

Letters from David Ngombu to Myf Hodkin dated April, June, July, September and October 1995

Letter from David Ngombu to Myf Hodkin dated 13th April 1995

[He expresses relief on receiving her letter, which was a reply to his letter written in December.. Acknowledges receipt of the bankdraft. The Executive of OWL Bo had decided to spend the money on food (mainly rice) for the displaced people living in the various camps in Bo. He (David Ngombu) is Chairman of the Relief Committee.]

Letter from David Ngombu to Myf Hodkin dated 5th June 1995

I want to be sure that you have received the report that was sent through Fr. Koroma of the Catholic Mission in Freetown....

In my last letter I promised to send photographs of the activities of the Bo Committee. Please find enclosed the said photographs. They vividly describe the situation as it is around here....

As you may have been informed, the situation is still continuing unabated. The rebel attacks are now a common factor in the Southern Region. Most of the people are now placed in makeshift camps in schools and dilapidated buildings, as can be seen from some of the pictures. Some people are accommodated in thatched houses which are emergency shelters. There are about 5 camps for the displaced people....

[There follows a list of 6 camps with the population of each. They range from 1,500 to 7,000 people.]

The major problems encountered by the camps are that of lack of food, medicines and clothing. In addition, these people lost most of their household materials like machetes [sic], blankets, buckets, cooking pots, pans, etc. as they were chased out of their homes by rebels....

I am now the Coordinator of the ICS Camp and the Chairman of all the camps in Bo.

Letter from David Ngombu to Myf Hodkin dated 31st July 1995

...The problem in the country is now beyond control. The cost of basic commodities like rice is now Le 28,000 (twenty-eight thousand leones) when the highest salary per month for teachers is Le 45,000 (forty-five thousand leones) and this has not been received for two months now. People have started dying of starvation in the Gondoma Camp for the displaced people and in my own camp (ICS School Camp, Durbar Grounds Section) about two people die of starvation each day. The worst of all is that Cholera has broken out in all of the camps in the town and the environs.

As a way of arresting the situation, the Department of Health has started putting up emergency Health Centres in all the camps (six in all) and in other parts of the town. The problem now is the availability of Oral Rehydration Salts (ORS) and other drugs. like Panadol, Chloroquine, ASA, Folic Acid, Multivits, Crystalline Penicillin and Chloroquine inj. Septrin tabs, Vitamin Tabs, Flagyl (sp ?) Injection needles, Syringes, Vermox, Ketrax, Bandages, capsules and other drugs. We have trained and qualified nurses attached to the Health Centres but the drugs are not there. People are suffering greatly.

The road from Bo - Freetown is still not safe. Most vehicles fear to travel along the main roads now for fear of rebel attacks which has been very persistent. Even the relief food has not been supplied for the past three months so you can imagine what this means. We need your support or else we will have alot of casualties. Children are the most vulnerable.

To help the displaced people in the camps, we have put them into groups of 20 (10 men 10 women) each group and are encouraging then to undertake some food production like cassava, potato, groundnut, corn, farming, Vegetable Farming and even Swamp Rice and Upland Rice Farming. In addition, we have introduced income - generating activities, like soap-making, bread baking, sewing and needlework, Gara -Tie Dyeing, baby food processing, etc. These groups cannot function properly as we lack the tools and materials. The Development Committees of the various camps have met NGO's to help but they are also constrained as they lack the tools. Please send us addresses of Charitable Organisations/ NGO's who will be of help. I have even developed a Project Proposal for the Women Groups to undertake soap - making, Gara - tie dyeing and baby food production. Let me hear from you about this project.

It's difficult for OWL, Bo Committee to meet these days as the situation is very abnormal. We are all busy looking out for food, shelter or the basic essentials of life.

Letter from David Ngombu to Myf Hodkin dated 19 September 1995

[Although he had written recently, he is taking advantage of the fact that a relative will soon be travelling to Britain and could take a letter with him. He is writing from Freetown, where he is attending the Biennial Conference of the People's Educational Association of Sierra Leone.]

The roads linking Freetown to the provinces are under frequent attack. The safest way to get to Freetown is by helicopter. However, as delegates to the National Conference we were not financially strong to pay the air freight, we had to travel down to Freetown under heavy military escort from where I am writing this letter.

The travel brought out the horrors of the attacks on convoys along the road. Most of us were spell-bound when we saw the important villages along the route burnt down to the ground while others were ghost towns. Also along the road were long lines of burnt vehicles and corpses. Some of the corpses were decaying and we could see vultures on them. This

situation is unimaginable. When we got to Freetown, there were sighs of relief as we had got to the end of the journey. How to get back to the provinces after the week-long conference was our sad thoughts. Hope God will guide us.

As you were informed in my last letter, situations in Bo and the environs had reached the highest crisis period in terms of the rebel war. Because of the frequent attacks on the roads, food and essential material supplies to the major towns had stopped, giving rise to famine, malnutrition and their subsequent effects. A lot of people are dying of hunger and cholera which broke out recently. The situation as we see it is beyond the control of relief agencies despite their attempts to bring it under control. One of the agencies, Medicine Sans Frontier (SF) has been engaged in airlifting baby food materials to Kenema and beyond where people are dieing[sic] in hundreds every day. We expect the same supplies for Bo. Meanwhile we are managing to live on scraps of food we could lay hands on - potato, cassava and wild fruits.

Freetown is by far better as there is food everywhere. The major problem is how to take it along. I pity my family left in Bo when I am exposed to food here when I have none for the family....

Letter from David Ngombu to Myf Hodkin dated 3rd October 1995

[Refers to recent letter, sent via his cousin, in which he describes his journey to Freetown to attend a meeting.]

I travelled back to Bo on Monday 25th September instant and experienced a very horrible thing. The government bus in which I was heading for Bo drove into a rebel ambush between Mosaic and Mile 91 along the Bo - Freetown Highway. The rebels ransacked the bus looking for bags of rice and other valuable items which they took along. I was unlucky my bag was among some of the things taken but happy my life was safe. Other vehicles coming after us were also ransacked and some people lost their lives. Thanks to the Almighty I am living to tell the story.

There is not much normal activity in the south - eastern part of the country as the rebel war still continues. Will let you know when sanity returns to this region....

Letter from David Ngombu to Myf Hodkin dated 13th November 1995

[He developed appendicitis while at a meeting in Freetown and had to have emergency surgery . This letter was written in the Gov't Hospital , Bo, where the surgery was performed.]

It is awful to see a lot of people amputated by the rebels admitted in the hospital. It is very awkward. However, two NGO's - Medecins Sans Frontieres from Belgium and Action International Contre La Faim (AICF) from France - are responsible for their medication and feeding. Without these NGO's a lot of amputated people and malnourished children would have died during this rebel times. We owe a lot to the western world.