

SIERRA LEONE DIARY 2000

REPORT ON THE SHORT VISIT OF MIKE THOMAS TO SIERRA LEONE IN APRIL 2000

Sunday 30th April

I set out for Heathrow Airport bound for Sierra Leone where I was to monitor a project of the Future in Our Hands Education and Development Fund funded by the Big Lottery Fund.

With the news that about 500 UN troops being taken hostage fresh in my mind I was feeling a little apprehensive.

I arrived at Heathrow to learn that the Ghana Airways flight to Accra the previous day had been cancelled and it appeared that, despite my prior booking, the flight I was due to take was full because of this problem. At the last moment I was told that there were in fact 6 single places available and I was lucky enough to be able to get one of these as I only had hand luggage.

The plane sped down the runway, but instead of taking off, it decelerated and returned to the terminal. This time there was a fault in the air speed indicator.

Passengers were accommodated at a local hotel where we arrived at about 2.00 a.m. Monday morning. I returned home and started to make alternative plans.

[This apparent setback later proved to be fortuitous]

Friday 5th May

After a relatively trouble-free journey from Gatwick, this time using Monarch Airways as far as Banjul in the Gambia and then Paramount Airways to Freetown, I arrived at Lungi Airport in Freetown to be greeted by the usual hassle at airports where anyone with a white face is descended upon by several men wanting to 'help you'!

I boarded the helicopter and arrived at the Mammy Yoko Heliport near the centre of Freetown where I was met by my courageous friend, Sierra Leonean Edward Kargbo, the co-ordinator of the project since it started. His life has been threatened twice since the start of the project 4 years ago. Five members of his Future in Our Hands group were killed whilst carrying out a survey and humanitarian work when people were driven into the bush by rebel attacks in the project area 90 miles north of Freetown.

He collected me from the heliport and took me to the flat of his sister, Sally, at the top of a four-storey building in Kissy Road near the centre of the city where I was due to spend the next few days. We arrived at 8.30 p.m.

The atmosphere in Freetown seemed strangely normal but I was struck by the small number of taxis compared with my last visit in 1993. A large number of people were walking in all directions.

Every now and then we would pass burnt-out cars and buildings - the aftermath of the terrible rebel onslaught on Freetown in January when the rebels drove thousands of civilians in front of them as a human shield to face the Nigerian soldiers guarding the city.

Edward and I talked until about 11.00 p.m. and he told me that he would be spending most of the next day consulting his staff and re-scheduling my programme.

As Edward talked about all that had been achieved despite his past injuries during an ambush on the convoy with which he was travelling, three attacks on the project areas and the destruction of materials, I felt once again privileged to know this man and count him as a close friend.

I had little sleep that night because of the oppressive heat inside the bedroom.

Saturday 6th May

I awoke at 7.00 a.m. and after breakfast accompanied Edward to his office in Brass Street just half a mile away. From there I was able to ring my wife Glenys and tell her I had arrived safely. This was the first opportunity I had found to do so. The 'office' was a rented garage with about 100 bags of grain seed taking up most of the space (at least this had been kept safe from the rebel attacks). In a corner of the room was a telephone and fax machine. I wondered how this frugal accommodation compared with that of other agencies working in Sierra Leone. Other aspects of Edward's management made me think that the Big Lottery Fund was getting exceptional value for its grant, especially with regard to the good will and hope that it had engendered in several thousand people traumatised by the conflict.

Edward left to talk with his staff and people from the displaced camps we were to visit the next day.

I had brought several games with me as presents and I spent most of the afternoon playing these with Sally's three children.

I returned to the office with Edward in the evening and there we were met by six women from the Clay Factory displaced camp where Edward's staff had been helping the women to establish income-generating

activities like tailoring, typing, gara dyeing and soap making. They were very pleased to see me and the appreciation of the help they had been receiving was a joy. One of his staff, Abu, returned from the project area at Yonibana and reported that the situation was quiet and stable. Edward thought that we would visit the area on Wednesday where we would see the agricultural work and other income-generating activities and the savings and credit scheme. A large meeting addressed by many dignitaries and attended by about two thousand people was also to be planned before moving on to the second project area at Lunsar where toilets and wells were being constructed.

In the evening he left to see his family who were living about ten miles away after first placing a mattress and my mosquito net on the outside veranda where a pleasant cool breeze would help me to get a good night's sleep, except that...!

Sunday 7th May

At about 2.00 a.m. Sally urged me to come inside quickly and told me that the rebels were reported only 20 miles away and headed towards Freetown. For about 5 mins I felt overwhelmed by a feeling of panic - the thought that within the next hour or two we could be threatened by rebels at the point of a gun. How would they react upon seeing me? Would I be taken hostage. However, after that short reaction I felt strangely calm - concerned rather than fearful. Abu had stayed the night. Sally urged that we must all stay together and not move from the house. We remained calm but generally silent as we waited in expectation of an onslaught upon the city. Thankfully the children slept, oblivious to what was happening. They had been through all this once before and I reflected upon the animated recounting of the horror of the rebels last visit by Sally's seven year old son, Mohammed, the previous night. He described how he had cowered in fear as one of the rebels had demanded money from him and how he had dodged through the streets trying to avoid other rebels [What men are these to threaten a small boy?].

The night passed and day broke with the sound of bells from the church on the other side of the road. It was nearly

8.00 a.m. and I resolved to attend the early service, but as I walked out of the building Edward (himself a Muslim with two wives and nine children) arrived and said that he felt the situation in the country was unstable. 'I should leave for Conakry in Guinea at once'. He was generous in the reason he gave for urging me to leave - 'If you stay I will worry about you as well as my family and anyway you can do more good for us if you leave'. I felt that deep down he wanted me to stay and hoped that the situation would stabilise within a few days so that I could return. I regret that I was not so confident, but I had very mixed feelings about going.

As we drove to the heliport at Mammy Yoko I felt that the least I could do was to give Edward most of my belongings including the camera I had borrowed from my wife, Glenys. I looked across at Edward and saw a tear flowing down his cheek - this echoed my own inner feelings.

There were many people starting to arrive but I was one of the first to order my ticket and was entered on a list. Most people were content to take the helicopter scheduled for Lungi and then book their plane flights onwards when they got there. Helicopters arrived and went as we waited. As some Lebanese (who dominate most of the country's economy) began to arrive, some people were concerned that they would bribe officials and jump the queue. I do not know whether this happened or not.

I was reminded of the film 'The Killing Fields' when it showed the Americans hurriedly leaving Phnom Penh as the Khmer Roug attacked the city.

A man dressed in a long green jacket and red trousers and wearing a bobble hat and dark glasses was talking to people in a comic fashion at the top of his voice and this added to the surreal nature of the situation. I guessed he was a local comedian, but he was talking in Krio which I had difficulty understanding. I don't know his motive for appearing on this most unlikely stage but his presence certainly relieved the tension.

As we left, Edward assured me that he would ring my wife - and I knew that he would.

We waited for what seemed like two hours with people pushing and shoving at the office kiosk with Edward hovering ready to collect my ticket. I was beginning to get the feeling that I might be staying after all! However the ticket finally arrived and we relaxed and took photographs of each other, Johnny Paul Koroma, himself once in alliance with the rebels but now one of the leaders in the government, was periodically heard giving assurances over the radio that 'the armed forces were ready to protect the nation at all costs even if the UN troops were to leave. Everyone should remain calm'.

After the helicopter arrived at Freetown's at Lungi Airport, officials started impressing a sense of urgency. However, it was over an hour before the Russian Paramount plane was ready to take off for Conakry. For some reason not explained by the pilot, the air conditioning inside was not working and the heat inside was oppressive. Several people complained, but I was unconcerned - this was hardly a trip to some tourist location!

Of course I arrived at Conakry in Guinea without a visa and the help desk was not open as this was a Sunday. Nor could I change my travellers cheques and I did not have enough money to buy my ticket for the onward flight to Banjul in the Gambia. I was immediately 'adopted' by a taxi driver and although I thought this was likely to cost me over the odds, I was glad of having a translator in a country where few people spoke English (Guinea had previously been a colony of France). We drove around looking for black market dealers who could change the few sterling notes I had on me (The next day I discovered the exchange rate and realised that I had been cheated out of about ten pounds). The first hotel he took me to was too expensive and the second had rooms which were too dirty. But third time was lucky and we found a good cheap hotel (£17.50 per night).

We returned to the airport and I rang Glenys. Edward had phoned her and she was relieved that I had left Sierra Leone.

Monday 8th May

I travelled into Conakry about seven miles away with the owner of the hotel. He took me to the British Consulate where I was advised about where to buy my ticket and change my travellers cheques.

After changing my travellers cheques and buying my ticket to Banjul (for the coming Thursday) I still did not know whether I would be able to change my booking for the flight on to Gatwick or whether I would be charged anything for this.

I was advised to try and get accommodation at the Catholic Mission, but when I arrived I was told that it was fully booked because of an important religious conference taking place that week and because of the number of people leaving Sierra Leone. Nevertheless I was told that I should wait and see the Secretary who had gone to the airport to meet missionaries coming from Freetown.

I sat beneath the cool shade of a grove of mango trees where I waited for about two hours.

As I sat there thinking that I had not eaten since breakfast, a mango fell and split on the ground next to me. I ate it with relish. The secretary then returned and confirmed that there was no room and that she expected more people from Freetown the next day and did not know how she would accommodate them. However, she asked the Mission driver to take me to find accommodation.

We soon found a very pleasant basic hotel (£17.50 per night) with an internal bar run by a very helpful young man with whom I was to become very friendly.

The climate of Conakry was very hot and humid (even more so than Freetown) and to find a room with air conditioning, a bath and a toilet was an unexpected and welcome surprise.

As I lay down I was struck by the realisation that I might have encountered a rebel attack in the project area of Yonibana if I had left Swindon on the 30th April as I had originally intended. Three journalists had been killed in this area at the time I should have been there according to my original schedule.

I rang Edward who told me that many people had marched to Foday Sankoh's residence in Freetown. Several were killed by Sankoh's soldiers during the protest. He sounded very worried about the situation. I slept very well that night for the first time since I left the UK.

Tuesday 9th May

As I sat eating breakfast the CNN News was showing the 250 British paratroopers arriving in Freetown to protect Europeans and, more worryingly, confrontations between UN soldiers and unarmed rebels. I thought about the possible consequences if the UN troops fired upon them.

I later rang Edward and this time he sounded more positive. He said that he had phoned Glenys again and sent the fax message, as I had requested, wishing my daughter a happy birthday. She will be 29 on Thursday. He asked if I would return to Sierra Leone, but I told him that I did not now have enough money to do so. I said that it was better for me to return to the UK and come again when we knew that the situation in the project areas was secure.

I went into town and bought a pineapple and a loaf of bread and then did some washing. I spent part of the day walking around town and then had a shower. My routine for the rest of the week was very much the same.

In the afternoon I watched a round table discussion about the Sierra Leone crisis. The Sierra Leone ambassador to the UN pointed out that their government had not been happy with the agreement they had been forced into by Britain, the UN and the USA. He also reminded us that Sierra Leoneans had fought for the Allies in two world wars and that now it was time for Europe to help them.

The commander of the British force said that their mandate was not to become involved in the conflict unless they were attacked. They were there to secure Lungi Airport and the safety of Europeans. I hoped that they had a hidden mandate to do more than that. He said that their role would release more UN soldiers to move inland.

The UN representative remarked that the UN soldiers had been sent in on the basis of good will by both parties in the conflict (I thought that this statement was grossly naive and irresponsible). He also said that the UN force had not yet been brought up to full strength. He admitted that some of the UN force had not matched up to expectations when confronted by the rebels. He said that there was a possibility that Nigerian troops could return, but he had insisted that the UN should pay for their involvement.

Sorious Samora, whose courageous filming had brought international attention to the brutal rebel attack on Freetown, also pointed out that Sierra Leoneans had fought in two world wars. He also criticised the UN and said that they had sent soldiers who were clearly not properly trained for the job.

The US representative said that under no circumstances would the US send troops, but that they would help with logistical support.

Wednesday 10th May

I faxed Glen with some questions to ask about my flight back. I told her that money was tight and that she might have to pick me up at Gatwick.

The CNN News was bad. Rebels had attacked Waterloo just a few miles from Freetown and a town in the east. Several UN armoured vehicles were reported captured by the rebels.

I rang Glenys and she told me that Edward was considering leaving the country.

Thursday 11th May

I awoke at 6.00 a.m. and left for Conakry Airport at 7.00 a.m. It rained for the first time since I had arrived in Africa.

I met a French journalist at the airport who was headed for Freetown. I gave him Edward's address.

The Ghana Airways plane took off at about 10.30 a.m. and arrived in Banjul at 11.00 a.m.

I took a taxi to the Gambia Experience at the Kairaba Hotel and booked my ticket back to Gatwick. I would have to pay £75 for this. I could not afford to stay at this hotel but found a small motel in a very pleasant location at Serakunda about 9 miles away. They charged £15 per night and this included breakfast.

The CNN reported more hopeful news from Sierra Leone. Government soldiers and UN and British troops had driven the rebels out of Waterloo and were moving out of Freetown to confront the rebels in other areas. At the same time thousands of people were flooding into Freetown to escape the rebels.

I met and walked with a friendly young man who took me to his Grandfather's house. He was a 'Maribu' - with a knowledge of Ju Ju magic. The young man had met my friend Matthew Tostevin in Serakunda. Matthew had covered the war for the BBC in 1990/91 travelling with troops on the front line along the border between Sierra Leone and Liberia. He witnessed many atrocities committed by soldiers on both sides. Some children were playing football in the compound and I joined in.

Friday 12th May

I got up at 8.00 a.m. and strolled around Serakunda. My friend from yesterday arrived to see me at 10.30 and I left for the airport at 11.00 a.m. I had to wait until 2.00 p.m. before I knew I could get my ticket. A senior official at the airport was very helpful.

I arrived at Gatwick at 11.00 p.m. and got back to Swindon at 2.30 a.m. Saturday morning.

SIERRA LEONE DIARY 2002

REPORT ON THE VISIT OF MIKE THOMAS TO SIERRA LEONE BETWEEN THE 16/11/2002 AND 6/12/2002

Introduction

I have made three previous visits to Sierra Leone and each of these visits, to which I will refer later in this report, has some relevance to the latest visit. Previous visits were in 1988, 1993 and 2000. I have shown previous events in italics.

This 2002 visit was a period during which I would undergo some reassessments of previous strongly held views and attitudes. This was also a period of personal encouragement which contrasted with the climate of cynicism in the UK about the views and values I believed to be essential for a better world for everyone.

The visit was to bring about many emotional feelings, caused not just by the reunion with the friends I had made on previous visits. I also had to come to terms with the need for the following actions in achieving an end to ten years of bloody, cruel and pointless conflict:

- the killing of children by British soldiers
- the incorporation into society of rebel soldiers (people for whom I had developed a deep loathing) who had committed the most terrible of atrocities against civilian populations.

The following events, which happened on previous visits, are relevant to this visit and will be described in more detail later:

- a visit to a slum of about 5,000 people at Kroobay in the capital, Freetown and the subsequent installation of water taps and construction of a community centre
- a visit to the rural areas around Yonibana, 90 miles NE of Freetown, and the subsequent agricultural projects to help poor communities recover from the war
- a seminar at Port Loko, 60 miles north of Freetown, on appropriate technology, organic farming and primary health care
- meetings with the original FIOH group in Robert Street, Freetown
- establishing a new FIOH group at Forah Bay Road, Freetown.

Precious water

I arrived at Mamyoko Heliport, on the night of 16th November, two hours later than expected. The delay was partly due to the removal of a fractious passenger at Gatwick and the usual chaos at Freetown's International Airport where there seems to be a policy of using 10 employees where 2 might do. I was met by Edward Kargbo and Olatunde Johnson who had patiently waited for my arrival. They had been joined by a member of a more recently established FIOH group in the capital which had been re-formed under the leadership of Osman Conteh. Both Olatunde and Edward had been developing the movement and helping people to survive the ten year civil war.

For the first and the last few days of my two and half week visit I stayed on the top floor of a three-storey building in Calabatown on the outskirts of Freetown. Each floor accommodated about 20 people served by a single toilet and bathroom. The flush on the toilet did not work of course and waste was cleared with half a bucket of water. I noticed that women were carrying water in very large plastic bowls up three flights of stairs from standpipes in the street. With that knowledge was it appropriate to flush away the faeces of the previous user before using it yourself? I will leave that question unanswered. How much water do you use when taking a very necessary 'bath' each day or to wash your clothes? In Africa, where people need far more water for their basic needs than we do in the UK, everyone has to manage on far less. We take water for granted and expect it to be on tap 24 hours a day every day. For Africans fetching water is a daily task, especially for women and children, that takes up a substantial part of their day. The situation is far more desperate in the rural areas.

Another facility we take for granted in the UK is the provision of free education for our children. If only English children were to witness the eagerness African children have for education they would not complain about going to school. There were children in the house at most times of the day when I was around and I would usually be confronted by a request to 'give them a lesson' - a bit of arithmetic, English, history, the importance of trees and the natural environment in general, etc. Most schools are private and those that are State run are usually starved of basic resources. Rarely can people afford to send their children to school every day.

I was amazed that these children were not still haunted by the spectre of the civil conflict - but then perhaps they were but were hiding this from me.

Although I was fully aware of the horrors, they were brought home to me very graphically by one of the FIOH staff, Jatu, who came each morning to make sure I had a breakfast and to keep me company. Her own experiences and those of friends she had spoken to, may sound terrible, but must have echoed those of nearly everyone in the country. The experience of people living in Calabatown, where I was staying, was especially bad because of the extended period of occupation by the rebels fighting against ECOMOG (combined African forces) led by the Nigerians based in the centre of the city.