



## Dialogues in Sierra Leone heal old wounds

JOHN BANGURA



**A teamwork exercise with politicians and local leaders**

A series of eight three-day dialogues for parliamentarians, paramount chiefs and local leaders in the different regions of Sierra Leone concluded 5-7 December in the northern city of Makeni. The dialogues were conducted by Hope-Sierra Leone (H-SL), a local NGO affiliated to Initiatives of Change International, in partnership with the United Nations Development Programme. Deep divisions remain in the country, which suffered a decade-long civil war 1991-2002. Some regions had also suffered violent clashes around last year's closely fought elections which saw the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) replaced by a new administration from the All People's Congress (APC) party. In several places, the wholesale dismissal of civil servants allied to the SLPP was a sore point.

All dialogues were facilitated by representatives of the police, army and civil society drawn from H-SL's Moral Foundations for Democracy programme, giving a practical illustration of teamwork and unity. The dialogues looked at issues of identity, conflict resolution, corruption and the need for personal change based on moral values. Each morning started with a time of silent reflection and sharing in small groups, which gave a chance for participants to talk about the trauma they had experienced. One woman MP spoke of her hatred towards her uncle, the local chief, who had opposed her election and hired a militia group to 'eliminate' her. 'I never dreamed of forgiving him, but now I will forgive him because of the healing I have received.'

In Kenema, the administrative centre of the deeply divided Eastern Region, the dialogue was preceded by a peace march through the main streets for supporters of the three main political parties, and the planting of a 'peace tree'. Representing the President of Sierra Leone, Dr Victor Foh told the crowd that the President viewed the dialogue as a major step towards his vision of attitudinal and behavioural change in the country.

In Makeni, Chief Massa Yeli Tham said how impressed he was to hear of the new political tolerance achieved in the towns of Kono and Bo as a result of the dialogues. 'I was astonished to hear that APC supporters wore green (SLPP colour) whilst SLPP supporters wore red (APC colour). This gives hope for the country. Throughout my 70 years experience this has never happened.'

## We are in this together

Hundreds of community leaders from the Richmond region, USA, gathered on 20 November for the 12th annual Metropolitan Richmond Day breakfast and forum organized by IofC's Hope in the Cities programme. Speaking on the day's theme, 'Building trust in the region', Richard Vinroot, former mayor of Charlotte, emphasized that 'relationships are fundamental for doing anything good in your community'. He told how, through trust and collaboration, his city had forged a creative regional partnership and built a light rail system connecting 16 'cogs' in North and South Carolina. John Moeser, senior fellow at the Bonner Center for Civic Engagement, remarked that citizens need to hold their leaders accountable. 'People want public transportation and good integrated schools. We want to know people who are different from ourselves. If the people lead, the leaders will follow.'

## Rajmohan Gandhi is new President of Initiatives of Change International

Professor Rajmohan Gandhi has been unanimously chosen as the new President of Initiatives of Change International, commencing January 2009. Gandhi is best known as biographer and grandson of Mahatma Gandhi. He has also used his academic and personal life to foster better relationships between Hindus and Muslims, and has a long association with IofC. The distinguished Indian academic and activist takes over from Mohamed Sahnoun, former Special Advisor to the Secretary General of the United Nations, who will continue as Chairman of the Caux Forum for Human Security.



**Rajmohan Gandhi**

DALEWAIN

# News in Brief

## Win honourably, lose graciously



Launch of the Clean Election Campaign in Ghana

'Ghana has consolidated its democracy,' said the European Union's chief observer after Ghana went to the polls on 7 December to elect a new president and parliament. Prior to the vote, 80,000 copies of a simple educational pamphlet were distributed via churches around the country as part of a Clean Election Campaign run by IofC Ghana. The campaign, on the theme 'Win honourably, lose graciously', was supported by the Methodist Church and the Ghana Journalists Association. The pamphlet gave information about what to look for in a good leader, warnings about corruption and a form inviting voters to pledge to act with integrity and refrain from violence. The campaign also involved radio discussions, a dialogue for Christian and Muslim youth and a peace walk. A run-off vote for the presidency will take place at the end of December after a close first round.

## Farming with a difference

Farmers from the UK, Switzerland, France, Uganda, Tanzania and Kenya took part in a 'peace and reconciliation' workshop, 1-4 December in Bungoma, Kenya, organized by IofC's International Farmers' Dialogue. 'When guns are roaring and bombs are exploding, you cannot farm,' said Julius S Khakula, opening the workshop. 'Every farmer has a vested interest in peace.' The Kenyans had been affected by the post-election violence that rocked the country at the beginning of the year. Anglican Bishop and former Chairman of the National Council of Churches of Kenya, Eliud Wabukala, gave his experience of his involvement in the process that led to the restoration of peace in the country. He warned that the country has not come out of the woods yet, and that the process of healing and reconciliation must go on.

## Cambodian youth camp

The Initiatives of Change Association, Cambodia, held a youth camp for 50 in Koh Kong, 29 October to 2 November, on the theme 'Plan our future today'. The basic ideas of IofC were introduced along with activities designed to help participants

discover more about themselves and to improve self esteem. Workshops were held on leadership, team building, nationalism and ethnicity, dance and tips for effective learning. Follow-up programmes will include visiting rural areas to help bridge the gulf between rural and urban populations, and preparing food for some of Phnom Penh's street people.

## Action for Life in India

MIKE BROWN



The Action for Life team meeting Tibetan children in Dharamsala, India

While terrorists were wreaking havoc in Mumbai, a team from Action for Life was exploring the principles of non-violent struggle with young Tibetan activists in Dharamsala, base of the Dalai Lama. Tibetan 'Prime Minister in exile' Samdong Rinpoche received the group, reminding them that 'compassionate coexistence is the only way'. Action for Life is a seven-month leadership development programme in Asia involving 21 young people from 14 countries. Four inter-generational teams are moving through north and south India, Gujarat, and the North-East states, meeting change-makers in various sectors and sharing their own experiences of transformation.

## Healing family roots

The *Morung Express* in violence-torn Nagaland, North East India, has reported on a series of workshops on 'Healing family roots', conducted in Dimapur and Kohima in late November by Nandor and Wendy Lim from Malaysia and Liu Ren-Jou from Taiwan who have been running similar programmes in their respective countries. The article notes the connection between what goes on inside the family and the problems of violence and trauma in the wider society: 'The effectiveness of the workshop is evident from the moving acknowledgements made by many of the participants of their own pains, deprivations and hurts, and finding release and healing by acknowledging the pains and sufferings of those they have blamed or judged. A power from heaven itself seems to be released when human beings find the grace to say, "I have seen only my side of the pain so far. I now understand..."'

# CALENDAR

## MELBOURNE, AUSTRALIA

30 January – 8 February  
Life Matters Course

## KUALA LUMPUR, MALAYSIA

26 February – 1 March  
Tools for Change conference

## RICHMOND, USA

27 February – 8 March  
Connecting Communities  
Trustbuilding Programme

## CAUX, SWITZERLAND

International Conferences  
see [www.caux.ch/2009](http://www.caux.ch/2009)

9-15 July

Learning to Live in a Multicultural World  
and  
Leading Change for a Sustainable World

17-22 July

Caux Forum for Human Security

24-29 July

Trust and Integrity in the Global Economy – a people-focused approach to globalization

9-15 August

Tools for Change – learning to be peacemakers

## SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA

30 Sept – 4 October  
Creators of Peace, international conference

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## PEOPLE BUILDING TRUST

### Nigeria's latest export: peace

*A Muslim imam and a Christian pastor: former enemies, now internationally renowned peacemakers. Two Nigerians have been taking their message of hope around the world. Mike Lowe reports.*

In a suburb of Melbourne a young man waits patiently in line to speak to Imam Ashafa. The crowd in this modern auditorium has mostly dispersed, yet around each of the main speakers – an imam and a pastor from Nigeria – many are gathered, trying to catch a word. Finally, after nearly half an hour, the young man gets his chance to tell the imam that he had hated ‘your people’ – the Muslims – so much. ‘I’ve done things [to your people.] You changed my world today. Please forgive me.’

Nigeria is Africa’s largest country, with a population of 140 million. It is one of a number of African countries where Christian and Muslim populations live side by side. Imam Muhammad Ashafa and Pastor James Wuye began their present work 14 years ago, after leading rival militias in clashes between Christians and Muslims that killed many thousands. In the fighting, the imam’s spiritual teacher and two cousins were killed. The pastor lost his right hand. Now they say that the true Muslim forgives and that the Christian cannot preach hatred.

**‘You changed my world today.  
Please forgive me.’**

Their work came to the attention of IofC’s FLT films in London. The resulting documentary, *The Imam and the Pastor*, tells the story of their remarkable

change, from sworn enemies to creating and heading the Muslim-Christian Interfaith Mediation Centre, based in their home city of Kaduna, northern Nigeria, which has been credited with saving many lives. Their model for religious harmony has been adopted by the Nigerian Government.

*The Imam and the Pastor* was launched in December 2006 at UN headquarters in New York, in the British Houses of Parliament and at the International Conference Centre in Nigeria itself. The film won first prize (short documentary section) at the Africa World Documentary Film Festival in St Louis, Missouri.

2008 has been a remarkable year for the imam and the pastor, taking their film and its message around the globe. In addition to their ongoing mediation work in Nigeria, they have been invited twice to Kenya’s Rift Valley Province to help with trust-building work between tribes involved in post-election violence earlier in the year. Thanks to a grant from the US Institute of Peace, this work has been filmed with a view to producing a follow-up documentary looking more specifically at their peace-building methodology.

In January the two men travelled to western Canada to engage with ethnically diverse communities in seven cities. Their example inspired Imam Syed Soharwardy from Calgary to set out on a six-month ‘walk for peace’ across Canada enlisting Muslims and Christians to wage a ‘jihad’ (struggle) against violence. Soharwardy told reporters that he took inspiration from





**Imam Ashafa and Pastor Wuye join people from Burnt Forest, Kenya, to celebrate the opening of a Peace Office in the town. The festivities, which were the culmination of several days of intensive mediation by Ashafa and Wuye, were covered by national newspapers and television. Burnt Forest was the area worst affected by inter-ethnic violence following Presidential elections at the end of December, 2007.**

*The Imam and the Pastor* because it portrayed 'two faith leaders who would continue to maintain that their own faith was the one they would proclaim, while committing themselves to eschew violence against the other's leadership and beliefs'.

A few weeks later the two men returned briefly, at the request of the Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT) for a screening of the film to DFAIT and other government department officials and representatives of NGOs. Introducing the men, David Angell, Director General of the Africa Bureau and former High Commissioner to Nigeria, said that of those working to effect change, the imam and the pastor 'are not only among the most inspiring but among the most effective'.

April and May saw the premieres of the French and German language versions of the film in Geneva and Berlin respectively, followed by a French premiere at the International Salon for Peace Initiatives in Vilette, Paris. The two largest circulation newspapers in French-speaking Switzerland each carried major articles on 'The imam and the pastor: two war-leaders converted to forgiveness'. The film was later shown on Swiss television, in German and Italian. It has also been shown on Swedish TV.

### ***'It is not about compromise. It is about creating a space for the other.'***

October saw the men return to Geneva, and then to Paris, for screenings of the film at Cinéma Verité, the world's most prestigious celebration of films that highlight humanitarian and social causes. Other guests included Queen Noor of Jordan. Nobel Laureate Wangari Maathai, IofC International President Mohamed Sahnoun, Bob Geldof and Meg Ryan.

A few weeks later the Nigerians headed to Australia for a three-week tour of four state capitals and the federal capital, hosted by Initiatives of Change. Interviewing them on ABC's popular *Late Night Live*

programme, veteran broadcaster Phillip Adams was moved to declare, 'I am talking to two people who are, quite clearly, amongst the most important people in the world at this moment of our troubled history.'

In Melbourne, their visit had the backing of the Islamic Council of Victoria, the Victorian Council of Churches and the Victorian Multicultural Commission, helping their message reach Christians and Muslims alike.

In Brisbane, some came armed with scripture to find fault with Christians and Muslims working together. 'We don't have full agreement on beliefs and values,' they responded, 'but we are children of Abraham and sons of Adam and as such have a duty to each other as fellow humans.... It is not about compromise. It is about creating a space for the other.'

Imam Ashafa explains: 'The Koran teaches that Islam is inclusive and acknowledges other religions. All those who believe in God have their reward. Mischievous religious leaders with the help of political interference have led people to follow hate and twisted the teachings.'

Pastor Wuye responds, 'The Bible says to pursue peace with all men, and holiness, without which we cannot see God. When Ashafa sought to show respect and compassion and seek forgiveness I was troubled and wept: "How can I forgive this enemy of mine who has killed my countrymen and caused the loss of my right hand in the fighting?" Just as his prophet had led him to forgiveness, so did Jesus challenge me.'

Ashafa acknowledges that it has been hard. 'We are held in suspicion in some parts of our communities. The biggest enemy we have to overcome is ignorance.'

In Canberra, the two Nigerians were special guest speakers at a seminar for 200 following the 22nd annual National Prayer Breakfast in Parliament House. Never before had a Muslim taken such a prominent part in this event. When asked what each had had to compromise in order to work with the other, both replied with an emphatic 'nothing at all', which drew spontaneous applause.

From Australia they travelled to Cyprus where they were panellists at the annual 'World Prayer for Peace' sponsored by the Catholic St Egidio Community and the Orthodox Church of Cyprus. In this small country, tragically divided between Greek/Christian and Turkish/Muslim communities, their experience was especially relevant.

Communal relations in some parts of Nigeria remain tense. The Interfaith Mediation Centre is on constant stand by to send task-forces of imams and pastors, trained by Ashafa and Wuye, to deal with ethno-religious conflict anywhere in the country.

The incontestable message of the imam and the pastor is that peaceful coexistence between Christians and Muslims is possible in Nigeria and throughout the world.