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URI Leads Non-Violent Elections Campaign in Uganda

Julian Foley Posted on Friday, October 14, 2011 at 03:57PM

Making History Today

Interfaith history is being made with the emergence of grassroots interfaith peacemakers operating in highly conflicted communities. **United Religions Initiative** (URI) has a sheaf of such stories. More than 500 URI Cooperation Circles in 78 countries are committed to "ending religious motivated conflict" and promoting "peace, justice, and healing." Each local circle defines its own mission, goals, and program. In conflicted countries and regions like Pakistan, the Philippines, and Uganda, this has meant interfaith activists putting their lives on the line.

The story on your left, featuring Despina Namwembe, is shorter than some we could tell yet serves as a good example of what is possible. A dozen years ago Despina Namwembe travelled to San Francisco as a URI young adult leader. Eventually she was invited onto URI's Global Council representing Africa, and now she is a URI regional staff member working out of Kampala. In the meantime, Despina has become one of Uganda's foremost human rights activists.

On January 4th in a hotel conference room in Kampala, Uganda, youth political leaders and leaders of Uganda's security forces came face to face for a highly unusual meeting: a national consultation to prevent violence in the upcoming elections on February 18.



Interfaith, multi-generational dialogue saves Uganda from election violence.

In previous years, elections have been marred by deadly clashes between youth and security forces, resulting in mutual distrust and popular disaffection with the electoral process. Complicating matters this year is the formation of ad hoc youth "security" forces that have no clear purpose or uniform code of conduct.

This breakthrough meeting in Kampala was part of an ongoing campaign by the Great Lakes (Africa) Regional office of United Religions Initiative (URI) – a global grassroots interfaith organization based in San Francisco, California – with support from the Open Society Initiative for Eastern Africa. It capped a series of local district meetings aimed at building trust and finding ways for the two groups to work together.

Speaking before their interfaith hosts and the chair of the country's electoral commission, each group aired its grievances. Youth felt sidelined, targeted and treated unfairly; the police and army saw the youth as pawns of politicians, forceful, unpredictable, and provocative.

"Allowing the groups to be heard by one another was a very big step in clearing up misconceptions and overcoming prejudices," said URI Regional Coordinator Despina Namwembe.

And by the time the meeting was over, the two groups had come to an agreement, committing to disbanding the youth brigades and other related militia groups; promoting balanced media coverage; instituting community policing; and educating the public about the role of security agencies.

In the final weeks before the election, URI Great Lakes is stepping up the campaign, sending peace ambassadors—youth, police and religious leaders—to violence-prone areas; reaching out through the radio and other media with messages of peace; and spreading hope that February 18 will begin a new era of civility.

The campaign was successful, the violence averted, and they published a booklet to share what they had learned. Ed.

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