

# Dialogue on justice and reconciliation

**Facilitated by Florella Hazely**  
**Notes taken by Alpha Abu**

**Alpha Abu works for both the radio and television stations of the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Service.**

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*In March 2000, well before the May crisis in the peace process, five key figures in Sierra Leone's search for peace were brought together in Freetown to discuss the prospects for justice and reconciliation and the potential impact of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) envisaged in the Lomé Agreement. The discussion was facilitated by Florella Hazely, advocacy officer for the Council of Churches in Sierra Leone, and the report prepared by Alpha Abu, who works for both the radio and television stations of the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Service. Excerpts are reproduced below.*

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**Zainab Bangura**, Director of the Campaign for Good Governance, part of the umbrella Civil Society Movement

The first thing we need to understand is that whatever has happened in Sierra Leone, we will never be able to forget. We might be able to forgive. And if we are to deal with that, it is very important to know exactly what happened, why did it happen and how it happened.

Something must have gone wrong somewhere that our brothers and sisters can resort to being less than beasts. We need to be very honest. Maybe they themselves need healing. But we need to understand it. And, until we are able to do that, we cannot put our lives together as a nation, because that psychological problem will always be behind us to say 'it will happen again'.

If we do not reconcile, I mean real reconciliation, where people can be honest with each other and know the truth of what happened and commit ourselves that it should never happen again in the history of this country, there cannot be true reconciliation. The perpetrators need to ask for forgiveness and the victims need to be able to forgive. The issue of vengeance shouldn't come into it.

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**Solomon Berewa**, Attorney General and Minister of Justice

We as a government are criticized quite heavily, and, I believe quite justifiably, for granting what has been called a blanket amnesty to those who caused what has been described in various quarters as the worst types of human rights violations. In doing that, we are more or less denying the victims of those violations any form of justice or redress. So the TRC was provided for in the agreement as a very weak way of addressing the issue of impunity.

The good thing about (the TRC) is that it is more a religious matter than a legal or political matter. It is our conviction, based purely from our own local settings and our individual religious beliefs, that if somebody wrongs you or does you anything harmful and he comes forward and owns up to it, that would bring some element of degradation to him and, in the process, it might chasten him. It will also bring some element of comfort to the victim.

If there is anything like innocent persons, they are the war victims. They did not create any situation which led to the war. There is no basis for inflicting the type of injury on them which they suffered.

In a situation like the TRC, the one thing that we do not want to appear, or even to be thought of, is the word vengeance. Forgiveness is the direct opposite of vengeance. So obviously, we are talking of truth and reconciliation where we want to bring people together after one has done wrong to the other. Even in law, if you do anything because of vengeance, whatever justification you have had initially, you lose that justification immediately. Justice implies trying to make some form of amends for some wrong done to the victim. The only justice the victim would have here is the satisfaction that he has come to know who caused the injury to him, whatever reasons he might have had, but above all, the request for forgiveness. And if the victim is satisfied with the manner of asking for forgiveness and he grants forgiveness, then that will be justice, and, in the process, reconciliation would come.

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**Father Giorgio Biguzzi**, Bishop of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Makeni

The thrust, the spirit, of the TRC is very positive. The aim is not in a sense punitive, it's 'Let's go beyond. Let's rebuild'. There are a lot of misconceptions among ordinary Sierra Leoneans about the commission. Some might think it's a way – just like with a sponge – to clean up the whole thing and go forward.

Legal amnesty is different from getting religious amnesty from God, which implies that it touches my soul, my inner being. I have to understand what I have done, accept, repent, if I'm the perpetrator, so that I can be healed. I will receive eventual amnesty from God and that will bring me to a point where I can be healed and my brother or sister can accept me, but if he is also ready to forgive. Forgiveness is a religious experience, an ethical and moral act.

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**Mike Lamin**, RUF Minister for Trade and Industry

We are in a very peculiar situation, in the sense that for eight to ten years we have been engulfed by a civil crisis and (all) have been victims, the combatants as well as the civil populace. We believe that the TRC should not be a kind of commission to inflict punishment on people alleged to have been engaged in human rights abuses.

We should encourage the perpetrators, as well as the victims, to explain themselves and not to threaten them with punitive measures or else we would be either wittingly or unwittingly postponing something which we are trying to

avert. We should not send a (negative) signal to those that took up arms as a result of the situation that we found ourselves in before the war.

Reconciliation underpins the essence of the commission itself. We should try by all means to desist from using the word 'vengeance'. Like somebody was mentioning about the January invasion after it was repulsed and the restoration of the democratically elected government in 1998, we found ourselves in a vicious cycle of violence. It is well documented that a lot of atrocities were committed even in Freetown here. So we should actually try to get that word [vengeance] out of our dictionary.

Collectively, we should not only focus on the victims but even the perpetrators themselves have psychological problems you have so-called PTSD – post traumatic stress disorder. We are all victims, perpetrators as well as ordinary victims. So we should look at the problem from a holistic point of view, instead of creating problems that in fact will revert us to the root of the crisis itself.

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**Prince Nicol**, Public Relations Officer for the Commission for the Consolidation of Peace (CCP), chaired by former AFRC leader Johnny Paul Koroma

The TRC would be an important ingredient in ensuring peace for a start. It is designed to ease the trauma that men, women, and children have gone through.

The African setting is such that you can subdue the human being when he knows that he has done awful things, when you get him to tell you that I did this or that, in front of you and elders. But let us not pick a leaf from the Western world and import their own form of truth and reconciliation to address the Sierra Leone issue.

If you offend an elder or a child and you take upon yourself to admit that I have committed these atrocities or these crimes, the African is a soft-spoken human being. On most occasions they accept that you have repented.

I believe that people should be encouraged to come and listen to those they call 'perpetrators' and for those who are alleged perpetrators of crimes to say what they have done.

If we want to actualize the terms of reference of the TRC, we should start to remove some of those words, like 'vengeance' and 'justice'. One should turn to the perpetrator and say: "You hurt me some time ago. Tell me why did you do it". Reconciliation has to come from the heart.