

HOMECOMING - A PERSONAL TRAVEL STORY COVERING MY VISIT TO SIERRA LEONE FROM THE 2ND. OF JULY TO THE 6TH. OF AUGUST.

The last time I visited Sierra Leone was about 3 years ago when the security situation was such that I could not go beyond Freetown so naturally I have been very anxious to go especially after the exit of the last military junta of Johnny Paul Koroma.

Christian Aid very kindly agreed to pay my return fare. International flights stopped flying to Lungi quite a while ago for security reasons so travel to Sierra Leone has for long been via a second country - the two favourites being Gambia and Guinea. Less common but available are Senegal, Ghana and Ivory Coast, but either way the fares are substantially high.

My eldest son Moinina Conteh was my travelling companion. He was born in Sierra Leone where he attended primary school and came at the age of 11 to live with his mother. He is nearly 21 now.

We chose to fly via Banjul because we had contact there, the flight arrived during daylight hours and also the official language is English, unlike Conakry.

We arrived in Banjul on the 30th. of June and the following day we booked our Freetown-Banjul flight with Ghana Airways. Ghana Airways does coastal flights from Dakar, Banjul, Conakry, Freetown, Abidjan and Accra about twice a week.

There are two other similar airlines: Belview and Air Dabia that do coastal shuttles but Ghana Airways is more experienced and reputable.

PRE-TRIP ANXIETIES.

I was roaring to go but I had quite a few concerns; flying from Heathrow to Banjul was quite straight forward but I was concerned about the Banjul-Freetown connection, going out and coming back. We wanted to be in Freetown at the earliest possible time, and we also needed to fly back to Banjul at an appropriate time to connect to fly back to Heathrow.

Our host, George Lahai, helped us make the bookings with Ghana Airways, and a day after our arrival we were on our way to Freetown. On the streets of Banjul George Lahai and I were looked on as 'bumsters' to Moinina who was thought of a tourist! (Bumster is the word used to mean tourist guide).

Although the war was officially over I was concerned about the security situation in Freetown and on our way to Bo. Bob Moran, our Freetown host was unable to meet us at Lungi so we got a taxi to take us to Freetown. The balcony where people stand to welcome arrivals was empty, so was the airport arrivals lounge. You usually have to fight to handle your own luggage because attendants fight over handling your luggage for tips.

ECOMOG troops guard the airport and have a commanding presence in the running of things.

On the ferry I met a few people I knew and they brought me up to date with situations in the country. They seemed quite relaxed because the security was very improved, but they all had horrible stories about atrocities committed by the junta and the RUF rebels who formed the previous administration. One of my acquaintances, Mustapha Daboh

said, "those boys were behaving as if they were from a different planet."

We stayed at KingTom with Bob Moran, a former colleague, now working for the Catholic Relief Services, (CRS) one of the leading Relief and Development Agencies in Sierra Leone.

When Bob was in Guinea he had his house burned by the fleeing junta, the most likely reason being his landlord may have been against them. He was lucky because the people staying with him were asked out before the house was set alight. In lots of cases occupants were locked in before the house was set alight.

Bob is American but has lived in Sierra Leone since 1970s and has raised a family there, so he knows the 'lie of the land' so he knew much for me to tap into. I felt like a 'Rip van Winkle!'

Bob had a trip up country and he offered us a lift to Bo. There was an incredible security presence on the road manned by ECOMOG troops and overall they were not interested in taking 'tolls' but were serious about what people were carrying to and from Freetown. They gave you no bother if you were not carrying arms. The check points were numerous; but if that is the price we have to pay for the security and freedom of our people so be it! Siaka Stevens is noted to have said, "internal vigilance is the price we have to pay for our liberty".

The road is reasonably good most of the way but the worst bit is the stretch from Taiama to Bo, that road has just about disappeared. Our journey took us about 5 hours. The 'normal' time is now 10 hours on the road from Bo to Freetown on the government bus and other passenger vehicles. So I really have no cause to complain, and after all we did it only once. Mind you Bo-Freetown used to be a 3 hour drive!

BO.

We stayed at the family house in New London which would be considered a suburb of Bo. Bo felt the brunt of the junta rule because they were alleged to be opposed to them. There was massive looting as the junta and their cohorts, the RUF rebels were fleeing the advance of ECOMOG forces from Liberia via Kenema. What they could not carry they burned. There are jokes of the raiders carrying computers screen thinking they televisions!

There were two lots of house burnings in Bo: clearly if the junta believed you were not for them your house would be burned, and after the junta fled, if you were a collaborator your house was burned. That is the sad story of M.B. Sesay, a wealthy businessman who threw in his lot with the junta, there is strong feeling his alliance was on ethnic lines - most of the junta were northerners, and although he had lived in Bo for so long he visibly sided with them. All his houses were scorched and he has the status of persona non grata. This act of revenge was not visited on everybody simply because you happen to have come from the north. I met friends and a former colleague who come from Northern Province but have homes in Bo. They and their families felt at ease and were carrying on with their lives.

The shells of the burnt out houses still stand and I doubt whether they will be rebuilt not only for the political tension, but the cost of building materials. The shops are still not stocked up so what little is available is expensive.

I did harbour fears in me especially at night, but they receded as time went on. There is still a curfew from midnight to 6am and it is enforced and highly respected.

SECURITY.

The security of the country is in the hands of the ECOMOG troops, especially the large towns. This is very visible in Bo. ECOMOG have their Hqtrs. at the compound of J. Mattar, opposite the police station. The police lost credibility in Bo when they shot protesting civilians. People I spoke to in Bo speak highly of the discipline on the ECOMOG forces. The troops are relieved of active duty after a spell so they can return home to their families. One morning I was walking passed the first check point from Bo and one of the ECOMOG soldiers was taking his leave of Bo. He looked visibly happy, happy to be going home, and he was waving his bye-byes going towards the vehicle taking him to Freetown. Bye-standers - traders, market women were clapping and waving back until he boarded his vehicle. Someone told me some of the soldiers said Sierra Leone was such a peaceful and peace loving place they would like to retire there!

There may have been isolated single incidences of indiscipline, or tension between locals and the soldiers, but the authorities control the situation very firmly and with respect to local authorities and the population.

Generally people have a good laugh at the Sandline issue that hit and stayed in the headlines here. People in the whole country were so desperate that they welcomed relief from any quarter, Sandline or not! Penfold has become a celebrity.

The kamajors have not been given the credit they deserve. But for them ECOMOG would have found it very difficult to dislodge the junta. It is a strongly held view that the kamajors weakened the junta, especially up country before ECOMOG moved in. ECOMOG would have taken Freetown, Bo, Kenema and Makeni easily but the junta would easily have retreated into the bush and harassed them using guerrilla warfare technique. But the kamajors, especially in Bo, (because that was where I was based), confined the junta to the township of Bo and were afraid to go anywhere near the outskirts. There incidences of kamajors abducting junta soldiers.

They had a stronger reason to fight to liberate their home territories so they had stomach for it unlike the junta. Some of my relations are kamajors. The alliance between the ECOMOG forces and the kamajors was great. The kamajors fanned the countryside to flush out any rebels or junta forces while the ECOMOG forces mainly concentrated on the towns.

The kamajors are now being gradually deployed to their home areas to ensure security and keep the peace.

Credit should be given to late Dr. Alpha Lavalie who initiated the kamajor militia. He died mysteriously at Mano Junction when there were explosions under the vehicle he travelling in.

ECOMOG has mandate to train a new national army before they leave. There is debate in the country as to how the new army should be constituted. Listening to a prominent elder in Bo, he held a strong view Paramount Chiefs should nominate conscripts as he remembers during the colonial period.

At the height of the rebel war the streets of Freetown were cleaned

of the street boys who formed the 'latter day' the army.

Some are suggesting that some faithful soldiers should form part of the new army.

TRANSPORT

The shortage of vehicles in the country is very visible. What the fleeing junta could not drive away they burned. Most of the new vehicles belong to Aid Agencies or such related bodies. Fortunately there is no MOT out there so people are doing what they can with 'carts' on four wheels. Taxis run a service they call "pole to pole"; if you board a taxi it takes you to where it parks and waits to load other passengers going to where you boarded it. It is difficult and expensive to hire a taxi to take you from where ever you are to where you wish to go. Fuel flows on and off at about Le4000 per gallon, that is about £1.5.

When the roads were difficult and dangerous to ply someone initiated air service from Hastings, about 12 miles out of Freetown, to Bo and Kenema. They are about 15 seater planes that fly almost every day. You have a choice of 2, one of West Coast Airways. The fare to Bo is Le 80,000 or \$50 one way and the flight last about 45 minutes. It has become an attractive novelty. We actually flew 3 times and it was good. The West Coast Airways is manned by Russian crew. You pay about Le16,000 for airport tax at Hastings but there is hardly a service to offer passengers!

Wheelbarrows are in great demand for transporting things from shops to homes e.g. a bag of rice, then of course there is the 'omolanke' - a cart pulled by at least 2 people.

There are a few bicycles to rent per hour. I saw new India made Raleigh bicycles in shops in Bo for about £100. Do you have a bicycle in your shed you are using? Would you be interested in help paying to get it out there? A cycle repair shop would provide jobs for a few youths. Sales of bicycles after repair would generate local funds for the Sports & Games and Library Programmes!

Most travel is still on foot.

There are few vehicles serving Bo and the outlying villages, they come in the morning and return in the afternoon/late evening.

Communication between Bo and Freetown is very slow. There is no telephone link because the junta damaged the link stations as they fled. Nobody knows when it will be restored although rumours abound that it will be soon. This makes Bo really cut off from Freetown and therefore the world outside.

Having said that though people watched the World Cup Games at the Bo School library, St. Pius, Pastoral Centre and some private homes. People were in sympathy when England got knocked out by Argentina. Apart from Brazil, which is always a popular, side people knew and were more interested in the England team than any other teams!

Bo has 24 hours electricity unlike Freetown. I also saw running tap water at a few places.

THE LAST DAYS OF THE JUNTA

Clearly the junta and their cohorts, the RUF rebels with whom they formed government, knew the resentment of the population towards them but they wanted to hang on to power through brutal force. They used every available means to enrich themselves. Their Secretary for

Southern Province is quoted to have said, "before we are reduced to eating bulgur, you will be eating grass", referring to the people of Bo. He used the FM Radio station in Bo to insult people until the technicians removed a few vital parts and went into hiding.

The story is told about a respectable, long established driver commonly known as Western. I think he acquired that name because he wrote "western" in the front part of his vehicle. He was the first to start running early morning shuttles to Freetown, (Western Area), and back in the evening. He went to the defence of someone who was being intimidated by one of the brigands. The fellow just turned round and shot him dead at point blank range. There are many stories of that sort. I just mention that because I knew the man.

They carried out two operations : the first they called 'operation pay yourself', which should be self explanatory. The second they called 'operation non living thing', by which they meant destroy anything that had life; this they embarked on when they were on the run. The story goes that when Freetown was taken over by ECOMOG the junta suddenly withdrew and as they did the kamajors took over and in excitement took to shooting in the air to celebrate for most of the night. The junta then regrouped and came back most of them in kamajor clothes and shot anyone they saw. That led to a stampede as people fled into the bush. The kamajor withdrew into the bush and lay in waiting for ECOMOG to arrive. Estimates say about 200 people got killed before ECOMOG arrived. Although it was it was in March people were wishing each other a 'happy new', a sort of new beginning. That spirit is there but the international community, and anyone in position to help needs to step in to make that wish a reality.

In Freetown the behaviour of the junta was no different, they were particularly irritated by the FM radio station which was pro Kabba and was called 'Radio Democracy'. It was more powerful than the national radio, SLBS and Hilton Fyle's FM radio.

Radio Democracy was very up to date with whatever was happening in Freetown, but the location of the station was a guarded secret. The junta offered a reward of Le10m for information about its location; that was more than the reward offered for shooting down the Nigerian Air force Alpha Jet - Le1m!

So frightened was Johnny Paul Koroma that they say he kept sleeping in different places every night, but Radio Democracy broadcast every day where he last slept. Junta forces cut telephone wires from public telephones. People caught listening to 'Radio Democracy' were in danger of intimidation, and a few cases their lives. Little boys posing as street sellers were paid to report anyone listening to 'Radio Democracy.'

ECOMOG intelligence infiltrated Freetown a long time before their attack on Freetown so they knew all the strategic places.

Michael Moss, a Methodist missionary friend, took us to the amputee camp at Waterloo on the 4th. of July and I recorded the story of one of the victims, Mohamed Mattia. He was about 55 years old. He comes from Bumpah in Nimikoro Chiefdom, Kono District. This is his story:

"It was in the evening at about 8:30pm when we saw people emerge from the bushes. They asked for their colleagues in uniform. We told them the only soldiers in uniform were at Motema. One of the men was ordered to look after us while the rest entered the village. They brought back some captives. We were pushed into a verandah room,

about 15 of us. They asked for cutlass and they selected those to be amputated with the message, "tell Kabba we are around". They took my wife and 4 of my children, 2 boys and 2 girls.

Next morning we went to ECOMOG at Motema but the dispensary had no drugs. After 7 days we were brought to Connaught hospital in Freetown."

The camp when it was full to capacity had about 6000 inmates but a lot of them have gone. I took some pictures so I can tell their stories. Everyone of them has a terrible story to tell.

Popular words and phrases of the junta were: 'off load', which meant to empty the contents of your pockets or bag; to 'pack someone' meant their being shot and killed; to give you 'long sleeve' meant to amputate you at the wrist; to give you 'short sleeve' meant to amputate you at the elbow.

THE ECONOMY.

The economy is in ruins. Part of the Bank of Sierra Leone was burned, the whole of Government Treasury was burned, the Bank buildings were attacked, and business men were special targets. No cultivation has taken place in most parts of the country for at least 4 years so food has to be imported. A 50 kilo bag of rice costs about Le33,000. Barclays and Standard Chartered are open in Freetown but not yet in Bo. The only bank open in Bo is the Sierra Leone Commercial Bank. A former colleague of mine said, "the banks not being open does not affect me because I have no money to put there".

The exchange rate when we left was Le2,500 to £1 in Bo and Le2,700 in Freetown. There are a lot of Foreign Exchange Bureaux in Freetown and there the mobile exchange banks who I was told are agents of the Bureaux. The mobile bankers do not pay any tax!

Sierra Rutile and SIEROMCO still remain closed, and there have been only private 'muscle and shovel' alluvial diamond and gold mining, most of which is smuggled mainly to Guinea and Gambia, but also a far afield as Mali.

Government is about to make a new ruling that no Lebanese should get involved in mining without a Sierra Leonean partner. A Lebanese friend told me the value of the Leone will appreciate when the diamond mining gets into full swing.

Employment is going to be problem for a very long time. There has been no investment in the country for a long time because of the war and insecurity.

Freetown was never really on the tourist trail but the hotels had a good share of business. Now the hotels are dormant, one of them, Mummy Yoko, was damaged in one of the early battles between ECOMOG and the junta. The once busy Lumley Beach lies almost empty.

Creating employment and people holding down jobs are the only lasting forms of security for people because they will not be attracted into creating a civil disorder in which they will lose.

In the absence of gainful employment people have taken to trading, the streets are crowded with people selling sticks of cigarette, boxes of matches, candles etc. So there is a working spirit.

TOWARDS MY RETURN

Part of the reason for my visit was to sound out local opinion about the Sports and Games, and Library Programmes I have in mind for Bo. I was able to talk 3 cabinet ministers, the National Director of Sports, people at the Sports Council, games teachers, and an expatriate, Jack, who works for the Catholic Relief Services (CRS). I had favourable audiences with everyone. I have the backing of the Ministers I talked to and the National Director of Sports to have the Programmes registered in Freetown as an NGO with partial or total duty free concessions!

Jack has experiences from Angola about the contribution of sports and games towards rehabilitation. He manages a group youth football teams in Freetown. He is willing to give the support I need.

I have started making arrangements to acquire a piece of land to build the sports and games facilities in Bo. Jack was particularly intested in what I planned to do because it was up country. There has always been the feeling in Freetown that anything in the Provinces is 'out there' which is not really of concern to us. This war would not hit Freetown directly if when it started up in Kailahun District the government in Freetown took it seriously. Now organisations, structures and offices abound in Freetown about relief, rehabilitation, children and war, conflict resolution etc.etc. while the greatest needs are up country especially Eastern and Southern Provinces which paid host to the war longer than anywhere else.

I also looked at existing grounds for sports and games they are in bad shape and would require maintenance. Has anyone a petrol driven mower?

There is an acute shortage of equipment - balls, boots, shorts, vests, socks, hoses, shin pads, tennis balls, racquets, table tennis balls etc. Equipment for field sports, like shot puts, discus, javelin are non existent.

I have come back feeling good that my ideas make sense and have support.

ANY OTHER BUSINESS.

I was in half mind about making a beehive to set up before my return, but I was only at the thinking stage until a swarm nested near a relation's house. I bought a piece of board and got a carpenter to make me a hive. I hived the swam about 3 days before we left. From the estimates I made it will cost about £50 to set up a family with a hive, and that's a one off support. Contribution for hives should be clearly indicated, please.

I will find time to keep bees as a hobby and would be willing to teach people about beekeeping.

My mother and others in the village of Sendumei in Kenema District fled when rebels attacked the village in April/May 1994. I tried to locate her through contacts in army and the Red Cross.

The rebels took them to a village, Nyandehun about 5 miles from Sendumei where she died and was buried. News of what happened to her has given such relief. I plan to give her a proper funeral when I return home. Thanks to all those who kept an interest in her and kept asking me.