



Le Monde diplomatique

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March 2008

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 To our readers

'THE BAD CHILD MUST STAY WITH THE COMMUNITY'

Sierra Leone: revenge and reconciliation

They were murderers, rapists, torturers, butchers and their victims in Sierra Leone's civil war. Now – for the moment, since diamond-funded conflict and chaos could return at any time – they try to fight in less destructive ways and resume the real lives they can barely remember

By [Angela Robson](#)

Dabo Seidu has tried to erase his former life. And he would prefer it if his passengers could do the same. "I'm not afraid of people," he declares, barking a command to one of his junior trainees at Kailahun Town's transport yard. "I've always had to defend myself." A frayed black denim waistcoat displays a supremely toned upper body. "This is my own vehicle. I bought it with my own money and I'm proud of it." He jumps on the back of a red and black motorbike and revs the engine.

The motorbike-taxi station is the busiest place in Kailahun and stands opposite Locust Life, one of the town's drinking bars. Around 40 young men are busy at work, either cleaning bikes or heading off with passengers. They are all ex-combatants, some of whom fought each other in the civil war. This bikers' employment scheme aims to reintegrate them into the community. The bikers also provide the only reliable transport in Kailahun District, and in and out of neighbouring Guinea and Liberia.

The anti-government Revolutionary United Front (RUF), backed by Liberia's Charles Taylor, launched its first attack into eastern Kailahun in March 1991. Dabo fought on the side of the RUF between 1992 and 2001. Forced recruitment of children was an early feature of RUF strategy as well as rape, torture, execution, looting and cannibalism.

Dabo shouts rather than talks. "When people came to this town, they didn't tell us what their mission was, what their programme was. If they see you as a young man and strong, they will just recruit you by force – and you will join them. We didn't force any civilians to fight for us. With my own group we never chopped off people's arms and limbs, but I saw it happen."

On the highway out of Kailahun towards Liberia, we drive past a billboard of children's photos. Coloured panels of cloth and ribbons flutter like Tibetan prayer flags from the top. I ask Dabo if we can stop. There are hundreds of pictures, from babies to teenagers, staring out from behind protective plastic coating.

More about Angela Robson.

Original text in English

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(1) Greg Campbell, *Blood Diamond: Tracing the Deadly Path of the World's Most Precious Stones*, Westview Press, London, 2002.

(2) Human Rights Watch, "Bringing Justice: the Special Court for Sierra Leone Accomplishments, Shortcomings, and Needed Support", September 2004.

(3) Ibid.

(4) Human Rights Watch, "We'll Kill You If You Cry: Sexual Violence in the Sierra Leone Conflict", January 2003.

(5) Physicians for Human Rights, "War-Related Sexual Violence in Sierra Leone: A Population-Based Assessment", 2002.

(6) PlusNews, "Africa: Former child soldiers at risk of HIV", February 2008.

(7) Aminatta Forna, *The Devil that Danced on the Water: A Daughter's Memoir*, Flamingo, London, 2003.

(8) Greg Campbell, op cit.

(9) Global Witness, "For a Few Dollars More: How al Qaeda moved into the diamond trade", 2003.

(10) Amnesty International UK, "Diamonds: Keep blood off your hands", January 2007.

(11) Human Rights Watch, "Youth, Poverty and Blood: The Lethal Legacy of West Africa's Regional Warriors", 2005.

Some have been photographed in their Sunday best – girls in long, lace-fringed dresses; boys in black waistcoats and suits.

These are Kailahun's lost children, displaced or abducted during the war. Beneath each picture is the child's name with contact details of the International Red Cross and the relatives who are trying to find them.

Dabo has never noticed the billboard before. When I ask him if these children might be dead, he talks about the appalling roads instead. "Since I was a little boy the road was bad. Nobody can blame the rebels that the road is bad. We just want the road to be developed."

What about his passengers? Are they afraid of the bikers?

"People forgive us because we were born here and we live together. We stay here in the same place with our relatives. Our relatives were victims. Our relatives were perpetrators. There is a local saying in Krio, 'there is no bush in which to deposit a bad child – so the bad child must stay with the community'."

Casualties of war

"The RUF had terror on its side," (1) writes the American journalist and author, Greg Campbell, who came to Sierra Leone in 2001 to investigate the country's implosion from the diamond trade. "Composed almost entirely of illiterate and drugged teenagers, the rebels respected no boundaries... their signature crime was amputation."

According to Human Rights Watch (HRW), the majority of crimes were perpetrated by rebels from the RUF and the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (2). Government forces and their allies, including the Civil Defence Forces, also committed serious crimes, although on a smaller scale and of a different nature. Children were used by all sides during the 11-year conflict: "Forces failed to distinguish between civilians and combatants. Families were gunned down in the street, children and adults had their limbs hacked off with machetes, and girls and women were taken to rebel bases and subjected to sexual violence" (3).

As many as 257,000 Sierra Leonean women and girls may have been raped during the civil war (4). Physicians for Human Rights found that half of those who came into contact with RUF forces experienced sexual violence (5).

By the end of the war in 2002 the nation's infrastructure had been seriously damaged. Nearly half the population was displaced. Kailahun was the first district to be attacked in the war, and the last to be disarmed; 80% of properties there destroyed during the conflict. In 2002 the UN-backed Special Court for Sierra Leone and Truth and Reconciliation Commission were set up to consolidate peace.

'It's hard for them to readjust'

"Seventy five per cent of youths in Kailahun District were actively involved in the war," says Dauda Kanu from Plan Sierra Leone, the children's development agency. Plan runs school programmes for former combatants that incorporate

peace-building training and counselling for girls who had children as a result of rape. He has been closely involved with the Kailahun bikers' project. "The majority of these former fighters will have perpetrated atrocities, such as amputation, rape, killing and destroying property. They were not really conscious of what they were doing. They were over-drugged." Plan says that many child soldiers were deliberately desensitised to the horrors of killing and violent sexual assault – attitudes they found hard to shake off when they returned to normal society. Large numbers of demobilised child soldiers are now injecting illegal drugs. "They are conditioned to be disinhibited in every way to violent behaviour and sexual behaviour. It's hard for them to readjust (6).

"Initially, there was a high level of trauma in the population," says Kanu. "When members of the fighting forces came into the market place, people were shouting and provoking them. The spirit of forgiveness was low and the desire for revenge was high. But things began to change after the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) process. People began to accept these fighters back into society."

He believes the biker reintegration programme is a simple but vital step forward. "Honestly, we must acknowledge the immense contribution that they are making – they are working hard. They are moving traders from one point to another. Particularly with the bad road conditions, business is flowing because of their support in driving people around. They are also providing courier services. You will see a bike-rider and he will tell you that he's going to this point and you can easily give him a letter and he takes it without any fee.

"In the past, these boys were idle, they had no education, no work. That was the main reason the war broke out. The youths who took part in the war still feel stigmatised and ashamed and cannot come clean about their actions. Things are still a little bit jittery. We've got to get them busy."

'They told us to lie flat on the ground'

In a dimly-lit back room of Locust Life, Kailahun's Amputee Support Committee is gathering for its weekly meeting. During the civil war, the RUF rebels mutilated 20,000 people, hacking off arms, legs, lips, ears and sometimes breasts and genitals with machetes and axes. Cutting off arms was the RUF's response to Sierra Leone president Ahmad Tejan Kabbah's 1996 plea for citizens to "join hands for peace".

Miriam, a young woman with no lower arms, thrusts out her stumps and tells her story. "I was on my way home through the fields with my husband and we saw boys coming along the road nearby. When we got closer, we saw they were drugged up and had weapons. We had no time to get away. They told us to lie flat on the ground." She stops talking, sighs and looks at the floor. "We have shared our experiences many times and all we get is promises. Promises of training, employment, new limbs. Nothing ever happens."

Two other members of the group start shouting. Miriam is right.

They are just being used. They didn't want to come here today; they don't feel safe; they don't want to give their names.

The owner of Locust Life, who is serving bottles of beer to passers-by, tells them they have nothing to fear. The chair of the Amputee Committee begins reciting the Lord's Prayer. Everyone joins in.

"It was over with very quickly," Miriam says of her amputation. "My husband was shot. They found me bleeding on the road. Amen."

Diamonds that funded the war

"Diamonds. They washed up in the water of streams, hid in the soft silt beds, even glistened underfoot on the roads and pathways," writes Sierra Leonean novelist Aminatta Forna in her memoir *The Devil that Danced on the Water*. "It was said that in Koidu people didn't look where they were going but walked everywhere with their heads bent down, gaze permanently trawling the ground for stones" (7).

Knee deep in orange water, 14-year-old Alfred pours bucket after bucket of gravel into a large circular sieve and searches for diamonds. We are in Dumba, just outside Kenema, a town built on rich, alluvial diamond fields, where the streets are lined with diamond-buying stores. Digging for diamonds has been Alfred's daily routine since he was nine, when he was brought to a mine by his older brother, Ismael.

Greg Campbell believes that the RUF profited by between \$25m and \$125m per year during the war by delivering rough gem-quality diamonds to the world's market.

"Because of their diamond wealth, throughout most of the war the RUF was better armed than its adversaries. Diamonds bought Kalashnikovs by the hundreds, Browning 12.7 millimetre heavy machine guns by the tens of dozens, and ammunition in million-block orders. Light artillery included rocket-propelled grenades, mortars, and SA-7 shoulder-launched surface-to-air missiles. The RUF bought helicopters for resupply... The RUF funded all this with proceeds from illegal diamond mining.

"There was certainly no lack of buyers. Everyone from legitimate brokers employed by Belgian cutting houses to agents of the Iranian-backed Lebanese terrorist organisation Hizbullah crowded the streets and hotels of Monrovia, eager for the chance to buy diamonds from the RUF: Monrovia was a no-man's land of freewheeling dealing in diamonds that had been soaked in the blood of innocent Sierra Leoneans" (8).

The NGO Global Witness has also claimed that al-Qaida was able to funnel about \$20m worth of illegally-mined rough diamonds through Sierra Leone during the war (9).

Alfred and Ismael's parents, who were farmers, were killed in the conflict. Ismael was captured by the RUF and forced to dig for diamonds. "We found diamonds, but we got nothing, sometimes not even food. If they felt like it, they would beat you for no reason and they shot people if they thought they were hiding

stones.”

“A big part of Sierra Leone’s recovery is helping the country address what underpinned the war,” says Amnesty International’s country director in Sierra Leone, Brima Abdulai Shreff. “Primarily, the inequitable distribution of proceeds from diamond mining. It continues to be a source of tension and much more needs to be done to protect child labourers in the trade.”

A report last year by Amnesty claims that, despite the introduction of the Kimberley Process, a certification system for rough diamonds that aims to prevent them from fuelling conflicts and financing terrorist networks, “conflict diamonds from Côte d’Ivoire are finding their way through Ghana into the legitimate diamond market. As the brutal conflict in Sierra Leone has shown, even a small amount of conflict diamonds can wreak enormous havoc in a country” (10).

“Since the war ended, I still dig, though I’ve not been lucky,” says Ismael. He and his brother survive because they work in a gang of 10 men. “If one of us finds a diamond, we all get a share of the money.” Alfred, at 14, is the youngest in the group. He would like to return to school but says he has no one to fund him. He points to his chest. “The work pains me, it is too hard, but one day, I’m sure, I will find diamonds.”

Rapping on the frontline

High in the hills above Freetown, the road is lined with mango and tamarind trees and the sun beats down from a cloudless sky. Boga Slim, a rapper from the Sierra Leonean hip-hop group Natural Born Niggers, gestures to a collection of buildings on the horizon. On 6 January 1999 rebel forces entered the capital city from this point. They unleashed a campaign of terror, No Living Thing, during which an estimated 5,000 people were killed. Many others had arms amputated.

“I heard fierce firing and screaming,” says Slim. “Though we’d been kind of expecting it, the invasion took us by surprise.”

During the fighting, Boga Slim was captured by the West Side Boys, a splinter faction of the AFRC. He claims he survived by rapping. “We rapped on the frontline. We got them in the mood for killing. In the evening, we entertained them again. We had no choice. If you’re not with them, your life is in danger. But I did not hold a gun.”

Issa Davies, who works with youth and children’s groups, says that, like other children caught up in the conflict, the West Side Boys were heavy users of homemade palm wine, locally grown marijuana and heroin bought with conflict diamonds.

“After the invasion of Freetown, they immediately transformed themselves as the West Side Boys. West Side comprised the SLA – the Sierra Leone Army – and jobless youths.

“These are the people who fought against civilians, who chopped off people’s arms, who burned Freetown. You would see them with the American flag tied on their head; you’d see them with caps turned upside down. It’s just like they’d been motivated by

these West Coast American hip-hop stars.”

Some of the ex-combatants who survived the war are now well-known rappers. Using a blend of hip hop and traditional goombay music, they out-rap each other and speak of peace and reconciliation.

“Hip-hop is popular among the youth,” says Davies. “Now it’s a grassroots, street-level music of rebellion, protest and struggle. The rivalry is still there between ex-combatants, but it’s vented in local soundclash festivals. It’s a way of braving the system and getting themselves to be more outspoken.”

Boga Slim believes music can change things for the better. He performs his lyrics in Krio, the national language, so “people can feel it more”.

Artists are also using soundclash festivals to protest about the way their country is being run. “We’re highlighting corruption and unemployment,” Slim says. “And the government is threatened. They’ve recruited their own rappers to perform on the radio and at soundclash festivals. They know we have influence and it makes them nervous.”

Regional warriors

In its report “Youth, Poverty and Blood: The Lethal Legacy of West Africa’s Regional Warriors”, Human Rights Watch claims that a migrant population of young fighters – regional warriors who view war as an economic opportunity – glide back and forth across the borders of West Africa.

HRW says that the majority of former fighters interviewed who had taken part in the 2000-03 United Nations-sponsored DDR programme “received only partial benefits, were kept out of the skills training component of the programme or failed to receive any benefits at all. They also identified corruption in this process and an inadequate grievance procedure within the DRR program as serious problems. Many perceived the programme’s failure to engage them as having contributed to their decision to take up arms in subsequent conflicts” (11).

Corinne Dufka, the report’s author, says that former combatants are still vulnerable. “Many remain unemployed and frustrated. A chain is only as strong as its weakest link. If there’s a weak link – and here I refer to a future armed conflict within the region – they may be easily be drawn into what many of them know all too well: the business of war. The laying down of arms in Sierra Leone is a success of sorts. But the issues that gave rise to the armed conflict – mainly poverty, corruption, weak rule of law – have not been adequately addressed by government and civil society. Much of the country has no electricity, unemployment is extremely high, corruption remains systemic. All of these things impact negatively on youth.

“The current administration is saying all the right things. What we’d now like to see them do is moving from rhetoric to action. To address the issues which gave rise to Sierra Leone’s exceptionally brutal war.”

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