



For Immediate Release:
Tuesday, April 20, 2006

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CVT EXPANDS OPERATIONS TO LOFA COUNTY, LIBERIA Community Health Services Help Liberians Return to Peace and Stability

Minneapolis – The Center for Victims of Torture (CVT) announced today that it would expand its counseling and community health efforts to Lofa County, in northern Liberia, an area almost entirely depopulated during the country’s 14-year civil war and now the focus of refugee return efforts organized by the United Nations. CVT Liberia provides counseling and community health activities to thousands of Liberians, including returning refugees, internally displaced people and local community members.

According to estimates made by officials in Voinjama, Lofa County’s largest town, up to 97 percent of the county’s population fled during Liberia’s civil war. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) expects 60,000 of 231,000 returning Liberian refugees will settle in Lofa County in the first half of 2006.

“Torture affects not only individuals but entire communities,” said Jean-Baptiste Mikulu, Ph.D., Country Director. “After the kind of political violence that destroyed Liberia, we know that individuals and communities must be healed for peace and stability to flourish.”

CVT Liberia is the only provider of in-depth mental health services for survivors of torture and trauma in Liberia. The core work is carried out by Liberian mental health paraprofessional counselors. They serve as mental health counselors, trainers and human rights advocates. In the long term, they will help build local capacity in Liberia to address the mental health needs of Liberians as the country rebuilds its democracy.

The counselors received intensive orientation by experienced expatriate mental health staff, and continue to receive training throughout their career with CVT. They do identification in the communities, clinical assessment, case management and they lead small group counseling sessions. They also conduct community sensitization activities and train staff from other agencies or organizations to increase understanding and awareness of torture and learn how to provide sensitive and appropriate care. CVT Liberia currently employs 36 Liberian paraprofessional counselors.

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Healing Individuals

Torture survivors can feel frightened and sad; some never leave their homes, and some are not able to care for their families. Counseling can help survivors return to the normal activities of daily life, including contributing to their families well-being and rebuilding their communities. CVT Liberia provides individual and small-group counseling services to hundreds of traumatized Liberians each year. Data is collected to evaluate the success of its mental health services and initial results show significant improvements in mental health.

Healing Communities

To assist with healing in communities, CVT Liberia conducts community sensitization activities and large-group reintegration activities to raise awareness of the prevalence and effects of torture and to promote healing. These activities allow CVT staff to identify potential clients and involve the community in the healing process by gaining significant knowledge that changes their behavior and beliefs related to trauma symptoms. This helps the community become a healing and supportive environment that will help torture survivors heal by paying better attention to them rather than stigmatizing them.

Partners in Healing

CVT Liberia is an active member of the national mental health coordination group, working with relevant government ministries, other NGOs, educational institutions, and others to build capacity in Liberia to provide care to victims of torture.

Paraprofessional counselors are networking with local partners, including Action for Christians Against Torture and the Prisoners Assistance Program, both based in Monrovia. The counselors are mentoring the staff of these organizations by providing training to increase the ability to provide for the needs of torture victims.

CVT Liberia also conducts training to government members and national NGOs to support the development of a system of justice that respects human rights and the rule of law. Most recently, CVT Liberia provided training to a graduating class of correctional officers, the first in more than 20 years.

Primary funding for CVT Liberia comes from the U.S. State Department's Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration. CVT began operations in Monrovia, Liberia's capital, and Bong County in April 2005.

The Center for Victims of Torture is an independent nonprofit headquartered in Minneapolis, MN. Its mission is to heal the wounds of torture on individuals, their families and their communities and to end torture worldwide.

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