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Civic Initiatives in the Peace Process

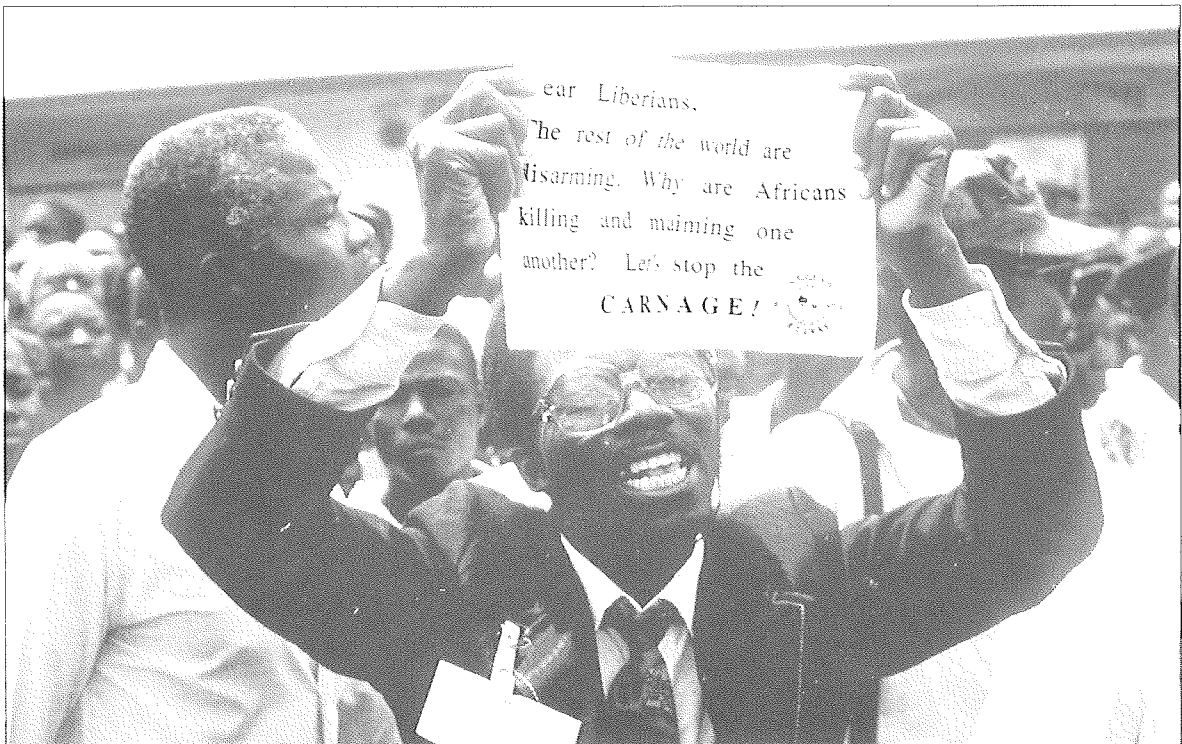
Through the Abuja Accord of August 1995, international negotiators provided for the direct participation of armed faction leaders on the sovereign Council of State of the Liberian Transitional Government. They did so believing that this would provide security to all factions, accelerate disarmament and ensure free and fair elections within twelve months. Unarmed political and civic groups opposed this agreement from the outset, highlighting its tacit legitimization of violence and looting by men whose will to disarm was highly questionable and whose control of ragtag factional armies was sparse at best. They feared that the accommodation of the factions and the arrival of armed militias in Monrovia would endanger

rather than enhance national reconciliation. On the 6th of April 1996, these fears were vindicated as forces loyal to various Transitional Government leaders engaged in some of the worst fighting witnessed in the capital in six and half years of war.

In 1990, civic proposals were adopted as the original ECOWAS peace plan

The Abuja Accord was the culmination of a trend by which civic groups have gradually been marginalised within the Liberian peace process. This article endeavors to give voice to the civic constituency, to

summarise its initiatives and to assess their impact on the peace process to date. Its prevailing message is that peace can only be assured by resisting trends towards militarisation and strengthening the role of civic groups in Liberian society.



Individual Liberians have faced the futile brutality of the war with a mix of courage and despair

Civic involvement in the Liberian peace process began in May 1990 when two major religious institutions, the Liberian Council of Churches (LCC) and the National Muslim Council of Liberia (NMCL), established the Inter-Faith Mediation Committee (IFMC). Traditional African religions inform the dominant belief systems in Liberia, but Islam and Christianity wield significant moral authority largely through the services they offer in relief work, health and education. Most of Liberia's bureaucrats and officials have benefitted from these services at one

time or another and hence generally demonstrate respect for religious leaders.

In the face of international reluctance to address the unfolding conflict, the IFMC initiated the first major attempt to facilitate dialogue between the main warring factions of the time, the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) and the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL). After shuttling between the headquarters of the two factions, the Committee secured an agreement from both sides to send representatives to Freetown, Sierra Leone

We assemble here today to say 'enough is enough'. We will take our country back. It is complete insanity to let our country, already plundered and raped, continue in the path of utter destruction. We have assembled here to say NO to the warlords and want to publicly declare that we will do every reasonable thing within our powers to ensure that their desire to ruin our country will not be tolerated but in fact resisted and prevented.'

- Ezekiel Pajibo, Africa Faith and Justice Network, Washington DC, April 1996

for comprehensive peace talks. These talks were held in the US Embassy in June 1990, but stuck on the issue of the status of President Doe. After a week of negotiation, the NPFL withdrew and announced the formation of an alternative government in the territories it had captured. As events deteriorated, with continuing carnage and a spiralling regional refugee crisis, the prospects for a purely diplomatic solution receded. It was at this juncture that the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) assumed the lead role in the peace process. In doing so, they adopted the prescription of the IFMC, calling for an immediate ceasefire, a military force to monitor this ceasefire, and the establishment of an interim government headed by a neutral personality to lead Liberia to free and fair elections within the year.

The intervention of ECOWAS and the creation of the ECOWAS Ceasefire Monitoring Group (ECOMOG)

diminished the extent and urgency of IFMC involvement in the peace process. Like other civic groups, the Committee was tempted to perceive regional intervention as an immediate panacea to the Liberian nightmare. This was ill-advised however, as the NPFL opposed the creation of ECOMOG, resolutely resisted its deployment, and refused to attend the national conference convened by ECOWAS to appoint the Interim Government of National Unity (IGNU).

This conference went ahead anyway in August 1990, and the IFMC was identified as the only neutral institution to preside over the deliberations. Since then, most

gatherings of civil society, and some involving the warring factions, have also been overseen by the Committee. Included in these is the March 1991 All-Liberian National Conference which sought, in vain, to co-opt the NPFL within the civilian dominated IGNU. Throughout the period 1990-93, the IFMC continued consultations with ECOWAS leaders and with members of the growing number of Liberian factions. In doing so, they strived to remain 'ideal mediators' exercising 'absolute neutrality' in their dealings with all parties.

In July 1993, the landmark Cotonou Accord marked the genesis of the 'power for guns' policy by which international negotiators sought to accommodate the armed factions with offers of access to significant state power. During the final leg of the Cotonou negotiations, the IFMC contributed to the resolution of a major disagreement concerning the allocation between

By 1994, civic groups were deeply troubled by the direction of the peace process

signatories of posts in the proposed Transitional Government. However, while helping to secure its passage, the Committee became increasingly troubled by the content of the agreement. This unease subsequently grew and by 1994, IFMC position statements expressed sharp disagreements with the direction of negotiations. The new position was largely influenced by the Catholic Prelate, Archbishop Michael K. Francis who articulated his conviction that 'the truth is not neutral, it is a position'. While deeply interested in ensuring that peace return to Liberia, Francis was opposed to appeasement on legal, moral and religious grounds. He argued that the policy

rewarded crime, thus perpetuating the vicious cycle of violence, and rendering genuine national reconciliation difficult, if not almost impossible.

By mid 1994, the NPFL had established itself as dominant among the factions represented in the Transitional Government. Attempting to exploit this position, it suggested, with a degree of support from elements in ULIMO, that the AFL be divested of its status as the lawful national army and replaced with a new military arrangement comprising fighters from all factions. In a further attempt to extend their power, the same faction leaders proposed traditional patriarch Chief Tamba Tailor as their consensus candidate to replace civilian politician David Kpomakpor as head of the Transitional Government. Asserting their principled new position, the IFMC publicly dissented from both these proposals. With regard to the military, they highlighted the unprofessional and ill-disciplined conduct of the factional militias, and urged that military reconstitution should be deferred until the establishment of an elected government. Attempted any sooner, they asserted, it would merely complicate and delay the process of disarmament. Regarding Tailor, they argued that the traditional chief was simply too old to assert meaningful authority over the Transitional Government through the complex process of transition.

In 1994 and 1995, amid continued fighting in the rural areas, popular demonstrations at the slow pace of progress began to take place in Monrovia. One was organised by women's groups demanding that the warring factions and the international community redouble their efforts to establish peace. Others took the form of violent attacks on the homes of individuals, including factional

loyalists. Sensing the potential danger of these diverse actions and the need to develop a collective and achievable agenda, the IFMC convened a series of national consultations. These intended to bring various civic groups into a collective arrangement with a single agenda of 'disarmament, peace, free and fair elections'. The emerging consortium comprised around fifty organisations, some national in character, including religious institutions, women's organisations, students groups, workers, merchants, youth and professional bodies. It has since held regular discussions under the leadership of the IFMC.

In March 1995, this consortium staged a successful one day 'stay home' action. The objective of this was to signal to the factions and the international community that the majority of Liberians are peaceful, to pressurize militias to disarm, to galvanise civic institutions and to reduce the danger of legitimate protest finding expression through violence. On February 15 1996, six months after the Abuja Accord had drawn the leaders of the armed factions into government, a second such action was launched. This too was a resounding success which launched the 'Civic Disarmament Campaign' (CDC). Chaired by the IFMC, the CDC seeks to mobilise the civic component of Liberia into a single initiative specifically to effect disarmament. Togba-nah Tipoteh, Chairman of the Interest Groups of Liberia (IGL), director of Susukuu and a significant player within the CDC has said: 'The Liberian people have a workable strategy for ending the war and moving towards a genuine peace. This strategy is support for ECOMOG to create a peaceful space in which ordinary Liberians interact with fighters to convince thousands of them to disarm; from disarmament to democratic elections to sustainable democracy.'

While a collective national agenda has become imperative, individual civic groups have also organised their own programmes to address the peace process and disarmament. The Liberian Women's Initiative (LWI) has conducted meetings, participated in demonstrations, and presented a range of position statements to ECOWAS and the factional leaders. Prominent LWI activists were also present to voice their concerns at the talks in December 1994 which culminated in the signing of the Accra Clarification.

For their part, Susukuu and the IGL have been involved in organising programmes to encourage fighters to disarm by providing academic and sometimes health care opportunities. Together, they launched a 'school for guns' programme to support former combatants. However, despite early promise, this project was seriously undermined by the recent renewal of hostilities.

In accounting for the ongoing war and delays in disarmament, civic organisations have often emphasised the commercialization of the Liberian war. They have highlighted how recent accords have addressed neither the direct benefits accruing from the illegal plunder of Liberia's natural resources, nor the profits arising from illicit dealings between the factions and a range of international

commercial interests. Worse, by securing the factions within the framework of the Transitional Government, the peace process has legitimised these acts of pillage and assisted their formal institutionalisation. Mrs. Mary Brownell, leader of the LWI, argues that: 'disarmament will only be effective when Liberians themselves adopt a serious posture. There has been mere lip service to disarmament because of substantial material gains. We see the blatant destruction of property and the killing of innocent civilians yet we turn a blind eye and pretend that all is well.'

As the viewpoints and actions of civic groups have become more critical, they have experienced increasing antagonism from the armed factions, especially those most prominent in the Transitional Government who have most to lose. This is best demonstrated by the looting, harassment and death threats that forced all prominent civic leaders to flee Monrovia during the recent violence in the city. The forthright stance of these leaders has also undermined their mediatory role. This is demonstrated by the collapse, amid 'government' accusations of partiality, of IFMC attempts to mediate between Roosevelt Johnson and his enemies immediately prior to the renewal of hostilities. Despite all this however, the courageous stance of the IFMC and its

With the protection of ECOMOG, unarmed Liberians have influenced over 15,000 combatants to disarm without any massive people's actions. So far, combatants who are tired of fighting have been laying down their guns like plums falling from a plum tree without any shaking of the tree. As most fighters are tired of fighting, and we want disarmament to move fast, all we have to do is to take massive action now for disarmament and combatants will lay down their guns fast just like plenty plums falling with the shaking of the plum tree. In reaching out to combatants to influence them to disarm, we must reach out with love and some concrete help to assist them to return to civil society and get a good chance to build a new and better life.'

- Susukuu, early 1996

allies has also raised the public profile of Liberian civil society and achieved increasing respect for its capacities.

In assessing the work of the IFMC, it is important to note that the continuous interaction of prominent Islamic and Christian leaders on the Committee forestalled the emergence of religious disharmony as a component of the civil war. While the peace process remained committed to defending a degree of civilian sovereignty, the IFMC also demonstrated the required neutrality and authority to ensure that negotiations were open, ordered and productive. The more recent strategic shift from ideal neutrality to the insistence on moral and religious standards has preserved a residue of respect for non-violence and the rule of law within decaying Liberian society.

*The present
impasse
provides a fresh
opportunity to
strengthen civic
groups*

In the aftermath of the recent violence, it has become apparent that civil society must be better supported in its attempts to pressure for disarmament and national reconciliation. Now that the faction leaders have shown themselves unable to bury

their differences and cooperate for the good of all Liberians, there is fresh potential for a heightened civic role in the peace process. However, the recent renewal of hostilities decimated the resources of civic groups and forced their leaders to flee the country. The question now is how far

the international community will be willing and able to shift its peacemaking emphasis in order to rebuild and strengthen the role of non-violent, non-sectarian initiatives in the reconstitution of Liberia. ■