

Two Decades After: Freetown Communities Still Bear Scars of Civil War

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In the early hours of the morning, the streets of Bombay and Mountain Cut in the East End of Freetown are already brought to life by the activities of residents. Roadside vendors arrange their stalls, some selling fried plantains and grilled fish, the aromas mixing with the cool, crisp air. Tricycles maneuver through the gentle flow of traffic, their engines humming as the city gradually shakes off its slumber, welcoming the new day.

These neighborhoods still bear the scars of Sierra Leone's eleven years (1991–2002) civil war, and violence here is cyclical.

Though the fighting ended decades ago, economic despair and lawlessness seem to have replaced bullets and the terror of the various factions involved in the war.

One unforgettable incident happened in April 2006, when youths from Mountain Cut lured police into a trap by falsely reporting a robbery. When the officers responded, they were ambushed by the youths, leading to a violent clash. While there were reports of injuries, details on casualties or arrests weren't unclear.

Fast forward on August 10, 2022, a similar but more severe outbreak of violence occurred in parts of the country. In Freetown, it occurred mainly in the east end of the capital city. Anti-government protests escalated into deadly clashes between security forces and demonstrators. While the government termed them as an attempt to overthrow it, according to its critics, the protests were fueled by widespread frustration over economic hardship, inflation, and the perceived inability of the authorities to address them.

Regardless of the true motive, what started as a peaceful demonstration against rising costs of living soon turned violent, with protesters attacking police officers and government properties, while security forces responded with heavy force.

According to an Amnesty International report, at least 20 people lost their lives in that incident. About six security officers were also reportedly killed in the incident. Many residents from communities like Mountain Cut were at the heart of that violent unrest.

Sorie Dumbuya, a man in his early 60s with tired eyes and rough hands, sits in front of his tailoring shop near the foot of Magazine community in Mountain Cut. The soft morning light bathed the scene where he sat on a wooden stool, his hands steady and focused as he mended a small bag, the gentle hum of the day beginning to stir around him.

Sorie was just a young boy when the war shattered his life, pushing him out of school and into a relentless fight for survival.

“They said the war is over,” he muttered, in Krio, staring at the ground. “But the war isn’t really over for some of us.”

Sorie never got the chance to return to school after the war ended. Instead, he found himself constantly caught in the struggle against poverty. He said he knew about some civil society organizations working on making things better for war victims, but that their work felt distant, like something for government people, not for men like him, whose daily battles were about survival.

When asked about transitional justice, Sorie simply shakes his head. For many Sierra Leoneans like him, justice is neither found in formal commissions nor defined by government-led reconciliation efforts. It is not measured by reports, public statements, or high-level discussions that rarely bring real change to ordinary people’s lives.

“The promises of officials feel distant, their words empty. They come, speak of justice, and then leave, while the struggles remain,” he said. True justice, for Sorie, is freedom from fear, the assurance that he will not wake up to hunger, nor to the threat of violence in his community.

But in a system that shields the powerful and leaves people like Sorie to struggle alone, fairness seems like an illusion, something meant only for those at the top.



Sorie Dumbuya mending a small bag

A few meters away from Sorie's tailoring shop, at a small business table along Bombay, Fourah Bay Road, Aminata Kabia, a 22-year-old university student who is studying peace and conflict studies at Fourah Bay College, University of Sierra Leone, scrolls through her phone.

Aminata's brows furrow as she reads the latest news updates, her fingers moving swiftly across the screen. As a student of peace and conflict studies, she understands the theories behind reconciliation and transitional justice, but on the streets of Freetown, she sees a different picture, one where justice is not just about court rulings or truth commissions, but about whether people can afford their next meal or walk home safely at night. With a sigh, she locks her phone and looks around, observing the hurried movements of traders and commuters, each navigating their own struggles in a city where survival often overshadows ideals of peace.

Unlike Sorie, Aminata never lived through the war, but she has read about it in books and news articles. She has learned about transitional justice, the Special Court, and the ongoing efforts to heal the nation.

"I understand what they tried to do," she said. "The truth commission, the justice mechanisms, they were important."

But when asked if she thought these efforts had truly reached ordinary people, she hesitated. "Honestly? No. You talk to most people here, and they feel like it's just government talk. And now? We are struggling. Young people don't have jobs. We see political violence rising again," she says.

Although Aminata never witnessed the war, she is worried about the future. Political parties are using jobless youth as foot soldiers, just like in the past. She has seen the clashes in Fourah Bay (between political parties and secret societies), fights that erupted before elections, the way young men are drawn into lawless activities, not out of ideology, but out of desperation.

"If civil society doesn't start engaging with us in a way that really matters," she said, "then maybe, just maybe, history will repeat itself."

At a street corner in Bombay, Zainab Turay, a 39-year-old petty trader and mother of three, arranges wrapped *'agidi'* on a round tray. Her business barely kept her family afloat.

"This country is tough," she sighed. "I sell everyday, but there's never any money."

Like many in her community, Zainab has seen violence firsthand, not from rebels, but from everyday life.

One early morning last month, two boys stole my money. Then they told me if I didn't give them more, they would stab me,” she recalled, gesturing toward a nearby shop that had been torched by thieves.



Zainab arranging her *'agidi'*

For Zainab, justice means security. It means being able to do business without fear, and without the threat of losing everything overnight.

She said: “The big men talk about people, but we don't see peace here. If people don't have food or work, how can they forget about violence?”

These ongoing struggles highlight the harsh realities faced by many communities in Sierra Leone. When basic survival becomes a daily challenge, the temptation to resort to crime or violence increases.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), established in the aftermath of the war, sought to address the root causes of the conflict and recommend essential reforms. Its final report (Volume 2, Chapter 3: “Root Causes of the Conflict,” Section 4: “Economic Factors and Marginalization,” p. 127) highlights how systemic inequality and postwar disillusionment created a fertile ground for recurring violence.

Successive governments have campaigned on the promises of addressing economic challenges. But for most citizens, the actions of the elected governments are either inadequate or are sincere enough to meet their

expectations. This apparent failure in meeting citizen's expectations has worsened public dissatisfaction.

It seems the current administration of President Julius Maada Bio is aware of this, and recently it has been making efforts to cushion the impact of the economic condition on the masses. It notably announced a reduction in prices of basic commodities like rice and sugar.

Earlier, in November 2023, the Chief Director and Professional Head of Sierra Leone's Ministry of Trade and Industry, Emmanuel Billy Konjoh, announced the drafting of new legislations aimed at stabilizing the market for essential commodities to address inflation and the rising cost of living.

The proposed Essential Commodities Act which is yet to be passed seeks to regulate the exchange of goods between importers and local suppliers in both the public and private sectors, with a focus on staple items such as rice, salt, and sugar. Additionally, the initiative aims to empower Sierra Leoneans to own businesses and manage local commodity prices, building upon the 1969 Sierra Leone Wholesale and Retail Act (Indigenes Act) and related legislation enacted over the years.

During a press briefing at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Konjoh highlighted the significant growth in Sierra Leone's industrial sector, noting an increase in the country's manufacturing GDP from 3% to 17% over the past five years.

Civil society organizations have played a crucial role in documenting war crimes, advocating for accountability, and promoting peacebuilding initiatives. However, despite these efforts, many residents of Freetown remain disconnected from the concept of transitional justice.

One organization at the forefront of peacebuilding is Talking Drum Studios (TDS), the legacy of Search for Common Ground, an international NGO that began operating in Sierra Leone in 2000. With over two decades of experience, TDS provides platforms for discussing crucial social and political issues through innovative radio and television programs.

"Our vision is to see a Sierra Leone where citizens' diversity becomes an agent for a just and peaceful community," said Alpha Kamara, the National Director of TDS. The organization's name, inspired by the West African talking drum—an instrument known for uniting people through its steady, guiding rhythms—symbolizes its commitment to fostering reconciliation and national cohesion.

TDS has been instrumental in advancing non-judicial transitional justice initiatives in Sierra Leone. Its long-running radio drama, *Atunda Ayenda* ("Lost

and Found”), has aired close to 6,000 episodes over the past two decades, providing credible information and serving as a vital platform for peace efforts.

Additionally, TDS has implemented community dialogue programs that bring together victims, former combatants, and community leaders, while also championing youth engagement and gender inclusion initiatives.

“We use media as a tool to bridge divides and empower marginalized voices,” Kamara said, emphasizing the crucial role TDS’s media initiatives play in truth-telling and national healing.

Despite its success, TDS faces significant challenges, including political resistance, cultural sensitivities surrounding truth-telling, and resource constraints. Nevertheless, the organization remains committed to fostering dialogue between victims and ex-combatants, creating opportunities for local and national development.

“Our experience has taught us that continuous engagement is key to healing and reconciliation,” Kamara emphasized, reflecting on the long-term commitment needed to transform conflict into cooperation.

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