

Letter from Jenny Gibson in Chogoria, Kenya to "Friends", dated 19.1.1996

.... an appeal on "Focus On Africa" yesterday evening by an AICF aid worker, Natalie Duamel (?) who had visited Bo, Sierra Leone, and is now in Paris spurred me to write and beg you to put pen to paper to try to prevent 300,000 people starving to death.

As you know I worked in Bo for 15 years. At that time the population was probably around 30 - 40,000 people. But the rebel attacks on the villages have caused thousands of people to flee to the towns for safety. All the citizens of Bo are hosting displaced people in their homes and there are big displaced people's camps. Ms. Duamel said that the population of Bo is now between 200,000 and 300,000. There is only one tarmac road from Freetown to Bo and Kenema and for the past 18 months rebels have been repeatedly attacking vehicles travelling on it, killing drivers and looting and burning food supplies they were carrying, so very little food has got through. Now for several weeks the road has been closed completely and only very small quantities of food have been airlifted in because there is no money to pay for an airlift. AICF (Action Internationale Contra La Faim) have been airlifting food for 500 severely malnourished children, but those who survive have to be sent back to families who are themselves starving. Ms. Duamel said 10,000 children are on the verge of starving and she estimated 300,000 people are at risk. She was talking only about Bo, but if food can't get through to Bo, it cannot get through to Kenema, and places beyond Kenema either (Segbwema, Daru, Panguma, Tongo Field) so probably her figures could be doubled. She sounded desperate and begged that people would write to their governments and the media to create international pressure for the United Nations to intervene to reopen the road.

I can corroborate what she says from other reports on BBC African Service and from letters. The rough laterite road running south from Bo leads to mainly rebel-held territory. Till recently some traffic was getting through on the equally rough laterite road from Yele in the North, but recently the rebels started attacking that road also. Some 2 weeks ago it was reported that the price of a sack of rice in Bo had gone up from Le25,000 to Le45,000 - at the time I left Sierra Leone in 1994 it was around 8.000 to 10,000 and a trained nurse's salary was Le 12,00 per month. An average Sierra Leonean family eats a sack of rice per month.

[She urges everyone to write to MP's to demand that the British Government take action. She would also like the situation in Sierra Leone to be given greater coverage in the media.]

You may already have heard the other Sierra Leonean news - that last Tuesday the Head of State, Captain Valentine Strasser, was overthrown in a bloodless coup and flown to Guinea in handcuffs. It is alleged that he wanted to obstruct the electoral process and hang on to power after the General Election, now on course to take place on February 26th. The new Head of State is his deputy, Brigadier Julius Maada Bio, whom I met when he was appointed as Lieutenant in charge of the defence of Segbwema -

and again later under more opulent circumstances, when as a member of the NPRC (National Provisional Ruling Council) he came to Segbwema with a small entourage to visit his sister, our maternity sister, Janet Bio....The general consensus seems to be that the coup was A Good Thing - election ordinances have now been published, including the stipulation that Strasser (now aged 30) was trying to get rid of, namely, that the Head of State should be no less than 40. Bio has promised that he will step down after the election. He has offered to meet the rebel leader, Fodah Sankoh, anywhere for unconditional peace talks. Two weeks or so ago it was said that OAU representatives had managed to persuade the rebels also to agree to peace talks. That would be the first step along a long road - getting rid of all the guns the country is awash with will be something else again.

[She mentions a newsletter called "Focus on Sierra Leone". which contains detailed news of the situation there. She also mentions ways of sending money to the Nixon Hospital in Segbwema]

I'll close with extracts from recent letters from two of my friends in Sierra Leone, which may give you some small comfort.

From Hassan Kpewa, an unemployed young man who devotes all his energies to running Sunday Schools for the children in Segbwema and surrounding villages - 2.1.96

"We spent Christmas happily (though there was rumour that the rebels will attack Segbwema on Christmas Day.) The New Year's Day was wonderful. No gun shot was heard and there was tight security in town. The Native Devils "NGO-Boi" danced from the morning until 8 p.m. It was a wonderful time in Segbwema. A party was held at the Nixon compound by the Displaced Fellowship at Under Fives Clinic building. Thank God for all this."

From "Mama Casan" (Mrs Cassandra Roques) in Bo, a retired nurse/midwife.... 30.8.95

"I am still alive and my good Lord is taking good care of me and my displaced and distressed people. My house is full dear[sic], some are lying on mattresses placed on the cement floor at night. In the morning we cover it nicely in one corner of the dwelling parlour to let the home appear decent. The situation of our country is still bad . Killing is still going on, burning houses, taking other people's property and so on" 3.12.95
"The money you sent [a very small amount] "came in very !!! handy - I was penniless yet I had hope and faith. My house is full with displaced and distressed families, one after the other. Anyway my Good Lord is making the daily provision....my Good Lord has never let me down,,,,, Doctor, our once sweet Sierra Leone is now hell for many of us, but I am thankful to God for the wonderful way He has been caring for me and my family. Everything is very expensive . Well dear, I am now 85 years. My health is not as before....I am thankful to God...."