Supporting Communities Affected by Conflict  
- Polly Byers, Executive Director

We have all seen the terrible suffering, and amazing courage and resilience, of the Ukrainian people over the past months. It is heartening to see the worldwide support for Ukrainian refugees, and unity against that invasion and occupation—yet at the same time, concerning to see the stark difference in attitudes toward people fleeing similarly devastating conflicts elsewhere. The crisis underscores the importance of supporting conflict-affected communities worldwide, not only the most visible crisis. We need to persevere in the hard work of bridging divides wherever they occur, countering hate, preventing recurring cycles of violence, and healing from the trauma of war and displacement.

As we face these global crises, Karuna’s work has never seemed more vital. With your support, we are building networks of local peacebuilders who are now actively preventing and mitigating violent conflict in Nigeria and Myanmar despite enormous challenges, and facilitating dialogues in the U.S. on divisive issues such as climate. We are also working with our Nigeria-based peacebuilding partner, the Neem Foundation, to adapt our joint peacebuilding model, which has been recognized for its success by the Nigerian government, to be used in other nations facing violent conflict.

At Karuna Center, we have personally been saddened by the unexpected death in February of our founder and senior peacebuilding advisor, Paula Green. Paula, as those who knew her can attest, was a tireless peacebuilder—a pioneer in the field who inspired countless people and organizations around the world dedicated to the work of bridging divides. We are humbled and honored to continue to carry the work on, and will be launching a fund to support our partners in her memory.

Photo above: Community-based mental health support in conflict-affected areas, Zamfara, Nigeria

Uniting With Courage and Creativity Against Violence in Myanmar  
- Daniela Westphal Huber, Program Manager

It takes courage to speak up against violence and doubly so when your country is ruled by a repressive military regime. In Myanmar, over 100 people traveled from seven different villages in northern Shan state to attend an event raising awareness about violence against women and girls, at an International Women’s Day event organized by Ta’ang Women’s Organization (TWO) this year (photo above). The event gathered village and youth leaders and community members for a discussion of video clips that told the stories of women facing harmful customary practices and overcoming gender norms.

Violence against women and girls was also the theme of a song and music video produced by All Arakan Youth Organizations Network (AAYON) in the Rakhine language. The video campaign raised awareness and encouraged compassion for the lives of women in camps for internally displaced people—regardless of their ethnicity and religion. The area has a history of marginalization and violence based on ethnicity, including state-led violence against Rohingya Muslims. Violence against women plays a role in driving the conflicts. Feedback on AAYON’s video campaign showed that it touched people’s hearts and inspired them to act from the values of compassion and inclusion in their own communities.

Both AAYON and TWO designed their campaigns as part of the inaugural cohort of the Creative Influencing Campaign, the main advocacy component of our Watering the Banyan Tree project in Myanmar. The project has supported peacebuilders with training and dialogue since the military coup. Participating organizations are now using their creativity to craft messages, then plan and launch innovative influencing campaigns.

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On the surface, it appears very simple how a conflict begins: A farmer returns home to discover that his entire field of corn has been eaten and trampled under-hoof. Gone is the food for his family and the seed corn for the next season. He demands justice—which the government delivers by seizing nearby herders’ cattle and demanding large sums of money to release them. The herders have now lost their means to support their own families, leading to clashes between the groups.

While the initial spark that sets off a conflagration may seem obvious, it’s much more difficult to untangle all of the dynamics that fuel tension between farmers and herders—government decisions and inaction, shifting weather patterns, diminished grazing and farming land, regional conflict, dangerous stereotypes, and broken communication. In an environment of suspicion and fear, how do two parties seemingly so at odds with one another begin to build trust?

The Protecting Our Communities Initiative (POCI) team began by meeting individually with the leadership of the All Farmers Association of Nigeria (AFAN) and the Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association of Nigeria (MACBAN). After preparing them for the dialogue process, we brought the leadership of the two groups together for the first time. As they listened to one another, they realized how the current situation was hurting both of their peoples, and began to work together to bring peace to their communities.

Since that first meeting, AFAN and MACBAN leadership have met on multiple occasions, and formed a WhatsApp group to keep in touch. Hundreds of listeners heard them discuss their shared efforts to bring peace over local radio, and the farmers and herders have launched a joint advocacy campaign to influence government leaders. Recently, 40 women from AFAN and MACBAN also came together in dialogue for the first time.

The road ahead is still long and fraught with difficulty. Incendiary language continues to appear in media alongside dangerous rumors. Dozens have been killed in Benue state since March, and a divisive election season is fast approaching. But the farmer and herder association leaders now call each other “brothers.” Karuna, Neem Foundation, and our local community partners at Elohim Development Foundation are committed to continuing to support them.

Transforming Conflict between Farmers and Herders in Nigeria: A Success Story
- Daniel Orth, Senior Program Manager

“If we can dialogue, there will be peace in just two weeks.” - MACBAN Leader

The Protecting Our Communities Initiative supports 18 rural Nigerian communities to develop practical, locally-led solutions to conflict. Over the past two years, Karuna has partnered with the Nigeria-based Neem Foundation and three local community organizations. The project’s elements include: (1) Early Warning-Early Response committees; (2) community-run dialogues; (3 & 5) mental health and psychosocial support to cope with trauma; and (4) outreach & advocacy. Community members have resolved more than 200 incidents to date that could have sparked broader conflict.

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Dialogue Toward Climate Justice in the U.S.

The U.S. is the second-largest producer of greenhouse gases worldwide—and that pollution disproportionally affects communities of color who have been marginalized from decisions to permit these emissions. Karuna co-facilitates the Transforming the Conversation on Carbon Pricing (TCCP) project, housed at the Deep South Center for Environmental Justice, to help move climate action forward with an equity and justice lens. We bring advocates of carbon pricing and environmental justice activists together in confidential dialogue. Through these relationships, participants have collaborated to strengthen national climate change legislation.

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