

Communications between Jane Knight and Patrick Koroma, July and September 1997

Notes about the current situation in Sierra Leone written by Jane Knight, dated 02/ 07/ 97

[She had spoken to Fr. Patrick Koroma in Freetown on June 27th.]

He told me that only for the last 2 days had the shooting at night ceased and he hoped that someone somewhere was in control of the daily looting and destruction. All the banks except 3 Sierra Leone ones were closed, so many people were without pay and money is just not flowing.

I asked about sources of food and he said the Indian shops (Choithrams) and the market women were still open for business for those who could pay.

He had sent a vehicle to Bo to take some salaries to some of his teachers and he was sending up the books he had received from OWL. He said the road to Bo is open but is closed from Bo to Kenema. Only vehicles with food and supplies could travel the road to Kenema and they were not allowed to come out again. Many workers have left the country. It is the biggest outflow of brain power which Sierra Leone has experienced. He said his place is to stay there with the people.

For him the church is a moral voice, He has been in contact with the rebels and said they are difficult to communicate with. In one camp near Makene the priests have managed to persuade the rebels to let the women and children come out of the camp to be educated. Once the dialogue starts at this level the door opens for further negotiation.

As far as any solution of the crisis is concerned he said that at the moment it seems all that can be done is to leave things to sort themselves out. How can you weed out rebels when they are not wearing uniforms ? There are guns everywhere but there are no obvious military targets which can be attacked without injuring the general population. If starvation takes a grip he thought the war might ease off in the hinterland, but there is a danger now that farmers will not plant in the current planting season for next year and then what ?

Reflecting on the deposed government Patrick thought they had not used their power effectively enough. There was still corruption and government supervision was minimised, They inherited a country with strong factions and the only way the factions could be controlled would have been through very strong inspired leadership. He felt the only solution now with even more factions dividing the population, was a good leader/ personality but who ?

He gave me a telephone number in Bo and I managed to reach a teacher who leaves his hiding place every day during daylight to sit by the phone to take and send messages. He said everyone is in hiding. It can be quiet

in Bo and then suddenly shooting breaks out. There are soldiers everywhere and there is raping, looting and killing at random. He said only 2 nights ago 50 people were killed in a nearby village. I was horrified when he told me that the village was Tikonko - a place many of us in OWL know well. He said it was the Sierra Leone army who was responsible for the killings.

I was also told the consignment of books had arrived in Bo and were in the hands of the Bo OWL Committee.

When asked how they were managing for food, he said the people were eating cassava, unless they had a lot of cash. Rice can be bought but at very high prices. He bravely said they were willing to suffer if it made the coup leaders come to their senses.

Notes taken by Jane Knight when speaking on the phone to Patrick Koroma, 15/9/97

British High Commission is trying to help from Guinea. Bombs seen.

Johannes Mallah said he was with the Chairman of OWL last week and plans to speak to him again. He said the committee bought bags of rice and distributed one bag and Le 20,000 per registered member of the link and displaced people and women and children.

He said it was the best thing he could do at the time.

He is back to work (the last 2 weeks) because Bo Power Stn. is an essential service.

Stalemate.

Mr. Pine (?) and Mr. Sheku went back to Bo on Tuesday and were with Patrick.

Fax prepared but not yet sent.

Will receive more money if we like. Everything so confusing. No clear message for us politically.

Blockade - no money to buy food and medicines.

Harassment and looting for travellers between Freetown and Bo checkpoint.

Neighbours are raiding each others houses. No money.

Koroma happy he can still get money to Bo. They use government bus. Drivers harassed by hungry. Begging by civilians . People with arms threatening them.

Everyone fighting everyone.

Should be a better way of forging ahead. But who to lead ? Everything turning backwards and people's spirits going down.

Nigerians not attempt to build up country so they will get nothing from being in Sierra Leone.

Patrick seemed very depressed and said it is very complex.