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## TRAGEDY STRIKES TOTOTA: When Poverty, Policy Failure and Petroleum Collide - And The Red Cross Steps Into The Void

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# BONG COUNTY'S BLOODY GOLD:

## *How a 22-Year Customary Land Dispute in Maerhju Became a Test Case for Liberia's Land Rights Act*

***By Victoria G Wesseh***

The fight over one artisanal pit in District #2 has left people dead, a family head in hiding, and three government ministries facing questions over who owns the land, who owns the gold, and who failed to stop the violence.

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EDITORIAL:

# THE LESSONS OF MAERHJU - The State Must Never Again Abandon Customary Land to Violence

Our Stand

This newspaper has investigated the 22-year bloodletting in Maerhju, District #2, Bong County. What we found is not a tribal war. It is a governance failure.

Two communities — one Kpelle family claiming ancestral inheritance, one Mandingo community claiming long-term occupation and investment — have fought over a gold-rich patch of earth because the Government of Liberia refused to do the one thing the law requires it to do: formalize who owns it.

People have allegedly died. People have been injured. A citizen, Mr. Amara Kamara, head of the Kamara family, has been forced to flee his own ancestral town after alleged death threats.

For this, we hold three institutions directly accountable: The Liberia Land Authority for failing to formalize Maerhju under the Land Rights Act of 2018; the Ministry of Mines and Energy for licensing artisanal mining on disputed customary land without Free, Prior, Informed Consent; and the Liberia National Police and Ministry of Justice for failing to investigate killings, injuries and threats to life.

The blood in Maerhju is on the hands of those who fought, but the blame for its recurrence lies squarely with the State that watched.

This must never happen again. Here are the lessons Maerhju must teach Liberia.

**LESSON 1: An Unformalized Customary Land Is a Time Bomb**

The Land Rights Act of 2018 was celebrated as one of Africa's most progressive land laws. It declares that customary communities OWN their land. But ownership on paper without mapping, boundary harmonization, and a Community Land Development and Management Committee [CLDMC] on the ground is a fiction.

Maerhju was never formalized. No deed search was done at the National Archives. No tribal certificate was confirmed. No CLDMC was elected. For 22 years, two legitimate customary claims were left to compete in a legal vacuum.

The Lesson: The LLA must stop treating formalization as a donor-funded pilot project in a few counties. It is a national security imperative. Every gold-rich, diamond-rich, forest-rich customary community in Bong, Nimba, Lofa, Grand Gedeh and Gbarpolu that remains unmapped today is Maerhju tomorrow.

We call on the LLA to publish within 30 days a full public schedule for the formalization of all mining-affected customary lands in Bong County, starting with Maerhju.

**LESSON 2: We Must End the Dangerous Lie That a Mining License Overrides Land Ownership**

For years, the Ministry of Mines and Energy has operated as if a Class C Artisanal Mining License is a title deed. It is not.

Under Article 2.3 of the Minerals and Mining Law, the State owns minerals. Under Chapter 3 and 8 of the Land Rights Act, the community owns the surface and has the right to decide how it is used and to benefit from it. The two laws must work together through a Cooperative Mining Agreement and FPIC.

In Maerhju, the Ministry licensed miners to dig on land whose ownership it never bothered to clarify. It pitted miners with a paper from Monrovia against a family with ancestral roots in the soil.

The Lesson: No Class C license should ever be issued or renewed in any district until the LLA certifies the status of the customary land. The Ministry of Mines and Energy and the LLA must sign and publish a Joint Memorandum of Understanding making FPIC and community benefit-sharing mandatory, not optional. Mining without the community's consent is trespass, even with a license.

**LESSON 3: Silence of the Police Is an Invitation to Jungle Justice**

Our Constitution is clear. Article 11 guarantees the right to life and security. Article 20 guarantees due process. The Liberia National Police Act of 2015 obliges the police to investigate threats to life. [a]

In Maerhju, between 2021 and 2023, local sources allege several people were killed. This paper could not independently verify the full toll because the Bong County Police Detachment has released no official crime statistics for the town. Now, a citizen has allegedly been threatened and forced into internal displacement, and again, there is no warrant, no charge, no investigation made public.

When the police do not investigate, communities enforce their own justice with cutlasses and shotguns.

The Lesson: The Ministry of Justice must immediately order a criminal investigation into all alleged killings, injuries, and death threats in Maerhju from 2021 to date. The Inspector General of Police must explain to the Liberian people why threats that forced a man from his home did not trigger a proactive investigation. Protection must be guaranteed for Mr. Kamara and all other community members willing to testify.

**LESSON 4: Do Not Ethnicize an Economic Dispute**

Maerhju began as an economic and legal dispute over land and gold. It risks becoming something far more dangerous: Kpelle versus Mandingo.

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Bong County knows this history too well. Central Liberia knows it too well. During and after our civil wars, Mandingo communities were scapegoated and dispossessed in land disputes. Any attempt to re-ethnicize Maerhju for political gain in District #2, a swing electoral district, would be reckless and incendiary.

We warn all politicians, chiefs, and youth leaders in Bong: This newspaper will name and shame any person who turns this land dispute into an ethnic mobilization.

The Lesson: The Ministry of Internal Affairs, through the Bong County Superintendent and the District #2 Commissioner, must convene an immediate, inclusive peace dialogue that separates the legal question of land ownership from the ethnic identities of the claimants. The Liberia Peacebuilding Office and the Independent National Commission on Human Rights must be present.

**OUR CALL TO THE GOVERNMENT - A THREE-POINT EMERGENCY ACTION PLAN**

We do not write this editorial to lament. We write to demand action. This newspaper calls on the Government of Liberia, as a matter of national urgency, to implement the following within the next 14 days:

**1. SECURITY FIRST:** The Minister of Justice and the Inspector General of Police must deploy a Bong County Joint Security Team to Maerhju, investigate all alleged threats, and provide a written guarantee of safe return for displaced persons, including Mr. Kamara.

**2. STOP THE GOLD, FIND THE FACTS:** The Ministers of Internal Affairs, Mines and Energy, and the Chairperson of the Liberia Land Authority must constitute a Joint Fact-Finding Mission to Maerhju, place an immediate moratorium on ALL artisanal mining in the disputed polygon under Section 14.3 of the Mining Law, and seal the site to prevent smuggling and further destruction of evidence.

**3. FINISH THE LAW:** The Liberia Land Authority must fast-track Maerhju as a priority customary community, conduct a participatory mapping and boundary harmonization, supervise the election of a CLDMC, and facilitate a lawful, written benefit-sharing agreement for any future mining. Nothing less.

For 22 years, Maerhju asked the State a simple question: Who owns our land?

For 22 years, the State answered with silence. In that silence, blood was spilled.

The Land Rights Act promised Liberians that they would never again be squatters on their own land. If that promise means anything, it must mean something in Maerhju today.

The graves in Maerhju and the exile of its son are a verdict on our land governance. The Government must now overturn that verdict — not with press releases, but with surveyors, with police investigators, and with the rule of law.

Maerhju must be the last place where Liberians kill each other over land the State refused to formalize.

# WHEN GRIEF TURNED TO FIRE - ZWEDRU BURNS AS POLITICS, DEATH AND VENGEANCE COLLIDE IN GRAND GEDEH

**By Our Staff Writer | Zwedru, Grand Gedeh County**

Zwedru, the quiet capital of Grand Gedeh, erupted.

What began as mourning for a young lawmaker on Tuesday, December 5, 2023, ended in plumes of smoke over private homes and a sacred public institution — an act that has now forced the Liberian Senate, legal scholars, and traditional leaders into a difficult national conversation about justice, power, and mob vengeance.

In the early hours after news broke of the sudden death of District #1 Representative Erol Madison Gwion, aggrieved citizens — believed to be supporters of the late lawmaker — set ablaze properties belonging to Grand Gedeh Senator Zoe Emmanuel Pennue and torched the headquarters of the County Traditional Council.

The Liberian Senate has condemned, in the strongest possible terms, the barbaric attacks on private and public properties in Zwedru by hoodlums.

But behind the fire is a much deeper political wound.

**A Rivalry That Defined Grand Gedeh Politics**

To understand Zwedru's anger, you must understand its ballot history.

The late Representative Erol Madison Gwion was not just any lawmaker. He was the man who ended Zoe Pennue's 15-year grip on District #1. When Pennue was elected Senator in 2020, Gwion replaced him in the Legislative by-election. He was then re-elected during the October 10, 2023 presidential and legislative elections, cementing his status as the new political heir of the county.

That history made him, in the eyes of many, a direct threat.

Some residents of Zwedru, who asked not to be named, quoted the angry mobs saying "Senator Pennue considered the late Gwion as being a main challenger to his 2029 senatorial bid". According to reports, protesters are accusing Senator Pennue of involvement in the death of the lawmaker, who has been his bitter rival up to his demise, although the cause of death is yet to be established.

The mob also accused a woman of bewitching the late Gwion and turned on the Traditional Council, vandalizing the facility accusing the chiefs of not handling traditional matters.

**The Legal Lens: From Grief to Felony**

Legally, what happened in Zwedru crossed a bright red line from protected protest to serious felony.

**Under Chapter 15 of Liberia's Penal Law:**

Arson: The willful burning of a dwelling house is a first-degree felony, punishable by up to 10 years imprisonment. Whether one house was burned down and another vandalized as officially noted by the Senate, or two residences were set ablaze as widely reported locally, the act meets the threshold.

Criminal Mischief and Burglary: The destruction of the Traditional Council office — a public, culturally protected property — constitutes criminal mischief and criminal trespass on public property.

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# WHEN GRIEF TURNED TO FIRE

Presumption of Innocence: Liberia's 1986 Constitution, Article 21, guarantees that no person shall be held liable without due process. The accusation that Senator Pennue "knows much more about the lawmaker's death" remains an unproven allegation by a mob. In the eyes of the law, it is hearsay until investigated by the Liberia National Police and Ministry of Justice.

Senator Pennue's office has since called on the Ministry of Justice to swiftly investigate the burning and vandalization.

Family members of the late Representative have countered, demanding the unconditional release of Grand Gedeans arrested on what they call bogus charges, reportedly on the orders of Senator Pennue. According to reports, six people have been arrested, and several others are on the run.

**The Political Lens: A Senate Under Fire**

**Politically, the Senate could not afford silence.**

Speaking through President Pro-tempore Albert Chie, the Senate also expressed deep shock on hearing of the passing of newly elected Grand Gedeh District One Representative, Erol Madison Gwion while simultaneously condemning the arson.

The statement was strategic. It did two things at once: It mourned a colleague to show institutional solidarity, and it branded the attackers as "hoodlums" to distance the Legislature from mob justice — a dangerous precedent in a county already described as tense and unstable.

If the Senate had failed to condemn the burning, it would have implicitly endorsed the idea that a Senator's property can be sacrificed to appease grief. If it had only condemned the burning without mourning Gwion, it would have appeared to be protecting its own.

**What Next?**

Zwedru today is calm but wounded. The Judiciary has already raised alarm that with a growing wave of protests, the protection of its judges in Grand Gedeh is under threat.

**Three questions now define the path forward:**

For the State: Will the Ministry of Justice conduct an independent autopsy and investigation into Rep. Gwion's death to kill the rumor that is fueling the fire, and will it prosecute arson without political witch-hunting?

For Grand Gedeh: Will the Traditional Council, whose own headquarters was burned, be able to mediate between the Pennue and Gwion factions, or has its moral authority been torched with its building?

**For Liberia: Will we continue to use the "rule of burning" instead of the Rule of Law?**

As one elder in Zwedru told our reporter on condition of anonymity: "We buried a Representative in the morning and buried the law in the afternoon."

The ashes in Zwedru are therefore not just about two houses. They are about what happens when politics becomes personal, when death becomes suspicion, and when justice is sought with matches instead of courts.

# When Washington Speaks, Will Monrovia Listen? Bility Breaks With Ally Chie, Demands Trial for Sanctioned Officials

As U.S. visa bans hit Liberia's legislative and fiscal powerbrokers, Rep-elect Musa Bility challenges President-elect Boakai to move from American designation to Liberian prosecution.

**MONROVIA – The political alliance is over. The legal question is just beginning.**

What was once described as a cordial, even strategic relationship between Grand Kru County Senator and Senate Pro-Tempore Albert T. Chie and Nimba County District #7 Representative-elect Musa Hassan Bility has fractured in public - and the wedge is a visa restriction from Washington.

On December 11, 2023, the United States Department of State designated three of the most powerful figures of the outgoing George Weah administration as ineligible for entry into the United States under Section 7031(c) of the Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act, 2023.

The designated officials: Finance and Development Planning Minister Samuel D. Tweah Jr., Senate Pro-Tempore Albert T. Chie, and Margibi County Senator J. Emmanuel Nuquay. Under the provision, their spouses and minor children are also barred: Delecia Berry Tweah, Abigail Chie, Ruthtoria Brown Nuquay, and the minor children of Tweah and Nuquay.

Two days earlier, the U.S. Department of the Treasury, acting under Executive Order 13818 - which builds on the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act - had separately designated Monrovia City Mayor Jefferson Koijee for alleged serious human rights abuses and corruption, including bribery, misappropriation of state assets, and interference with anti-corruption investigators.

For Bility, a incoming lawmaker, businessman, and former Chairman of the Liberty Party who is now contesting for Speaker of the 55th Legislature, the designations are not a foreign policy footnote. They are a domestic legal test.

**The Bility Doctrine: From Designation to Prosecution**

Appearing on Voice of Liberia 104.1 FM on Tuesday, December 12, Bility called on President-elect Joseph Nyuma Boakai and his incoming Unity Party government to do what the Weah administration did not: investigate.

"The allegations of sanctions are very grave and I hope to see this government reviewing them and taking the appropriate actions," Bility said. "What the U.S. government does is to give you an indication; the government must have the courage to follow it up and take appropriate legal measures to prosecute."

**Bility's argument is both political and jurisprudential.**

Politically, he frames the sanctions as a governance failure. "Every civilized or decent government will immediately act when its officials are accused of committing grave allegations against the state and its people, but the Weah led-administration has failed to take any actions up to present," he said.

Legally, he draws a bright line between an American immigration action and Liberian criminal accountability. A 7031(c) designation is not a criminal conviction in a U.S. court. It is an administrative finding by the Secretary of State, based on "credible information" of significant corruption or gross violations of human rights, that triggers visa ineligibility. It does not, by itself, produce admissible evidence in a Liberian court.

But Bility argues that is precisely why Monrovia must act. The U.S. action, he contends, should trigger Liberia's own Mutual Legal Assistance and anti-corruption framework. **Cont'd Pg 5**

# When Washington Speaks

"You cannot assume that the Americans have not presented facts to the government," he said. "Maybe... they have presented facts and the government has failed to act on it and they have come out in public because of frustration."

He called on the incoming Minister of Justice and Attorney General to formally request the evidentiary package from Washington. "America is a very meticulous country; they don't just get up and make allegations. They based it on information that they have."

**What Washington Actually Alleged**

According to the State Department statement, released to coincide with the opening of the Conference of States Parties to the UN Convention Against Corruption, Tweah, Chie, and Nuquay "abused their public positions by soliciting, accepting, and offering bribes to manipulate legislative processes and public funding, including activities in the mining sector."

**That language matters. Under Liberian law, those allegations, if proven, could constitute violations of:**

The Penal Law of Liberia - Chapter 12 on Bribery and Corruption
The Public Procurement and Concessions Act
The Code of Conduct for Public Officials
The Liberia Anti-Corruption Commission Act, as amended in 2022 to grant direct prosecutorial powers

Yet to date, none of the designated officials has been investigated, charged, or tried domestically. This creates what legal scholars call an "accountability gap" - international designation without domestic adjudication.

Bility insists closing that gap also protects the accused. "The investigation is important to afford those accused the opportunity to clear their names," he said. "It's unfair that people have been sanctioned for years and there's no investigation. It's not correct."

The presumption of innocence, he implied, requires a process - not silence.

**A Speaker's Race and a Legislature on Trial**

Bility's call cannot be separated from his own political ambition.

He is one of three leading contenders for Speaker of the House of Representatives of the 55th Legislature, alongside Fonati Koffa of Grand Kru and Richard Koon of Montserrado. His pitch is institutional reform.

"The Legislature has let this country down; it has betrayed this country," Bility said. "The National Legislature remains the most powerful branch of the Liberian government, but the body has failed to execute its constitutional responsibilities."

Under Article 29 and Article 34 of the 1986 Constitution, the Legislature has oversight over the national budget, concessions, and the conduct of the Executive. Bility argues it has become, in his words, "a dungeon for the executive" and "a hustling ground."

"I am not going there to make money but to turn things around. The real problem with our country is the Legislature," he said. "As head of the Legislature, that building is going to be sanctified."

He also promised to reset relations with the Legislative Press Corps, calling for mutual respect without "compromise or twisting of news stories to please anyone."

And in a striking personal disclosure, Bility said he has put his larger presidential ambition on hold. "I wanted to be Vice President but I realized that if you want to change this country, not everybody will be President," he said. He noted that the election of Nimba Senator Jeremiah Koung as Vice President-elect prompted him to defer his own presidential bid, pledging to support Koung should he run in 2029.

**The Boakai Test: Audit the Inheritance**

Beyond individual prosecutions, Bility is urging a systemic audit of the Weah years - something he says Weah himself failed to do upon inheriting from Ellen Johnson Sirleaf in 2018.

"The mistake that George Weah made by not assessing the performance of the government that he inherited, I pray that Ambassador Boakai will not make that mistake," Bility said.

He wants the Boakai administration to publish a State of the Republic inherited report: what assets, debts, concessions, payroll, and contingent liabilities were left behind, what is wrong with the system, and how it will be fixed.

For an incoming government that campaigned on "Rescue Mission" and anti-corruption, the U.S. designations present the first major test of that slogan.

Will the Ministry of Justice invoke Section 10.2 of the LACC Act to open a preliminary investigation? Will it formally request evidence under the U.S.-Liberia law enforcement channel? Will the Senate, which still includes Chie and Nuquay until January, lift any claim of legislative immunity for investigation?

Or will Liberia do what it has done with nearly a dozen previous 7031(c) and Global Magnitsky designations since 2020 - acknowledge the press release and move on?

As Bility put it: "Let the government go to the process; if there is any reason to review the evidence and find reasons to indict, they should."

In Monrovia, the question is no longer whether Washington has spoken. It has. The question is whether Monrovia will answer - in court.

# How Liberia's Disabled Community Survived

They appealed directly to the Government of Liberia, the National Commission on Disabilities, and private caregivers to move from ratification to implementation — to "practically show respect" to the CRPD.

**The demand includes:**

Reasonable accommodation in all emergency health responses under the Public Health Law, including accessible communication and targeted outreach through Disabled Persons Organizations, DPOs.
Enforcement of the National Disability Act of 2018, particularly provisions on health access, transport, and non-discrimination.
Disaggregated data collection — counting persons with disabilities in health and social protection programs, as required by CRPD Article 31.

Cole, who has also conducted research in Sierra Leone, Rwanda, Kenya, and Zambia, said Liberia stands out for its resilience.

"I was overwhelmed by the participants' stories about how they survived during the peak of COVID-19," she said. "Liberia's disabled people are talented; their talents should be promoted by the Government and private sector."

She added, smiling: "Highly hospitable! I am overwhelmed by the hospitality of my disabled Liberian hosts and non-disabled people I have met. I will be back in February, 2023."

The research will continue with life-history interviews, but for one afternoon at Bella Casa, the evidence was already on the wall — in photographs, and in captions written by the photographers themselves.

It was a simple legal and political argument made visual: Nothing about us without us, even in a pandemic.

# TRAGEDY STRIKES TOTOTA: When Poverty, Policy Failure and Petroleum Collide - And The Red Cross Steps Into The Void



**By Staff Writer**

TOTOTA, Bong County - It was the day after Christmas. In Totota, a bustling transit town 130km from Monrovia on the Monrovia-Ganta highway, a fuel tanker jackknifed and overturned. What happened next was not just an accident. It was a national indictment.

According to eyewitnesses and video footage that flooded Liberian social media, dozens of residents - including women and children who had traveled to Totota to celebrate Christmas - rushed to the leaking tanker with buckets, jerry cans and plastic bags to scoop fuel.

**Minutes later, the tanker exploded.**

In a devastating incident on December 26, a gasoline tanker explosion rocked Totota in Bong County, leaving in its wake a trail of destruction, death, and injuries. Authorities confirmed more than 40 dead and at least 83 injured on the day, a figure that would later climb to over 70 as critically burned patients succumbed at JFK Medical Center.

Among them was a pregnant woman who had rushed to retrieve her daughter from the accident scene when the tanker exploded, tragically killing her along with her daughter and husband. That family's poignant story is just one among the tales of sorrow emerging from this devastating incident.

**The Swift Response: Red Cross on the Frontline**

While the state apparatus scrambled, the Liberia National Red Cross Society as a first responder was swift in mobilizing.

Secretary General Gregory T. Blamoh said: "Our primary concern is to provide immediate assistance to those affected by this tragic incident. The Red Cross team is on the ground, working tirelessly to support local efforts in handling the aftermath."

**The Red Cross role was not cosmetic. It was operational, legal, and profoundly human:**

1. Body Management and Dignity: The Society supplied body bags, collected charred remains, and partnered with the Bong County Health Team to ensure dignified burial. On December 28, it organized a mass burial for ten victims in Totota, including the pregnant woman. The ceremonies were conducted in partnership with the Liberian National Red Cross Society.

2. Psychosocial First Aid: "We do not only address the physical needs of affected communities and people but also support their emotional well-being," Blamoh stated, pledging continued psychosocial support.

3. Cash and Accountability: Through its IFRC network, the Red Cross later moved beyond burial to direct cash assistance via mobile money to survivors and families of victims of the fuel tanker explosion in Totota - a model that aligns with international humanitarian law principles of dignity and non-discrimination.

Health workers from the Liberia National Red Cross Society and the Bong County Health Team were photographed moving bodies on December 26, 2023 - images that would define the tragedy.

**The Legal Lens: Who Is Liable When Desperation Explodes?**

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Legally, Totota is a textbook case of concurrent negligence under Liberian tort law and a potential violation of constitutional rights.

**A. The State's Duty of Care: Under Article 11 of the 1986 Constitution of Liberia,** every person has the right to life and security. The National Disaster Management Agency (NDMA) Act of 2016 mandates the Agency to prevent, mitigate and respond to hazards, including hazardous material transport. The fact that a leaking petroleum tanker was left unsecured, un-cordoned, and accessible to civilians for minutes before explosion raises prima facie questions of regulatory failure. Where were the Liberia National Police traffic detachment, the Ministry of Transport road safety officers, and the Environmental Protection Agency's hazardous materials protocol?

**B. Carrier and Owner Liability:** Under Liberia's Vehicle and Traffic Law and Petroleum Law, transporters of highly flammable products must maintain roadworthiness, driver certification, and emergency spill procedures. An overturned tanker leaking fuel on a major highway should have triggered immediate emergency containment, not a free-for-all scramble. Civil liability for wrongful death and negligence can attach to the trucking company and insurer.

**C. The Poverty Defense Is No Defense:** The government cannot criminalize survivors for "looting" fuel. Liberian criminal law requires mens rea. What drove people to the tanker was not criminal intent but extreme energy poverty. To prosecute victims while ignoring systemic regulatory collapse would be legally perverse and morally obscene.

**D. Mass Burial and the Law:** The Public Health Law of Liberia requires identification, death certification, and family consent before mass burial. The Red Cross's meticulous documentation - tracking victims and ensuring respectful burial - provided the legal due diligence the overwhelmed state health system could not.

**The Political Lens: A Nation Running on Fumes**

**Politically, Totota exploded twice.**

The first explosion killed bodies. The second exploded the myth of a functional post-war state.

**1. The Economics of Desperation:** Liberia imports 100% of its petroleum. When global prices rise, pump prices in rural Bong County can double. A gallon of gasoline selling for $6 USD represents a day's wage. The sight of free fuel leaking onto the road was, for many, not recklessness but rational survival. A government that cannot provide affordable energy, social protection, or public safety education has created the conditions for its citizens to trade their lives for fuel.

**2. The Governance Vacuum:** The tragedy occurred on December 26, 2023, in the twilight of the Weah administration and weeks before the inauguration of President Joseph Boakai on January 22, 2024. The transition period was marked by controversies over tenure officials and a strained disaster response system operating with reduced staff due to funding constraints. Totota exposed that Liberia's disaster management remains reactive, not preventive.

**3. From Tragedy to Policy?** Lawmaker at the time declared Totota a national disaster. Yet, two years later, there is still no national Hazardous Materials Transport Regulation, no mandatory community-based Early Warning Systems on the Ganta corridor, and no national burn unit capable of handling 80+ burn patients simultaneously. JFK's Deputy CEO Dr. Dama Koffa had to lament publicly that victims were in dire need of medical supplies.

The Red Cross, supported by Swedish Red Cross, IFRC, and later UNHCR which beefed up humanitarian intervention by donating assorted items after recalling the explosion that killed over 40 persons, filled a gap that should have been filled by the National Disaster Management Agency's budget.

**Conclusion: The Fire That Should Not Be Forgotten**

Totota was not an act of God. It was a preventable disaster rooted in poverty, weak enforcement of petroleum transport safety, and the absence of a rapid hazmat response.

The Liberia National Red Cross Society responded swiftly. It did what humanitarians do: supply body bags, collect remains, bury the dead with dignity, comfort the living, and send cash to those left with nothing.

But humanitarian response is not a substitute for political responsibility.

If Liberia is to honor the pregnant mother, her daughter, her husband, and the scores of others who died for a gallon of gasoline, the Legislature must pass a comprehensive Dangerous Goods Road Transport Act, the Executive must fund the NDMA and establish regional burn and trauma centers, and the Petroleum Regulatory Authority must enforce real-time tracking and emergency shut-off valves on all tankers.

Otherwise, the next tanker will overturn. And the next crowd will gather. And we will again ask the Red Cross to do the work of the state.

Reporting based on LNRCS, IFRC Annual Report 2023, Bong County Health Team, and eyewitness accounts. Death tolls reflect official counts as of Dec 26-28, 2023; hospital figures continued to rise.

## How Boakai's 20,567 Votes Ended Weah's Presidency

we have heard their voice," Weah said in an address to the nation, adding that Boakai "is in a lead that we cannot surpass."

"I urge you to follow my example and accept the result of the elections," he said in the speech even before the provisional results were announced, adding that "our time will come again" in 2029.

The concession speech paved the way for Liberia's second democratic transfer of power in over seven decades — the first was when Weah swept to power six years ago.

The US congratulated "Boakai on his victory and President Weah for his peaceful acceptance of the results" State Department spokesman Matthew Miller said.

"We call on all citizens to follow President Weah's example and accept the results," Miller said.

We have a job to do, Boakai says
"We have a job ahead of us to do and I'm excited that the citizens have given us approval," Boakai told Reuters news agency shortly after the results were announced.

"First and foremost, we want to have a message of peace and reconciliation," he added.

Boakai supporters in the capital, Monrovia, danced and honked car horns in the rain after the near-final results were announced.

The election was widely seen as a test of democracy in a region that has seen a spate of military coups over the last several years.

# The Totota Tragedy Tests Liberia's Law

**By Our Staff Writer | Bong County**

**TOTOTA, Bong County -** When the 20 bags of 25kg rice arrived at Phebe Hospital on Saturday, December 30, 2023, they were more than food. They were a symbol of a health system stretched to breaking point, a legal framework questioned, and a political class under scrutiny.

Four days earlier, on Tuesday, December 26, at about 5:30 p.m., a petroleum tanker transporting gasoline from Monrovia veered off the main highway in Totota, Lower Bong County, about 130km from the capital. The tanker overturned, ruptured and began leaking. Within minutes, as is common in poverty-driven fuel scooping across West Africa, dozens of residents rushed with buckets, bottles and jerry cans to collect the spilling fuel. Then it exploded.

Liberia's Chief Medical Officer, Dr. Francis Kateh, would later confirm more than 40 dead on the scene, with other tallies putting the figure as high as 80 to 89 dead and over 83 to 250 severely burned. The Liberia National Red Cross and Bong County Health Team were left moving charred bodies from the roadside.

It was the deadliest road-linked disaster in Liberia since the end of the civil war.

**The LBNM Response: A Regulatory Body Steps Into Relief**

In the immediate aftermath, Phebe Hospital - a 156-bed referral and teaching hospital in Suakoko - became the epicenter of the response. It issued urgent appeals for medical and non-medical supplies.

Answering that call, the Liberian Board of Nursing and Midwifery (LBNM) arrived on December 30.

Making the presentation, LBNM Registrar Madam Cecelia C. Kpangbala-Flomo said the intervention was born of professional duty and moral obligation.

"When we heard and saw on social media about the Totota tragedy on December 26, we knew that Phebe Hospital was going to have a huge challenge to address the situation in time. On behalf of the LBNM, we want to say thank you to the management of Phebe Hospital and brought a little of 20 bags of rice as our appreciation and contribution for everything you've been doing to treat the victims," Madam Kpangbala-Flomo said.

She extended sympathy to families of the deceased and praised health workers across Bong County, noting that the LBNM is concerned about the well-being of both victims and frontline caregivers.

Receiving the consignment, Phebe Hospital Medical Director, Dr. Minnie Sankawulo-Ricks, described the gesture as timely and appropriate, while using the occasion to appeal for more.

"We appreciate the Nursing and Midwifery Board. But we need more - dressings, IV fluids, antibiotics, burn kits, nutritional support and beddings to strengthen our capacity to feed and provide medical care for the patients," Dr. Ricks said.

**The Legal Lens: Where Does Liability Lie?**

Beneath the humanitarian gesture lies a web of unresolved legal questions that Liberia has failed to codify since the war.

**Transport and Hazardous Materials Negligence:**

Under Liberian law, the transport of petroleum products is governed by the Ministry of Transport regulations, the Liberia Petroleum Regulatory Authority Act, and EPA environmental safety standards. Who was responsible for the roadworthiness of the tanker? Was the driver licensed for hazardous goods? Was the vehicle insured for third-party public liability? To date, no public report has been released on the carrier company or its insurance status.

**State Duty of Care and Disaster Management Law:**

The 2023 Totota fire exposed gaps in Liberia's National Disaster Management Policy. Phebe Hospital, which also houses the Phebe Paramedical Training Program and is funded primarily by the Ministry of Health, was forced to absorb a mass-burn casualty event with limited burn units. The law grants the National Disaster Management Agency (NDMA) powers to declare and coordinate, but implementation remains donor-dependent.

**The Role of the LBNM:**

Legally, the LBNM is not a relief agency. Established under Chapters 65 and 66 of Title 33 of the Liberian Code - the Nurses and Midwives Practice Act - it is the autonomous legal authority to regulate nursing and midwifery education, credentialing, and professional conduct. Its mandate is to "create regulations, policies, and methods of punishment to regulate the practice of nursing and midwifery." Its presence in Totota, therefore, is politically significant - it signals that the regulatory body is being forced to act as a frontline humanitarian actor because the statutory disaster response system failed to pre-position resources.

Legal analysts argue this tragedy must trigger a Coroner's Inquest under Liberian law and a public safety audit of the Monrovia-Gbarnga corridor.

**The Political Lens: From Tragedy to National Disaster Politics**

Politically, the Totota explosion became an immediate test of the outgoing Weah administration and the incoming Boakai administration.

Bong County District #6 Representative Moima Briggs-Mensah declared the incident a "national disaster" on the floor of the Legislature, calling for state support for victims and for Phebe Hospital.

The declaration matters. A formal declaration of a national disaster under Liberian law unlocks emergency appropriations, waives procurement bottlenecks, and obligates the central government, not just Bong County, to fund long-term care, including reconstructive surgery for burn victims and compensation for bereaved families.

Yet critics noted the familiar pattern: tragedy, outpouring of rice, used clothes and small cash donations, photo opportunities, and then silence. No national fuel scooping sensitization law. No enforcement of safety perimeters by the Liberia National Police when tankers overturn. No national burn center.

The LBNM's donation of rice - while culturally resonant in Liberia where feeding patients' families is part of hospital upkeep - also underscores a painful political economy: hospitals must beg for food to keep patients alive because national health budgetary allocation remains below the Abuja Declaration 15% threshold.

**What Next?**

As Totota buries its dead, the questions that remain are not about rice.

They are about whether Liberia will finally pass and enforce a Hazardous Materials Transport Act, whether the NDMA will be empowered with a real budget, and whether Phebe Hospital will receive the infrastructure upgrade it has needed for decades.

Madam Kpangbala-Flomo's gesture was humane. But as one senior nurse at Phebe whispered during the presentation, "We cannot nurse a country with rice alone. We need law, we need systems, we need political will."

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The victims of Totota - market women, schoolboys, okada riders who rushed to collect leaking fuel to resell for $2 - were victims of poverty before they were victims of fire. Until the legal and political root causes are addressed, the next tanker will fall, and the next crowd will rush.

Phebe Hospital continues to appeal for blood, silver sulfadiazine, pain medications, and food support. Those wishing to support can contact the hospital administration in Suakoko, Bong County.

# When Distance Means Exclusion — How Liberia's Disabled Community Survived Two Pandemics

**By Staff Writer**

British PhD Researcher Uses Photovoice to Document COVID-19, Ebola and the Unfinished Promise of Disability Rights in Liberia

***By [Your Byline] | MONROVIA -***

On a Friday afternoon in December 2022, the lobby of Bella Casa Hotel in Sinkor was transformed. It was not a typical hotel exhibition. On easels and white walls hung 20 photographs taken not by professional photojournalists, but by blind men, wheelchair users, deaf women, and persons with psychosocial disabilities from across Montserrado County.

Each photo had a handwritten caption. One showed an empty taxi speeding past a man with a white cane. The caption read: "I was not invisible before COVID, but the drivers made me so."

That image was the culmination of a two-month participatory research project led by Ellie Cole, a British doctoral researcher from University College London, UCL, and her Liberian research partner, Jamesetta Wahblo Seton, a lecturer at the University of Liberia.

Cole, who first came to Liberia in 2015 during the Ebola response and arrived for this phase of fieldwork on October 28, 2022, is conducting a comparative study titled: "Exploring the Comparative Experience of People with Disabilities of the COVID-19 and Ebola Emergency Health Responses."

The project is funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council, ESRC, as part of her PhD.

"I wanted to understand what happens when a public health response designed for the general population lands on a population that is already structurally excluded," Cole told this paper in an exclusive interview at the National Union of Organizations of the Disabled, NUOD, headquarters on 9th Street on December 19, 2022.

Working through NUOD as her institutional partner, she employed a methodology called photovoice.

**The Method: Giving Cameras, Not Just Questionnaires**

Photovoice is a legally and politically significant research method. Instead of researchers speaking about disabled people, participants are given cameras to document their own realities, then collectively analyze what the images mean.

"In Liberia, voices of persons with disabilities often go unheard and their opinions are not considered. Photovoice is a powerful way for people to have their voices heard," Cole said.

Over 70 people — including NUOD members, caregivers, development partners, and journalists — attended the exhibition on December 16. Each participant chose one photograph from weeks of shooting to display.

Madam Evelyn Deh, Secretary and Accountant of NUOD, who has served as a documentarian and caregiver for the disability community for years, said the method captured what reports cannot.

**Three Fronts of Exclusion: Health, Restriction, and Transportation**

Cole's research is organized around four thematic areas that emerged directly from the participants: Health, Restrictions, Transportation, and Food Security. Each carries profound legal implications for Liberia.

**1. Health: The Right to Access Without Stigma**

Liberia ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, CRPD, in 2012. Article 25 guarantees the right to the highest attainable standard of health without discrimination. Liberia's own 2018 National Disability Act domesticates many of those obligations.

**Yet participants described a parallel pandemic of stigma.**

Before coming to Liberia, Cole said she had reviewed desk literature indicating a rise in psychosocial disabilities due to lack of medication and fear of clinics. In Monrovia, that was confirmed.

"One woman with a physical disability told me she had malaria symptoms but refused to go to the hospital because she feared health workers would label her as a COVID case and isolate her," Cole recounted. "The impact of COVID was causing other health problems to go untreated."

Other participants cited negative attitudes from health workers, inaccessible health information — particularly for deaf persons who did not receive sign language interpretation of COVID-19 messaging — and an inability to access psychosocial support.

**For many, Ebola was a trigger.**

"Experience of Ebola was a triggering event, particularly for psychosocial issues," Cole said. "But many also felt equipped after Ebola. They knew what to do and how to properly combat the disease. The trauma, however, returned with COVID-19."

**2. Restrictions: When Public Health Measures Are Not Disability-Inclusive**

Government measures — including mandatory eight-foot social distancing and a dusk-to-dawn curfew — were, by law, applicable to all. In practice, they were discriminatory in effect.

This is the legal test of indirect discrimination under the CRPD: a neutral policy that disproportionately harms persons with disabilities without reasonable accommodation.

Visually impaired participants told Cole at NUOD interactive sessions that they could not "see" whether they were eight feet away. Sighted persons, fearful of infection, often refused to guide them or actively pushed them away, breaking the radius themselves.

For persons with hearing impairments, the consequences were physical.

"Some persons told me about the greater risk encountered by caregivers who had to do their work before 3 p.m. due to curfew. Others told me people with hearing impairments were beaten during curfew time because they had not received information about the curfew," Cole said.

The lack of accessible emergency communication — no captioning, no Liberian Sign Language on national broadcasts — left them legally unprotected during a lawful order.

"Restrictions were difficult for all Liberians, but particularly for these people," she said.

**3. Transportation and Movement: The Right to the City**

**Article 20 of the CRPD guarantees personal mobility. In Monrovia, that right is negotiated at the roadside.**

Participants overwhelmingly lamented refusal of service by commercial drivers. Taxi drivers refused to stop for persons who waved with a white cane. Others refused to allow wheelchair users who required extra time to board. During their food-search tours, blind persons reported being unable to cross roads because no driver would stop.

This is not merely a social attitude problem. Under Section 4.5 of Liberia's National Disability Act, denial of access to public transportation on the basis of disability constitutes discrimination and is actionable.

**4. Food and Food Security: The Stimulus Package Gap**

The final theme, Food Security, exposed gaps in social protection.

Cole said she was informed before arriving that many disabled families did not receive the Government of Liberia's COVID-19 Household Food Support Programme, commonly called the "Stimulus Package."

In response, NUOD put out an SOS appeal on community radio, after which private supplies arrived for members.

During focus groups, participants described loss of livelihoods — many depend on small trading, street begging, or daily hustle — and having to beg for donations to feed families when markets closed.

"Related to this is livelihoods," Cole noted. "When you tell people to stay home, but their home has no food and their livelihood is outside, you criminalize survival."

**A Political Demand, Not Just a Research Project**

For the participants, the exhibition was not just art. It was advocacy.

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# BONG COUNTY'S BLOODY GOLD

***MAERHJU, Bong County, District #2***

The road to Maerhju ends where the forest has been turned inside out. Pits, mounds of red laterite, and abandoned sluices scar what residents say was once family farmland. It is here, in a gold-rich enclave 30 kilometers outside Gbarnga, that Liberia's most ambitious land reform is being tested – not in a courtroom or a policy workshop, but in blood.

For more than two decades, two communities who have lived side-by-side have fought for control of this mine. On one side is the family of Amara Kamara, a Kpelle man whose relatives say they are the customary owners of the land. On the other is a minority Mandingo community that has lived, worked, and invested in the artisanal mine for years.

What began in 2001 as a quiet competing claim over ancestral land has, according to multiple local sources, escalated over 22 years into a cycle of violent confrontation, injury, death, and forced displacement. The latest casualty is not just the peace of the town, but the rule of law itself.

**This is the Maerhju story – and it is Liberia's story.**

**A Dispute Born in a Legal Vacuum**

Residents trace the origin of the conflict to a customary arrangement. The land in question, they said, was originally settled and farmed by the Kamara family. Amara Kamara's uncle, exercising customary authority, appointed Amara as caretaker-manager of the family holding – a common practice under Kpelle customary tenure.

The discovery of alluvial gold changed everything.

When artisanal gold was found, the economic value of the surface land exploded. Amara Kamara and his family asserted what they described as indefeasible customary ownership – that the land is theirs by ancestry, and therefore the right to determine who mines it is theirs.

The opposing Mandingo group advanced a competing customary narrative: long-term, peaceful occupation, development of the mining infrastructure, and continuous investment, which under customary norms can also ripen into rights.

**Neither claim was ever adjudicated.**

There was no deed search at the archives in Monrovia. There was no Customary Land Formalization, no Tribal Certificate confirmation, no boundary harmonization, and no Community Land Development and Management Committee (CLDMC) established as required by the Land Rights Act of 2018 (LRA).

The Liberia Land Authority (LLA), which under Section 9.1 of the LRA is mandated to identify, map and formalize customary lands, never completed the process in Maerhju. The Ministry of Mines and Energy continued to treat the area as an open artisanal mining zone.

As one Gbarnga-based property lawyer told this paper: "What you have in Maerhju is a classic post-war vacuum. Two legitimate customary claims, zero formalization, and a highly valuable resource underneath. That is a formula for violent self-help."

**The Human Cost: Death, Injury and Flight**

Local accounts gathered independently in Maerhju indicate that between 2021 and 2023, the dispute periodically erupted into organized confrontations over access to mining pits and proceeds from gold sales. Sources allege that several persons were killed and many more injured over that period. This paper could not independently verify the



full casualty count as of press time, and the Bong County Detachment of the Liberia National Police (LNP) has not released official crime statistics for the town.

**The most recent escalation, however, is specific and political.**

Amara Kamara, described by family sources as the head of the affected Kamara family, was accused by opposing parties of instigating riots in connection with the land dispute. Shortly after those accusations were made public, Kamara allegedly received direct threats to his life.

Fearing for his safety, family sources said, Kamara was forced to flee Maerhju and Bong County entirely. His current whereabouts are being held for security reasons.

No arrest warrant, formal charge sheet, or LNP wanted notice has been announced by the LNP Bong County Commander against Mr. Kamara or against any member of either community in connection with the latest violence. That absence of state action is itself at the heart of the legal concern.

**The Legal Fault Lines**

The Maerhju crisis exposes two unresolved contradictions at the core of Liberian law.

**The Surface vs. Subsoil Contradiction**

Under Article 2.3 of the Minerals and Mining Law of 2000, as amended, "all mineral resources on, in, or under the surface of the Republic are owned by the Republic of Liberia." The State, through the Ministry of Mines and Energy, holds sole authority to issue Class C Artisanal Mining Licenses.

But under Chapter 3 and Chapter 8 of the Land Rights Act of 2018, customary communities are granted full ownership of their customary lands, including the right to decide how surface land is used, managed, and developed, and to receive benefits from natural resources on that land.

Maerhju sits at the collision point. The community owns the surface, the State owns the gold underneath, and the artisanal miners occupy both. Without a formal Community Land formalization and without a Cooperative Mining Agreement that recognizes the customary landowners as required by the LRA's Free, Prior, Informed Consent (FPIC) provisions, the two regimes talk past each other.

Result: The miners claim a license from Mines and Energy is enough. The family claims their customary deed is enough. Both are half-right under law, and fully wrong without the other.

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**The Due Process and Right to Life Failure**

The Liberian Constitution is explicit. Article 11(a) guarantees the right to life and security of the person. Article 20(a) guarantees that no person shall be deprived of life, liberty, or property without due process of law.

The reported cycle of killings, injuries, and now alleged death threats and forced internal displacement of Mr. Kamara, if verified, constitutes a prima facie violation of those rights and a failure of the State's protective obligation.

The legal pathway was clear: Under Section 68 of the LRA and the LLA's Alternative Land Disputes Resolution Policy, the dispute should have been referred to the Bong County Land Administration Office and the District #2 Land Dispute Resolution Committee for mediation, boundary confirmation, and referral to the LLA for formal survey.

That did not happen. Instead, according to residents, enforcement was left to community muscle.

Legal analysts say the LNP's obligation under the LNP Act of 2015 to investigate threats to life and the Ministry of Internal Affairs' duty to protect persons in customary land disputes were not proactively discharged.

**The Political Powder Keg**

**Maerhju is not just a land case. It is a political geography.**

Bong County, Liberia's third most populous county, is dominated by the Kpelle, the country's largest ethnic group. The Mandingo community, largely Muslim and historically associated with trade and mining, is a significant minority in central Liberia, with a painful history of being scapegoated in land disputes during and after the civil wars.

In District #2 – a swing electoral district in legislative elections – any Kpelle-Mandingo confrontation carries immediate political risk. Local politicians, chiefs, and youth leaders interviewed for this article expressed fear that failure to resolve Maerhju legally will allow it to be re-ethnicized and weaponized.

"This was an economic and legal dispute. If the County Superintendent and District Commissioner allow it to become Kpelle versus Mandingo, we are inviting a repeat of the 2008 Gbarnga land violence," one civil society leader in Gbarnga warned.

Efforts to obtain comment from the Bong County Superintendent, the District #2 Commissioner, and the Bong County Land Administrator on Monday and Tuesday were unsuccessful.

**What Must Happen Now**

Civil society actors and land rights advocates in Gbarnga are calling for a three-track emergency intervention:

**Immediate Security:**

The Ministry of Justice and LNP must investigate the alleged threats against Amara Kamara and other community members, guarantee safe return or safe relocation, and ensure protection under the Witness Protection framework.

**Moratorium and Joint Fact-Finding:**

The Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Liberia Land Authority, and the Ministry of Mines and Energy must constitute a Joint Fact-Finding Mission to Maerhju, immediately suspend all artisanal mining in the disputed polygon pending adjudication under Section 14.3 of the Mining Law, and preserve the site.

**Formalization:**

The LLA must fast-track the identification and mapping of Maerhju as a customary community, support the election of a CLDMC, and conduct a formal boundary harmonization and confirmatory survey. Only then can a lawful benefit-sharing agreement for artisanal mining be negotiated.

For 22 years, Maerhju has waited for the State to decide who owns its land. For 22 years, the State has answered with silence. In that silence, people have died, gold has been smuggled out, and a man has fled his ancestral home.

The Land Rights Act promised that customary Liberians would never again be squatters on their own land. In Maerhju, that promise is being measured not in statutes, but in graves and in exile.

This is a developing story. The paper will continue to pursue official responses from the Liberia Land Authority, Ministry of Mines and Energy, and Bong County Administration. Anyone with verified information on the Maerhju case can contact our newsroom in confidence.*

**<u>EDITOR'S NOTE ON STANDARDS:</u>**

*All allegations of criminal conduct, including instigation of riots and death threats, are attributed to opposing parties and family sources and remain unproven allegations as of press time. No court of competent jurisdiction has adjudicated ownership of the disputed parcel. Casualty figures are reported as local accounts pending independent verification.*



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EDITORIAL

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**THE LESSONS OF MAERHJU - The State Must Never Again Abandon Customary Land to Violence**

# WHEN GRIEF TURNED TO FIRE - ZWEDRU BURNS AS POLITICS, DEATH AND VENGEANCE COLLIDE IN GRAND GEDEH

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# LIBERIA'S THIN MARGIN: How Boakai's 20,567 Votes Ended Weah's Presidency and Tested West Africa's Democratic Law

***Liberian President George Weah has conceded electoral defeat to his challenger, Joseph Boakai, paving the way for Liberia's second democratic transfer of power in over seven decades.***



Liberian President George Weah conceded defeat to opposition leader Joseph Boakai after a tight runoff election, provisional results Friday showed.

Boakai led with a razor-thin margin, having received 50.9% of the vote over Weah's 49.1% with nearly all the votes counted, the country's elections commission said.

The results were a dramatic reversal from the 2017 election when Weah, a 57-year-old former soccer star, easily beat Boakai in the second round.

Boakai, 78, is a former vice president and a career politician. He emerged neck-and-neck with Weah in the first round of voting in October.

But he failed to secure 50% of the vote needed for an outright victory, leading to Tuesday's run-off election.

Weah concedes defeat in speech, Boakai supporters celebrate win
"The Liberian people have spoken and

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