

Liberia Police News

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About 50 people in the village of Klay, northwestern Liberia, recently gathered to watch a man apply red-hot metal to the limbs of four youths accused of robbery. The man dipped a machete in a concoction of water, palm oil and kola nuts, held it in fire for several minutes, and then placed it on the right legs of the four suspects. None of the youths - ages 16 to 26 - appeared to flinch. They were deemed not guilty. This practice known as 'sassywood' is banned under national law, but is still regarded as a legitimate form of justice by many Liberians. A suspect is subjected to intense pain and judged on his or her reaction - if the hot metal burns the person's leg, he or she is found guilty.

Four years after the fighting ended, progress in rebuilding the judicial and corrections system is "very slow", according to an August report by the UN Security Council. "The judicial system is constrained by limited infrastructure, shortage of qualified personnel, lack of capacity to process cases, poor management and lack of the necessary will to institute reforms." The report said most people do not have access to legal counsel.

Legal advisers in Liberia say the absence of functioning courts in most rural areas is due in large part to lawyers' reluctance to take judgeships there, as well as the lack of infrastructure for courts. In the central Liberian town of Gbarnga in Bong County, 150km north of the capital Monrovia, residents told IRIN that trial by ordeal is the only means to adjudicate alleged crimes. "If somebody is accused of stealing money, clothes, jewellery, food or other items, the best [way] to know who committed the act is to administer sassywood, which is fast - it takes less than 30 minutes to know who did the act," Gbarnga resident Johnny Bono said. Users of sassywood believe the person administering it and the instruments used have mystical powers. Practitioners are paid in money or goods - up to 2000 Liberian dollars (US\$32) per 'trial' in the capital and about a third of that in rural areas. Sometimes payment is kola nuts and a pure-white chicken. "The trial by ordeal in most parts of the country clearly shows that most people do not have confidence in the court system," Anthony Valcke, Liberia country director of the American Bar Association in Africa, told IRIN. "If people had such confidence, they would not resort to trial by ordeal." "No amount of laws or government order can stop sassywood," Yerkula Zaizay, a resident of Gbarnga, told IRIN. "It is a tradition that our forefathers left with us. This is better than going to court. My late grandfather taught me how to apply sassywood and it is part of my culture so it cannot be easily stopped."

..We cannot waste our time going to court. The sassywood is our courtroom... Gbarnga resident Bono said, "We cannot waste our time going to court. The sassywood is our courtroom. This is what our forefathers have been practising in the past and it has been working."