

## Sierra Leone, the conflict and the world

**A speech given by Dr Dennis Bright at the Conflict, Development and Peace Network (CODEP) Conference, 18th – 20 June 2001, London**

The Sierra Leone tragedy is now well known and in these past few years we have seen the emergence of an impressive body of experts on Sierra Leone issues, who have between them put together an equally impressive fund of facts and figures for the purposes of their work. In treating the topic "Sierra Leone, the conflict and the world", I would simply like to give a Sierra Leonean, non-official, insider's perspective of how the conflict brought the world closer to Sierra Leone, and some of the implications of this meeting for the lives of the citizens of my country.

### Foreign Presence

Sierra Leone today has been described as the United Nation's biggest theatre of peacekeeping operations. When I checked a week ago, contingents from Pakistan and Nepal were on their way and on arrival in Freetown would bring the total number of peacekeepers to just over seventeen thousand. In fact, if Secretary General Kofi Annan's request to the Security Council had been granted there would have been a force of twenty thousand five hundred men and women by now keeping the peace in Sierra Leone.

In terms of foreign presence, there are also some five hundred British troops who under a bilateral arrangement are currently re-training and re-structuring the Sierra Leone Army. Keith Biddle and his team of British police experts under a Commonwealth programme are also helping out, trying to rebuild the Sierra Leone Police Force. There has also been a British Accountant General looking at the finances of the country.

Furthermore, Sierra Leone now has a very high concentration of international NGOs with foreign personnel operating in areas such as humanitarian relief, development, medical support, peace building etc. and I would like you to believe me that there is an awful lot of pushing and shoving going on out there.

As a matter of fact, although the war has been going on for ten years, it

is only in the past two years that the bulk of peacekeepers and NGOs from the International Community actually entered Sierra Leone. This was the wish or even demand of the Sierra Leonean people. What therefore are effects of this foreign presence on the situation in the country and on the minds of the people themselves ? Now, Sierra Leone is a country with a population of 4 to 5 million, of which some 2 million are either living as refugees in other countries or as internally displaced persons in the big towns. For those Sierra Leoneans still living in the country there is suddenly an overwhelming visibility of foreign helpers perceived in ways that are both interesting and instructive.

### Confidence and Security

It must be said that when news came of the UN's decision to send troops to Sierra Leone, the general feeling in Sierra Leone was relief that we too existed and that the world did not stop at Kosovo. There was an indescribable upsurge of confidence and belief that the international community, realising that it had neglected a whole nation in conflict for too long was now finally coming to rescue her from the clutches of terror and barbarism.

This increased sense of security felt by the general public was seriously undermined by the events that involved the abduction by rebels of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) of 500 UN peacekeepers in the end of April/early May last year. However, the U.N. stood strong and the British troops limited the damage and restored the feeling that the world was still behind us. On their part, the United Nations Mission to Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL), in spite of its vicissitudes, is today definitely regaining credibility especially in the way it has been conducting negotiations recently with the RUF and Government, and producing results.

British troops, vehicles and equipment, UNAMSIL uniforms, patrols and checkpoints, all provide much needed confidence to a people who no longer had faith in their own army or security system. At a meeting in Tasso Island near Freetown, I remember the Themne tribal head, King Naimbana, telling his audience that had he been told years ago that a day would come when white men would be keeping watch over him, his family and property while he slept comfortably in bed at night, he would have laughed his sides out in disbelief. By white men he was referring of course to the Indians or Jordanians in UNAMSIL who were manning checkpoints at the time. This sense of security and confidence in the foreign troops is not only felt in the capital, Freetown, but also and especially in the provincial areas where UNAMSIL troops have been deployed or where British troops are doing their training exercises.

Even the RUF now seem to trust only UNAMSIL, whose troops the very RUF kidnapped a year ago.

Another positive thing is that the peace keeping operation and the increase in NGO activity has created many more jobs for Sierra Leoneans especially at the junior level. Local personnel such as secretaries, drivers, security, electricians, plumbers etc are now working in all the four regions of Sierra Leone, being exposed to tougher challenges and demands for efficiency and high standard performance in exchange for better remuneration and conditions of work. In fact, working for UN has in several cases had an amazing effect on some of my countrymen who, relishing their newfound status, ride dreamily and sometimes even arrogantly on their illusions of grandeur; with every driver regarding himself as a scaled-down copy of Kofi Annan!

### Perceptions and Illusions

In this country rated as the poorest in the world it is not surprising that in the eyes of the ordinary Sierra Leonean almost everything about the UN outfit there is seen as an expression of affluence. For those who have not been to Freetown lately you need to see the impressive display of hundreds of white, four-wheel drive vehicles in the parking lot at Mammy Yoko, the UNAMSIL headquarters, the helicopters that seem to be landing and taking off all the time at the specially built heliports, in fact, the whole equipment and logistical paraphernalia; people also look at the volume of dollars changed at the black market, the mountains of stuff packed in trolleys at the supermarkets and of course the bottles of beer at the clubs and beach bars. The interesting thing is that although the UN mission is composed of Africans and Asians, the lingering impression is that all this is white man's money, especially American and British. And this is how the comparatively higher standard of living of UN personnel and officials of other international agencies has come to reinforce the stereotype images people held about the easy and comfortable life for all in America and England.

Certainly there are serious socio-economic implications in this perception and it is no secret that the level of prostitution has risen sharply while the age of the "Kolonkos", as young prostitutes (some school girls) are nicknamed out there, has been falling to alarmingly low levels. But this must be expected whenever men are plunged far from home into the ambiguities and uncertainties of a war-no-war situation that is not theirs; their conduct changes to levels of permissiveness that would never have been imagined at home.

There is also the unsettling observation that at this time when Sierra Leone so badly needs its young men and women to rebuild it, there are increasingly large numbers of youths, obviously conquered by the attractive images of the good life abroad and crushed under the weight of material and social difficulties at home, who are playing the D.V. lottery game. In this way they hope to go and find a place for them and their families in the American dream.

Earlier on I mentioned the "overwhelming visibility" of the UN. Well, it does appear as if in terms of relationship with the Government of Sierra Leone we should be talking about the overwhelming power of the international community. As the current government is now completing its five-year term which has been marked by all sorts of violent eruptions and interruptions and an enduring war, it is now clear that only the commitment and support of the international community for democratic governance has kept it in place.

With hardly any control since it came to power over the country's main resource base (i.e.) the diamond-rich Kono district, the Government in order to run the country has been left with hardly any other alternative but to permanently resort to the generosity of donors. And the way things are going it looks as though Government is slowly losing control and being dwarfed by the almighty international community.

There is something like a continuing erosion of State power here, first by an extremely cruel rebellion which physically and economically usurped Government's authority and control over certain parts of the country, and then as an already weakened entity, by the overwhelming force and dictates of a powerful international community that is paying the piper and therefore calling the tune. Already, some newspapers are talking about loss of sovereignty or re-colonisation, but this brings us again to the question; where a Government is faced with a crisis like ours and consequently becomes a beneficiary to such a large-scale international humanitarian and/or military assistance with several donors who have their specific interests and requirements, what scope has that Government to make choices and decisions of its own that are not compulsorily donor-sensitive?

Let us take for example the campaign for a Special Court and a Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Sierra Leone. It is obvious that the Government is under considerable pressure from International Human Rights Organisations to get on with it now and very now, even though public opinion and the reality on the ground are indicating the necessity to suspend the debate until disarmament has been concluded and security restored.

There is a similar trend at the level of NGO activities. The prevailing conditions in Sierra Leone today have made the intervention of big NGOs or agencies that handle big operations imperative. These are organisations that enjoy much attention, and an easy access to funding. Now, I am of the view that a lot of money can be saved if a proper assessment of the real impact of these big NGOs and their activities on their target beneficiaries and communities is done and the corresponding lessons learnt. One day, a friend of mine showed me the brilliant annual report of a major NGO working in Sierra Leone. The success celebrated in that document hardly reflected the minimal impact made upon the communities targeted, and said little of the continuing misery of the inhabitants. The truth is that the very size of these NGOs provokes illusions and expectations, perceptions and deceptions that quite often constitute an impediment to the achievement of the goals of those bodies. This is certainly not to decry the crucial role that NGOs have been and are still playing in our countries. I only wish that their articulation with smaller organisations or associations will be improved so that much of the in-depth work that is being done in local communities by smaller and less privileged organisations may not continue to be drowned into insignificance, resulting in frustration and the loss of brilliant initiatives.

Furthermore, I will be interested in finding a partner to work with me on the sociological and psychological relationships between NGOs and their beneficiaries within the framework of project design and implementation. I do believe that much will be learnt that should help us in our work.

## **Mercenaries**

It is also worth mentioning the role mercenaries who are in fact leftovers from other crises in the world (South Africa, Eastern Europe etc) have been playing in the Sierra Leone conflict. All factions in this conflict have at some stage resorted to the use of mercenaries. The NPRC Government in Sierra Leone used the Executive Outcomes from South Africa, there was the Sandline affair involving the Kabba Government, and the RUF/AFRC sometimes used Ukrainians. Interestingly, Ukrainians are now in Sierra Leone not as mercenaries this time but as part of the UN peacekeeping force. They have about 100 troops as part of a whole aviation unit with 4 gunships.

These mercenaries are expensive and are used in restricted numbers when necessary because of their sophistication and technological efficiency. But their efforts are being supplemented now by a growing sub-regional mercenary industry. The trend now is for fighters to move

freely across borders in West Africa offering their services to one rebel group or the other on a "pay-yourself" basis during attacks.

The existence of an open market for mercenaries including security firms that can be easily accessed on the internet spells danger for the West African sub-region where many countries today display the very same political and socio-economic signals that heralded the Sierra Leone war.

### Arms, Drugs and Human Rights

This leads me to the issue the international trade in small arms and hard drugs. I do not think I can say anything new on the subject considering the innumerable surveys, studies and conferences that have been conducted or held in that area. I would simply invite you to ponder over the devastating effects that the trade in small arms and drugs, which are somehow taken for granted, have had on my country and particularly on those children who were dragged into the conflict.

Recently some school children were asked by their teacher to make drawings of things that interested them. A former child combatant under rehabilitation promptly drew a pistol. When told that this was not appropriate he rubbed off the pistol and did a grenade instead. In the last month alone the RUF has released up to six hundred of these children to UNAMSIL and child protection agencies. We should be expecting many more. Some of these children have lost their parents and have never been to school. The only fact of their lives has been the weapons that were bought and put in their hands and through which they survived. Under the influence of very hard drugs some them have committed the worst atrocities ever recorded in human history.

Having said that I would like to submit that we, all of us, Sierra Leoneans as well as the International community had a moral responsibility to protect and preserve the innocence of those children. And it is not through signing conventions alone or ratifying them but by taking positive action on the ground to ensure their protection against this kind of abuse that has transformed them into killing machines. This is why the fight against the manufacturing and trafficking of small arms must now be intensified; and when the Special Court being proposed to deal with violations of human rights and international law takes off the ground, let us make a lot of noise and argue that together with Foday Sankoh who gave those children guns and drugs, those who produced and sold them, free market or not, also have a case to answer.

We seem to have internalised the mass production and distribution of small arms and drugs as one of those unavoidable vices of our civilisation that are of considerable importance to our economies and therefore our survival. But this was the way slavery was considered normal in those days when not a single barrel of sugar came to Europe that was not tainted with the blood of Africans. However, through the moral and spiritual strength of the Church and forefathers of civil society activism like William Wilberforce the slave trade was abolished. For so long, the world accepted cigarette smoking as a natural habit and an economic booster. Today thanks to the resourcefulness and vigilance of advocates, this habit is gradually being uprooted from our system, economics or not.

A sub-regional meeting on the issue of small arms has just been held, ending on 9th June this year, as a prelude to an international conference on small arms to be held in New York next month. This is an opportunity for NGOs, Civil Society organisations, Religious organisations etc, using the evidence of the thousands of brutalised and militarised Sierra Leonean children and who have been destroyed by the greed and commercial interests of gun makers and bandits, to launch an all-out, final offensive against the production and trafficking of these deadly weapons.

To my Human Rights colleagues therefore, I would like to propose a whole debate here; between the reactive measure of addressing impunity by spending one million dollars to try a single human rights violator in Sierra Leone, and the preventive measure of addressing the ethics of small arms trade by using similar resources to challenge their production and trafficking.

## Communications Technology

Finally, I would like to look at aspects of the role played by modern technology in the Sierra Leone conflict and the way in which the conflict accelerated the entry of my countrymen into the global village.

The rebellion exploited communications technology in such a way that, except when it chose to remain silent, the RUF was never isolated from the world. Much of their propaganda was done through interviews given to the international media especially the BBC using satellite phones. So important were they that satellite phones sometimes formed part of the rebels main requests during negotiations.

On the other hand, without media technology the world would not have known so much about the horrors of the war nor would the RUF have



been able to monitor international condemnation of their actions.

For the majority of Sierra Leoneans it could be said that the conflict in a variety of ways led to their discovery of a whole new world of technology or better still to the awareness of the smallness of the world today.

During the junta rule in 1997 many Sierra Leoneans of all levels in society fled the country to seek refuge mainly in Guinea and the Gambia and found themselves suddenly depending for their sustenance on financial support from relatives and friends in Britain, the U.S.A., Europe and even beyond. This was when a good number of Sierra Leoneans at home or in exile were obliged by the circumstances to become deeply familiar with such things as international money transfer, e-mail and other internet facilities, and to begin to perceive the world as a technologically shrunken space where people could meet and do things with people anywhere, even when the State itself has collapsed.

This conflict has generated infinite trust in information technology as is evident in the large numbers of computer training institutes and internet cafes that sprang up in various parts of Sierra Leone after the 1997 junta period.

And perhaps this is where the future of aid to development, tangible and sustainable development lies: in the capacity of people to meet and work with other people elsewhere through the advantages of information technology not to replace but to consolidate State-State cooperation. I refer to an approach named "decentralised cooperation" that France has been using. This involves the State devolving some of its bilateral assistance to local governments, which can then develop well-monitored developmental programmes with communities and known, identifiable people in the beneficiary countries. The strategy will include the creation of invaluable linkages at local government level between, for instance, hospitals, clinics, educational and training institutions, sports organisations, artisans and small manufacturers in particular towns or regions in Europe, and their counterparts in selected developed countries, with a focus on the exchange of knowledge, skills, equipment and materials. The projects supported will be concrete, visible, meaningful and even more humane because even local NGO s and taxpayers based in the assisting towns or regions in Europe can be given a role to play in their implementation.

## Conclusion



In conclusion, let me reiterate the sense of security and confidence generated among the people of my country by the reassuring presence of foreign military and non-military supporters, particularly since the whole State security system had collapsed. However, there are some social repercussions of such heavy presence and certain profound implications for the Government's capacity, now that it is so heavily dependent on foreign assistance, to take key decisions without approval by the international community.

Furthermore, it appears as if the time has come for Human Rights organisations to go beyond the issue of blood diamonds and engage in a definitive battle against the manufacture and trafficking of small arms, with a spirit and commitment comparable to that of the abolitionists who successfully fought against slavery. We have a duty to protect the children of the world from the horrifying forms of abuse to which the children of Sierra Leone have been subjected.

The conflict in Sierra Leone brought that country and the rest of the world closer in many ways. Physically, the diversity of nationalities represented in the general effort to bring peace and development to Sierra Leone is truly remarkable and reassuring. But the conflict has also reinforced images of "good life always" in the Western countries. As a result, the ambition of many young Sierra Leoneans, naturally, is to flee their country and journey to the promised El Dorados. Above all, the conflict has taught even the peasants of Sierra Leone how small the world has become, and that people can reach and help other people using many channels including that "modern witchcraft" through which Mohamed in America, within minutes after a phone call, sent in those dollars that helped to repair the roof and saved the family from disgrace.