Local citizens collaborate to promote violence-free elections in Liberia

“One goal, one nation, one people – together we can make things peaceful.”

This is the message being spread by local peace committees in Liberia as they work to maintain peace before and during the national elections that are now less than a month away.

Local citizens, some of whom were previously in conflict with one another, are currently collaborating across sectors in four counties in Liberia to “say no to violence” during the West African nation’s upcoming elections, an effort supported by the Purdue Peace Project, a university-based political violence prevention initiative.

These elections, set to take place Oct. 10, 2017, are important as they will allow Liberians to demonstrate their commitment to the democratic electoral process, as well as lasting peace. Liberia has undergone two presidential elections since the end of its civil strife in 2003. Both elections, won by current president, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, were marked by incidents of political violence. Liberia’s 2017 election is incredibly significant; it will be the first change of political power since Sirleaf’s election and will be the first election after the draw down of the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL), which placed Liberia’s security back in its own hands.

The PPP has supported locally driven peacebuilding initiatives in Liberia since 2013, collaborating with pen-pen riders (motorcycle taxi drivers) who are mostly ex-combatants to reduce the likelihood of political violence associated with pen-pen riders and improve relationships between pen-pen riders, their customers, and the police. Out of this collaboration emerged the Pen-Pen Peace Network (PPPN) in Montserrado County, which has worked to prevent violence related to pen-pen riders, counter the spread of Ebola, and now to promote peaceful elections.

The Montserrado PPPN was one of the earliest groups to be engaging in violence prevention efforts related to the 2017 elections. Additionally, the PPP’s collaborations with pen-pen riders and unions, the Liberia National Police, and other community members extended to Bong, Margibi, and Nimba counties in 2016, with local peace committees forming in each to prevent violence surrounding the 2017 elections and to improve relations between pen-pen riders and police, who have historically had violent interactions.

With the election steadily approaching, these local peace committees are doing final pushes to ensure a violence-free 2017 election. Local peace committees in the four counties are currently engaging in a series of community outreach activities to promote peaceful elections, ranging from radio campaigns to football (soccer) matches between pen-pen riders police to peace marches and town halls.

To date, peacebuilding activities of these counties in Liberia have contributed to reducing incidents of violence related to pen-pen riders; improving relationships between pen-pen drivers and the police who are now committed to working together toward peace; and creating dialogue about the need for peaceful elections. The commitment and efforts of these local peace committees leading up to the election raise the hope that violence-free elections are possible for Liberia.

The mission of the Purdue Peace Project (PPP) is to convene groups of local citizens in fragile states where clearly identified situations threaten to lead to political violence, and encourage and assist these citizens in their efforts to bring about peaceful solutions. For additional information, please contact Dr. Stacey Connaughton, PPP Project Director, at sconnaug@purdue.edu or visit the Purdue Peace Project website at https://www.cla.purdue.edu/ppp/.