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WHAT IS ALL THE FUSS ABOUT???

Borders

On November 18, while glancing through my Facebook stories, I came across a friend's comment on Liberia (See above). His remark covered a cross-section of topics: the Congo and Country dichotomy, citizenship, immigrant population (illegal and legal), Liberia's melting pot appeal, and the prevailing economic and social issues. However, what sparked my interest was the question – "What is all the fuss about; why fuss when there is no border control?" Also interesting was the remark that "anyone can take up residence in Liberia and have a government job." The view that the Government can cope with Liberia's internal problems without tackling the security concerns of Liberia's borders is arguable. I thought the article was thought-provoking and here is my take.

The world is changing. Securing our borders at the same time reassessing and revamping our immigration and citizenship process is imperative. Moreover, the notion of a "melting pot" reflecting a course of action going back to the establishment of the Liberian nation is no longer relevant. Today's Liberia must continue to be welcoming, yet more selective and prudent.

The impact of terrorism forces European nations, the United States and the rest of the world to re-evaluate borders and immigration policies. The influx of refugees seeking refuge in Europe has triggered political divisions within the European Union resulting in the building of concrete borders along the Hungary-Serbia, Bulgaria-Turkey, and Greece-Turkey borders. The United States' political debates and upcoming 2016 presidential elections are overrun by issues of immigration, border security and terrorism. The Paris attacks, efforts to stamp the flow of refugees, finding political solutions, re-evaluating immigrations policies and fighting extremism are now hot topic for us all.

The porosity of Liberia's borders is a challenge and adds to the government's powerlessness to manage cross-border issues of transnational organized crime, money laundering, illegal trafficking of drugs, small arms, Ebola, and the new wave of terrorism from the north. In a rapidly changing world, these are issues that Liberia must also confront.

Liberia has changed. The change began with the 1980 coup d'état that killed and uprooted so many of us and brought about a destabilization that Liberia and Liberians are still recovering from. Liberia's transformation intensified beginning in 1989 when rebel factions without any difficulty entered Liberia's national territory, lay siege to the nation-state, and cost human, social and material damage. Our civil war spilled over to Sierra Leone in 1991. Combatants from Sierra Leone and Liberia attack the border

communities of Guinea from 1999-2000 causing Guinea to enter into the fracas. Cote d'Ivoire's internal political and social tensions attracted armed groups from Liberia and Sierra Leone in late 2002 adding to the prolongation of Cote d'Ivoire's instability. (*West Africa's Refugee Crisis Spills Across Many Borders, August 1, 2003, Feature, By Jeff Drumtra*)

Liberia's civil war showed that any group or anyone can easily infiltrate a country's unmanaged borders, wage war, terrorize its civilian population, and keep a vicious war going for 14 years. An effect of the war was transnational crossings by Liberians, Sierra Leoneans, Guineans and Ivoirians seeking safety, running from one country to another. It is estimated that the destabilization uprooted 1.1 million people within the West African region and cost up to a quarter-million lives.

In 2006, Liberia began its rebirth. A new government was elected committing itself to paving the way for Liberia's emergence from its violent past and rebuilding the country. Fast-track to 2015, the "the energies redirected" to dealing with the challenges born out of the violence of our past have been halted in its tracks. According to *American Security Project, January 03, 2015, "10 Key National Security challenges in 2015 that the United States could face"* (Liberia as well), the 6th challenge is "*the aftermath of Ebola and the Destabilization of West Africa.*" In December 2013, the first case of Ebola was found in Guinea. By the end of 2014, it had killed more than 8,000 people and it cost to the West African region could reach \$33 billion if not stopped. According to the report, the \$33 billion is "2.5 times the entire size of the three affected economies". The Destabilization of West Africa refers to Boko Haram that has killed over 20,000 and displaced 2.3 million people since 2009. (*Wikipedia, 2015; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boko_Haram*). According to the World Health Organization, worldwide there have been *28,637 cases of Ebola virus disease and 11,314 deaths as of 22 November.*"

In addition, we think we are immune to terror threats, but we are all threatened by Boko Haram, DAESH, ISIS, ISIL and Taliban (whatever the name). Likewise, we are not immune from attacks neither the political or socio-economic insecurities of our neighbors. Liberians at home and abroad must know that without a secure border, the internal mechanism for sustaining the state (a strong immigration policy, robust interior management policy, an effective leadership, a people galvanize around protecting Liberia's national integrity) is easily influenced by borders concerns.

As illegal migrants arrive through our porous borders, our already underdeveloped economy, social structures, and health services are stretched beyond endurance. Our laid-back policy threatens our national security and the potential for the world's new breed of violent and brutal terrorists entering the country undetected is real.

So why is it important to make the securitization and monitoring of Liberia's porous border a national priority?

The open arms policy is no longer relevant to the new world order. Knowledgeable Liberians should know that our archaic immigration policies can be easily exploited by those who want to harm Liberia.

Our porous borders and lax border and immigration enforcement can no longer be sustained. An example of its non-sustainability was the arrival of Ebola, which combined with the nonchalance of national authorities contributed to the spread of Ebola in Liberia, killing 4,808 Liberians. Travelers from a plagued town near our border brought it into Liberia and the rest is history. Liberia was declared Ebola-free in September 2015, however on 19 November, a 15 year old boy, his father and brother tested positive for Ebola. On 23 November 2015, the boy died. The country continues to be threatened by Ebola outbreaks.

Boko Haram out of Nigeria, since its insurgency in 2009, has killed 20,000, uprooted and displaced more than 2.3 million. Boko Haram is a serious threat and has created a destabilizing effect in 3 adjacent

countries. As a result, Boko Haram has the possibility of spreading, engulfing itself and at the same time creating further and wider instability in the region. Furthermore, according to the American Security Project report (see above), Boko Haram's threat will not only bring instability but will also bring with it corruption and criminal gangs that Liberia and other countries may not be able to counter for years.

The **socio-economic environment** continues to decline. Our country and institutions are overwhelmed by corruption, weak governance, high unemployment and widespread illiteracy that hinder development. In addition, the 2014 introduction of Ebola into Liberia by way of the border eroded much of the gains of the last few years. The Ebola impact on an already weak economic and service delivery system has been crippling and revealed the chronic weakness of our health system and government. Household incomes have been severely affected by the economic downturns.

The **fear and stigma of Ebola** have led to the flight of investors and Liberians most especially from the Diaspora who wanted very much to contribute to the development of the country. Concessions companies in mining and agriculture have suspended investments. Those returning are few.

Islam is growing at a faster rate in Liberia than Christianity. Liberia's civil war, transnational crossings, porosity and negligent borders have resulted in the movements of native Liberians into foreign lands and the influx of non-native Liberians into Liberia. According to Patrick Johnstone and Jason Mandrigk's research statistics on Liberia in its 21st Century edition of Operation World, 38.33% of Liberians are Christian, with an annual growth rate of +8.6%; Muslims are 13% with an annual growth rate +11.3%; while the traditional ethnic groups are 48.37 percent with an annual growth rate of 7.8%.

What do we do?

1. Revamp our national security plan to include more vigilante border control.
- 2- Review our immigration policy.
- 3- Set up a mandatory citizenship policy in Liberia and world-wide through our embassies and consulates for the registration of Liberians inclusive of dual citizenship holders.
- 4- With our international partners (UN, they leave soon, EU, USAID, and western governments) get the funding necessary to set up an identity management system where biographic data is collected from all citizens into a national database.
- 5- The Republic of Liberia was created as a Christian nation with Christian values. Although, the Republic has been operating on its secular status, Christians make up 85 percent of Liberia's 4 million population. The amendment to Liberia's constitution to reinstate Christianity as the nation's religion was passed by 99.4 percent. (***Muslims Protest Liberia Proposal To Institute Christianity As State Religion, Call For Secularism By Lora Mofteh, April 03 2015***). This is an issue that must be handled quickly and with care.
- 6- As President John F. Kennedy said in his famous 1961 inauguration speech "my fellow Americans, ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country." So, we must also ask the same of each one of us what can you/me, do for Liberia? As we look, to each one of us, we should also look at our global Diaspora force. The global community and Liberia have a lot to gain if the two work together. The Diaspora community has a global financial force that has little invested or channeled to Liberia or the government. We can work together to create something tangible as seen by the Diaspora communities of Rwanda, Ethiopia, Ghana and so many others.

Follow me next month for more engaging thoughts on Liberia's Diaspora and what we can do.