

**Wilton Park Conference on Fostering Social Cohesion in Nigeria:  
February 26<sup>th</sup> -28<sup>th</sup> 2020/WP1752  
*Session on Looking Forward – February 27<sup>th</sup>***

**A Synopsis:**

Let me begin by appreciating the organizers of this important consultation: Wilton Park in partnership with the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office for inviting me. It is my hope that this gathering will not end up as another talk shop or a one-off event. Does anyone still believe in the Nigerian project? Many Nigerians are angry and discouraged with all that is happening in Nigeria today especially with the corruption that is so glaring and the insecurity affecting all of us regardless of where you live or come from. I am personally angry and sad at what is happening in Nigeria today, but I still believe in the indivisible unity of my country and will do everything under God to promote unity and peaceful co-existence among Nigerians. I hope this conference will be the beginning of a genuine process in finding practical solutions towards fostering social cohesion in Nigeria. From my interactions with various stakeholders in the course of my peace building work I have come to one conclusion, most citizens of Nigeria are ready and yearning for sustainable peace based on justice for all. This conclusion has also come as a result of my direct field experience in meetings with and listening to the voices of the victims of violence in Nigeria.

Nigerians today live in a climate of mistrust and this leads me to something I think is critical and needs to be factored in – in our search for fostering social cohesion. I sense too that people are also holding back their commitment to pursue peace because of fear of betrayals. A lot of people DO NOT trust the government to always do the right things. We have a climate in which generally rather than specifically, Christians do not trust Muslims and vice versa and this manifest itself in mutual mistrust. This is worrisome but it is also possible to transform this problem into something positive for the good of Nigeria. Therefore, the need to engage in trust, confidence and friendship building are required to set the stage to foster social cohesion in Nigeria. In fostering social cohesion, we need to focus on the real issues beyond peripheral diversions. It is encouraging to note that in spite of the challenges we see, there are also opportunities for peace in the attempt to foster social cohesion.

**1. Opportunities to strengthen inter-faith initiatives to promote peace and foster social cohesion**

- On February 5<sup>th</sup>, 2019, ahead of Nigeria's election, The Gideon & Funmi Para-Mallam Peace Foundation reached out to top Muslim and Christian leaders to promote joint action in support of peaceful co-existence and action against election violence in Nigeria. The keynote address was delivered by the US Ambassador Stuart Symington.
- CAN – Christian Association of Nigeria Plateau in January 2020 jointly with Jama'atu Nasiril Islam (JNI) brought Christians and Muslims together and trained them to act against the on-going attacks in local communities in Plateau State, Nigeria.
- We have had very timely and helpful visits between July-December 2019, to three States in the crisis-affected areas of Kaduna, Benue and Plateau States by the British High Commission in partnership with our Peace Foundation. Two of those visits were with the British High Commissioner and some of the staff present in this meeting: Grant Morris,

Alice Gore; Dominic William and others who are back in Nigeria. In all those visits, the High Commission staff engaged with the victims directly including the High Commissioner interacting with both Christians and Muslims. In all the three States I have continued to receive phone calls from both sides asking: what next?

- Voice of Women in Peace and Security, a Christian Women for Excellence and Empowerment in Nigerian Society (CWEENS) initiative which brought Christian and Muslim women working together in Riyom and Mangu LGAs in Plateau State.
- NIREC in Nigeria is helping to foster good understanding and conversations between the CAN President of CAN Rev. Dr. Supo Ayokunle and the Sultan of Sokoto, His Eminence Abubabkar Sa'ad. I relate to both leaders and I know this is helping in some ways – to smooth frayed nerves and promote peaceful conversations - even when things aren't so rosy right now between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria, if truth be told.

## **2. Peace Building in the Context of Inter-faith Communities in De-escalating Violence and Promoting Tolerance/Peaceful Co-existence**

Below are independent initiatives (steps) taken for peace from our Peace Foundation in partnership with Christians and Muslims who share similar ideals. Their names could be provided if needed. There is an urgent need to promote sustainable peace which is predicated on justice. The Para-Mallam Peace Foundation bears this fact in mind and this has been a great part of conversations for peace in the following communities:

- Mai Adikwo in Rayfield, Jos, peace building work with positive outcomes – 2010-2020 – have experience a decade of peace with no mutual attacks since May 2010. Both Christians and Muslims are working together to maintain the peace together, through the facilitation of our Peace Foundation.
- Kafanchan – we hosted one of the most successful and largest attended (540) Christians and Muslim, Peace Gathering for Southern Kaduna. The peace meeting helped to douse tension from July 2017 – November 2019, until renewed violence is starting to emerge now Dec 2019 into 2020. Along with a Deputy Chief Imam and a Rev (Prof) we are taking steps to arrest the situation.
- Promoting grassroots community-based peace gatherings has helped some of us to work closely and directly with the communities to detect early warning signs of conflict with a view to de-escalate tension through mutual cooperation and dialogue.
- To de-escalate violence, Christians need to reach out more intentionally to their Muslims counterparts; this is the model of Christ, he goes and does not wait. He forgave even when he was not asked. 'Father forgive them for they do not what they are doing,' Luke 23:34, in the face of his unjust condemnation to die by crucifixion. Christians need to reach out to honest and truth-honoring Muslim leaders to reach their communities to discourage the culture of violence and hate against Christians from within their community and we as Christians need to continue doing same to stop the cycle of violence. There is a need to build bridges of peace across the religious divide in Nigeria and West Africa.

### **3. How can such initiatives be scaled up and supported?**

- Promote some economic empowerment program(s) for young men and women in the crises affected areas. Our Peace Foundation has designed one, tagged: Youth Agricultural Skills Acquisition Project (YASAP). This initiative is designed to be a two-year pilot program which seeks to bring 50 Christian and Muslim youths together.
- Address Victims' Plight - from my interactions with the victims from the different ethnic and religious streams, I hear the same stories of suffering, deprivation and neglect. We need to look closely and hear their cries and perhaps craft a national narrative around this crisis regardless of ethnicity and religion. Other community-based projects could include: clean and portable drinking water (borehole), cottage hospitals, schools, and building homes, among other basic needs.
- Address specific humanitarian needs of displaced populations and supporting efforts to see them returned and resettled to their ancestral home lands. For example, in Plateau State today there exists cases of land grabbing, especially in Riyom, Bokkos and Barkin Ladi LGAs. Most of these cases happened between 2011 and 2016. The glimmer of hope is that the Plateau State Governor has made it very clear that all lands forcefully taken from the indigenous people would be returned. It is estimated that about 35 or more communities were sacked - most of whom are have been living as IDPs for years. The Fulanis have occupied some of these communities while others have remained desolate.
- Plateau Peace Agency - The establishment of the Plateau State Peace Agency signifies a departure from the reactive mode of responding to the challenges of Peace and security, to being proactive. The idea is to resolve old conflicts, stop new ones from happening, and also promote a stable and peaceful society. The Plateau State Peace Building Agency also works closely with religious institutions to promote interfaith dialogue and engage with the traditional institutions.
- Housing is a key challenge: there is an absolute need to rebuild some of those communities – simple houses in which the local famers have enjoyed living in their communities which has been disrupted by the attacks and displacement by Boko Haram and Fulani Herdsmen in most of Borno and Yobe States (North East and the Middlebelt areas. Displacing people from their ancestral farmlands is a major concern. Closely tied to this is the need for security to be provided for the returnees. Police and military presence appear inadequate at the moment. The security is over stretched but the government also lacks the political will to end the madness in the killings and displacement as expected.

### **4. Help from the British Government and International Community**

- Engage with the government of Nigeria and call out the attacks for what they are. Hatred of others on account of their ethnic nationality and religious identity should never be tolerated. Work with the Nigerian government as a matter of urgency to end the present culture of violence and impunity in the country.

- Help rebuild new homes to enable those displaced and are IDPs in the North East, Middlebelt, North West to return to their ancestral farmlands. This may be a better way to channel the huge financial aid the British tax payers are spending on Nigeria.
- Support local peace building initiatives as these agencies pursue immediate economic empowerment programs for short- and long-term relief to the victims.
- Leadership in mobilizing the international community to act fast in securing the immediate release and freedom for those still held in Boko Haram captivity. These are Leah Sharibu the 16-year-old, kidnapped along with over 100 other Dapchi School girls on February 19<sup>th</sup>, 2018. All were released a month later except then 14-year-old Leah - who was kept back because of her Christian faith. The Chibok girls kidnapped in April 2014 has 103 of the girls still unaccounted for; along with many others including Muslim women held captive. It is needful to mention here that apart from Leah Sharibu, there remains other Christian women such as Alice Ngaddah, a Nurse working with UNICEF in Maiduguri at the time of her kidnapping along with two Muslim aid workers who sadly were killed. By March 1<sup>st</sup> Alice would have spent two years in Boko Haram's captivity. There are also Grace Tuka – kidnaped on July 18<sup>th</sup>, 2019 and Lillian Daniel Gyang a 100-level University of Maiduguri student and 7 others from Plateau, kidnapped on January 9<sup>th</sup>, 2020 on their way back to resume their studies at the University after the Christmas break.

## **5. Alternative dispute settlement mechanisms, addressing impunity**

- Involvement of stakeholders at the grassroots has proved effective, for example, Kagoro Chieftdom opted to find alternative settlement mechanisms. If a farm produce is destroyed, the Fulani Ardo will be alerted, and he will sit in council with his team and they will sanction the culprit. Similarly, if a Fulani cow is killed, those responsible are made to pay the necessary fine. When murders are involved, they Police are brought in. This has helped to promote mutual cooperation and dialogue.
- Leaders in some communities have agreed to hand over the criminal elements among them to the civil authorities. The challenge however, has been what the Police does with them. In Plateau State this has happened both among the Beroms and Fulanis.
- NIREC – Nigeria's inter-religious council has acted in the background to find alternatives mechanisms to address impunity behind the scenes.

## **Looking Forward - Some Recommendations:**

1. The Nigerian government needs to come clean on (the? Its?) Islamization agenda. Fear, even if a perceived one, of an Islamization agenda in Nigeria is real. Dismissing, denying and attacking this without looking at it with the political will and courage to make changes does not help. If social cohesion is to become a reality this needs to be addressed. Both the government and the Islamic community need to address this NOT by telling but by DOING

and showing that this is not the case. Denial is the worst way to address people's fears. A re-composition of our present security chiefs will go a long in allaying such fears.

2. There is a need to act collectively to stop retaliatory attacks and revenge killings each time an attack takes place. The cycle of violence helps no one. It does not help the communities, Christians, Muslims, or government – no one except the merchants of death. We need to declare that there is no place for such vices in our society. Tied closely to this is the need to discourage Nigerians from borrowing-fights. We as Nigerians need to stop borrowing fights. Just what exactly do I mean? In Nigeria, people 'borrow-fights' based on ethnic and religious identity. These are fights they know little or nothing about. Strangely, you do not see inter-state political fights, but ethnic and religious inter-state fights abound. Something happens in Kafanchan and Kaduna starts to boil. Something happens in Katsina and Aba in the East is boiling. Something happens in Lagos and Kano is boiling. If borrowed fights based on ethnicity and religion keeps festering, they may become the mother of all fights in Nigeria - unless arrested swiftly. This gathering should also care about borrow-fights. We may need to do this almost without the politicians unless the politicians are willing to put the overall interest of the nation above their ethnic and religious identities.
3. Peace building efforts needs to be combined with victim led and inspired programmatic interventions in the targeted communities who have suffered untold deprivations all across Nigeria; particularly in Northern Nigeria. Urgent steps are required to discourage governments from weaponizing these attacks and monetizing peace building. Too many people are making money out of this crisis in the name of peace building or maintaining security.
4. Encourage an accountable, independent, Christian-Muslim coalition to end the violence. There is need to build a coalition of well-chosen partners from among Christian and Muslim leaders who are honest men and women of integrity who will speak truth to power, hold the government accountable to the people, identify areas of commonalities, and look beyond religious and ethnic divides to promote social justice and freedom of belief for all in Nigeria. Christian and Muslim leaders need to stand together, speak together and collectively act to seek an end to the insecurity. They need to jointly stand and say NO to the impunity and together compel the government to act in the collective interest of all Nigerians. Intra and inter divisions among and between Christians and Muslims is only helping politicians both in and out of power to use such tactics to divide the nation. There is need for a national narrative, independent of ethnicity and religion, for all to rally around. Such a narrative need to be inclusive of the shared experiences of the victims.
5. There is a need to address inter-security agency rivalry. This has led to unhealthy competition among them with dire consequences to their professionalism, competence, effectiveness and efficiency. While this is happening, human beings are hunted down like animals, kidnapped and killed in Nigeria. Fighting terrorism leaves no room for rivalry.
6. Resettlement of the IDPs by ensuring return to their ancestral homelands. This needs to be done while providing security for their safety, etc. There are today IDPs in the following States: Borno, Yobe, Plateau, Benue, Taraba, Adamawa, Nasarawa, Zamfara, Kaduna and

the Federal Capital Territory. The victims need practical help in the areas of shelter, employment, the education of their children, productive farming activities and common-sense cattle grazing activities. For all practical purposes, what we see today are clear cases in which the aggressors are being helped while the victims are being ignored. Therefore, we have a situation where the aggressors have found a way to cast themselves also as victims thereby making those affected by their violence, double-victims. This is a tragedy that needs to be reversed.

7. Foreign governments need to put the safety and security of indigenous people above their economic and political interest. Supporting any government in Nigeria should be tied to the well-being of Nigerians and not just the interest of politicians. Foreign governments should stand with the defenseless citizens of Nigeria rather than pandering to their own interests and the interest of those in power.

## Conclusion

Is social cohesion possible in Nigeria? It may be a real challenge as people are fast losing confidence in the Nigerian project, but I will still say – YES, we can achieve social cohesion in Nigeria. This need is not only about us but also about God who created humanity. When we view things from God’s perspective in bringing people of diverse ethnic, cultural and religious orientation together - in one geographical space, I pray and hope this serves as a real motivation to spur us on in the journey of fostering social cohesion, in spite of the stormy clouds.

I have always maintained that God made no mistake in putting a large population of Christians and Muslims in today’s Nigeria. Many have argued that Nigeria is only a mere geographical expression. I think otherwise. The many ethnic nationalities (about 250 or so) could be turned into a positive advantage. From our human perspective, social cohesion may be difficult but focusing on our collective humanity and inspired by the example of other countries, we can still foster social cohesion in Nigeria. Let the journey begin in earnest. Social cohesion is a necessary requirement for development to take place. This must be anchored on respect for our shared humanity and shared spaces which accommodates all ethnic nationalities regardless of our diverse religious beliefs.

Let us keep working at bringing people together around common issues which could be mutualized. Justice and peace go hand in hand and injustice and the absence of peace also go hand in hand. The presence of social injustice creates the conditions for social combustion. Let’s work towards fostering social cohesion that rings loud and clear to all - with justice. In *Interfaith Just Peacemaking* edited by Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite she says: “*Just Peacemaking necessitates not only the participation of individual peacemakers, but also the combine efforts of peacemakers communities. These groups and associations provide a framework for the development of individuals who work for increased cooperation and peacemaking action in the world.*” This should form the bedrock of our commitment to fostering social cohesion in Nigeria.

The British Foreign and Commonwealth office needs to consciously guard against the temptation of agenda setting in any form or encouraging a narrative which ends with the double victims’

syndrome, which is the re-victimization of victims when their voices are drawn in official explanations, arguments and counter arguments from both sides. In any conflict situation there are multi-layered and multi-dimensional narratives based on diverse contributing factors and dynamics which needs to be carefully and analytically unpacked in order to ensure justice for all. Thank you.

***Gideon Para-Mallam (Revd)***

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