



Report on the Seminar for the Signatories of the Linas-Marcoussis Peace Accord “Techniques for Building Consensus and Compromise”

July 13-18, 2003

Institut Industriel de l’Afrique de l’Ouest, Grand Bassam, Cote d’Ivoire

Sponsored by the U.S. Embassy in Abidjan and the Minister for National Reconciliation of the Cote d’Ivoire

Dr. Joyce Neu
Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice
University of San Diego

I was invited by the U. S. State Department and the U.S. Embassy in Abidjan to be a “Resource Person” for a seminar for the signatories of the January 2003 peace accord in Cote d’Ivoire that ended a short but violent war that began in 2002. As part of a four-person team, I facilitated meetings, moderated sessions, and gave a lecture on conflict resolution to the participants.

The seminar was an attempt to move the peace process forward through providing the engaged parties with the skills and tools necessary to do so. Nine political parties were represented, including Les Forces Nouvelles, the consolidated rebel group. We were housed at the Institut Industriel, a conference facility in Grand Bassam, about an hour outside of Abidjan. From Sunday afternoon through Friday evening, 36 representatives of the political parties, the four resource persons, and the conference organizers lived, worked, ate and drank together.

Each day consisted of one or two lectures in plenary by one or more of the resource persons. We spent most of the day in small groups, with each resource person facilitating a group of nine – one person from each of the political parties. For four days, the small groups became the village

Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice
University of San Diego
5998 Alcala Park ■ San Diego, CA 92110
(619) 260-7509 ■ fax (619) 260-7570

of “Ndougou” – a simulation designed by Dr. I. William Zartman¹ and a colleague. The simulation of the village was to help participants deal with real issues facing Cote d’Ivoire today – issues of succession of leaders, inclusion of minorities, modernization, democratization, etc.

In addition to the simulation, topics discussed in the small groups included 1) what kind of society do you want to live in in 3 years?, 2) what are the obstacles to having that society?, 3) how do you overcome those obstacles?, and 4) what kind of institutions do you need to put in place to guarantee that the society you want endures? These topics led to animated discussions both in the small groups and in plenary, when each of the four groups would come together to report back to the larger group. Across political parties, there was amazing consensus on the kind of society people wanted in Cote d’Ivoire. General themes included democratic governance, active civil society, rule of law, and less politicization of everyday life.

Notable to several of us was the fact that although many of the participants had taken part in the Marcoussis Peace talks, they did not know each other and, in some cases, didn’t know each other’s names or even how to pronounce them. The week spent together in Grand Bassam created the beginnings of trust in each other, and the participants vowed to continue meeting “in the spirit of Grand Bassam.”

I believe the seminar accomplished a number of positive goals:

1) it brought together people who did not know each other. In my experience, the fact that the political elite do not even know who the others are is a bit surprising and may not be all bad. This may mean that they have not built up personal animosities. But it also means they have no ties with each other. Personal relationship-building is important to improving political relationships and trust.

2) the seminar started to build trust between individuals and political parties. This process of re-humanization takes time after violent conflict has erupted and requires more positive experiences with the others. That is why it is crucial that these people continue to get together under good circumstances to work out their issues in a constructive (facilitated) environment. Right now, they cannot afford to start having negative interactions when there is so little trust developed. There is little resilience -- it needs to be built in over time.

3) the political parties were able to experience a problem and its resolution (i.e., Ndougou) without becoming personally involved, so hopefully some of the lessons from Ndougou will be applied in their real-life context.

4) the parties were able to see that "the world is watching" (this is Ahmedou Ould Abdallah's² term) through the U.S. Embassy organizing this workshop. This interest, expressed through the conference, may help restrain the parties from resorting to violent means if the implementation of the agreement does not go the way they want it to go. Knowing that a 3rd party as powerful as the U.S. is paying attention is extremely important in the message it sends.

¹ Dr. Zartman is the Jacob Blaustein Professor of Conflict Management at the School for Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University in Washington, DC.

² Amb. Ould Abdallah was the UN Secretary-General’s Special Representative to Burundi and the Great Lakes in the early-mid 90s and believed that by drawing international attention to the imminent civil war in Burundi, he was able to keep it from escalating into full-fledged warfare

5) some practical information and skills were shared with the participants so that they will better understand how to enter into negotiations and how to facilitate better, more productive meetings.

All this said, as a non-expert on the Cote d'Ivoire, I came away with the sense that peace hangs in the balance. It is not clear that there is the glue to hold these people together. Some appear to be looking for a way out of the peace accords while all are suspicious about the others' motivations. The reality of peace accords with which I'm familiar is that they are never implemented as quickly as people want and therefore, bad intentions are ascribed to those charged with implementing the agreement. One thing that might help in this case is promoting the perception that all parties are acting in good faith (unless this is absolutely not the case). This can happen through a change in the media -- better training for journalists in how to be partners in resolving the conflict, not in stoking a new one. Another thing is engaging influential leaders in the community to "buy" into the peace agreement and to "sell" it to their colleagues, congregations, etc. Another is to continue to offer the political actors a chance to come together in a safe environment such as the one offered in Grand Bassam.

I believe the workshop was a success, for the reasons mentioned above. As of this writing³, I have had emails telling me that the political parties are continuing to meet in order to implement the peace accord and that the women are forming their own inter-political group so that they can "really get things done."

³ August 12, 2003