

IMPRESSIONS OF BO : MYF HODGKIN REPORTS

It is now a week since I returned from Bo (says Myf Hodgkin writing on 17th November). Time enough you would think for the bewildering kaleidoscope of images and feelings to settle down into some sort of a pattern. Far from it! - my mind continues to jump about from one scene to another and small incidents and chance remarks vividly call up some emotion or insight of the visit. As my only other personal experience of Africa has been the two years I spent with VSO in rural Kenya in 1984-85, it was inevitable that at first I should make comparisons, but I soon realised that this was not really useful. Some things were delightfully familiar - the warmth and hospitality to a visitor - the genuine interest in people rather than things; but Sierra Leone has its own atmosphere which does not need comparisons and deserves to be savoured for itself.

My lasting impressions are of the enormous amount of caring thought and hard work which had gone into the preparations for my visit, starting with Raymond James' journey to Lungi airport to meet me - getting us back to Bo in the absence of public transport and continuing through innumerable small kindnesses - boiling all my drinking water - supplying me with mosquito net and sprays - putting an electric fan in my room - not arranging midday visits when we would have to walk in the sun.

Confirming arrangements for my programme were not easy either. No local transport, few telephones, most communication by visits and notes via a courier.

It soon became apparent that the business of economic survival occupies most of the ordinary people of Sierra Leone for the whole of their waking hours. With inflation sky-high, local services intermittent (electricity) or non-existent (running water) and a bag of rice costing more than a teacher's monthly salary, everyone has to try to 'manage'. What does this mean in practice? - If you are a teacher it probably means that you work a four day week and then spend the other three days cultivating your vegetable garden, going out to trap 'bush meat' or fishing to feed the family. You may resort to writing booklets on lesson notes to sell to your pupils if you can get the paper. Your wife and children will do what they can - collecting firewood to use and to sell; making snacks to sell at the school gates or along the roadside. If you are lucky enough to have a fridge and it still works, you can sell plastic bags of cold water during the hours when the electric supply is on.

I have 'gone on' about this at some length, because I am filled with admiration at the ingenuity and determination of our friends and their ability to keep going; but I couldn't help asking why should a country which has fertile soils, no drought, no

overpopulation and considerable mineral wealth be in such a state of economic chaos?

There are obviously external factors involved - The Gulf crisis has aggravated the fuel shortages, the Liberian war has added the problem of refugees (one teacher I met is housing 40 people). Issues of unfair world trade and finances affect Sierra Leone like many other developing countries, but on top of all that is the sad realisation that the people in power are bleeding the country to death.

There are new Mercedes cars cruising round the pot-holed streets of Bo - THEY manage to get fuel - who owns them? The diamond traders?; those 'doing well' out of aid contracts?: the politically successful? These are the people whose children are sent abroad to be educated and whose families can buy the foreign medical care denied to the ordinary people of the country. Their money must be tucked away in foreign accounts as the 'Leone' will buy nothing abroad.

What to do? How to work for change? It is not easy. Political opposition is not tolerated, illiteracy is high in rural areas and people will follow a charismatic leader who promises local goodies and hands out a few 'sweeteners'.

Is the Link relevant to all this? What can WE do? I certainly asked myself this question and still do. To begin with I felt redundant, perhaps even embarrassed to be

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viewing such problems without apparent ability to help. By the end of my stay my feelings had become much more positive. I still hadn't any answers - long term - but I am sure that it was right to go to Bo. I feel privileged that my friends let me share their lives even for so short a time and I think that they were really glad that I had experienced their problems at first hands and witnessed their amazing determination to

So where does that leave us? We must let more people know how things are. We must help them to help themselves in any way possible. The sending of paper to make exercise books was highly successful - paper is desperately short and very expensive - by making and selling exercise books at reasonable cost both the children and the 'Link' benefit. There are shipping problems here, but it is up to us to find a way round they.

Meanwhile PLEASE continue to write to your friends - it is a great morale booster for them to know that we are thinking of them and understand a little of what they are going through. If you don't have a correspondent and would like to make contact please talk to one of the committee. Sierra Leoneans love writing letters, especially to people with similar jobs and interests. We will try to match you up if you would like to make the commitment to write regularly.

Further plans are in the pipeline, but enough for this time.