



## **Lofa County Assessment Trip Report**

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Pewee Flomoku  
Senior Project Coordinator  
Carter Center Liberia

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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 several people died, the Liberian police's Emergency 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 the Executive branch and told us that they “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 him it was not right to threaten people who are already stressed and appealed to the youths to re-enter the hall.

During our visit, all sides expressed appreciation to the NTC for their work and urged them to return to Lofa to work toward a lasting solution. This they pledged to do. The NTC also met with the family of the deceased 22 year old, Korpo Kamara, whose murder in Konia Town had triggered the February 26 violence, pledging to help the family with the child she has left.

## **KONIA**

We traveled, along with David K. Zaza (JPC lead monitor for Lofa), to Konia to start our fact-finding. Konia is a roughly one-hour drive from Voinjama, the scene of the worst of the violence. We met with the mother of the late Korpo Kamara, an eleventh grade student of the Zorzor Lutheran High School, who was murdered some time between February 22-26, 2010. Madam Deddeh Kamara narrated in tears how her 22-year-old daughter went missing on the morning of February 22 and was found dead on February

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 weekend as usual. On the morning of February 22, Korpo left the room that she shared with her boyfriend, Steven Horace, around 6am and went outside. According to Horace, she always went out around that time to make a fire or use the toilet. However, this time she did not return after a long period and the boyfriend decided to go looking for her.

After searching around the house and the hand pump, Steven still could not find Korpo and alerted the neighbors and Korpo's parents. Soon, the whole town was searching for Korpo. News of Korpo's disappearance got to her school in Zorzor. Students gathered quickly and started a demonstration, demanding that officials find Korpo. The JPC's lead monitor David Zaza in Konia commands respect from the community and was able to calm the students down. Still unable to find her daughter, Madam Deddeh consulted a spiritual man or *Sassy-wood* player. The man she consulted to perform the ritual is the Imam of the Konia mosque, "old man" Flomolu Dorley. Imam Dorley called his son Mamadee Dorley and a friend named Lazo to actually perform the ritual.

They asked Madam Deddeh, a Lorma, and her husband, a Gbardi, to pay \$6000 Liberian Dollars (LD) for the service. Madam Deddeh did not have the full amount so she went to her sister Lawuo who gave her \$2500LD as an initial payment. They agreed the balance would be paid after the *Sassy-wood* player either located Korpo or identified those who may have kidnapped her.

Imam Dorley promised the family that they would find their daughter in three days. During the ritual, the Imam told the family that Korpo was in the hands of two people and was still being held in town. On the second day Imam Dorley returned the \$2500LD and said they were unable to solve the mystery. Madam Deddeh said she broke down in tears and disappointment and said she would not take the money back. All she wanted was her daughter.

We learned that Korpo had a feud with Vai Sekou (of the Mandingo tribe) who took money from Korpo to clear her garden spot but failed to complete the task. Korpo had threatened to sue him. On the morning of Korpo's disappearance, Via Sekou went to Korpo's house to find her so he could go and finish the job. He went away when he was told that Korpo was missing. It was later discovered that Via Sekou was one of the two men who requested the \$6000LD to perform the ritual for the return of Korpo. This has made Korpo's family suspect that Via Sekou was somehow involved in their daughter's death.

On the third day of the search, Korpo's body was found behind the Garbo public school. Her body had some parts missing and it looked like someone had poured acid on her. This location had been searched earlier and is often passed by people going for wood, greens, and water. Students were already demonstrating in Konia and calling on

authorities to find Korpo's killers. Even the Liberian Vice President, Joseph Boakei, 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 Korpo's family. The students finally allowed the Vice President to pass through the roadblock. Meanwhile, Korpo's mother cried bitterly, upset with Imam Dorley, who had promised the return of Korpo by performing the ritual.

The students went to Korpo's mother to find out who had promised her that they would locate Korpo. She told them it was Imam Dorley and they all started rushing toward the mosque to find him, throwing stones. The Imam locked himself in the mosque while the angry students continued throwing stones and calling for him to come out. Mamadee Dorley ran to place phone calls to other relatives both in Zorzor and Voinjama reportedly saying that: "The Lorma people have killed our father and burned the mosque." This appears to be the source of the information that led to the mob action in Voinjama. The mosque was at no point burned nor was the Imam harmed, although the mosque was stoned.

## **VOINJAMA**

On the morning of March 8 we arrived in Voinjama. Our first challenge was to get one of our partners, James Fayiah with Common Action, released from jail. Fayiah was arrested the day before by an officer of the Emergency Response Unit (ERU) of the Liberian National Police and charged with hindering law enforcement. He slept in jail with his wife who refused to go home for fear he would be harmed. Fayiah intervened in a situation outside a local video club where he had gone to watch European football. He heard his friend shouting outside, so he left the club to see what was happening. Fayiah's friend told him that he was slapped by the man standing nearby. Fayiah asked the other man to identify himself. The man was not wearing a uniform but said he was an ERU officer and proceeded to arrest Fayiah for asking him for his identification. We informed the police commander of the situation, but he said he knew nothing about the case. We also informed the County Attorney. This prompted the commander to release Fayiah.

### ***Meeting with TCC Partners***

We met with all our partners that afternoon and expressed TCC's concern for them and sympathy to those who lost family members. We also spoke with them about the situation and what they thought needed to be done. During our three hours of discussion, we found that they were all traumatized. Therefore, we conducted a motivational and spiritually uplifting session.

The partners, a number of whom had to run from their homes when the fighting broke out, were all afraid and confused about what happened and how they were going to be able to do their work. We explained to them how TCC remains neutral during these conflicts and, as partners of TCC, they should try to do the same. We had all eight of them attend our subsequent meetings, visitations, consultations, and join us on a tour of

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's 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 a strong tone, he blamed the Mandingos for starting the violence and expressed disappointment in the Muslim leadership for not doing enough to stop their children from taking to the streets.

He said he would leave no stone unturned until the truth was established and challenged the Council (which is made up of both Mandingos and Lormas) to do the same by not taking sides. He said that in the past people have not always been able to acknowledge the truth, however, only the truth would settle the crisis in Lofa. He said: "As for me I don't care if the president removes me right now or in the future because of my stand on telling the truth, I will tell whoever is wrong in this recent crisis that they are wrong no matter who it is or which tribe."

He then stated that Chief Kamara, the chief for elder affairs (a Mandingo) with the NTC Lofa branch, was not doing enough to stop the Mandingo youths when they started the violence. Chief Kamara expressed surprise over the manner in which the Superintendent blamed him for the crisis. He invited TCC to come with him to the Mandingo quarter mosque and investigate the role he and other Muslim leaders played during the violence. We agreed to go with the chief to speak with his people. We also said that no one group is to blame for the violence, but as leaders we must all accept responsibility.

As the meeting ended, they all agreed to work together toward finding a lasting solution to the crisis in Lofa. They appealed to the TCC to help them with this effort. The superintendent finally closed the meeting by saying he would not support a quick fix solution, nor support animal sacrifice just for celebration. "Before any sacrifice can take place, justice should take place, all sides should be satisfied with the outcome. No animal will die for nothing again."

### *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. Alihaji 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 them so that we can all live together. According to tradition, we asked for the Imam's 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 about 15 people, excluding our team, why we were in Voinjama.

First, we expressed regret about the violence and stated that we wanted to be present during this time of sorrow to listen and help find a solution to the problem. We also stated that we wanted to know of any mediation efforts had been tried unsuccessfully so that a reoccurrence of the violence could be avoided.

Mr. Ismail Kromah, the Secretary General of the Lofa Muslim Council, spoke for the community. He started by thanking TCC for its work in Liberia and around the world. He said he has followed TCC's activities and thinks that it could be of a great help. On behalf of the group, he condemned the violence and said that they were taken by surprise. Mr. Kromah expressed disappointment about how things had unfolded.

**Biases:** He said that the County Superintendent and County Attorney blame the entire crisis on the Mandingo/Muslim community. Government ministers, peace builders, NGOs, and other organizations have been told that the Mandingos/Muslims caused the problem. He said some of these groups had not reached out to them to find out their side of the story thus making them appear very violent. He talked about how six mosques were burned in Lofa a few years ago and up to now there has been no outcome from the investigations conducted. He said that there are no Mandingo people in positions of authority in the county.

**Prejudice:** He said Mandingos/Muslims have suffered many abuses from the Lorma tribe with the help of the authorities: "They consider us strangers in our own home. We cannot live in some towns. Do you call this justice or fair play? We have to be frank and discuss the real issues." He said that until issues of marginalization, power imbalance, biases, prejudices, and tribalism can be corrected, peace in Lofa will be elusive. We sought to open the discussion to others by asking what they thought were some of the root causes of the conflict and how they thought it could be resolved.

One major issue was power imbalance because, we were told, only the Lorma tribe has authority in the county. They also stated that there is not equal opportunity for all. Additionally, children are taught that Mandingos/Muslims are strangers and as such don't

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: “most of our children were killed in cold blood and we want to know those people who did it and for what...we want your [TCC] to come help us talk to our children so that their hearts can remain cool or we will have problem again.”

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: “People should be responsible for their actions, no Mandingo or Lorma man involved in this crisis should go free.”

A woman who spoke in tears said if the government does not take action against those who killed our people, “they (GOL) should know that not one woman has born a crazy child; our children are sitting and watching.”

Another chief said, “this thing is too much, they (Mandingos) killed our people during the Ulimo and LURD wars and we forgave them so they think they can always get up anytime and kill people and go free? They treated us (Lormas) like criminals when we fled to Guinea during the war, we don’t know which country they belong to Guinea or Liberia”.

We tried to focus the discussion on the way forward. They expressed deeply rooted hatreds from the civil war, including blaming Mandingos for burning of towns and villages including churches. They also expressed the belief that Mandingos/Muslims always have something to hide and which explains why they are closed to people of different tribes and never allow their daughters to marry non-Mandingos/Muslims. We were told that the Mandingos always want to show off and dominate. Mandingos/Muslims consider any other Mandingo/Muslim from anywhere else to be their brother or sister and there are therefore no clear lines between who is a Liberian Mandingo or Guinea Mandingo. They also believe Mandingos are violent and they push their children to cause trouble and hide behind religion for protection.

Afterwards, the team conducted other town meetings with both Mandingos and Lormas that went very well. For example, in Sakornedou (a predominately Mandingo/Muslim town) the chief and Imam was very pleased that we drove more than an hour from Voinjama to see them. He praised our partners for the rule of law education that helped them to move away from conflict. He said “we told our brothers (Mandingos/Muslims from Voinjama) that we cannot get involved in any crisis or trouble they have, we are living peacefully here and don’t want any trouble.” He urged TCC to go back into their community with the messages and also reach out to other communities in the Quadibodi district, which is mainly a Mandingo district created recently by the Legislature. Lofa now has 7 districts.

The team met with the youth community (mostly Mandingos) who thanked the TCC for its interest in their side of the story. They blame most of what happened on lack of education/information, tribal hatred, lack of jobs, idleness, lack of youth programs, and the discourteous manner used by authorities. The youths most often work or act along tribal lines.

There were suggestions that a way forward may be to engage the youth community continuously with information, empowerment, job creation, and generally find ways to keep them busy. “Most of us are high school graduates but have no jobs, or means of going forward with our education...the old guys want to take all always.” They acknowledged that some of their friends are easily used because they are idle. “We need empowerment, just something to do to keep ourselves busy. We would highly appreciate the help of the Carter Center.”

## **FINDINGS**

1. The people are divided on tribal lines.
2. There were administrative lapses in the initial handling of the murder of Korpo Kamara in Konia. County authorities did not act swiftly to address the situation in Konia and so it spread to Voinjama. If the government does not act expeditiously and carefully in Korpo’s murder case, there will be violence again soon and it will be wide spread.
3. The issue of power imbalance is a root cause for conflict. Some people (mostly Mandingos) are not happy with the present county leadership.
4. Most Mandingos are viewed as Muslims by Lormas and as strangers in Lofa. They are treated as such. (Not all Mandingos are Muslims and not all Muslims are Mandingos).
5. Mandingos are not allowed to sleep in some towns in Lofa (mostly in the Zorzor district). They cannot live in these towns or own any property. If they lived there



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 back into the family. Also, Mandingos don't allow their daughters to get involved 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 don't practice religion. But Lormas will easily accept Christians before Muslims. Muslims are the majority in Lofa although some other tribes (like Gbandi and Mendi) are also heavily Muslims.
8. In most areas, the rights of people who are not members of traditional societies are often violated. The issue of traditional masks coming out in towns at anytime without warning is something that needs to be addressed. If you are caught unaware with the mask in town, you will be heavily fined, punished, or made to join the *poro* or *sande* society by force. This is affecting both Muslims and Christians.
9. There were concerns about the mass arrests carried out by security agencies after the February 26 violence. Most people were taken in for questioning and forced to stay in cells longer than the law allows.
10. The resident judge has stayed out of the county and so the County Attorney cannot file cases and may have to transfer some of the cases.
11. People are not willing to testify in open court for fear of attack from the accused or the family. One woman who volunteered to testify was threatened and authorities had to move her to Monrovia for protection.
12. There were reports of extra police action, mostly during the curfew hours. (One unconfirmed report stated that women, mostly young girls, were arrested and taken to the ERU base where they were raped by the officers). It is difficult to verify this allegation because of the curfew and the unwillingness of people to admit or discuss it.

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 situation in Zorzor went from being potentially explosive to normal as a result of the intervention of our JPC lead monitor, Mr. David K. Zaza. All sides praise him for his level of tolerance, respect, and ability to deal with all parties.
17. Our findings show clearly that Lofa is in crisis, but also that the ground is safe enough for our partners to continue with their needed work.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. We have to work very closely with NTC Lofa branch to remain engaged with all sides in the conflict to prevent the conflict from breaking out again and to help find a lasting solution.
2. We should start our USAID grant with NTC in Lofa. That way, we will be able to test and determine the success of the project depending on how Lofa is handled.
3. We should work with other service providers where necessary in order to have a united front in helping Lofans find their own solution that will be acceptable to all.
4. We should try to identify some quick impact emergency funds to intervene in one or two communities with the youth.
5. We should share some of our thoughts with our Government partners (the Ministry of Justice and Ministry of Internal Affairs) as they make their on-going decisions on the situation in Lofa.
6. We should improve our logistical support to our Gbarnga office and our partners in Lofa to remain engaged with all sides and provide them our moral support during this period of crisis.
7. We should start talking to organizations interested in the media to request that they quickly prioritize Voinjama for assistance. There is no radio station in Voinjama. This could provide relief to residents.

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's 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)