

“Mano River Region at Risk?: Post-Conflict Conversations Within and Across Borders”

Monrovia, Liberia: January 13 & 14, 2009

A “States at Regional Risk” Conference

Conference Description

The States at Regional Risk (SARR) project is an initiative of the Institute of Critical International Studies at Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia, USA. Through international conferences and workshops, SARR provides opportunities for focused and creative discussion among policy-makers, international scholarly experts, and members of civil society to enhance practical understanding and responses to situations of civil instability and governmental risk. The project focuses on four key world areas, including the countries of the Mano River region, which have had a history of state instability.

In the present case, SARR targets the fact that Liberia has changed during the past decade from being a flash point and exporter of civil war and instability to being a regional anchor, albeit tenuous, for the maintenance and even export of peace, stability, democracy, and development. Last year, Liberia improved on the *Foreign Policy* “States at Risk” index more than any other developing country in the world. The democratic and largely peaceful election of an opposition party candidate in Sierra Leone appears to continue this trend, while the situation in Guinea remains fragile.

The present conference, taking place in Monrovia, January 2009, highlights focused and creative discussion amongst well-placed government officials, international scholarly experts, and members of civil society. The focus is on Liberia in regional perspective. A key issue is the degree to which national, regional, and sub-national responses can or should be foregrounded in managing or responding to situations of potential or actual violent conflict. Conflicts in the Mano River region have long crossed state borders while also having dominant national and key sub-national parameters, causes, and constituencies. In the emerging national and regional picture of the Mano River area, what special role should or should not Liberia play? What special risks and opportunities have ethnic diasporas, commercial networks, and refugee flows posed at the level of the village, county, nation, and region? Do these dynamics play out differently in rural and urban contexts?

The SARR Monrovia conference will foreground discussion of these themes by focusing on key issues of pragmatic relevance and significance. The conversation will be framed around several provocative target questions concerning Liberia and other countries of the Mano River region. Participants will receive these questions prior to the conference and will be asked to submit a brief written response (1-2) pages in advance of the conference. During the conference, participants will speak individually for very few minutes to share their written responses. These brief presentations will introduce key issues from different perspectives and allow for maximal collective interchange and discussion to follow.

The conference is co-organized by Bruce Knauff, Executive Director of the Institute of Critical International Studies, Emory University and Mike McGovern, Assistant Professor of Anthropology, Yale University. The conference implementing partner is Liberia Democracy Watch (LDW), based in Monrovia, George Wah Williams, CEO. Dr. Joanna Davidson, ICIS/SARR Post-doctoral Fellow is coordinating the conference target questions and written reports. The SARR project is supported by the Carnegie Corporation of New York.