

**FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATION MARK DIALOGUE BETWEEN
MPs AND LEADERS IN THE DIAMOND RICH TOWN OF KONO,
EASTERN REGION, SIERRA LEONE, 31 OCT – 2 NOV 2008**

UNDP, in collaboration with Hope-Sierra Leone (H-SL), has successfully completed the fifth in a nationwide series of eight interactive dialogues for parliamentarians, mayors, chairpersons and traditional leaders in the Eastern town of Kono. H-SL is a widely respected NGO affiliated to Initiatives of Change International. This is one of several innovative programmes that UNDP is bringing to MPs through its credible partners.

These dialogues aim to foster national cohesion, promote political tolerance and encourage reconciliation between parliamentarians and other stakeholders in order to achieve sustainable peace and development. The diamond-rich town of Kono has



A Youth Band leads the procession

The launch was preceded by a peace march through the main street of Kono. Over one thousand supporters of the three major political parties (APC, SLPP, and PMDC), together with members of the SLP, RSLAF and Civil Society groups joined this colourful display of tolerance and love. Many relayed messages of peace, reconciliation and solidarity through songs and placards. The march past did much to bridge the gulf between the supporters of the major political parties.

witnessed bitter disputes, unrest and violence in the last 18 months, so bringing together a cross section of the leadership of the town is highly significant. Trainers from H-SL's Moral Foundations for Democracy (MFD) programme facilitated the dialogue, led by Ibrahim Saidu (Civil Society). Other members of the team were Sgt. Zainab Mbalu Gbla (Sierra Leone Police, SLP), Lt. Edward Komba (Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces, RSLAF), Faaba Boima (Civil Society), Sgt. Eric Harvey (SLP).



Left to right: SLPP Chairman, APC Mayor, PMDC Dist. Sec. demonstrate political tolerance

In his keynote address, the Founder of Hope-Sierra Leone, John Bangura, gave an overview of his mission which he said “is a call from God to come and serve humanity and help to consolidate peace in the country.” He related how he lost nine members of his family during the eleven-year rebel war. This caused him to nurture deep hatred against the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), but his quest for revenge was halted through divine inspiration. In 1999 he decided to become a roving peace ambassador in the country. He called on the people of Kono to refrain from violence, and to accept and forgive one another in the name of peace and reconciliation. Mr.

Bangura told the crowd firmly that Kono will never develop if people do not change their attitude, noting that it is high time Kono people started to think about development and stop the intimidation and violence. He admonished them to bear in mind that “we are all Sierra Leoneans, therefore we must look at each other as brothers and sisters.”



Left: Supporters joyfully demonstrate their support for peace, reconciliation and political tolerance

The Paramount Chief of Wense Chiefdom, Aiah Kamanda, encouraged his subjects to reconcile and heal the wounds of the past in the interests of national cohesion. He maintained that development should be the concern of all, not party differences. The chief commended H-SL and UNDP for bringing them together for inter-party dialogue for peace and development.

The Commander of Ninth Brigade, Major Tamba Yamba, informed the gathering that they should all come on board to preach peace in the district, adding that development can only occur where there is peace.

ASP Mohamed Kamara, Support Officer, Motema Police Station, said that the police have a moral obligation to maintain peace and remain committed to serve the people. He described the dialogue as a welcome initiative, especially when the facilitation was done jointly by members of the police, military and civil society.

Following the Opening Session, over forty participants including MPs, Traditional Leaders, Mayors, Councillors and representatives of the different political parties took part in the 3-day interactive dialogue at the Kumba Satta Hall. Topics included corruption, root causes of under-development, political intolerance, hate, attitudinal change and the moral challenge to heal the bitterness of the past. The dialogue further strengthened team work and trust building amongst the participants, such that some felt able, in small groups, to bring into the open deep personal hatred and wrongdoing and to seek forgiveness and reconciliation.

Every morning from 8 – 9 everyone participated in a ‘reflection and decision’ session, commonly referred to as ‘R&D’. A facilitator first introduces a topic or story, ending with a question or theme. Participants then go into smaller groups to reflect in silence and share ideas on the theme for that day.

During one of the R&D sessions a woman councillor, Kadija (not her real name), courageously shared with her group the torture and trauma she suffered at the hands of the former civil defence force (CDF), a pro-government militia, during the war. She made no secret of her hatred and thirst for revenge against the SLPP which she believed had backed the CDF. Moved by what she had experienced during the dialogue, she decided to share things that she had never had the courage to tell the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, set up to investigate crimes committed during the eleven-year rebel war.

“When we heard rumours of an RUF invasion of Kono, I and my family decided to move to the safest zone, near the border with Guinea. On our way the CDF kamajors (traditional warriors) interrogated us and took away our money, stripped me naked and later tied me up because my husband was a soldier. I was nine-months’ pregnant with twins and one of the kamajors hit me. The shock caused my first baby to be delivered with nobody to come to my aid. The second baby was forcefully dragged out. As if this was not enough, we were taken to the execution field where fifteen of us were lined up. I was 12th in the row. I saw with my own eyes nine people slaughtered in cold blood. By a miracle of God we were rescued by Guinean soldiers who took me to a medical hospital where I was admitted for three months.”

Because of this bitter experience at the hands of the kamajors, Kadija had nurtured bitter hatred against them and had never thought of forgiving them, but she said that Mary the Mother of Christ appeared to her in the form of a dream and asked her to forgive the kamajors. This had made her start to think about forgiveness. “Because of what has been shared here, I know that other people have had even more bitter experiences than me, and have forgiven the perpetrators. Therefore I have today forgiven the kamajors for the pain and agony inflicted on me” Kadija said in tears.

One of the political activists for the People’s Movement for Democratic Change (PMDC) in Kono, Felix Fofoe, told the gathering that during the campaign for the



2007 presidential and parliamentary elections, he was beaten and intimidated by some members of the SLPP, the ruling party at that time. The matter was before the Magistrates’ Court in Kono but as a result of the dialogue he had decided to withdraw the matter from court and forgive the perpetrators.

Left: Morning ‘R&D’ session

A former SLPP woman councillor confessed that her husband had been forced to resign from the police by a top government official because of her role in politics. “I nurtured a deep grievance against this man, but because of what I have learnt during this dialogue I have forgiven him now and for ever” said the former councillor.

A youth leaders who was also the leader of the APC task force, said that he was constantly and falsely accused by the police and paramount chiefs for crimes that he did not commit. He added, “During the election my life was marginalised and suppressed by the chiefs because I belonged to the APC, but because of the teachings of the dialogue I have forgiven them.”

Many other people made open and frank statements, saying that they had decided to forgive the perpetrators in the name of peace and sustainable development in the country.

The Paramount Chief of Wense Chiefdom, Aiah Kamanda became the centre of controversy. During the ‘R&D’ time some people accused him of being a partisan

member of the SLPP who used to intimidate all those who refused to support his party, especially those who supported the APC. Chief Kamanda bravely accepted the accusation, saying that he had done it in the interests of the district.



Right: A light-hearted moment during the dialogue

During the course of the dialogue participants looked at key topics such as corruption, search for values, change, team work and trust building, conflict prevention, and forgiveness and reconciliation. Furthermore, they discussed the urgent need to heal the bitterness of the past and maintain the hard-earned peace. During lunch breaks participants divided into groups to do community service by serving each other with food and drinks. This was also a fun session with plenty of jokes!

After dinner one evening the documentary film “The Imam and the Pastor” was seen. This shows how the Muslim and Christian leaders of two militia groups in Northern Nigeria reconciled with each other and set up an Interfaith Mediation Centre. The message of the film was used as the theme for the following day’s ‘R&D’ session.

At the end of the three-day session, stakeholders, together with staff of H-SL, took a unanimous decision to invite H.E. the President, Dr Ernest Bai Koroma, and the Honourable Vice-President, Chief Samuel Sam-Sumana, to plant a peace tree in Kono. In addition, participants suggested that the programme be replicated at constituency and chiefdom levels for the benefit of local people.

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