

## PUBLIC RELATIONS AND RECONCILIATION

**Annie Anipa**

*Director of Public Affairs  
National Reconciliation Commission, Ghana*

### INTRODUCTION

In any human community or organization, conflict is bound to occur because we perceive things differently. And when conflicts occur, it is necessary to find amicable solution; otherwise the conflicts could escalate and lead to strong feelings of enmity or bitterness. Without a strong attempt at reconciliation, the parties may find themselves using any available means to inflict physical and/or psychological wounds on the “enemy”. This enemy theory is so strong in people's consciousness that whether they know it or not, it is always threatening to break loose. In many cases, it so colours perceptions that people observe things with suspicion. Many otherwise innocuous events become causes of real conflict because they have been refracted through the prism of experience which tints it and adds unpleasant colours to it.

In a preface to a book on the Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Ambassador Oluyemi Adeniji, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL), wrote:

Truth is a prerequisite for genuine reconciliation and can pave the way for redress and the deterrence of further abuses (of human rights). In this way, revealing the truth leads to the addressing of impunity. Reconciliation also becomes possible on the basis of knowing the truth and having the will to acknowledge and learn from the past, in order not to repeat it. Without truth and reconciliation, communities will not heal, grievances will remain deep-seated, reintegration will be illusory, development will remain a mirage and peace may be no more than an interlude between periods of war.

At least 21 official truth and reconciliation commissions have been established around the world since 1974. Countries in Africa that have established the commissions include Uganda,



Zimbabwe, Chad, South Africa, Burundi, Nigeria, Rwanda and Sierra Leone. The commissions have gone by different names and it should be noted that some of them at the time of their operation did not consider themselves to be truth commissions nor were they popularly considered to be such. But they have been so designated because they share the following characteristics:

- They focus on the past;
- They investigate a pattern of abuses over a period of time rather than a specific event;
- They are temporary bodies typically in operation for six months to two years and complete their work with the submission of a report; and
- They are officially sanctioned, authorized or empowered by the state and sometimes also by the armed opposition, as in peace accords.

The official status of a truth and reconciliation commission gives it better access to official sources of information, increased security to undertake sensitive investigation and a greater likelihood that its recommendations will receive serious attention from authorities.

#### THE NATIONAL RECONCILIATION COMMISSION OF GHANA

Relatively, Ghana is a peaceful country viewed against the socio-political upheavals in African countries such as Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Burundi Chad and South Africa. However it cannot be denied that the country has had its share of instability. Ghana's political history has been chequered as a result of military interventions that have disrupted her experiment in democracy and, in some cases, led to gross abuses of human rights. Families have been torn apart, businessmen have lost businesses unjustifiably, lives have been lost unjustifiably, and immeasurable suffering inflicted sometimes on innocent citizens. Even during constitutional regimes, there have been cases of utter disregard for the rights of the individual and the denial of justice.

For us in Ghana, the question that has been asked is: do we bury this past in the graveyard of history or do we take a reconciliatory look at these regrettable events of the past, in order to forgive and forget and derive lessons to guide our efforts at consolidating our democracy?



These and other considerations culminated in the establishment of the National Reconciliation Commission (NRC) in Ghana. The Commission came into being with the appointment and swearing in of the nine Commissioners by the President of the Republic on 6 May 2002. This was after the passage of the NRC Act by Parliament (Act 611) on 9 June 2002. The Commission is supported by a Secretariat headed by an Executive Secretary who is assisted by five directorates including Public Affairs and *five* zonal offices.

The Commission is an independent body and is not subject to the direction or control of any person or authority.

### **Object of the NRC**

The object of the Commission, as spelt out in Act 611, is to seek and promote national reconciliation among Ghanaians by establishing an accurate and complete historical record of human rights violations and abuses inflicted on persons by public institutions and holders of public office or persons purporting to have acted on behalf of the state during periods of unconstitutional governments.

The unconstitutional periods in Ghana are:

- 24 February 1966 to 22 August 1969 (corresponding to the rule of the military regime that toppled the government of Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, the first President of Ghana)
- 13 January 1972 to 23 September 1979 (corresponding to another period of military rule following the overthrow of the civilian government of Dr. K. A. Busia)
- 31 December 1981 to 6 January 1993 (corresponding to the period of unconstitutional rule of the regime headed by Flt. Lt. J. J. Rawlings).

On the other hand, the Act makes it possible for the Commission to extend its mandate to the period between 6 March 1957 (the date of Ghana's Independence) and 6 January 1993 when the Fourth Republican Constitution came into effect. Indeed the Commission received well over 3,000 statements and they cover the period of 6 March 1957 to 6 January 1993.

To complete the set objectives, the Commission also has the responsibility to recommend to the President, redress for the wrongs committed during the specified periods.



## **Functions of the Commission**

Under the NRC Act, the Commission is empowered to:

- Investigate human rights violations and abuses relating to killings, abductions, disappearances, detentions, torture, ill-treatment and seizure of property suffered by persons within the specified periods;
- Investigate the context within which the violations occurred;
- Identify the public institutions, bodies and public office holders or persons involved in the abuses as well as identity and specify the victims;
- Investigate and determine whether or not the violations and abuses were deliberately planned and executed by the state or public officials; and
- Educate the public and give sufficient publicity to the work of the Commission so as to encourage the public to contribute positively to the achievement of the objectives of the Commission.

## **Powers of the Commission**

The Commission was vested with the powers of the police in respect of entry and search of premises, as well as seizure and removal of articles considered relevant to the investigation. It also had the powers of a High Court in relation to the issuance of subpoenas, examination of witnesses under oath, charge for contempt of court and disclosure of information. These powers were vested in the Commission to facilitate its work as a fact-finding body. However, the Commission was neither a court nor a tribunal in the sense that it was not out to determine who was innocent and who was guilty. In undertaking its work, the Commission's focus was to find the truth.

## **Hearings**

The Commission was given the power to conduct public or private hearings in order to receive testimonies and their veracity in a judicial manner. Indeed, the Commission began sitting on 14 January 2003. In conducting these hearings, the focus of the Commission was to establish whether there had been a violation or abuse, the nature of the abuse, and the pattern of the



abuse and also to establish whether the event occurred as alleged.

The public hearings were also an investigative tool aimed at assisting the fact-finding process. At the same time, they were a means for facilitating and fulfilling the healing process of victims and perpetrators.

## PUBLIC RELATIONS AND THE RECONCILIATION PROCESS

### **The Experience of South Africa and Sierra Leone**

In an article entitled, “Symbiosis: Mass Media and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa”, the New School For Social Research in New York described the South African reconciliation process, especially the hearings, as a media event and likened it to other events like the Apollo moonwalk, Nelson Mandela's release from prison and Princess Diana's funeral.

Initially the hearings in South Africa were going to be held in camera, however the intervention of 23 non-governmental agencies prevented this. The hearings thus became a very big event in South Africa. The electronic and print media were used extensively to reach the entire nation. A Press Corp was put in place to facilitate this. Added to this were live broadcasts of the proceedings, which heightened public participation in the reconciliation exercise.

In Sierra Leone, public awareness activities began after the passage of the law that established the Truth and Reconciliation Commission on 22 February 2000. The awareness programmes were facilitated by UNAMSIL in collaboration with the Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights (OCHCR) and other non-governmental agencies. Round table discussions were organized followed by an all-embracing national workshop with international bodies in attendance to sensitize community leaders in Sierra Leone.

Subsequently UNAMSIL launched a public awareness campaign. Seminars were organized, brochures were printed and circulated, weekly radio programmes were held, publicity materials; T-shirts, stickers and banners were produced and distributed to increase support for the TRC. I believe the educational programmes have continued even after the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The TRC is yet to begin hearings.



## **Preparatory Work in Ghana**

In the case of Ghana, before the passage of the NRC Act, a non-governmental institution, the Centre for Democratic Development (CDD) undertook a survey of opinions on national reconciliation in May 2001. The findings of that survey revealed that 89 per cent Ghanaians favoured some form of national reconciliation. In the debate that ensued, a major point of disagreement concerned the periods to be covered by the Commission. The exercise was seen as targeting military governments or specifically, the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) and the Provisional National Defence Council (**PNDC**) governments headed by Ex-President J. J. Rawlings.

So polarized was the debate in the Ghanaian Parliament that the largest opposition party in the country, the NDC, staged a walkout in protest before the passage of the Act. This concern was addressed when the Act was passed by extending the Commission's mandate to cover all post independence governments; however, segments of the public have expressed apprehensions about the use of discretion by the Commission in dealing with periods of civilian governments. Their difficulty is that while some come to the Commission through “doors”, others are to come through “windows”. That is their interpretation of the window of opportunity offered for civilian regimes. The reality is that the Commission received more statements/petitions on military governments, especially those that stayed in power over a long period.

As part of the preparatory work, a series of workshop were organized for media practitioners by CDD in collaboration with the Ghana Journalists Association, giving birth to a document dubbed “Akosombo Accord” which provided guidelines on media reportage.

## **Focus Groups and Community Forums**

The NRC is using this PR tool considerably. During the preparatory stage of the Commission's work, i.e., before the hearings, community forums involve the military, the police, the prisons service, traditional rulers, labour groups, students, religious bodies, district assemblies and other identifiable bodies. This is ongoing and it also involved co-operation with the Civil Society Coalition of the CDD.



An important public relations effort was realized when a coalition of civil society on national reconciliation was put in place by CDD to assist in raising public awareness of the reconciliation exercise even before the establishment of the Commission. The coalition, made up of representatives of religious bodies, business executives, retired public servants, retired judges and other prominent Ghanaians, has complemented the work of the Commission especially the public education programmes.

## MEDIA RELATIONS

The Commission's Press Corp, made up of journalists from the print and electronic media, played a very significant role in the dissemination of information to the Ghanaian public. The policy of the Commission was to maintain credibility with the media in the sense that we tried as much as possible not to favour one media house over the other and we provided easy access to the Commission, making sure that there was no confusion on the identity of the spokesperson of the Commission.

The most challenging media programme of the Commission was the live coverage of the public hearings by Ghana Television. Transparency was one key factor that informed the decision to transmit the NRC proceedings live. In sharing the details of the human rights abuses, we hoped that a good a number of Ghanaians would become more aware of their fundamental human rights. This, of course has its negative side, as experienced recently when a private comment by the Chairman of the Commission was inadvertently transmitted on television because the Commission's newly installed powerful microphones were on when he talked. Again, critics have wondered whether the nation needed to be subjected to the gory details of some of the human rights abuses.

The Commission found it necessary to develop a website ([www.nrcghana.org](http://www.nrcghana.org)) to disseminate information in and outside Ghana.

### **Expected Benefits**

In *Unspeakable Truths*, a book by Priscilla Hayner, Executive Director of the International Centre for Transitional Justice, she assigns five reasons why reconciliation commissions are necessary. According to her, these are to:



- Clarify and acknowledge the truth;
- Respond to the needs and interests of victims;
- Contribute to justice and accountability;
- Outline institutional responsibility and recommend reforms; and
- Promote reconciliation and reduce tensions resulting from past violence.

The benefits expected from the reconciliation journey embarked upon in Ghana are linked to these reasons in that it is to:

Recommend ways to prevent such violations by recommending legal and administrative reforms in torture prone institutions;

- Aid victims of human rights abuses to heal and come to terms with their experience through counselling
- Recommend reparation such as restoration of confiscated property, establishment of scholarship schemes, erection of monuments; and
- Recommend the setting up of a reparation and rehabilitation fund.

These recommendations will be embodied in a report to be submitted to the President for implementation. Real reconciliation begins with the implementation of the report to be submitted the President. This will largely depend upon the commitment to implement the report. In Africa, reconciliation has suffered a serious setback because politicians did not have the commitment and political will to implement recommendations in the reports that were submitted. In Uganda, President Idi Amin and President Museveni established two of such commissions; President Amin refused to publish the report to implement the recommendations. The report of the second Commission has still not been distributed. In Burundi, the very day the report was to be released, there was a military coup and the report was held back. In South Africa a five-volume report was released in 1998, the four addenda to the report were released recently. The government has not made any commitment to implement recommendations.

This notwithstanding, there is no doubt that reconciliation aims at strengthening democratic institutions. It has been said that investment thrives when there is stability, peace, good



governance and the rule of law. How do we lay the infrastructure to ensure good governance in Africa? Reconciliation and reintegration are part of that process.

