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WEST AFRICA PROGRAMME

Building lasting peace and justice

In 2005 Conciliation Resources focused on community peacebuilding, supporting young people in peace and reconstruction efforts, and strengthening civil society's involvement in regional stability. This work concentrated on Sierra Leone and several partner initiatives in Liberia and Guinea.

A sign of hope and stability for the region came in Liberia after years of brutal war where Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was elected the first woman head of state in Africa. Meanwhile United Nations forces prepared to withdraw from Sierra Leone nearly three years after war officially ended, amid concern about the army's ability to protect its citizens. In Guinea, public security and living standards worsened, increasing fears about its future.

Encouraging communities to build peace

In southern Sierra Leone, our partners the Sulima Fishing Community Development Project (SFCDP) and Bo Peace and Reconciliation Movement (BPRM) extended their peace monitoring work to neighbouring districts and communities.

BPRM and SFCDP's public peace and reconciliation events increased their profile among formal institutions such as local and national government, courts and the police,

who are increasingly involving the peace monitors in their work. BPRM was asked to join the Joint District Security Committee and SFCDP is involved in the Border Security Committee around the Mano River Union bridge.

Both groups have also included more women peace monitors in their work, giving women a voice in community decision-making and justice processes.

Making women's voices count

The importance of women's interests and ability to promote peace has also been a driving force behind our support to the Satta Kumba Amara Resource Centre in Kono, one of Sierra Leone's most war-affected regions. Building of this centre was completed in 2005 and it now provides a much-needed meeting place for women's groups and social activists.

Working with UNDP and Sierra Leone's Ministry of Youth and Sports we also piloted income-generating activities across the country for young women affected by violence during the war. These aimed to develop their lives beyond exploitation and dependency.

We supported two visits by the Mano River Women's Peace Network to build solidarity and conflict advocacy strategies among women from Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone.

Photo: The Mano River Women's Peace Network during a CR-supported visit to Liberia in February 2005 to meet with Gyude Bryant, chairman of its Transitional Government.

In Freetown, we supported students to successfully campaign for fair and unusually violence-free national student elections.



Helping young people develop alternatives to violence

Our Youth in Progress project and drop-in-centre in Kenema, eastern Sierra Leone, continued to train young war-affected people on finding alternatives to violence.

After several years of mentoring and accompaniment, young men and women are now involved in business and agricultural micro-enterprise groups. They have shown encouraging levels of organization and leadership. Greater trust and respect from community leaders has led to better relations between these two generations historically prone to settling their differences through violence.

In Freetown, we supported students from Fourah Bay College Peace and Conflict Department's Society for Peace

and Conflict Resolution to successfully campaign for fair and unusually violence-free national student elections.

Improving safety and security

Together with International Alert, we supported the Mano River Union Peace Forum in strengthening cross-border links between civil society groups in Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea.

The Forum worked on building sub-regional peace through media, youth and women-focused training workshops. Several management committee meetings developed stronger local leadership of the forum's strategy and activities.

CR also organized two meetings with the Forum to examine critical issues about the border dispute at Yenga in Guinea-Sierra Leone and determine strategies with key NGOs and parliamentarians to diffuse tensions and resolve the conflict.

Looking ahead

From 2006 to 2008 we will focus on our successful community peacebuilding and youth work, strengthening national and sub-regional groups' advocacy work and sharing good practice across West Africa. We will also support activists in border areas and countries struggling with the legacies of these inter-connected wars.

For more information about our work see our website: www.c-r.org

Photo: Young people in a roleplay exercise at a conflict transformation training workshop in December 2005 at CR's drop-in-centre in Kenema, southeastern Sierra Leone.



Building peace through volunteer peace monitors

Bo Peace and Reconciliation Movement (BPRM) is a coalition of nine civil society organizations working on peacebuilding, reconciliation and conflict prevention in southern Sierra Leone.

They do this through their trained community 'peace monitors', who mediate in local conflicts ranging from domestic violence, land cases, ex-combatant reintegration and longstanding inter-chiefdom disputes. In 2005, BPRM handled 187 conflicts in Bo and Pujehun districts. Of these, 141 were resolved and 31 partly-resolved.

Once they have resolved conflicts, BPRM do regular follow-up and make sure local communities are trained to keep an eye on the situation. This is done through Peace and Reconciliation Committees, made up of volunteer peace monitors whose work complements BPRM's 20 part-time paid peace monitors based in Bo town.

With 92 women and men volunteers, BPRM is now able to cover eight chiefdoms in Bo and Pujehun. These volunteers monitor the impact of resolved conflicts in their own communities and act as an early warning system for new or potential conflicts. They also help ensure tensions do not reach boiling point. This makes their role critical.

"The work of the volunteer peace monitors has been so valuable to us," explains Alex Nallo, BPRM's senior field officer. "Because of them we now have detailed information about the various conflicts in the district in the palm of our hands."

In 2005, two new committees were set up in Bagbe and Niawa Lenga chiefdoms. The volunteers played an important role in a recent border dispute between Niawa Lenga and another chiefdom where tensions were rising. BPRM says the volunteers managed to ensure that these communities, especially young people, have not used violence to try to settle this sensitive conflict.

"Our hope is that the volunteers' work will in the long term help their communities become more peaceful," explains BPRM's coordinator Hassan H. Feika. "And that this will also help strengthen our economic development, respect for human rights and cooperation."

The volunteers resolve conflicts in their own communities and act as an early warning system for new or potential conflicts.

Photo: Bagbe chiefdom section chiefs shake hands with their Paramount Chief after BPRM's peace monitors resolved a 15-year old conflict between them.