

Civil society and peacebuilding:

The role of the Inter-Religious Council of Sierra Leone

by Thomas Mark Turay

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Among the numerous players involved in shaping the Lomé Peace Agreement, the Inter-Religious Council of Sierra Leone (IRCSL) stands out as the most highly visible and effective non-governmental bridge builder between the warring factions and a population devastated and divided by more than eight years of violence.

With Muslims making up an estimated sixty per cent of Sierra Leone's 4.5 million people and Christians another fifteen to twenty per cent, the mosques and churches and their agencies were key players in the spiritual, cultural and socio-economic development of Sierra Leone before and after independence. Despite spiritual differences between Muslims, Christians and believers in traditional religions, tolerance, co-operation and inter-faith marriages have been hallmarks of religious practice in Sierra Leone. The outbreak of war brought the two major religious groups closer together than ever before. Ordinary Muslims and Christians began to urge their religious leaders to act to end the violence and they in turn condemned the war and urged the RUF to lay down its arms. Churches and mosques around the country preached against the barbaric nature of the violence, prompting rebel forces to target religious leaders and institutions. The rebels burnt schools, killed some missionaries and, on several occasions, abducted religious leaders. As the attacks intensified, it became evident that Muslims and Christians needed to co-operate to a greater extent and use their religious influence and mandate to prevail on both the rebels and the government to find a peaceful resolution.

Inception

In April 1997, religious leaders – with the active support and encouragement of the World Conference on Religion and Peace (WCRP) – established the IRCSL. Some of the founders had been active throughout the Abidjan peace



talks in 1996, earning the respect of both the government and the RUF in the process. The Council was inspired primarily by religious beliefs in the promotion of social justice; secondly, by the example of the Inter-Religious Council in Liberia, which was very vocal against human rights abuses during and after Liberia's civil war; and, thirdly, by calls from their membership to be more proactive in the peace process. Organizational members include the Supreme Islamic Council, the Sierra Leone Muslim Congress, the Federation of Muslim Women Associations in Sierra Leone, the Council of Imams, and the Sierra Leone Islamic Missionary Union. Christian members include the Roman Catholic Church, the Pentecostal Churches Council and the Council of Churches in Sierra Leone (an umbrella for eighteen Protestant denominations).

Testing the waters

On 23 May 1997, a Council delegation met with President Kabbah "to urge him and remind him about the worsening security situation in the country and to put IRCSL up-front in trying to resolve the conflict", according to Co-Chair Alimamy P. Koroma (also the Secretary General of the Council of Churches). But the initiative came too late to forestall the coup by junior army officers two days later. The IRCSL leaders realized that civilians looked to them to use their influence in convincing the military to resolve the crisis peacefully. They actively

pursued dialogue with the coup leaders and listened to their complaints, while at the same time expressing condemnation of the coup and human rights abuses committed by the junta. They tried hard to convince the coup leaders to listen to the bulk of Sierra Leoneans and the international community and return the country to civilian rule. They also sought to persuade them of the resolve of civil society to sustain its campaign of civil disobedience and the commitment of the international community to isolate the new regime.

The Council's efforts in the ill-fated peace talks in Conakry in October 1997 had virtually no impact on the course taken by the military, which remained defiant of domestic and international pressure until it was overthrown by ECOMOG in February 1998. Nonetheless, there is little doubt that the Council's high visibility and engagement with the junta prevented greater abuses against civilians. With the restoration of civilian government in March 1998, the Council conducted nation-wide thanksgiving services. But it reacted warily to the government's two-track approach to ending the conflict – which combined military force with negotiations.

The Council's relative silence was broken when rebel advances throughout the eastern and northern provinces increased in late 1998. Attacks on religious establishments climaxed in the attack on Freetown in January 1999 when rebels and AFRC soldiers burned

many churches and mosques. Members of certain religious groups, especially Catholics, were abducted and some were murdered. Immediately after the attack had been repelled, Francis Okelo, the UN Secretary General's Special Envoy, turned to the IRCSL as a key player in the search for peace. He encouraged the Council to initiate a dialogue between President Kabbah and RUF leader Foday Sankoh, then being held in custody in Freetown. The IRCSL reciprocated by not challenging the UN, ECOWAS and Western diplomatic support for a combined military and negotiation strategy.

Growing influence

In early February 1999, the IRCSL released a statement: "The Council is alarmed at the brutality, inhumanity and barbarity unleashed by these rebels and condemns unequivocally all such heinous activities and their perpetrators, as they go against God's plan for mankind, whom he made in His own image." The Council also appealed to the "leadership of the RUF to demonstrate their sincerity of purpose and love for their country and its people by accepting the invitation (of Kabbah) to engage in purposeful dialogue leading to the final and lasting resolution of the crisis in Sierra Leone."

The statement signalled the relaunching of the Council's earlier campaign for a negotiated settlement and its expansion from private lobbying and public advocacy to a multi-faceted approach. One tack was to convene paramount chiefs, tribal heads and parliamentarians in a series of consultative meetings to articulate their views without fear of a government backlash.

By the end of February, the Council issued another statement, agreeing with Kabbah that the Abidjan Accord serve as a basis for future negotiations, but arguing that it be reviewed. It warned that the government should "talk less and listen more, and that the people of Sierra Leone should be given the opportunity to hear from the RUF and its allies what they seek". In concrete terms, the Council recommended the convening of a national consultative conference, the closing of the border with Liberia, and the appointment of a roving regional peace ambassador. It suggested prudence in reintegrating former soldiers into the army.

Presidential meetings

The Council then initiated a number of meetings with Kabbah to 'consolidate the existing relationship' and to build greater confidence between the Council and the government, as it pressed to gain access to Sankoh. In early March, a delegation was allowed to meet the RUF leader at a military barracks in Freetown – a test of the Council's neutrality and the level of trust it commanded from both the government and Sankoh. The delegation

briefed Sankoh on the previous consultations with Kabbah, the chiefs and civil society groups. They pointed out that they recognized the RUF leader as one of the key players in the peace process. In turn, Sankoh used the occasion to communicate his stated willingness to negotiate a peaceful settlement, as well as his positions and views on how that should happen. To ensure that Sankoh was serious, the Council pleaded with him to authorize the release of some abducted children and child soldiers. Sankoh requested that Council members provide humanitarian assistance in the form of food and medicines to his rebels.

The Council demonstrated its goodwill by providing clothing, blankets, and sanitary kits to surrendered soldiers, while providing relief food to civilians. "The IRCSL made radio contacts with a cross-section of rebels in the bush, counselled them on the need for peace, visited and met with them in their base in the bush to continue discussions on the way to peace," Alimamy P. Koroma said. "These activities helped to consolidate real confidence and thus marked the beginning of actual dialogue between the RUF and the government of Sierra Leone through the kind facilitation of the IRCSL." Sankoh was allowed to talk with his field commanders by radio and with the international media. Rebel field commanders responded by releasing fifty-four abducted children. Meanwhile, at the urging of the Council, the government accepted the notion of a neutral venue for eventual negotiations and more frequent meetings between government representatives and the RUF.

Liberia

In mid-April, a large delegation of Council members travelled to Liberia to highlight the need to engage President Charles Taylor in the peace process, as well as to meet with RUF members in Monrovia (including spokesman Omrie Golley and military advisor Ibrahima Bah). In the emotional encounter, "the two groups met, they embraced, they were all talking about peace, they want peace for their country," Liberian Information Minister Joe Mulbah reported. "We heard some of them saying 'We are Sierra Leoneans, why continue to kill ourselves? It is time for peace for our country'." When the IRCSL delegation, along with its Liberian counterpart, met with Taylor, they appealed to him "to join the government and people of Sierra Leone in the search for peace in Sierra Leone. When there is war in Sierra Leone there cannot be peace anywhere in the sub-region." Taylor "promised to help restore peace to Sierra Leone."

Unsurprisingly, the Council's activities provoked sharp criticism from some civil society groups, local newspapers, politicians and many ordinary Sierra Leoneans opposed to negotiations with the rebels. The visit to Monrovia was particularly controversial because of

Liberian support for the RUF. Yet it ultimately led the Kabbah government to rethink its initial rejection of dialogue with Taylor and to solicit his co-operation. The ECOWAS, OAU, UN, UK and US governments' representatives agreed with the IRCSL's position regarding Taylor and he eventually took part in the Lomé negotiations.

Lomé

The initial interventions by religious leaders led the RUF to invite the Council to its internal consultations in Lomé prior to formal negotiations. As the actual talks got underway, a fifteen-member team, including representatives from the IRCSL, WCRP and Norwegian Church Aid, was on hand to provide guidance and act as 'informal mediators', primarily to build confidence. The Council's main strategy was to remain neutral and supportive of the mediation process. Recognized by regional foreign ministers for having 'kick started' the peace process, IRCSL members became integral facilitators of the talks. During negotiating impasses, Council members acted as 'go-betweens' to convince the parties to return to the table. They also used caucusing to air critical issues raised by the parties and to encourage them to co-operate and work towards finding common ground. In moments when the parties failed to see eye-to-eye on certain burning issues, such as power-sharing and the removal of regional military forces from Sierra Leone, the Council members resorted to preaching and praying to sway resistant hard liners. Beyond the talks, the IRCSL played a key role in helping the UN to secure the release of more abducted children, as a sign of the RUF's commitment to the peace process. After the signing of the agreement, Council members collaborated with the UN and other agencies to conduct an emergency relief needs assessment in RUF-held territory.

The Council's active role in encouraging and promoting the negotiations that resulted in the Lomé Agreement was recognized by giving the IRCSL a predominant role in the Council of Elders and Religious Leaders, which was to be established to mediate disputes of interpretation of the accord. However, the Council was never set up. IRCSL members did become involved in reconciliation, relief, human rights training, democratization, disarmament, and reintegration programmes, especially of child combatants and children affected by the war.

The IRCSL organized the free distribution of thousands of copies of the agreement to civil society groups and local and international NGOs. It also continued to reach out to the civil populace and the rebels, primarily through biweekly 'experience-sharing' sessions on various themes of the agreement. The sessions provided a forum for discussions regarding the implementation of the

agreement and issues related to the post-war period in Sierra Leone. They also provided an opportunity for combatants to ask for forgiveness, while allowing people who had suffered to articulate their feelings about atrocities and other abuses. Participants included representatives from the RUF, junta military, government agencies, the media, international and local NGOs, paramount chiefs, politicians and the general public.

Achievements

Among Sierra Leone's civil society groups, the IRCSL showed great initiative and played a significant role in facilitating dialogue and building confidence among the different parties to the conflict, both prior to and after the Lomé peace talks. The IRCSL earned the respect of civil society, the parties to the conflict and the international community. The Council achieved this status through a variety of actions such as consultative meetings with all the key players in the crisis, press releases, communiqués, experience sharing, prayers, and the preaching of God's message of repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation.

Rev. Fornah Usman, a Wesleyan minister from Makeni and IRCSL member, conveyed the spiritual dimension of the Council's approach: "We are always preaching the ministry of reconciliation. No matter what those guys may have done, there is room on the side of the Lord to forgive them and to bring them back on the road they are supposed to be on. We don't want to take sides in a conflict, because as religious ministers we are supposed to be on top of the situation. If any of the factions is not doing something right, we must be in a position to tell them the wrong things they are doing. For those things that are correct we can applaud them."

It is extremely difficult to determine the relative impact of the IRCSL vis-à-vis the other players who facilitated the peace talks. The Council took the bold step to initiate the first meeting between Sankoh and Kabbah after the invasion of Freetown. Their visit to Monrovia prior to the Lomé talks helped to recognize Charles Taylor as a key player capable of prevailing on the rebels to lay down their arms. It also provided recognition of the improved relationship between the two governments. Perhaps the greatest impact of the Council's involvement was in helping to build confidence between the rebels and civil society – a trust heavily shaken, however, by the return to military confrontation in May 2000.