

## **Transcript Sierra Leone – 2004 – Sylvia Fletcher:**

Sierra Leone suffered from a tumultuous and violent political history in its post-Colonial period, until three successful elections deemed free and fair enabled peaceful transfers of power according to the Constitution and election laws. Three anecdotes from the Local Government elections of 2004 and the post-2004 electoral reform process illustrate some of the many inputs by Sierra Leonean leadership with international assistance that made this possible. But first, some background.

The rivalry between the two major political parties, the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) and the All People's Congress (APC) has been intense since Independence in 1961. With the exception of the rule of Sir Milton Margai from 1961 to 1964, it's a history of abuses of power, exclusion of opposition parties, corruption, one-party rule, disputed elections, and a pattern of coups, some bloodless, others ending in the execution of coup leaders. Between 1967-1968 there were three military coups, arguing corruption and political exclusion.

The Siaka Stevens government (APC) took office in 1968 and began a process of power consolidation such that the opposition SLPP boycotted the 1973 elections. Alleged coup-plotters in 1974 were executed, nationwide demonstrations were put down violently in 1977, and a new constitution in 1978 created one-party rule. Elections in 1982 were contested, with alleged irregularities. Then, after 18 years as head-of-state, Stevens retired at the end of his term in 1985. His successor, Joseph Momoh, who had been head of the military, was elected without opposition. He was criticized for corruption, and an alleged coup attempt in 1987 ended with arrests and the execution of the Vice-President and others.

In 1990, with domestic and international pressure for reforms, the APC Parliament adopted a new constitution providing for a multi-party system, and subsequently the SLPP was revived, together with other parties, to contest multi-party elections in late 1992. In the meantime, in March 1991 the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) rebels, commanded by Foday Sankoh, entered Sierra Leone from Liberia, aided by Liberian President Charles Taylor. The RUF proceeded to control most of Eastern Sierra Leone without effective resistance from the Momoh government. Abuses of power, corruption, the inability to pay civil servants, and unemployed youth contributed to a general collapse, and in April 1992 a group of young army officers staged a coup, sending Momoh into exile in Guinea.

The newly established National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC), initially well-received, suspended the constitution, banned political parties and limited press freedom. The NPRC pushed the RUF back to the Liberian border, but an alleged coup against the NPRC was put down, resulting in the execution of army officers and some Momoh government officials. In 1994, another NPRC rivalry resulted in exile of the deputy NPRC leader. NPRC in-fighting weakened their ability to fight the RUF, which regained control over the East and marched toward the capital, Freetown. The NPRC contracted the mercenary group Executive Outcomes, which drove back the RUF in short order. However, in 1996, NPRC leader Strasser was arrested by his bodyguards and flown into exile, and the coup leader, Julius Maada-Bio, who had been elevated by

Strasser as deputy NPRC leader, announced a return to democratically elected government.

Elections were held in 1996, and SLPP won the elections under Ahmed Tejan Kabbah, a retired UN official who had not been a political protagonist during the previous decades. President Kabbah negotiated a peace agreement with the RUF in late 1996 in Abidjan and terminated the contract of Executive Outcomes, which created an opportunity for the RUF to renew its attacks. By March 1997 the Abidjan peace agreement had collapsed, and in May 1997 a group of army officers staged a coup, establishing the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC), with President Kabbah going into exile in Guinea. The AFRC invited the RUF to join them, and Freetown was over-run in a wave of violence called "Operation Pay Yourself."

A military force sent by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) combatted the AFRC/RUF junta and reinstated President Kabbah by March 1998.

President Kabbah disbanded the army and 25 soldiers were executed for their role in the 1997 coup. ECOMOG was unable to defeat the RUF, and the Kabbah government, supported by the international community, entered into peace talks with the RUF, resulting in the Lomé Peace Accord in July 1999, under the negotiation of Attorney General Solomon Berewa, a constitutional law expert.

In October 1999 the United Nations established UNAMSIL, what became the largest peace-keeping operation of the time. The security situation continued to be compromised by groups of RUF rebels, with RUF leader Sankoh refusing to commit his rebels to the disarmament process. Eventually, with the efforts of a newly constituted army, UN peace-keepers, and a newly trained police force, disarmament was completed. Sankoh was arrested as he was trying to flee Freetown during one of the episodes of RUF fighting.

In the elections of 2002, President Kabbah was re-elected with an SLPP majority in parliament. Solomon Berewa was elected Vice-President.

The Kabbah government, supported by UNAMSIL and bilateral assistance, proceeded to reform and train the police, reconstitute the army, conclude disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of former combatants, undertake reconciliation under the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, renew judicial presence across the country, and begin a number of governance reforms. Among those were the adoption of the Local Government Act, the product of a task force presided by Vice-President Solomon Berewa. The Local Government Elections of 2004 re-established local government councils after thirty years of absence, with innovations such as mandated seats for women, youth and disabled people in Ward Development Committees.

My first anecdote concerns the creation of a national radio network which supported the peace process and crucial transition elections. During the armed conflict, many national non-governmental organizations (NGOs) developed, linked to international humanitarian assistance. Many were community-based groups and some were dedicated to the "good governance" agenda and human rights. During the 2002 electoral campaign, the international community supported some of these Sierra Leonean organizations to provide radio programming on topics of political dialogue, civic and voter education, the need for reconciliation, and similar topics. Radio communication was paramount. Small

local radio stations with limited broadcasting range had their own frequencies and local programming.

For the 2004 elections, these local radio stations were integrated into a national radio network which would disseminate the voter education content from the National Electoral Commission (NEC). On election day they linked into a national chain.

I can remember sitting by my radio on election day, listening to the transmission of news relayed by these local stations to inform the public on live radio about the conduct of the elections throughout the day. Then, when the polls had closed, we waited for live transmission of the ballot counts from each election site. These were read over radio by the authorized local official at each site, in the presence of political party representatives and local observers, who were accredited at each polling place. People huddled around their radio sets all over the country, listening live to the outcome of the votes, as tallied at each polling place. There was full transparency in real time of the election results, as witnessed by thousands of poll workers, party representatives and observers.

We are well accustomed to watching live reporting of vote counts on TV in many countries, but this was novel for Sierra Leone in 2004, the vote count from each polling place being broadcast live to all radio listeners across the country, through the National Radio Network. The credibility of the elections process was virtually guaranteed by this “all-eyes” and “all-ears” initiative.

A recurring complaint since Independence was corruption of election officials and election payments to polls workers. In late 2003, the Government of Sierra Leone asked the UN to manage the payment of poll workers for the Local Government Elections. The head of UNAMSIL asked me, as the UNDP head of the governance program, if we could do that. Sure, I said, knowing that there were no banks operating outside of Freetown. The use of cell-phone payments had not yet started in Sierra Leone. We would have to deliver cash for a series of election events, starting with voter registration, then validation of voter lists, and finally election day. We would need to move exact amounts of cash to every location in the country, to arrive precisely on time, to be distributed to specific people, who needed to sign that they had received their specific allotted payment.

The transport of the cash payments would be done by UN peace-keepers, in sealed parcels delivered to them by UNDP, my office. There would be Sierra Leone police escorts, as well.

With the NEC, we proceeded to develop the detailed list of personnel at each site, together with their job titles and payment amounts. We assigned UNDP and some UNAMSIL staff to prepare manila envelopes with a list for each envelope, containing the names of people, their function, and amount of pay. These lists had to be signed by each recipient, then returned to UNDP as proof of payment, before going to the Government, the owner of the cash. There were also “hand-over” lists for the delivery of envelopes at each stage of the transport.

The day before a payment convoy was to depart, we would assemble at UNAMSIL, under armed guards, and on long tables, would proceed to manually count out the Sierra Leonean currency, stuff the envelopes, seal them, and aggregate them into

bundles for each location and each vehicle. The next morning, the UNAMSIL convoys would depart, and deliver their envelopes of cash.

Early in the morning of the day we were preparing the cash packets, I would go in my UNDP vehicle with a UNAMSIL escort to the basement of the Sierra Leone Central Bank to receive the total allocation of money for that day's delivery of cash envelopes to election workers. I would sign for the cash bundles, then proceed to drive across Freetown to the UNAMSIL compound. The Sierra Leone Police was also providing a vehicle and motorcycle escort for my convoy.

The first day of this expedition, as we were coming up from the underground driveway of the Central Bank, the police sirens were turned on. That was most unusual, because I knew President Kabbah hated police sirens and the public hated them, reminding them of previous more dictatorial regimes. As we were traversing the downtown streets, my vehicle passed the vehicle of the SRSG, the Special Representative of the Secretary General, the head of the UN in Sierra Leone. Immediately, my phone rang. "Sylvia, is that you I just passed with a police escort blaring sirens?" "Yes, Sir, that's my convoy, and we're on our way to UNAMSIL from the Central Bank." "But, last week the Chancellor of Germany was here on an official visit, and the President didn't give him a convoy with sirens!" "Yes, I know. But the Chancellor of Germany was not transporting the equivalent of one million dollars of Sierra Leone's money. That's what I have in my vehicle. I'm on my way to stuff it in envelopes for the elections payments of tomorrow!" That was quite an improvised, but successful, way for the NEC and the President to assure the citizens that there was no corruption in the payments to election workers. Miraculously, or due to very careful safeguards, we had a perfect record, certified by an external audit by the KPMG affiliate, including a few envelopes labeled "BOAT PAYMENTS" for the rental of boats to complete our chain of deliveries in some lowland areas.

My final story is the most significant. After the Local Government elections, various evaluation reports pointed to weaknesses in the NEC and elections systems. A major electoral reform agenda was adopted by Government and supported by a joint EAD/UNDP project, the Elections Assistance Division of the Political Office of the UN. The Chief Elections Commissioner had resigned, and I recall that at least two candidates were rejected after vetting, the vetting including representatives of the political parties.

There was a mini-crisis related to this appointment, in anticipation of what was expected to be a highly contested presidential election in 2006. President Kabbah would not be running. He had defeated the APC candidate, Ernest Bai Koroma, in 2002. The SLPP candidate would be the sitting Vice-President, Dr. Solomon Berewa. Vice-President Berewa, according to the unfortunate electoral history since Independence, would be expected by cynical observers, to benefit from any electoral fraud that the NEC might initiate or tolerate. It was the SLPP that was appointing the new NEC Chief Electoral Commissioner.

There was plenty of discussion and worried hand-wringing among Sierra Leonean activists and international supporters of the post-war transition. I knew that

Vice-President Berewa's opinion would be extremely important for this appointment by President Kabbah. One of the hallmarks of the post-war governance initiatives was the participation of women and youth, historically under-represented groups in elected office. In fact, Dr. Berewa had been a champion for including women's participation in the Local Government Ward Development Committees and was also active encouraging women to run for Parliament and for his party to place them in "electable" positions on the ballot.

In a moment of reflection on this problem, I thought I would ask Dr. Berewa if he would consider naming a woman to Chair the NEC. This would be a "first" and might bring a fresh sense of credibility and trust in the management of the NEC. I relied on the deep trust I had developed with Dr. Berewa, ever since he was heading the peace negotiations in Lomé...but that's another story. Dr. Berewa said "yes" to considering a woman candidate, and asked who I would suggest. I remembered UNDP's old motto that we aspired to be the government's most trusted advisor. I consulted a number of women in civil society, the university, and government. They came up with several names, and each one was discarded for one reason or another, until they coincided with one name they all supported. I took that name to Dr. Berewa, and President Kabbah appointed Christiana Thorpe to be the Chief Electoral Commissioner.

Christiana Thorpe was a well-respected educationalist, who had studied in Ireland, became a nun, was head of a secondary school in Freetown, resigned her religious vows, and was married to an APC member of Parliament, but was known to be politically very independent. Christiana Thorpe completed the NEC reforms and presided over a very difficult election in 2007. Dr. Berewa lost the election in a run-off and accepted the victory of his APC rival.

This election brought closure to the history of allegations of electoral corruption, post-election coups and imperfect transfers of power. Since the 2007 elections, there have been clean elections and clean government transfers, to date.

Visionary leadership matters for transitions, and that was exhibited by President Kabbah and Vice-President Berewa in extremely complex times for Sierra Leone. There are many ways to promote the credibility of elections, and the trust of the people relies on transparency of the process, as well as the integrity of elections systems. The National Radio Network, involving dozens of reporters and community radio stations, broadcasting civic and voter education then transmitting the election results live enabled that trust.