

Letter from Jenny Gibson (in Segbwema) to "friends" dated 19.1. 92

Just after I last wrote the French Agency A.I.C.F. (Action Internationale Contra La Faim) moved into Segbwema and Daru to set up much - needed feeding centres for malnourished children and their mums. We gladly gave them an empty ward which they rapidly filled with small walking skeletons encamped all over the floor as well as on the 8 or 10 beds which we hadn't moved into other wards as extras. They gave us some help with food for our own children's ward and it took the pressure off of our ward a bit. We've also been getting the Christian Council or the Methodist Church Sierra Leone lorries up every fortnight or so with supplies of rice, protein foods, and sometimes old clothes and blankets - thanks to the generosity of you all, back in U.K. So every Saturday morning Alfred Mbogba (deputy chief nursing officer) is busy distributing 7 cups of rice, and 3 cups of ground nuts to all the displaced patients. in the hospital and the relatives taking care of them, with extra beans and tins of sardines for the most severely malnourished adult inpatients and out patients....

Meanwhile however storm clouds were gathering again. The rebels crossed the Moa River again at Manowa and retook Manowa and Bunumbu (I hope you've still got the map from my last letter !) and Sahr Manga, whom some of you met at last year's Youth Exchange, who had gone back to Bunumbu as dispenser, is missing. The rebels attacked a number of villages in that area where displaced people had just been resettled. The weary displaced people flocked back into Segbwema for safety and filled every square centimetre of space in all the schools, with many sleeping on the ground outside the classrooms because there was no room inside. This was 2 days after the schools had made a belated attempt at reopening - end of schooling ! The Red Cross had got itself organised to feed 10,000 in Segbwema (and was trying to send food to Bunumbu for the resettled ones) so suddenly found itself with an extra 10,000 or more mouths to feed many of whom hadn't managed to get any supplies, and it was reported to me today that 2 or 3 are dying in the camps per day.

The rebels also have been making repeated attacks on Daru and Daru Barracks and on one occasion there was a stampede of fleeing displaced people across Daru bridge, with 7 people crushed to death on the bridge and others falling into the river and being drowned. A 9 p.m. curfew was imposed on Segbwema at the end of November, enforced by trigger-happy soldiers who from time to time decide that the best way to deter would-be rebels is to make plenty of bang bangs. I took to sleeping in the Maternity Private Ward so that the night watchman would not need to make the 50- yard journey from the hospital to my house to call me for emergencies.

On Sunday Dec.8 we heard that the rebels had taken Lalehun, about 8 miles away, half way between Bunumbu and Segbwema, and the soldiers were running away. Everyone expected Segbwema to be the next place to be attacked. Miraculously that evening a contingent of Guinean troops and ULIMO troops (Liberian exiles opposed to Charles Taylor) turned up in Segbwema and the following day the ULIMO soldiers retook Lalehun and Bunumbu again, though being guerilla warfare the tide ebbs and flows quite a bit....

We tried unsuccessfully to reduce the number of patients . I discharged as many patients as possible and we didn't do any elective surgery, and when the hospital vehicle eventually got mended we evacuated as many immobile patients as possible to Panguma. But patients continued to come to us and an epidemic of amoebic dysentery (made worse by DP camps having pretty well no sanitation or water supply) and a massacre on Dec 20th at a small village, Gbaama, near Daru Barracks, where many civilians got caught in the crossfire between rebels and soldiers, ensured that by Christmas the hospital was as full as ever.

On December 22nd the student nurses put on our annual Nativity Play for the patients. It was performed with all the clowning and all the laughter that is so much a part of all dramas performed here- (the biggest clown was King Herod, when he wasn't being a tramp arriving at the inn, or a frightened sheep, rather stealing the angel's thunder) and in modern dress, more or less (you didn't know that 20th century angels wear operation gowns, did you ?). But in the process of preparing it we discovered that the Christmas story is the story of Displaced People, arriving weary and in pain at their destination and finding the place so overcrowded that there was no room for them, and of mothers and children running away from savage soldiers out to kill them.

On Christmas day there were booms and flashes in the distance as we went to the early morning Communion service in the hospital chapel. The rebels took Lalehun again. Chris and his boys and my boy, Boima, and I joined up for a delicious Christmas dinner of chicken stew and pork jolloff rice, and Philip cheered us up during Christmas dinner by remarking that he had heard a rumour that the rebels were attacking Bandajuma Kpolihun (4 miles away) again....

I'd decided on Dec.20th that I was fairly near the end of my tether and that come-what-may I must take 3 days holiday....We decided to go to Panguma on Boxing Day, evacuating the two most seriously injured of the Gbaama patients and their relatives with us and leaving the hospital in the capable hands of Alfred Mbogba. Although we hadn't been able to tell Panguma we were coming, and we arrived just as the nuns and father were finishing their Boxing Day dinner , we couldn't have been made more welcome. Plates of turkey with all its trimmings followed by trifle and plum pud, miraculously descended from heaven. There was 24 hours a day electricity and videos to watch.... Best of all we could wander freely looking for birds in the bush.... We returned to Segbwema on Sunday afternoon Dec. 29th completely refreshed, relaxed and able to cope again - and found that we had been safely out of the way for another bit of excitement on Dec. 27th when the rebels had attacked Nyanyahun, a mile from the Male River bridge, our lifeline to the big outside world... By the time we got back the Guineans were firmly in charge of Nyanyahun and the bridge was considerably better guarded....

Stop Press Jan.22nd. On January 21st our local commandant, a Segbwema man whom everyone trusted, was killed in a rebel ambush. So there is alot of loss of morale here...

Since Jan.10th ECOMOG (the W.African peacekeeping force) is supposed to be policing the Liberian border to prevent armaments coming in and going out of Liberia (they are alleged to be going in from Burkino Faso.) The stop press news is that Segbwema has been promoted to being the administrative capital of Kailahun District. UNICEF is starting work on building a proper refugee camp with shelters for 2,000 families made from thatch and local materials plus plastic sheeting, and with arrangements for a proper water supply and sanitation. They are helping with chalk, etc. for a big combined Primary school and a big combined Secondary school for displaced children and local children, staffed by local; and displaced teachers, to start functioning almost immediately. They have also promised to help with rehabilitation when the war is over and people can return to their own villages. Our own community health team is starting work tomorrow on contacting community leaders they knew before, and in the DP camps, and sorting out how we can best promote community-based health care and development, in co-operation with the churches and other agencies, for the communities on our doorstep. The local churches are getting together in a Segbwema Council of Churches....

P.S. 6. 2. 92 The military situation here remains quiescent as from the beginning of January- skirmishes with small groups of rebel guerrillas in the surrounding villages but a lot of soldiers in Segbwema and no feeling of imminent threat to Segbwema. Charles Taylor has gone to France.