

SIERRA LEONE

**THE FIGHTER
FROM
DEATH ROW**

*Testimony of Survival
By a Christian Journalist*

*By
Hilton Ebenezer Fyle*

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WARNING: The errors in this book are deliberate. They symbolize the economic strains which the author encountered as a result of his imprisonment, mental torture, and impoverishment by the "democratic" government of President Tejan Kabba in Sierra Leone. However, they do not alter the meaning in any way.

SIERRA LEONE

THE FIGHTER FROM DEATH ROW

Testimony of Survival By a Christian Journalist

DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF

ALL victims of political violence in Sierra Leone..... 23 March 1991 to 7 July 1999 ESPECIALLY fellow journalist Conrad Roy, an editor of the Expo Times newspaper, Freetown, who died in 1999 as a result of his unnecessary detention MOSHOOD K.O. Abiola of Nigeria and Rev Christian Peacock, my good old buddies; AND my mother Mrs. Gwendoline Fyle, who died in a foreign land on 7th March 1999 and had to be buried there.

ALSO TO THE LIVING

The Committee to Protect Journalists (New York, USA) who remained relentless on my behalf since my first trial in 1996, and for the money, time and trouble spent on my treason trial in 1998.; The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), for regularly supplying an assortment of relief items to us in prison, and providing a shoulder for me to cry on...her name was Pascal; my brothers Clifton and Cecil and their wives, especially Margaret for their care and support.....to Nna and her husband Mr. Bangura, Umaru, Mabinty and Alikadi, Hajia Mama and Mrs. Conteh who provided life-support while I was in the hole; to my sister Edith, Glenis, Cornette, Charles, Fatmatta, Roston and Essie Stevens-Harding who participated in my rehabilitation; the angel Kannie Kabba whose love and care were unfailing and indispensable MEMBERS of Teaneck United Methodist Church, New Jersey, USA; Paul Gabriel of the Columbus Baptist Temple; and everyone else who prayed for me, especially the displaced citizens.

Thank Y'all.

MOST OF ALL TO GOD THE ALMIGHTY

You parted the Red Sea yesterday to deliver your beloved Israel.

You opened the prison gates this time to set me free.

Human help is undependable, but you never fail.

Thank you, my creator.

Preamble

Martin Luther King said, "Peace is not merely the absence of tension. It is the presence of justice." When a journalist in a war-torn "democratic" country is arrested, beaten, tried and sentenced to death for speaking out and allowing others to do the same, that is injustice. In July 1999, Sierra Leone began the struggle to return to peace with the help of the United States government, the United Nations and the West African Community of Nations (ECOWAS), following one of the most brutal wars fought by rebels anywhere on this earth.

This book paints a disturbing picture of Sierra Leone, a society badly in need of a cleanup: from a chronic cancer of corruption,

A disturbing picture of Sierra Leone's president. He executes 24 for serving a military government for 9 months. Yet he was chief advisor to the previous one for four years.

bad governance, state-sponsored political violence, and worst of all--a polluted system of justice. Without it, peace will always be a dream, and turmoil the abiding reality. This story spans the years 1995 to 1999. The writer gives a cogent and chronological history of the racy developments in his home country, as a parallel to his own experiences as a player witness and victim. United Nations chiefs in New York will surely have to answer questions about the conduct of their personnel in the Sierra Leone peace process, as a result of the revelations herein. Human experience, however grim, has its laughs, and there is no shortage of them in the narrative.

But how does a journalist walk out of Death Row without the consent of his government or the prison authorities, to tell his story? It is for you to find out if miracles like that can still occur in today's world!

CHAPTER ONE

A HERITAGE OF DISHONOR

If the Attorney General and Minister of Justice of Sierra Leone, Solomon Berewa had heard this story, he may have realized that I did not come to this world to be subdued by my enemies, and end up sprawled on the ground in disgrace, a victim of their viciousness, a lifeless testimony of their deadly poison.

After struggling for years against poverty with five children, and a marriage that was marked by bitter quarrels and violence, my mother became pregnant again. My father, whose fault it was, was not going to hear anything about having a sixth child. The headaches with the previous five were already weighing heavily, and had exacerbated the situation. So there was going to be no argument about this. My mother was going to get rid of this pregnancy. She agreed.

The abortion was done a few days later by Nurse Connie, an obstetric nurse who had a small practice down the road. “She certainly removed something,” my mother recalls, “she showed me a white-looking piece of something inside a jar of water.”...then it was time to go home.

The aftermath of that “abortion” was an unprecedented experience that nearly took my mother to her grave. She was gripped by pain of a type that she had never encountered before in all her child-bearing years. The

pain was enduring and bitter, Mrs. Fyle could not eat, or sleep, neither could she sit upright or stay in bed. She spent most of the next four days wrestling with the pain....rolling on the floor, scratching it with her fingernails and biting the legs of their wooden chairs. But somehow she managed to conceal it from my father, who spent most of his time away at his shoe-repair shop. Anyway, Daddy was satisfied that this baby had been sent packing.

My mother's pain finally began to subside. And then the big surprise came. She began to observe the symptoms of pregnancy. She was puzzled and troubled ...did Nurse Connie remove the wrong part, or did she merely remove one fetus and leave another one behind?. But more than that, she was frightened at the prospect of returning to Nurse Connie for another abortion. It would kill her. But then, what would my father say or do when he found out that there was still a baby in there.

Mrs. Fyle, decided there was no going back. She was going to hold on to the pregnancy, and keep the secret from my father for as long as possible. By the time he knew it would be too late. Seven months later I was born. So even before I achieved human form, when I had no voice, no brain and no eyes or limbs, there was a mighty power protecting me. That immortal, matchless power is the same one that saved me over fifty years later in 1998, from a brutal and deadly act of revenge by Berewa and the government of Sierra Leone. And it comes from one source....the One True God, the Almighty, who made the sun, the moon and the earth, and created all mankind.

I can give you no other explanation, because, my suffering had gone beyond the stage of human redemption. My family, my friends, the British High Commission in Freetown, listeners to the BBC World Service, my broadcasting colleagues at the Voice of America, The Committee to Protect Journalists based in New York, Journalists Without Frontiers in France, Amnesty International, and other foreign-based journalists and Statesmen....they all tried, but president Tejan Kabba and his team were adamant that my Death Sentence should be carried out...I was going to hang, for exercising my basic democratic rights as a journalist. Only God could deliver me ..and he did. He waited until there was no hope, then he went to work.

My Death Sentence was the climax to four years of real struggle to make an impact on my country, to fight against poverty and ignorance, to keep people close to God, to help the establishing of the new democracy, whose flag the new Kabba government had been waving around the free world since it came to power in 1996, hypnotizing Washington, London, Paris, Berlin and other western democracies in the process.

Sierra Leone is a small former colony of Britain, tucked-in on the West African Coast between Liberia and Guinea. It is rich in gold, diamonds, and not less than 14 other lucrative natural resources. But since 1971, a decade after independence, its four million people have found the enjoyment of those riches an impossible dream. Their land has become a playground for dictators and rebels, a paragon of the ills that have been plaguing Africa.....six military coups since 1967, bad governance, government-sponsored violence and intimidation, serious violations of human rights, abuses of the constitution, and corruption that has spread like a cancer to every level of society.

Sierra Leone is classed as the poorest country in the world. But whenever I compare its beauty and wealth with its troubles, I cannot help but sink in despair. In 1999 for example, in the eastern border region, I was walking along some of the most picturesque landscapes on this earth.. But then I had to walk four miles from my village to another village, just to borrow a nail-cutter from a friend and trim my nails.

But why should a country swimming in wealth be so poor ? The unquestionable answer is, bad leaders. Sierra Leone has been burdened like a curse with bad leadership by selfish politicians. The medical doctor who led Sierra Leone into independence in 1961, Sir Milton Margai, was a gem. But he died in 1963. It was his successor and younger brother, Sir Albert Margai, who introduced bad governance, nepotism, and other foul ingredients that caused the first of six military coups, and numerous attempts to overthrow successive governments.

Under Albert Margai the ruling political party, the Sierra Leone Peoples Party SLPP lost much of its popularity. He was accused of flooding senior government posts with members of his Mende tribe while there were twelve other tribes in the land, and overseeing corruption. Soon the SLPP was facing a major challenge from the newly-formed All Peoples Congress APC, led by a veteran trade unionist, Siaka Stevens.

In the 1967 general election, Albert Margai and the SLPP lost and the APC won. But instead of accepting the result Albert Margai (with the help of his Attorney General) tried to manipulate it, by introducing unfair technicalities that brought the two parties neck-and-neck, with an equal number of parliamentary seats. A crisis erupted, there were public protests. The army intervened on Margai's side. Martial Law was declared by army chief Brigadier Lansana, and Siaka Stevens and his APC colleagues fled into exile in the neighboring state of Guinea. Lansana's coup lasted three days, then a counter-coup. However the new military government showed no sign of doing justice to the winner of the 1967 election. A year later they too were overthrown by junior soldiers who invited Siaka

Stevens and his APC team to return home from Guinea and rule.

Prime Minister Stevens began as a true democrat, but he soon launched an undeclared campaign against his old enemy the SLPP, with lingering memories of all the suffering they had caused him and his team. This campaign and certain other "wayward" actions caused a split between Siaka Stevens and some of his key men. He accused his internal opposition of treason, and their alleged ringleaders like the army chief Brigadier John Bangurah and Minister of Information Ibrahim Taqi, were tried and executed. Stevens then turned his venom on the SLPP's politicians who were already gathering fresh momentum to fight back. The SLPP and all other opposition parties were banned, and Sierra Leone was officially declared a One-Party State.

Some SLPP politicians decided to be pragmatic. They crossed over and joined the APC government. Those who continued to resist were harassed, arrested, detained, beaten, and on a few occasions killed. So Siaka Stevens became the unchallenged dictator of Sierra Leone. He decided who should or should not run for parliament, and every other major issue in government. There were no protests from the United States and its western allies, because they were too busy fighting the Cold War....any opposing noises could instantly throw Sierra Leone into the lap of the Soviet Union, giving it a propaganda victory.

Under the APC there was only one way to prosper in Sierra Leone. You had to know someone highly-placed in the ruling party or the government. If you could get to Siaka Stevens himself and humor him, all the better. President Stevens was praised for bringing people of various tribes into his government. Those who joined prospered. They got fat contracts but were never asked questions when they did not perform. When they were held for fraud they fell at his feet and were pardoned, but held on to the loot. Eventually it was the Limba, his own tribal group, that began to see their fortunes soaring to new heights. They got the best jobs, the foreign trips, the contracts, the best girlfriends and the most exotic cars. Whenever and wherever the SLPP reared its head it was crushed. The thugs who executed the violence and other activists were given scholarships to study abroad. But the SLPP was stubborn. It refused to be put to sleep.

Siaka Stevens began his downward slide in 1980, after he used up a lot of the nation's reserves to stage the annual Heads of State conference of the Organization of African Unity OAU in Freetown, thus automatically becoming OAU chairman for a year and fulfilling his greatest political ambition. The economy of Sierra Leone tumbled to new depths, and citizens began to find the nerve to overcome intimidation and grumble behind closed doors.

Finally the criticism spilled into the streets, and Siaka Stevens realized that his glory days were over. In 1986 he chose as his successor the army commander Joseph Momoh, and handed power to him. The elections were rigged as usual, and Momoh was declared president. Instead of tackling the problems of Sierra Leone with the urgency of a cardiac-arrest call, president Joseph Momoh and his new team launched into a period of rest and relaxation, and were "having a party" while the country continued to bleed. The mark of APC prosperity was a pot-belly. Tribalism got worse...people from the Limba tribe (to which president Momoh also belonged) and other APC favorites were recruited into the army on production of a complimentary card from a government minister, instead of the usual entry qualifications.

The president and his inner circle spent their weekends at a resort deep in the Limba-speaking region called Binkolo, about 125 miles from the capital Freetown. This was where Momoh and his kitchen cabinet- head of police, the army chief, big business leaders, top party officials, favorite paramount chiefs and a few top cabinet ministers- held meetings in-between the partying, endorsing and vetoing cabinet decisions and prescribing the way forward for the nation. This exclusive club with supreme powers was called Ekute. The SLPP was watching, planning and waiting.

Sierra Leoneans were now undergoing deep suffering while their president and his men got fatter, and continued to expose their love of the good life, good women and quality alcohol. After eighteen years of Siaka Stevens and a roaring welcome for Joseph Momoh, it was depression again in the late 1980s and No Change. Like Siaka Stevens before him, Momoh survived internal opposition. He sent one of his top ministers called Francis Minah-who was a Mende- to be executed for treason. But while he had his sights on keeping the SLPP impotent, there was another force organizing in the the heartland of the SLPP against him. A little-known photographer called Foday Sankoh- a former army corporal- was traveling from village to town to village across the eastern and southern provinces with his camera as decoy, holding meetings with angry and bewildered citizens, offering another way out of the country's economic mess...with the gun.

Corporal Foday Sankoh received widespread support from these abandoned, helpless and poverty-stricken fathers and mothers...thousands of young and frustrated school drop-outs enlisted for the cause. By the end of 1990 Foday Sankoh had enough confidence to deliver an ultimatum to present Momoh's (by now) unpopular government. It was, "Change course or face the consequences." Momoh ignored the ultimatum, and on the 23rd of March 1991 Foday Sankoh led his rebel fighters to attack the town of Bomaru in the Kailahun District, not far from the Liberian border. This was the beginning

of the rebel war in Sierra Leone, by the Revolutionary United Front RUF.

President Momoh's government sent their loyal troops over to crush the new offensive by the Revolutionary United Front RUF, but it was no good. They were routed in most of the attacks. The government began to rush-recruit young people into the army at random and hand them guns for battle after only a few weeks of training. School drop-outs, criminals and heavy Marijuana smokers began to mix with their better-trained colleagues, and so the pollution of the Sierra Leone Armed Forces was set in motion.

President Momoh's attempts to put down the RUF rebels was approached with characteristic unseriousness. According to some army officers from the warfront, the guns used by government troops were old and outdated, compared with the automatic rifles of the enemy. Mortars "refused to explode", supplies and salaries were not forthcoming as expected. Worst of all, the government soldiers found the harsh conditions of the jungle punishing. In between exchanges of fire, RUF rebels teased them about their poor salaries-Ten Dollars per month for a Second Lieutenant at that time. They would shout out: "You Momoh soldier. Are you willing to come out here and die for Ten Dollars per month? Come on my friend. Go home."

Government soldiers became more and more enraged as their living conditions worsened in the bush. One officer called Julius Maada Bio told me that sometimes he had to catch lizards and cook them for his dinner. On the 29th of April 1992, a small group of government soldiers from the warfront drove into the capital Freetown and overthrew the government of president oseph Momoh. They set up their new military administration and called it the National Provisional Ruling Council NPRC. Captain Valentine Strasser was appointed NPRC chairman and Head of State, LT S.A.J. Musa was named Deputy chairman and Head of the cabinet, while Lt Julius Maada Bio became the new Secretary of State for Information and Broadcasting.

I was working in England while all these events unfolded from the middle of the 1970s to the birth of the NPRC, but as a BBC journalist and a native of the land, it was painful to hear the complaints of the sufferers, and then listen to the propaganda of APC government leaders as they tried to cover up their corruption and other crimes against the people with sweet talk on the international airwaves. So many of my friends who graduated from college with me had been reduced to severe poverty, and whenever I was home on vacation I was driven to tears by some of their stories. They fought long and hard for success with dignity and honesty as they had been taught, they struggled to resist surrendering their self-esteem to political patronage and presidential boot-licking. Finally they lost the will to fight on. A few decided to play political ball and become APC praise-singers or

servants, while the majority held on to their noble ideals and paid the price by descending to the bottom of the well.

For so many years I was an angry man in London....an angry Sierra Leonean who never had an answer when his English colleagues asked, "What's going on in Sierra Leone, Hilton?" During president Momoh's tenure-1986 to 1992- an official of the World Bank told me in Paris that if the Sierra Leone government sold all its expensive official cars, it would raise enough money to revive the economy. "The political will is just not there." he lamented.

My pain was all the more excruciating when I traveled across the capital Freetown, my birthplace. I could not help comparing the decay and squalor with what I had left behind in London (even allowing for differentials).Over twenty years after independence we were still coping with serious water shortages, neglected city roads, overflowing trash in public containers, and unaffordable health care. The 80 percent poor could not move beyond buying two pills for a headache. Medicines were being stolen, doctors and surgeons were charging high fees while using tax-paying hospital facilities at the same time. Malaria was doing a wonderful job. Electricity was available for an average of three days per month...whenever the lights came on children screamed as though it was Jesus riding into Jerusalem...their parents were warned to pay their electricity bills regularly, nonetheless.

During the Momoh years, car owners, taxi and bus operators were lining up at gas stations for three days without success. Sometimes just when it came to your turn the attendant announced there was no more selling. Call him to a corner for a friendly conversation, and he would explain that the remainder of the gas was being reserved for people with special privileges. The impossible prices of spare parts forced so many of my middle class friends to sell their cars. Others resorted to running a taxi service after work to make ends meet. One of my best friends at college who became a senior teacher at a top rate high school, devoted worktime and spare time to making and trading in spicy barbecued fish and meat. At evenings and weekends he traveled on foot around the numerous bars and drinking spots in town to sell the tasty stuff, which is reputed to delay drunkenness. Even a university lecturer was in the same business. For them it was the only way to earn an honest buck.

Yes, dignity, self-esteem and status had gone, and the educated middle class in Sierra Leone were crawling in poverty along with the rest, as a result of callous neglect and corruption by their own government. This was a man-made disaster. Parents felt relieved to see their school-going children falling into the arms of government ministers, party bosses and

other wealthy beneficiaries, all of them married. The teenagers, commonly called Fresh- Pick, were picked up at home in style, disappeared for the night, and returned just before dawn with a share of their earnings, after deducting expenses for clothing, shoes, cosmetic operations and entertainment. In this way the family survived.

Many married couples split up, because poverty had forced the wives into high-earning extra-marital relationships with "Big Men". Otherwise the cost of rent became so prohibitive that husband and wife had to live separately...the children were distributed among their friends and relations who were doing well, and the furniture was either kept in storage or auctioned. And so prostitution, glorified prostitution, became the gateway to economic survival for many. At the same time these hard-pressed victims were witnessing the lavishness and extravagance of those who were in power. They met them in the bars, saw them in their flashy cars, and heard about their womanizing ways and corrupt deals. The government was not hiding anything anymore, everyone knew what was going on.

By 1989 the society in Sierra Leone had undergone a transformation on two fronts. First, the role models in the society turned out to be the same people who were stealing the wealth of the country and suppressing free speech. Second, in a nation where crooks had become the stars and role models of the day, members of the public decided to copy their examples, and search for any means of making corrupt money at their respective work stations. From the highest ranking to the lowest, the rationale was, "If they can get away with it so can I. If I am caught I can always bribe my way out of trouble." So the moment a person was appointed to an important position he began to explore the possibilities. Whenever people met and the topic came up, the central question was how much money could be made corruptly on the side. If the answer was an obvious Yes-as it is at Customs, the Treasury, the Police, the Income Tax Department and the Ministry of Trade and Industry, or in Mining- the person was congratulated and catapulted into "The Order of High Corruption and Public Admiration." As for performance in the job itself, who cared? Even the boss would crawl after you for some cash when things became tight. Today we live in an age where military governments are frowned upon. But guess who did all this damage to Sierra Leone....they were civilians. Civilian governments.

By the end of the 1980s I had developed a fixation of distaste and a phobia of anger for the politicians of Sierra Leone. They all seemed to come from the same stable...selfish, corrupt, unpatriotic and uncaring. I can swear that no politician then or now can recite the whole of the Sierra Leone national anthem. Do such things matter to them, did it ever matter?

They were responsible for the backwardness of our people yesterday, and today. They have been fighting each other for years, APC against SLPP, and the innocent forgotten citizens have been the victims.

When the 1980s ended I said, "This can't go on. Something has to be done for our people."...perhaps a new political formula had to be found to rid Sierra Leone of this never-ending spiral of bad governance, from four years of SLPP-1963 to 1967- to over twenty years of APC rule. But what should be done, and who should do it? I could not do much then, not while the APC with its violent record was still in power. It would be suicidal to go home and operate in that kind of climate, as a catalyst for change. As a journalist I only had to rock the boat once with a corruption or repression story, and I could soon be cruising on the road to my execution (official or unofficial). For instance, one of my best friends at college, Mustapha Kemokai, who rose to become a high school principal in his home district of Pujehun, dared to oppose the famous APC heavyweight in the area. He was butchered to death, then his bleeding body was reportedly tied to the back of a vehicle and dragged across the rugged streets of the town.

I was on vacation in New York on the 29th of April 1992 when news reached me that president Joseph Momoh and his APC government had been overthrown. As soon as I confirmed it was true I jumped for joy, and instantly decided it was time to return home to Sierra Leone. I did not care who was coming to power. The APC yoke was gone, and that was enough. Two weeks later I was in Freetown with a film crew from London, to shoot a documentary recounting many of the misdeeds of the overthrown APC administration, recording them as a lesson of history that would deter any future government from going the same way.

Over twenty percent of the story was devoted to coverage of the rebel war and the atrocities committed by the RUF. My English camera operator and Australian sound recordist had never been to Africa, but risked their lives to travel with me deep into RUF operational areas in the bush, and capture scenes of their destruction in several villages. Indeed, such was my joy that I did not hesitate spending over 50,000 Dollars on the project. I named it "Nightmare In Paradise", and in homes and movie theaters thousands of Sierra Leoneans and non Sierra Leoneans watched it. I also presented several extracts as television reports to a world audience on CNN World Report in 1992 and 1993.

When I entered the scene in 1994 after 21 years of roaring success at the BBC, the rebel war in Sierra Leone was already three years old. The rebels of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), had set out to fight against the APC government. Now that government was gone, but they were still

fighting, unable to come to peace terms with the NPRC military government. Soon after their arrival in 1992 and in 1993, the NPRC military government put up a tough fight against their enemies in the bush and made many impressive gains, but the RUF rebels just would not go away.

My crusading activities for peace at home took off in a very strange way. One afternoon early in 1995, a mysterious woman calling herself Princess James called me on the phone, and asked me to meet her at home.....she had a message for me. A check on her background revealed that she was a very religious elderly woman - her son Eric was my friend- she was also the leader of a prayer group, and a regular visitor to Israel, the Holy Land. In her parlor the following day, Mrs. James told me that before dawn one morning, as soon as she said Amen after her prayers, she had a heavenly message which she wrote down. It was that she should summon me and instruct me to call the nation to pray for the war to end. If everyone prayed together, God would intervene and end the war. Fasting would also be a good thing. But the key point was that everyone in the country should pray together.

This was a tall order. I had already launched a few initiatives to help the war victims. I had also involved the American ambassador Mrs. Lauralee Peters and some of the major companies in the land in a national essay competition entitled, "How To End The Rebel War." She was heading a galaxy of eminent judges, and prizes from the Sierra Leone Brewery and other houses, were going to the best entries....so impressed was she with the effort that at her expense, the US Embassy compiled the best entries into a neat book. The small number of copies produced were circulated to key targets. But for all of this the war continued.

I obeyed my heavenly assignment, which Mrs. Princess James had conveyed to me. I used my jeep, hired a megaphone and a driver, and drove around Freetown and its suburbs calling on people to pray to God for an end to this misery. We drove around the markets, around the city center, and wherever people could be seen. I composed and printed leaflets which were distributed to parts of the provinces not controlled by the rebels. I went to the national broadcasting station to put out a message. After consulting with heaven in worship, I came up with a special date for the prayers to take place.

The response was disappointing. People heard the message, but although radio reported that some in the provinces obeyed and prayed, the majority could not care less. Freetown (the capital) was the worst culprit. The audience behaved as though they could not be bothered. Some of my fellow journalists laughed when they saw me on the streets, and must have thought I was reaching the borders of insanity.

This was only the beginning of a series of campaigns which I conducted in the next three years, and which hurt the political aspirations of some people. When the NPRC military government left, these SLPP politicians came to power. But they decided that this was going to be a long stay, and -just like the oppressive APC government before them- anyone who attempted to disrupt their plans would be roughly dealt with. The Committee To Protect Journalists, based in New York, has released the names of nearly 20 journalists who suffered at the hands of president Tejan Kabba's government in 1998, under democratic rule. We were arrested, beaten up, taken to court, detained, and five of us were sentenced to death, just because we wrote or spoke about things that were deemed unfavorable.

Even in the days of Communism, the Russians were never so vicious, yet here were people who had worked, studied and lived in the world's most enviable democracy, the United States, perpetrating such brutality against their own countrymen and women because of their lust for power and longevity, and because of their disdain for opposition. This was going to be their secret agenda, and they would go on fooling the world that they had come to set Sierra Leone on this new path towards democracy and prosperity.

Unfortunately I could not play their game, neither do I keep silent anywhere when I see people being bullied or their rights taken from them. And my bravery comes from the fact that I know that whatever I am doing does not carry any corrupt or evil intentions, and that the Lord Almighty is protecting me .

This book is designed to explain my struggles fighting for true democracy, for an end to the rebel war, for the citizens to be well informed about their government's activities. Not only did the government brutalize me, it spread false propaganda as part of a character-assassination campaign, persuading the poor and ignorant citizens to believe that I was a political devil. I was even condemned by some members of my own immediate family. But my strength came only from the Bible...Jesus told me there, that what I had been doing was right, and that I should carry on doing it fearlessly. A Christian is a fighter, and it is perhaps no coincidence that I was born and raised at Soldier Street in Freetown. The fact that I am here in the United States and can tell my story today from a land of peace and freedom, is testimony to prove that God wants it to be told. I am the winner. I still have the voice and I will continue to use it. The job of a Christian is to fight against evil. Tejan Kabba and his government have known no peace, since they put me in jail.

The people of Sierra Leone have suffered too long. They need to

break free from the enslavement of poverty and ignorance, to disentangle themselves from the curse of dishonest leaders who keep them in abiding poverty when their country is so rich.....leaders who would not hesitate to ask the United Nations to starve them, or have them bombed, shelled and burned in the streets, just to stay in power. The world should know. These things should not be said, that is why they wanted me to die.

And to you who are reading this, let it be an inspiration. If you are involved in any struggle, as long as your motive is honest, I say Fight On, and stay in touch with God all the way. If he saved me he can save you. Your enemy is nothing in the sight of the Almighty. So do not be afraid. You do not even have to turn to the right or the left. Like Joshua just keep going, and you will win. Remember what David said...The Lord is on my side. What can humans do to me?

CHAPTER TWO

CHECK OUT.... CHECK IN

In the middle of 1994 when I returned home, the country was in a state of limbo.....a condition that was marked by trouble and uncertainty. The trouble was twofold. First, the NPRC military government discovered that for all the millions of Dollars sunk into military hardware and the mass mobilization of soldiers, it could not defeat the rebels of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF). The trouble for the citizens, though, was that after just over a year of relief, they were now having problems with these young soldiers of the NPRC who had delivered them from the yoke of suffering by overthrowing the previous APC civilian government. The NPRC had to go, but would they? No one argues with a military government.....and there lay the uncertainty.

However there was already a Notice To Quit on the table. A year before this, in April 1993, while the NPRC was celebrating its first year in office at the National Stadium, the Chairman of the NPRC and Head of State Captain Valentine Strasser had promised the nation and the International Community in a national broadcast, that his military government would hand power back to the civilians by the 29th of April 1996, the date of their fourth anniversary. Now, a year later, the International Community continued to hold the NPRC to that commitment.

Of course, the most noble and respectable way out was through Multi-Party elections. The NPRC soon unveiled its timetable. A twelve-month Democratic Transition Program would begin early in 1995, leading to parliamentary and presidential elections, with the official hand-over ceremony a few weeks later. An Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) was going to be in charge of preparing and conducting the elections. The National Commission for Democracy (NCD) was entrusted with the task of educating the voters about democracy and their behavior during the period..

This announcement was music to many ears.. The United Nations was going to play a big role in the process, with money, equipment and personnel.. The chairman of INEC was going to be a Sierra Leonean and former Under Secretary General at the United Nations: Dr. James Jonah, and among other commissioners working with him would be another just-retired old boy of the United Nations, Dr. Amadu Fadlu-Deen.

1995 arrived. Visitors to United Nations House and the INEC headquarters in Freetown began to see a surge of activity, with new jeeps (SUVs), computers and foreign experts arriving for the operation.. James Jonah flew out on an international campaign, to muster moral support and financial contributions for the Fifteen Million US Dollars (or more) needed to fund the 1996 elections.

The Democratic Transition ran into problems almost as soon as it began. It was a monumental and fundamental poser..... how can you conduct nationwide elections in a country, when over two-thirds of the land is affected by civil war? Since independence in 1961, every general election in Sierra Leone was conducted on the basis of geographical constituencies. This was always a welcome moment, the only opportunity that the voting population had to be pampered by various election candidates, and to openly damn those deceitful politicians who disappeared as soon as they had won the battle of the ballot box, thus sentencing their constituents to another five year term of neglect, extreme poverty and backwardness.

In addition, this custom of Constituency Elections had been converted into a human right and documented in the 1991 Constitution.

Section 31 says: “ Every citizen of Sierra Leone being eighteen years of age and above, and of sound mind, shall have the right to vote, and accordingly shall be entitled to be registered as a voter for the purpose of public elections and referenda.”

The simple truth that was now presenting itself to the NPRC government was this. If the 1991 Constitution was to be respected, if the people's basic right to register as voters and choose their own leaders was not to be violated, then elections should not be held while the war continued, be-

cause so many war victims - those hiding in the bush, refugees in neighboring countries, internally displaced citizens, people trapped in rebel-held areas, and others who had been psychologically battered by the experience - would not be able to vote. It was a Catch-22 situation....you hold an election to allow the people to choose their own leaders, when you know that most of them will be unable to vote anyway.....you are breaking the rules of democracy to usher in democracy. It did not smell good.

Worse still, the 1991 Constitution of Sierra Leone clearly dictates the mechanism for running general elections.

Section 38 Subsection One says: “Sierra Leone shall be divided into constituencies for the purpose of electing.....members of parliament.”

Section 38 Subsection Two says: “Every constituency established.....shall return one member of parliament.”

Section 74 states "The number of constituencies shall be over sixty.”

And Section 38 Subsection Three says; “The boundaries of each constituency shall be such that the number of inhabitants thereof is as nearly equal to the population quota as is reasonably practicable; provided that the number of inhabitants of such a constituency may be greater or less than the population quota, in order to take account of means of communications, geographical features, density of population, the distribution of different communities, the areas and boundaries of the chiefdoms and other administrative or traditional areas.”

Attorney General Claude Campbell was one of Sierra Leone’s best, and he would surely have recited these concretized and inviolable provisions of the constitution to the men of the NPRC. The problem was enough to derail the Democratic Transition. However, it was not long before an escape route was offered, allegedly by the highly respected Chairman Jonah of INEC. Instead of having to cancel the elections, why not go for an alternative called Proportional Representation (PR).

Dr. Jonah may have borrowed the idea from Germany, where this system has worked so well for decades.....he is an expert in German history. But three arguments against this PR idea were too solid to make it a fitting alternative for Sierra Leone.

First, as has already been stated, Sierra Leoneans were accustomed to the old system of elections by geographical constituencies. It was not perfect, but it worked. People in well over sixty constituencies went to the polls on election day across the land and voted. Under Proportional Representation PR the whole country becomes one constituency. In Germany where the system works beautifully, every voter has the chance to exercise this freedom across the land , because the atmosphere is peaceful. In Sierra

Leone however, that was not going to be possible, because the RUF rebels were controlling some parts of the country, terrorizing others, and had left still other areas an uninhabitable splash of debris. So if the system had to be changed, surely the voters had to be consulted, because the only other legal instrument qualified to change it, Parliament, was suspended after the coup...and in a one-Party state, these representatives had no claim to credibility anyway.

Second, under the 1991 Constitution, any election for the nation's leaders other than by geographical constituencies is simply illegal.

Third and most important, here was a war raging fiercely in two thirds of the country. The voters, the indispensable player in this exercise, were being gunned down, butchered, injured or captured, living in the bush out of fear, or too psychologically intoxicated by their experience to enjoy and properly exercise this most crucial human right. Remember that this was supposed to be the first truly democratic elections in over twenty years.

On the 15th September 1995, as the temperature of election fever continued to rise, two young men visited me at the offices of my newspaper called 1-2-3 (Father, Son and Holy Spirit). They introduced themselves as Yahya Labay Kamara and Alpha Lampana Kamara, brothers from Bo Town, the administrative capital of the southern province. Yahya and Alpha told me they were seriously concerned that the NPRC government was going ahead with elections while the country was in turmoil. The rebel war was talking a heavy toll on life, property and personal security, and it appeared to them that the authorities in Freetown were not aware of the full extent of the trouble.

They told me that Bo Town, the provincial capital 120 miles away was experiencing a flood of displaced people who had either just escaped a rebel attack on one of the outlying villages, or were simply afraid that their village would be the next target for a surprise blitz. Many of the escapees were arriving in Bo in a wretched condition having lost all their belongings, and their stories were chilling. If these were the same people who were going to be asked to vote in four months time in the January and February 1996 elections, it would be most unfair. The Kamara brothers told me they had spoken to many of these displaced, and their overwhelming desire was to return to their homes. They were not interested in anything else, not even elections.

As we discussed the situation I told the Kamaras that I shared their view, and this kind of uneasiness was mainly why I had decided not to enter the political battlefield. The best thing, we agreed, was that the war should first be brought to an end. With peace prevailing, these war victims could return to their homes, then they would be ready for elections. I asked Yahya

and Alpha why they had come to me with these concerns. They replied that their real aim was to alert the NPRC government and the country to this mistake, but they did not know how to go about it. So they decided to come to me. They had watched my two documentaries on Sierra Leone, they had heard about my Trust Fund for displaced people, I owned a newspaper, and I was a prominent citizen, the kind that the NPRC government and the people would listen to.

I could not disguise how impressed I was, that two young men-obviously under 30 years of age-who should otherwise be chasing the good life on the fast lane, could be so inspired to think seriously about the state of their country and do something about it. Patriotism could not be made of sterner stuff, I said. However I needed a few days to ponder the matter, pray over it, then decide what to do. Before we parted we prayed. I offered a Christian prayer for guidance, and they followed with a Muslim prayer called the Al Fatiya, the equivalent of The Lords Prayer.

As the days wore on, the more I thought it over the more I became convinced that it was no coincidence that the Kamara brothers had come to me with their concerns. This must have been my commission from the Almighty in Heaven to step into action. I should be the one to speak out.....why did they not take their concern elsewhere. Why me?

By the time Yahya and his brother returned five days later I had irrevocably made up my mind. I proposed that we launch a national crusade and call it the Peace Before Election Campaign, PEBEC (pronounced PIBEK). As there were only four months to go to the elections, our campaign would have to be swift, dynamic and effective. Yahya and Alpha were low on cash, so I was going to pay for everything. We agreed that Yahya and Alpha should be the co-chairmen of PEBEC, and I would be the vice chairman. At the same time I asked Yahya, the better-educated of the two, to join the staff of the 1-2-3 newspaper, so that he could earn some money and participate in the campaign with confidence.

Our first move was to break the news on the front page of my 1-2-3 newspaper on the 21st of September 1995. The headline read, PEACE BEFORE ELECTION CAMPAIGN BEGINS. Following that, in the next few months, we did the following:

- We wrote a letter to the NPRC government, informing them about the existence of the campaign, in order the eliminate the possibility of a raid on our premises by the soldiers.
- We held a series of meetings with college students.
- We printed two sets of fliers, distributing the first set among citizens during the evening rush hour, and pasting the second set on walls and trees and poles in all areas of Freetown.

- We visited a number of youth camps in the east and center of Freetown to acquaint these young dropouts with the situation.
- We made a round of visits to camps holding displaced war victims.

My assistant, Lascaff, received his first rude shock at the Old Fourah Bay College Displaced Camp in Cline Town, just next to the Freetown Harbor, which the locals call Watta Key. The leaking 130 year old concrete shell was on three floors. Thin black plastic sheets were taped around all the areas where windows used to be. The ground floor was dark and cold, and most of the children had runny noses, which was a sign that the five month old rainy season with its cold winds had given them a pounding. Forget about medicines. Families lived in sections, but there were no screens to separate one family from the other; no wardrobes, no chairs, no tables, no benches, not even boxes. Just the bare floor and walls, and no privacy.

Up on the second floor there was a huge gaping hole on the wooden floor, and while I was fearing the worst, children were unsuspectingly playing near and around it. One slip, and there would be a funeral. But then what was the alternative? The women complained that they had suffered throughout the rainy season, because the taping on the plastic sheets could not withstand the force of the storm--winds from the mighty Rokel River which was only some 100 yards from this old, dilapidated building. I recognized one woman whom I had met twice during my visits here to distribute food and other items. "How are you, Fatmatta?". She was fine, she told me. "And where is your little girl who helped to carry my things to the car last time?".

That little girl had gone two miles to the center of Freetown to beg. This was now the norm among the displaced. No one was coming to meet them and help, so they had to go out and beg. At first the adults discovered that they were being ignored by the givers, so they began to send their children, aged between four and ten years. The kids set off in the morning on their daily trek accompanied by one of the women inmates. Once in town, the children spread out, while their "security officer" kept watch from a safe distance. The sheer picture of a kindergartener, shabbily dressed with rough hair, her hand stretched out with bony, innocent and pleading face, was enough to invoke pity and bring out a donation. And so the children---mainly girls---invariably returned home with something that could buy ingredients for the day's cooking.

The camp leader at Old Fourah Bay College then took us further up to the third floor. It was here that I almost broke down in tears. A mother had opened a pot of steaming rice and was lining up the plastic plates to serve the day's meal, while only eight feet away her infant daughter was sitting on a potty, emptying her bowels.

We also took our message to the Old Chanrai Displaced Camp at Kissy Dockyard, on the eastern fringes of Freetown. The situation here was certainly no better. The building was an old and disused one-story warehouse in concrete. Apart from a few vents on the upper parts of the walls, there was no inlet for sunlight or air; just one door on opposite sides of this 200-yard long concrete box. It was dark and hot inside every hour of the day, especially when the sun was overhead. During the dry season (November to April) they could escape out into the yard or take shelter under a few trees around the vicinity. But now in October, the rain was still confining them to the darkness and heat inside.

What made their situation particularly worse was the overcrowding at this camp....too little space for too many. Every little infection that broke out would spread like wildfire, and children were the most vulnerable. Two years before this, in 1993, I walked into the camp and found almost every child with a white medicinal paste on it's face, believed to be calamine. The leader told me then that there was an outbreak of measles which was claiming the lives of one child per day on average. That lasted for three months. Then it was malaria, and after that it was something else like chicken pox or diarrhea, then it was malaria all over again.

But even now in October 1995 the war-weary women of the Kissy Dockyard Displaced Camp, who had come mainly from the northern province, were still struggling to keep their children alive, and every month four or five funerals of children were being held.

"Look at that woman over there." The camp chairman pointed to a young sad face in her late twenties, seated on the floor with her back on the cold concrete wall. "She is crying every day. She had her baby tied to her back when the rebels arrived. She joined the other villagers and they fled to a nearby bush. Then she realized that the baby was missing. It had dropped from her back during all the confusion. She wanted to run back to look for the child, but that would have been foolish. She could not even cry aloud for her missing baby, because if the rebels heard the noise they would simply find them....and you know what that means. She spent three months living in the bush with her family and other villagers, until they managed to find a road that took them to Freetown. They walked all the way." The young sad face pulled up a piece of her wrap-around skirt with her right hand, and touched the corners of her watering eyes.