

SIERRA LEONE TRAVELOGUE -

FROM MONDAY 25TH MAY TO THURSDAY 11TH JUNE 1992

This was a follow-up visit after my four week trip in September/October 1991 to see my relations who were uprooted by the armed rebel incursion from neighbouring Liberia.

One of the painful experiences of my 1991 visit was to be so close to my birthplace and be unable to reach there for security reasons. This time I went to see how my immediate and extended family relations were resettling after they were displaced for about ten months - two planting seasons. They told me their return brought them a great deal of emotional and psychological relief.

The trail of destruction was extensive and deep - ten dwelling houses were burned to the ground, with furniture, including the village school and hall. The destruction was in retaliation against the people fleeing into hiding in the bush after their first face to face encounter with the rebels.

The rebels first arrived in my own village, Golahun Vaama, on Thursday 2nd May 1991 from the nearby village, Gandohun. They intimidated the people, looted and promised to come back, and issued stern warnings that if people fled their village would be burned. On their way back to their base they shot dead a young man at Gandohun, the first village they had come through. That young man was called Paul Sesay, a schoolmate of mine in primary school. News of this spread quickly to all the neighbouring villages. This was the main reason why people fled from my village and the rebels reacted by burning ten houses, the village school and hall. The roof of my family house was riddled with bullets and leaks badly when it rains.

First Impressions and Experiences

I arrived in my village on Friday 5th June late in the afternoon. I could not pass through the villages of Bandawoh, Sendumei and Golahun Menilla without stopping to greet people, to share sympathy with them for what they had been through. What met my eye when I arrived in my home village was lots of open spaces - where houses had been razed to the ground. I was made welcome by relations and other people coming to greet me. Some of the emotions turned into tears of joy on seeing me, and sorrow as they retold their nightmarish experiences at the hands of the rebels. When things quietened down a bit, I made a tour of the village.

I stopped to greet people as I passed. Most women were preparing the evening meal. They showed me the food they were preparing - 'bulgur wheat' and corn meal - rations the Catholic Relief Services distributed when people first returned to the village. I asked them when they expected the next delivery. No-one was sure. Not everybody got the rations. When the team first arrived they registered only those who had returned at that time.

Those who returned after the registration did not receive any supply. Relations shared their quota with those who had gone without. The surviving houses were full to capacity because those whose houses were burned were taken in. There are plans in the dry season to help rebuild those houses through community effort.

I insisted on being served with the 'refugee food' as it had come to be called. It was edible but it had a very strange taste. The effect of the food has been intermittent diarrhoea. The level of nutrition has gone down a lot, especially in children.

The following day I slid out of the village by the first vehicle that came and went to Bo, which is my second home, and bought 100 bags of rice to take back to the village. I distributed that to seven villages - Bandawoh, Sendumei, Golahun Menilla, Luyenge, Golahun Vaama, Matakahun and Gandohun. That gesture was greeted with warmth and appreciation. My sincere thanks to friends who enabled me through their financial support }o do that, topped up with my own means. A 50 kilo bag of rice costs the equivalent of £15 delivered. My thanks also go to Haj Fawaz who helped me purchase the rice and organised transportation.

People have started planting, but the plots are small, that being determined by the amount of seed rice they are able to get. Harvests do not come in until November/December. I am therefore making a personal appeal for funds to help me send some more food in early August. If you are inclined to help, please make cheques payable to me. I have opened an account at the National Westminster Bank in Stony Stratford to serve this purpose.

Sierra Leone, compared to other problem-stricken African countries, does not receive enough publicity, attention and support. The main line support comes from Christian Aid, Catholic Relief Services, Red Cross, Methodist Church Overseas Division, Action Aid, the Anglican Church, and recently Save the Children, but there are gaps in the coverage and my home area falls into one of these gaps.

I spent the first night in the village at an informal meeting catching up with news. To my surprise, people were full of humour as they told me of their experiences. They had no bitterness.

The rebels from Liberia spoke some sort of English. Most people in my home area are illiterate and the gap in communication caused lots of problems, some of which ended in tragedy, like the case of my schoolfriend Paul Sesay who was shot dead. When the rebels entered his village, he was the only one who understood what they were saying, so he was the interpreter. The rebels instructed him to order the people to fell trees across the motor road. Fearing reprisals from the Sierra Leone government soldiers, the people did not carry out the order. On the second visit of the rebels, they shot Paul for flouting their authority.

when rebels entered any village, the first things they looked for were guns, ex-service men and village traders. Any ex-servicemen would be shot, guns seized and traders looted.

One of the first picked on when they entered my village was a man called Braima Gboi. They asked him if he had a gun. He could not understand (he is illiterate) and he answered - "Yes, Sir". Pointing their gun at him, they ordered him to lead them to where it was. He took them to his house. When he stood confused they hit him with the butt of their guns. He was saved by a schoolboy who was at home on holiday. He interpreted to him what the rebels were saying before the rebels realised the man did not understand them. The man told his story with such humour we all laughed, including him.

To ease their problem of communication, the rebels decided to take the schoolboy, Mambu Lukule, with them. Fortunately for him, the rebels wanted food so they asked the people to catch some sheep and goats for them. While rounding up the sheep and goats, the boy escaped into the bush into hiding.

The rebels looted from the houses and ordered my cousin, John Turay, to guard their booty while they made their way to the next village, threatening him that if anything went missing he would be shot. They forced five villagers at gunpoint to lead them to the next village. These five prisoners were made to walk, ahead by about 50 yards, so that if they ran into an army ambush the five would provide human shields for them. Fortunately there was no ambush to and from that village, but the rebels were very jittery with fear of army pursuit. They in fact did not eat the food they had ordered my people to prepare for them. They also in their panic forgot the booty they had asked my cousin to guard. That was fortunate because they would have used him and others to be porters. The looted goods were given back to the owners. It was after this experience that most people fled.

National News

There was a military takeover in Sierra Leone on Thursday 30th April 1992. Some people do not call it a military coup but a national rescue mission.

Fighting the rebel war was the first conflict Sierra Leone soldiers were involved in. Apart from troops contributed towards the 1939-45 war, the only other conflict experiences were peacekeeping roles in the Congo (now Zaire), the Gulf war, and the West African Peace-keeping (ECOMOG) in Liberia.

True, Sierra Leone was ill-prepared and ill-equipped to fight off the rebel invasion, but the most fundamental factor was total lack of Sierra Leone Government commitment to the war and consequently support for our troops.

The rebel invasion affected areas the Government felt were opposed to them. For that reason it was in government's

political interest to keep the war going as long as it did not blaze out of control. It was also an unfortunate time for the region because apart from preparations for the Gulf War, Eastern Europe was collapsing and the conflict in Yugoslavia was fermenting, and the media-sensitive areas in Africa - Somalia, Ethiopia - were ablaze. There were also significant newsworthy political events taking place in South Africa.

So the problems in Liberia and Sierra Leone were largely ignored by the world, except by Christian Aid who stepped up aid support and sent two journalists in early February 1992, and the Methodist Church whose congregations in Eastern Province were uprooted and large numbers of them fled into neighbouring Guinea.

Logistical support - arms, ammunitions, medical and food supply - for the Government troops at the war front was poor. This inevitably bred frustrations as our soldiers wishing to carry out their professional duty were hampered by our Government's lack of commitment and total support. Their national prestige and pride were also severely bruised. When other forms of communications with the Government in Freetown failed, they sought audience with the President who heaped insults on them. Tempers flared up and the President, unable to control situations, fled into neighbouring Guinea leaving the army to take over.

The army takeover had the full support of the whole country, hence their success in mobilising people to do lots of voluntary work. The city Freetown and the provincial towns were cleaned in about one day. The chronic fuel shortage has been healed, the Banks now have cash, the roads are being repaired, prices have come down considerably and people generally feel at ease in the country.

It is the wish and prayers of most people that the interim government continues on the path of success to put the country right again.

Moussa M. Conteh

7th July 1992

SIERRA LEONE.

ADMINISTRATIVE
BOUNDARIES.

