



John Bangura (left) with three 'chiefs'  
– see caption at bottom of page

## PEOPLE BUILDING TRUST

### Driving towards peace in Sierra Leone

*A refugee gets ex-combatants, NGOs, military and police officers working together. John Bangura tells his story to Mike Brown...*

**J**OHN BANGURA drives a bus in Copenhagen. In his spare time he enables ex-combatants and victims of Sierra Leone's civil war to work together on a rice-growing project, and has started a far-reaching 'Moral Foundations for Democracy' training programme for police, military and civil society. He is now planning a Clean Election Campaign before crucial elections next year, the first since 17,000 UN peacekeepers left.

Most of this is done after hours, long distance between Denmark and Sierra Leone, by telephone and email. 'I have a beautiful telephone bill,' he smiles wryly. To add to it, since 2001 John has made 13 visits to his home country, getting these initiatives underway.

### **'My weapon has always been to share my own experience'**

John wasn't always a bus driver. His father employed 100 men mining diamonds – the 'blessing and curse' of Sierra Leone. John had a good education, went to business school and set up his own flourishing companies. But tragic events in West Africa overtook his career. On a business trip to neighbouring Liberia, he was taken at gunpoint from his hotel room by a death squad. He was saved only when the Sierra Leone President threatened all-out war if he and other hostages were not released.

The situation escalated into war anyway, fighting over control of lucrative diamond mines. From 1991, when Liberian-backed rebels staged a coup, Sierra Leone collapsed into 10 years of civil war leaving 75,000 dead and thousands cruelly maimed. Destruction of the

country's infrastructure plunged Sierra Leone to bottom of the UN's human development index.

John Bangura had been part of resisting the rebels' efforts to take power, so had to flee. 'I knew what I was up to.' He sent his wife and daughter out of Freetown for safety, and managed to slip out himself on a Russian flight bound for Moscow. His hope was to join relatives in the US. He got as far as Denmark, where he spent the next 23 months in detention. He remembers being 'acutely traumatized,' after witnessing a massacre in his town and losing nine of his family members. A psychiatrist tried to help. And a retired Danish church minister came every Thursday to support a Bible study group with the detainees – Syrians, Iraqis, Armenians, Iranians, other Africans...

But his mind was fixed on one thing: revenge. He wanted to hunt down those who had destroyed his country and killed his family members.

The minister stayed in touch after John was granted asylum and, in 1998, took John to an Initiatives of Change conference in Caux, Switzerland. There, meeting others who had suffered like him, something penetrated his hatred. Learning to search his conscience in silence, 'I was able to revisit what was deep down... I arrived at the thought that the resources I was planning to use to take revenge would be better spent to bring healing to my country.'

He left Caux with one other 'revelation' – concerning his wife, Aminata. After waiting for five years, he had managed to get her and his daughter to Copenhagen. ➔

*Photo, top:* John Bangura (left) in Caux during August with (from left to right): Inspector-General of Police Brima Acha Kamara, Chief of the Defence Staff Maj-Gen Sam Mbomah, and Paramount Chief Massa Yeli Tham II of Makari Gbanti Chiefdom.

But there were things she didn't know. On returning from Caux, 'I knelt down before her and admitted what I had been doing.'

Next year his Danish friends helped him get to an African-led conference in Tanzania. During one meeting he had something of a vision in which he heard a call: 'John, your country is on fire; your people are dying. You must do something about it.' It was then that 'my mission for peace started'.

And so did the phone calls. Back in Copenhagen, he and Aminata considered whom they could trust in Sierra Leone. They began with Aminata's brother-in-law, asking him to find 10 men and women willing to respond to this challenge: 'Are you ready to work for your country without being paid? To go on a journey of healing, risk your lives and not to point a finger of blame at anyone?' Nine days later the brother-in-law phoned back saying he had the 10 people who would meet next day. John was ready with an agenda, 'guided by what I'd learned from IofC meetings'. He sent \$100 so that they could fax reports after each meeting. 'Hope-Sierra Leone' was born.

## **'A foundation of confidence' among rebels so UN peace-keepers could enter**

The country was still at war. UN personnel had been taken hostage in the north. In 2000 'Hope-Sierra Leone' (H-SL) joined civil society groups who built 'a foundation of confidence' among rebels, clearing the way for UN peace-keepers to enter the area. John was phoning rebel leaders, building relationships. By 2001, he felt it was safe enough to return to his country for six weeks, and to go to Makeni in Northern Province.

He met leaders of the rebel Revolutionary United Front; former army officers who had taken power in 1991 with their Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC); and the government's Civil Defence Force (CDF). All said they would sign for peace – and they did. Taking courage from his own victory over revenge, he invited former junta leader Johnny Paul Koroma (AFRC) and his bitter enemy, the Deputy Minister of Defence (former head of the CDF) to the IofC conference in Caux. They came; and John became known as the 'friend who brought those two characters together'.

In 2002, following the formal ending of the war on 18 January, John made two trips to Sierra Leone, running workshops on 'Non-violent communication' in key areas. At the end of one in Makeni, ex-combatants planted a 'Peace and Reconciliation Tree'. Men who had fought with guns stood holding shovels, proclaiming that never again would they fight their own people.

John saw that the war had 'stolen' young people from their communities. In order to 'kick-start development', it was vital to help the 70,000 ex-combatants get back to work. He approached the Paramount Chief (traditional leader) of the region who provided H-SL with 1,000 acres of land for 'integrated farming' projects. H-SL currently engages 500 such ex-combatants in

this work. (The Danish government is now providing substantial funding through its foreign aid agency for this project.)

In the run up to UN-supervised elections in 2002, John went to see the Election Commissioner. H-SL was one of 16 organizations accredited to do voter education and monitoring.

'Whether talking with ex-combatants or a Minister,' says John, 'my "weapon" has always been to share my own experience of how my life was transformed and how I talked with my wife. I then invite them to join me in the vision I have for my country.'

As the UN's peace-keepers began withdrawing, John saw that Sierra Leone's police and military forces needed to be prepared as 'custodians of peace, and become part of healing the country'. He got a date with the Deputy Inspector-General of the Sierra Leone Police, and invited him to Caux in 2003. The DI-G returned in 2004 with the Joint Forces Commander of the Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces.

These senior officers requested training for their officers. So the 'Moral Foundations for Democracy' (MFD) training programme was prepared by an IofC team from Denmark, Netherlands, Norway, UK and USA. In Sierra Leone, the Minister of Internal Affairs and the Deputy Minister of Defence gave approval for a tri-partite programme involving the military, police force and civil society. In 2005 two six-day pilot courses were held, followed by training which qualified 23 Sierra Leoneans to deliver the Course over the next five years. In response to many requests, 25 senior military and police officers and leaders of civil society attended a 3-day MFD course, to see at first-hand what was being offered.



Kees Scheijgrond

Scanning the testimonies of participants gives an impression of battle-hardened men and women gaining new confidence in personal integrity and professional disciplines: abandoning schemes of personal revenge, facing family violence and alcohol abuse, ending the 'envelope' system of collecting bribes and distributing them to their officers, senior policemen together assessing their mistakes in silence and sharing their vision as a regular part of operations.

Sierra Leone still stands in the balance. Elections next year, without UN intervention, will test the credibility of all that has been achieved.

Meanwhile, John Bangura is still driving his bus... and his vision of a peaceful Sierra Leone.