Doe Boulevard. Besides, the TRC recommends constructing a memorial for President Doe (TRC 2009: 380).

Resistance against Doe grew and took shape with support from the Diaspora (TRC 2008: 117-118). In 1989, the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), lead by Charles Taylor, invaded Liberia from Cote d’Ivoire. Ex-soldiers narrate that during the war, their number reduced as many soldiers were killed and many deflected. A number of AFL soldiers joined other forces. In 1989, before the war, the Armed Forces of Liberia had a strength of 6’000 soldiers (Malan 2008: 27), many of which had been trained in the US, Israel and other countries. The soldiers were trained in various forms of special trainings in various specia-

¹⁰ Education, more especially a higher degree is regarded as a mark of quality in present-day Liberia, but also before, as Moran (2006: 77) refers this to the contrast to the rural/urban, civilized/native, or the modern/traditional divide.

¹¹ See also http://onliberia.org/liberia_since1980.htm (12.05.2011)

lizations, including the air forces, as state many of the interview partners. So during the war, new soldiers were mobilized and drafted into the army.

The period until 2003 was marked by a series of wars, peace agreements, interim governments and Taylor's presidency. The ex-soldiers state that they did not really care about who was heading the state, even today. They have sworn an oath to protect and defend the state, and considered it as their duty even when the state in fact ceased to function and existed but as various imaginaries to the actors.

The 1997 elections that brought Charles Taylor to the presidency were considered “*free, fair and transparent*”, however, it is widely recognized that they were held in an environment of intimidation (i.e. Jaye 2003: 5 or Moran 2006: 105). Under President Taylor, the army was marginalized: as former loyalists of President Doe and mainly Krahn members, Taylor mistrusted their loyalty. He kept the army on payroll (15 USD) and used as his personalized militia and supporters, decorating these with high ranks (Malan 2008: 8f, interview ex-soldier). This was the reason, according to the deactivated soldiers, that only Taylor loyalists – based on merit or not - could increase in rank, where as AFL remained at the ranks they had before the war.

The institution of the AFL and many of its actions in the 1980ies and during the war, especially at the beginning, is severely criticized (c.f. Ellis 2007: 62, Kieh 2008: 148f). The army has been accused of various forms of human rights violations and atrocities, such as the UN compound massacre, the JFK hospital massacre or the commonly known Lutheran Church Massacre in July 1990. These massacres had cost the lives of hundreds or thousands of civilians. The TRC holds five to six percent of the atrocities committed during the war responsible to the AFL (TRC 2009: 264-267).

The path to peace

The Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) was signed in Accra in 2003 by members of the three warring factions Government of Liberia e.g. Charles Taylor (GOL), Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) and Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL). The agreement included several issues, amongst other the restructuring of the Armed Forces of Liberia with a new command structure, drawing from the ranks of GOL, LURD or MODEL, and civilians with an appropriate background. It was further decided that

ECOWAS, the UN, AU and the ICGL¹² support the Security Sector Reform effort. In addition, the parties requested the US to play a leading role in the restructuring process (CPA 2003, Art VII). The UN Security Council Resolution 1509 (2003) defined the key parameters and aims of the DDRR program, and the Transitional Government established a National Commission, NCDDRR. Target groups of DDRR were defined to be the combatants of the AFL, GOL, LURD, MODEL and other paramilitary forces and militias.

103,019 ex-combatants were registered in the DDRR program¹³, including a number of 12'254 ex-AFL. As stated above, categories are often blurred and referred to situationally. The group of AFL soldiers that was mobilized and drafted into the army during the war is referred to as the "1990ies". They have been demobilized after the war and received a benefit of 540 USD. Those soldiers who were part of the AFL before the war are referred to as the regular deactivated AFL soldiers, and they have received a benefit depending on rank and years of service. There exist a number of other regular deactivated security forces, such as the Liberian National Police (LNP), the Special Security Service (SSS) and others, which are also referred to as ex-servicemen, or ex-securities.

The AFL was disarmed, demobilized and thus appears in the statistics of the DDRR program. However, they say that they did not receive money for their weapons and were excluded from other parts of the DDRR program such as trauma healing, skills training. They were not integrated into the new army or into society. Instead of the package that was given to irregular combatants, the entire AFL was given notice to evict the barracks within 72 hours. This moment of 72 hours is an often remembered and narrated turning point in their live trajectories: It is the short period of disruption of their life trajectories. According to their evaluation, irregular forces received tools and assistance to reintegration into a new life, but for the ex-AFL it was the moment of disintegration. This created many problems for the soldiers, and the spontaneous decision had been to respond with violence. However, the opinion leaders in the army sat together to form a plan. The group decided to inform the soldiers to remain calm and await the result of the elections. This was considered a viable solution, for the majority was exhausted of war. But the problem remained, that in too short time, they were "*thrown out of the barracks*", which was considered unconstitutional; "*.... the army resolution also states that, if a man is to be retired and taken away from the barracks, he must be there for 90 days period. At which time you are able, to, you know, to resettle himself, plan where to go, how you gonna earn a living, and the rest of it. Nothing*

¹² International Contact Group on Liberia, a group composed of international experts to implement the CPA.

¹³ Pugel (2007: 18) estimates the number of ex-combatants even higher, at 105'699 - or more. A large number of interviewed ex-combatants had not participated in the DDRR program because they did not want to be identified as ex-combatants (Pugel 2007: 45).

like that! As soon as we had heard that we are out of the system, the following week, we should evict, we should leave the barracks.” (UDAFOL group interview). The soldiers hence left the barracks and awaited the new government. In her inauguration address, however, President Johnson Sirleaf addressed the deactivated soldiers as voluntarily retirees¹⁴. Knowing the law well, the soldiers did not accept this, as none of them had written a letter of resignation, nor had they received a certificate of retirement. Subsequently, a certificate of retirement was provided to them.

The deactivated soldiers were not integrated into the new army, vetted and trained by the American military company DynCorp International. They could apply to join the new army as other Liberians. Yet less than 5% of the new army are members of the deactivated army (UN Security Council S/2007/689). According to Alusula (2008: 20), they were not considered for the new army for reasons of impartiality. Besides, the AFL is seen as composed of actors who committed atrocities, and the government was hesitant to have such elements amongst the new army.

The results of the peace process hence are evaluated as a loss by the soldiers: They had lost their profession, they were accused for atrocities, their files were destroyed¹⁵ and with that, the records of honors were lost. They are left with the accusations of atrocities. With the receipt of the honorably retirement certificate, the deactivated soldiers were deleted from the government payroll; the amount of the deactivation was considered an insult, as they did not cover the sacrifices of war, the arrear payments¹⁶ or insurances. The ex-soldiers felt what happened to them was unconstitutional: only the approval of the legislature or a referendum can disband an entire army. This plight then was translated into a repertoire to articulate their interests (Hagmann and Peclard 2010: 547).

Formation of UDAFOL

After the army was disbanded, the ex-soldiers decided to form themselves into a group to tackle their complex problem. They held elections and voted on a chairman, who began to lead their advocacy with the government. It is said that he was not an experienced negotiator nor was he persistent and successful in representing the plight of the ex-soldiers. Hence, these started to demonstrate. The large group gained attention of the government,

¹⁴ http://www.emansion.gov.lr/doc/inaugural_add_1.pdf (10.05.2011)

¹⁵ Certificates of honor and as well as crimes are listed in each soldier's file, the "201 file", "military jacket" that they claim were destroyed at their disbandment.

¹⁶ This in fact is not a problem solely in Liberia; in other countries salaries are often delayed or not paid at all.

and the dialogue was taken up again. The ex-soldiers requested a monthly rent, which subsequently was provided – however, the 15 USD monthly rent was considered too low¹⁷. Through the processes and mutual interactions, the group began to build capacity and intensify their activities. There was a change in the leadership after the chairman passed away and another soldier took over. Responsibility was delegated to several members of the leadership: a legal advisor, a grievances chairman, a chairman for strategy and operations, a secretary general and a chairman. All of the members of the leadership are retired senior officers of the former Armed Forces of Liberia. The UDAFOL leadership is composed of members of several ethnic groups, including Gio, Grebo, Krahn and Mandingo. The organization does not receive any external funding.

UDAFOL claims they have honorably dedicated their lives to serve their nation loyally, and now they feel not being treated fairly in the peace process. Therefore, the aim of the group is to advocate for the rights and interests of the ex-soldiers, as a member of UDAFOL summarizes: “(...) *the Comprehensive Peace Accord that was signed in Accra in 2003, in that accord, (...) one of the provisions under the Security Sector Reform mentions in that accord: all irregular forces, let me underscore: all irregular forces shall be disarmed and disbanded. They will cease to exist. But the Armed Forces of Liberia shall be disarmed and restructured with a new command structure. So, that paragraph, when the people returned to Liberia, they deviated from that particular sector. Instead of restructuring, they disbanded the military (...) we told this present government that, you will have to revisit the CPA thus placing this matter of the AFL in the rightful direction. But they said no, they cannot undo what has been done. Then we said no, we will not accept that until we are treated fairly.*” Though much of their grievance concerns the bad living condition due to the low pension, the loss of their files, records, social and life insurances, their main concern is the lost recognition. Their claim may appear somewhat contradictory or questionable, as they seem both interested in joining the army and at the same time request a retirement payment. The “1990ies” are unsatisfied with the benefit of 540 USD they received at their demobilization. For the majority of the soldiers who are above the age of 50, the main interest lies in a decent pension pay. The younger members and those that were ambitious for a military career had expressed interest in joining the new army. So UDAFOL represents the general interest of the roughly 16’000 members of the disbanded army: having been left out in the peace process, for not “being someone”¹⁸.

¹⁷ “15 Dollars doesn’t even buy a bag of rice”, hence is not sufficient for a living.

¹⁸ Heitz (forthcoming), observed actor’s interests in being recognized, respectable actors.

In various forms of activities, they articulate their claim publicly by demonstrating and by seeking meetings with government actors as well as the international community including embassies and international veteran associations. The international actors however refer them back to their government, for it is an internal security issue. The ex-soldiers had crafted and submitted a petition to dismiss the president for the unconstitutional deactivation of the army, as, according to their knowledge and the constitution, only the legislative could approve such an act.

The ex-soldiers continue to promote their claim in the national media, actively by producing articles, and reports are published about their activities: they are famous for their massive demonstrations. The ex-soldiers are capable of mobilizing hundreds of soldiers to fill the streets. There is a range of debate on the issue of their demonstrations; the ex-soldiers state that their demonstrations are peaceful. At times they would tie their T-shirts together and walk with bare hands in the streets. The national and international actors are aware of these actions and respond differently to them, however, a notion of chaos, riot and even violence indicate a feeling of perceived insecurity – both from the ex-soldiers as well as the public: In the range of the 2009 international women's colloquium, soldiers preparing to demonstrate were stopped by the police¹⁹. The accounts on the activities of the deactivated soldiers are many. However, the reports show that the group was and is successfully gaining public attention.

In February 2010, a dialogue had taken place between the group and President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. According to a press release by the Executive Mansion, the ex-soldiers had apologized for the petition they had launched to dismiss the President for the unconstitutional deactivation of the army. It went on that the soldiers pledged loyalty and promised to collaborate with the government. In return, the President accepted the apology and promised tackle the problems the ex-soldiers are facing in integrating into society. A working plan was to be elaborated with the Ministry of Defense²⁰. Shortly after, however, news made public that the government provides education and vocational training opportunities for ex-soldiers and it would not pay cash contributions to the soldiers.

Rumors cursed that in the range of the July 26 Independence Day celebration, a central

¹⁹ UN Security Council (S/2007/689), or media reports that will be quoted below. There are even narratives of injuries and deaths. The chairman was severely injured. Star Radio, 10.03.2009, "Police confirms arrest of ex-AFL personnel", Star Radio 03.12.2009: "Ex-AFL commander Wolo Nagbe resurfaces ...says armed police fired at him".

²⁰ "Leadership of Demobilized AFL Soldiers Assure President Sirleaf of Unwavering Support". Executive Mansion Press Release, 25.02.2010.

Liberian holiday, the President would honor some of the ex-service men for their extraordinary service to the nation. Some 15 persons were then announced to be honored, personalities of public and political importance, of local and national importance. However, no ex-AFL soldier was among these. Instead, in September 2010, the government invited the leadership of UDAFOL to a meeting and presented a token to the UDAFOL leadership in order to honor their efforts to keep the peace and their collaboration with the government. Thereafter, however, the news spread quickly that they had received an amount of USD 10'000, creating a series of challenges to the leadership of UDAFOL²¹. One of the members is said to have rejected the token, which created additional challenges within the group. The incident had reached the news and there was a heated debate in a news program. And hence, this event created a turning point in the advocacy of the deactivated soldiers: in order to prevent the basis from going against the government or against the leadership, the chairman of UDAFOL had to be replaced. The chairman hence was released and a new chairman was installed. The event had consequences for the solidarity – not only of the group of deactivated soldiers, but also within the UDAFOL leadership. The leadership split into two groups. *Backstabbing* of members against other, such as the accusation of one group that the other was holding “secret meetings”²² fueled the tension. Though the reasons and accusations were vague, and later rejected, the news caused investigations, remanding some of the members in custody.

Shortly after this incident, the government announced to pay an amount of 16 Mio Liberian Dollars, which would be the last batch of arrear payments²³. The soldiers claim that the government owes them more, depending on length of service between five months and three and a half year's arrears. This led to frustration and again, they took the streets on December 21, 2010²⁴.

Interestingly, even if they challenge internal security by their demonstrations, national security remains a crucial concern to the ex-soldiers. They are aware of security issues and politics within the country and in the subregion. As the chain of command still exists and

²¹ “Old soldiers deny taking bribe from President Sirleaf” Star Radio, 30.09.2010. Additional tension arose because one member rejected the token.

²² „Ex-AFL Soldiers Hold Secret Meetings in Monrovia, but...” Heritage, 15.12.2010.

²³ “Angry Partisans Threaten to Dump Unity Party. Over Chairman's “Broken promises”; Civil Servants, Ex-Soldiers, Others Get Pay Friday” Daily Observer, 16.12.2010. 16 Mio Liberian Dollars payments to 8'907 former AFL soldiers, 2'935 former police officers and 1'695 retired and current Special Security Service Officers. For the total of 13'537 security personnel, this equals to a total amount of 1'182 Liberian Dollars, that is roughly 16 US Dollars per person. This amount is slightly more than the monthly pension of roughly 15 US Dollars.

²⁴ „Ex-AFL Soldiers Demonstrate in Demand of Arrears“, Heritage, 21.12.2010, and UMIL Radio Summary (Radio Veritas), 17.12.2010 “Ex-Soldiers differ with Government Disbanded”.

plays a role in their interaction, it also serves as a means of information and exchange. There are ex-soldiers in all the counties, and hence, they are aware of news, especially in case of conflicts. They are not only informed of deaths or illnesses of their former soldiers, but also about cross-border activities in the context of the Ivorian conflict.

At the time of this writing, the UDAFOL is reunited. In the forefield of the 2011 elections, a new option unfolded itself to UDAFOL: Presidential candidates discovered the potential of the large number of ex-soldiers and their families as attractive constituency, as will be described below. Hence, the ex-soldier's plight is successfully mobilizing public support.

Public discourses

As stated before and has to be emphasized again, the public is divided on the issue of the deactivated soldiers. Some argue that the AFL, as many other groups have been a warring faction and committed atrocities, especially along ethnic lines. The opinions of ordinary Liberians are diverse, and argumentation goes along many lines. However, contested or not, it is widely believed that the ex-soldiers deserve their arrear payments.

Unlike case studies for example by Schafer (1998) or Alden (2006) on assistance to the reintegration of ex-soldiers by local communities, I have not come across such accounts in my research.

Many informants feel uncomfortable with social and economic problems not being addressed, and doubt what will happen if UNMIL²⁵ leaves after the elections in 2011. *"...As we are going closer to the elections, one of the problems here, of the deactivated soldiers, is based on their past record. The past record of overthrowing an elected president, this is what is haunting them. So if any president is coming at the scene, they will look at the past record of what they did in the past, and pursue them against their past record. So this is one of the points. But in every solution, there bears a problem...."* (Group discussion in West Point)²⁶. This statement refers to the various coups and attempts since the 1980ies which rooted in the AFL, and even rumors circulated in 2006 with speculations that Charles Julu, a former AFL soldier, had played a central role²⁷. Hence, the reputation of the

²⁵ United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) has successfully kept peace in Liberia since 2003 with a strength of initially 15'000 peacekeepers. <http://unmil.org/>. (20.05.2011).

²⁶ The West Point Group discussion was held at the West Point Intellectual Forum, a public forum open to anybody. In the afternoons, people meet and discuss various issues. The discussion we initiated was held very broadly about "current social problems in Liberia", the topic of ex-AFL came up. Among the group of about 30 people, none identified him or herself as former soldier.

²⁷ BBC, 19.07.2007 „Arrests over Liberia Coup Plot“.

army was in question, as it was appropriated by each leader and its loyalty always doubted. Others raise the critique that the army took side, and in the end, no one could be trusted. Even others argue that the army had received a rent and a benefit, while they, the ordinary citizens, received nothing. The following statement summarizes these opinions:

„... those soldiers that we were depending on, indeed, they served us. But we were not fair to them. Because you will not be expecting me to go and defend you, while I'm defending you, you pass behind me, you go to the same people that I'm fighting, then you give them an entrance where they will come and pass and come and hit me. So I will end up defending myself. This is what happened to the soldiers. Not that they never defended us, they defended us! But certain time came, they had to defend themselves! This is what's happening in our country. And you people are talking about 540. Yes, indeed, they gave some of them 540, some of them 2'000 [USD], we saw it. But they were never told that was going to be the end of what (...) they have for them. Each time they go there [dialogue with the government], they will promise them, each time they go there, they promise them. And promise, as people say: promise is a dept: once you don't pay it, I will continue coming to you. So, not everybody against the deactivated soldiers!”

The issue of the payment, more especially the amount of the payment raised some concern: to some informants, the rewards were seen as too high, for others too low. The issue of payment was raised more often than the one of atrocities. Surprisingly, the local actors were not only well informed about the procedure of the deactivation, but also on the advocacy of UDAFOL.

The public debate found its way into the media and propaganda machines of political parties in the forefield of the 2011 presidential elections. The ex-soldiers are discovered as seemingly large and coherent group with common interests. If all deactivated security personnel, the AFL, Liberian National Police, the Special Security Service, would round up to 18'000, multiplied by 10 to include family and relatives, widows and other sympathizers, and organize to register and vote collectively, they could constitute about 10% of the 1,779,187 registered voters²⁸. Several presidential candidates hence started to seek their support with the group, amongst others Prince Johnson²⁹, claiming to be a former soldier; Chea Cheapoo³⁰, a politician and lawyer who had been briefly Chief Justice in the 1980ies;

²⁸ C.f. NEC Voter Registration, <http://www.necliberia.org> (13.05.2011).

²⁹ „Prince Johnson Not Eligible for the Presidency...Say former AFL Soldiers: Cite Military Reasons“ the Inquirer, 03.02.2011.

³⁰ Informal discussion with the ex-soldiers. Chea Cheapoo was later suspended as standard bearer from the party, see footnote 32.

and Moses Jarbo³¹, the former executive director of the NCDDRR. These candidates have promised to pay the benefits to the ex-soldiers, the widows and disabled, should they vote for them. Chea Cheapoo was dismissed by his party after he pledged support for the deactivated soldiers³². With this turn-around of Chea Cheapoo's party, it can be concluded that the ex-AFL is an ambivalent, contested group of actors. They do constitute a large number of voters, but are nevertheless an ambivalent group.

Preliminary conclusion: Ex-soldiers, a post-conflict challenge?

Demobilization after a conflict basically would fall in the realms of the state, but under the circumstances of state weakness or even inexistence, this approach has become less feasible. The problems of the aftermath - social, logistical, environmental, economic or political - are many and complex, hence creating a number of difficulties to the local, national and international actors (c.f. Jaye 2003). Due to the quasi non-existent state, the implementation of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in Liberia was characterized by an "*overwhelming lack of local ownership*" Jaye (2006: 13, c.f. Mehler 2004: 19). With much effort and resources, more than 100'000 ex-combatants were assisted in their transition from war to peace. There existed diverse and high expectations towards the many opportunities that seemed to open up new avenues for future projects after the war: reintegration assistance programs, scholarships, new opportunities in a new security sector, or seemingly new economic opportunities with the incoming of international donors, new concession agreements, economic recovery and growing national reserves and tax income. Of course, not everybody profited equally, and the economic condition still creates a challenge to a successful and sustainable social and economic reintegration. Others, however, feel they have not gained from the peace process. The case study presented such a group. The ex-soldiers feel that they have been left out. Was the process wrongly understood? Was it wrongly done? Where the expectations of the actors too high? Or was it simply a matter of information (c.f. Jennings 2008: 7)? Whatsoever went wrong, the ex-soldiers feel they have lost in the process, and as long as their honor is not restored, they will continue claiming what they feel they deserve. They articulate their claim publicly, as they feel they were the ones who kept the rebels out of town, and now they are the ones that are left in the streets.

³¹ Dr. Jarbo Stresses Unity", In Profile Daily, 15.03.2011

³² „After Naming Running Mate – Pres. Hopeful Booted Out.“ In Profile Daily, 14.04.2011.

In the last eight years since the Peace Agreement, the ex-soldiers feel that their claim was never really addressed. The leadership continues with its claim making; they seek meetings with state actors, then again they stage demonstrations or publish news articles. They not only request the dialogue with government, but also the international community as well as other interest groups such as international veteran associations. In contrary to other groups who state their claims publicly³³, the deactivated soldiers are actors who were trained and habituated to the use of weapons and physical violence, hence creating a sentiment uncertainty, if not insecurity. Though the leadership constantly emphasizes its interest in peace, some degree of impatience can be felt.

The discourses on the group are, as shown, diverse and contested. Basically, the group is widely noticed, as their number is impressive, and their plight is known to the public. However, the reaction towards them is diverse. The international community is aware of this social problem and security issue, and a number of published reports indicate to this problem, such as Alusula (2008: 22): *“the Liberian society is put at the risk of having to contend with a considerable number of persons who are well skilled in war and who have no viable source of livelihood”*, see also Jaye (2006 and 2009), Malan (2008), or Nilsson (2009). In addition, the deactivated AFL is the only mentioned pressure group in the CIA World Factbook on Liberia. The government has, through the Bureau of Veteran Affairs and other means, responded partially to their claims, as the ex-soldiers receive a monthly rent and have in recent times received arrear payments.

As is widely noticed and agreed upon, and Alusula (2008: 21) summarizes, a Security Sector Reform cannot meet all the various expectations due to constraints of resources, however, all efforts should be made to minimize resentment by those who perceive themselves as potential beneficiaries. Others, such as for example Boas and Hatloy (2008: 38), state that the government and international community are challenged to create an environment of improved capacities for ex-combatants.

The issue of the ex-soldiers became new relevance due to the fact that a number of ex-soldiers have crossed the border to fight in the recent Ivorian conflict.

³³ See publication by author on a Liberian woman's organization and its negotiation process with state actors (Kaufmann, forthcoming).

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