



## **Lofa County Assessment Trip Report**

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#### **BACKGROUND**

Lofa County saw much of the worst fighting during the Liberian civil war. The fighting broke down largely along ethnic lines, pitting predominantly ethnic Mandingos against the Lorma people, despite generations of largely peaceful co-existence. Following the end of the war in 2003 and subsequent disarmament, there have been various efforts at inter-communal reconciliation as refugees and internally displaced people have returned, often to find the land that they left occupied by others. Although the peace has held in Lofa, it is widely acknowledged that the underlying tensions and disagreements between the counties two main groups have not yet been addressed, meaning that the peace is fragile.

On February 26, mob violence broke out in Voinjama, the capital of Lofa County, with rival gangs of Lorma and Mandingo youth taking to the streets, attacking one another and burning places of worship, business, and homes. After a day of violence during which a police response Unit reached Voinjama and restored order.

The Carter Center (TCC) has been working in Lofa County for the past three years as part of its access to justice programming. In collaboration with the Ministry of Justice and Ministry of Internal Affairs, we work with the following three civil society partners in Lofa: Traditional Women United for Peace and Common Action Liberia to deliver civic education on the rule of law, and with the Catholic Justice and Peace Commission (JPC), which provides Community Legal Advisors in eight counties, including Lofa, to help rural citizens resolve local problems and exercise their rights. TCC has also been working to strengthen the capacity of traditional leaders, women and youth in rural areas to resolve local problems consistent with the law. Following the violence, TCC staff visited Lofa to check on our program partners and to better understand the context of the violence.

## **TRIP OVERVIEW**

On March 7, 2010, a Carter Center (TCC) team of Pewee Flomoku, Senior Project Coordinator, and Anthony Hill, Project Driver, traveled to Lofa County to assess the situation after the February 26 mob violence that led to the death of several citizens in Voinjama. Our mission was to do a security assessment to determine if the situation on the ground was secure enough for our partners (JPC and Common Action Liberia) to continue their work; to understand how TCC civic education messages could be modified in response to the disturbance; and, to understand better the causes of the conflict in order to understand what peace-building measures might be needed. Lastly, the visit sought to show support for our partners and the communities we work in and, more generally, the people of Lofa.

## **PRELIMINARY MEETINGS**

Before reaching Lofa, on March 7, we met with the National Traditional Council (NTC) in Gbarnga for a two-hour briefing on their findings from Lofa. TCC had funded the Council to do a quick intervention in Lofa to help stop the violence from spreading. The Council, headed by chairman chief Zanzan Karwor, led a delegation of nine people (both male and female) to talk to all sides to cease hostility and make room for dialogue.

The NTC told us that they had held meetings with different actors to set the stage for a general meeting. The NTC was in Lofa during an assessment visit by a delegation from [redacted] saved the day when a number of disgruntled youths started walking out of the meeting hall after some strong worded statements from a highly placed member of government (reportedly, he threatened military action if there was a reoccurrence of violence). Chief Zanzan Karwar, Chairman of the NTC, informed

26. She expressed serious disappointment about the manner in which the death of her daughter was being handled, especially by town officials, state security, and government ministers.

According to Madam Deddeh, her daughter Korpo traveled from Zorzor to Konia for the

Even the Liberian Vice President, Joseph Boakai, was stopped on his way to Voinjama by the angry students who demanded his intervention. He told them to be calm so that the security services could investigate and gave some money to the students and for

The students finally allowed the Vice , upset

with Imam Dorley, who had promised the rTJETH2 682ron ofebyp(e)-5rfrmingte ra.( )JTJETBT1 0 0 1 453.2

the city. This enabled us to introduce them to various parties, county officials, Imams, pastors and the NTC. We went in our TCC T-shirts. The high level of suspicion was reduced as we told the gatherings of our work and they told us what they were looking forward to.

***Meeting with National Traditional Council, Lofa Branch***

A meeting with the NTC Lofa branch was held on March 9, with the Superintendent of Lofa, Honorable Galakpa Kortimai, in attendance. After performing traditional welcome ceremonies, we were asked to state the purpose of our trip.

We expressed our regret about the incident and extended sympathy to those who had lost family members. We then outlined the purpose of our trip and introduced our partners. The Council thanked TCC for the level of support given to the NTC to intervene in the Lofa crisis. The Council expressed deep concern about the violence and urged the Center to help them get to the bottom of the crisis.

The Lofa County superintendent closed the meeting by thanking our team for its support in Lofa. He urged the NTC to be truthful and remain neutral in their intervention. In ater performiostrong

### ***Meeting with Mandingo/Muslim Community***

On March 10, the team met with opinion leaders of the Muslim community. We were welcomed by the head Imam, Alihaji Varmuyan Sheriff, after an introduction by Chief Kamara. Alihiji Sheriff thanked the TCC for traveling to Lofa during the crisis period. He prayed that Allah would bless our work and continue to help the poor and those seeking justice.

He said peace is what they pray for everyday and that they know Allah will grant it to

blessing and introduced each member of our team (which included women, although women are not customarily allowed sit on the same bench with the Imam or chiefs at the mosque) and told the gathering of

have rights to settle on their land. They do not tell their children how the Mandingos and Lormas lived together during the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century and that they share many similar traditions. There is also a fear of Mandingo/Muslim political and economic dominance if they were to take power. Finally, there is hatred for the Mandingo/Muslim religion because they do not allow their daughters to marry non-Muslims.

### ***Meeting with Lorma Community***

We met the chiefs from the Lorma community (both men and women) in Lawalazu town some 35-minute drive from Voinjama on March 11. Lawalazu is one of the communities visited by our partners for civic education. The women head *Zoe* (spiritual leader) Ma Weedor thanked TCC and the partners for the work done in their community and for coming to share with them during this difficult period. She expressed the pain they felt as mothers and fathers, saying that:                      our children were killed in cold blood and we

us talk to our children so that their hearts can remain cool or we will have problem

Acting town chief Kolubah Zaza thanked TCC for helping his town to understand the rule of law and peace work. He said our visit was very important because during such a time, you discover your true friends. He called on the Government of Liberia to investigate the violence in Voinjama and take action before it spreads to other towns:

Afterwards, the team conducted other town meetings with both Mandingos and Lormas that went very well. For example, in Sakornedou (a predominate



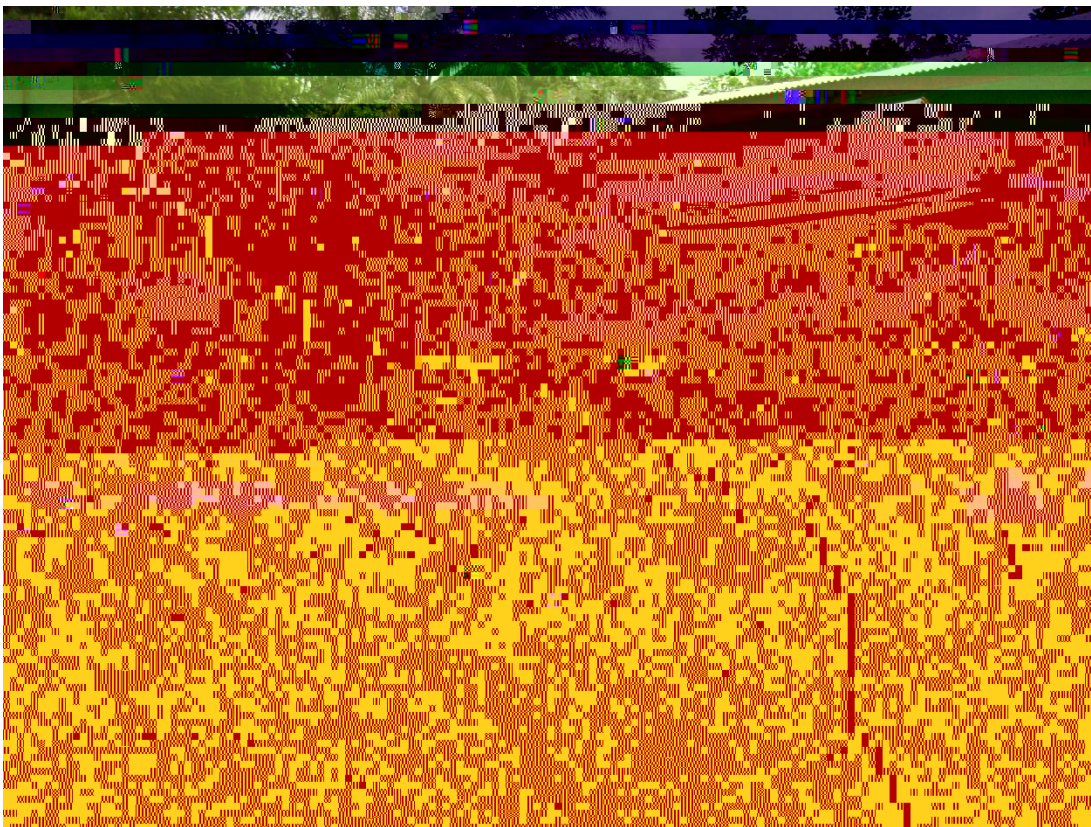
or owned property before the war, the space was taken over by Lormas. There has been no meaningful reconciliation.

6. The issue of intermarriage is very big for both sides. Lormas whose daughters have married Mandingo men and had their children, have refused to allow them in any kind of relationship with Lormas or non-Muslims. If they find out that a woman is involved with a non-Mandingo/Muslim, she will no longer be a part of that family and it might even lead to her death. Despite these strict rules, many Lorma women have children by Mandingo men. These women and their children have no protection. They cannot go to their fathers if there are family problems. Instead, they are forced to stay with their husbands. This is the same with the other side.
7. Religious tolerance is another issue hidden under most of the conflicts. Islam was the first religion in Lofa before the settlers came in with Christianity. But, today people view Islam and those associated with it as foreigners. Most people in Lofa Muslims. Muslims are the majority in Lofa although some other tribes (like Gbandi and Mendi)

13. We were also told by a victim who claimed that the County Attorney and some ERU officers took his business money from him while arresting him. Our JPC team is following this matter.
14. Our partners will have to work hard in Voinjama in order to help victims and community members overcome their trauma.
15. There is need for more information and awareness in Voinjama because of the lack of a radio station.
16. The s

8. The issue of power imbalance is critical and needs serious attention. Most people from both sides think Lormas and Mandingos should be excluded from the county top post of superintendent. They said this was the case during the Bryant administration and there was no problem with leadership.
9. TCC should expose staff to more conflict intervention and management trainings here in Liberia and abroad.

We wish to thank all for the support that led to the findings. All of our activities were documented through video.



Mediation Support Unit Standby Team. (Photo by Jeffrey Mapendere)