

Global Vision

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Editor's note

Dear Global Vision Africa readers,

As GlobalVision goes to press we heard of the terrible news of the car crash in Zimbabwe of Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai and the loss of his wife Susan. On behalf of our readers we should like to offer our sincere condolences. The crash came just two days after Mr Tsvangirai delivered his maiden speech to parliament after being sworn in as prime minister in Zimbabwe's power-sharing government. He and his Susan, 50, who married in 1978, had six children. Senior MDC official Eddie Cross paid tribute to Mrs Tsvangirai, saying: "I think Susan's loss is going to be a huge blow for Morgan. They were a very close family and had a fantastic relationship. She was an amazing woman." On a more positive note this issue of GV Af-

rica profiles the efforts of politicians and entrepreneurs in the Democratic Republic of Congo to make meaningful change after decades of political and civil upheaval. We also report on the West African nation of Sierra Leone - popularised by the Hollywood movie Blood Diamond, to see what change has happened on the ground, and found the results of the visit quite positive. We also meet with two leading lights in the business world in Africa - Abdirashid Duale CEO of Dahabshiil and Tnell Diallo, Executive Director of Medshare International. Africa in 2009 is clearly not going to be dull and we hope to continue to report on the best of times as well as the tougher times.

Paul Trustfull
Editor-in-Chief



EDITOR-IN-CHIEF PAUL TRUSTFULL WITH INFLUENTIAL GOVERNOR OF THE DRC'S KATANGA PROVINCE, MOISE KATUMBI CHAPWE

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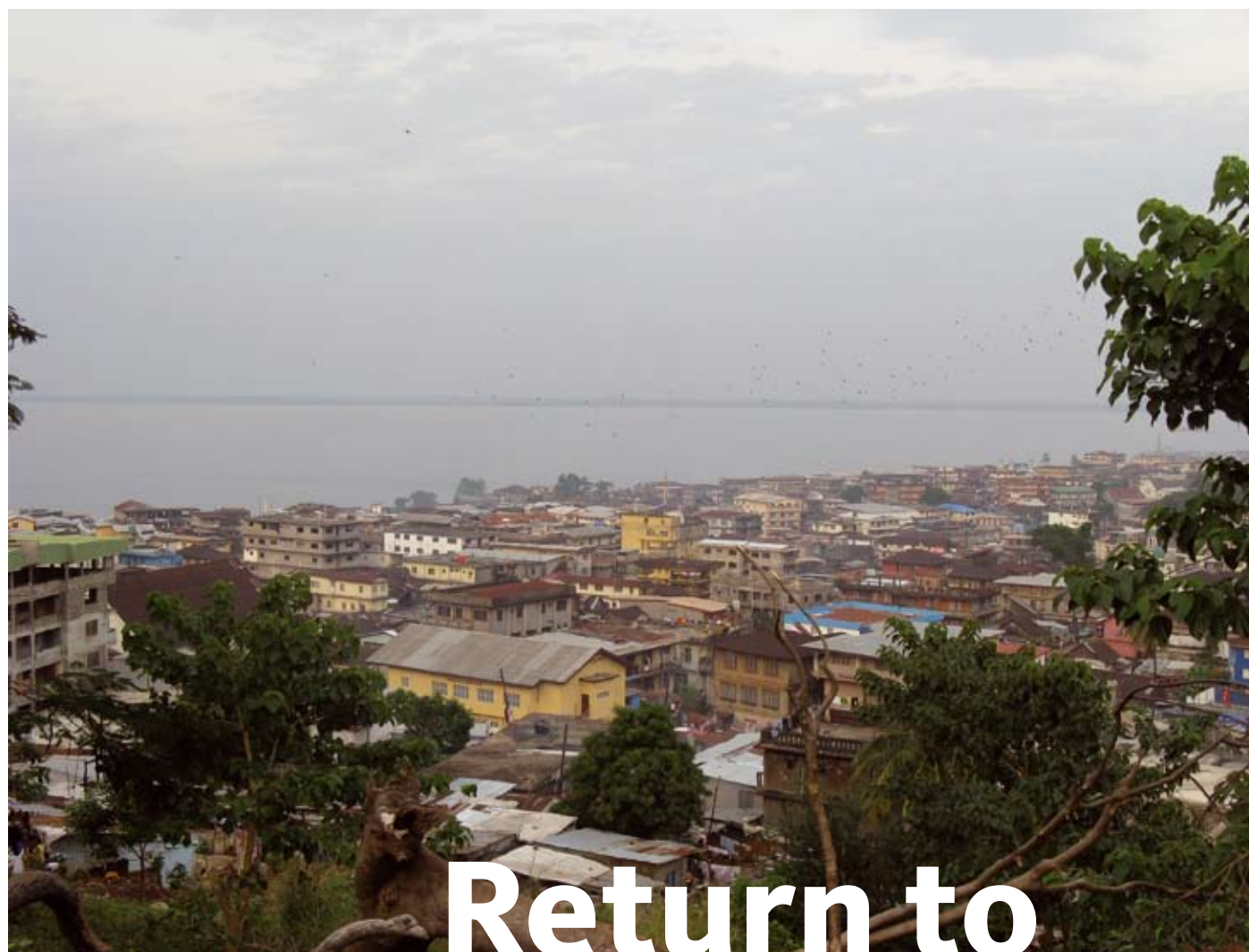
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CAPITAL OF FREETOWN

Return to

Sierra Leone

JAKE R. BRIGHT

As I sat at Casablanca Airport in Morocco, preparing to board a late night flight to Sierra Leone, West Africa, I had second thoughts: I was about to make a trip back to a country, where only several years ago was embroiled in a decade-long, horrific civil war, and I was alone.



CAPITAL OF FREETOWN

I had taken a vacation from my banking job in Manhattan to complete a freelance writing project. The focus was to return to Sierra Leone, retrace my steps, connect with old friends, and assess the country's postwar progress.

Fourteen years earlier, in my late teens, I had traveled through this country during the early stages of the war, on assignment with The Red Cross. Though the trip was a big influence on me, it left me with conflicting views on Africa and impressions of a fractured State. While Sierra Leone was one of the world's poorest countries by economic and health standards, it was clinging to its roots as a proud, hospitable, resource rich,

ex-British colony founded by freed slaves in the late 18th century, and this was marked by the tremendous warmth, generosity, and dynamism shown by the local population.

However, on the other hand, it was teetering on the edge of an abyss. It was in a freefall; enmeshed in an escalating civil war between a fragile military government, barely able to maintain authority outside the capital of Freetown, and an armed rebel group led by a reckless ex-army captain, Foday Sankoh. Sankoh, with the backing and support of neighboring Liberian warlord Charles Taylor, had begun employing units of kidnapped, drugged, and desensitized child soldiers

with automatic weapons to wage a nationwide campaign of terror for control of the country's diamond rich regions. As I left this small nation, I hoped it would regain its footing and quell the war, though realistically remaining uncertain about the country's future. Unfortunately, it tumbled into a chaos beyond anyone's imagination. The war escalated throughout the 1990s, with much of the population being displaced and Sankoh's forces twice overrunning, burning, looting, and terrorizing the country's capital. The rebels strayed from any coherent political agenda, widening their reign of terror by indiscriminately executing and hacking off the limbs of any civilians.

When the government tried to encourage voting during a general election through a slogan: “The future is in your hands,” the rebel response was punitive amputation. With the perseverance of the Sierra Leonean people and the assistance of a West African and British-led UN Peacekeeping force, the country was finally able to end the war and reinstate a democratically elected government in early 2002.

So, with all this in mind I boarded my night flight, having no idea what to expect upon arrival. Would the country resemble some scene out of a Mad Max movie with decimated infrastructure and general dystopia? Given the level of brutality perpetrated and suffered by the residents in the years after my departure, what kind of populace would I encounter?

After landing at Lungi Airport in Sierra Leone at around 11pm, I got a place to sleep for a few hours, before boarding the first ferry to Freetown, the country’s capital city.

After only one day, I realized Sierra Leone was overwhelmingly stable and began to construct a post-war picture of the country. Most people holding any impression of Sierra Leone, probably have one that is about 10 years old. The international consciousness raised about the war in recent years through movies like the Academy Award nominated *Blood Diamond* or the work of artists like Kanye West was based on things that happened in the 1990s, and quite frankly, came too late to do much good. Once I hit the ground and started speaking with citizens of all backgrounds, it became clear that today’s Sierra Leone is full of hope. Anything about the war is like a dreadful nightmare that the people would rather forget, though its effects still linger.

Freetown is popping with tremendous energy and commercial activity sprawling out of every nook and cranny. The country has a new democratically elected president, Ernest Bai Koroma, who has embraced an anti-corruption campaign and worked to restore electricity, re-establish control over natural resources, and attract foreign investment.



AUTHOR WITH FORMER CHILD COMBATANTS AND FORCED LABORERS AT RED CROSS CAR CENTER

Most of the buildings that were destroyed or damaged during the war have been repaired or rebuilt. The country also established its own truth and reconciliation commission. Rebel combatants have been disarmed and the military and police force are being turned professional with the assistance of a British-led advisory group. Another distinct sign of change is the lack of arms or military presence. This is different from my previous experience where there were armed checkpoints, curfews, soldiers with AK 47s and RPGs in plenty, and Nigerian Alpha Jets flying bombing runs overhead. What impressed me immediately was the prevalence of convenient mobile phone services. Before leaving the US, I learned that of the 182 countries my Blackberry would function in, Sierra Leone was not one of them. That was not so. I discovered that it is easier to obtain a mobile phone and wireless connection in Sierra Leone than the US. At the airport, on the ferry, and around every corner in Freetown, one can purchase a cheap cell phone and prepaid SIM card, gaining about one to two hours of local call time for around \$1 to \$2.

I asked a Red Cross volunteer about connecting my Blackberry and within minutes I was led to an outdoor vendor who, in addition to offering bananas and coconuts, was able to sell me a Celtel SIM card that provided a number, text messaging, and voicemail. There was no contract or credit check and if I needed more minutes, all I had to do was stop off at just about any roadside kiosk to “top up” my phone, as the locals say. Several international mobile phone providers are operating in the country, all competing heavily and all active at various levels in the community. I spent time with a local management associate from Zain, Kamal Abass. He explained that some multi-national providers were willing to risk temporary losses in Africa to stay ahead of competitors and establish an imprint on key parts of the continent. The reasoning is that countries like Sierra Leone will develop into profitable markets, and waiting until then to enter would be too late.

In addition to wireless phone access, internet cafes have sprung up in the country, despite the fact that most of it still has no electricity. In the capital, Sierra Leoneans are surfing the web in every neighborhood for



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just under \$1 an hour with PCs powered day and night by generators. Shops, restaurants, and beauty salons are being partitioned as web cafes and there are now reportedly nine internet service providers operating.

The country is also working steadily to recapture revenues from its assortment of mineral and agricultural resources, which it hopes to direct back as investment in infrastructure and human development. Disputed as a blessing or a curse, one of Sierra Leone’s most valuable and talked about assets is its rich deposits of diamonds. These diamonds have been documented as a source of contention, corruption, and smuggling as far back as British author Graham Greene’s writings on the country in the 1930s and 40s. Diamonds were the central cause and focus of the civil war, and while they yielded great windfalls in guns, dollars, and power to warlords and smugglers in the region, there were little to no government revenues recorded for them over a decade.

Speaking to Sierra Leoneans and hanging around some of the expat frequented locales, rumors and talk of smuggling have not subsided. So called “419ers,” a general West

African term from Nigeria for shady figures; scam artists and smugglers can be seen cruising around the popular Lumley Beach area in \$60,000 to \$100,000 luxury vehicles, this in a country where the annual per capita income averages about \$2 to \$3 a day. I met with a spokesperson for the Ministry of Mineral Resources, Mr Sonnoh, who outlined in detail the postwar system the government had put in place to license individual and corporate mining activities, capture revenues on diamond exports, thwart smuggling, and invest state diamond profits back into communities. He explained the difficulty of earning the true value of the diamonds when the country does not have the capability of performing large scale mining itself or selling the diamonds directly on world markets.

Any major operation requires the equipment and expertise of outside companies. Diamonds that are found are taken out by exporters so Sierra Leone is only able to earn taxes and fees on stones that are officially exported and sold by others for market value. When pressed on the issue of diamond smuggling and the talk I had heard that it is still common, Mr Sonnoh

mentioned specific cases of individuals caught and prosecuted and exclaimed: “My friend, you have to understand, the natural resources of this country were a complete free for all for those with the most guns for nearly a decade. We are steadily making progress.”

The government is in fact recording significant fees from diamond exports of an estimated \$175 million in 2006 compared to barely \$1 million in 1999, and a percentage of these earnings is being invested back into communities through the country’s Diamond Community Development Fund.

Increasing revenue through tourism is also high on the government’s agenda. While the country has many attractions, including beaches considered among the most beautiful in West Africa, the war-time image remains a major impediment. Still, the President and other ministers are touting tourism publicly on regular basis and the country recently signed an agreement with The World Bank to enact a five-year plan to develop Sierra Leone’s tourism assets. President Koroma has also announced the country is “open for business,” underscoring his commitment to create an appealing environment for foreign direct investment.

Zain Sierra Leone (formerly Celtel) received \$25 million of investment financing in 2007, Heineken recently increased its ownership in The Sierra Leone Brewery, and the government established a new investment and export promotion agency in 2008.

While there are a lot of positive things to report on modern Sierra Leone, it is also important to mention the hard realities faced by the country and its people on a day to day basis. This was brought home to me during my stay, when local newspaper headlines reported that Sierra Leone had ranked last on the latest UN Human Development Index, a general measure of a country’s health, education, and economic conditions. In other words, its unofficial title as “one of the world’s poorest countries” was downgraded to “the world’s poorest country.” Sierra Leone faces tremendous challenges, including meeting basic human needs, disease, inadequate infrastructure, and a lack of educational and employment



INTERNET CAFÉ IN FREETOWN



MOBILE PHONE STAND ON STREET

opportunities. There are few jobs, few prospects to attend any level of school without a sponsor, and some of the highest infant

mortality and lowest life expectancy rates in the world. Nearly everyone in the country is an

entrepreneur at one level or another, either trying to make a living or just finding innovative ways to make it through each day. In the capital and throughout the nation, people are up at dawn each day tending to their trades, managing their small kiosks and roadside stands, and hustling their goods through the streets and markets.

Little girls and boys serve as their own mobile businesses, sales clerks and cash registers with bowls of bananas, oranges, bread, and other goods stacked on their heads. They chant slogans in the native English based pidgin, Krio. Col wata de (cold water for sale), fine cola de (fine cola nuts for sale), and bred de (bread for sale) is heard repeatedly on each street and path. Young people in Sierra Leone plead for the opportunity to go to school at any level, which is not compulsory and few can afford to. One young man was flabbergasted when I explained that primary education in the US is free and some still choose to drop out.

In conversations with local citizens, one senses continued optimism within the country, but this is tempered by the perceived slow pace of progress since the war ended and the difficulties faced daily by average citizens. I tapped into some of this frustration during a conversation with a group of young men at a popular outdoor cafe in the Congo Cross section of Freetown. There were complaints that five years after the war, and with a lot of donor support, the country still did not have electricity, a decent road system, easy access to clean water, and had been forced to expensively import its national staple, rice.

A young computer technician, Jordan, lamented that even though he has a good job he feels he needs to work outside the country for several years to earn a decent wage or advance his education. And the unanimous fear of the group was that for all the people had gone through, Sierra Leone's leaders would forget their peacetime promises and slip back into the systematic corruption that was rampant before the war. The group agreed that the war aside, corruption and lack of education were the prevailing reasons a country with such



AUTHOR IN SIERRA LEONE IN THE 1990S

rich resources would continually end up at the bottom of UN's development ranking. As I listened to their concerns, Emmerson, one of a new generation of local musicians, who has become an outspoken critics of corrupt politicians, filled the café from a small radio behind the bar. In his hit song Two Foot Arita or Two Footed Rats, translated from Krio, he compares certain politicians to thieving rats and warns if they don't shape up, "We Go Wap Oh" or "We will deal with you."

During the last segment of my stay, I visited a child advocacy and rehabilitation (CAR) center, which proved to be one of the more challenging, yet moving aspects of my trip. The CAR program was created by The Sierra Leonean Red Cross to assist former child combatants, forced laborers and sex slaves, most of who were involved in the war. I met with the architects of the program and spent a day at a center outside the town of Waterloo visiting with its participants. Most of them were abducted from the ages of seven to 16, drugged, given guns and forced to witness and participate in horrific acts. After the war ended, many of these children either had no parents or were banished from their communities because of the stigma of having been with the rebels. The local Red Cross decided it had to act and designed CAR to provide a

comprehensive regimen of counseling, therapy, mentoring, reintegration, and training in job-related skills. Meeting some of the children and hearing specific examples of what they had been through, it was hard to remain composed. The local Red Cross CAR counselor Mariama Fullah told me of a panel they put together early after the program's launch, where CAR youth told their individual experiences to a group of European aid workers: Not a single one walked away with dry eyes.

I observed CAR participants, most of them now in their teens or early 20s, learning carpentry, tailoring and making garments and making furniture that is sold at local markets. A number of the program's original participants have moved on to form their own construction businesses, which are involved with various aspects of rebuilding the country. The CAR Centers, the local Red Cross volunteers who created them, and the youth participating represent the real determination of Sierra Leoneans and an ironic twist of humanity. These children who had their childhoods stolen from them and who were once forcibly employed in destroying the country are now actively participating in the local economy and assisting in rebuilding the nation. I left the center a copy of an award winning

book, Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Child Soldier, by a former Sierra Leonean child-soldier turned US adoptee Ishmael Beah, to everyone's interest and surprise that an ex-child combatant from their country had gone so far in the US.

While boarding the evening ferry to make the journey back to Lungi Airport, I started to collect parting thoughts on modern Sierra Leone. I was relieved to have returned to a nation at peace with a stable government committed to advancing the positive development of the country. My overwhelming sentiment, however, was with common Sierra Leonean people for their perseverance, energy, and continuing hope.

After spending days walking the paths and streets of the country and feeling the sheer energy of the general population, most of whom had endured 10 years of war, had never been to school, and could not read or write, I began thinking that perhaps one of Sierra Leone's most valuable yet grossly overlooked resources was not gold, diamonds or materials, but its people. I could not help but wonder what many Sierra Leoneans would be capable of if just given the tools and different circumstances. This could be said for many parts of Africa. I began to think further that any situation where individuals lack an infrastructure or basic human needs, there is an unknown loss of human potential on a local and global level.

Sierra Leone has overcome tremendous difficulties and finds itself in a unique position of peace, stable government and the support of outside partners. I believe that its citizens, if only given the right national playing field, would prosper at all levels. It is now up to their leaders to make good on their promises, partner with the right actors in the donor community and private sector, and create an environment where Sierra Leone's people have a chance to live up to their potential.