



Solomon Islands ex-militants commit to work for peace

A group of 28 former commanders of the Isatabu Freedom Movement (IFM) took part this June in a course on peace and community building organized by Winds of Change, as Initiatives of Change is known in the Solomon Islands.

It was the first time the group had come together since the Townsville Peace Agreement in 2000.

From 1998 until 2003, when Australia sent in troops, the Solomon Islands suffered a period of violence and lawlessness with many killings and thousands displaced. Much of the fighting took place on the island of Guadalcanal between the Guale IFM forces and people from Malaita. When some Guale militants refused to sign the Townsville Peace Agreement the IFM began to fragment, leading to further clashes. It was these wounds inflicted by Guals on Guals that the course aimed to heal.

Initially the group was tense. Fingers were pointed. 'You killed my brother'. 'You burned down my cousin's village!' But tensions gave way to a realization that all were both victims and perpetrators and 'change must start with ourselves'. By the end of the week, the men were committing



MIKE LOWE

Former militants

themselves to go back to their communities to work for reconciliation.

Joseph Sangu, one of the former supreme commanders, said, 'Our eyes are now opened. We should never point fingers. We need everyone to be involved in the reconciliation process.' Leone Laku Koio, who was a top IFM administrator during the troubles, said 'We realized that true reconciliation needs those of us who were actively involved in the unrest and the victims... we cannot wait upon our leaders to reconcile with other leaders. The problem was ours and only we ourselves can solve it.'

Beyond tribalism

In May two Peace Circles workshops took place in Kenya, gathering 24 women from six tribes, including leaders from both government and community/village level as well as local NGOs, and farmers. Kenya's post-election violence led to over 1,000 deaths and up to 600,000 being displaced.

Half way through, a young journalist was asking herself, 'Why do I hate people?' Another decided to forgive her brother-in-law who had led the killing of Kikuyus in his area. The workshop ended with the women pledging themselves to 'stand up and speak for peace'.

Three of the women invited IofC's Kenya I Care campaign to speak to schools in Kalenjin-dominated Eldoret. Two brave young Kikuyus responded, sharing with the students their own decisions to combat corruption and tribalism starting in their own lives. Returning to their hosts after an exhausting day, the two 'peace visitors' found the village elders gathered. 'The men were very keen to make us feel safe,' writes Ann Njeri. One confessed his shame at what his people had done, saying 'not all Kalenjins are killers'.

One of the worst atrocities was the burning down of a church providing shelter to women and children fleeing the violence. The minister in charge, Rev Stephen Mburu, spoke at the IofC Kenya retreat at the end of May. There were many hours of listening to each others' stories – the Kalenjin

who faced death for protecting Kikuyus; the man shot with a poisoned arrow in his ankle who now said 'my heart has been healed'. Mburu said it was the first time he had been so happy since the attack, in which he was also badly beaten. Although he had already forgiven the attackers he now 'felt the great need of completely letting those feelings off my heart and to forgive completely.'



ANN NJERI

Peace Circles

News in Brief

Liverpool's Big Hope

UK's Liverpool Hope University hosted a Global Youth Congress, The Big Hope, in June, attended by 600 from 55 countries. IofC proposed several international speakers who spoke on 'Faith relationships across the world': Sushobha Barve, active in reconciliation work in Kashmir; Niketu Iralu, who works for peace in his native Nagaland; and Ramez Salamé from Beirut, who has done similar work in Lebanon. Also speaking were Imam Ashafa and Pastor Wuye, Joint Directors of the Inter-Faith Mediation Centre in Kaduna, Nigeria, and featured in *The Imam and the Pastor* made by IofC's FLT films. In his closing address, the Dean of Liverpool Cathedral said the imam and pastor had 'worked together to transform an area of despair to an area of hope and development.... hope is born of God, practised in courage.' A few days later, several of these same speakers participated in a weekend conference, 'Conversations on Trust-Building', organized by IofC in Derbyshire, UK. Abdool Kadir Gooljar, President of the Muslim Society of Britain, told the conference: 'I strongly believe that our work with Initiatives of Change is building a strong platform to bring love and peace between different faiths and build a better world for the children of tomorrow.'

Lessons from the civil war

IofC's Hope in the Cities programme partnered with the American Civil War Center (ACWC) in Richmond, Virginia, in a pilot program for students to learn about the Civil War and explore through dialogue its continuing effects today.

The ACWC presents the story of the Civil War from three perspectives: the Union, the Confederate and African American. Mark Howell, director of education at ACWC, said the organizers 'were so encouraged by how the students responded to the programme that we intend to expand the opportunity'.

Art into action

Among the crowds perusing Richmond's monthly 'art walk', several hundred were encouraged to create their own art. Hope in the Cities invited people to reflect on 'Where do you see injustice in Richmond?' and 'What would a more just community look like?' and then to paint their vision. This creative dialogue spurred insightful commentary on the challenges facing the community and hopeful visions for its



future. It also introduced the work of Hope in the Cities to a new, younger population who were encouraged to engage in efforts to turn these visions into reality.

From Lebanon to the world

As part of Pangea Day, 'a global event bringing the world together through film', an interview with two former Lebanese militia commanders, now active with IofC, was screened by 92 TV stations around the world. Assaad Chaftari and Mohieddine Shihab had fought for Christian and Muslim militias respectively during Lebanon's civil war. Asked how they had managed to come together, Chaftari said that his first steps involved changing many aspects of his personal life. This meant seeing others as they really were and not as he wanted them to be. This led to him making a public statement in the press asking forgiveness from his victims and their families, and forgiving those who had harmed him. Referring to recent violence in Lebanon, the interviewer said that they were 'living proof' that there could be a move forward.

Palestinian apology draws Lebanese response

At the initiative of members of the IofC team in Lebanon, a letter was recently published in the leading Arabic newspaper *Al-Safir* in response to the PLO's 'Palestinian Declaration for Lebanon' which outlines proposals for future relations with Lebanon, and includes an unconditional apology for 'any damage [the Palestinians] have caused to our dear Lebanon' since 1948. In response, 44 Christian Lebanese signed an 'Appeal to our Palestinian brothers in Lebanon', apologizing for the 'unjustified acts' committed by Christians during the war which led to the deaths of innocent Palestinians. The following day, the Lebanese press reported the PLO representative in Lebanon saying, 'We are very pleased with the exchanged apologies' which 'constitute a good beginning for mutual understanding of the need for the Lebanese for stability and the need for Palestinians to return to their homes.'

CALENDAR

CAUX, SWITZERLAND

International conferences:

3-9 July

Global Servant-Leadership

11-16 July

Trust and Integrity in the Global Economy

18-23 July

Addressing the Root Causes of Human Insecurity

25 July-1 August

Tools for Change

3-10 August

Renewal Arts: Can artists mend a broken world?

12-17 August

Developing Cultural Dialogue

www.caux.ch/2008

KOREA

9-16 August

14th Asia Pacific Youth Conference

SOUTH AFRICA

20 September-15 November

Harambee leadership training

BOLOGNA, ITALY

9-13 October

Between over abundance and famine

RICHMOND, USA

6 November

Metropolitan Richmond Day

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Members of the Initiative Dialogue team

PEOPLE BUILDING TRUST

The foundation of shared citizenship

In suburban Paris, residents are learning to engage in dialogue to address the split developing between the West and the Muslim world.

Frédéric and Nathalie Chavanne report

At the beginning of our 21st century, how to live together with our differences seems to be a growing challenge. Globalization is not helping to smooth out our possible conflicts but, on the contrary, seems to be arousing reflexes about affirming identity. In the face of a sense of insecurity or injustice in the world as we see it today, people who are similar or share the same interests are strongly tempted to stick together. Is this a threat to social cohesion in our countries or to peace in the world?

'I have found allies with whom to build a form of citizenship, together with the tools and determination to do it.'

In particular there seems to be a split developing between people or countries of the Muslim faith and those whom one could broadly describe as the West. The attacks in the United States in September 2001, followed by those in Madrid, Bali and elsewhere, the war in Iraq and the Middle East, the controversy over the publication of cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed, the Pope's declaration at Ratisbonne, the persecution of Christian minorities in countries with a Muslim majority: all give the impression of a worsening situation. In France it is becoming urgent to forge links between the different social and cultural elements which are separated by walls of prejudice, fear or mistrust.

In the French Initiatives of Change team some 20 French of North African and 'native' stock try to bring an answer through an Initiative Dialogue programme. Ten years of a faithful, listening approach and availability, despite busy lives, have enabled them to know and appreciate each other, to talk at a deep level and to create relationships of trust. Joyful, convivial parties have played a part, especially around generous meals offered by Muslim families. Particularly memorable was the Christmas party organized a couple of years ago by Christians at the request of their Muslim friends, who wanted to know more about the deep meaning of this religious feast.

Since September 2001 the group has instituted 'heart-pouring' meetings to reveal the inner turmoil aroused by the difficult events referred to above. Openness but also humility about oneself or the failings of one's cultural group are key. 'The deeper one goes into what one feels, naming clearly the hurts, the more we experience one another at a deep level,' emphasizes Alain, an elder in the group. 'In some of our discussions, we like to be quiet after we have given full rein to words and emotions,' adds Nathalie. 'Together we are then ready for the unexpected idea or sudden flash of wisdom coming from one or other of us in the silence. This helps us to put things into perspective, not to be driven by our bitterness or first reactions and to remain, each at our own level, builders of bridges between people. It offers an antidote, casting out such old demons as the partisan spirit, the doubt whether we will ever come





to understand one another, insidious mistrust of the other person, the desire to convert that person to one's own point of view.'

'Thanks to this group, I have moved on in my mind from the status of foreign immigrant to that of French citizen,' confides Raoudha, Tunisian mother and trainer of professional counsellors in integration. 'I have found allies with whom to build a form of citizenship, together with the tools and determination to do it.'

'Meeting my North African friends, many of whom had to leave their country, has led me to re-evaluate the privilege of having a country where I feel at home,' explains Nathalie, who lives with her family in a comfortable town west of Paris. 'I have wondered what kind of France I would have belonged to if I had not been able to create meaningful links with people from a culture quite different from mine, transcending images and ideas inherited from a particular family and colonial past.'

Erwan, who is now coordinator of the Initiative Dialogue programme, remembers his first meeting with the dialogue circle nearly two years earlier. It was a decisive beginning for this young engineer. 'The theme was to share one of the fundamental values of my life. I had never had the opportunity to participate in exchanges in the presence of women who were wearing the Islamic headscarf,' he recalls. 'I

'The deeper one goes into what one feels, naming clearly the hurts, the more we experience one another at a deep level.'

was surprised and touched to see them nodding as I described what was important to me.'

For Fékri, Raoudha's husband, 'the value of Initiative Dialogue lies in the art of initiating change within people, helping them to work on how they see themselves and others and sharpening their sense of responsibility in relation to their environment.'

These thoughts have led to initiatives. Fékri, who teaches English in Coignières, which is set in

a large Parisian *banlieue* (suburb) in which 70% of the population is of immigrant origin, set up an association to help Muslims find ways to meet specific needs such as setting up school support and establishing a prayer room in a place granted by the local authorities. Béchir and his wife Jamila founded the association Espace Savoir Synergie (Experience Synergy Group) which aims to support young Muslim executives who want to actively play their role in living together in harmony in France. Activities such as a visit to the European Parliament, meeting members of parliament and exploring the cathedral in Chartres, a French architectural and historical jewel, have helped them to understand better some of the constituent elements of their adoptive country. Samia is involved in training Muslim Scouts using her experience with the Initiatives of Change programme, Education for Peace. Raoudha provides support for marginalized youngsters in her neighbourhood.

At the end of May 2008 the group gave a presentation at the International Salon of Peace Initiatives, held in Paris as part of the International Decade for a Culture of Peace. The theme of the presentation was 'Do we have to be alike to share the same citizenship?' 'No,' replies Nathalie, 'but we must agree on a number of points: I will mention four of them. Firstly, we must hold onto the desire for a shared future and unite around a common project. All of us here dream of a society extending to the far corners of Europe in which we can live together in harmony.'

'Secondly, we must welcome diversity as a sign of the times, a point of no return. We can even speak of humanity's heritage, which we want to respect and learn how to manage. But it would be counterproductive if we were too quick to judge those who struggle to accept this. All the material and social changes which have affected our ways of life over the last 30 years have shaken the roots of individuals, families and society to such an extent that it is understandable if many people feel threatened by the irruption of new cultures within their society of origin. We want to contribute to mutual acceptance of differences in this country.'

'Thirdly, we must be open to learning and try to understand the other person's inner logic. My thoughts and the way I see things are not the be-all and end-all. Lastly, we must unite on the basis of common values which speak to the hearts of everyone.'

The great challenge for members of the Initiative Dialogue team is to spread what they have learned. It is also their ambition to define a new European citizenship which would allow everyone, while remaining faithful to their own heritage, to be open and to adapt to the difference and diversity which are now the defining mark of our society.

Translated by Mary Jones and Lyndsay Collinge