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# Liberia's Military Tries to Remedy Tension Over Ebola Quarantine

By CLAIR MacDOUGALL MAY 12, 2015

MONROVIA, Liberia — The chief of staff for the Armed Forces of Liberia, Brig. Gen. Daniel D. Ziankahn Jr., hung up his navy blue suit, put on a bright yellow jersey and shorts, then bounded toward a sandy field.

Nine months earlier, his soldiers fired live rounds into the seaside slum of West Point and beat residents after rioting broke out on the first day of a government quarantine of the neighborhood during the Ebola epidemic.

But now, rather than manning a barricade, his troops were playing a soccer match intended to help repair the rift between the security forces and the residents of West Point.

On Saturday, the day Liberia's Ebola epidemic was officially declared over, the players scuffled and tumbled back and forth on a makeshift soccer pitch flanked by hundreds of community members, most of them cheering for the side in black, their own West Point All Star team.

It was a stark contrast to last summer, when a holding center for Ebola patients was set up in the same part of Monrovia, the capital, without the community's consent. Residents feared that the government was importing the disease into their neighborhood, and some ransacked the center a few days after it was established.

The unrest, and the late-night secret burials of Ebola victims by their

families, led President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf to announce a quarantine of West Point that would begin on Aug. 20, effectively trapping tens of thousands of residents inside.

West Pointers woke up behind barricades guarded by soldiers and police officers. When the neighborhood commissioner, Miatta H. Flowers, tried to move her family on the first day, security forces helped. Rioting erupted, residents expressing fury about being cut off from the rest of the city.

A few people were shot, including a 15-year-old boy, Shakie Kamara, who later bled to death while Monrovia's major hospitals reeled from the epidemic. Shakie's body was buried without an autopsy.

Ms. Johnson Sirleaf acknowledged in an interview in March that her decision to quarantine West Point had been a mistake. "It did not take long to know that did not work," she said. "It created more tension in the society."

But on Monday, during a ceremony to celebrate the end of Liberia's Ebola outbreak, Ms. Johnson Sirleaf also defended the security forces, emphasizing the role they played in helping American soldiers build treatment centers during a chaotic period for the country.

"They don't always do good things, and sometimes some of them do bad things," she said. She added that she wanted to commend the security forces because they "protected us in those difficult days when the sirens were screaming and the telephones were ringing and people were dying."

As Ebola has disappeared from Liberia, attention has turned again to West Point, which has been lauded for organizing itself and establishing infection control measures that drove the virus out of the community almost five months before the epidemic ended throughout the country. The quarantine was halted after 10 days. On Armed Forces Day in February, Samuel Kofi Woods, a former minister of public works who is also a human rights lawyer, urged the military, known as the A.F.L., to return to West Point to mend relations.

"The A.F.L. must return to West Point, this time armed with shovels, diggers, pens, paper," he told hundreds of soldiers at a ceremony, "and engage in community waste management and sanitation, cleanup exercises, adult literacy, sporting activities and other initiatives aimed at restoring the broken relationship."

Mr. Woods and two American officers who helped in the Ebola efforts — Lt. Col. Allen Hahn and Lt. Col. Kevin Koerner, who worked with the United Nations mission in Liberia — set out to start the reconciliation process.

“It seemed like the right thing to do,” Colonel Hahn said, adding that the need to remedy ill will about the quarantine put the Liberian government in a “politically sensitive” position.

The two Americans helped arrange a series of community meetings in West Point focused on transforming the dark, damp school that had been used as the holding center for Ebola patients, as well as on the project to reconcile the community with the security forces.

The official reopening of the school, the Nathaniel Varney Massaquoi elementary and junior high school, was held on Friday. Built in the 1970s, it was a food market that was converted to a school under the military dictator Samuel Doe.

With weak walls and a rusty roof, the building did little to nurture learning or shelter students from the heavy rains that beat down on the country half of the year. And with few toilets and unsanitary water, it did little to protect them from disease.

Over the last two months, the school has been renovated by volunteers and the army’s engineering battalion, with the help of close to \$400,000 from the United Nations and other donors.

The haunting blue walls, which surrounded patients dying on thin mattresses on the floor, have been washed white. The low roof was raised, and light now filters in. Fans spin on the walls, electricity is steady, and water will soon run through pipes for the first time in decades.

A colorful mural of fish, canoes, a butterfly and Liberian peppers designed by an artist from Baltimore was painted across the facade. Despite the official reopening, the school was not prepared to welcome students back last week, even though three months had passed since other schools that had closed during the outbreak started up again. Final adjustments were being made for an expected opening on Monday.

While many West Pointers lauded these efforts, some chided the

government for what they called its lack of involvement.

“We felt neglected by the government; the government cannot tell me it spent a dime, and it’s a government school,” said Alaowei Z. Warri, head of the school’s Parent Teacher Association.

One day recently, the military’s jaunty band marched down the main road of the neighborhood, and soldiers in plain clothes helped pick up trash. But whoever shot Shakie has not been identified, and the decision-making behind the West Point quarantine and the soldiers’ behavior have not been fully explained, despite inquiries by the military and the national human rights commission. Still, many residents say the recent cooperation points to the possibility of laying the tensions to rest.

Many also say more must be done to improve living standards in West Point, like providing clean water, toilets and showers, many of which have been ripped away by coastal erosion.

“What you see here was done by the international community. It is foreign partners that came in and did it,” said Kenneth Martu, a community leader who negotiated with the government to lift the quarantine. “These things are just symbolic, but I think we need to do more.”

At a memorial service before the soccer match, Shakie’s brother, Daniel Bah, read from a piece of paper with the heading “Family Statement.” The family thanked a variety of people, including President Obama, the United Nations, the Liberian military and Mr. Woods, asking them to “ensure a better living” for Shakie’s grandmother and father.

The teenager’s relatives, along with the family of a man who was wounded during the riots, have talked with the government about compensation.

For now, even critics of the government have praised the military’s conciliatory steps. “The citizens of Liberia are embracing the armed forces of Liberia,” said Mr. Warri, the parent-teacher leader. “That bitter past is erasing little by little.”

In the feel-good match, the West Point All Star team claimed a victory, 1-0. Kona Kalon, a resident who sells dry goods, jumped up and down. “West Point beat the soldier people,” she said. “We are very happy.”

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