Volume 24 ● Number 5 ● April 16, 2010

Featured Stories

Africa: Reports of violence during historic elections in Sudan.
Asia: Pakistan considers banning domestic violence.
Latin America: Senator in Colombia accused of conspiring with FARC.

The countries for the Peace & Justice Update have been chosen as areas of focus at the institute.

Source information: Information presented in this update is condensed from wire and newspaper reports from Lexis/Nexis and from electronic sites on the World Wide Web. Complete bibliographical information is unavailable from these services, but every attempt has been made to properly cite information and give credit to source materials. This update is intended for use by IPJ staff and associates for informational purposes only. As the material in this update is condensed, and does not directly quote the primary source, information from the update should not be quoted. Any opinions expressed herein solely reflect the views of the individual Update author(s) and in no way reflect the official views and/or positions of the IPJ, its staff, or the University of San Diego.

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The Peace & Justice Updates are written by the Spring 2010 interns at the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice at the University of San Diego.

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UPDATE SUMMARY

CARIBBEAN

CUBA
Pro-government activists organize events to bolster patriotism.

HAITI
Weather-related relocation of IDPs raises concerns.

LATIN AMERICA

COLOMBIA
Senator Córdoba accused of conspiring with the FARC.

GUATEMALA
Progress being made in justice system says CICIG’s Castresana.

HONDURAS
Nine killed in shootout between suspected gang rivals.

SOUTH ASIA

NEPAL
Supreme Court splits on its decision about President Yadav’s reinstatement of army chief.

PAKISTAN
Parliament considers banning domestic violence.

SRI LANKA
President’s UPFA party wins majority in first parliamentary elections since end of conflict.

SOUTHEAST ASIA

PHILIPPINES
Overseas Absentee Voting begins in Singapore, while Philippines attempts to ban sample ballots.
SUDAN AND UGANDA

SUDAN
Reports of violence tarnish otherwise peaceful but technically flawed elections.

UGANDA
Special units of former LRA fighters are recruited by Ugandan army to find Kony.

WEST AFRICA

CÔTE D’IVOIRE
UN assessment mission arrives to examine election progress.

GUINEA
Government bans “unauthorized demonstrations.”

LIBERIA
Workshop held to discuss framework for national plan on climate change readiness.
CUBA

Pro-government activists organize events to bolster Cuban patriotism. Members of the dissident groups, “Ladies in White,” were arrested April 11 after their routine silent march after Mass. Laura Pollan, co-founder of the group, stated, “There was a mob of government people shouting things.” Uniformed police and security agents blocked the Ladies from continuing their traditional walk, forced them into a bus, and escorted them to their homes. The scene was reminiscent of March’s protest by the Ladies to commemorate the seventh anniversary of the prisoners’ detention when violence escalated over the course of the week. Several women were injured by security agents. According to Associated Press, Cuba’s human rights situation has been the cause of renewed international tension since the death of dissident Orlando Zapata Tamayo, Feb. 23, after a long hunger strike in jail. The communist government considers dissidents part of an international campaign to defame Cuba fueled, by foreign news media and the United States, and states it will not succumb to what it calls international “blackmail.”

In an attempt to defend itself against such international outcry pro-Castro activists organized what was referred to by the communist government as a politically important “concert for the homeland.” The show was headlined by Cuba’s most famous folk singer, Silvio Rodriguez, who did not sing, but only read a letter defending the single-party communist system. Appearances by other top artists from the Cuban “Nueva Trova” movement, a genre that mixes folk music and pro-Castro politics, followed Rodriguez. However it was not enough to retain the sparse crowd that diminished as performances continued. State controlled media said the concert would prove Cuba’s artists and intellectuals support the government but the estimated 1, 400 Cubans who assisted the event were in
stark contrast to thousands who routinely jam the plaza for free concerts. The next major event planned in defense of Cuba’s image is the annual May Day march. The government has announced that this year’s parade will be a formal show of support for its communist way of life. Renowned Cuban blogger, Yoani Sanchez, has referred to a recent exchange of letters between Silvio Rodriguez and Cuban exile, Carlos Alberto Montaner, in the Huffington Post as a potential “sign of a new start” for productive dialog between opposing political groups in Cuba. (AP, April 11; HuffingtonPost, April 11)

HAITI

Caption: Workers installing latrines at the Corail resettlement site. (Source: Oxfam)

Weather-related relocation of IDPs raises concerns. A new settlement in Corail Cesselesse, which spans almost 11 square miles and is located approximately 12 miles north of Port-au-Prince, will be the next temporary “home” for 6,000 Haitians who were facing weather-related danger. Officials fear that an estimated 50,000 individuals are most at risk from the rains, due to their current living conditions. UN and U.S. officials recommended the 7,500 people living in Petionville golf course, where they were especially at risk of floods and mudslides, be resettled. The goal is to complete resettlement of the 7,500 individuals within the next two weeks.

The relocation process is being criticized for its haste and lack of planning, but President René Préval claims the government had been preparing sites prior to the rains. France Hurtubise, spokeswoman for the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs questioned “if there wasn’t a more humane way to move the people.” Marcel Stoessel, head of Oxfam’s operations in Haiti remarked, “We realize this is an emergency relocation due to impending rains and we are moving with utmost urgency to prepare this site…But future moves cannot be done in this last-minute fashion.” There is a necessity to take the proper precautions in preparing sites so that the safety of the people can be ensured, and their basic needs met. Oxfam places partial blame for the poor living conditions of some camps on the haste with which they were built.

Rainy seasons are usual for this time of year in Haiti and typically deadly as well. In 2004, thousands died during heavy rains and in 2008 approximately 800 people died as the result of three hurricanes and a tropical storm. With infrastructural issues compounded by the January 12 earthquake, typical
concerns about rains and tropical storms are heightened. (AFP, April 13; AP, April 11; BBC, April 11; TIME, April 13, 2010)

LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

COLOMBIA

Senator Piedad Córdoba (right) with Pablo Emiliano Moncayo, who was released by the FARC March 30 (Source: Reuters)

Senator Córdoba accused of conspiring with the FARC. The Inspector General’s office announced April 13 that it has made a list of charges against leftist Senator Piedad Córdoba. The list accuses her of collaborating with the leftist rebel group Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), going beyond her role as a hostage release mediator, but she has not yet officially been charged. The Inspector General’s office is pursuing other cases of individuals engaged in “FARC politics;” evidence for all of these cases, including Córdoba’s, comes from email exchanges with the FARC.

Córdoba, senator since 1994, was instrumental in negotiating the March 28 and March 30 releases of Colombian soldiers Josué Daniel Calvo and Pablo Emiliano Moncayo, who had been held by the FARC for 11 months and 12 years, respectively. Her efforts also resulted in the April 1 handover of the remains of police officer Julian Guevara, who died in FARC captivity in 2006.

On April 12 Córdoba, also a leader of the activist group Colombians for Peace, was in Bern, Switzerland, as part of a two-week tour of Europe aimed at bringing international attention to the
violent conflict and hostage situation in Colombia. While in Switzerland, Córdoba will meet with the UN Commission on Human Rights, the International Committee of the Red Cross, and the European Inter-Parliamentary Union, among others, before continuing on to other countries.

Córdoba and others, including 7 ½ year FARC hostage and former department governor Alan Jara, are calling for “humanitarian exchange,” in which the FARC would release more hostages in exchange for the government releasing FARC prisoners. They see this as the most effective way of overcoming the stalemate between the FARC and the government on matters of prisoners and setting free to the hostages caught in the middle. The rebel group stated that after the releases of Moncayo and Calvo it would not participate in any more unilateral releases; further releases would need to be bilateral, met by the government freeing FARC prisoners. The FARC is holding at least 20 political hostages in addition to hundreds of kidnap victims they are holding for ransom. (Colombia Reports, April 13; El Tiempo, April 14, 2010)

GUATEMALA

Carlos Castresana, director of CICIG (Source: Prensa Libre)

Progress being made in justice system says CICIG’s Castresana. Despite a 95 to 99 percent impunity rate, Carlos Castresana, director of the International Commission against Impunity (CICIG), said there have been positive advances in the nation's judicial system. Castresana cited the quality of criminals being caught. He stated, “When has there been in prison a former president, a defense minister, a minister of Finance, two leaders of the [National Civil Police] (PNC), entrepreneurs, lawyers, judges?” He says this is progress because people at this level have never “been bothered by the criminal courts in Guatemala.” He argues that people may say this is not enough, but when looked at historically, what has changed in the past 20 years, even two years ago, much has improved. He acknowledges it is still not enough. There are, on average, 17 murders a day in a country with a population of only 14 million. CICIG is an UN-appointed independent body that supports the Public Ministry, the National Civil Police and other state institutions. Its mandate is to investigate illegal security forces and clandestine security organizations and work towards ending impunity in Guatemala. (Prensa Libre, April 12, 2010)
HONDURAS

Caption: Honduran government ordered military to help police combat violence. (Source: La Prensa)

Nine killed in shootout between suspected gang rivals. On April 11, masked men dressed in police uniforms entered a house in an impoverished area on the outskirts of Tegucigalpa and opened fire. Inside the house, shots were returned and the exchange resulted in the death of seven men and two women. In addition, several people were wounded when the men opened fire in the streets before entering the house. According to Tegucigalpa’s police chief Mario Chamorro, the violence was provoked by drug-related disputes over territory. Deputy Security Minister Armando Calidonio commented that the individuals involved in the incident are suspected members of the rival gangs Mara Salvatrucha and Mara 18.

Observers of Violence, a Madrid-based nonprofit, estimated 20,590 violent deaths occurred in Honduras over the past five years. Drug-related deaths in particular have been on the rise, and are partially attributed to Honduras’ central location in the trafficking route of cocaine from Columbia to the United States. According to Honduran authorities, several Mexican cartels are supposedly fighting for control in Central America, most notably Joaquín “Shorty” Guzman, one of Mexico’s top drug traffickers. In 2009 an estimated 1,600 deaths in Honduras were attributed to drug-related violence. (AP, April 12; CBS News, April 11; Washington Post, April 11, 2010).
SOUTH ASIA

NEPAL

President Yadav

(Source: BBC)

Supreme Court splits on its decision about President Yadav’s reinstatement of army chief. On April 13, a partial bench of the Supreme Court was unable to agree if President Ram Baran Yadav’s decision to restore Rookmangud Katawal to his position as army chief, after then-Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal had fired him, was constitutional. The two Supreme Court judges differed in their decision after five months of hearings on the case. Supreme Court judge Rjendra Prasad Koirala claimed the issue was moot as Katawal had resigned. Justice Damodar Prasad Sharma argued the situation posed a serious legal issue and should be presented before a full bench.

In May 2009, Maoist leader Dahal, also known as Prachanda, fired Katawal for defying a number of government orders. Katawal was quickly reinstated by President Yadav of the Nepali Congress party, which prompted Dahal to resign from his post. The decision furthered tensions between the two political parties and continues to play a role in the struggle for the government to finish a national constitution by the May 28, 2010 deadline. Also at issue for the constitution is whether or not to incorporate the Maoist militia into the Nepali Army, which Dahal argues must be done to restore peace.

While the two justices did not agree how to resolve the conflict between Dahal and Yadav, they did agree that the president does not have legal immunity and that anyone can file a petition against the president of Nepal. The case will now go before a full bench. (República; Himalayan Times, April 13, 2010)
PAKISTAN

Pakistan considers banning domestic violence. Legislator Yasmeen Rehman has sponsored a bill, currently under review in a Parliament committee, banning domestic violence in Pakistan. The bill puts forward a broad definition of domestic violence beyond assault, including: emotional abuse, stalking, wrongful confinement, and depriving a spouse of money or other resources necessary to survival. The bill is intended to protect everyone in a household including elderly parents, children and husbands. It has also included the formation of local “protection committees,” which are required to include women and file complaints on behalf of victims. According to AP, the bill states abusers can face months or years in prison and thousands of dollars in fines if they violate court protection orders.

Activists say that Pakistani law allows for women to turn to anti-assault statues, but unless they are severely beaten their claims are difficult to prove. Police rarely interfere in domestic matters and often do not take women seriously. Most women in Pakistan, like Zakia Perveen, who was beaten by her husband for seven years, do not leave their husband for fear of becoming pariahs in their conservative towns. After she filed for divorce Perveen’s husband threw acid on her face, destroying her left eye. She stated, “People don’t appreciate women who go to the police stations. I just thought it was my destiny, my fate.”

Violence against women is a widespread phenomenon in Pakistan, and a habit for men in rural areas according to legislator Yasmeen Rehman. Pakistan is a Muslim-majority nation of 175 million in which the greater part lives in poverty, half of adults are illiterate, and extremist ideologies are becoming more popular. The common view regarding domestic violence in Pakistan is similar to that of leading Islamist lawmaker, Maulana Muhammad Khan Sherani. He declared in an interview with AP that domestic violence was not a problem until advocacy groups appeared and created the “issue” of women’s rights. He said the new law led to more divorce and disrupted family life by allowing police and other authorities’ interference. Sherani states, “We oppose this law because it is not the solution—rather it is a possible cause of more chaos in society.” Pakistan is behind many other countries when it comes to banning domestic violence, it is rated 153 in the gender-related development index (GDI), out of the 155 countries. (AP, April 8; UNDP, 2009)
Polling workers carry boxes of ballots to a counting center in Colombo (Source: NYT)

President’s UPFA party wins majority in first parliamentary elections since end of conflict. Sri Lanka held parliamentary elections April 8, the first since the government’s defeat of the rebel group Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in May 2009. President Mahinda Rajapaska's United People’s Freedom Alliance (UPFA) has won 117 of the 225, or 60 percent, of the seats so far while the main opposition party, United National Party (UNP), has secured 46 seats. The final results are to be determined after repolling takes place April 20 for 18 polling centers in two electorates that experienced violence on election day. The UPFA is projected to win 24 to 28 more seats of the 55 that remain unassigned, which would still not give the party a two-thirds majority Rajapaska was seeking. The two-thirds majority would allow Rajapaska to implement changes to the constitution; it is believed that he might seek to change the constitution to allow him to run for a third term. However, it is possible UPFA could attain the two-thirds majority even after the election results are confirmed by swaying some of the opposition members of parliament to cross the aisle. Rajapaka has said the majority in parliament for his party will allow the government to proceed with its reconciliation and development plans for the country.

In rallies before the election, Rajapaska tried to appeal to minority Tamil voters by promising to unite the nation and ease the ethnic divide. The independent Campaign for Free and Fair Elections did not deem the April 8 elections fair and free. Voter turnout was low, especially among Tamil internally displaced persons (IDP) in the north. Fifty-five percent of the country’s 14 million registered voters participated in the vote. Tamil IDPs cited dissatisfaction with the resettlement process and frustration with lack of representation for their ethnic minority in the government as reasons for not participating in the election, according to Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN). IRIN also reported outdated registration lists and not knowing where polling centers were located as barriers to voting for the IDPs. An estimated 280,000 people were displaced by the 26 year conflict between the LTTE and the government that ended in May 2009; around 104,000 have been resettled. (AFP, April 12; BBC, April 9; IRIN, April 12; Reuters, April 10, 2010)
Overseas Absentee Voting began April 10 in Singapore for Filipinos. (Source: MindaNews)

Overseas Absentee Voting begins in Singapore, while Philippines attempts to ban sample ballots. April 10 marked the first day of Overseas Absentee Voting (OAV) for Filipinos in Singapore. Less than 200 of the expected 31,853 absentee voters cast their vote at the Philippine embassy on Nassim Road. Election officials are expecting more Filipinos to casts their votes in the coming days until May 10, the last day for OAV, which coincides with the start date of Philippines' first automated elections. According to MindaNews, Philippine Embassy Consul General Neal Imperial said text messages exhorting Filipino workers to cast their votes were sent free of charge, courtesy of Singtel, a major Singapore phone company. Philippine officials and the Commission on Elections (Comelec) have been working hard to encourage Filipinos to cast their votes, arranging air-conditioned tents outside the embassy where voters are checked in and can cast their votes. Imperial asserted that they “want the voters to feel at ease when they come.”

Voters were impressed with the embassy’s organization. First time voter Michele Espiritu said, “It’s not like in the Philippines where voting is not orderly.” The voting process took approximately five minutes. Singapore and Hong Kong are the only places outside the Philippines where automated polling is being piloted from April 10 to May 10. In other parts of the world, Filipino voters have to fill in their ballots and mail them.

While voting in Singapore has gone rather smoothly, Senator Richard Gordon has appealed to Comelec to ban candidates from distributing sample ballots in the Philippines. Gordon argues that the distribution of sample ballots can be used to sabotage the precinct count optical scan (PCOS) machines, thus forcing Comelec to conduct a manual count and thereby increasing the possibility of election fraud. The senator has also appealed to Comelec to limit poll watchers to one per candidate,
declaring them unnecessary with the new automated systems. He fearful that the presence of multiple poll watchers may also be a sign of vote buying. The first automated elections in the Philippines will be held on May 10. (Mindanews, April 11; Mindanews, April 12; Philstar, April 13)

SUDAN AND UGANDA

SUDAN

Caption: A Sudanese woman looks for her name on a list of voters. (Source: BBC)

Reports of violence tarnish otherwise peaceful, but technically flawed, elections. Conflicting reports were released Thursday about the murder of nine people in the Western Bahr al-Ghazal state of South Sudan. The ruling party- National Congress Party, (NCP), claimed the southern army had targeted and killed nine individuals including at least five of their party’s officials. Agnes Lokudu, head of the NCP in the south claimed that “the (army) got very angry and shot him (the local president),” because the NCP was receiving a lot of votes. South Sudan’s army (SPLA) says that rather than being a politically motivated incident, it was a “crime of passion” by one of their soldiers who discovered his wife in the act of adultery with an NCP chief. Kuol Diem, SPLA spokesperson, further explained, “This is clearly an adultery case and nothing to do with elections and politics. The NCP is just trying to politicize it.”

Elections began April 11 and were supposed to last just three days, but on April 12 the electoral commission announced the voting period would be extended by two days. Citing delays in the start of polling in the south, the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement (SPLM), had called for a four day extension. The decision to extend voting was met with approval by the United Nations: “The UN also hopes that this will enable more Sudanese voters to cast their vote, especially in areas and constituencies where the technical errors caused delays to the voting process or where voters have
been unable to determine which polling center they are registered in,” explained Martin Nesirky, a spokesman for Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon.

Reports about technical and logistical concerns with the voting process were particularly rampant in the south. Issues reported included late opening of many polling stations, names missing from voter lists, a lack of voting materials, and changes of voting sites. “The Commission has decided to extend the voting for two more days until Thursday, April 15. After reviewing some technical mistakes, the Commission has found reasons to extend the vote to allow voters to practice their… rights,” remarked spokesman Salah Habib. However, long before elections began, Sudan’s voting process was heavily criticized. Several opposition parties boycotted elections, citing illegitimacy in the election process.

The recent disappearance of four peacekeepers of the African Union-United Nations (UNAMID) force raises additional concerns about violence. The peacekeepers were last sighted April 11 in South Darfur. Ibrahim Gambari, head of UNAMID stated, “There have been no sightings of our staff and we are deeply concerned for their well-being.” Security concerns in Darfur prompted the European Union to withdraw their election observers. (AP, April 13 and April 15; CNN, April 12; Reuters, April 15; Reuters Africa, April 15; UN News, April 12, April 14; Voice of America, April 13)

UGANDA

Ugandan troops search for top LRA commanders (Source: NYT)

Special units of former LRA fighters are recruited by Ugandan army to find Kony. The Ugandan army is using former fighters from the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) to track down the rebel group’s elusive leader, Joseph Kony. Ugandan troops, known as the Uganda People’s Defense Force (UPDF) are searching for the LRA, particularly Kony and other top commanders, in three countries: Central African Republic (CAR), Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and Sudan. Most of the former LRA members in these special squads of the UPDF were abducted by the rebel group
as children, trained to attack and murder in LRA’s signature village raids. The army’s reasoning is that the surrendered LRA fighters are familiar with Kony’s mindset and tactics, making them more effective in pursuing him than those who did not have such contact with the LRA. “The government’s policy is to grant amnesty to all LRA fighters except to the top three,” according to a *New York Times* article. These three are Kony, Dominic Ongwen, and Okot Odhiambo, all of whom are wanted by the International Criminal Court (ICC).

According to American officials, at least half of the LRA’s fighters have been captured or killed by the UPDF in the past year and a half. The United States is providing support to the offensive against the LRA, mainly by supplying trucks, planes, and fuel to the army. A bill entitled *Lord’s Resistance Army Disarmament and Northern Uganda Recovery Act of 2009* was passed by the U.S. Senate March 10 and is currently under review in the House of Representatives. This legislation would require President Barack Obama to devise a plan to directly address the atrocities caused by the LRA and would approve military action.

Kony formed the LRA in the late 1980s to counter Yoweri Museveni, who came to power in 1986 and is still president today. The rebel group lacks any apparent ideology or goals. Since pressured to leave Ugandan territory in 2006, they have been launching attacks on villages in CAR and DRC, killing and kidnapping dozens of civilians at a time, sometimes hundreds, as in the case of the December Makombo massacre in DRC. There has been speculation for months about Kony’s whereabouts; most recent claims say he is in CAR. *(Independent, April 13; NYT, April 10, 2010)*

**WEST AFRICA**

**CÔTE D’IVOIRE**

![Image of UNOCI delegation meeting with Youssouf Bakayoko](Source: UNOCI local website)

Above: Members of the UNOCI delegation meet with Youssouf Bakayoko, chairman of the Independent Electoral Commission *(Source: UNOCI local website)*

UN assessment mission arrives to examine election progress. On April 12, a delegation of 20 officials from *United Nations Operation in Côte d’Ivoire (UNOCI)* arrived in Abidjan to monitor
Côte d’Ivoire’s progress toward national elections. According to delegation spokesperson Hamadoun Touré, the group’s presence signifies an important step for the country. “At each crucial moment of the Ivoirian process, the United Nations sends a mission to assess the situation. That is the case now, because, technically, we are not far from the elections.”

Touré’s assertion that elections are “technically” not far away is suitably ambiguous, as a firm date for elections has yet to be determined. Invariably postponed since 2005, open elections remain a necessary condition for sustainable peace in a country still unofficially divided between northern Muslims and southern Christians. While a coalition government is in place for the time being, President Laurent Gbagbo has repeatedly delayed new elections since his term expired in 2005. The most recent impediment to elections, controversy over voter registration efforts, is the focal point of current negotiations.

The presence of the UNOCI assessment mission demonstrates a concerted effort on the part of the UN to facilitate the process, but is not a guarantor of elections occurring in the immediate future. The delegation will be in Côte d’Ivoire through April 20, splitting its time between official meetings in Abidjan and tours of rural voting areas in the countryside. Talks are scheduled to include members of disparate political parties, civil society leaders, religious groups, and international partners, such as Burkina Faso’s president Blaise Compaoré, whose work to broker peace in the country has been lauded by the international community.

In addition to the electoral aspects of his visit, Touré addressed critics of UNOCI troops, who have accused peacekeepers of considering themselves above the law when it comes to violating traffic regulations. While traffic regulations may seem light fare given the seriousness of the political divisions in Côte d’Ivoire, the issue provides an opportunity for Touré to bolster goodwill towards UN forces at relatively little cost and in a relatively noncontroversial way. Touré pledged to reprimand any troops found culpable and stressed that such activity was at odds with the spirit of UN involvement. “Our mandate,” he said, “is to help protect Ivoirians, and not to create additional difficulties for populations who are already suffering from the crisis.” By working to finalize voter registration and thereby ready the country for elections, Touré’s team hopes to fulfill its mandate. (PR-Canada, April 11, 2010)

GUINEA

Above: Map of Guinea (Source: CIA World Factbook)
Government bans “unauthorized demonstrations.” On April 12 Nawa Damey, Minister of Territorial Administration and Public Affairs, announced that the interim government had banned “unauthorized demonstrations” until further notice. The announcement, delivered in a national radio broadcast, followed consecutive political demonstrations April 10 and 11, which disrupted traffic patterns in the capital Conakry. According to the government, the measure is preventative. The stated goal is to avoid excessive disruptions in the city and to minimize opportunities for violence in order to maintain stability leading up to elections in June.

This measure is not the first of its kind in Guinea. Two weeks earlier, the government banned demonstrations in the September 28 Stadium, citing similar concerns over public safety and the potential for stoking flames of political discord and violence. The stadium carries special significance for Guineans, as it was the site of the September 28 massacre in 2009, when over 150 peaceful demonstrators were killed by security forces of since-ousted junta leader Moussa Dadis Camara. Critics of the ban on stadium activity accused the government of posturing, noting that the ban was put into effect the day before a group openly critical of the government was to perform in the stadium. In the days prior to the demonstration in the stadium, Camara had banned public demonstrations. Despite the ban, protestors decided to carry on the demonstration as planned. The resulting conflict within the stadium represented one of the worst documented human rights abuses in Guinean history.

This is not to say that the ban on demonstrations caused the massacre, nor is it to say that the recent government prohibition is a sign of violence to come. Balancing human freedoms and security in a volatile political climate with a history of internecine violence is a difficult task which requires flexibility. It very well may be the case that the government’s ban on demonstrations is simply an effort to maintain the current relative stability in the country and to hold off would-be provocateurs until elections have occurred. For those Guineans who were in Conakry in September of 2009, however, it may be difficult not to hear echoes of the past in the decrees of the present. (Afrique Jet, April 13, 2010; AFP, September 28, 2009; ANN, March 28, 2010)

LIBERIA

Above: Members from groups across the political spectrum gather to shape climate policy (Source: Liberian Observer)
Workshop held to discuss framework for national plan on climate change readiness. On April 3, the group Action Against Climate Change in Liberia (AACCL) hosted a meeting among civil society leaders, government officials, and international development workers to craft a national plan to meet the challenges of climate change. The purpose of the gathering was to ensure that a wide cross section of voices in society had the chance to provide their suggestions prior to the government constructing its plan, which has been tentatively titled Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation in Liberia (REDD).

The working group – which also included officials from the World Bank and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) – acknowledged the value of forest land in terms of resources, biodiversity, and as carbon sinks crucial to combating the effects of climate change. Having conceded this point, members called on the government to balance the need for preservation with the needs of indigenous groups whose livelihood is often dependent on forest lands. To this end, the group expressed hope that responsible forest management could produce both “meaningful reduction of carbon emissions” and a viable solution for forest-reliant groups by securing the resources for the long term while allowing sustainable access to forest lands in the short term. In order to ensure that the rights of these indigenous groups are taken into account, the group concluded that, “REDD will require the full engagement and respect for the rights of indigenous peoples and other forest-dependent communities.”

In addition to their suggestions for Liberian policy vis-à-vis climate change, members of the working group were quick to acknowledge the obvious. Namely, that the Copenhagen talks of 2009 did not fully achieve their intended objectives and that without the commitment of larger emitters, the consequences of climate change may be dire for residents of the globe, Liberia included. However, by crafting a readiness plan which anticipates the needs of disparate groups within Liberian society and deals realistically with potential resource disruption and destabilization, the parties involved are doing their part to help minimize the potential deleterious effects of climate change on Liberians in the years to come. (Liberian Observer, April 12, 2010)