

NATIONS

IN • THE • NEWS

Sierra Leone

Recovering with Canada's help

The people of Sierra Leone have suffered enormously in the brutal civil war that broke out in 1990. A cease-fire was called in fall 2000, and the bloodletting has lessened as the Sierra Leone Army and the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone extend their control into rebel-held territories. Further progress is expected this fall: peacekeepers will be deployed to the diamond-rich areas over which much of the war has been fought, and two new instruments for peace and justice will be established—the Special Court and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

The civil war has blighted the lives of children in Sierra Leone. Almost half the country's 4.5 million people have fled their homes. Those who reach comparative safety in the cities find that basic social services are inadequate. Others wait to return home from refugee camps in neighbouring countries.

Many families were separated in flight and children were injured, lost or orphaned—or died. Those who survived remain haunted by the appalling deprivations, dismemberments and deaths they have witnessed. Adolescent girls traditionally are seen carrying younger siblings on their backs; in too many cases they bear the additional burden of heading their impoverished, homeless families.

An estimated 5500 children have been "recruited" into various armies—a substantial contingent of the 300 000 child soldiers around the world. Thousands of Sierra Leonean boys and girls have been abducted to provide slave labour for troops. Now a second generation of child soldiers is being born of girl children forced into sexual slavery.

Amid these serious problems, Canada supports international efforts to help the government of Sierra Leone restore peace, order and good governance for its people.

Bringing children home

In 1997, humanitarian agencies led by UNICEF established Child Protection Programs (CPP) to assist war-affected children in the southern region of Sierra Leone. CPP identifies, documents, traces and reunites children separated from their families.

Some 348 ex-combatant and unaccompanied children were reunited with their families in southern Sierra Leone through the initial efforts of World Vision Sierra Leone (WVSL) and World Vision Canada, supported by CIDA. Another 270 children were demilitarized and placed in foster care. But a soldier does not return to being a child overnight.

WVSL helps the girls and boys reintegrate into their families and communities. Aiding the process are activities to rebuild communities. WVSL has repaired schoolrooms and established village-based skills training centres.

The communities themselves are learning more about child rights and protection, including basic child welfare issues.

With ongoing support from CIDA's Child Protection Action Plan, WVSL is continuing and expanding its efforts. Among other things, it is trying to introduce child rights and protection sensitization efforts into rebel-held areas of eastern Sierra Leone.



Young children wait their turn for a food handout from the World Food Programme at a refugee camp in Bo, central Sierra Leone.

A role for neighbouring countries

The most obvious impact of a civil war on a neighbouring country is the influx of refugees seeking safety and sustenance, often for many years. In Guinea alone there are 400 000 refugees from Sierra Leone. West African nations have agreed on a co-ordinated regional approach to meet the needs of the war-affected, especially children.

This past August, the Economic Community of West African States joined with Canada to set up the Child Protection Unit. The Unit will become a critical forum for all issues related to the protection of war-affected children in West Africa. Its primary role will be advocacy, seeking to secure strong regional linkages between governments, civil society and international organizations. It will also monitor the situation of children in conflicts, and will promote preventive mechanisms and the rehabilitation/reintegration of war-affected children.

Talking Drum Studio

In the confusion and horror of war, truth and accurate news are hard to find. Fortunately, reliable news and information are available in Sierra Leone over radio, Africa's primary mass communications medium. The source is Talking Drum Studio (TDS), which creates and distributes programming designed to promote and consolidate peace. The station has become a favourite of many Sierra Leoneans.