

## **Demobilizing the war Machines: Making Peace Last**

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Taking the guns from the children

Mr. Chairman, distinguished fellow panelists, distinguished guests, I greet you all in the name of peace.

Mr. Chairman, please allow me to start with the customary by thanking the organizers of this gathering for inviting me to give this presentation on a burning issue that has made headline news in very many recent conflicts around the globe, most especially in Africa—youth and conflict. Before the violence in Mozambique, Liberia and Sierra Leone came along, the subject of youth and conflict prevention was largely on the margin of political discourse. In situations in which it got discussed at all, it was mostly as an addendum to other issues. When therefore machete-wielding teenagers set out to work in Rwanda and Sierra Leone, to name two outstanding examples, it became clear that the subject could no longer be ignored. A flurry of literature has appeared on the subject in a bid to explain why young people get sucked into organized violence. Experts of all shades and opinion have also written dense tracts in order to explain how these same youths can at the same time become agents of positive change, especially in a post-conflict situation. But since this is a relatively new field, most of the rules are being made as we go along.

I will be brief and to the point for Shakespeare says brevity is the soul of wit. In line with this I will dwell largely on the Sierra Leone scenario not only because this is the conflict

that I know best but also because this is the conflict that even the United Nations and indeed the international community know better. The present prevailing situation in the country offers a golden opportunity on how all the players involved in sorting out the mess can bring their experiences to bear on the demobilizing of the war machines and making peace last. This paper offers a youth perspective to the discussion.

### End of War

Sierra Leone's civil war formally ended in January 2002. The end of this carnage is good news for the country's children. From the genesis of the crisis to its very end, they were, quite literally, always present on the frontlines. An estimated 5,400 are reported to have carried arms at any one time during the conflict. This is no doubt a conservative estimate. The exact number of those who pulled the trigger or raised the machete will never be known. What is known however is that the impact of their activities not only on other children but also on themselves and the wider society will have far reaching ramifications. Every Sierra Leonean child who witnessed the crisis is traumatized. At the height of the crisis, child soldiering became to Sierra Leone as snow is to December.

The mental and physical rehabilitation of this category of the country's population is crucial for both the present and future stability. This was the message conveyed by Alhaji Baba Sawaneh, the 14-year former child soldier from Sierra Leone, who became the first such child to address the UN Security Council. The end of hostilities is a huge step towards the successful rehabilitation and reintegration of former child soldiers. The two

are intrinsically tied together as many of the former combatants from all the factions are young men (and women) barely out of their teens.

But the comfortable notion that the end of the armed phase of the war means the end of the conflict has taken a beating in recent scholarship. 800,000 people were killed in Rwanda, not before, but AFTER, the Arusha Peace Accord. This was approximately fifty times more deaths than had occurred during the 1990-1993 phase of the civil war. In Sierra Leone in January 1999, an estimated 6,000 people lost their lives and thousands of dollars worth of property were destroyed when rebels zigzagged their way into the capital Freetown. The attack took place two years after the warring parties had agreed to give peace a chance at a well-publicized Accord signing ceremony in Lome, Togo. These two glaring examples bore the signature of young people. Judging from the past, one will be on safe ground to state that in Sierra Leone it is not yet over until its all over.

### Youths and the war

Demographically youths constitute the majority in Sierra Leone. Over 60 percent of the population is below 25 years. More than half of its 4.5 million inhabitants is below 15 years, thereby making it one of Africa's, and indeed one of the world's youngest. According to the UNDP Human Development Index Report, it is also the world's poorest. It does not require one to be an expert to figure out that there is a direct link between these age and percentage figures and the war—and now the peace process. In countries that have strong democratic foundations, the majority rules, but in Sierra Leone the majority is not even qualified to vote, let alone rule. The culture of 'grey-haired'

decision making has become so ingrained that urgent issues affecting the welfare of the country's most active and most restless segment of the population has always been treated as a footnote to topics such as Art and Craft development and the teaching of Greek and Roman culture in the University.

The subject of youth and conflict is nothing new in Sierra Leone. From the colonial era to the present day the country's future leaders have never hesitated to use anything within their reach in order to address what they often perceived as imbalance and injustice. If the British still have their colonial records intact, they too can testify to this assertion. These earlier editions of youth violence were carried out by young men in their late teens and early 30's.

Then came the 1991 crisis which ushered in the concept of child soldiers into the country. The war introduced 8-year olds capable of putting the Kalashnikov to deadly use. Because of their tender age, many of such children found it difficult to tell the difference between work and play. They saw the war as a game and the AK 47 as a toy, especially as this toy was capable of working wonders.

But what type of children/youth am I talking about here? A closer look at the situation will reveal that the vast majority of those who took part in the 'cock and fire' exercises or raised the machete can barely explain why they fought; they neither belong to the middle class nor to the educated few. Many had a marginalized existence prior to recruitment as combatants. This is the group that as a matter of urgency has to be actively engaged through positive action. They always feel they have no stake in the status quo. This is the

bad news. There is the good news however, which is that not all youths in the country were trigger-happy. This is crucial because when people mention the Sierra Leone civil war one of the first things that come to mind is the active participation of the youths in the conflict. There is some iota of truth in this view, because at the height of the crisis child soldiering was to Sierra Leone as snow is to December. The unquestionable truth however is that only an infinitesimal number ever carried a weapon. The vast majority resisted enlistment into any of the factions. Thousands fled the country rather than get sucked into the crisis. It is this majority that now holds the key the sustenance of the peace.

#### The war and the international community

In demobilizing the Sierra Leone war machine and giving peace a chance, one can say that post-conflict Sierra Leone is off to a good start. The foundation was laid at the 1999 Lome Peace Accord.

The 1999 Peace Treaty signed between the government and the RUF made Sierra Leone unique with regards to the treatment of children in post-conflict situations. It became the first time ever in which children were written into a Peace agreement, written into a demobilization process and also written into the mandate of peacekeeping. This was unlike the cases of Mozambique, El Salvador and Angola, in which this category of the fighting force were excluded from support programs because the military denied their existence. This glaring omission created a lot of hitches for the peace processes in these countries. With Sierra Leone, the international community appears to have learnt from

those earlier mistakes. Peacekeepers were explicitly mandated to look after the welfare of the children.

Well over 4,000 children have been separated from their guns in Sierra Leone. How do we stop such children from falling into the wrong hands once again? How do we balance the needs of such children with that of the needs of the wider society so as not to cause a backlash?

Education is key to this process. Donors often tend to focus more on the immediate problems of disarmament, food and basic health and not on the long-term commitments that goes with education. School attendance lies at about 30%. Immediate challenges should be tackled with an eye on the long-term goals. The availability of functional education provides the children and their communities with an alternative to the economy of war.

The Community Education Investment Program (CEIP) for ex-child combatants, returnees and abductees, initiated by UNICEF has been successful in enrolling more than 1,000 children into 106 participating schools across the country. For each CEIP child enrolled in a school, the school can choose one of three kits per year, the options being a kit of school supplies, a kit of teaching aid, and a kit of recreation equipment. The value of each kit is approximately \$75. This to me is a fine example of how the basic educational needs of these children can be met without causing uproar in the community.

The vast majority of the young people that I have worked with have expressed their desire to either go back to school or to learn some skills. The educational system should be overhauled to make it more relevant to the needs of the society. The present system turns out more dropouts than it does refined young men and women. The infamous Sam 'Mosquito' Bockarie was a school-drop-out-turned-disco-dancer-turned-commando. His previous disco-dancing work experience firmly convinced him that he could shoot and dance his way to power.

The participation of the wider society to the entire process is crucial. The general attitude towards these children is negative. People fear and at the same time loathe such children. They resent what they see as a preferential treatment given to them. In some cases, the people are right. Some NGO's accord priority to the rehabilitation of these children and in the process pay scant attention to how the wider society perceives such assistance. In March 2000, a mutual suspicion between ex-child combatants in one of the rehabilitation centres and members of the Community in which they were hosted turned violent. At least three people were treated for injuries at the central hospital.

I worked on several projects for former child combatants. My experience is that such rehabilitation projects can only have the desired effects if they are balanced with the needs and expectations of the society. Regular contacts and dialogue between the stakeholders should therefore be an important component of such rehabilitation program. I utilized music and dance as a creative mechanism to bring the two together.

The strengthening of the government structures is equally vital. A weak government cannot maintain or consolidate the peace, and therefore cannot secure the welfare of its citizens, including that of the children. The economy is largely donor driven. The diamondiferous Kono district still retains its character as the WILD EAST. Government control in these areas is strong more on paper than in practice. Incursions in the border areas from neighboring Liberia have already occurred. Britain in particular and UNAMSIL have done a great job with regards to the provision of security. Official sale of diamonds has increased considerably of late. But it will take a while before the long-term tangible results of this can be realized. All on its own the cash strapped government can neither bark nor bite. If most of the officials are also corrupt, then the situation is made even worse.

Peacekeepers have a vital role to play in stabilizing post-conflict Sierra Leone. Their continued presence is a moral guarantee that the international community still cares about the situation. It is also a deterrent for the ‘spoilers’ who are hanging out in Liberia waiting for an ideal opportunity to strike. No one in Sierra Leone expects the UN to stay forever. People know it’s only a matter of time before the blue berets bid farewell. They are however expecting that any such withdrawal should be done so as not to jeopardize the present gains.

Post-conflict justice is crucial. People are watching to see if the perpetrators will be brought to the book. The rebel leader Foday Sankoh has already developed dreadlocks in

detention. Sierra Leoneans want to know what his new-look hairstyle will be in the not too distant future.

The youths in Sierra Leone need jobs. University and High School graduates roam the streets of Freetown looking for jobs. The few vacancies that they can find require job experience. But where can the experience come from when their previous job search turned up blank. Some NGO's parachute all their personnel into the country. The only vacancies that such NGO's have are 1 cleaner, 1 gate man and two drivers.

Last but not the least; post conflict societies require strong commitment and sincerity from all those with the means to do so. Take for example the issue of the availability of arms. Even if every single weapon used in a conflict has been beaten into ploughshares, this same country can easily slide back to war if the weapons can be easily replaced. It is easier to take up a gun than to put it down. In May 2000 an article appeared in the British press which caused embarrassment for the British government. The picture showed a 14-year old boy in Sierra Leone as a member of the Sierra Leone government army. He was dressed in a British-supplied uniform and carried a British-supplied gun. That Abu carried a British supplied gun show the global connections of his being armed to fight. His gun came to him from a government that has ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child to the government of Sierra Leone which has similarly ratified the convention.

Perhaps the main lesson that one can draw from this incident is that Africa needs less and weapons mainly because there is no guarantee that the arms will always end up in the right hands. The government soldier who in the morning has pledged to defend the country and its constitution will in the afternoon turn against the same government and its

people it has pledged to protect. The guns he will use will most likely have been supplied through official channels.