

Report of the Town Hall Meeting on Mitigating Violence in the 2019 General Election in Benue State.

Introduction.

The African Centre for Leadership Strategy and Development (Centre LSD) held a town hall meeting with key stakeholders in Makurdi the Benue State capital on promoting Peaceful 2019 General Elections in Nigeria. The event which held in Hallydays Hotel Makurdi had as its core objective focused on mitigating violence before, during and after the 2019 general election in the Benue State. The town hall meeting was an offshoot of the community sensitization and rapid assessment engagement with the respective groups- traditional rulers, leaders of thought, women and youths in Gboko, Oju and Oturkpo. The Makurdi event drew participation from the respective groups mentioned, government actors- the National Orientation Agency (NOA), and the press. The discussion at the meeting centred on how to promote peace at times of election. It was a lesson learning and sharing event between the communities of peoples- those whose communities were peaceful and had no incident of violence and those who had experienced violence. Over 50 participants were in attendance with each lending their voice to the object of the town hall meeting. The town hall meeting was supported by the START Fund Network through ChristianAid Nigeria.

Proceedings of the Meeting.

Welcome Address

Mr. Uchenna Arisukwu Programme Coordinator and Project lead, welcomed the participants to the town hall meeting. He appreciated them for making out time and for painstakingly travel from far distances to be part of the meeting. For him, it was a signal of the commitment they have to this project and for the objective that it seeks to promote. Peace he said cannot be quantified nor valued until it is lost. Therefore, peace as far as he is concerned is better a thousand times more than a crisis situation where the peoples will all have to work extremely hard to restore peace and harmony. A key period where peace or peaceful coexistence is tampered with as the history of this country shows is at times of election- where old animosities are re-enlivened for political gains by selfish politicians. Benue State is not immune to this kind of situation neither is it insulated from same. That is the main reason why Benue was selected as a key focal state of the project alongside Kaduna State. Interestingly, we are here today to rub minds together on how to mitigate violence or the possibility of its occurrence within and around our respective communities. We are mindful of the fact that every politics is local and therefore most of the conflicts and violence are first expressed from the community levels where incidentally the political actors are not resident in. Yet the areas where the embers of political difference are violently expressed. We need our communities to be safe and devoid of any form of crisis that are politically motivated. And that is why we are all here to enjoin one another in this discursive genre to ensure peace reigns supreme in our different places of abode. Uchenna urged all participants to be free in the discussion, share experiences and make lasting recommendations that will keep our communities safe for habitation irrespective of the mastication of the selfish politicians.

Goodwill Messages

HRH Esther Ero, who represented her husband HRH and Retired Commissioner of Police, Ogah Ero, a first class chief of the Igede nation, welcomed all the participants to the town hall

meeting and extended greeting from the Igede traditional ruler to the participants noting that HRH was unavoidably absent owing to prior engagement. According to her, peace is not the absence of war but the management of conflict. She said peace is a paramount thing and is key to discussions in this event. We need peace in our communities because without it, every other human endeavour will be challenged and made impossible to achieve. Esther also stated that any plan to disrupt the peace in our communities will not succeed and prayed that the concluding part of the election in the state will be peaceful. In this gathering, there will be a lot that each of the participants will take home as we all brainstorm. She pledged that whatever the resolutions from this meeting, the Igede nation will abide by it, as long as it makes room for progress.

For King Ahua Ikpa, he expressed lots of appreciation to the Centre for putting in place the entire project which seeks to promote peace in the land. Although the project seems a bit late, like the fable will say. It is better late than never. Ikpa noted that the cost of dealing with a conflict or crisis situation is far higher than the cost of preventing it. Benue is a centre point of conflict with the farmer-herder crisis and the expression of political difference between various politicians in the state and at the national levels. Fortunately for us, there has not been a breakdown of law and order in the course of the 2019 general elections in the state. Interest breeds conflict within and amongst our people. We need to be able to strike a balance between our respective interest in order for peace to reign. However, Ikpa stated that himself and other respectable traditional rulers will work to douse any tension that may arise during the course of the remaining election elections in the state.

For the representatives of the National Orientation Agency (NOA) Mr. Anthony Abu, mitigating peace during election is one of the core mandates of the NOA. The NOA and Centre LSD have similar objectives in relation to this issue. He noted that the NOA has been on the field carrying out series of activities sensitizing and mobilizing citizens on peace-building since the last quarter of 2018. They have also carried out voter education on violence free elections in Nigeria. Abu expressed happiness that the election has come and gone, and relative peace exist between and amongst our respective peoples. The struggle for peace is not over yet especially with the inconclusive election in the governorship elections. What we must do now is to ignore the insinuation by our politicians and chose to follow the part of peace and justice and make our points clear to them through the power of our vote. We have no reason to take up arms against one another during election when the politicians have not done enough to salvage the plight of the people. He urged the community of peoples to go out and vote their hearts out, conduct themselves peacefully and return to their respective homes.

Mrs. Dorcas Wuese who is the president Tiv Women Association thanked Centre LSD and ChristianAid for organising this event. She noted that the women are pained by the actions of politicians who project their selfish interest to their people especially their children who fall victims or facilitators of electoral malfeasance. The women are mothers of the society and as such we have taken it upon ourselves to talk and educate our children wherever they are not to follow the dictates of politicians who end up using them during election and dumping them thereafter. She called on politicians to do more to deliver the dividend of democracy to the people rather than dividing us along ethnic and political lines. The determination to develop our society is one way that we can ensure peace in our respective communities and homes. Wuese prayed for the peace of the country.

Garba Dahiru who represented the Jama'at Nas'ul Islam Oturkpo emphasized the place of peace from both Christian and Islamic points of view. The significance of peace cannot be overemphasized, without peace no one would be here today. We must always be God fearing, love one another irrespective of our ethnic or religious background. For the group this has been the subject of their preaching in the mosques. God has eschewed us fear and run away from trouble or crisis. We must not allow the electoral process and all it comes with to disrupt our peace and harmony. He enjoined the Centre to continue to engage the public using this kind of tension dousing event to deepen peace in the country.

Mr. John Akuse, a representative of the office of the Tor Tiv, noted that promoting peace at election period is not negotiable. We need peace to move this country forward. He said that emergency response and preparedness must always be at the back of our minds. Doing so does not mean we are praying for such eventualities or crisis but rather it will help us to galvanize our people in a manner that ensures peaceful coexistence between our peoples. Those who divide us do not have good plans for us and so we must do everything possible and within the ambit of the law to allow peace to reign in our midst. He summed up his message with admonition saying that in all that we do, we must remember that one day we will all leave this world. And so, we must do those positive things that we can be remembered for.

Presentation: The Role of Traditional and Religious Leaders in Mitigating Pre and Post-Election Violence - Uchenna Arisukwu

Nigeria is currently going through another general elections to determine those who will take over the reins of power for the next 4 years. Since the commencement or lift of ban on election campaign, politicians and their supporters have been up at their game criss-crossing the length and breadth of the country. The process as we are observing is given concerned Nigeria a cause to worry as much is left to be desired. The conduct and actions of politicians have the capacity to implode the society as campaigns in all ramifications have tended towards negative utterances that could lead to the expression of conflict and violence. As communities of peoples, we will not allow politicians to cause us the crisis that they are not likely to be affected by. Therefore, we need to prepare citizens ahead on strategies for mitigating violence and to promote peace through the management and dissemination of information between and amongst our respective peoples. This has become critical in view of the desperation, violent outburst amongst politicians and the tension that this leaves behind in the polity. Arisukwu stated that no country can make progress in an atmosphere of conflict and potential violence. It is the projection of the possibility of likely occurrence of conflict and violence that this project- promoting peaceful election in Nigeria in 2019 was put in place with the support from START FUND Network through Christian Aid Nigeria.

Uche Arisukwu pointed out that the project focuses on certain outcomes that is expected to be seen. This according to him include the fact that people need to exhibit proper attitudinal behaviours before during and after the in order to reduce the risks or triggers of violence; reduction of recurrent violent inter-religious, communal and political conflicts for peaceful coexistence in the long run; acceptance of local solutions to peaceful coexistence and sustainability beyond the project; mitigate and or reduce electoral violence through entrenching positive attitude and conduct for citizens and other agents like the media. To make this happen, the project will work to make religious and traditional leaders agents of information dissemination between and amongst their subjects and particular as it relates to positive

behavioural attitudes; ensure that the people are adequately sensitized on proper behavioural conduct during and after elections; strengthen the capacity of the key actors in the project. The project is also expected to provide a platform for alternative conflict resolution. Expectedly, the project will work with key stakeholders including traditional and religious leaders, INEC, SEMA, relevant government agencies, local NGOs and partners, community structure and citizens. Two states Benue and Kaduna are the focal states of the project while it hopes to reach at least 255,000 beneficiaries in 36,000 households, and 2million individuals through the mass media in the states. The project has a life span of 45days beginning from February 18th to end April 4th 2019. Traditional rulers have a major role to play in making peaceful coexistence in our various communities a reality. And that is the reason why the project has sensitized and mobilized all the relevant stakeholders. Today we have the various groups represented- traditional rulers, religious leaders, youths, women and even the media, in this town hall meeting where ideas as to how to achieve meaningful peace in our domains can be shared and further taken back to the community for dissemination.

Comments and Questions

Following the presentation made by the project lead, comments and question were asked by the participants. This including the following:

The project promoting peaceful 2019 general elections in Nigeria ends shortly before the handing over date of the winners of the 2019 election. But between now and this date, anything can happen especially in respect of conflict and violence, what then happens?

Response

That this project is ending before the handing over date does not mean that any eventuality cannot be handled by community gate keepers. That is the key reason for the sensitization meeting we have had in the respective communities as well as the town hall meeting here today. All we seek to project using this medium is to find a way that our people will have a change of attitude towards politics and politicians as well as how we respond to the caprices of those who are supposed to be representing us at different levels in different offices. Once we are able to change attitudes, we really do not need to fear of any possible challenge that may arise before the hand over date.

- A participant commented that the major problem we have is with our politicians. They recruit the idle minds to foment trouble during elections
- Another participant noted that as traditional rulers and leaders of the different groups here present, we must see ourselves as gate keepers and as such the message we receive from this workshop must be taken down to the communities and preached in manner that will attenuate the conflict and violent situation that may face our peoples. It is important that we learn not to perpetually rely on the different civil society groups for continued assistance or for things to be done for us on issues like this. We need to begin to do certain things for ourselves using the learning from forums or platforms like this. This message needs also to get to the people at the top levels so that as we are driving this message to the grassroots, it will compliment each other at both levels. It's a good thing that the NOA is already doing this at different level preaching the message of peace between and amongst our peoples.

- Peace is our right and the custodian of peace is God himself. And when the peace of God departs from any one, it will be a disaster. There is need for us to return to the custodian of peace himself to ask for peace in our land.
- Mitigating electoral violence is very important for the peace of the nation and particularly in Benue state and as such, the participant believed that this engagement should have started long before election and enough to yield more positive response and result. Yet, it's never too late as the state has an inconclusive election to deal with and more so the implication this will have for future elections in the state.
- A participant pointed accusing fingers on the security apparatus in the country as being complicit during electioneering period while the youths are the major facilitators of violence where they occur.

Group Work

What can traditional, religious, women and youth leaders do to promote peaceful election in 2019?

Group Work Report

Women Group

The women group reported as follows:

- That charity begins at home and as such as women and parents we must live exemplary lives from which our wards can learn.
- Teach our children and advice our politicians to avoid thuggery and unhealthy politics.
- We will continue to talk to our family members to desist from anything that breeds violence.
- We will encourage our youths never to be idle as there are a lot of things that can be done to eke a living no matter how little it is. This will discourage idleness and the chance of being drawn into acts of violence.
- We must preach the need to love one another in our various communities and this can be achieved through the formation of different local groups and association that can help to integrate progressive ideas as well as discipline amongst our youths.
- We will preach against things like careless utterances and rumours spread by both politicians and followers concerning election. Some of these are done on facebook and the social media in general.

The comment that followed was that the bulk of the problem starts at the home front and so we need to catch them young and ensure that the right attitude is cultivated in the youths.

Traditional Rulers

The traditional rulers believe that they can do the following to mitigate violence in their respective communities.

- They will carry out sensitization of their peoples and this will be done from the home front to the community in general particularly to dissuade drug use and abuse amongst the youths who are at the core and trigger of violence

- Educate voters regarding electoral malpractices and caution young people on the consequences of violating the laws.
- Old regular meetings with politicians and illustrious sons of the land on the negative effects of electoral violence at all times and what they can do to prevent such occurrence.
- Maintain peaceful coexistence in their respective communities by holding meetings with all the sections of the community regarding this.
- Use of traditional systems for peace building through the application of sanctions against offenders of communal rules and regulations.
- Capacity of those appointed to be traditional rulers is an important factor in the way and manner they respond or intervene at times of crisis within their domain. They cited the capacity of the traditional ruler of Igede nations who is a retired police commissioner as an example.
- Use of communication facilities such as radio and television programmes to inform and educate their subject on the consequences of misbehaviours during election
- Traditional rulers will use every available means including phones and traditional means of communication to undertake reporting of early warning signs of intending violence to the relevant authorities.
- We would educate our community on the need to elect those who can serve the people and to serve themselves.
- Traditional rulers will make public pronouncements/statements denouncing violence before, during and after election.
- We can pay courtesy call on INEC and security agencies before elections to solicit their support for free fair elections in their respective domains.
- Plead and advocate with politicians and their godfathers to play the political game by the rules.
- Community policing will be taken even ore seriously and any stranger in our respective domains must be known and their mission well known too

Comments and Questions

As it is known, traditional rulers are not supposed to be partisan, what role will they play to remain non-partisan?

In responding to this question, a traditional ruler defended that as leaders they are like shepherds over the people. They are the ones with the obligation of preaching peace to their people. He also harped on the community policing and restated it is key to peaceful coexistence. It helps them to know those coming in and out of the community and what they do. That way they can check those likely to foment trouble. In the 1960s, there were traditional rulers who were actively involved in politics. But this is no longer so today especially that there is a law in place that bar them form being partisan. So traditional rulers are not to be involved in politics, we must be neutral, and must not endorse any candidate standing for an election.

Another participant enjoined the traditional rulers never to appear with any candidate standing for an election in campaigns ad rallies. Others say that the traditional rulers should be allowed to monitor elections in their domains and the result that will follow this will be massive. They have canvassed for a traditional rulers' observer group that should be accredited by INEC to monitor elections.

This view was however opposed by a participant who stated that rather than being allowed to monitor elections, they should be limited to their traditional of being the custodian of their respective land and nothing else

Religious Leaders

As religious leaders, we have observed that political violence does not know Christians nor moslems and therefore commended the organizers of this event for providing us the opportunity to restate what role we can play to mitigate violence. Our role therefore include the following:

- We will engage in constant prayers to God almighty for our nation Nigeria and our leaders.
- We will constantly preach the gospel of peace
- Always appeal to traditional rulers to help preach the gospel too to their subjects
- Religious leaders would always be careful about the message they preach to their followers
- Religious leaders will ensure they are non-partisan
- They should do everything to help in empowering and assisting our teaming unemployed youth. This way they can be taken off the path of fomenting trouble.
- We will preach about the dangers of facilitating violence at any given time.
- We will use our position to preach the need for our followers to obey the laws of the land.

This group was however reminded that even the bible des not abhor religious leaders involvement in partisan politics.

Youth Group

For the youth group, they have listed a whole number of they think can be done to promote peaceful election in 2019 and beyond. This includes the following:

- Mapping out possible triggers of election violence
- Carry out advocacy to youth forums on election violence
- Encourage youths to engage skills and vocational activities and education
- Sensitization of youths through community activities, jingles n the need to refrain from violence and violent activities.
- Identification of youths with potential for involvement in violent activities
- Identification of arms and drug dealers for the purpose of check mating their illicit activities.
- Regular meetings with security agencies.
- Link and associate with other youth s and potential violators to preach peace
- Discourage and report arms/drug dealers
- Verify sources of news and discourage fake news in the society and on the social media.
- Integration of traditional and religious leaders as patrons of youth forums to serve as role models.
- Ensure there are legislations/laws to curtail the excesses around electoral violence
- Expose violators of peace.
- We would be vigilant to know the goings on in our respective communities

- Incorporate party leaders into the youth forums
- Work to ensure that electoral victories are limitedly celebrated so as not to create the room for expression of difference
- Dialogue session on peace building, conflict sensitivity with youths and political groups.

General Comments

The crisis we are witnessing today is because the church has gone to sleep. The church should go out and take its rightful place. Others say that the crisis is beyond the church. Politics has become big business and as such we must do everything to reduce the amount of money that is available to politicians for election. We also need traditional rulers to make a binding statement or decree to their respective peoples that will help to limit violence and the chances of it in our communities.