



FOREWORD

by JAMES A. ONI

*Girl's hands as she watches funeral in
the stadium of Freetown, 12 May 2000*

Source: Reuters NewMedia Inc/2000

After the signing of the Lomé Peace Agreement on 7 July 1999, many Sierra Leoneans believed, though with much scepticism, that the country was at long last on the path towards real reconciliation and an end to violence, destruction and human rights abuses. However, the resumption of hostilities in May 2000 has again severely shaken these hopes. Unless positive actions are taken to stop the conflict, the country is bound to slide back into the dark days of violence and uncertainty.

Writing as a Ugandan who has seen his own country being trapped in seemingly endless conflicts, I am acutely aware of the importance of initiatives at every level to keep the momentum towards peace and democracy going. Armed conflicts invariably inflict untold damage and sufferings on the civilian population who are often seen as helpless victims. The people's needs and interests are rarely respected by those locked in the armed conflict. More than ever, civil society needs all the support it can get to participate in finding lasting solutions that can positively shape the country's destiny and institute mechanisms that can protect the people against abuses of power.

The challenge to ensure that the opportunity for lasting change in Sierra Leone is not thrown away at this critical time rests largely with the warring parties. Interested foreign governments, especially the UK and US, and international organizations such as the United Nations, the Organization of African Unity and the Economic Community of West African States, are critically important as well. International trade in precious raw materials, especially diamonds, has contributed to fuelling the war. Recent proposals to curb the trade in 'conflict diamonds' is a positive move that may help to deny the warring parties valuable incomes that are so often used to sustain the conflict.

The government of Sierra Leone must demonstrate that it has the political will to achieve a peaceful resolution. For example, there is need for the government to speed up the implementation of key areas of the Lomé Agreement and embrace the challenges within it. While the government has the responsibility to ensure that law and order prevails in all parts of the country and that all its citizens are secure, this task has to be handled delicately without plunging the country into another full-scale war. A strategy of 'peace through war' is totally undesirable at this delicate time. The history of past attempts at reaching a settlement shows that negotiation can work but also that there is a price to pay for political compromise. It is vitally important that any new agreement reached must not sell out the legitimate concerns and the natural resources of the people of Sierra Leone.

The leadership of the RUF and other armed groups on their part have a big responsibility to allow peace to return to Sierra Leone. The seemingly erratic and unpredictable behaviour of the RUF leadership is a matter of great concern.

The issue of reconciliation and forgiveness in any armed conflict is a complex and extremely difficult matter to deal with. Sierra Leone is no exception. As a compromise for peace and stability, the Lomé Agreement granted blanket amnesty to the rebels and other perpetrators of grave human rights violations. The Amnesty Bill adopted in Uganda confronts us with similar political and moral dilemmas.

Victims and relatives of those who were killed, tortured or seriously abused suffer untold anguish when they see that those responsible for the death and suffering of their loved ones walk away with impunity. To many, such lack of accountability denies the victims of the violators any form of justice or redress. But the reality of life is such that reconciliation demands for down-to-earth difficult compromises and enormous degree of forgiveness.

This issue of Accord gives an account of the Sierra Leone conflict and peace process and provides valuable information for those engaged in peacemaking across the world. For those of us seeking a negotiated settlement in Acholiland, there are two striking lessons among others that can be learnt from this conflict and the attempts to end it.

The first important lesson is that it is very risky to focus attention only on one individual. The central focus of the Lomé process was on Foday Sankoh, leader of the RUF, in the belief that he was going to bring his followers along to accept a negotiated settlement. This proved to be wrong and if anything Sankoh's personal conducts and ambitions have become a major obstacle to the peace process.

The second lesson that comes out clearly from the Sierra Leone conflict is that new approaches have to be devised by future mediators and negotiators in dealing with rebel groups that are elusive and unpredictable. Equally, future rebel negotiators need to understand that the very fabric of civilization and co-existence demands a high degree of integrity and honour in keeping promises.

The crisis of the Lomé Agreement underscores the importance of looking again at the process and outcome of past accords. A durable settlement will have to be built on the strong foundations of democracy and popular participation and not on the shifting sands of buying off interests. If the Sierra Leonean peace process can yet be brought back on track, it will inspire others such as those striving for peace in northern Uganda.

Dr James A. Obita is a Ugandan working to try and bring peace to northern Uganda. He holds a PhD from the School of Industrial Chemistry, University of New South Wales, Australia.