

# Visit to SIERRA LEONE

*Chris Harris*



## Harriet Harman MP March 2004

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## *Introduction*

I had three important reasons to visit Africa

- Many of those who live in my South London constituency of Camberwell and Peckham in Southwark come from Africa. It is now estimated that over 30% of my constituents come from Africa, with some wards made up of almost 50% Africans. I have created strong links with my newly arrived African constituents. Visiting their continent of origin is an important step in strengthening those links still further.
- I share the government's strong commitment to the UK playing a leading role in promoting development and tackling poverty internationally – and in particular protecting children from becoming prey to human trafficking.
- The Prime Minister has asked all ministers to make a priority of working with Africa. He has himself set up the Commission for Africa \*

I spent a week in Sierra Leone in March 2004 during which I

- Met President Kabbah
- Attended the opening of the Sierra Leone Special Court – established by President Kabbah with the support of the United Nations to try those with the greatest responsibility for the most serious crimes during the fighting.
- Travelled to the northern province of Bombali where I visited primary schools and a project for women who had been made vulnerable during the war by losing their families or being taken as “brides” by the soldiers
- Talked to street children living rough in Freetown's Victoria Park
- Had a meeting with the Commission for War Affected Children – established by President Kabbah – to support children who have been affected by the war because they had been taken as child soldiers, had suffered physical injuries, had been taken as “child brides” by soldiers, had been orphaned by the fighting or had missed years of schooling because of the fighting.
- Met the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE) and the 50:50 Group which campaigns for equality for women.
- Met the High Commissioner for the UK in Sierra Leone – John Mitchener.

Following my visit

- I have worked with Tony Baldry MP, Chair of the Parliamentary Select Committee on International Development, to arrange for the Select Committee to hold a hearing in Peckham to take evidence from my Sierra Leonian constituents for the Select Committee's inquiry into “Migration and Development” which is due for completion in July 2004. This will be the first time the Select Committee has held a formal session to take evidence outside Westminster.
- I have arranged for the Secretary of State for Development, Hilary Benn MP, to come to my constituency to meet Africans living in Southwark
- I have reported to the Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Constitutional Affairs, Lord Falconer, on the progress of the Sierra Leone Special Court and my strong support for it.

- I will be exploring whether it will be possible for there to be a trade mission from Southwark Chamber of Commerce (of which I am President) to Sierra Leone.
- I am co-hosting – with Plan International – a meeting in the House of Commons reporting back on my visit.
- I have personally reported back to the Prime Minister on my visit to Sierra Leone.

Before my visit I held a meeting at Southwark Town Hall and was briefed by those from Sierra Leone living in my constituency.

My visit was sponsored and organised by Plan International, a leading non-governmental organisation working in Sierra Leone. I'd like to thank them for making the visit possible and place on record how highly valued the work of Plan Sierra Leone is. While I was in Sierra Leone I heard high praise for their work from those in the schools which Plan had rehabilitated, those working in projects to help those whose lives had been devastated by the fighting and from President Kabbah. Plan work with the local community to build schools, dig wells and train teachers and health workers. Plan's work is particularly focused on the children of Sierra Leone – who suffered most from the fighting and who are the key to Sierra Leone having a prosperous and secure future.

### *Sierra Leone*



### *Close connections between Africa and South London*

When I was first elected MP for Peckham in the South London Borough of Southwark in 1982 it was an overwhelmingly white community. Neighbouring Brixton in Lambeth has long had a large ethnic minority community – but these communities were small in Southwark and they were mainly from the Caribbean rather than Africa.

Over the last decade that changed. I had come to know more about Africa as I grew to know the African communities in Peckham. Southwark is now home to a large community of West Africans, mostly Nigerians, Sierra Leonians and Ghanaians – as well as from the Ivory coast and some East African countries particularly Uganda, Somalia and Tanzania. Between 1991 and 2001 the African population in Southwark more than doubled, and it continues to grow at a rapid rate.



*Above: South London African Women's Organisation Domestic Violence Conference*

It was not hard for me to strike up a good relationship with my new constituents. They are a community which values hard work and places a great emphasis on education. And the African women and I work closely together on our shared concerns such as the need to help mothers struggling to cope with work and family responsibilities, the need for more nurseries and the task of stepping up action against child abuse and domestic violence.

My Sierra Leonian constituents not only study and work hard, but they also play a major part in the political life of the community. My constituency assistant, Dora Dixon-Fyle, is from Freetown. She is a leading councillor in the London Borough of Southwark and

is deputy leader of Southwark's Labour group. The Mayor of Southwark, Columba Blanga, is from Moyamba.

My constituents bring photographs of Africa into my advice surgeries when they come to ask for my help – photos of weddings, elderly family members and smiling children. Long before the national newspapers began to report the appalling fighting and suffering in Sierra Leone, one of my constituents brought in two photos. One showed me a picture of his home. It was a simple home in beautiful fertile countryside. The home was surrounded by a little garden full of flowers. The next photo was what that same home had become. It was burnt nearly to the ground. As I looked closer I saw, to my horror what looked like parts of a body. I thought I must have been seeing it wrong – and pointing at what looked like a severed arm I asked “what's this in the bottom of the photo”. My constituent told me that it was the body parts of his relatives who had been in the home when it was set on fire and were massacred as they fled.

As Foreign Secretary, Robin Cook was being criticised in the House of Commons over the “Sandline” affair – I was telling him that my constituents were coming to see me in my advice surgery to ask me to thank him for what the British Government was doing.

So I thought it was about time for me to visit the continent from which so many of my constituents had come. Though many of them had made their home in Peckham – much of their hearts still remains with their towns and villages in Africa.

The opportunity to visit came when I received two invitations. One, from Geoffrey Robertson QC inviting me in my capacity as Solicitor General, to the opening of the Special Court in Sierra Leone. And the other from Marie Staunton director of Plan International – a children's charity which works with local communities rebuilding Sierra Leone.

My first visit to Africa was a journey to see the country of origin of so many of my constituents. To understand better their concerns, to see for myself what is going on in their country and to play my part in the UK government's important contribution to the future of Sierra Leone.

### *Child Victims*

The focus of my visit was on the task of rebuilding Sierra Leone and, in particular helping the children on who Sierra Leone's future depends.

Children have been the main victims of the fighting in Sierra Leone. I met children who had lost their parents, seen their homes burnt out, seen dead bodies in the streets. Girls told me of how they were taken as “wives” by the rebels and bore their children. Boys told me how they were taken to work for the rebels and then to fight. Many had to flee their homes, thousands had their education disrupted. The children I met told me they want, above all, to be able to go to school and they told of their hopes to make something of their lives and help re-build their country.

These children are the hope for Sierra Leone's future. If their needs are met Sierra Leone can look forward to a better future. If they are not, then the disaffection of hundreds of thousands of children and young people will create further intractable problems for Sierra Leone.

### *The Work of Plan International in Sierra Leone*

I was greatly impressed by the work Plan International undertakes. Plan is the lead Non Governmental Organisation working to support children in Sierra Leone and has been responsible for financing the rehabilitation of 48 schools devastated in the fighting and for training and supporting teachers.

*Below: Children at a rehabilitated school in Makeni*

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Their approach is to sit down and make a plan with the local community to create a better future for their children. Together they build schools, dig wells and train teachers and health workers. Volunteers from the community work with Sierra Leonian Plan staff to run the projects. Their work is based on listening to the children themselves – and then shaping the projects to meet their concerns.

I saw their work in the Northern province of Bombali. Three hours fast driving brought us to Makeni. We visited the United Methodist Church Primary school and spoke to children who study in classes of up to 80. Some classes can't fit into the shells of the buildings and have to take place outside under the trees. We then visited Binkolo Primary School which has just been rehabilitated. They are doing more work to expand their facilities still further as increasing numbers of children want to resume their

education. I was struck by the contrast between the high quality of the school work and the almost complete lack of facilities – no roof, no desk, hardly any books. Yet the drawings of dissections of an eye were good enough to have deserved to be put up on the wall had it been done by a child in one of our local primary schools in Peckham. The children concentrate and work hard, despite being very crowded in the baking heat. The United Methodist Primary School in Makeni Town has yet to be rehabilitated. But with only £24267 and in only 3 months time the children will have a completely rehabilitated school, freshly painted and filled with desks chairs and books.

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### *The Street Children of Freetown's Victoria Park*

The future remains much less certain for the “street children” I met in Victoria Park in Freetown (*pictured above*)

According to the Commission for War Affected Children, set up by the Sierra Leone government, some 3,000 children orphaned and displaced by the war live on the streets. We met some of these children early one morning and they told us how dangerous and miserable their life is as street children. They dare not beg for food – if they do they are beaten. So they work as porters or sweeping the streets and collecting rubbish. They are not in school. If they fall ill or are injured they get no health care. The girls get raped.

The Commission, working with local and international charities, is setting up shelters and skills training for those who've been living on the streets, sometimes for many years. Their work is vital – and it's urgent. The children are highly vulnerable. With the right

support they will become part of the strength of Sierra Leone's future. Without it they face a grim life of struggle and could be easy prey for human traffickers as Sierra Leone opens up to increased travel to and from Europe.

### *Sierra Leone's women struggling for equality*

Women in Sierra Leone play an active part in providing for their families as well as caring for them. I met the women of the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE) in the Northern province of Bombali. They work with Plan to run a project



*Above: Talking to a woman in Makeni*

for women left vulnerable after the fighting. Women taken by soldiers from their villages are now learning hairdressing, needlework and even car mechanics. The women of FAWE had, one day earlier in Makeni, led a demonstration of 200 women which was addressed by President Kabbah. They are demanding equal rights. Many of them seemed just the sort of

people that should be in their national parliament. But the idea that they should go into politics didn't appeal to most of them. One said she didn't want to go into parliament because she wanted to make a difference to peoples' lives rather than just talking about it.

But the members of the 50:50 Group I met in Freetown were strongly committed to getting more women into parliament. They've made progress recently – 14% of the MPs in Sierra Leone Parliament are now women. Recently President Kabbah considered whether they needed quotas to increase women's representation but decided that would need a change in the constitution which he was not in favour of and which he believed would be discrimination. They hope they'll be able to make more progress without such "positive action"

"Let us be frank and admit that despite the progress we have made, a lot more remains to be done to improve the equal participation of women in every area of development of our country.... May this observance of International Women's Day inspire us to unite our strength in enhancing the status of women – our mothers and sisters. In doing so we would be contributing directly and indirectly to the overall economic and social development of our country."

*His Excellency Alhaji Dr. Ahmed Tejan Kabbah, President of the Republic of Sierra Leone, 8<sup>th</sup> March 2004*

There's a strong women's movement which is growing in confidence and places great emphasis on the importance of girls' education and equality of opportunity for women. There's a strong challenge to domestic violence – with posters telling women not to put up with it and men not to do it. But



despite the strong belief among many that a change in the status of women is necessary, outside Freetown female circumcision continues to be carried out as routine on all girls – whether Muslim or Christian – from the age of 6 to 13 years. I found it perplexing to hear women who are so strongly for women’s rights saying it is “not an issue”. While the women in Freetown assert that it causes infection, continuing health problems and incontinence – the women in the Northern Province we met asserted it was “traditional” and helped with cleanliness. It is hard to think of something which so clearly marks inequality between men and women.

### *The Special Criminal Court*

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*Above: At the Special Criminal Court, with Mr Robin Vincent, Registrar of the Special Court, David Crane, Prosecutor of the Court, and Desmond De Silva, the Deputy Prosecutor*

An essential part of rebuilding Sierra Leone is, in the view of President Kabbah and many people we met, the search for justice after the brutality and the fighting. At the end of the fighting President Kabbah appealed to the UN for support from the international community to set up a Special Criminal court to try those with the greatest responsibility for the most serious crimes in the fighting.



*Above: meeting with guards at the Special Court*

“So, this is a Special Court for Sierra Leone, a symbol of the rule of law and an essential element in the pursuit of peace, justice and national reconciliation for the people of Sierra Leone. It is also a Special Court for the international community, a symbol of the rule of international law, especially at a time when some State and non-State actors are increasingly displaying, shamelessly, contempt for the principals of international law, including international humanitarian law and human rights law. This Special Court is good for Sierra Leone. It is also good for the world today. It will certainly contribute to the jurisprudence of international humanitarian law, and enhance the promotion and protection of the fundamental rights of people everywhere.”

*His Excellency Alhaji Dr. Ahmed Tejan Kabbah, President of the Republic of Sierra Leone, 8<sup>th</sup> March 2004*

As Miriam Murray, Plan’s Education Officer, explained to us. “If someone confesses to me that they killed my mother, is that enough? No, that is not justice” Over and over again people told us that the court was necessary to tackle what they call the “culture of impunity” – that you will never be called to account for your crimes.

The demand is that there should be an end to the culture of impunity and that those who commit brutal acts will know that they will be held to account.

The court is staffed by a team of international lawyers serving as judiciary, prosecution and defence. Unlike other international criminal tribunals, the Court is not far away in the Hague. It is doing its work right in the heart of Sierra Leone where passions still run high and divisions still run deep. The modern court building - which will become part of the Sierra Leone justice system when the special court has finished its work in 2006 – stands high above Freetown. The President of the Court, Geoffrey Robertson QC and the deputy prosecutor Desmond DaSilva QC are both British. It is a credit to them that they have left comfortable practices in London to work on the front line of international justice.

There was a great strength of feeling that Charles Taylor, former leader of Liberia, who has been indicted by the Special Court, should not be able to escape justice by being allowed continued sanctuary in Nigeria.

*Chris Harris*

### *Meeting President Kabbah*

At my meeting with President Kabbah, I reported to him the positive role played in Southwark by those from Sierra Leone. I congratulated him on his profound and moving speech at the Special Court's opening. We discussed his work to help Sierra Leone's children and I urged him not to rule out a constitutional change if his efforts to improve women's participation in politics stall.



*Above: President Kabbah*

President Kabbah told me he welcomes the strengthening of business links between my constituents and Sierra Leone, but that in doing so I must remind my constituents that they must trade only in an open and transparent way and must not encourage or engage in bribery or corruption.

### *Human Trafficking*

Before going to Sierra Leone, I had been working closely with community organizations in my constituency as well as with other government ministers on the growing problem of human trafficking. This is where people – mostly women and children – are tricked and brought to Europe, often from Africa, into domestic slavery or enforced prostitution. Families in poor rural areas of Western Africa have often sent their children to cities for a 'better life'. But the better life they are offered may be anything but that. We need to create an international web of protection for them. This cannot be done by one country alone or by one agency, such as police, immigration or social services but needs a co-ordinated national, European-wide and international approach. What is needed includes

- A recognition that development is key to tackling the poverty which is the underlying cause of children becoming vulnerable to trafficking
- Awareness raising in Africa of the danger of child trafficking

- Awareness raising across Europe of the increasing problem of child trafficking
- Effective detection, prosecution and seizing the proceeds of crime of traffickers.
- Work within the UK-based communities from the countries of origin of the children vulnerable to trafficking
- Awareness raising and training for all those in UK agencies who will be involved in combatting child trafficking including social services, immigration, police, prosecution, judiciary and the voluntary sector
- Support for programmes to rehabilitate victims of child trafficking

### *The future*

Sierra Leone's people could be prosperous – their home is fertile agriculturally, their beaches are spectacular, and their country is rich in minerals. I look forward to working with Sierra Leonians in Southwark, the UK Government and the Sierra Leone Government to help Sierra Leone achieve the prosperous and peaceful future its people want and deserve.

### *Itinerary*

- Monday 8<sup>th</sup> March: -Arrive in Freetown
- Tuesday 9<sup>th</sup> March: -Meet Kabbah Williams, the youngest child soldier in Sierra Leone.
- Visit Makeni –Visit to a rehabilitated school
  - Visit to a un-rehabilitated school
  - Lunch at the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE)
  - Visit to FAWE Vocational Skills Training Centre for vulnerable girls and women
  - Return to Freetown – dinner with FAWE, Community Animation and Development Organisation, Pikin to Pikin (an NGO which specializes in child-to-child approaches to health and hygiene education) UNICEF and Country Management Team
- Wed 10<sup>th</sup> March: -Opening of Special Court
- Meeting with National Association for War Affected Children re child trafficking
  - Meeting with Children's Forum
  - Voice of Children UNAMSIL radio station
  - Reception at British High Commission
- Thursday 11<sup>th</sup> March: -Meeting with Street Children in Victoria Park
- Meeting with Plan Sierra Leone staff
  - Meeting with Andrew Kromah, MODCAR radio consultant
  - Meeting with President Kabbah
  - Depart for UK

### *Acknowledgements*

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- Chris Harris of The Times for permission to use his photographs

\* The Commission for Africa

On 26<sup>th</sup> February the Prime Minister launched a new initiative – the Commission for Africa. The key aim of the Commission is to generate increased support for the G8 Africa Action Plan and the New Partnership for African Development (NePAD).

The Commission will look at current problems facing Africa and assess policies (both within Africa and internationally). It will seek to identify the policy strengths and the weaknesses, what more could or should be done; and where more support is needed from the international community. A key stimulus for the commission is the fact that many African Countries will not meet any of the Millennium Development Goals by 2015.

The Commission will conclude its work and report in Spring 2005, in time for the 2005 G8 Summit, which will be chaired by the UK. The Prime Minister has already made a commitment to put Africa at the top of the agenda for the G8 2005.

Confirmed commissioners include:

Gordon Brown, Hilary Benn, Prime Minister Meles of Ethiopia, K.Y. Amoako (Head of the UN Economic Commission for Africa), Trevor Manuel (South African Minister of Finance), Michael Camdessus (President Chirac's Africa Personal Representative), US Senator Nancy Kassebaum Baker and Sir Bob Geldof.

The Commissioners, supported by the secretariat, will consult a wide range of experts and thinkers and call for papers on the theme he/she is leading on.

The themes of the report will not be officially confirmed until April but are likely to include some or all of the following:

- the economy (including development finance, economic integration and trade)
- education
- conflict resolution and peace-building
- health
- the environment
- HIV/AIDS
- Governance
- culture

I plan to visit Nigeria in Autumn 2004 and Ghana and Ivory Coast in Spring 2005.