

THE
CARTER CENTER



CARTER CENTER NEWS

SPRING 2022

Guinea Worm Cases
at Historical Low

Venezuelans
Go to Polls



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ON THE COVER

A woman near Wau, South Sudan, holds her baby. The country reported just four cases of Guinea worm disease in 2021. Globally 15 cases were reported, the fewest ever. Read more about the Carter Center's progress in eradicating the parasitic disease on page 4.



From the CEO

Center Has Long History in War-Torn Nations

Like you, we at The Carter Center are horrified by the devastation, misery, and reported human rights violations taking place in Ukraine. We continue to send our thoughts and prayers to the Ukrainian people.

Rebuilding after war is a long, cumbersome process, and the Center has assisted many nations with this process over the years.

Liberia endured two civil wars in the 1990s, and the Center helped bring about an enduring peace through mediation, then assisted in creating the environment to rebuild. We observed national elections and implemented programs to support access to justice and to information. And we are assisting the country as it builds a mental health care system from the ground up, crucial in any country but especially one where the wounds of war are still fresh.



A woman in Liberia flashes the peace sign. The Carter Center has worked to help establish rule-of-law and mental health infrastructure in the country following two civil wars.

Meanwhile, The Carter Center has ongoing projects in Colombia on issues related to the 2016 peace accord that ended that country's 50-year civil war—including matters of human rights, the separation of child soldiers from the conflict, and political and electoral reform.

We have helped Nepal establish norms of democracy after a civil war, monitoring several elections and keeping observers on the ground in between to monitor the flow of accurate political information. Today, the Carter Center serves as the official Independent Observer of the fragile implementation of a civil peace agreement in Mali.

These are just a few examples. Wars eventually end, and when they do, someone needs to step in and help pick up the pieces. That's what "waging peace" means, and it is an integral part of who we are. Thank you for standing by us in this vital work.



Paige Alexander is the chief executive officer of The Carter Center.

Georgia Enacts State Mental Health Parity Law

The Georgia General Assembly unanimously passed the Mental Health Parity Act, ensuring that the state will enforce parity in insurance coverage for behavioral health care for the first time. The act, which Gov. Brian Kemp signed into law on April 4, could serve as a model for other states where mental health coverage lags.

The act will help Georgians access affordable mental health and substance use disorder treatment for themselves and their children by ensuring that public and private health insurance plans cover behavioral health equitably with physical health.

Led by the efforts of former First Lady Rosalynn Carter, The Carter Center has been active for decades to help Georgia improve its mental health care system.

Nigeria, Ethiopia Achieve River Blindness Milestones

Nations on opposite sides of Africa have reported major milestones in the fight against river blindness.

In Nigeria, transmission of the disease has been eliminated in Plateau and Nasarawa states, which have a combined population of more than 5 million. After more than two decades of mass treatment with Mectizan® (donated by Merck & Co. Inc.), transmission of the disease finally was found to have been interrupted in the two states in 2018. After that determination, treatment was stopped and epidemiologists examined more than 15,000 black flies over three years, and none was infective. This finding confirmed the disease had been eliminated.

In Ethiopia, transmission was interrupted in three formerly highly endemic districts in the Oromia region with a combined population of more than 500,000. Treatment is being stopped there and a three-year period of post-treatment surveillance is beginning.

In Nigeria, volunteer Gabriel Ani measures Cordelia Anude to determine proper dosage of a treatment for river blindness. Nigeria recently announced that two states in the country had eliminated the parasitic disease.



Guinea Worm Cases Reach Historical Low



An Ethiopian girl filters drinking water to prevent Guinea worm disease.

Just 15 human cases of Guinea worm disease were reported in four countries in 2021, the lowest number ever recorded. When The Carter Center started leading the global eradication campaign in 1986, there were an estimated 3.5 million cases in 21 countries.

The 15 cases mark a 44.4% decline from the 27 cases reported in 2020. Guinea worm infections in animals fell 45% in 2021.

“Eradication is an approaching reality,” Carter Center CEO Paige Alexander said. “The national ministries of health, with our support, have implemented interventions that are working, and the result is a measurable reduction in human suffering and animal infections. That’s what this work is all about. We need to keep pressing to the finish line.”

Guinea worm disease is usually contracted when people consume water contaminated with tiny crustaceans—called copepods—that eat Guinea worm larvae. After about a year, a meter-long pregnant female worm emerges slowly through a painful blister in the skin, often on the legs or feet. A sufferer may seek relief by dipping

the affected limb in water. However, contact with water stimulates the emerging worm to release its larvae and start the cycle all over again. Guinea worm disease incapacitates people for weeks or months, reducing individuals’ ability to care for themselves, work, grow food for their families, or attend school.

During 2021, eight human cases of Guinea worm disease were reported in Chad, down from 12 the previous year. Four cases were reported in South Sudan, two in Mali, and one in Ethiopia. Angola and Cameroon, which each had one human case in 2020, reported none in 2021.

“Chad’s Ministry of Health made significant strides against both human and animal cases in 2021,” said Adam Weiss, director of the Carter Center Guinea Worm Eradication Program. “Everyone in Chad, from the national leadership to the village volunteer, has shown a strong commitment to carrying out the interventions and protecting everyone against this disease.”

As for Guinea worm infections in animals in 2021, Chad reported infections



Guinea worm infections in animals, such as the dog seen here, have made eradication efforts more challenging in recent years.

in 790 domestic dogs and 65 domestic cats. Cameroon reported 10 infected dogs along its border with an area endemic in Chad, and Mali reported 16 infected dogs and one cat. Ethiopia reported two infected dogs and one cat. Significantly, Ethiopia found no infections in baboons in 2021, compared to four infected baboons in 2020. The worms that infect animals are the same species as those that infect humans; therefore, eradication



Makoy Samuel Yibi, longtime director of the South Sudan Guinea Worm Eradication Program, talks about transmission of the disease near a water source for Kuron, South Sudan.

Leaders Pledge to Eradicate Guinea Worm by 2030

High-ranking officials of countries affected by Guinea worm disease gathered in March 2022 for a three-day summit in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. The attendees issued a declaration, committing to devote all resources needed to interrupt transmission of the disease and certify its eradication by 2030.

Leaders from Chad, Ethiopia, South Sudan, Angola, Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Cameroon confirmed their commitment by signing the declaration. Representatives of Mali were unable to attend the event but signed the declaration later.

“It was gratifying to see the sense of urgency the endemic countries, donors, and the international community expressed,” said Jason Carter, Carter Center Board of Trustees chair.

Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, director-general of the World Health Organization, attended the summit and said that more commitment is needed for the final stage of Guinea worm eradication. “There should not be any complacency, because the job is not finished yet.”

The Carter Center and Reaching the Last Mile sponsored the event.

requires stopping infections in both.

The sharp reductions in cases in 2021 are especially notable in light of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and significant security challenges—military coups, civil conflict, insurgencies—in some endemic countries. While international health workers and researchers are vital to the success of the

program, the day-to-day leadership and work of maintaining community awareness and education about Guinea worm, along with monitoring for infections, filtering drinking water, and protecting water sources from contamination, are largely the domain of community and family members. So, while travel restrictions have had some impact, the

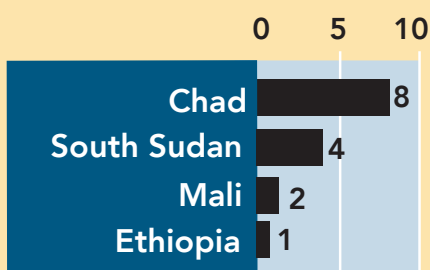
campaign has not been interrupted.

Intensive interventions such as public health education, diligent use of water filters, treatment of stagnant water sources with larvicide, and cash rewards for reporting suspected cases have contributed to the decline, said Sarah Yerian, senior associate director of the Guinea Worm Eradication Program at The Carter Center.

“Despite the challenges of the pandemic, people have really stepped up to do what’s needed to reduce infections,” Yerian said. “Rumor reporting is so important to this fight, and folks in Chad, South Sudan, and elsewhere are doing their part.”

15 Human Cases of Guinea Worm Disease Reported in 2021*

Number of Human Cases



Since 1986, 17 countries have stopped Guinea worm transmission: Ghana, 2010; Nigeria, 2008; Niger, 2008; Burkina Faso, 2006; Cote d’Ivoire, 2006; Togo, 2006; Benin, 2004; Mauritania, 2004; Uganda, 2003; Sudan, 2002; Central African Republic, 2001; Cameroon, 1997; Yemen, 1997; Senegal, 1997; India, 1996; Kenya, 1994; Pakistan, 1993.

*Provisional figures



Center Sends Expert Group to Venezuelan Elections



Municipal and regional elections don't usually attract much interest outside the country where they're taking place, but when Venezuelans went to the polls last November to choose their next governors and mayors, the world was paying close attention.

"The country is under a crisis—a political crisis, economic crisis, humanitarian crisis—and has been for almost a decade," explained Jennie Lincoln, the Carter Center's senior advisor on Latin America and the Caribbean and the head of the Center's expert mission to analyze the November election.

In the last five years, President Nicolás Maduro has disbanded the opposition-dominated National Assembly and replaced it with a Constituent Assembly of loyalists. He disqualified, arrested, or prompted opponents into exile and stacked the high court with justices favorable to him. These actions led the opposition to boycott the last two elections, claiming that the ruling party had rigged the system—and in some cases, the votes.

But in 2021, the opposition reversed course.

"The opposition chose to participate," Lincoln said. "In an uphill battle, on an uneven playing field, but they chose to participate."

The world was watching as Venezuelans went to the polls last November. At left (top and bottom): Venezuelans prepare to vote at polling stations. Top right: Venezuelans shop at a Caracas market.

Even more striking, Venezuela's electoral council invited The Carter Center, the European Union, and the United Nations to assess the electoral process, promising them complete independence to observe proceedings and publish reports.

"For these reasons, we decided to send a small team of election experts to assess the process," said David Carroll, director of the Carter Center's Democracy Program. "We knew going in that the election would not meet international standards, but we felt we could still offer analysis and recommendations that could help improve future elections."

The Carter Center's six-person team took part in more than 50 meetings, sitting down with government and opposition leaders, members of the electoral council, civil society groups, human rights organizations, business leaders, and ordinary voters.

Though the team was too small to assess voting and counting processes, they did spend election day visiting polling stations to continue learning about the process.

Luis Garcia, a voter who spent hours waiting in line at his precinct in Valencia, stopped Lincoln to thank the Center for being on hand: "Thanks for coming and supporting our democracy here in Venezuela," he said. "Your presence here is very important because you can see that we are voting...we are exercising democracy."

When the votes were tallied, the opposition had won 55% of the overall vote but only four of 23 governorships and 120 of 335 mayoral seats.

"The opposition was so fragmented," explained Lincoln, "that they did not gain a lot of territory."

The deck is also still stacked against them, as The Carter Center pointed out in a preliminary report, noting that political and governmental interference undermined the election commission and that legal provisions surrounding freedom of expression, candidate registration, and campaign financing do not comply with core international standards. The report also condemned the government for barring many key opposition candidates from running. It described an atmosphere of repression, highlighting the more than 250 people being held as political prisoners.

In a particularly egregious example of



Venezuelans check the voter list for their names.

government interference, the courts halted vote counting in one state after early numbers showed that an opposition candidate was likely to win the governorship, claiming he was ineligible to run despite all evidence to the contrary.

But then something interesting happened: In the new election, the substitute opposition candidate trounced the government's candidate.

Even before that show of strength by the opposition, people inside and outside the country were saying that November's elections could serve as a catalyst for change.

"It's very important to note that even

though these were regional and municipal elections, a struggling Venezuelan population decided to go to the polls," Lincoln said. "In a democracy, the only way to make a change is to participate. These elections may be a turning point toward reconciliation and resolution of the crisis in Venezuela."

The Carter Center is continuing to monitor the political situation in Venezuela and explore ways it might play a role in strengthening democracy and human rights there.

West Bank Palestinians Vote in Municipal Elections

Despite a highly challenging political and human rights environment, Palestinians living in large cities in the West Bank went to the polls on March 26 in a peaceful and well-administered exercise to elect municipal councils, a Carter Center electoral expert team found. Virtually all the major cities in the West Bank had competitive contests, despite a formal boycott by the Hamas party and intimidation and harassment of candidates by security forces and others.

The vote was the second phase of municipal elections; a first phase was conducted in December in smaller towns and villages in the West Bank, which is dominated by the Fatah party. No elections took place in the Gaza Strip, which is controlled by Hamas.

The municipal elections were scheduled following the last-minute cancellation of national elections for the Palestinian Legislative Council and presidency in May 2021. Palestinians have not voted for their national leadership since 2006. The Carter Center called on international actors to respect the fundamental rights of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza to choose their national leaders and to help promote a renewal of democratic governance.

The Carter Center called on Fatah and Hamas to reconcile and said more must be done to ensure respect for Palestinians' right to hold regular elections and to speak and assemble without fear of harassment or intimidation by Palestinian or Israeli security forces or political opponents.

Trapping Flies All in a Day's Work for Village Leader

Every so often, Berihun Takele spends a morning sitting on a riverbank with rolled-up pantlegs, waiting for tiny black flies to land on him or his companions. When the insects appear, someone in the group traps them in a small plastic tube. At day's end, the trapped flies are sent off to a lab for testing.



Berihun Takele

As the leader of his Ethiopian community, Takele undertakes this tedious task as a volunteer in the name of public health. The test results will reveal the prevalence of river blindness, a parasitic disease, in his village of Wudi Gemzu in the country's Amhara region.

The Carter Center works in Ethiopia

A volunteer traps black flies for research along a river near Wudi Gemzu village in Ethiopia's Amhara region.

to eliminate the disease, which can cause intense itching, skin discoloration, and eye disease that often leads to permanent blindness. Carter Center staff train volunteers like Takele to distribute preventive medication and provide health education to their communities in addition to occasional fly collection.

The disease is spread through the bites of infected black flies that breed in fast-flowing rivers, thus the need to test a sample of the insects.

Takele's wait at the riverbank can be punctuated by excitement at times. There was the time a man became too animated while telling a story and fell over backward into the river, and the time a woman lost both shoes while trying to wade across. And, of course, the river is full of crocodiles.

"We are not afraid of them," Takele said.

In recent years, fewer and fewer captured flies have tested positive. That's because the elimination program is working:

Mass administration of the drug Mectizan[®] (donated by Merck & Co. Inc.) to humans has reduced the number of infected people, so that when flies bite, they don't pick up pathogens to pass on to other humans via subsequent bites.

Wudi Gemzu, however, has been an exception. Although the surrounding area appears to have interrupted transmission of river blindness, Takele's village is a hot spot where some flies have continued to test positive. In response, The Carter Center and the Ethiopian government have increased Mectizan distribution from twice to four times a year in a bid to snuff out the remnants of river blindness in the area.

And so, Takele and his friends continue to sit by the river, waiting for flies to land. He says he doesn't mind a small sacrifice for the greater good.

"The future, I believe, of these communities," he said, "is that all of them are free from disease, thriving in development."



Campaign Shows Power of Information

If you had a huge, stinking, bloated animal carcass — say, a horse or a buffalo — blocking the main street in your neighborhood, you probably could figure out who to call to do something about it.

But in much of the world, women in particular lack access to municipal services simply because of a dearth of transparent information. Through its Inform Women, Transform Lives initiative, The Carter Center is working with cities around the globe to help more women gain access to available services.

Several months ago, a large decaying animal was indeed obstructing a street in a township in Cape Town, South Africa. The whole community had to navigate around the carcass while they waited for it to deteriorate enough for them to be able to dispose of it, which might have been weeks.

As Carter Center partners, the city of Cape Town had used public libraries to provide training to 400 women from the townships on digital literacy and the municipal services. That information soon proved useful: A woman in the township with the dead animal who had received the training told another that the city would remove dead animals. Others did not believe her. She showed them by calling the city number she had learned about through the campaign, and that same day, city workers came and took the carcass away.

“To think that because these women did not have information, they had spent their whole lives living with the rotting smell of animals in their streets,” said Laura Neuman, who leads the Carter Center’s campaign. “Information really is transformational.”



A mural in Atlanta, Georgia, publicizes the city’s 311 phone number, which provides access to non-emergency city services. Atlanta is a partner city in the Carter Center’s global campaign to provide government information to women.

Over the last year the first 12 cities taking part in the campaign have come up with a dozen ways women can enhance their lives through public information, said Neuman.

Guatemala City raised awareness about women’s centers that provide health, legal, and social services.

Colombo, Sri Lanka, created a mobile app for women to use when feeling unsafe, particularly on public transit, where harassment is common.

Chicago focused on increasing the number of women who receive the CityKey, a program that provides a government-issued photo ID, particularly important for marginalized women, such as survivors of domestic violence or those experiencing homelessness, Neuman said. The key unlocks services such as access to public libraries, transit, and discount medicine. With the support of The Carter Center, Chicago recently reached 60,000 CityKeys distributed.

This spring, 12 more cities were added to the campaign, and they all have plans for how to reach the women in their areas.

In Nairobi, Kenya, for example, organizers will reach out to women about the city’s health, legal, and psychosocial services and support mechanisms for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence. In Bogota, Colombia, the city will inform women caregivers about city resources, such as training, respite, and health services.

During a Carter Center-sponsored roundtable, the team from Casablanca, Morocco, learned about the work done by Monrovia, Liberia — one of the first cohort cities — to raise awareness about the city’s waste management services. The Moroccans decided to take on this issue and plan to build on the experiences and lessons from Liberia.

Neuman called the exchange “a great example of peer-to-peer learning.”

“We know the incredible number of competing priorities that the cities must address each day,” she said. “But we also know that by providing meaningful information and assuring that it reaches women, astonishing changes will happen.”

Partner Cities for the Carter Center’s Inform Women, Transform Lives Initiative

2021 Cities

Amman, Jordan
Atlanta, USA
Buenos Aires, Argentina
Cape Town, South Africa
Chicago, USA
Colombo, Sri Lanka
Dublin, Ireland
Guatemala City, Guatemala
Kampala, Uganda
Lima, Peru
Monrovia, Liberia
São Paulo, Brazil

2022 Cities

Birmingham, United Kingdom
Bogota, Colombia
Casablanca, Morocco
Dhaka North, Bangladesh
Freetown, Sierra Leone
Maputo, Mozambique
Montevideo, Uruguay
Nairobi, Kenya
Paris, France
Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic
Tunis, Tunisia
Washington, D.C., USA

Barbara Smith

Vice President Ready to Keep the Peace

Barbara Smith, vice president of the Carter Center's peace programs, says she was born to her line of work. Her mother is from Germany and taught her the value of international perspectives. Her father was in the military and ingrained in her the importance of service.

Even so, she briefly flirted with a career in medicine at the University of Texas: "That lasted about a semester," she said, laughing. "I don't even like the sight of blood. That should have been my first clue."

Instead, she found herself drawn to diplomacy and international relations, and an internship at the U.S. State Department sealed the deal.

Smith's career prior to joining The Carter Center in September 2020 included positions at the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, The Asia Foundation, and the U.S. Agency for International Development.

She spent several years working in Sarajevo after the Bosnian war. One of her more memorable assignments involved organizing a helicopter tour for ambassadors to solicit support for the Reconstruction and Return Task Force.

But of all her pre-Center jobs, the most rewarding—and the most challenging—was serving as a director in the National Security Council under President Barack Obama.

"There's just nothing like working at the White House," she said. "It's so exciting."

During her 13 months there, Smith focused on Afghanistan and Pakistan. Her tasks included writing daily talking points for spokespeople and a weekly briefer for Obama: "You had to distill everything you thought the president should know that week into one page."

After returning to USAID and then doing some consulting, Smith is once again moving in presidential circles—this time as an employee of the president whose fireside chats she remembers from childhood.

Smith had long been aware of The Carter Center, particularly on election observation. She'd even once met with David Carroll, director of the Democracy Program, while in Atlanta visiting in-laws. When she learned that her former USAID colleague Paige Alexander had come on board as the Center's CEO, her interest grew. Months later, Smith landed the job of vice president of peace programs.

"How many people get to have a title like that?" she marveled.

Despite her familiarity with the Center's reputation, it wasn't until she took on the role that she realized the full depth and breadth of Center's efforts.

"I had no idea that the peace programs had over 50 different projects and were changing lives in the way we are across Latin America and Africa and Asia."

Smith's priorities for the next few years include mentoring organizations in countries where the Center works so that they can play leading roles in their fields. She points to the Democracy Program's



Barbara Smith joined the Carter Center in September 2020 as vice president for peace programs. She said her most rewarding past post was serving as a director in the National Security Council under President Barack Obama.

work with an Ethiopian fact-checking group as one example of this.

Another priority is finding more opportunities for the Center's peace and health programs to work together in the way they've begun to do in Mali—where conflict resolution work makes it easier to undertake health initiatives, and health initiatives serve as incentives to keep the peace.

Working to build a more peaceful world isn't easy.

Since Smith joined the Center, Afghanistan has fallen to the Taliban; Myanmar, Mali, and Sudan have suffered coups, the U.S. capitol was stormed by rioters, and Russia has invaded Ukraine.

"It does all get to be too much sometimes," Smith admitted. "But then I think about Bosnia and Herzegovina, which, after a brutal civil war that saw neighbors fighting neighbors, now has had a democracy, albeit a transitional one, for 20 years. Or the situation in East Timor, another country on which I worked, that is still rated as a free democracy many years after the conflict there. There are success stories, and that's what you have to focus on."

USAID to Support Zimbabwe Election Mission

The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) is funding an upcoming Carter Center election observation mission to Zimbabwe. The grant provides \$3 million over three years and will fund the deployment of core staff and observers to assess elections anticipated in July 2023.

The Center plans to open its office in capital city Harare this summer. The team will provide an early Carter Center presence in the country to monitor pre-election activities. Two long-term observers will deploy to Zimbabwe this fall to support the Harare-based team to assess the anticipated boundary delimitation process, known as redistricting in the United States. Additional long-term observers will join the team in spring 2023 to assess pre-election dynamics throughout the country.

This long-term presence will be supplemented by a diverse short-term observation delegation composed of 40 regional and international experts and high-level leadership during the immediate election period. The mission will then transition to a locally led team to continue in-country collaboration for advocacy and reform. The Center will work with local civil society partners throughout its mission and with the Electoral Support Network of Southern Africa—a regional network of election observation organizations—to conduct a pre-election assessment, allowing the team to highlight early concerns to the government of Zimbabwe and the election commission.

The Carter Center sent a small group of experts to Zimbabwe in 2018 and issued a report of its findings.

USAID is a longtime supporter of The Carter Center, also funding several peace and health programs, including the River Blindness Elimination Program.

Swedish Grant Funds Liberian Project

The government of Sweden is supporting The Carter Center and Liberia Election Observation Network (LEON) with a three-year, \$3 million grant to advance democratic governance through citizen observation, including monitoring legislative activities, conducting national surveys, and advocating for election reform. The program is finishing its first year, during which LEON was able to observe a special election, report on activity within Liberia's legislature, and release analyses and assessments on an electoral reform bill and the implementation of recommendations from election observers.

An umbrella organization with national coverage and a presence in each of Liberia's 73 electoral districts, LEON has observed electoral and democratic processes since 2017, emerging as a recognized and respected voice on election-related issues in Liberia. The organization has built a reputation for increasing government transparency, encouraging citizen engagement, building confidence in the Liberian government, and supporting peaceful elections. LEON's



In a photo from a previous election, a Liberian man checks in at a polling station to vote. Under a grant from Sweden, The Carter Center is working with the Liberia Election Observation Network to further citizen monitoring of democratic processes.

work is viewed as credible, nonpartisan, and broadly representative of the Liberian people.

Looking ahead, The Carter Center anticipates that LEON will continue to play a key role in furthering democracy in Liberia.

Donors to Visit Center This Fall

The Carter Center will host a group of donors this fall for a weekend of events and fellowship. Members of the Ambassadors Circle and the Legacy Circle will meet at The Carter Center in Atlanta and hear from its experts on current peace and health projects. The group will then travel to Plains, Georgia, to learn more about former U.S. President Jimmy Carter's roots and see the small town that produced a Nobel Prize-winning leader. The Executive Briefing and Visit to Plains event will be held Sept. 29 through Oct. 2. The group will be in Plains for President Carter's 98th birthday, which is Oct. 1. Space is limited and registration will open in June. Note that a virtual component to the event is available this year.

The Ambassadors Circle was founded by President and Mrs. Carter to honor the generosity of individuals who support the Center's work with unrestricted gifts of \$1,000 or more annually. Similarly,



the Legacy Circle recognizes those who plan a gift to the Center through their wills. For more information, contact the Center: AmbassadorsCircle@cartercenter.org or (404) 420-3814.

Members of the Carter Center's Ambassadors Circle are invited to Atlanta and Plains, Georgia, for a weekend of events this fall.

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Johnny Ndebe is a national dispute resolution monitor for The Carter Center in Liberia.

NOTES FROM THE FIELD

Respect Bridges Differences During Protest

By Johnny Ndebe

In late 2021, I was notified that a crowd of protesters had blockaded a bridge a few hours from Monrovia, Liberia, where I work as the national dispute monitor with The Carter Center.

The demonstrators were upset that the person elected to represent them in the national legislature had not been seated a year after the election because of legal proceedings. They were blocking a key bridge to bring attention to their

complaint, blocking traffic for miles in each direction.

I drove the four hours from Monrovia to the scene of the protest, where police appeared to be preparing for a violent confrontation with the demonstrators.

While on the way, I had called few traditional stakeholders from the region who I know, who have been benefiting from Carter Center training and other activities, and they informed the protesters that I was coming there to engage with them. When I got there, they recognized me, and they had confidence that I was there to listen to them and get this situation resolved.

I spent three nights on the bridge with the protesters, listening to their demands and gaining their trust. I carried their concerns to the police commander, relaying the message that they intended for it to remain a peaceful demonstration. I then escorted the commander to a meeting with the protest leaders.

The protesters then shared their food with tired and hungry police officers. The bridge was open before I left and has remained open.

I have been working with traditional leaders across Liberia over many years, helping them to understand the rule of law system and how to resolve community disputes. If I hadn't been able to understand their system, I might have aggravated the situation.

We can build on this success to increase our relationship and our work in building peace and understanding in Liberia.

