

IFP SECURITY CLUSTER

GRAND GEDEH COUNTY, LIBERIA

# SECURITY AND JUSTICE FROM A COUNTY PERSPECTIVE

Richard Reeve with Jackson Speare

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COUNTY PERSPECTIVE

GRAND GEDEH COUNTY, LIBERIA

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## ACRONYMS

|               |   |
|---------------|---|
| <b>AFL</b>    | Armed Forces of Liberia                                       |
| <b>BIN</b>    | Bureau of Immigration and Naturalisation                      |
| <b>DEA</b>    | Drug Enforcement Agency                                       |
| <b>DDRR</b>   | Disarmament, Demobilisation, Reintegration and Rehabilitation |
| <b>ECOWAS</b> | Economic Community of West African States                     |
| <b>ERU</b>    | Emergency Response Unit                                       |
| <b>FDA</b>    | Forestry Development Authority                                |
| <b>FPU</b>    | Formed Police Unit (paramilitary within UNMIL)                |
| <b>JSSR</b>   | Justice and security system reform                            |
| <b>LNP</b>    | Liberia National Police                                       |
| <b>LURD</b>   | Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy             |
| <b>MODEL</b>  | Movement for Democracy in Liberia                             |
| <b>NBI</b>    | National Bureau of Investigation                              |
| <b>NSA</b>    | National Security Agency                                      |
| <b>NPFL</b>   | National Patriotic Front of Liberia                           |
| <b>OHCHR</b>  | Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights              |
| <b>SSR</b>    | Security sector reform  |
| <b>TRC</b>    | Truth and Reconciliation Commission                           |
| <b>ULIMO</b>  | United Liberation Movement for Democracy in Liberia           |
| <b>UNMIL</b>  | United Nations Mission in Liberia                             |
| <b>UNPOL</b>  | Civilian UNMIL Police   |
| <b>WCPU</b>   | Women and Children Protection Unit                            |

## BACKGROUND

The accessible and accountable provision of security and justice is one of the main requirements for a peaceful society and sustained social and economic development. Security provision and access to justice are regarded as essential public services, are fundamental building blocks in promoting good governance and are critical for the creation of a secure environment at both the local and national level.

Liberia witnessed a civil war between 1989 and 2003 that destroyed its state security and justice institutions, devastated its productive capacity and infrastructure, and displaced around one-third of its population.<sup>1</sup> Recovery has been slow, reflecting the extraordinarily low base reached at the end of fighting in August 2003. Reconstruction and reform began in earnest from mid-2004 with the full deployment of the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) and accelerated from January 2006 with the inauguration of a popularly elected government. Security sector reform (SSR) began soon after the disarmament and demobilisation of 101,495 ex-combatants in 2004,<sup>2</sup> with major input from UNMIL and the US government. To date, the SSR process relaunched the police in 2004, dissolved or consolidated many of the plethora of irregular or undisciplined security forces established during the 1990s in 2004–05, and has re-created the military from scratch since 2006. Justice sector reform has re-established broadly functioning courts in all of the county seats, redeployed judges and county attorneys, restored some prisons and established a Judicial Institute in Monrovia to train or retrain sufficient magistrates and judges.

SSR has been a relatively open process in Liberia and has proceeded through county-level engagements with stakeholders and civil society in 2006 to determine the security needs of the nation. Similarly, in 2007–08 consultations at district and county levels were used to inform the Poverty Reduction Strategy (2008–11) and accompanying County Development Agenda, with Security and Governance and the Rule of Law being the first and third of four pillars.<sup>3</sup> International Alert's research and engagement with communities in Bong, Lofa and Grand Gedeh counties seeks to continue and strengthen this engagement at the local level, analysing whether security and justice priorities have changed over time and whether there has been ongoing progress in access to security and justice services.

1 One-third is the figure most often cited for Liberians displaced long term. A 2007 assessment by the UN/Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) cited in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) final report (p.270) says: 'some 86% of the population were dislocated at one time or another during the war'. Available at [http://www.trcofliberia.org/reports/final/volume-two\\_layout-1.pdf](http://www.trcofliberia.org/reports/final/volume-two_layout-1.pdf)

2 It is widely acknowledged that many, if not most, of the demobilised had not fought during the war. Only 28,314 weapons were collected during Disarmament, Demobilisation, Reintegration and Rehabilitation (DDRR).

3 The others are Economic Revitalisation and Infrastructure and Basic Services.

## INTRODUCTION

This short briefing is based on focus group discussions and interviews in Grand Gedeh County during April 2010. Interviews and community consultations were held in Zwedru, the county seat and the rural border community of Toe Town. The research thus attempted a representative sample of rural and urban communities from across the county but the results should be considered indicative rather than comprehensive.



## GRAND GEDEH COUNTY IN CONTEXT

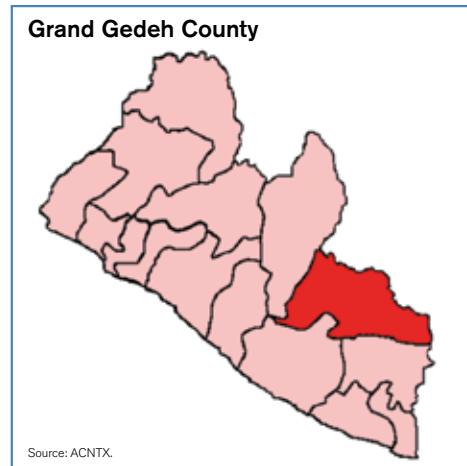
Grand Gedeh is the second largest county in Liberia and the ninth most populous, thus it is one of the most sparsely populated. It is located in the southeast of Liberia. Its long northern border is the frontier with Côte d'Ivoire. To the south is River Gee County and Sinoe County. To the west is Nimba County. Most of the Grand Gedeh population lives between county seat Zwedru and Nimba County in the northwest.

The interior and east of the county is mainly rainforest with isolated foresting and farming settlements. Zwedru is the only significant-sized town, ranking seventh in Liberia and the largest in the southeast. Grand Gedeh has a relatively straightforward demography, being dominated by the Krahn ethnic group with minorities of Sapo in the south, Grebo in the east and a more mixed population in Zwedru and the west, including Mandingo and Gio. Most Grebo-dominated areas broke away to form River Gee County in 2000. According to the 2008 census, Grand Gedeh has the highest sustained demographic growth of any county outside Monrovia and has the second largest average household size (7.6 persons).

Historically, the county is closely associated with the military regime of Samuel Doe (1980–90). Zwedru was relatively well developed in the 1980s as Doe's country home and his Krahn kin rapidly assumed influential positions in government and the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL). After Doe's 1990 murder, many Krahn fought on through the civil war as the core of the AFL and the Roosevelt Johnson-led faction of the United Liberation Movement for Democracy in Liberia (ULIMO-J). In 2000–03 many Krahn veterans and youth joined the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) and then the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL). During 2002–04 there was some impact on Grand Gedeh from the fighting in neighbouring Côte d'Ivoire.

Forestry is traditionally the mainstay of the local economy but has been considerably disrupted by the international sanctions imposed on Liberian timber from 2003 to 2006. The most important cash crop was palm oil, but currently there is little beyond subsistence farming and a little cocoa production. Prospecting is under way for iron ore in the Putu mountains and there is considerable artisanal mining for gold. There are no facilities for higher education in the county and no significant manufacturing or processing industries.

Except within Zwedru city, there are no tarred roads in Grand Gedeh, no rail links, no navigable rivers and only a tiny airstrip in Zwedru to serve the UNMIL base. Zwedru is at least ten hours' drive from Monrovia, with the journey normally undertaken over two days. In the long wet season, the highway between Ganta and Harper through Grand Gedeh can become impassable. There is no public electricity production or distribution and no improved water. Zwedru and some towns along the highway have mobile telephone coverage but many forest communities do not. Community radio normally covers at least the west of the county.



### Grand Gedeh County

**Area:** 10,484 km<sup>2</sup>

**Population:** 126,146 (2008 census)

**Main ethnic groups:** Krahn, Grebo, Sapo, Gio, Mandingo

**Economy:** Forestry, Gold, Agriculture, Palm Oil

## SECURITY SITUATION

While Grand Gedeh does not have a particularly high record of post-war violence or unrest, respondents in the county outside of the administration and security forces generally identified their county as insecure, with the potential for future instability and violence. Widespread sources of concern were relations between the Krahn and their neighbours in Nimba County, the situation in Côte d'Ivoire, high unemployment and economic marginalisation, and a perception of central government neglect if not punishment of the Krahn.

### TYPES OF CRIME

Types of crime recorded by the police in Grand Gedeh coincide quite closely with those crimes perceived by local civilians. The main reported crimes are theft, assault and burglary. Rapes are reported to the Liberia National Police (LNP) on average two or three times per month, though the rate is reported to have reduced. Armed violence is rare and all respondents agreed that modern weapons, not including single-shot hunting rifles, are very rarely used or encountered.

### WOMEN AND SECURITY

Women in Grand Gedeh noted particular concerns about the security of women small traders, whether trading in Nimba County, Côte d'Ivoire or the border market in Toe Town. Communal tensions limit their perceived ability to trade and receive a fair price in Nimba, while some women felt vulnerable to assault by Ivorian security personnel, who sometimes cross into Toe Town to visit the market. Women in Zwedru felt particularly insecure because of the presence in their midst of a maximum-security prison, from which dangerous criminals have escaped en masse. Rural women saw teenage pregnancy, often occurring at 12–14 years, early marriage and other harmful traditional practices within their communities as the major threats to the security of women and girls.

### GRAND GEDEH–NIMBA RELATIONS

The most frequently cited threat to security in Grand Gedeh is inter-communal violence between natives of Grand Gedeh (ethnic Krahn) and Nimba (especially Gio) counties. During the Doe era, the Krahn-based government was seen to have persecuted Gio and Mano from Nimba who actively opposed it. Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) began its insurgency in Nimba in 1989 and drew many of its recruits from the county. Prince Johnson, a leader of the Independent NPFL faction from Nimba, and his troops tortured and killed Doe the following year. Throughout the civil war, Grand Gedeh was the scene of conflict between Krahn-based groups (especially the AFL, ULIMO-J and MODEL) and factions allied with Taylor and Prince Johnson. Most Krahn regard this as a war of self-defence to protect their county and communities.

Since 2005 Prince Johnson has been the Senior Senator for Nimba County. The Junior Senator is Adolphus Dolo (alias "General Peanut Butter"), another of Taylor's senior commanders. Johnson is a leading candidate for the presidency of Liberia in October 2011, raising concerns about the destabilising influence of his campaigning in Grand Gedeh or attempting to pass through the county to reach the rest of the southeast. Many in Grand Gedeh say they cannot accept the humiliation of Johnson campaigning on their territory. While locals could attempt to block his passage through the county, there is a general fear of a retaliatory blockade in Nimba, which would

sever the only reliable connection to Monrovia and trade with Guinea. Many Gio live and work peacefully in Grand Gedeh but Krahn report it is not possible for them to do the same in Nimba. Several respondents referenced a January 2010 football match in Monrovia between the two county teams as a near trigger for violence in Zwedru after local Gio celebrated Nimba's victory by singing wartime chants in praise of Johnson.

The final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of 2009 has had a divisive impact in Grand Gedeh. While the report recommended the prosecution of Prince Johnson and Dolo, many Krahn saw it as an attempt by other groups to persecute their wartime leaders in particular. Attempts by chiefs to use traditional rituals to reconcile the Krahn and Gio are ongoing.

## THE IVORIAN BORDER

There is far less tension surrounding trans-border relations with Ivorian neighbours, many of whom are also Krahn, or the significant trading population of Guinean origin. Only about 700 Ivorian refugees remain in Grand Gedeh. Several thousand Grand Gedeh refugees are said to remain in Côte d'Ivoire as well as Ghana and Nigeria. Some locals believe the majority of all remaining Liberian refugees are Krahn who lack confidence in post-war security. There remains disquiet about the potential for the Ivorian crisis to spill over into Grand Gedeh. Both the NPFL and MODEL originally entered Liberia with Ivorian support and there was considerable movement of combatants between the two conflict zones in 2002–03. No such movements of armed persons or weapons were reported in recent years.

## YOUTH, UNEMPLOYMENT AND THE 'WAR-AFFECTED'

The other major grievance across Grand Gedeh is the lack of economic or educational opportunities. Locals estimated unemployment at above 80 percent and pointed to an exodus of talented young people to Monrovia and the coast. There is a perception that the government of President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf is dominated by the Americo-Liberian elite that Doe overthrew in 1980 and that this conditions its attitude to Grand Gedeh.<sup>4</sup>

Rehabilitation and reintegration of ex-combatants in Grand Gedeh is an additional source of frustration with the government. Locals estimate that some three-quarters of local young men, and many women, were mobilised as combatants during the war. Reintegration programmes to educate and train these 'war-affected' were regarded as poorly conceived and executed, with little economic impact. The lack of higher education possibilities in Grand Gedeh was widely cited by local youth as evidence of a policy of neglect.

## LAND DISPUTES AND OCCUPATIONS

Land disputes were widely cited as a source of conflict. Displacement and resettlement over nearly 20 years has fostered confusion over land ownership and the reassertion of local government institutions such as the county surveyor's office have stoked tensions with the chiefs who see land disputes and allocations as their preserve. The same piece of land was often said to have been sold to multiple buyers.

So far there is little inward investment in land and agriculture in Grand Gedeh. Reopening of the forests, or the ongoing prohibition of logging, is a greater source of frustration. The Forestry Development Authority (FDA) is pursuing a very incremental policy of reopening the forests in line with donor pressures. In theory, its regulations should insist upon local jobs creation and protection of local hunting grounds. In practice, thousands of former foresters are frustrated at delays in the restoration of logging four years after sanctions were lifted. There are also concerns about the lack of information provided by iron ore prospectors in Putu and the use of labourers from elsewhere in Liberia and beyond.

Alluvial mining for gold is a major informal industry in Grand Gedeh as squatters have occupied former commercial mining sites and forest areas, including Sapu National Park on the southern border. Many squatters

<sup>4</sup> Johnson Sirleaf was a minister in the government of President William Tolbert overthrown by Doe in April 1980. She briefly supported the NPFL before turning against Taylor.

are reportedly ex-combatants and have occupied these sites since the end of fighting in 2003 or before, often with their families. Others are reportedly foreigners from across West Africa. Rumours of weapons, drugs and lawlessness are widespread but the officials and police concede they have no presence and little knowledge of conditions around the informal mines. The FDA would like to clear squatters out of the forest in order to develop it for logging or conservation but its rangers are unarmed and unwilling to confront the squatters. The LNP has insufficient manpower to assist. All respondents agreed that it would be counter-productive to the security of surrounding communities to clear the forest without developing alternative livelihood opportunities.

## SECURITY PROVIDERS

Primary responsibility for public security within Grand Gedeh County rests with the LNP, supported by the National Bureau of Investigation (NBI), the National Security Agency (NSA) and the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA). Border protection is provided by the Bureau of Immigration and Naturalisation (BIN), which also has four internal checkpoints on the main highway. All of these security forces report to the Ministry of Justice through the County Attorney, who works within the office of the County Superintendent in Zwedru and co-chairs the county Joint Security Council.

Zwedru is LNP headquarters for Region 4, incorporating Grand Gedeh, Sinoe and River Cess counties. There is a very limited police presence outside of Zwedru, with small posts only in the larger district centres, including Putu, Toe Town, Ziah Town and Zlah. Zwedru and Toe Town have Women and Children Protection Units (WCPUs), although in the latter at least there are only male personnel. Community Policing Forums began to be rolled out with UN assistance in early 2010.

LNP total presence in Grand Gedeh is 57 personnel, including 8 female officers (14%, slightly above the national average). This represents a police to civilian ratio of 1:2,200, more than double the national ratio of about 1:900. The actual number of LNP officers in-county has decreased by one-third from 78 in 2008 and 86 in 2007. This appears to be one of the most rapid declines in Liberia and the local commander ascribes this to a desire for better advancement and training in Monrovia. Recruitment of additional police, with female officers prioritised, has been difficult, apparently because of the negative image of the LNP among the local population.

### LNP and BIN Presence in Grand Gedeh

**Total LNP:** 57 (8 female)

**Police to civilian ratio:** 1:2,200

**Total BIN:** 48

Source: LNP and BIN

Logistics is a major problem for the LNP in Grand Gedeh as in all other rural counties. There are only two vehicles (pick-ups) and one minibus serving one of the largest counties and these are often not serviceable. Additionally, there are a few police motorbikes but many LNP as well as BIN rely on private transport or requisitions to make patrols, investigations and arrests. Similarly, communications rely on private telephones in the absence of radios, though much of the county is out of cellular coverage. There is no forensic equipment. Most villages are accessible only by foot, especially during the rainy season, and see no police presence. In Toe Town, where there are five assigned LNP officers, there is virtually no capacity to patrol, very limited capacity to investigate and make arrests, and no capacity to respond to public-order incidents.

In addition to the LNP, there are 48 BIN officers in Grand Gedeh spread very thinly along the long Ivorian border. These are based in Zwedru, at three major crossing points and four internal checkpoints. There are at least nine more informal border-crossing points without any BIN presence. In most cases, existing BIN posts are poorly located or in need of reconstruction. Bad roads and bad weather are major impediments to their patrols. BIN has only one vehicle, one or two motorcycles and some canoes, no radios and few uniforms.

None of the Liberian security forces present in Grand Gedeh County is currently armed or equipped to confront manifestations of violence. The nearest armed back-up to the LNP is the Emergency Response Unit (ERU) in Monrovia. This is dependent on UN helicopters to deploy to the southeast, as in April 2009 in response to a prison break in Zwedru. There is no presence of the new AFL in Grand Gedeh and no publicised plan to deploy the small army there. The nearest AFL detachment is currently the engineering unit at Gbarnga, at least five hours' drive from Zwedru. Formerly, the AFL had an important garrison in Zwedru, which was its HQ in the southeast.

In consequence, response to public-order incidents relies heavily on the UNMIL. Zwedru hosts the UNMIL HQ for Sector 4 (southeast Liberia), manned by a Pakistani infantry company and Chinese engineering and medical companies plus an Indian Formed Police Unit (FPU) for public order. There is also a Pakistani infantry platoon at Toe Town, close to the main Ivorian border crossing. Civilian UNMIL Police (UNPOL) are present to deploy on patrols in support of the LNP. UNMIL has significantly reduced its military presence in the county since late 2009, withdrawing an Ethiopian battalion.

## PERCEPTIONS OF THE POLICE

Perceptions of the LNP among respondents in Grand Gedeh were frequently negative. Police officers were generally viewed as insufficiently motivated to respond to crime adequately and without the manpower or resources to patrol or be proactive in crime prevention. One magistrate complained that many cases had to be dismissed due to the LNP's inability to prepare correct charge sheets. Women's groups complained that the police frequently let drop cases of sexual or domestic violence against women, especially where the suspect was powerfully connected. Many women are reluctant to approach the WCPU in cases of domestic violence due to shame and fear of abandonment by their partners.

Most respondents believed it was necessary to pay the police at least for fuel, stationery and telecommunications in order for the LNP to investigate a reported crime. Local police deny they ask for payment to investigate crimes but concede they face major logistic problems in operating anywhere outside the main towns and sometimes find it too dangerous to patrol at night, even within towns.

Confidence in the armed forces was strikingly higher than in the LNP, which is recruited from across Liberia. Due perhaps to the dominant influence of the Krahn in the old AFL (which was disbanded in 2005), as well as potential instability from Côte d'Ivoire, numerous respondents advocated deployment of the new AFL to Grand Gedeh to replace UNMIL. Withdrawal of Ethiopian peacekeepers from Grand Gedeh during 2009 was a source of concern to several respondents in Toe Town close to the Nimba and Ivorian borders.

## ALTERNATIVE SECURITY PROVIDERS

Due to the low concentration of police, the reality in Grand Gedeh is of continued heavy reliance on UNMIL for security and rights protection and as a deterrent to more serious violence. Alternative security providers include some private security guards in Zwedru and informal tribal militia deputised by chiefs in rural areas. Vigilantism appears to be quite common in both Zwedru and Toe Town in response to the perceived inability of the LNP to provide any security after dark. There is some confusion at least in Toe Town over the difference between vigilante patrols and community policing. As elsewhere in Liberia, women's organisations can be mobilised to provide unarmed patrols in support of women's security.

Secret societies in rural areas retain massive influence and can impede the ability of the state to protect and investigate crimes. Both LNP and BIN officers mentioned the invocation of sacred forest or the appearance of bush "devils" to prevent their presence in certain areas and to protect customary investigative procedures or punishments.<sup>5</sup>

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5 In Liberia and neighbouring countries, "devils" are the masked oracles of secret societies (*Poros* for men, *Sandes* for women) that may only be looked upon by initiates. Areas of forest reserved for initiations and society meetings are regarded as sacred territory of the "devils" and off-limits to non-initiates.

## JUSTICE PROVISION

As throughout Liberia, a dual justice system operates in Grand Gedeh. Statutory justice according to the laws passed by the executive in Monrovia is administered through circuit and magisterial courts. Customary justice according to the unwritten conventions of the Krahn and other peoples is administered through quarter, town, clan and paramount (district) chiefs responsible via the district and county administrations to the Ministry of Interior. Hinterland Regulations governing what the chiefs can rule upon are unclear, incomplete and occasionally obsolete, and there is some dispute over the jurisdiction of each system.<sup>6</sup> The reality in Grand Gedeh is pragmatic, with the statutory system confined largely to Zwedru, district capitals or prioritised issues such as rape and homicide.

### THE STATUTORY JUSTICE SYSTEM

The formal system of justice in Grand Gedeh is still in the early stages of recovery from its collapse during the civil war and, as elsewhere in Liberia, is overburdened by caseload and expectations. However, the extension of the statutory justice system into the “leeward counties”<sup>7</sup> even before 1989 was never extensive, thus formal courts are often as much to be established as re-established.

Zwedru is the location of the county circuit court. There are magisterial courts in eight locations, one for each district headquarters. Zwedru is also home to the Palace of Corrections, one of only two supposedly maximum-security prisons in Liberia, also used for pre-trial detentions within the county. There is little or no secure transport of prisoners from across the country to Zwedru; suspects and convicts are routinely transported on the back of police motorcycles.

Administration of justice is the responsibility of the County Attorney, who also oversees the county security forces. There is a shortage of qualified personnel at all levels, from magistrates through county solicitors (prosecutors), public defenders to court clerks. In Zwedru, there are only two magistrates, one clerk, one solicitor and one defender, with these two lawyers having to serve both magisterial and circuit courts when not working in Monrovia. The magisterial court is located in a temporary insecure facility despite land having been allocated for the construction of a new building. Outside Zwedru, there are no lawyers and some magistrates have to serve as their own clerks. More magistrates are being recruited in 2010 but training is expected to take two years.

Respondents in Grand Gedeh were highly critical of the legal system, especially the magisterial courts and the investigation of crimes by the LNP. The statutory system is seen as inefficient or ineffective since the overburdened courts are slow and it is difficult to get witnesses to travel to court to give evidence. The police are seen as unable to collect, preserve and present evidence sufficient for conviction. Numerous respondents spoke of the police letting prosecutions lapse due to failure to refer suspects to magistrates or simply refusing to arrest powerful or well-connected individuals. Because of inferior pay or conditions, judges, magistrates, juries and witnesses are seen as open to bribery or intimidation.

<sup>6</sup> An additional quirk of Liberia’s codified legal system is that the statute book was partially destroyed during the war and the remnants have subsequently been reassembled and privately copyrighted by a former Minister of Justice. Many decisions of the Supreme Court have also been lost such that it is not possible to trace precedent clearly. Thus, the constitutionality of parts of the Hinterland Regulations is in question.

<sup>7</sup> These are the inland counties, only fully demarcated in 1964, where state authority was long delegated to the chiefs: today Gbarpolu, Lofa, Bong, Nimba, Grand Gedeh and River Gee counties.



## THE CUSTOMARY JUSTICE SYSTEM

Customary justice is dispensed by chiefs present in every village, town quarter and district according to the tribal and/or clan affiliation of the appellant. This is subject to oversight by the District Commissioners, representing the Ministry of Interior, which pays chiefs a nominal stipend. Typically, this is a form of restorative justice, emphasising the perpetrator's responsibility to the community. Fines may be imposed but they are supposedly payable to the victim or her/his family rather than to the chief. Decisions are appealable to higher chiefs but not to the statutory courts. The National Traditional Council of Liberia provides additional dispute resolution between groups and chiefs.

In theory, chiefs are elected, at least at higher levels. In practice, there have been no nationwide chieftom elections since before the war and most current office holders have replaced deceased predecessors. Thus far, the Liberian government has set no schedule for decentralisation elections.

Customary justice is supposed to be confined to civil cases, with most criminal cases referable to the statutory system. In reality, for rural communities, customary justice appears to retain the support of the population as a tried and tested system with relatively predictable duration and outcomes, low cost and limited stigma relative to the formal system, which may be associated with alienation or retribution from the perpetrator's family or wider community.

However, the system often overlaps with the statutory courts and tends to recognise inequalities in male and female rights and responsibilities contrary to the national constitution, for example, marriage of female minors or settlement of rape cases by marriage or compensation. In cases where rival claimants belong to different tribes or clans, the customary system can be adversarial. There is confusion over the limits of customary justice in the criminal sphere. One senior chief in Grand Gedeh claimed that chiefs had jurisdiction to try all cases except treason and sedition.

At the national level, the statutory justice system is uncomfortable with the intrusion of the chiefs into the legal domain, even where the magisterial and circuit courts have no capacity to provide alternative justice. However, in Grand Gedeh, magistrates and chiefs say they refer cases to one another's jurisdiction, with Zwedru magistrates content to see minor disputes resolved without reference to the courts. Others in the county claim both magistrates and chiefs are reluctant to pass on cases, preferring to impose fines or bonds of their own even for crimes outside of their jurisdiction. Chiefs reject these accusations and that they still use trial by ordeal ("sassay wood") to prove guilt. There is a feeling in the southeast that the current government has tacitly endorsed sassay wood by failing to prosecute chiefs known to have employed it.



## IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS, LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND CIVIL SOCIETY

Liberia has come a long way in police reform since 2004 and made gradual progress in re-establishing the core of a statutory justice system outside Monrovia. However, state resources will not be sufficient to meet the security and justice needs of the large, dispersed rural population in the medium term. Courts are barely resourced and LNP manpower and logistics outside the capital are already declining, even as the drawdown of UNMIL transfers greater responsibilities to Liberian institutions. Ongoing dialogue between national and local government, donors, communities, formal and informal security and justice providers is crucial to fitting the country's ambitious justice and security system reform (JSSR) programme to local realities and addressing the needs identified by local voices. Based on this local research, specific activities in Grand Gedeh County might include:

- Improving conditions for local security forces, including pay, accommodation and training opportunities, to promote personnel recruitment, retention and effectiveness;
- Doubling the number of police personnel in-county, prioritising recruitment of women and the deployment in the southeast of a paramilitary ERU;
- Improving LNP mobility by providing and maintaining robust vehicles and fuel to permit safe transport of victims, witnesses and suspects/convicts as well as facilitating patrol and response;
- Harmonising statutory and customary justice systems through clarification of the Hinterland Regulations, customary laws and dispute-resolution mechanisms and the training and sensitisation of chiefs, magistrates and police;
- Targeting justice sector resources to magisterial courts to improve security of premises and training and provision of personnel (magistrates, solicitors, clerks, bailiffs);
- Training and deployment of paralegal advocates to guide victims through the justice process and advise chiefs on rights and responsibilities;
- Facilitating communication between local communities, police and government on security and justice issues, including through community radio stations and training in conflict-sensitive reporting during elections;
- Creating an all-weather highway across Grand Gedeh and an all-weather alternative route to ports and Monrovia via the coast;
- Improving local educational and health facilities to offset the perception of government neglect, including the construction of a higher education facility; and
- Developing alternative livelihood opportunities for squatter communities currently occupying the former gold mines, forest concessions and national park.

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