

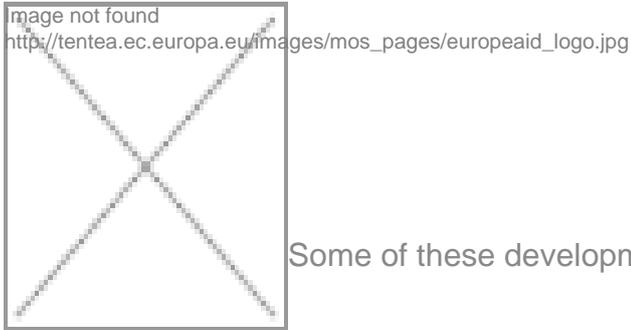
Liberia and Sierra Leone move to designate Gola Rainforest as National Park

The governments of Liberia and Sierra Leone have started the formal processes of designating the Gola Rainforest as a shared National Park and Protected Area. "There is every reason for us to protect the Gola Forest on both sides of our border, since doing so will ensure that it will continuously provide ecological services to the surrounding communities", said presidents of Liberia H.E. Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf and Sierra Leone H.E. Dr Ernest Bai Koroma in a joint statement presented at a recent conference in Sweden. Gola Rainforest is part of the Upper Guinea Forest Ecosystem, which is one of the world's most biodiversity-rich ecosystems. Of the 240-250 forest dependent birds in the region - such White-breasted Guineafowl *Agelastes meleagrides* and White-necked Picathartes *Picathartes gymnocephalus* (both Vulnerable) - more than 25 are threatened or restricted-range species. It is also home to more than 50 mammal species, such as Forest Elephant *Loxodonta cyclotis*, Pygmy Hippo *Choeropsis liberiensis* and ten species of primate, including Chimpanzee *Pan troglodytes*. Last year the Presidents of Sierra Leone and Liberia established the "The Across the River transboundary Peace Park" project to protect the Gola Rainforest - an area covering the Gola, Lofa and Foya Forest Reserves (see map). This commitment is now being translated into actions by both countries.

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In Liberia, the Government announced its intention to set aside and upgrade a portion of the Gola National Forest into a National Park. This was closely followed by a public consultation by Liberia's Forestry Development Authority on the intention to set the Gola National Forest aside as a formally Protected Area, and to contribute to a regional effort in cross border conservation initiatives. In Sierra Leone, Dr Sam Sesay - The Minister for Agriculture, Forestry and Food Security - recently announced: "in the coming months Gola will become Sierra Leone's second National Park, and is the first step in the government ambitious plans to develop a Protected Area network throughout the country". Having recently gained Cabinet approval in Sierra Leone, actions are now focused upon tabling the Gola Rainforest National Park bill before Parliament for final approval. "Our 20-year dream is becoming a reality now that both governments are pushing ahead with the vital processes of designating their shared Gola Rainforest as a National Park", said Dr Paulinus Ngeh - BirdLife's West Africa Sub-



Some of these developments form part of the Across the River

transboundary Peace Park, which is a four year European Union (EuropeAid fund) grant to Vogelbescherming Nederland (VBN; BirdLife in the Netherlands) aimed at securing long term conservation benefits, improved natural resources and biodiversity conservation and global carbon storage of the most critical habitats of the Upper Guinea Forest ecosystem. The implementation of the project is coordinated by the BirdLife International Africa Partnership along with its BirdLife Partners: the Conservation Society of Sierra Leone (CSSL; BirdLife in Sierra Leone); the Society for Conservation of Nature of Liberia (SCNL; BirdLife in Liberia and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB; BirdLife in the UK); and Government partners comprising the Forestry Development Authority (FDA); and the Forestry Division (FD) of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Food Security. Co-funding provided by the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund (CEPF), and the Sustainable & Thriving Environments for West African Regional Development (STEWARD) Program of the US Agency for International Development (USAID), the US Forest Service, International Programs and Basel Zoo CEPF is a joint initiative of Conservation International, the French Development Agency, the government of Japan, the Global Environment Facility, the MacArthur Foundation and the World Bank.