



Early civil society peace initiatives

The official diplomatic efforts that eventually drew the government of Sierra Leone and the RUF into formal peace negotiations and led to the Abidjan Accord in 1996 were preceded and complemented by a range of other initiatives aimed at a peaceful settlement of the conflict. A diverse cast of civil society groups and individuals were important at different stages, some active in mobilizing public opinion in favour of peace and democratization, while others operated in the shadows cast by the high-level international political manoeuvring that led to the Abidjan Accord.

Despite initial efforts and good intentions, civil society was to remain largely on the fringes of the actual negotiations as they developed in 1996. A return to democratic government became the main focus of many organizations, while international support for Sierra Leonean civil society organizations was often not sustained. With hindsight it is evident that civil society energies and resources became concentrated more on personal and organizational survival than on solving the country's continuing crisis. The fact that virtually all the negotiations took place outside Sierra Leone also handicapped civil society involvement.

Family, Bo District, March 2000

Source: Lennart Jahansen

The Mano River Bridge initiative

While women's groups and prominent individuals began to organize to promote both a transition to democracy and an end to the war, the seeds of a less-well publicized, civilian-led initiative were germinating among community leaders in displacement camps sheltering southerners who had been forced to flee the RUF. In late 1994, the NPRC sanctioned a peace overture led by community leaders from Soro-Gbema chiefdom on the Liberian border. In mid-December and January 1995, a group of local leaders walked across the Mano River Bridge into RUF-controlled territory carrying banners bearing peace messages in English and Arabic and singing Islamic songs. One of the initiative's instigators, John Massaquoi, wrote later: "We assembled at the edge of the bridge on the Liberian side, began singing and started moving bravely, but never sure if we would be back alive. We got there alive. We met the rebels."

That day, three members of the fifteen-person delegation – Musu Kpaka (the mother of the local RUF commander Momoh Konneh), Prince Massaquoi and Alhaji Emurana Massaquoi – volunteered to stay in the hands of the RUF, who were afraid of being attacked. They were to remain captives for two years. In the following weeks at two subsequent meetings marked by swings between periods of high tension and amicable fraternizing, efforts to persuade the RUF to enter negotiations with the government foundered. Media reports at the time

indicated that Sankoh rejected NPRC conditions for more substantive talks. Participants in the Mano River Bridge initiative, however, attributed the failure to high levels of suspicion between the RUF and the government, and military action against the rebels whilst the talks were underway.

The National Co-ordinating Committee for Peace

In early 1995, some sixty non-governmental and civil society groups, including the Women's Movement for Peace, the Council of Churches in Sierra Leone, the Sierra Leone Labour Congress and the Sierra Leone Teachers' Union, came together to form the National Co-ordinating Committee for Peace. The NCCP organized a number of workshops and conferences. The intention was to create a strong national peace constituency, which would force both the government and the RUF to the negotiating table and ensure that any peace agreement would be sustainable.

But the group lasted only six months. On 12 July 1995, it issued a statement asking the local media to stop referring to the RUF as "bandits" or even "rebels," and instead call its members "fighters." The organization's spokesman, M'ban Kabu, then launched a verbal attack on Executive Outcomes, the South African mercenary group hired by the NPRC government to beat back the



Hawa – aged 18

interviewed by Ambrose James in April 2000

I was captured in 1997 by the RUF. I took part in the attack of Kono and Freetown during the January invasion. We burnt houses, killed people and cut off their hands. [To escape] I boarded a vehicle from Makeni to Freetown with no fare. When I arrived in Freetown I ran away. I sell ice for people and I am paid monthly. I want to learn tailoring so I can be self-sufficient. I want to establish a tailoring shop and employ my friends who do not have jobs. Youths in Sierra Leone are just used by politicians in their election campaigns and they gain nothing in return. Look at the number of youths who are unemployed in the city. I think that unless there is a radical change in the politics of this nation, where people will concentrate on youths, as they form the bulk of the population, there is no future for them.



Ahmed – aged 25

interviewed by Ambrase James in April 2000

I was a Kamajor defending my community. In 1996 with the bad governance of the NPRC, we all wanted democracy. When elections were declared, we voted for President Kabbah. After the elections the president was overthrown by the AFRC – more military business. These soldiers started to threaten our people and put them under pressure and it was because of this that I thought that by joining this society I will help to put an end to this. I was a patrol commander with fifty men under my control and my role was to discuss with these men about strategies. [The Kamajor society] had a genuine cause in defending this nation. The medicinal power was very good if you abide by the laws and principles. In fact, I used to hesitate to face battle initially, but when we were attacked at our base at Gbalma, I saw it. Bullets hitting me all over and dropping, leaving me unhurt. It is an organized movement but we lacked logistical support. The Kamajors were not a disciplined force because of the high illiteracy rate amongst us. [In the future] I still want to continue my driving job.

rebels, calling them “hard-core apartheid attack dogs.” This was too much for the government and the NPRC had Kabu arrested, along with the editor of the Standard Times newspaper, which had quoted Kabu’s remarks on page one, and thrown into jail. The NCCP never recovered and quickly disintegrated.

Civil society ‘contact group’

Despite setbacks, by mid-1995 peace was firmly on the agenda of a wide range of Sierra Leonean organizations and individuals. Approaches to bringing the war to an end had been regularly suggested by the Supreme Islamic Council to local Muslim clerics as subjects for weekly services. The Sierra Leone Labour Congress had been one of the prime movers of the NCCP, while the Council of Churches was a member of the Multi-Religious Council for Peace and had its own Peace Committee. The Sierra Leone Women’s Movement for Peace (SLWMP) was active as part of the broader women’s movement (see “Sierra Leonean women and the peace process”).

The ICRC had facilitated initial discreet radio contacts between four civic leaders and the RUF in August and had offered to arrange a meeting between an expanded group of civic and religious representatives. However, after the initiative was communicated to the government and it responded by widely publicizing the possibility of talks, there was no movement on the part of the RUF,

even after the ICRC formally informed the RUF that the government would allow such a meeting to go ahead. Threats by RUF spokesmen against relief convoys clouded the prospects for talks further, along with atrocities carried out in the name of the RUF near Bo, and accusations of collaboration by government officials and supporters against some of the civic leaders.

To prepare for possible talks, the NGOs expressed an interest to Conciliation Resources for training in negotiation and mediation skills. In October 1995, a training session took place in Freetown with fourteen members of a ‘contact group’ of civic leaders. Participants included a paramount chief, senior officials of the Supreme Islamic Council, the Council of Churches, the Labour Congress, the Teachers Union, the Petty Traders Association, officials of the SLWMP, and representatives of displaced people. Several of those involved had ongoing professional and personal contacts with key government officials, members of the military and representatives of the international inter-governmental and non-governmental community. Three of the participants had spoken with Sankoh by radio. These and other activities made the organizations and their leaders visible and credible actors in the peace process, as well as targets of suspicion.

The training session was aimed at strengthening the capability of the individuals involved and their

organizations to respond to concrete peace overtures, and to act, if called upon, as intermediaries between the parties to the conflict. Another objective was to improve communication between and among the civic groups and encourage a spirit of trust and co-operation in pursuit of long-term peace and reconstruction. All the participants expressed a firm commitment to pursuing peace both as individuals and through their organizations. However, optimism for civilians to play an intermediary role between parties to the conflict was at a low ebb, in part due to government publicity of the RUF invitation and the collapse of ICRC efforts to deliver food and tools to RUF-controlled areas. The sessions also underscored the differences of opinion on the root causes of the war, varying degrees of opposition or sympathy towards the NPRC government, differing opinions and feelings with regard to the culpability of different parties to the conflict, and degrees of personal and organizational distrust. It was also evident that the overall climate of fear and intimidation had had a chilling effect on the ability of individuals and organizations to openly express themselves and carry on certain activities without fear of reprisal or vilification.

Following the sessions a delegation of participants met with a government official to discuss the seminar and the future activities of the group. That the group had come together to discuss and develop its mediation capabilities was communicated to the RUF in mid-November. But Sankoh never followed up on their invitation to meet with civil society leaders and the group's existence was short-lived. Nonetheless, a number of individual members, such as SLWMP President Fatmatta Boie-Kamara and Pujehun peace activist John Massaquoi, were to continue to play influential roles at the national and local levels.

Diaspora actors

Individual Sierra Leoneans outside the country have been deeply involved on all sides of the conflict. Among the more visible has been Omrie Golley, a London-based businessman and one-time NPRC supporter. After falling out with the NPRC, Golley had himself introduced to Sankoh in his forest hideout. Golley also launched a group called The National Convention for Reconstruction and Development of Sierra Leone (NCRD) with its stated objective being the restoration of peace and reconciliation in Sierra Leone as a precursor for economic and social reconstruction and development. According to Golley, this group acted as a 'peacebroker' between the rebels and successive Sierra Leonean governments, although he admitted that those governments also suspected him of being partial to the RUF. As the

momentum for negotiations developed Golley, and other expatriate Sierra Leoneans who had been calling for a negotiated settlement, gravitated towards the region. In general, they received a warmer welcome from an RUF struggling to establish political legitimacy than from the Sierra Leone government or the diplomatic community.

While Golley's contacts with the RUF in 1995–96 may have provided Sankoh and his followers with some external recognition, he appeared to play more of an observer role than anything else in the Abidjan peace negotiations. Subsequently, Golley was to become more intimately involved with the RUF and emerged as the group's official spokesman in the preliminary moves that led to the Lomé Peace Agreement in 1999. However, when Sankoh was freed to take part in the negotiations, Golley's star began to fade. After the signing of the agreement, RUF officials denounced Golley and accused him of collecting money on behalf of the RUF without its consent. Golley denied the allegation and said that his leaving the RUF fold came about by mutual consent and was rooted in policy differences over implementation of the Peace Agreement. "Since the signing of the accord, I have been most concerned with the pace and the direction of the peace process, particularly regarding disarmament and demobilization, about the showing of remorse and pursuing positive acts of reconciliation and rehabilitation in favour of the people of Sierra Leone and most particularly in respect of recent human rights abuses being perpetrated against innocent civilians." He also announced he was forming a political party to contest the next elections.

Another leading expatriate actor has been Ambrose Ganda, a London-based critic of successive Sierra Leone governments who, beginning in early 1994, called for a peaceful solution to the conflict in his influential newsletter *Focus on Sierra Leone*. "The war exists; it has not been won; it is spreading; rebels appear to dictate the pace. Through sheer arrogance and an almost uncontrolled urge to self-destruct, the NPRC buries its head in the sands of illusion and ignores advice that they must seriously seek to negotiate with the enemy," Ganda then wrote.

Ganda's highly visible and controversial efforts – tracking the progress of the war, publicly arguing for a negotiated peace, helping to organize diaspora groups favouring dialogue and, whenever possible, personally encouraging the parties to the conflict to enter negotiations – were often condemned by the Sierra Leone authorities and other critics. Nonetheless, Ganda persevered in arguing publicly for a negotiated settlement and in privately encouraging both the RUF and government sympathisers to negotiate rather than continue the carnage.