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Sierra Leone, Conflict

The Painful Scars of Sierra Leone's Civil War

From 1991 to 2002, Sierra Leone was ravaged by a brutal civil war that was fueled by funds from diamond mines and killed more than 50,000 people. The war was characterized by widespread destruction, child soldiers and mass atrocities. The impacts of that war still echo throughout the nation, as they are one of the world's poorest countries. War is a plague that destroys all in its path, so there needs to be plans in place from organizations like the United Nations to prevent more scenarios like Sierra Leone. People's basic needs should be met, and since a war was not prevented in Sierra Leone, certain steps must be taken in order to rebuild the country. Aid needs to be sent immediately after conflicts, infrastructure needs to be rebuilt, and Sierra Leone should rebrand itself as the clean energy capital of Africa.

Sierra Leone is home to many unique customs and traditions. Traditionally, the typical family has all of their extended relatives living under one roof. Outside of the capital of Freetown, where the buildings are mostly made of wood, homes are generally composed of clay with a roof made of straw (*Every Culture*). The vast majority of people do not have access to electricity. Only about 6% of the rural population and 52% of urban households have electricity. Sadly, only 2% of Sierra Leone has clean, readily available water (*CIA World Factbook*). The most commonly eaten food is rice. It is eaten at every meal and is prepared in countless different ways. Other common foods that are consumed are seafood, chicken, cassava and fruits. Food is either grown in rural areas or is bought at commonplaces such as markets found in urban areas. The men usually do field work, while women prepare food in open-air kitchens (*Every Culture*). Almost half of the working population are subsistence farmers, while the majority of the other jobs are in diamond and iron mining and services. The education system needs to be improved, with only 43% of people 15 and older being literate. Even before the war, the health care system was severely lacking, and now it is in shambles. The country has the highest death rate in the world and the second-highest infant mortality rate (*CIA World Factbook*). This shows that proper access to hospitals and medicine is almost non-existent. People are dying at an awful rate in Sierra Leone because they cannot get proper treatment or vaccines to prevent common diseases from killing them. The biggest barrier to nutritious food is poverty. Unfortunately, families cannot sell any of the food they produce through farming, or they will starve. Nutritious food is also very expensive, and therefore inaccessible to most people. A lack of social programs is also a culprit for blocking people from earning more money and surviving. Despite all its challenges, Sierra Leonians still take great pride in their etiquette and manners. For example, food is always provided for guests, even if it is in short supply for the family. In terms of religion, the country is a mix of Islam and Christianity, but traditional families still observe old indigenous beliefs and ceremonies (*Every Culture*). Overall, Sierra Leone has many very unique family traditions.

The Sierra Leone Civil War was a devastating conflict that destroyed millions of lives forever. The war began in 1991 when a group called the Revolutionary United Front fought to overthrow the sitting government under Joseph Momah . The war was long and bloody, fueled by the endless funds of diamond mines throughout the country. These diamonds became known as "Blood Diamonds" because the profits were used to raise armies and to fight the war that killed so many

innocent people (*Britannica*). The war also saw witness to heinous atrocities such as mutilations, gunning down entire families, and the chopping off of childrens' hands. Both sides used child soldiers that were forced into fighting. Mass murders, arson, and rape swept through cities like Freetown during the infamous January 1999 Offensive (*Human Rights Watch*). Mercenaries were also used to fight the war, and whole neighborhoods were burned to the ground. It finally ended in 2002 when the Sierra Leone government, with the assistance from the United Nations and British soldiers, defeated the Revolutionary United Front (*Britannica*). The impact of the war was felt around the country. Cities saw the most massacres and arsons, while the population in rural areas were forced to work in diamond mines and join the army. Not only did 50,000 people die, but 500,000 were displaced. This is a shocking statistic considering that Sierra Leone only has a population of four million (*Black Past*). The war destroyed the health care system, which has terrible implications for the people. They cannot get medicine or care for their sick, which is a massive problem, especially in a place where water-borne diseases and malaria are so prevalent. The war also damaged infrastructure and put many people out of jobs, so more and more people went hungry (*World Health Organization*). Much of the population was also forced out of their homes. Many Sierra Leonians had no work because of the war, and had no way of growing food because they had no house and land to grow life saving crops on. This is especially devastating considering much of the population are subsistence farmers. There is no doubt that the Civil War caused a tremendous amount of pain and hunger in Sierra Leone. Environmentally, the war also had detrimental effects. The most obvious one is the diamond mines that were used to fund the war. Diamond mines cut deep into the earth, disrupting layers of soil and rock, causing massive erosion. That erosion pollutes waterways with sediment, decreasing the clarity and killing aquatic organisms (*Worldwildlife.org*). If these mines flood with rainwater, that water becomes highly acidic as well as polluted. Once it gets into waterways, it elevates the acidity of the water (*Environmental Protection Agency*). One less obvious effect comes from the thousands of homes that were burnt to the ground. First, the burning of the wooden homes releases the CO₂ stored in the wood into the atmosphere, contributing to climate change. Second, the debris from the burnt homes gets washed away into streams or rivers, causing the water to become choked with wreckage of houses. Overall, the Sierra Leone Civil War destroyed people's lives and negatively impacted the environment.

How is it possible to prevent wars before they start, and how can aid and assistance be provided to countries like Sierra Leone who are trying to recover from a war? First, wars are often fought because of resource scarcity of food, raw materials, land and water. Because of this, it is important for more organizations like UNICEF and the United Nations to support people in impoverished countries and areas. The likelihood of conflict is reduced when people's needs are met. As written by the *New York Times*, "the likelihood of a civil war decreases as countries get richer". This could be done in the form of building wells in villages where there is no access to clean water and by sending volunteer groups to build stable housing in place of slums found in cities. Donated money could be used to expand sewage systems and provide electricity to more homes. When people have basic resources like water, housing, clean streets, and electricity, they are much less likely to try to overthrow the government and start a civil war.

There also needs to be an end to the systemic racism embedded in U.N. reaction times. Countries in Africa do not get the same urgency and attention that European countries do when they are facing a crisis. An example of this is the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the full might of the U.N. was thrown upon the situation almost immediately. The U.N. contributed a whole 25,000 troops to quell the fighting in Bosnia (*History.com*). Another factor that played a role was that Sierra Leone does not offer direct benefits, such as oil, to major players in the United Nations, like the United States. On the other hand, Bosnia and Hertzogovinia was on the front line of a post Cold

War world, so the U.N. took action more quickly. In Sierra Leone, it took many years for the U.N. to get involved (*BBC*).

If tensions are escalating between two groups who are close to fighting a war, it is paramount that the United Nations steps in to negotiate peace talks. It is critical that the wants and needs of each side are outlined and a plan to meet those needs is created. If no negotiation is reached, the United Nations must lead the way to compromise. This can be an extremely difficult task, especially when a group refuses to cooperate. But sometimes, this can be the only way to prevent thousands of deaths. If this does not work and war is inevitable, the best thing to do will be to still try to make peace talks at every opportunity.

Once the war has ended, the U.N. needs to lead treaty talks, and make sure plans are in place to prevent more conflict. It is also extremely important to involve other countries in the region, or even the African Union, to help them be invested in the recovery process. Culture, ethnicity, religion, and needs of the combatants need to be carefully considered during the talks. If these things are not discussed, it will only lead to more fighting. A prime example of this was the Treaty of Versailles that ended World War I. The Ottoman Empire was destroyed, and the victorious nations decided to split up the former territory into countries. They did not think once about relationships between groups or ethnic borders, so they put people who traditionally had conflicts with one another into the same country. Now, the Middle East is in turmoil and chaos because of the Treaty of Versailles (*WW1: Does the peace that ended the war haunt us today?*).

After peace conferences and the war is over, aid needs to be sent right away to help all of the people affected by the war. Much like the civil war in Sierra Leone, most wars create hundreds of thousands of refugees that have nowhere to go and no food to eat (*The Guardian*). This is where refugee organizations and countries of the world need to help. Money from countries should be donated to organizations that help refugees find shelter and get food to eat. Refugee camps could be built with the donated money and could provide food and shelter until the government stabilizes. The problem with this is that it will take a lot of money to create and take care of the camps, so nations will have to be willing to help people. After the thousands of refugees are given ample food and shelter, the next problem that comes is the hardest one to solve and is one that Sierra Leone is still having issues with after almost 20 years: rebuilding the crumbled infrastructure.

Infrastructure such as roads, hospitals, and schools are massive undertakings and takes years to complete. However, it needs to be rebuilt if the population wants to come out of hunger and poverty. Like many other solutions to problems, this one deals with money. First of all, the government needs to be stabilized, with leaders put in place that both groups can agree on. This can be done by vote, or by the United Nations. Of course, just simply instituting a government in a war torn country is no small task, so perhaps representatives from other countries around the world who succeeded in repairing the government after a civil war could act as advisors. In Sierra Leone, help from other countries has actually worked in stabilizing the government. As of 2018, Sierra Leone has had four successful elections since its civil war. This was possible because of assistance from countries like the United States who have worked with the Sierra Leone government to “build government accountability, ensure responsive public institutions, strengthen judicial processes, and promote strong democratic norms and processes” (*US Department of State*). Then, money should be given to the government to help it get out of war debt and have money to repair the country by the United Nations. If this government is corrupt, they need to be quickly removed from power. The first priority would be to build hospitals to care for the sick and give medical treatment. Without a health care system, a country could not come out of poverty for multiple reasons. The death rate and infant mortality rate will be high, forcing mothers to give birth to more children, which progresses to poverty. People will also die young, taking out a part of the working age

population, which leads to less money for families. The next priority should be to build schools because education is a great way out of poverty. Children will become educated and could then get good paying jobs, but if there are no schools, this cannot happen, and they will not have enough money to survive. Finally, the last step to rebuilding a nation that has been torn apart by war is to establish social services like medicare and social security. These objectives will not happen for a long time after the war but will secure the country and make the possibility of war fall dramatically. They can only be possible if the previous objectives are completed, and they need a strong government to accomplish them. If these steps are followed and carried out effectively, a country will recover from war, and its people can be brought out of hunger and poverty. In Sierra Leone specifically, health care is the number one type of foreign aid that should be sent because of the incredibly high death rate there. In fact, countries today see the medical system in Sierra Leone as a top priority, and have been sending items such as medicine and mosquito nets to citizens (*US Department of State*). Foreign aid has not done everything it has hoped it would in Sierra Leone (there is still massive poverty and the highest death rate in the world), but it still has had a positive impact on the people living there.

Most of the solutions that have already been laid out have been short term and require huge amounts of money. However, this next solution is focussed on helping Sierra Leone in years down the road, and it does not take a massive donation of funds. In Rwanda, after a brutal genocide that killed anywhere from 500,000-800,000 people, the new president transformed the devastated country into the tech capital of Africa and reignited the economy by being on the cutting edge of technology (*Rwanda genocide: 100 days of slaughter*). Sierra Leone also suffered a traumatic national experience and needs to do something similar to recover from their civil war. Instead of investing in tech as Rwanda did, Sierra Leone should invest in renewable energy. They could become the renewable energy capital of Africa, which would allow them to lead the continent in clean energy and help them make money by selling their energy and equipment such as solar panels and turbines to nearby countries. This process will do a number of amazing things for the country: create thousands of good paying jobs and boost exports, allow Sierra Leone to be self-reliant, provide energy to the country, and help the environment. The first thing to do in order to start this process would be to convince the acting government that this is the right path to go down. This could be done by having a “mentor country”. A great example of this could be a country like Norway. Norway has already seen the benefits of renewable energy and have really bought into the process of moving away from nonrenewable sources. A whole 45% of their energy is generated from renewable energy, and that number keeps climbing (*Euro News*). After they agree to change to clean energy, all the mentor country like Norway needs to do is put in a little bit of money to jump start the operation, with the knowledge that it will be repaid. The operation will specifically include the production of solar panels, wind turbines, hydroelectric dams, and electricity lines to transfer the energy. People may think that it would be too expensive to convert an entire country to renewable energy, but in the case of Sierra Leone, it’s not as expensive as it seems. For example, a typical 250 watt panel costs \$175 to \$375 on average (*Home Advisor*), and 250 watts converts to about 2191 kWh per year. Sierra Leone uses 279 million Kwh per year (*World Data.info*). The math shows that the solar panels alone would cost only around \$31,834,771 to power the country. For comparison, it cost 5.5 billion to build Sofi Stadium in California (*Construction Dive*). The reason that it would cost so little is because Sierra Leone uses very little energy, so it would not take much to make enough solar panels to power the country. However, it would cost more money to build the powerlines to transfer the electricity, but it is still relatively

inexpensive. After things like wind turbines and solar panels are created, the economy will begin to recover. Those turbines and other renewable energy mechanisms will need to be built, and maintained. This will create thousands of jobs for a nation that has an unemployment rate of 15% (*CIA World Factbook*). Sierra Leone will also be able to sell things like solar panels to other countries to boost the national income. This new influx of money will allow Sierra Leone to not need U.N. assistance and be able to support itself. Not only will utilizing renewable energy be helpful to the economy, but it will also provide a service that the country desperately needs: energy. Only 26% of the population has electricity, and that problem can be solved with the investment in renewable energy (*CIA World Factbook*). Finally, protecting the environment will save Sierra Leone from many issues in the future that other countries who do not move forward will have to face. If the public is presented with all of the benefits of switching to renewable energy through advertising or education, then they will really buy into it and go along with the process. This is a long-term solution, and it needs to be put into action only after immediate aid is established, but it will position Sierra Leone for success in years to come.

Sierra Leone is tasked with rebuilding its country after a terrible civil war. It is one of the poorest nations in the world and is facing huge challenges of bringing back its infrastructure and health care, providing basic needs to its people, and stabilizing the political situation. Conflict and its aftermath is an issue today that needs to be solved. Wars need to be stopped before they start, and peace talks need to be led by the United Nations and other regional governments. But once the talks are over, refugees need to be cared for and aid given to the new government to create infrastructure. The government should provide social services to lessen the likelihood of subsequent wars. Finally, to ensure that Sierra Leone can have a prosperous future, it should convert itself into the clean energy capital of Africa and the World. These solutions would help solve the problems that come with conflict and could potentially help prevent it.

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