

Sierra Leone: The Unfulfilled Promise of Reparations

By patricia.ngevao@awokonewspaper.sl

For over two decades, Sierra Leone's war victims have been living with the painful reality that the promises made to them after the civil war remain largely unfulfilled.

The civil conflict, which raged between 1991 and 2002, left behind thousands of victims, including those who were maimed in brutal rebel attacks. For many of these survivors, the struggle for justice, dignity, and reparations has been an ongoing battle, compounded by government neglect and institutional failures.

Reparations, defined as redress for victims of human rights abuses, can take forms such as rehabilitation, restitution, compensation, truth-telling, restoring dignity, and improving quality of life. The concept also includes ensuring "non-repetition" to prevent future harm. The Sierra Leone reparations program emphasizes rehabilitation through service packages and symbolic actions to acknowledge past wrongs, aiming to balance victims' needs with national development goals while avoiding further societal division. Rehabilitation focuses on providing medical and psychological care, addressing immediate needs and supporting long-term recovery. Symbolic reparations, like memorial services and monuments, honor victims, preserve the memory of the conflict, and foster healing and reconciliation. (TRC Report, vol.2, chp4, sec.22-26, pgs233-234)

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Sierra Leone made specific recommendations regarding reparations. The detailed recommendations can be found in vol.4, chp.5, sec.100-209, p250-265 of the TRC final report. These areas outline the call for a comprehensive reparations program, including healthcare, financial assistance, housing, and skills training for survivors of the war.

In 2008, a reparations program was launched under the auspices of the National Commission for Social Action (NaCSA), with backing from international donors. This program provided some victims with one-time cash payments and prosthetic limbs, but crucial long-term support such as monthly pensions, sustainable healthcare, and sustained economic empowerment has been strikingly absent.

At the edge of Kenema, situated along the highway, lies a war amputee camp, home to dozens of war survivors who still bear the physical and emotional scars of the conflict.

The settlement, meant to serve as a refuge for those maimed during the war, now stands as a grim reminder of broken promises: Inadequate healthcare, and the daily struggle for survival define life here.

Among the residents is 35-year-old Seibatu Kallon, a double amputee and blind mother of four. She vividly recalls the day rebels stormed her village, forever altering her fate.

"I spent nine months in the hospital after they cut off my hands. When I left, there was nothing for me, no pension, no medical care, no counseling, just survival," she says. Like many others in the

camp, she relies on charity and street begging to provide for her children. “We are living symbols of resilience, but resilience does not feed our families,” Seibatu laments.

Her neighbor, Lamin Gaima, who lost both feet in an attack in 1992, shares a similar struggle. His wife left him after his injury, leaving him to raise seven children alone. “We were promised financial support, but nothing came. My children are on the streets because I cannot provide for them,” he says.

This failure to fulfill reparations is not just an issue of insufficient funds; it’s also a story of broken promises, mismanagement, and political inefficiency. The TRC’s recommended reforms, which included financial pensions, mental health services, and vocational training to integrate survivors back into society, have remained out of reach for many victims.

Mohamed Tarawallie, President of the War Wounded Association, argues that reparations should not be seen as charity but as a fundamental right for those who have suffered so deeply. “We do not just need charity, we need structured support that enables us to become productive members of society,” he asserts. “That is what true justice looks like.”

Civil society organizations like the Network Movement for Justice and Development (NMJD) continue to advocate for war victims’ rights. Abu A. Brima, the Executive Director of NMJD, agrees with Tarawallie, stressing that reparations must be viewed not as handouts but as a form of justice.

“These individuals have lost everything and deserve to live with dignity. Reparations should be seen as a right. However, the logistical and bureaucratic barriers, ranging from poor infrastructure in remote areas to corruption have prevented many survivors from accessing the benefits they are entitled to,” he said.

National Commission for Social Action (NaCSA), acknowledging the gaps in the reparations program, has cited financial constraints as a major challenge. However, Ernest Mbaimba Ndomahina, Commissioner of NaCSA, said they are committed to fulfilling their mandate.

“The commission remains committed to collaborating with international partners to support war victims. Ensuring the long-term sustainability of the program will require continued funding and political support,” he told Awoko.

The situation in Sierra Leone offers critical lessons for other post-conflict nations. The promises of reparations, if unfulfilled, can leave victims further marginalized and increase their sense of abandonment.

For amputees like Seibatu, Lamin, and Alpha, their lives have been defined not just by the horrors of the war but by the unkept promises made by governments that have failed to adequately support them.

As these survivors continue their fight for justice, Sierra Leone’s failure to deliver on its reparations promises remains a strong reminder of the dangers of leaving war victims to fend for themselves in a society that has moved on but left them behind.

Sierra Leone's experience should serve as a cautionary tale for post-conflict countries around the world. Reparations are not simply a matter of providing financial compensation; they are about restoring dignity, rebuilding lives, and ensuring that the victims of war do not remain invisible in the pursuit of peace and national healing.

This story is brought to you with support from the Africa Transitional Justice Legacy Fund (ATJLF) through the Media Reform Coordinating Group (MRCG), under the project 'Engaging Media and Communities to Change the Narrative on Transitional Justice Issues in Sierra Leone.'