

Wellington: How community leaders led reconciliation efforts in post-war Sierra Leone

By Mohamed Sinneh Kamara

One major issue post-war Sierra Leone had to deal with was reconciling perpetrators of violence with members of the communities they lived in prior to the war.

Many former combatants couldn't return home for fear of persecution for their role in meting violence on their own people. For some of these, it was their families, particularly their parents, who paid their price for their actions.

In Wellington in the eastern part of the Sierra Leonean capital, Freetown, Chief Yagbome Posseh Bangura had a first hand experience of this situation. First, she had the task of convincing her people to return to the community after the war.

"During the war, people fled in search of safety," narrates the female traditional leader in an interview at her residence at 84 City Road, Wellington.

Wellington is one of the largest areas of Freetown. Chief Bangura's jurisdiction entails Rokupa, Railway Line, City Road and Portee, among other communities. City Road, where the child lives, is along Old Road. Like the rest of the east end, it is highly populated, with many of the residents engaging in petty trading and other informal economic activities like fishing.

Many of the residents of these communities and beyond sought refuge at the Cline Town Camp, which is known popularly for hosting displaced people during the war.

According to Chief Bangura, regular supplies of food and other provisions made her people reluctant to leave the camp after the war. But she also realized that many had no place to return to after their houses had been burnt down during the war.

She eventually succeeded to convince many to return, with her providing help to some who needed it. She even personally provided shelter to children who lost their parents to the war, those who were amputated and those who lost their families. Others who lost their houses in the community were provided help in the form of clothing, etc.

Soon after, came the issue of reconciliation, as among those who return were the very ones who caused the havoc.

Sheik Musa Kamara, Chief Imam of Masjid Joshua at Old Railway Line, Wellington, was at the heart of dealing with this issue. He recalled how the community people were angry with the perpetrators, many of whom were their own children, who took up arms to destroy their own communities.

"These perpetrators later returned to their community after the war has ended to plead for forgiveness," he said.

As a religious leader, Imam Kamara said his advice was that anything that happens, is the will of God.

“If a perpetrator came and beg sincerely, it's the right of the people to forgive them and not to send them away to the bush, where they once stayed. Sending them away will cause more,” he said.

Parents whose children were rebels sought prayer for them from the Imam.

These parents themselves had to deal with angry community members for the actions of their children. One of them, Ibrahim Koroma, is now late. But the community people recall his explanation that his son was captured by rebels in the mining district of Kono, where he had gone in search of job, and forced to join their ranks. Koroma reported said that at the time, his son had no chance of escaping – either he joined the rebels or face certain death.

While some parents, like Ibrahim, understood the plight of their children who had to get involved with the rebels reluctantly, others couldn't stand it; they rejected their children as part of their families. Some, out of embarrassment, even stayed away from the Jamaa.

When Imam Kamara realized this, he decided to take action by preaching about forgiveness and unity. His mosque also served as a counselling center for the former fighters. He said that led to many of the community members – parents and neighbours – forgiving each other. Through this, some of the former combatants themselves became the reason for their former colleagues to return.

According to the TRC report: Volume 3, Chapter 7, Paragraph 20, at the community level, reconciliation is fostered or facilitated by understanding and sharing experiences and by creating the conditions for community acceptance of wrongdoing.

“Return to the community by perpetrators involves accountability on the part of those perpetrators. The community, represented by elders, religious leaders and chiefs, acknowledge the wrongdoing symbolically on behalf of all in the community, thus allowing for the entry of the perpetrators back into the community. It is important to note that the community cannot forgive in the name of the individual wronged; it can only acknowledge the harm done to the community. The acknowledgment of wrongdoing helps pave the way for the victim and perpetrator to live together. The approval and support of the community in such a reconciliation process is necessary in order to make reconciliation sustainable,” the report notes.

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.