

NATIONS

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Sierra Leone: A society to rebuild

Located near the equator, Sierra Leone is a small land of plains and plateaus. Its fragile economy is based mainly on mining (bauxite, diamonds) and the production of coffee and cocoa beans. European contact goes back to 1462, when explorer Pedro de Sintra sighted and mapped this part of Africa's west coast, giving it the Portuguese name of Serra Leôa, or "Lion Mountains."

With a population of approximately 5 million, Sierra Leone is one of the poorest countries in the world. Its economy has declined considerably since civil war broke out in 1991. On the UN Development Programme's Human Development Index, Canada ranks first; Sierra Leone ranks last. Two-way trade between Canada and Sierra Leone is almost non-existent.

Sierra Leone long served as an important post for the trade in slaves between Africa and North America. British traders dislodged the Portuguese in the 17th century. In 1787, Britain established the settlement of Freetown, now the capital, as a haven for newly freed slaves. Sierra Leone became a British colony in 1808. It gained independence in 1961, joining the Commonwealth, and in 1971 it became a republic. Seven years later, its President and Prime Minister, Siaka Stevens, instituted a dictatorship. Democracy was brought back in 1991 by his successor, General Joseph Momoh, but he was soon ousted.

A horrific insurgency ensued, waged by the Revolutionary United Front (RUF); this left close to 100 000 dead, while warring factions deliberately amputated the limbs of thousands of people, including small children. Over 3 million Sierra Leoneans have been displaced by war within and outside the country; of these, more than 60 percent are children. Despite the signing of the Lomé Peace Accord in July 1999, fighting has continued in many parts of the country—as have human rights abuses, the majority perpetrated by the RUF.

Canada is concerned at the ordeal to which Sierra Leoneans, particularly children, have been subjected. Since the beginning of the conflict, Canada has

given millions of dollars in humanitarian assistance plus support to the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone. Most of the funding has been channelled through the Canadian International Development Agency. Targeted have been the most vulnerable areas and people in need. The help has included emergency food aid, shelter and emergency health supplies.

Last April 29 and 30, Foreign Affairs Minister Axworthy visited Sierra Leone to evaluate the country's political situation and to renew Canada's commitment to providing support for war-affected children, peacekeeping and peacebuilding activities.

The Minister announced that Canada would provide \$250 000 for a National Commission for War-Affected Children, to be created by the Sierra Leone government. The Commission will ensure that the Sierra Leone government gives priority to children's needs in policy making and resource allocation.

Said Mr. Axworthy, "The people of Sierra Leone, particularly children, have suffered tremendously. It is essential that we restore a sense of hope and ensure they can live a long, productive and secure life." ●—



FREETOWN



photos: Sierra Leone Web (www.sierra-leone.org)