

An open letter dated 6. 04 .94 from Jenny Gibson

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This letter comes to reverse completely the optimism of my pre-Christmas letter....Christmas was peaceful if busy, and 1994 started off all right with the launch of a fund-raising appeal within the Sierra Leone Methodist Church for rehabilitation of Kailahun-Kono district with generous support from Freetown and elsewhere.

It seems that a lot of renegade Sierra Leonean soldiers have joined the rebels....Rebels and soldiers now wear the same uniforms, which can be confusing... suddenly on Jan.28th the rebels attacked and recaptured Bunumbu, which after a long time in rebel hands before, was being resettled and rebuilt, and which has now been flattened again. The population of Bunumbu flocked in to join the 20 or 30,000 displaced people in Segbwema, and there was fear that Segbwema might be the next target. Instead the rebels moved east and captured Tongo (the second centre of diamond mining after Koidu.)...their next ploy was to attack the roads - in February the Kenema - Segbwema road and in March the Bo - Kenema road.....

[Describes the difficulty of bringing drugs and money from Freetown to Bo by road, due to rebel attacks and land mines.]

Minor attacks on the road continued but to our great joy Mr. Barnes and the hospital vehicle travelled safely from Freetown on March 1st, bringing about 2/3 of the drug consignment and the January salaries....However since then it has never been safe enough for the hospital vehicle to go back to Freetown to collect the balance of the drugs. Our joy was short-lived as on March 4th the rebels captured Bendu Junction (nearest village to us on the Kenema - Segbwema road) again about half of the houses have been burnt out. - and got as far as the Male River bridge (our umbilical cord !) Segbwema owes its survival so far to a contingent of Guinean soldiers, complete with war tank, who've been stationed at Segbwema since things started getting hot. That day they were stationed all around the hospital compound waiting for an attack which fortunately never came as the rebels were defeated at the bridge....

Thwarted in their attempt to capture Segbwema, the rebels turned their attention to Panguma Hospital, which was guarded only by Sierra Leonean soldiers. That's the Catholic Hospital about 30 miles from Segbwema.... On March 12th the rebels attacked Panguma. The expatriate staff tried to escape as a convoy but were greeted with a hail of bullets as they came out of the hospital gates. I'm told that my friend Dr. Elco (a young Dutch doctor whom I had previously worked with) crashed his vehicle underneath a bridge, killing his wife and 3 year old daughter immediately. Father Phaelen McAllister got out of his car to help and was shot dead. Sister Madeleine put her foot on the accelerator and the sisters escaped. Ann, a British doctor, was in the back of Elco's car and was bruised with a crush fracture of one vertebra, She stayed to try to help Elco,who was

seriously injured and who died about an hour later after a final bullet from the rebels.

[Ann was then captured by the rebels and survived a shootout between the rebels and a party of soldiers. She managed to persuade the soldiers that she was not a white rebel. so she was finally released.]

Meanwhile the rebels had started attacking the Bo-Kenema Road....These have been getting steadily worse and the terrible thing is that their prime target is food supplies. At the beginning they incinerated 2 lorries full of rice and just before I left they attacked a fish lorry killing 4 people from Segbwema town. In consequence no one dares bring food over the Bo-Kenema road now.

[Impossibility of farming under these conditions.]

Then with the renewed fighting, the population of Bunumbu, Tongo, all the villages along the road, etc. emptied itself into Segbwema and Kenema for safe haven. The Red Cross supply of rice is now exhausted as is the World Food Programme's supply of corn - soya blend for feeding malnourished children, and the price of food in the market was rocketing when I left....

Conversely, Sierra Leone's main revenue - diamonds, coffee, cocoa - all came from the eastern Province, which also has the most fertile soil in the country for growing rice. None of this is now moving from the East to Freetown, and where the country's money is coming from is a mystery - particularly the money to buy the dozens of brand new guns which I see in the hands of more and more young men who are joining the army because they are unemployed and no other work is available to them. Army pay is meagre but soldiers have other ways of making money.

I've concentrated so far on the situation at Segbwema, but plenty has been happening elsewhere. On the night of Feb. 22nd there was a shoot-out in Kenema between the citizens of Kenema who had formed their own defence force and the army who refused to respect the curfew which the local militia was trying to enforce. A hotel in the centre of Kenema where the soldiers had been drinking was destroyed. Since then Kenema has been guarded by Nigerian soldiers and has been relatively peaceful but towns north, south, east and west of Kenema (Boajibu and Panguma, Joru, Mano Junction and Blama) have been battlefields for guerilla attacks and have been depopulated, now having only soldiers living in them....

No one knows the motive behind these rebel attacks. Nor does there seem to be any rebel leader with whom one can negotiate, as there's been no squeak from Foday Sankoh for many months. It's alleged that he's been wounded, is in hiding somewhere, and can't get the use of Charles Taylor's broadcasting system in Liberia, which he was using before. The original aim of the rebels who joined the invading Liberian rebels in 1991 was to overthrow the APC government - but that task was done for them on April 29, 1992 when the N.P.R.C. took over. Some say the rebels are trying to overthrow the N.P.R.C., others that this is pure banditry and the

only aim is loot, and increasing numbers are now muttering that this is an intertribal vendetta....A highly respected Irish friend of mine also suggested that it might be the result of Big Power involvement behind the scenes - U.S.A., Russia, Britain and Germany - perhaps because S.L. may have offshore oil which has not been announced....

[Difficulties in sending and receiving post and in keeping the hospital running.]

Dr. Musa was due for a month's leave and I was very anxious for him to take it as I knew he might be single-handed when I went on leave. So I was the only doctor at the hospital for those 4 weeks, and was getting increasingly worried that, as he had gone to visit a friend on the other side of Bo, he might not be able to get back along the Bo - Kenema road. In the event, although most of the traffic was traversing that part of the road in convoys under military escort, he sailed along the road in his new car unescorted and without incident and got back to Segbwema on March 24 to my great relief. Although we had been cut off from post and food, our radio link with the Methodist office in Freetown has continued to work well.

[Description of her hurried packing and frantic departure from Segbwema. The bus she was travelling to Freetown in was shot at but the driver got them to safety.]

She finally left Freetown on April 2nd.]