

## ***Reparations Delayed: Sierra Leone's War Victims Still Waiting for Justice***

***By Zainab Sunkary Koroma***

More than two decades after Sierra Leone's brutal civil war ended, survivors who bore its deepest scars are still waiting for promises to be fulfilled. Amid fading memories and a shifting political landscape, the country's war victims remain in limbo, holding onto hope, living with trauma, and demanding the justice they were assured.

In the aftermath of the conflict, which lasted from 1991 to 2002 and claimed over 50,000 lives, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was established to chart a path to national healing. Among its most urgent recommendations was a reparations programme for victims, one that included healthcare, education, housing, psychosocial support, and financial compensation. But the road from recommendation to reality has been long and largely unmet.

Meanwhile, in a quiet corner of Hastings, just outside Freetown, Pa Salieu Conteh sits on the veranda of what remains of the once-crowded Hastings Amputee Camp. He is one of only four surviving residents. A former farmer, Conteh lost his arm during a rebel attack while shielding his family. The trauma, both physical and emotional, endures. "We've received help only twice," he says, referring to small grants issued under the late President Ahmed Tejan Kabbah and later in 2018 under President Ernest Bai Koroma. "Since then, nothing. We've written letters, requested meetings with president he has not responded. Are they waiting for all of us to die?"

Conteh's frustration echoes across other camps, including the Jui Amputee Camp in Freetown, where Amadu Jalloh chairman of the Jui camp. He too lost a limb during the war and now supports his family through petty trading. "We rely mostly on

NGOs and international donors,” Jalloh says. “My children have university requirements, but I cannot afford to send them. We’re not asking for luxury, just a fair chance.”

In 2008, the National Commission for Social Action (NaCSA) launched a reparations programme backed by international donors. Some victims received cash handouts or prosthetic limbs, but these were largely one-off interventions. The long-term vision, monthly pensions, mental health services, vocational training, remain a distant hope. “Reparations are not charity,” argues Mohamed Tarawallie, President of the War Wounded Association. “They are a right. The TRC made that clear. What we need is structured support that restores dignity and empowers us to make meaningful contributions to society. That is what true justice looks like.”

Joseph Ben Kaifala, Chairman of the Monuments and Relics Commission and Founder of the Centre for Memory and Reparations, has worked for years to preserve the legacy of the war and support survivors. The centre’s efforts, ranging from symbolic acts of remembrance to trauma healing, are grounded in the belief that without material reparations, genuine healing remains incomplete.

“The TRC split reparations into symbolic and material categories because they knew the state couldn’t afford to compensate every victim,” Kaifala explains. “But they identified four priority groups; amputees, war-wounded, survivors of sexual violence, and child soldiers. Even within these groups, delivery has been abysmal.” The Center has collaborated with amputee associations to amplify survivor stories, including portrait narratives now housed at the Sierra Leone Peace Museum. It has also launched a grassroots trust fund, encouraging Sierra Leoneans to donate monthly, in cash or kind, to support victims directly. “But this is not enough,” Kaifala stresses. “What we need is political will. A dedicated reparations

commission and a government-backed trust fund could make a real difference. Civil society, religious institutions, and international partners must also step up.”

Many of the war’s survivors are now elderly. Their ranks are thinning. The failure to deliver on reparations not only deepens their suffering but risks eroding public trust in transitional justice mechanisms. Multiple attempts to obtain comments from NaCSA for this story were unsuccessful.

Sierra Leone’s experience offers a stark warning to post-conflict nations: reconciliation cannot happen without recognition, and recognition must be tangible. Reparations are not merely about compensating victims; they are about affirming their humanity, rebuilding broken lives, and ensuring that those most harmed are not left behind. As Conteh, Jalloh, and others wait, their pleas remain the same: justice delayed should not become justice denied.

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