

Reports from Michael Moss January and April 1999

Report from Michael Moss dated January 1999

FREETOWN ATTACKED !

On Wednesday morning 6th January 1999 I woke around 6:30 to listen to the BBC World Service programme NETWORK AFRICA. and at the same time heard rumblings of gunshots in the distance.

Upon hearing the rebels had entered Freetown from the East I woke completely. Dr. Spencer, the SL Minister of Information came on the air and when questioned about the rebels entry into Freetown he stated that in the early hours of the morning rebels entered Freetown at Cabala Town using men, women and children as human shields so that the Nigerian-led ECOMOG forces would not attack them. Dr. Spencer also stated that all civilians should remain indoors as ECOMOG forces had the situation under control and anyone found on the street would be considered a rebel and shot.

This commenced a fortnight of uncertainty, not knowing what was really happening, whether ECOMOG Forces or rebels were having the upper hand. We had to rely on the two BBC World Service programmes, "FOCUS ON AFRICA" and "Network Africa" for any information. There was a local Commercial Radio Station which would interrupt the music being played to give bulletins either from the government or ECOMOG. As usual there were many conflicting reports as to what was happening, so none of us really knew the exact state of affairs.

Living on the Western side of Freetown we were in a safer situation than those on the Eastern side especially as it was known that heavy fighting was taking place in the Wellington and Kissy areas. Later on it was learnt that the rebels were gaining ground and, using the BBC "Focus on Africa" programme, the RUF Field Commander, call "Mosquito", managed to give instructions to the rebels to attack the main Wilberforce barracks, which as the crow flies is only a mile away from our Compound !

Fortunately, the first three days we had 24 hours electricity, although at night time we all observed a complete blackout. Then the rebels attacked King Tom where the power station is sited and soon all the lights went out for over a month.

Bombardments continued non stop day and night, and kept getting closer to us. We soon knew Wilberforce Barracks was being attacked, without success, as bullets were flying all around us and often we had to lie on the floor.

On Thursday night 7th January after a very heavy day of bombardment, indicating that serious fighting was taking place. between ECOMOG Forces and the rebels, we were shocked to hear on the radio the President Alhaji Dr. Ahmed Tejan Kabba stating that he had met the RUF rebel leader, Cpl. Foday Sankoh (sentenced to death after being found guilty at the Freetown High Court the previous October and now waiting for his appeal

to be heard) .The two had agreed to an immediate ceasefire and during the following seven days consultations would be held with ECOWAS countries and the Sierra Leone Government, after which, if the ceasefire was implemented, then Foday Sankoh could be released. There is no doubt that this announcement was a bombshell to us listeners. We all felt that the rebels had gained the upper hand and in return the Nigerian-led ECOMOG Forces had let their African Brothers and Sisters down in Sierra Leone.

All during the night into the following day the heavy bombardment continued, it was obvious that the cease fire offer was totally ignored. Unfortunately, the BBC Programme "FOCUS ON AFRICA" too often made contacts with the rebels and thus enabled them to put out propaganda statements. This made us very despondent and feared for the future.

During this period we were house bound, only ECOMOG vehicles, which was very rarely, used the road at the top of our compound. When there was no bombardment or gunshots a deadly silence prevailed which added to the eerie atmosphere hanging over us. Also, what items of food we had in the house was rapidly being consumed and fears were being expressed when it will be possible to go out and see if food items can be purchased.

After a week it seemed that ECOMOG got their act together and were now on the offensive against the rebels, and we were allowed to leave the confines of our compounds. Going into Tengbe Town we met hundreds walking along just to be out of their compounds, people greeting each other and by the little local market women were busy selling their wares. Two days later we were able to walk the 1 1/ 2 miles to our Kingharman Road compound so we could greet our colleagues and listen to their ordeals when the Compound was occupied by ex SL soldiers (combatants) who had deserted and joined the rebels.

Our colleagues reported the combatants occupied the compound, set up two mortar guns, raided the various residences of food, clothing and demanded money at gunpoint ! Although told it was Methodist Church Compound it made no difference to their demands. After three days of terrifying all those living on the compound, the ex-combatants left and as they crossed the Kingharman Road they walked into an ECOMOG ambush !

As the ECOMOG Forces managed to get the upper hand, they pushed the rebels out of the Brookfields area onto Kingtom where there was extensive destruction to the police barracks (reported that there was heavy casualties among the police and their families) and nearby properties. Miraculously, the nearby Power Station only suffered minor damage. After heavy fighting the rebels were eventually ousted out of the centre of Freetown. The extent of damage to properties was appalling - house after house along Padema were either burnt down or badly damaged, and the lower parts of Wellington, Bathurst and Liverpool Streets, private properties all suffered the same fate. Houses opposite Wesley House, home of MCSL, were completely demolished, so was the nearby big market and the Central Police Station. Around the corner from

Wesley House stands the City Hall, built less than 30 years ago, which was completely devastated and will have to be demolished and rebuilt. In the same area many business premises were totally destroyed. The bus station was untouched although the SIERRATEL building behind it was ransacked.

Along Sani Abaca Street (formerly Kissy Street) many shops were destroyed and into Kissy Street the old Holy Trinity Anglican Church was totally destroyed, and by the time the rebels were ousted out of Kissy Road almost half the houses and business premises had been destroyed.

To detail the mass destruction of dwellings and properties in the Mountain Cut area, Wellington, Calaba Town, the list would be almost endless, especially as at the present time it is not possible to travel up to Waterloo and its environs as the rebels are still active in that area.

It is estimated that almost 75% of the low cost houses have been totally destroyed and rough estimates have put the number of private dwellings destroyed at more than 2,000. This figure does not include business premises or Government property, although it is known that all Police Stations the rebels could lay their hands on were totally destroyed.

Because of the atrocities carried out by the rebels of mutilating people, mainly women and children by cutting off their fingers or hands, burning of property (sometimes preventing people from leaving so they were simply burnt to death) thousands from the east end risked their lives by fleeing up to the hills overlooking Freetown into the western part to either stay with relatives/ friends or in schools or anywhere they could settle down. The National Stadium was opened up to thousands of these unfortunate people and well over 40,000 found shelter....[Two partially illegible paragraphs]

All during this time all of us were very concerned about friends and work colleagues in the east end of the town, not knowing if they had managed to escape or otherwise. One family was my driver, Joseph, and when I was walking into Tengbe Town I came across him and his family of two sons and two sisters of his Wife - he really looked very haggard and decided for the safety of his family to make his way to my place after a very harrowing twelve days with rebels all around where he lived. It was a risk to flee. I was overjoyed to receive them and give them some peace. As the rice was getting low in the house I had to hurriedly purchase some more rice at the local market - before the rebel attack rice was selling @Le 200 cup. I had to pay Le 1,100 / cup, palmoil which used to sell @Le 400/pt. now cost over Le 1,000/ pt - how the local people on low incomes managed I dread to think. Finally for over a week I had 28 people staying with me, most from the east end and to feed them, and must admit I was pleased that I was in a position to do so.

MCSL's properties were not spared with the Wesley Manse, Walpole Street, badly burnt, the Zion Circuit Office and Manse in Circular Road totally destroyed, we have heard that both our Churches in Upper and Lower Allentown have been destroyed, also the Manse at Hasting. As

Waterloo is present a "no-go" area, we shall have to wait until the area is freed before we know if our Churches / Manses are intact.

This is a brief resume of the AFRC/ rebel attack on Freetown. but it will at least give you some idea of the extent of the damage done to homes, business properties and government buildings, besides the great suffering of the people. We shall continue to ask the same question "Why were these atrocities carried out and what purpose did they serve?"

Letter from Michael Moss to Ron and Liz Fennel dated 12th April 1999

[Description of their trip by boat from Conakry to Freetown. It was an overnight trip in choppy waters.]

....Since my arrival I have tried my utmost to phone you, but cannot purchase a phone card at SLET or any of the other Exchanges. (There are cards being sold but are faked and of course I have no desire to enrich those selling them at my expense and then finding they cannot be used.) Also I have been to SLET on at least four occasions during the past week when I have been in the Office only to find crowds of people and some had been there four hours trying to phone their relatives/ friends overseas....

We are praying for the forthcoming peace talks in Lome, but many people in high circles feel that Sankoh is no longer in charge. He has asked his rebels to open the roads to the Provinces and to release children they are holding. Well, the roads are still closed and only a handful of children have been handed over. I met a UNICEF lady last Friday and she told me that they have records of over 3,000 children abducted !....