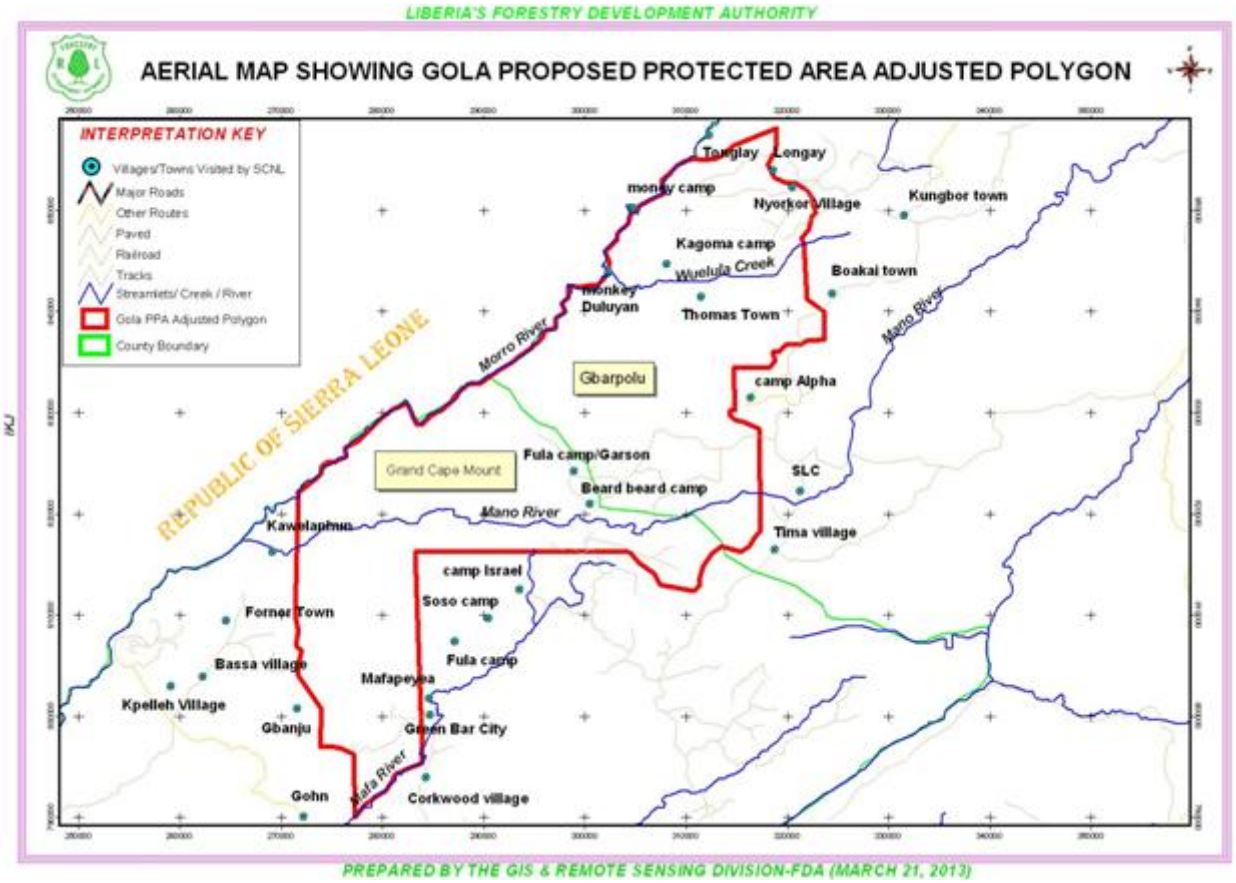
Title

The Liberian Government has been undertaking some admirable steps as part of efforts to conserve the remaining disappearing West Africa Upper Guinea Forest Ecoregion; a biogeographic region which is recognized as a biodiversity hotspot of global importance.

After the German Forest Mission assessment of Liberia?s forest in 1958, the Government of Liberia established 9 National Forests across the country of which 3 have since been gazetted as protected areas: i.e. Sapo National Park located in south-eastern Liberia, East Nimba Nature Reserve in the north and Lake Piso Multiple Sustainable Use Reserve in the west. In addition, the Government has earmarked 3 other forests as proposed protected areas: i.e. the Gola Forest National Park, Wonegizi Protected Area and Grebo Protected Area. She has also revised and upgraded her forest laws resulting in the National Forestry Reform Law of 2006 in which the Government of Liberia commits to set aside 1.5 million hectares (i.e. 30% of the country?s forest area) for protection. While the government strives to meeting this goal, low capacity and funding for conservation, increasing global demand for timber, growing mechanized plantation agriculture and need for revenue generation to address developmental priorities are amongst the major challenges faced by the Government in meeting this ambitious target.

The Liberia Forestry Development Authority (FDA), with funding from the World Bank, began working towards the gazettement package of the Gola in 2008. As a demonstration of the country?s commitment to realizing this target, Liberia and Sierra Leone through their Presidents H.E. Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf and H.E. Ernest Bai Koroma agreed at a joint communiqué to establish a trans-boundary Peace Park covering 2,000 km² by linking up the two Gola Forests in Liberia and Sierra Leone. The two Presidents launched the process towards the establishment of the Peace Park in Lalihun, Sierra Leone in May 2009. President Sirleaf in her speech said *?the launch of the Peace Park will serve as a symbol of our reserved commitment to peace, stability and biodiversity conservation in this region? while President Bai Koroma emphasized ?the long term benefits of the conservation of Gola far outweigh the short term benefits of extraction and destruction?.*



To realize the Peace Park, Liberia and Sierra Leone first had to establish the Gola Forest National Park in Liberia and the, so named, Gola Rainforest National Park in Sierra Leone. Sierra Leone established hers in December 2011 while Liberia is yet to establish her National Park; a process that started as far back as 2008 with funding from the World Bank and has made only slow progress since. The President of Liberia however, in her annual address delivered in January 2014, called on the legislature to pass into law the act declaring the proposed Gola Forest National Park into a National Park. This public political support from the President has intensified the pressure on the FDA and its partners to fast track the Gola gazettement process.

The BirdLife Africa Partnership is actively supporting the establishment of the National Park in Liberia. Since January 2013, under the Aage V. Jensen Charity Foundation (AVJCF) funded *?The Gola National Park: realizing its vast potential?* project, BirdLife International, the Society for the Conservation of Nature of Liberia (SCNL) and the FDA are working hand in hand towards the gazettement of the Gola Forest National Park through, among others, community engagement and awareness creation, provision of alternative livelihood activities to local communities, conducting biodiversity and threats monitoring in the Gola, and the provision of logistical support, field equipment and monthly patrol rations to the FDA forest rangers.

As part of AVJCF funded project support to fast track the gazettement process, SCNL hosted the Liberian consultant, in person of Professor John T. Woods from the University of Liberia, who was hired in December 2013 by the FDA to prepare the Gola gazettement package. SCNL also provided support such as office space, electricity, internet access, office equipment use and printing access.

And on the 8th of April 2014, FDA, SCNL, the World Bank and Professor Woods met at the headquarters of the FDA where actionable steps and a firm timeframe were agreed upon. Those include the projection to have the Gola gazettement package submitted to the Office of the President by May 15, 2014; the Gola Forest National Park enacted into law by July 26, 2014, and the Presidential formal declaration of the National Park by August 24, 2014.

At the end of the meeting the FDA Deputy Managing Director for Operations, Mr Tuagben underscored the need to speed up the completion of the Gola gazettement package and have the it sent to the President within the agreed time frame. For his part Professor Woods, stressed that he will continue to be available to work along with the FDA and its partners to lobby the legislature for a speedy approval of the gazettement proposal.

The declaration of the Gola Forest National Park will be a major achievement for Liberia and its partners in conservation, and will be a massive step forward towards the establishment of the Liberia ? Sierra Leone trans-boundary Peace Park to which both countries committed themselves in 2009. With an increasing unsustainable pressure on the forest and its resources, there is no time for further delay.

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