

Liberia: Healing the Wounds of Civil War

Author: IWPR

Most Liberians say they are ready to forgive, if not forget, atrocities committed by fighters. Jerome Verdier's best friend's mother still weeps when she sees him. Sixteen years ago, her son left the house he shared with his old schoolmate to look for food just as Liberia's civil war was beginning to rage. Charles Peah never came home, one of tens of thousands of Liberians who simply disappeared into unmarked graves.

Now Verdier's new job as head of Liberia's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, TRC, means he may come face to face with the people who killed his friend.

"He was like a little brother to me. We met in second grade, grew up in the same community, and then he moved away but came back to live with me because of the war," Verdier, a US-trained environmental lawyer, told IWPR. "He never came home from the food search. Even now his mother cries if she sees me."

The dynamic young lawyer and civil rights activist is among nine prominent Liberians given the responsibility, as TRC commissioners, of healing the wounds caused by decades of vicious conflict interrupted by periods of fragile peace. During the worst days of the war, he organised food distribution and struggled to document abuses, risking the wrath of the factions who battled to control Monrovia, the capital city.

He remembers narrowly escaping execution when his would-be killers were distracted by a passing food lorry. "They held us at gunpoint and ordered us to strip," he said. "That [escape] was by the grace of God."

Although Verdier himself was lucky, an estimated quarter of a million people in a population of just over three million died during the longest period of civil war, lasting 14 years. Hundreds of thousands more were raped, robbed or mutilated.

Now, after more than two years of peace, the country is struggling to reintegrate over one hundred thousand disarmed ex-combatants back into the society they victimised. Many of them were children, abducted from their families and forced to commit atrocities by a mixture of drugs and threats.

"This country may never find its bearings and reconcile its people if the truth about its past is not adequately revealed and understood and its people made to account for their actions. People died, people lost properties, people have been displaced, people are in refugee camps ... The TRC will follow all leads. It will assemble all pieces of evidence and whatever evidence points to any Liberian, inside and outside of Liberia," said Verdier.

During the ceremony to launch the TRC last month, Liberia's new president, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, stressed the need for reconciliation and pledged to strike a balance between restorative and retributive justice. The outspoken new head of state has been imprisoned several times herself, and once threatened with rape. She pledged to forgive those who targeted her personally. "I have come to believe that when the truth is told, humanity is redeemed from the cowardice claws of violence," she said.

The bullet-ridden Executive Mansion, where the ceremony was held, rang with thunderous applause when

she warned, "Our government will ensure that those culpable of crimes against humanity will face up to their crimes, no matter when, where or how."

Many former faction commanders were elected as senators or parliamentary representatives in elections last October and November and are now part of Johnson-Sirleaf's government. Former warlords Adolphus "Peanut Butter" Dolo and Prince Yormie Johnson, notorious for supervising the torture and killing of former President Samuel Doe, were two of many dubious characters elected to the Senate. But the TRC's head has promised to use his powers of subpoena to pursue those most culpable of gross human rights violations.

"No member of society is immune to the TRC process," said Verdier, confirming that it is part of its mandate to make recommendations for prosecution. "I am very, very confident that Liberians are determined to do away with the culture of impunity. If members of the current government are found to be guilty of rights violations, especially heinous crimes against humanity, yes, definitely [they

may be prosecuted]."

Most Liberians say that for the sake of peace they are ready to forgive, if not forget, the atrocities committed by rank-and-file fighters. "The memories ambush you at odd times," said Katherine Kebbah, now working as a nanny in the capital.

During the war, she was forced to flee several times and was raped by rebel forces loyal to Charles Taylor, the richest, most powerful and best connected of the warlords, who fought his way to the presidency, where he became a kind of mafia don, trafficking diamonds and timber and terrorising the population.

"The man take me into the bush, he do what he wanted," said Kebbah. Her father and sister were being forced to have sex with each other by the rebels, but her grandmother bravely intervened to save them. Instead, the family house was burned down. Despite her family's suffering, Kebbah said she approves of the TRC and is ready to forgive those who have caused her such pain. "If he [her rapist] can be a Christian, and change his wickedness, I can forgive him," she said.

Corinne Dufka, the West Africa head of Human Rights Watch, said such forgiveness is key to Liberians being able to live in peace together again. But although welcoming the president's commitment to bring those most responsible for crimes against humanity to trial, bypassing the snail-like International Criminal Court in The Hague, she warned, "How those identified as most responsible are to be tried, however, poses a major challenge, especially given the near-collapsed state of the Liberian judicial system.

"Few of Liberia's fifteen counties have prisons or courthouses and lawyers typically earn only 25 US dollars per month."

Despite the challenges, Dufka's organisation recently joined over 300 Liberian and international groups who wrote to President Johnson-Sirleaf urging her to ensure that Taylor stands trial for his crimes. He has already been indicted on seventeen counts of crimes against humanity by a United Nations-backed special court for his part in the war of neighbouring Sierra Leone.

Taylor went into exile in Nigeria two-and-a-half years ago, having first transferred nearly the entire contents of Liberia's Treasury to his various foreign bank accounts. A UN peacekeeping force moved in which eventually allowed last year's parliamentary and presidential elections to take place. The indictment for Sierra Leone charges Taylor with mass murder, rape and the extensive use of child soldiers through the Revolutionary United Front, a Sierra Leonean rebel group notorious for mutilation and murder, which Taylor financed and armed from Liberia.

Even forgiveness, Kobbah agreed, has its limits. After he waged war on them, she said, terrified Liberians tried to reconcile with Taylor by electing him president, but he betrayed them by continuing his human rights violations.

"He said we should forgive and forget him, that's why we put him in the [president's] chair," she said. "But then he go back on his word, he can say anything, anytime [meaning he lied]. He cannot be trusted. Some I can forgive, but not him. Never him."

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