



**Ex-combatants, Returnees, Land  
and Conflict in Liberia**

Jairo Munive Rincon

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**JAIRO MUNIVE RINCON**

PhD Candidate, DIIS  
jmr@diis.dk

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Danish Institute for International Studies, DIIS  
Strandgade 56, DK-1401 Copenhagen, Denmark  
Ph: +45 32 69 87 87  
Fax: +45 32 69 87 00  
E-mail: [diis@diis.dk](mailto:diis@diis.dk)  
Web: [www.diis.dk](http://www.diis.dk)

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## **ABSTRACT**

In post-conflict settings, land disputes often appear as a factor that without due attention and interventions can endanger peace and stability. During Liberia's 15 years of civil war, the civilian population was severely hit and many fled, abandoning houses and land. Abandoned property was often appropriated by squatters, and after the war ended in 2003 many ex-combatants settled in urban areas. Ganta, Liberia's second largest city, is a remarkable example of this. During the war combatants captured land in a process considered to be a rightful re-appropriation of lands wrongfully taken over by others in the past.

In the case of Liberia, and also other post-conflict countries, settlement patterns and the composition of communities have been altered by the conflict, along with the sources and patterns of livelihood and the way land is used. In relation to return movements it is necessary to ask – return to what and under what conditions? Likewise, international and national efforts have been put into securing that Liberian ex-combatants are making a living away from the gun and reintegrating into society – but reintegration into what?



## INTRODUCTION

In post-conflict settings, land disputes often appear as a factor that without due attention and interventions can endanger peace and stability. During Liberia's 15 years of civil war, the civilian population was severely hit and many fled, abandoning houses and land. Abandoned property was often appropriated by squatters, and after the war ended in 2003 many ex-combatants settled in urban areas. Ganta, Liberia's second largest city, is a remarkable example of this. During the war combatants captured land in a process considered to be a rightful re-appropriation of lands wrongfully taken over by others in the past. The war raised awareness among young combatants of past social and political relations that affected their current (limited) rights to resources. Moreover, at the end of the war many ex-combatants settled on land and sustained that it was their benefit or reward for having fought. The armed conflict altered the country's demographic distribution and changed rules and conditions of access to land and property.

In the post-conflict transition phase when refugees and internally displaced return to their abandoned properties they find them occupied by others – generating a latent risk for rising tensions and outbreaks of violence. Looking into this complex of problems, this working paper explores disputes over land ownership in the context of refugee return, ex-combatant presence and current reconstruction efforts. Thus 'return' entails much more than helping displaced and refugee populations to go back home and reconstruct their lives. Standard technical responses by humanitarian agencies cannot, it seems, be applied without a thorough consideration of local contingent conflicts if durable peace is to be achieved. In the case of Liberia, and also other post-conflict countries, settlement

patterns and the composition of communities have been altered by the conflict, along with the sources and patterns of livelihood and the way land is used. In relation to return movements it is necessary to ask - return to what and under what conditions? (Alden Wily, 2009). Likewise, international and national efforts have been put into securing that Liberian ex-combatants are making a living away from the gun and reintegrating into society – but reintegration into what?

Ganta is located in Nimba County in north-eastern Liberia on the border to Guinea, 200 km from the capital. With approximately 42,000 inhabitants it is the second largest city.<sup>1</sup> As a main transit and commercial hub, access to the city's trade is of interest to traders and marketers, but the war altered access and control over land and in the aftermath of war disputes have arisen between different groupings – in particular ex-combatants and returning refugees. The dispute is reinforced by the fact that ex-combatants and returning refugees belong to different ethnic groups, have different religions, and supported rival factions during the war. The squatting ex-combatants are from the Mano and Gio ethnic groups, they are Christian and fought for Charles Taylor during the war; while the majority of returnees claiming their properties back belong to the Mandingo ethnic group, are Muslims, and supported the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) rebels during the war. The two groups are confronted over the distribution of land in Ganta city, the stakes are high

<sup>1</sup> Liberia is divided into 15 counties. Each county is further subdivided into administrative districts headed by District Commissioners. The district is the lowest administrative unit at which central government operates. Below the districts are chiefdoms, clans and cities/towns. The County Superintendents, Statutory Superintendents, District Commissioners and Township Commissioners are all appointed by the President, rather than elected, and are accountable to the President through the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

and the situation is volatile because of both groups' threats and use of violence.

The working paper starts with an outline of different accounts of the causes to the Liberian civil war where land appears as an important factor. Then a historical perspective on land issues in Liberia is presented, focusing on land appropriation in what came to be known as Nimba County – regarded as the cradle of the civil war – and how this was central to the formation and consolidation of the Liberian state. The particular position of the Mandingo community is briefly described. Then follows an account of the civil war and the effects it had for the local population in terms of land access. I go on to describe the solutions posed by the government of Libe-

ria to the numerous land disputes. As the case of Ganta shows, there are strong (negative) linkages between the reintegration of returnees, on the one hand, and the demobilization and reintegration of fighters on the other. As most observers point out, the successful reintegration of fighters is a precondition for fostering the security needed for the successful reintegration of returnees (see, for example, Faubert et al., 2005: 27). And yet in the present case, a successful injection of cash to ex-combatants facilitated the creation of squatter communities and perpetuated the land disputes between returnees, ex-combatants and their political patrons to this day. The paper is based on 12 months fieldwork in Liberia between 2006 and 2009.



Map of Liberia. Source: UN Cartographic Section.



Land and property issues are always a major concern after conflict, even when they were not a major trigger of war.<sup>2</sup> In Liberia, as elsewhere, land access, tenure and rights cut across a number of different sectors in the transition from war to peace and the peace-keeping efforts by the international community. Besides their importance in relation to the return and reintegration of refugees and displaced people, land issues play a key role in the restoration of livelihoods and security. Land issues also affect issues relating to justice and the rule of law and the reintegration of ex-combatants into communities. So in a word, land is at the centre of livelihood and security strategies for both displaced, refugees and ex-combatants alike.

Research for this working paper also involved the making of a documentary film.<sup>3</sup> The film centres on showing ex-combatants' and returnees' relation to space and place in post-conflict Liberia. The use of video enables a more vivid presentation and understanding of what is at stake in current land disputes – clearly an important issue for the presented individuals – and arguably for most of Liberians. In that sense visual language becomes the language of research rather than its tool.

## EXPLAINING THE LIBERIAN CIVIL WAR

The Liberian Civil War (1989-1996 and again 1999-2003) claimed the lives of more than 200,000 persons and further displaced a million others internally or into refugee camps in neighbouring countries. Increasing political

repression had caused instability during the 70s and the indigenous population's growing resentment with the ruling elite – the Americo-Liberians – culminated in the 1980 *coup d'état* by Samuel Doe, a sergeant in the Liberian army. Doe was from the Khran ethnic group and represented a final overturn of the Americo-Liberian rule.<sup>4</sup> However, Doe installed an ethnically based military regime characterized by corruption and gross abuses of power. He reformed the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL), which before 1980 had a senior leadership dominated by Americo-Liberians and indigenous only as lower ranks. Now Doe filled important military positions with fellow members of his ethnic group and purged the army's rank and file of other ethnic groups, such as Gios and Manos.<sup>5</sup> By perpetuating these ethnic divisions inside the AFL, he turned the army into an ethnic-dominated instrument of oppression. Doe's rule was challenged in 1989 when the rebel group National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) led by Charles G. Taylor invaded Liberia from the Ivory Coast.

Taylor's supporters were predominantly from the Gio and Mano groups. This ignited the first period of intermittent civil war from 1989 to 1996. In 1996 the first war ended with a cease-fire and a peace accord that agreed on the installation of a transitional government uniting all faction leaders. One year later Charles Taylor was elected president, but

<sup>2</sup> For a superb overview of the role of land issues in conflict and post-conflict situations see Pantuliano (2009).

<sup>3</sup> See the film at <http://www.diis.dk/sw91457.asp>

<sup>4</sup> The Americo-Liberians are the descendants of the first American slaves that founded the republic of Liberia in 1847. These settlers drew much of their prestige from their association with the United States and were convinced of their superior civilization. See Ellis, 1999.

<sup>5</sup> There are 16 ethnic groups that make up Liberia's indigenous population. The Kpelle in central and western Liberia is the largest ethnic group. Americo-Liberians make up less than 5 percent of the population. These ethnic groups are not naturally given communities and are the product of the expansion and consolidation of the Liberian state. See D'Azevedo, 1989.

his time in the presidential palace did not last long. In 1999 civil war re-ignited. Taylor's previous opponents formed two new armed factions: the Liberian United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD), generally associated with the Mandingo ethnic group, and the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL), associated with the Krahn. The second war lasted until August 2003 when a second peace accord was reached, Charles Taylor left the country and United Nations established a peace-keeping mission in Liberia (UNMIL). But what was all this fighting about?

Two of the most accepted interpretative frames analyzing and explaining the Liberian civil war mention, respectively, economic incentives and youth resentment as the important reasons. One explanation emphasizes the economic motivations of war by stressing the fact that military factions and leaders did not necessarily share or endorse a political agenda, but were rather interested in seizing control of territory and the state within a broad strategy to exploit opportunities for private wealth accumulation (Ellis, 1999; Hoffman, 2005; Reno, 1998). Warlords exchanged the resources of the territory under their control to foreign companies and businessmen in return for the means by which to secure their grip on power. Thus, in this explanation land figures prominently as a means for resource extraction and economic profiting.

Another explanation focuses on generational divisions and the marginalization of youth as a decisive factor (Bøås and Dunn, 2007; Richards, 2005). The fighting and associated violence was not random it is sustained, but rational and aimed at achieving strategic outcomes: liberation and empowerment of the young generation. War, according to Richards, represented a "drama of social exclusion" (Richards, 1996). Bøås points to a perpetual state of "fragility

among youth" in Liberia and in the West African region in general (Bøås and Dunn, 2007: 43). Access to land is seen as crucial in determining youth's fragility *vis-à-vis* other population groups, specially the older generation. Land tenure laws had since the 19<sup>th</sup> century given elder men strong control over land and perpetuating tenure insecurity among the younger population (Richards, 2005). Thus, unequal land access, in this view, leads to youth marginalization and resentment and serves as a potent incentive to take up arms. Both explanations underscore beyond doubt integral parts of the Liberian strife in their focusing on structural inequalities and economic motivations and in the analysis of land as a resource for extraction and in agrarian settings of social and political membership and positioning. In sum, the central role that land tenure issues had in the cause and development of the Liberian conflict is well recognized.

Yet I look into the matter from a somehow different angle: Land is important insofar as it makes possible the articulation of threats of violence between population groups and makes possible and justifiable the deployment of violence and force. In fact struggles and disputes in post-conflict Liberia over land and belonging appear to be not merely about land *per se*, but about authority, legitimacy and belonging to a moral community. Struggles over land in the aftermath of conflict in Liberia provide a window of opportunity to explore what the means and methods are for defining relations of force and practices of exclusion among population groups. To zoom in on the local conflict dynamics and micro-foundations of war, as Kalyvas sustains, can enrich our understanding of what the conflict was and still is about – e.g. questions of how and why people join or defect, how violence takes place, etc. (Kalyvas, 2003: 481).

Far from being a new phenomenon, conflict over access and control of land has been an enduring factor of Liberia's troubled history.

## THE STATE AND LAND GRABBING

The territory today known as Liberia was not colonized by Europeans, but freed American slaves settled here in the beginning of the 19th century. In 1847 the Republic of Liberia was founded and this initiated the development of a modern state. When the settlers arrived, they met a territory inhabited by 'stateless societies', in which notions of kinship and common ancestry served as the main glue for communities without central political institutions.<sup>6</sup> The settlers remained on the coast, but claimed sovereignty over the interior or so-called hinterland. For the territories under its control the settler government created a statutory system of land tenure, while customary law, based on usufruct rights, continued to prevail in the hinterland where the government had only partial control. It was not until late 19th century, when France and Britain launched colonial adventures in neighbouring areas that the Americo-Liberians – or Congos as they are called in Liberia – decided to gain territorial foot on the interior to protect Monrovia's claims over the territory. The territorial expansion of the nascent Liberian state was secured through the establishment of indirect rule in the hinterland (Akingbade, 1978). The so-called "pacification" of the

hinterland was considered to be completed by 1925 (Sawyer, 1992: 242). Pacification is at best a strong euphemism because the process of installing state power, control and sovereignty in the interior was by far pacific. Rather, it was a brutal fight between the Liberian Frontier Force (LFF) and the different indigenous tribes that resisted.

Access to and ownership of land was another area where the state imposed its sovereignty. The ownership of the land rested with the national government; all un-deeded land, including land occupied by indigenous peoples, was public land. In consequence, the government was the sole legal vendor of land and it could not be purchased directly from indigenous peoples. The ultimate arbiter of the acquisition of the deeding of the land was the president.<sup>7</sup> This model of modern land administration has since then been used by the state as a mechanism of political control, since the need to seek presidential approval urged the party interested in acquisition to be loyal to the central government (Richards, 2005).

The government deeded new land that was sold to 'citizens' – meaning Americo-Liberians and educated up-country people – or allocated to foreign concessions for rubber, timber and mineral extraction. In the sixties one observer described the rampant land appropriation in the following terms: "honourables, and others who have the ear of the President have engaged in one of the most extensive programs of private land acquisition outside of South Africa, Rhodesian and the Portuguese dependencies" (Liebenow, 1969: 209). Even if the Liberian Code of Law from 1956 offered certain statutory rights to indigenous peoples, over time, in-

<sup>6</sup> It was in the process of interaction with the nascent Liberian state that these kinship-based communities were classified as distinct "tribes". These are Bassa, Belle, Dey, Gbandi, Gio, Gola, Grebo, Kissi, Kpelle, Krahn, Kru, Lorma, Mandingo, Mando, Mende, and Vai.

<sup>7</sup> Clower et al. (1966) describe the entire administrative process.

creasing areas in rural Liberia were transferred from the customary system to the statutory system by the acquisition of land deeds (through chiefs) by the ruling Americo-Liberian government officials.

When the Liberian provinces became counties in 1963, the customary tenure system continued and was sanctioned as a parallel system to the statutory system. Some aspects of the customary tenure system were supported and changed to suit the interest of the ruling elite, while other aspects were declared illegal. Since then uncontrolled land appropriation and land speculation have been sources of conflict and uncertainty in rural Liberia (GOL/GRC 2007). Due to its strategic location, at the cross roads of Guinea, Ivory Coast and Liberia, Ganta was a popular place to acquire land: “everybody wanted a piece of land in Ganta!” as one informant formulates it. After declaring Ganta a city, the central government started to sell out of the land – not without objections from the local indigenous people. One informant recalls the process like this:

Before Ganta was declared a city it was predominantly Mano...when the government decided to sell land as public land, it was very difficult for the indigenous to accept. They inherited the land and how could they buy their own land? And from who are they going to buy? So when the chief then, the late old-man Gbatu, was approached he found it difficult to convince his people! What he then suggested was that since this central part of Ganta is being contested by people who wanted to buy, and on the other hand the indigenous people are saying that buying their own land was not reasonable. (Interview, Ganta, 2007)

Most of the land was bought by Americo-Liberians and some representatives of the Liberian state did not even have to buy the land, which was simply allocated to them in their functions as state representatives – as a gesture of good will by local chiefs towards the government:

...all this places bought by the Congo people from the indigenous, the Congo people did not buy it. There was a procedure, a regulation that never was followed. The land was allocated to the Congo people because as you know the Congo people came as officials of government, some took 25 acres of land and maybe to have their garden or house. Later on because of their influence in government they decided to own the place. First they had the place surveyed then the president signed the deed. The land becoming later in time their legitimate land. (Interview, Ganta, 2008)

The neighbourhood in Ganta, where Americo-Liberians acquired the majority of deeds, became popularly known as Congo-Town. However, Americo-Liberian residence and land ownership in Ganta did not last long. When Liberia experienced an economic slowdown during the 1970s, many became deeply affected and decided to leave the hinterland. This was exacerbated by the military coup in 1980. Sergeant Samuel Doe’s rule put an end to the Americo-Liberian elite dominance and catapulted a hatred for their rule that had been latent among the indigenous population. This led most Americo-Liberian land owners to sell their properties to Mandingo traders in the hinterland, including Ganta, and return to Monrovia.

## **THE MANDINGOS, ALLIANCES AND CONFLICTS**

In the central governments 'pacification of the hinterland' in the 19<sup>th</sup> century there was one population group that played a particular role – the Mandingos. In opposition to the indigenous sedentary agriculturalists the Mandingos were a mobile trading community with origin in the predominantly Muslim interior West African savannah regions. The Mandingos had long traded in the region, in particular exporting kola nuts from the coastal forest margins to the interior savannah – a region that fell under French dominance when the colonial powers arrived. When the Liberian state launched a series of military campaigns in 1912-17 by the Liberian Frontier Force, it particularly aimed at breaking the French-backed trade in rubber and kola nuts between the Mandingo traders and local populations. In spite of the French connections, the Americo-Liberians also considered the Mandingo potential allies and agents of modernization for their active engagement in trade and sense of 'order' (Konneh, 1996: 97; Sawyer, 1992). The central government allowed the Mandingo to have their own chiefs, to settle disputes internally and to avoid usual court costs and fines. The Mandingos' willingness to grant credit to government officials helped earning them favourable treatment in local affairs, and in turn indigenous chiefs offered manpower to Mandingo traders to build houses or carry loads to market places. It was only with the extension of the road network after 1950 that Mandingo merchants effectively settled in the Liberian interior (Blanchard, 1973).

In the early 60s the Mandingos dominated the transportation system and owned most of the vehicles used for transportation, which allowed them to travel to market places. The Mandingo traders did most of the marketing

of staple crops, rice and other commercial products like coffee and cocoa mainly buying for resale in Monrovia. Despite Liberia's economic downturn in the 70s, the Mandingo settlement kept its pace and they soon represented the majority of the population in the bigger towns and strategic government market sites. Mandingo traders acquired during this decade properties in central Ganta from Americo-Liberian families dropping the country-side for a return to business in Monrovia. To secure survival as a 'minority' group and for the protection of rights and citizenship, the Mandingo had through the years formed strong alliances with the power holders in Monrovia.

When Sergeant Doe from the Krahn clan took power, he extended his patronage network to specific ethnic group. The Mandingo community got special treatments. Doe officially recognized the Mandingo as a Liberian ethnic group to the outrage of the many who regarded them as foreigners (Ellis, 1999; Konneh, 1996). Doe also appointed Mandingo officials to government positions and encouraged them to buy land. With this new political power the Mandingo acquired a stronger position than before when they only lived as traders and credit facilitators to rural communities. This constituted the second 'wave' of land acquisition by Mandingo in Ganta.

## **THE CIVIL WAR AND DISARMAMENT IN GANTA**

From the early 1980's ongoing tensions about land issues were registered in Ganta and in Nimba in general. Following a coup attempt in 1985, Nimba County came under constant harassment and punishment by Samuel Doe's troops, and the Nimbaians were angered by



the perceived Mandingo support for the Doe regime. Since the conquest of the hinterland, Doe was the first Liberian head of state who excluded certain ethnic groups from political society, most notably the Gio and the Mano, while granting commercial privileges, land access and state employment opportunities to others like the Mandingo (Ellis, 1999: 65). The situation aggravated in the aftermath of Charles Taylor's incursion in 1989. When Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Front (NPFL) initiated an armed struggle against Doe, he used and manipulated the latent anti-Mandingo sentiment in Nimba. The NPFL young combatants sought to cancel debts by harassing Mandingo moneylenders or by appropriating and looting their stores (Richards, 1996). A month after the incursion Doe strongly encouraged Mandingo who had fled the country to return: "I sometimes hear people say Mandingo are not citizens... this is a black lie, we are all citizens, if anyone tell you that you are a foreigner, tell him he is also a foreigner...the question is not that of citizenship, but greed and power".<sup>8</sup> But the civil war was a reality and hostility and mistrust only grew between ethnic groups, such as the Mandingos, Gios, Manos and Krahn, who all associated with specific civil war factions; an animosity is still rampant, especially in Nimba county, by observers called the "cradle of the war".

By the outbreak of the civil war in 1989, the legal mechanisms for acquiring land deeds, especially in areas under customary tenure, were contentious and volatile. During the first civil war multiple new administrative units with poorly defined boundaries, e.g. cities and statutory districts, were created by the legislative bodies. In Ganta the first round of fighting (1989-1996) exacerbated disputes

over land and control over trade. However, when the fighting ended and Charles Taylor was elected president in 1997, he ordered the evacuation of all occupied properties. In the following years several clashes occurred in Ganta as the result of disagreements with court rulings in different land disputes. In one of the most severe cases, the police was deployed to Ganta to quell riots between groups of Manos and Mandingos. Then in 1999 the second civil war broke out and the unrest was aggravated by tension between the Liberian and Guinean governments. President Charles Taylor accused Guinea of backing the Mandingo dominated Liberian United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) insurgency.<sup>9</sup> The Liberian government furthermore blamed members of the Krahn and Mandingo communities for the attacks. The population of Ganta started to fear an attack from Guinea – fears which unfortunately became reality when LURD invaded Ganta in March 2003 and one of the fiercest battles during the second phase of the war took place.

As the LURD rebels approached Ganta and during their occupation of the city, Taylor's generals called on the public to remain committed to the cause of the defence of their county from the hands of *strangers*. Some among the local communities organized themselves in civil militias – the so-called Single Barrel Groups – to fight and defend their land. Hundreds of volunteer fighters including the single-barrel group named and styled as the "*Issakaba*" took part in the fighting for defending and recapturing Ganta.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> In 1999 and 2000, Liberian rebels operating from neighbouring Guinea carried out attacks in Lofa County, northern Liberia.

<sup>10</sup> The "*Issakaba*" name was taking from a series of Nigerian popular movies in which a vigilante group the "*Issakaba boys*" enforces law and order and protect communities from criminal elements.

<sup>8</sup> The News 01/30/1990. Monrovia

This is not to say that forced conscription of young males did not take place, for it did. Local newspapers reported raids, including an attempt to press school children into joining the government forces in Ganta during March 2003, which sparked off protest riots among community dwellers. The Liberian Justice and Peace commission reported “it all started when a gang of militiamen in two pick-ups abducted in broad daylight and in clear view of several residents 15 students from four of the seven high schools in the town (JPC, 2003). Locals tried to resist the assault and ravage by the government forces and all activities were paralyzed for three days.

The Single Barrel Groups were first used in the civil war by NPFL (especially during the 1989 campaign), but probably have close links to previous community-based defence structures. When the NPFL captured towns and villages, it organized people in militia-like structures and the commanders leading the single barrel groups eventually became town chiefs (or rather *town commanders*), twisting thereby the local balance of power and authority away from elders. This implied an important shift in authority, not only in terms of the dichotomy between civilians and combatants but also from elders to youth. During the civil war, every time there was intensification in the fighting and a perceived threat, rural dwellers could resort to these structures for the defence of the community. This type of organization was especially common at front-line communities close to neighbouring counties. Mobilization happened every time there was a sense of “insecurity”, as one of the villagers formulated it. Today the legacy of community self-defence is pretty much intact. In my fieldwork I have found that communities and villages are still willing to organize and mobilize male youth to defend their property and their land at any time. Amos

Sawyer has observed similar patterns where local men were mobilized for the defence of communities, and elders negotiated to have local militia units recognized as part of the occupying armed faction (Sawyer, 2005).

For three months Charles Taylor’s government forces and LURD rebel forces fought over the control of the city, which was a considered a Taylor stronghold. The city suffered considerable damage. The LURD rebels looted properties and burned several buildings, including stores, shops and leading entertainment centres in the commercial part of Ganta. According to accounts from community dwellers in border villages around Ganta, clouds of smoke hanged in the sky for days after the first attack. Ethnic and religious tensions went high and almost the entire civilian population fled to the interior of the county.

In June 2003, when Ganta was recaptured by government forces, it was therefore completely in the hands of armed young soldiers. Ganta was in one sense a void ‘no man’s land’ and in another sense it was ‘every soldier’s land’ – a territory under fluid dominance undergoing significant changes. The battle led to the concentration of a significant number of combatants/armed civilians/militia members in the city. As a ‘hellhole’, and a definite compose site of war, Ganta qualified as a cantonment site when the UN-sponsored Disarmament process began after the peace accords in 2003. Many militia fighters armed with single barrel guns and fighters from other areas (especially from Upper Nimba county) went straight to the cantonment site or were transported by the International Organization for Migration. 10,912 fighters were disarmed, the majority of them fought for the NPFL (UNDP, 2005).

In effect, during the disarmament period, a majority of ex-combatants settled in Ganta. Perceptions of enhanced security and better

livelihood possibilities and the existing social infrastructure were important in this decision. Another major contributing factor to ex-combatants' 'immobility' and permanence in Ganta had to do with the fact that the 300 USD Transitional Safety Net Allowance (TSA) was paid in two instalments.<sup>11</sup> In the Ganta case, the waiting time between the first and the second payment was several months. Many of the youngsters that patiently awaited the second instalment are still squatters in different communities in Ganta. The occupation of some of the properties is an indirect and unintended consequence of the disarmament program in two ways. First, the instalments permitted many of the young ex-fighters to purchase materials to build houses on land for which they had no deeds. Secondly, it allowed ex-combatants to start small informal commercial businesses. The proximity of their houses to the market area and the main street of Ganta is of crucial importance to the success of the informal businesses, according to the majority of informants.

## **RETURNING HOME AND TRANSITION TO 'PEACE'**

When the civil war ended in late 2003 and the UN peace-keeping mission was deployed, Ganta city remained under the control of former government forces – or rather a mixture of members of the paramilitary Anti-Terrorist Unit (ATU) and government militias – led by several ex-NPFL commanders and Taylor loyalists. Slowly, the civilians started to return to Nimba County, but many were unable to reoccupy their homes and

land, which had been taken over by squatters. The civil war had generated important population movements in and out of the area and severely altered both its ethnic and socio-economic structures. One particular group of squatters is constituted by young fighters from pro-Taylor militias who fought and won the battle over Ganta. When the war ended, these young fighters used their physical presence and position as victorious, and capacity to rapidly organize in self-defence groups if necessary, to appropriate land:

When we cleared Ganta we were just here. At that time there was not a single structure standing. We were here protecting and dying for the area, since the [LURD] rebels said they will come back. If you are in Guinea and can't fix the area [the exiled Mandingos], I have by all means the right and power to fix the area so my self can settle. That is the reason we the soldiers are building. (Interview, NPFL ex-combatant, 28 years, 2007)

We defended the land. I served proudly with the single barrel groups. We fought bitterly for months here. We the single barrel groups will do it again, if they want to force us from here again. (Interview, NPFL ex-combatant, 29 years, 2008)

I cleared Ganta, I decided to build it again with my soldiers! (Interview NPFL ex-general, 28 years, 2006)

Thus the picture that emerges is that of a complex process of land grabbing and appropriation by ex-fighters who feel a right to settle in Ganta because they, in their own words, "defended the land". Much has changed and in the post-war phase it is thus not self-evident that people can 'return' to the place

<sup>11</sup> The TSA was designed to provide ex-combatants with financial means during the period prior to reintegration and to decrease their dependence on former commanders.



where they lived before the war. This is why the issue of land tenancy may spur conflicts in the post-conflict setting. Such disputes often invoke both ethnic and political overtones related to alliances developed during the civil wars. Ganta is a case in point.

After the battle over Ganta in March 2003, local elders and commanders of government forces and pro-Taylor militias appointed a mayor and re-established the City Council, according the political structure of civilian authority in Ganta. Sustained in claims to have been at the forefront in the defence of town, the capacity to mobilize a young constituency ready to take arms and support from local Mano and Gio communities, several ex-NPFL commanders and Taylor supporters secured positions as *de facto* power holders in central Nimba. Thus Ganta was firmly in the hands of one party in the conflict. In the immediate aftermath of the war, these *de facto* power holders emerged as patrons and protectors of those – mostly Manos and Gios – who ventured to return.

In the following months the local civil authorities came to play a key role in the reconstruction efforts of the badly damaged infrastructure. The Mayor and the City Council envisioned as their main task to encourage a rapid return and resettlement to develop the town for “the benefit of the people” (Interview, City Council member, 2008). To foster this returning, civilians and ex-combatants were granted ‘squatter rights’ (a kind of leasing permit) by the Mayor to important parts of Ganta. Formally, the Mayor and City Council granted these rights to 33 individuals, however the actual number of squatters supersedes 350 (Government of Liberia Commission, 2007). Most of the land and properties ‘leased’ in this modality are located in downtown Ganta, which before the war used to be populated by Mandingo merchants.

One informant recalls the Mandingos’ position before the war:

The Mandingo had a lot of businesses before the war. The economy! They did diamond, gold, petroleum, and other business even petty trade. Transportation business. Everything! There was a lot of resentment. For their economic success! (Interview, Ganta, 2006)

Thus the contrast is stark to the actual situation in Ganta. In the words of a community Mandingo leader who returned from exile in 2005:

Presently in the market we have only two Mandingo women that are engaged in sale. In 1990, before the war, it was 95% of traders were Mandingo....majority of the people are still in exile. (Interview, Ganta, 2006)

The majority of Mandingos are still in exile, he says, implying that few have actually returned to claim back property. The few returning Mandingos report to have encountered hostility – because the Mano and Gio generally hold all Mandingos responsible for the atrocities committed by LURD during the siege of Ganta. The situation is that upon return many Mandingos find their land and properties occupied by squatters, often previous members of the pro-Taylor militias, endorsed by the local political authorities. The land conflicts therefore are invested with an important ethnic dimension and the situation is volatile; the disputed land is vociferously claimed by the Mandingos: “we will take our properties back by force if necessary” (Interview, Mandingo elder, 2006). To avoid escalation, mediate and possibly seek peaceful solutions a Land Dispute Commission was established.

In 2006 Liberia's President Johnson-Sirleaf inaugurated the Ad-Hoc Presidential Commission on the County Inter Ethnic Land Dispute. The Commission's main task was to investigate the various land disputes deriving in continued ethnic tension between Mano, Gios and Mandingos in Nimba. Land disputes are ranked high as one of the issues threatening national peace and security in the country (Government of Liberia, 2007). The Commission carried out consultations and public hearings in the major cities of Nimba County. The intention was to give all parties an opportunity to express their grievances and concerns. The Commission appointed a technical committee to conduct in-depth investigation into land claims. The aim was to come up with recommendations on how to solve the dispute. For its economic importance, Ganta city was at the center of the dispute. A former Charles Taylor general, today a member of the legislature, formulated it this way at a public meeting: "My people, if we solve Ganta, we solve everything..." (Public hearing, Ganta, 2007). The Commission notes in its preliminary report to the President that: "Ganta is considered as the center of the land/property dispute in Nimba county" (Government of Liberia, 2007: 1). The urge is such that the Chairman of the Land Dispute Commission strongly warned those building on disputed land in Ganta to "stop or else their structures (will) be demolished".<sup>12</sup>

In their claims and complaints to the Presidential Commission the involved parties frame the land disputes remarkably different. The Manos and Gios are reluctant to classify the land dispute as a tribal or ethnic issue in public meetings and hearings. They sustain that disputes should be addressed

on an individual basis, since as one of the leaders argues: "I am an individual, and my case is different from my brothers and some of their places are not occupied, they could come and build it. But they are approaching the issue in group, even if your land is clear..." (Public hearing, Ganta, 2007)

Whereas the strategy followed by Mandingos, maybe due to the position as a minority group, is not to address the disputes individually, but on a group basis. One Mandingo informant frames the claims this way:

The Government doesn't have the will power to muscle any concrete action. The issue of land is a critical matter. We need a solution. The city authority of Ganta has authorized the survey and illegal sale of lands belonging to Mandingo people. This is an ingredient for a tribal conflict. This is unacceptable by our community. (Interview, Ganta, 2006)

Thus, some Mandingos see the actual land disputes as a trigger for 'a tribal conflict' because they as a group feel overruled and excluded. In response to this position a Mano town chief blamed the Mandingos for politicizing (meaning ethnicizing) the land dispute in the county. He said "there is no tribal land dispute...the misunderstanding is inter-personal and not Gios and Manos against Mandingos." To avoid escalation, the Liberian government has to walk a thin line between these opposing interests. The Land Commission in its final report elaborated a set of recommendations, among them the elaboration of a peace and reconciliation program, the expansion of the city and assistance to claimants and occupants who require relocation in order to avoid "conflict".

<sup>12</sup> Daily Observer, 06/02/07; Monrovia.

## **POLITICAL POWER IN THE AFTERMATH OF WAR**

When Charles Taylor's militias retook the besieged town Ganta, as already explained, the Mayor was appointed by a group of local leaders, including the militias. This move cemented the Gios' and Manos' physical and political dominance in Nimba. In an attempt to break this rising political power, the association Mandingos of Nimba sent a letter to the chairman of the National Transitional Government in the first year after the cease of hostilities. They requested to be included in the administration of Nimba County in order to "afford our people the security confidence and opportunity to contribute their quota to the reconstruction of their beloved country" (Letter, Mandingos of Nimba, 2004). However, the request made by the Mandingos was ignored by the National Transitional Government in Nimba. Ganta was no exception. The Mayor of Ganta, put in place by Taylor loyalists, got approval by the Ministry of Internal Affairs to act until elections would be held. Due to financial constraints and civil unrest municipal elections had not been held in Liberia since 1985 and until today. In 2008, since no elections were foreseen in the near future, Liberia's Supreme Court ruled that the President should appoint local mayors in consultation with local politicians. The Liberian constitution does not define the powers of Counties nor provide a constitutionally guaranteed functional relationship between central and local government. It does call for elections of municipal mayors and chiefs, but debate continues over how and when such elections should be held. The balance of power favours the central government. Counties and Districts manage no local budgets; only the central govern-

ment has the authority to collect and manage revenue and control all budgets.

In several areas – caused by the lack of clarity in the constitution, rules and regulations – there are overlapping roles and functions within local government and between local government and the national government. One of these is the authority to lease out public land and grant 'squatter rights' to citizens. It is generally agreed that the local city administration can grant squatter rights to people who qualify; though squatter rights can only be given for land that is publicly owned. Since 2003 in Ganta, the City Council and Mayor have administrated the allocation of land in a rather unorthodox way. In the words of a commissioner "Never in the history of this country has any city mayor had the audacity to grant squatter rights to people to occupy land belonging to private individuals" (Interviews, 2007). Not only did the Mayor, in conjunction with the City Council, grant squatter rights to people settled on privately owned land, but furthermore they earned from it. The proceeds were never reported to the central government or to the private owners of the land. Granting squatter rights thereby became a major source of income to the local administrators. On top of this, the Mayor was herself squatting and constructing a private shop on land belonging to a prominent local Mandingo. One explanation to why the Mayor and the Council were able to get away with these actions lies in the power invested in them stemming from the claim to have been at the forefront in the defence of Ganta – combined with the capacity to mobilize a young potentially violent constituency. It was not until 2008 – and after direct orders from the Minister of Internal Affairs – that the Mayor had to retract and revoke all squatter rights granted

at least on paper. The young ex-combatants are still squatting in central Ganta in spite of their squatter rights being revoked.

One caveat is in place here. Local power holders are not only invested with legitimacy because of their powerful constituency in Ganta, but also acquire legitimacy through their interaction with institutions of the central state such as the Minister of Interior and the *de facto* armed authority of the United Nations. Therefore the existing local political authorities are not some kind of 'parallel' structure to the central state, but rather constitute the most localized form of the state – both formally and in the perception of the inhabitants in Ganta.

The overlaps or close relations between actual political figures and former generals and faction leaders described here also exist at the national level. In the 2005 legislature, several popular politicians and legislators are ex-leaders of armed factions, some with significant constituencies in Ganta (Reno, 2008; Sawyer, 2008). The town, as stated before, is predominantly Taylor-loyal and was a major site of NPFL recruitment. During the election campaign in 2005 the 'ex-commanders now politicians' reminded voters of their role in armed groups and track record of defending Nimba County against armed intrusion by LURD (Sawyer, 2008: 19). Similar processes take place in national and local politics – and there are direct links between the two. How does this affect politics and land conflict resolution at the local level? Constant communication seems to flow between squatters in Nimba, some senators, members of the Land Dispute Committee and local representatives of ex-combatants – telling the squatters when to attend meetings aimed at resolving the disputes and whether or not to cooperate with the claimants of the disputed

properties. Several Mandingo informants recall how a prominent senator of Nimba summoned a meeting at his residence in Monrovia, and in the course of the meeting let the group of Nimba Mandingos know that without establishing a patronage connection to him, the Nimba land and properties disputes would never be resolved. The senator asked the Mandingos to "give him their today so that he could give the Mandingos their tomorrow" (Interviews, Monrovia and Ganta, 2007-2008). He asked the Mandingos to find a plot of land in the heart of Ganta, more precisely the plot currently being used as the market, so that he, along with government of Liberia, could develop it into a memorial park for the victims of the civil war (Interviews, Monrovia and Ganta, 2007).

In sum, wartime leaders now national politicians enjoy local legitimacy in Ganta, which situates them in a powerful position to settle current claims and disputes over land. Threats of violence lurk under the surface of meetings and negotiations. Thus, – perceived as those who lost the war in Nimba – the Mandingo returnees' "today" and "tomorrow" with regards to access to land is deeply dependent on the discretionary powers of the politicians in power. The government acknowledges the volatile character of land disputes and recognizes that the Liberian population is seriously concerned about solving the land issues. However, the government of Liberia seems to be failing in efforts to resolve disputes over land in Nimba County and other parts of the country. The position "if we fight again, we will fight about land" quoted in a government report communicates very clearly that land is a crucial issue for peace in Liberia (GOL/GRC, 2007).

## CONCLUSION

While the overall security situation in Liberia has stabilized, local property and land disputes in particularly Nimba County continue to a cause of concern for the Liberian government and the United Nations Mission in Liberia. This working paper has focused on the present struggle over access to land between ex-combatants and returnees, traced it back in history and accounted for pre-conflict land issues and the processes of change that occur during the civil war.

The disputes and social struggle over land in post-conflict Liberia are not only about land *per se*, but about authority and legitimacy more broadly. Returnees base their claims to land and property on pre-war ownership and a right to return to the way things used to be; whereas the ex-combatant squatters ground their claims in three interrelated aspects: physical presence on the land, threats of violence, and a moral claim to the land as 'reward' for heroism and for defending it during the war. Actual local political power positions favour certain groups and interests, even if the national project is reconciliation between groups.

As things stand now, the return of refugees and internally displaced and the reintegration of ex-combatants appear mutually exclusive processes. Young ex-combatants have tried to improve their socio-economic and political standing by exploiting the opportunities offered by internal conflict. The result is a profound reshaping of relations between local populations.

Overlapping rights and claims to land hinder confidence among ex-combatants and returnees, delaying any process of reconciliation in the long run. The present case pushes us to take more seriously issues of inclusion and exclusion, authority and legitimacy in

the aftermath of civil war. The international community has to date sought to stabilize the Liberian state in Monrovia, without addressing issues of citizenship, land access and political power at the local level. The Liberian state's sovereign power on land matters is yet to be performed. Until then, a latent danger for a resurgence of armed conflict strongly lurks in Liberia.



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