

West Africa Update

Search for Common Ground

Situation Update

Overall, the situation in West Africa remains highly volatile and most steps forward to peace are accompanied by small setbacks. Developments in Liberia in the run up to the October elections, as well as challenges associated with the return and reintegration of thousands of refugees and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), threaten the country's fragile stabilisation. In Sierra Leone, the United Nations Mission UNAMSIL's mandate concludes at the end of 2005, while outbreaks of violence and mounting public discontent over slow socio-economic recovery are challenging the optimistic outlook for the country's future security. The ongoing crisis in Côte d'Ivoire, the effects of which on neighbouring countries are becoming increasingly apparent, hinders full implementation of the peace process and threatens to further polarise divided groups as the country prepares for the presidential elections. Uncertainty about the future political leadership in Guinea, coupled with the dramatic deterioration of socio-economic conditions continue to challenge the country's overall stability, with possible repercussions for the whole sub region.

Building Momentum for Peace: New Programme in Côte d'Ivoire

Since the September 2002 armed uprising, Côte d'Ivoire has been in the grips of a protracted conflict, which has divided the country, disrupted the economy severely, displaced over 800,000 people, and proliferated interethnic and inter-group violence. A 6,000-troop UN peacekeeping force (ONUCI) has been deployed, and peace talks have been ongoing, with Pretoria II in June 2005 being the latest, but little movement towards peace has actually occurred. Political and military reform is stagnating and signs indicate that the situation could rapidly decline. With an election pending, it is quite possible people will be further divided and violence will escalate. Given the porous borders and the number of unemployed and armed youth who move throughout the region to earn their living through violence, SFCG esteems the security of Côte d'Ivoire to be critical to the stability of the entire sub region.



The SFCG in Côte d'Ivoire office in Abidjan.

Based on assessment missions in 2002 and 2003, SFCG decided it could support the Ivorian peace process and promote dialogue and reconciliation between polarised groups to counter growing interethnic and inter-group violence. With start-up funding from the US-based National Endowment for Democracy and financial programme support from the European Commission and the World Bank SFCG was able to launch Search For Common Ground in Côte d'Ivoire.

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Regional Synergy: Linking Women's Peace Groups in West Africa

The Mano River Women's Peace Network (MARWOPNET) celebrated its 5th anniversary in Kambia, a border town between Guinea and Sierra Leone. The celebrations were a special and joyous event not only for the network's members but for all women's groups working for peace in the sub region. Participants, including representatives from women's groups, government officials, parliamentarians and local authorities, unanimously welcomed the opportunity to rekindle peace initiatives in the sub region. For OFACI, a Côte d'Ivoire-based women's network invited to join SFCG's West Africa team for the event, the weeklong festivities were a unique occasion to become familiar with women leading peace and conflict transformation initiatives. Both OFACI and MARWOPNET are partnering with SFCG to develop and link women's peace initiatives regionally. As part of a broad regional strategy to strengthen women's leadership and capacity to develop responses to conflict, SFCG supports its partners' efforts to engage in collaborative peace building and encourages other women to promote women's peacemaking in their respective communities. Talking Drum Studio was present to capture some of the dialogues and powerful testimonies from women, who at the peak of the crisis had stood against hatred and violence. The discussions were aired on partner radio stations in Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia to raise public awareness and mobilise other groups to sustain peace in the region. The festivities also involved the creation of an early warning post in Kambia in solidarity with a group of local women who risked their lives by encouraging cross-border rapprochement. The event was successful in reinforcing synergies among women's groups at the national and regional levels and OFACI, with SFCG's support, will draw on some of the skills and experiences of these groups to promote peace initiatives back in Côte d'Ivoire. MARWOPNET hopes to establish three community radio stations in the border areas as part of their early-warning work, and TDS will work with them to support this development.

Understanding Conflict: Uncovering the Past, Opening the Future

SFCG and three local partners in Liberia -Development Education Network of Liberia (DEN-L), Center for Justice and Peace Studies (CJPS) and Southeastern Women's Development Association (SEWODA)- conducted a participatory conflict assessment in eight conflict-prone communities in Bong, Nimba and Grand Gedeh Counties. Integrating participatory rural appraisal (PRA) tools with conflict analysis mechanisms the assessment team analysed the causes and consequences of conflict in these communities and identified the capacities for peace, such as village institutions and social capital. SFCG and its partners let the understanding they gained in this assessment inform the design of their interventions in these communities.

The assessment reveals four main conclusions: First, the causes of the conflict are rooted deeply in historical experiences and misunderstandings. Uncovering the past is an essential step in the social reconciliation process. Second, the conflicts in Bong and Nimba are not about ethnicity or discrimination (around marriage). These only indicate a deeper social grievance over certain groups traditionally holding wealth and power and thus dominating other groups. Third, poverty underlies all these as various groups struggle over scarce resources, politicians and other influential persons exploit and manipulate the situation and infuse it with ethnicity. Fourth and final, political leadership lacks broad-based support.

Following the conflict assessment, a series of inter-group dialogues were conducted in the target areas by DEN-L, CJPS and SEWODA. Each dialogue session lasted four days and brought together 40 participants from ethnic and religious backgrounds representing a cross section of community members including local leaders, women, ex-combatants, and youth groups. The inter-group dialogues were facilitated using participatory tools and approaches such as focus group discussion, role-play, brainstorming and team work. These tools and approaches were used to ensure that all participants contributed to the discussion and feel a sense of ownership of the outcome.

SFCG in West Africa is grateful for the support of these donors:



SFCG Launches Gbarnga Studio to Support Local Radio Programming

SFCG launched a new production studio in Gbarnga, Bong County on June 3^d, with financial support from USAID, USAID/OTI and the Royal Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Designed as a training and production facility, TDS will use the fully equipped studio to train local journalists to improve the quality of the programs produced by the rural radio stations, and to produce programs in local languages. The studio helps to decentralise radio production and improve the skills of journalists in rural areas, so that they are better equipped to contribute more positively to the electoral and reintegration processes.



SFCG Regional Director Frances Fortune's opening speech for the Gbarnga Studio.

Donor representatives, representatives from the international community, local county authorities, heads of community-based radio stations, SFCG's partners, and representatives from local NGOs attended the official opening.

"The elections messages in the local languages have motivated more people in Bong County to register and vote in the coming elections" - Local dignitary during the opening program of the Studio in Gbarnga.

The new Gbarnga studio was immediately put to use as SFCG began production of a series of video clips discussing why people should vote and how to choose the right candidate. SFCG is focusing this effort on youth outside of Monrovia, particularly targeting population centres as Gbarnga, Ganta and Zwedru. The videos comprise of *vox pop* clips from ordinary citizens around Gbarnga on their views on the election and appropriate ways to participate. The first series of clips were distributed to 60 video houses in July; well ahead of the October elections. SFCG will produce a new series of clips in August, addressing issues arising during the campaign season opening earlier that month.

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SFCG uses an integrated combination of media production, media training, and community outreach to reduce tensions, facilitate reconciliation, and strengthen social cohesion, focusing particularly on the

For more information on SFCG in Côte d'Ivoire go to:
http://www.sfcg.org/programmes/cote/programmes_cote.html

North and West. Planned activities include: conflict transformation training for radio station personnel, and local peace actors and groups; facilitated dialogue among divided communities; raising awareness on the peace process; solidarity events; and developing problem solving skills through drama and arts. As with all of SFCG's programmes, activities will be implemented in partnership with local organisations. Key partners include the National Programme for Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (PNDDR), 'l'Organisation des Femmes Actives de Côte d'Ivoire' (OFACI), and CARE.

Says SFCG Regional Director Frances Fortune: "Building from experience in other West Africa programmes, SFCG in Côte d'Ivoire will be opening its own Talking Drum Studio. The studio will create media programming that gives space to moderate voices to discuss critical issues facing the country. It will also serve as a training facility for radio journalists, particularly those from the West and North."

SFCG will focus its programme in different areas in Côte d'Ivoire, targeting places with high intercommunity tensions that are at risk of violent conflict, in both urban and rural regions. Particular attention will be devoted to reaching IDPs, youth, and other victims of the conflict, notably children and women.

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TDS Improves Children's Rights Awareness in Sierra Leone

Improving the lives of millions of children across Africa and giving them visibility requires international solidarity, commitment and awareness. The Day of the African Child on 16 June serves as an effective platform to draw attention to the plight of African children today. Initiated by the Organisation of African Unity in 1991, the Day pays tribute to the courage of thousands of school children who took to the streets of Soweto, South Africa in 1976 to protest discrimination and education inequality. To commemorate the event, Talking Drum Studio organised radio and community outreach programmes across Sierra Leone focussing on "The African Orphan, Our Collective Responsibility." Using resources from TDS' popular children's drama, *Olu*, the drama team travelled to Kabala, Makeni, and Mile 91, to meet children and facilitate roundtable debates around the plight of orphans. The roundtables generated lively and thought-provoking discussions on children's rights, the vulnerability of orphans and the importance of education. With over 300,000 orphans registered in Sierra Leone, this is an important issue. The material generated throughout the country is being incorporated in future story lines of *Olu*.

Search for Common Ground/Talking Drum Studio, Comparative Analysis of Audience Listening Surveys from 2002 and 2004, January 2005

- 89% of respondents listen to TDS programmes. Of those, 58.9% is confident all information is accurate (this is down from 63.1% in 2002, which might be due to the higher number of call-in and discussion programmes).
- *Atunda Ayenda* is TDS' most popular programme: 90% is familiar with the soap opera (compared to 41% in 2002 when it had just started running) and 68% deems its contents relevant for their lives.
- Over one third of the people surveyed noted tangible improvements in their lives with regard to resolving conflict peacefully, community relations and/or reconciliation, as a direct result of listening to TDS programmes.

Highlighting Cross-border Reconciliation on Radio

Although they share the same culture, traditions and customs, the Kissi people, living at the crossroads of Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone, have been deeply divided by the years of conflict in the region that nurtured suspicion and fear. So when parliamentarians, chiefs, elders and other members of the Kissi communities converged in Kailahun District, Sierra Leone for a regional peacebuilding event SFCG's Talking Drum Studio was present to relay everything to radio audiences across the sub-region. For four days TDS captured the happenings live in local Kissi and Mende, as well as in English and French. SFCG strives to saturate Sierra Leone's media with positive examples of interethnic, inter-group and international activity. To do so, TDS has partnerships with 18 community radio stations and its programmes are also made available to stations abroad free-of-charge. In addition, TDS reporters write articles for newspapers and other print media, to bring initiatives like the Kissi meeting to attention.

Forty-five people were expected, but more than 200 people from Kissi communities in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea gathered for music, dance, theatre, and sports to celebrate their traditions and culture. In addition, they met for dialogue in which they explored ways to break down barriers and increase understanding between the different communities. The event was cheerfully concluded with the opening of a regional market in Koindu, where the three countries converge. President Kabba of Sierra Leone, Guinean Prime Minister Diallo and Liberia Transitional Chairman Bryant, visited Koindu to jointly open the market on 20 February and meet the Kissi present. All three made commitments to support the solidarity building that the Kissi had begun to foster trade and other means of development. As one participant said: "The contribution of this event to peace and reconciliation will have a significant impact not only in the Kissi communities but also in the surrounding regions".

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Reaching Out to Underserved Communities in Fangamadou

Fangamadou is located in Guinea's 'Parrot's Beak' a region that juts into Sierra Leone. In response to a request from Plan Guinée, a Talking Drum Studio team composed of members of SFCG in Guinea and Sierra Leone, as well as staff from the Media Foundation for Peace visited the communities. The purpose of the mission was to assess the needs of the communities and help a local radio broadcaster led by youth develop into a more professional children's radio station.

While communities in Fangamadou have no access to national radio broadcasts, they need to be informed of developments in Guinea and have a right to have their concerns heard. Local youth have tried to address the information needs of their communities through an amateur broadcaster, Radio Mallaya. Radio Mallaya currently develops youth and children-centred programmes and creates linkages with other stations, including Radio Moa, a Sierra Leone-based community station supported by SFCG. Fangamadou residents told TDS that local communities would benefit considerably from the project because it would increase both community participation and youth involvement, as well as improve access to information where previously there was none.



Residents of Gbessé, Fangamadou: "Our children's involvement in Fangamadou Radio will stimulate them to play a more active role the communities"

With a little help from SFCG, Radio Mallaya and Guékédou Community Radio will be established soon and communities in Guinea and Sierra Leone alike have

pledged to help sustain the children's radio stations. The two stations are expected to complement each other and strengthen relationships between communities throughout the sub-region. Programming in local languages will ensure that information needs are met and communities' opinions and concerns raised.

Enabling Refugees and Displaced Persons to Make Informed Choices about Voluntary Return

Recent feedback on *Situation Report*, a TDS Liberia programme reaching out to Liberian refugees and IDPs, indicates the growing popularity of the programme. *Situation Report*, which airs on 30 radio stations in Liberia, two in Guinea's Forest Region and 4 in the southern part of Sierra Leone, aims to sensitise displaced Liberians on conditions in their home communities to enable them to make informed decisions about returning home. The programme provides timely updates on UNHCR and UN Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) operations as well as on socio-economic developments inside Liberia. It also features interviews with refugees and returnees so that their concerns and opinions are given a platform for discussion. Most often, refugees will voice a concern in *Situation Report* one week, and UNHCR will respond in the program the next week. Feedback from refugees in Nzérékoré revealed that *Situation Report* is a much sought-after programme because it conveys simple and straightforward messages on progress in the peace process.

"*Situation Report is a very interesting programme as it informs us on the situation in our beloved country. The programme makes us feel like being home and [we] wish it to continue to echo developments in our country.*" - Refugee in Nzérékoré

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