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Report 125

AGLI's Election Violence Prevention Program in Burundi

The main reason I went to Burundi for a week was to see how our Election Violence Prevent Program was coming along and to seek funding for our new project of a cell-phone based Early Warning System for the elections.

To review, with support from the US Institute of Peace, HROC-Burundi is conducting 4 basic HROC workshops in 9 violence prone communities for 80 to 100 people in each community. Two day follow-up workshops continue the training in trauma healing and reconciliation and to plan ways to keep the Burundi elections non-violent in those communities. There are five elections for different levels of government between May 21 and September 7. When we wrote the proposal we were expecting only two elections so this is going to make our work a little more complicated and strung out over time. So be it. After a community celebration for these 100 participants and their guests, HROC-Burundi will organize the trainees into Democracy and Peace Groups which will try to prevent violence during the whole election process; campaigning, voting, and post election. Too frequently election monitoring has been confined to what happens on the voting day and the few days afterward when the votes are counted. Already, as I reported in my last posting, 35 QPN-Burundi election observers watched the enrollment of voters.

How will this project work? I found in the post-election violence in Kenya that most people were totally opposed to the violence, but since each one was an unorganized individual, he or she was paralyzed in his/her response. What if people in a community were organized and knew each other well. Would they be able to band together to prevent some cases of violence? If so, which ones? Would they be putting themselves in danger if they did this? How could this actually work at the grassroots? This is what we are experimenting with this program during the Burundian elections.

My first unknown was if the local people would be timid and afraid or bold and strengthened by their unity. In my discussions with the Quaker Peace Network-Burundi election observers and the nine people who were in the seminar to become trainers of citizen reporters, I found that those involved in the project were determined to do whatever they could to prevent violence.

For example, if one person in a Democracy and Peace Group (D&PG) came across a potentially violent incident – say one of the youth groups affiliated with a political party threatening to beat up someone from another political party – could they call on the others in their group to come to the place of conflict and the group as a whole would be a witness to the events. This observation is based on the fact that people are less prone to do violent or bad actions when others are watching. Could this put the D&PG members in danger themselves? Clearly if the violence has gotten to the point where people are using guns or throwing grenades, the D&PG members would not be useful. Normally, though, violence begins with small incidents and escalates. There are other questions that need to be answered. How should the D&PG members inform the local government authorities or police? What should they do if it is the police or local officials who are part of the violence?

The results of my talking with people was unanimous. People were determined to make the whole election process as peaceful as possible so that the country could move forward rather than return to the violent days of the past. This – rather than money, organization, or input from the outside – is the essential element of this project; the determination, commitment, and bravery of the average concerned citizen.

We have added another component to this program; an Early Warning System based on cell phones. My main reason to go and visit all those embassies and large NGO's was to try to find funding for this program. Alas, I totally failed. But in good ole AGLI tradition, we have decided to go forward anyway and do the best that we can. So how will we do this with little funding?

We have hired Domitien Sabongerwa for ten months to be the coordinator of the Early Warning System. I was surprised to realize that I had attended his wedding in 2001 on one of my trips to Burundi!

Almost half the cost of the program is hi-tech cell phones that can take pictures and hopefully send email and video. Instead of purchasing these, we will collect used cell phones. We have already asked people in the United Kingdom to collect phones for us. Phones in the US are not as useful because they do not use SIM cards. But I have been told that AT&T and TMobile phones do use SIM cards and would work. If you would like to collect these used cell phones for us, please email me at dave@aglifpt.org. We wish to have a minimum of 100 and a maximum of 400.

Part of the project is to train some of the D&PG members to become "citizen reporters", i.e., to teach them the basics of learning how to properly and accurately report incidents in their communities. This continues a long AGLI/Friends Peace Teams tradition that concerned grassroots citizens with some minimal training can have a major impact on successful peacemaking. Last Saturday I attended the first day of the five day seminar to train the nine trainers in citizen reporting. This was led by Sarah Jackson, who volunteered her vacation time to lead the seminar – another way that AGLI will be cutting costs to the bone.

So wish us luck, keep us in your prayers, stay tuned for breaking news!

Thanks.

Peace,
Dave

New webpage: www.aglifpt.org

New email: dave@aglifpt.org