

# Çava?



## The Newsletter of Friends of Guinea

Advocacy, Information, and Networking for Guinea and Peace Corps Guinea

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### Innovative School in Conakry Works to Eradicate Female Genital Cutting

*Pastor James Kunduno, Coordinator, Amazonian Bi-Lingual School, Petty Simbaya, Conakry*

#### KNOW THE SCHOOL

Amazonian Bi-Lingual School is the brainchild of the Amazonian Initiative Movement, a not-for-profit organization that works in Sierra Leone as well as Guinea. It is a bilingual co-educational day and boarding school operating in Guinea since 2001. The school was established to complement the Guinean government's efforts to provide quality bilingual education for internally displaced/refugee children (especially girls) and host community members, as a pilot project to introduce awareness in schools on Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C), and to discuss other harmful human rights violations imposed on children and women and to promote human rights issues in schools (like women and children's rights, conflict management/peace building, gender equality) in Guinea.



*Students at the Amazonian School.*

Today the school boasts numerous international students. Pupils in the external examination classes are registered in the West Africa Examination Council (WAEC) and are taken to Sierra Leone to take examinations in English. Activities like

school band, scouting, library, science laboratory, computer class with an LCD projector, full French courses, adult literacy

classes, excursions, athletics sessions, special lessons on FGM/C and other harmful traditional human rights abuses make the school very unique. The school boasts competent, trained and qualified teachers and administrators.

The school encounters numerous challenges (paying rent, funding new equipment, etc.), and is always in need of financial and program support.

#### FGM/C IN GUINEA

FGM/C is a common practice in many places in sub-Saharan Africa. Various ethnic groups in at least 25-28 African countries practice it. In some societies, the procedure is routinely carried out when a girl is a few weeks or a few months old, while in others, it occurs later in childhood at puberty/adolescence. In the case of the latter, FGC is typically part of a ritual initiation into womanhood that includes a period of seclusion and education about the rights and duties of a wife. It is often assumed that FGC is an ancient and deeply entrenched practice and that it is associated with cultural ceremonial initiations. Guinea is not an exception.

FGC has been common in the Republic of Guinea for more than two centuries and perhaps much longer. Both Muslim and Christian populations practice genital cutting in Guinea. There is no exact date known when the various ethnic groups adopted the practice.

The prevalence of FGM/C in Guinea is 96% practiced throughout the country among women with ages ranging from few weeks to 40 years old and with little ethnic or religious difference. Female genital cutting is a traditional practice that cannot be easily stopped in Guinea even though it is a world human rights issue and has been outlawed by the government for three decades. The Guineans feel that the female genital organ [clitoris] functions mainly to enhance sexual feelings. The cutting of the female genital organ reduces their sexual feelings so they believe it should be partially or totally removed. The practice of FGM/C is sometimes called Female circumcision, however, the degree of cutting is so much more extensive than male circumcision, often impairing the woman's sexual and reproductive functions. FGM/C practice affects more than 10,000 girls and women in Guinea and half this number of them are at risk every year. Girls are being circumcised at younger ages than in the past, and they are spending less time in the period of seclusion and instruction that follows.

There is a clear tendency toward medicalization of FGM/C. Medicalization in this case means that FGM/C is done at home or in a health facility by health care personnel rather than by a traditional practitioner. Generally, it also means having a milder form of FGM/C performed. The practice of FGM/C forms part of the expectations of most individuals in the country.

The Guinean government has ratified various international conventions that oppose the practice. More importantly, the 1965 Constitution clearly forbids the mutilation of the genital organs of both men and women, and the crime is punishable by life imprisonment. To date, however, no one has been indicted for this crime. In 1989, a governmental declaration condemned harmful traditional practices, including FGM. A law passed in 2000 that protects women and men from torture and all cruel treatment affecting the body, especially the reproductive organs. A national plan to campaign against FGM/C has been developed in collaboration with the Ministry of Social Welfare, Children and Women's Affairs and various national development agencies.

Amazonian Initiative Movement, registered in Guinea as *Association pour le Soutien aux Initiatives des femmes et Filles Amazones* (ASIFAM), and other NGOs seek to eradicate the practice, because we believe the negative consequences of FGM/C have no respect for age, religion, place/method of practice (i.e. hospital/clinics) and professions (doctors, nurses or cultural practitioners). Whoever and whatever method is chosen, as long as the cutting of the clitoris and other genital organs takes place without any medical reasons, we believe it is a human right violation, and the women and girls who undergo this practice are victims. In addition to the dangers at the time of the procedure (often carried out without proper medical instruments and personnel), other negative issues caused by the practice of FGM/C in Guinea include a high dropout rate for girls, causing high illiteracy amongst women, female reproductive problems, increases in infant mortality and maternal mortality rates, and poverty in the rural regions (where all money made from agriculture might be spent on the initiation ceremony rites within a space of a month or less, leading to malnourishment of children, hunger, poor housing facilities etc). At Amazonian, we believe that FGM/C even if practiced in the most modernized, medicalized form, does not spare its victims from the pains, shock, bleeding, sexual in-satisfaction, and it can not replace the role of the clitoris during childbirth.

Only a few NGOs have been battling FGM/C in Guinea, and the practice is still being held to with strong conviction. FGM/C is practiced in almost every village, town and city and by all the tribes. Organizations and agencies planning campaigns against FGC in Guinea face several critical obstacles. There is a lack of proper channels to campaign against FGM/C that pose a lot of controversial conflicts even amongst the advocates against FGM/C.

Many Guinean women continue to believe that a woman or girl is ineligible for marriage if she is not cut; that she is unclean and not a true adult woman if her genitalia organs are not either partially or totally removed. In fact in Guinea, most parents believe in partial removal of the genital organ while culturally/traditionally it is the total removal that is required. The belief is so strong in most people, illiterate or literate, that the customary family bond compels their family members to practice it on their girl children otherwise they are considered

as not a true son/daughter of the soil. Children with parents who ignore the practice of FGM/C are marginalized and are ignored for important family meetings. Girls who attempt not to be cut are sometimes disowned by their parents and become laughing stock to their friends within their peer groups.

Amazonian has worked towards the eradication of FGM/C in many ways. We have been involved in organizing symposium, skit drama presentations, poems, songs, and composition at the school level for staff, pupils and parents. Also we have been involved in community awareness raising meetings in three Communes of Conakry (Themnetaye-Kaloum, Bonfi-Dixin and Petit Simbaya-Ratoma). We have organized community awareness meetings in the interior of Guinea, in Kissidougou and Gueckedou, preaching the abolishment of the practice because of its negative consequences on the lives of women and their communities. In these regions, we held meetings with different stakeholders: children, youth, practitioners, women, men, teachers, and local authorities.



*Pastor James, School Coordinator*

Apart from that AIM has hosted/hosts a handful of girl children running away from the practice and offers them free, quality education and supports them with their room and board. The eradication of FGM/C is taught as a lesson at the school.

If we could stop all forms of FGM/C, we would save African women and children from high infant/maternal mortality rates, we would allow our beautiful Guinean women/daughters to complete their education and help in national development programs, and we would help in reducing poverty in the country. Stopping FGC in Guinea would contribute to the sound health of women and girls.

## **Guinean elections slated for June 27**

*Brian Farenell, FOG Communications Director*

Guinea's acting head of state General Sekouba Konate issued a decree announcing that the country will hold a presidential vote on June 27; if successful, this would mark the country's first democratic election since independence. An Independent Electoral Commission will organize the vote. Critically, General Konate has reaffirmed that military members of the junta will not be allowed to run. He has urged members of his entourage to guard against anyone who would prolong the transition to democracy and warned; the civilian Prime Minister Jean-Marie Dore, who won't stand in the elections, has warned of a plot by soldiers loyal to the sidelined former junta leader Moussa Dadis Camara. Additionally, a new constitution was proposed, the text of which is available at [www.guineenews.org](http://www.guineenews.org). Additionally, the transitional government has restored the Supreme Court, which had been suspended following the death of long time head of state Gen. Lansana Conte.

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# Guinea's First Democratic Presidential Elections: Be a Part of History

*Jennifer Swift-Morgan, Alliance Guinea, RPCV '99-'01*

In the beginning of May, Guinea's interim president Captain Sekouba Konate [confirmed by presidential decree](#) the "irreversible" decision that presidential elections will indeed be held on June 27. The campaign officially began on May 17 and goes through June 26, with run-off elections likely to be held on July 18. Political parties in Guinea that can mobilize a 400,000,000FG (roughly \$78,000) deposit are declaring their candidates and an [electoral list has been released](#) that counts 4,224,272 registered voters, including 53,083 Guineans living abroad. Finally, a new constitution for Guinea (where there had been none since it was dissolved following the coup in December 2008) has been [adopted by presidential decree](#) – limiting presidential terms to 5 years renewable only once.

The challenges to holding free and fair presidential elections on such an accelerated timeline in a place that has never before experienced them are clearly formidable. However, the stage has been set and all systems are go – now just up to everyone who cares to do all that we can to see that they go as well as possible. You may be like many of us who believe that elections are not THE solution to creating a new Guinea, but they are at this point a critical first step.

## So – what can anyone do to help?

Alliance Guinea has been in discussions with partners in Guinea and in the Diaspora, with international NGOs and with the State Department and we are working on a few key initiatives where we think our membership and our partners can be particularly effective. And to make it work and have the greatest positive impact possible, we really need your input and participation. Want to be a part of what should be a historic turning point in Guinea's history? The following is a list of how to get involved.

**1. Congressional outreach:** We are thrilled that many of you have already answered the call to join forces with other Alliance members in your area to make sure that your Congressional representatives know what that reference to Guinea in the State of Union was all about – and what it means for America to "always stand on the side of freedom and human dignity." We're preparing a letter that we need you to ask your Members of Congress to sign, addressed to Secretary of State Clinton, saying that they are monitoring events closely, asking that the US do all it can to help Guinea with this transition – and also to ensure that the perpetrators of the September 28 crimes against humanity are brought to justice.

There is still time to get involved with this critical pre-election effort; contact Steve Wood at [stephenawood@gmail.com](mailto:stephenawood@gmail.com) to find out more.

**2. Candidate questionnaire:** Alliance is joining forces with our friends at [RougeJauneVert.com](http://RougeJauneVert.com) and many others to develop a common form of 15-20 questions for candidates to answer, providing the means to compare on substantive issues and cast an informed vote.

To learn more and become involved in the development and dissemination of this questionnaire, contact Mohamed Toure at [mohamedl.toure@gmail.com](mailto:mohamedl.toure@gmail.com).

**3. Ushahidi for Guinea:** First introduced in Kenya to collect citizen-generated information about events in that country following their elections in 2007, [Ushahidi](#) has since been adapted for multiple uses around the world. In the case of

Guinea, Alliance is heading up the effort to create the platform for people on the ground to send election-related messages and notice of events in their community using SMS sent to an internet-based map – allowing election monitors, the media and the general public to follow the development of discussions and incidents in real time. We are looking for volunteers and could really use your help to manage and make the most of this powerful tool – and while comfort with the Internet is recommended no experience is necessary. To find out more and get involved, contact Bady Balde at [bady.balde@gmail.com](mailto:bady.balde@gmail.com).

**4. Blog:** Follow the Guinean news closely and feel like you have an important perspective to share? Want to reach a diverse audience around the world of Guineans, other friends of Guinea, international media and international players with your analyses? Become a blogger for [www.allianceguinea.org](http://www.allianceguinea.org)! Our resigned website offers an excellent opportunity for you share your thoughts and spur debate. You can write in either French or English and the Alliance translation team will translate either way. To help our diverse following keep up and better understand the most important developments around democracy and justice in Guinea – especially in the run-up to these historic elections – by blogging on regular basis, contact Raul Rothblatt at [rrothblatt@gmail.com](mailto:rrothblatt@gmail.com).

**5. Host an informational event and get on your local radio station to talk about Guinea!** It's a great story – especially if you have a high concentration of Guineans where you are living and can join forces for a joint appearance. We were able to make it on to WNYC's Brian Lehrer Show in New York around an event on democracy and freedom of the media organized at the Columbia University School of Journalism; make your own news and tell your local media outlets why Guinea's story matters to everyone.

**6. The Next Greatest Thing:** Have an idea about something else that we can do in the next few weeks to make a difference? Want to take the initiative and make that idea happen? We're all about letting a thousand democratic and justice flowers bloom – let us know how the rest of us at Alliance can help by contacting Jen Swift-Morgan at [jbsfela@yahoo.com](mailto:jbsfela@yahoo.com). Or just do it and post something on the Alliance Guinea Facebook wall to let the rest of us know!

**7. Join the Alliance Steering Committee!** Want to be a part of guiding the direction of Alliance, creating new initiatives, helping to get our work resourced and in forming critical partnerships to further our agenda? There's still time to join the Alliance Steering Committee. The committee has recently decided to go for it and is in the process of getting incorporated as a "501(c)(3)" non-profit organization in the US, and so this is a particularly exciting time to get involved. Contact Jen at [jbsfela@yahoo.com](mailto:jbsfela@yahoo.com) to discuss.

**8. Organize a fundraiser:** We're still a scrappy, volunteer-run organization without membership fees, and we will be facing a number of expenses soon related our election activities. Can you organize a fundraiser in your community or school? Know Guinean musicians in your area or are a master of Guinean music yourself? Want to hold a mini West-African film festival or a "Goodies for Guinea" bake sale like one of our partner high schools did? If you bring the initiative, we can provide you with background materials and advice – contact Agathe Sector at [alsector@yahoo.com](mailto:alsector@yahoo.com) if you wish to discuss.



**9. Donate!** Don't have a lot of time but a lot of good intention and the desire to help? With a very ambitious agenda and no benefactor yet to pick up all the bills, we could really use your financial support. Donate whatever you can to the cause by clicking the "donate" button at [www.allianceguinea.org](http://www.allianceguinea.org). We've got radio spots in Guinea to purchase, flyers to print, some rice to buy for our in-country volunteer team of young people. Your support now will go a long way in helping us truly have a positive impact on this historic time in Guinea. Thanks.

We hope you're as fired up and ready to go as we are about helping to bring about a new Guinea. Together anything is possible.

In solidarity,

The Alliance Guinea Steering Committee

Alhoussaine Bah, New York, NY

Bady Balde, Boston, MA

Mamadou Barry, Lille, France

Damien Brockman, Austin, TX – and soon Guinea!

Mme Doussou Conde, New York, NY

Raul Rothblatt, New York, NY

Agathe Sector, Burlington, VT

Jen Swift-Morgan, New York, NY

Mohamed Toure, Baltimore, MD

Steve Wood, New Haven, CT

## Want to Re-live your PCV Experience?

Peace Corps Response is currently looking for RPCVs to serve a nine-month tour in Guinea as secondary-school teachers for math, chemistry and physics. The Peace Corps program was suspended in 2009 due to civil unrest, but is now in the first phase of re-establishing a presence in Guinea. Response Volunteers are being asked to support the initial re-entry by filling a vital gap between the start of the academic year and the re-introduction of two-year Peace Corps Volunteers.

We would like to encourage RPCVs to take advantage of this opportunity and [apply](#) for one of these positions. PCRVs will teach classes ranging in size from 25-100 students, prepare lessons, proctor exams, and participate in school administrative activities. Applicants must have a degree in a related field, advanced French proficiency and familiarity with developing instructional materials.

Contact: **Heather Schwenk, Chief of Operations, Peace Corps Response, 1111 20th Street NW, Washington, DC 20526, 202.692.2334 or 800.424.8580 ext. 2334**

## Interested in helping FOG?

Friends of Guinea is always in need of dedicated volunteers to help with its organizational efforts. We are currently without an active Secretary.

Visit <http://www.friendsofguinea.org/aboutfog/officerduties.shtml> to see officer duties, and contact [info@friendsofguinea.org](mailto:info@friendsofguinea.org) with any questions. Thanks in advance!

Our thanks go to Jessamyn Miller for her work as co-webmaster for the past year. Her help has been appreciated.



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