

JUSTICE COMES TO SIERRA LEONE

With strong support from Canada, a unique tribunal is working to bring justice—and peace—to a war-torn country.

Edward Conteh was walking down a street in Sierra Leone's capital of Freetown last spring when he saw the man who had entered his urban neighbourhood at the height of the country's civil war and hacked off his left arm with a machete. Conteh, a schoolteacher, rushed home to tell his son, who immediately wanted to search out and kill the man. But his father held him back. "No more revenge," he said. "What we need is justice."

One of the countless survivors of his country's bloody 1991-2001 civil war, Conteh is watching justice begin to unfold in the Special Court for Sierra Leone. Set up in 2002, the Court has a three-year mandate to prosecute those who bear the greatest responsibility for atrocities committed since a peace agreement signed in 1996 failed.

The court has 11 standing indictments against the leaders of all three warring factions, as well as the former president of neighbouring Liberia, Charles Taylor, now living in exile in Nigeria. The crimes range from murder, rape and acts of terror to sexual slavery and the conscription of children into an armed force.

As a member of the UN Security Council in 2000, Canada helped to establish the Special Court for Sierra Leone and continues to be instrumental in its operation, contributing both funds and personnel. According to Chief Prosecutor David Crane, Canadians make up 21 percent of staff at the Office of the Prosecutor, the largest international contingent. Six lawyers in the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade's (DFAIT) Young Professionals International initiative have worked at the

Court in the past two years. And Brigadier-General Pierre Boutet, a retired judge advocate general in Canada's Department of National Defence, serves as a trial judge.

Mora Johnson, a former political officer with DFAIT and now a University of Toronto law student who interned at the Court for three months last summer, says that it's not enough to deliver justice; it's also important

to show the people who suffered so much in the war that justice is being done. To this end, the Court has held "town hall" meetings all over the country, where role-playing exercises and question-and-answer sessions attempt to explain the role of the Court to victims and perpetrators alike.

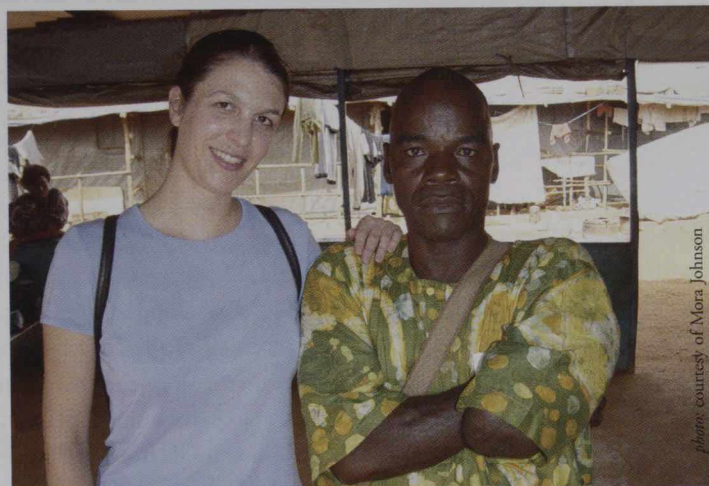
"If one of the Court's goals is to bring a sense of justice and accountability, it's

important that ordinary people know what's happening," says Johnson.

It was during a visit to an amputee camp that Johnson met Edward Conteh, whose arm had been mutilated. Later, she ran into the schoolteacher again in the Court, where he was watching the early proceedings. Conteh's decision to seek solace in the process unfolding before him rather than to pursue a personal vendetta left a deep impression.

"He knew that revenge would only perpetuate the cycle of violence," Johnson says. "In a way, Edward's response encapsulated the philosophy behind the creation of the Special Court: there can be no peace without justice." ❁

For more information on the Special Court for Sierra Leone, see www.sc-sl.org.



Mora Johnson and Edward Conteh in a Freetown amputee camp: no peace without justice