

The sierra leone country paper

Transforming africa from a bleeding to a renewed continent

By: John A. Bangura, founder of Hope - Sierra Leone, June 2000

Mr. Chairman, Distinguished ladies and gentlemen.

We are grateful to be here and would like to thank the organizers of this conference for giving us the privilege to share our views with the brothers and sisters from all over the world on this burning issue of what could best be described as "Africa's Meteoric Retrogression" as against the unprecedented progression of industrialized nations. That Africa is a bleeding continent, is indeed a painful elaboration of the obvious. Perhaps no one summarizes the situation better than Dr. Said Adejumboi at the second Development Policy Commission for Africa on the theme: "Democracy, Civil Society and Governance in Africa 11".

"Beginning from the 1980's, there has been a gradual but concerted attempts to reverse the trend of political despair and disillusionment which hitherto characterized political life in Africa. This attempt manifests itself in the demand for political pluralism and democratisation. The long years of political misrule and of course bad governance exemplified by personalized political regimes and ruthless dictatorships left most African states politically demobilised and economically decapitated with a mercerised population ravaged by poverty, illiteracy and disease. Regrettably, Africa harbours the highest stock of the world's poorest people".

Indeed it is against this background of gloom and doom that we are here to start talking of a new beginning i.e. transforming Africa from a bleeding to a renewed continent. And to achieve this, we must run a few images on the screen of our minds to see how this cataclysm happened, who did it and why. I am sure this exercise is necessary because it is a dangerous thing for a person to have such a memory and we certainly don't want the beginning we are all longing for to turn out to be a new disaster.

By the late 50's to the early 60's, most colonial flags in the continent had been pulled down marking the end of colonial rule. The morale was high and amidst cheers and jubilation, the elites at the time took over the affairs of their different countries and vouched to make life better.

However, towards the end of the 60's, politics took on a new meaning and dimension piercing deep in to the fabrics of society and letting it "fall apart" (Chinua Achebe).

People started thinking more in terms of ethnic solidarity than of national interest. E.g the Biafran war in Nigeria, The Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda and Burundi; clan problems in Somalia etc. The list could be endless. Certain political elites would manipulate the masses into believing that only a sister or brother of the same ethnic background could improve their lot. The game that would lead the continent over the precipice of destruction had begun.

In my country Sierra Leone for example, education was declared a privilege and not a right, and this was of course perfectly in conformity with the logic of the dispensation, to keep the people illiterate and poor making them easier to manipulate at election time. And so as a result, the miserable youths were transformed into thugs, drugged, hounded into trucks and commissioned to go out to burn and kill their brothers on behalf of politicians whose children were safe in Britain and America studying to return and replace their fathers. A phenomenon, which is not new in the African continent. The business of government was like a jamboree, reserved for a privileged few and their sycophants who grew in numbers by the day.

Thus, youth marginalization over the decades by different leaderships has seriously hampered development on the continent. Mis-management of the economy and lack of socio-economic programmes has resulted into a high rate of unemployment or under-employment among the youth including school leavers and University graduates. Most feel dejected and completely cut off from the main stream of society. Youth radicalism and anger against rotten systems of governments thus, was marked in the late 1970's and early 80's when there was an urgent desire for change, and youths sought solace in the lyrics of such artist like Bob Marley, Peter Tosh etc.

Again in Sierra Leone, another inspiration for the hopeless youths was Colonel Gaddafi's "Green Book" which gave many disaffected young people revolutionary impetus for their crusade against what they consider as an unjust system. Little wonder that when the Revolutionary United Front (R.U.F) launched its operations, it was not difficult to get recruits since most of the marginalized youths saw this as an opportunity of hope, power and a new meaning in life.

With total economic mismanagement and collapse, most African states witnessed the cancerous growth of corruption and the progressive decay of her societies. It was no longer necessary to work hard for a living and our traditional African solidarity became engrafted with social parasitism.

Today, the gap between the rich and the poor is so great that literally, the biblical saying, "To those who have, shall more be given. And to those who have not, even what they have shall be taken away from them" is very eminent. Stealing from the nations' coffers, wealth continues to flow in one direction only i.e. from the poor to the rich; and the most vulnerable are women, children, the poor and the marginalized.

In Sierra Leone for example, for the machinery of corruption to work effectively, a new class was created to assist the man at the top. This was the contractor class. These were the people who collected public funds to do work, but never delivered. They assiduously paraded the corridors of power with documents containing fake contracts in brief cases, and the streets of the city with fast expensive cars.

Top men in the public service did not protest strongly against their salaries, which could hardly buy them a pair of good shoes because they could find other ways and means. So, the typists, clerks and cleaners who were not entitled to per diems or percentages had to sell office stationary, sit on files or make them disappear in order to keep their pots boiling.

So endemic was corruption that the civil service was like a nightmare. There was a complete breakdown in the judiciary system, which lost its independence and became a manipulative toy in the hands of the powers that be. Landlords treated teachers who had the sacred responsibility of preparing children for the business of running the country in the future like lepers. They did not have the money, and therefore, in

order to survive, created parallel schools ingeniously named " syndicates", sold cool aid and waited for the next round of teachers strike.

Again, I'm sure these phenomena are not characteristic of Sierra Leone alone. Today, wars, disease, hunger etc. have engulfed the continent. Africa is indeed bleeding, a formless continent. No hope? No future for the generations born after independence? A complete erosion of fundamental human rights and freedom abound in most countries of the continent.

We definitely cannot turn down our eyes on our new heroes whose personalities and activities correspond to the new essence of greed, immorality and selfishness that have characterized a lowering of moral and ethnic standards such that many people now find it difficult to distinguish between right and wrong; a total absence of functional or viable infrastructure and basic utilities such as electricity, clean water, telecommunications etc. Africa, I am sure, has men and women of excellence, integrity and sound education.

And so as we start talking about a new beginning, let us ask ourselves " which way Africa?" Surely, there is need for a democratic change but above all, there is " The demand for political participation and the involvement of the people in the choice of their leaders and decision-making which constitutes the critical hub of political democracy" (Sørensen, 1993).

Today, to give us a helping hand, the World Bank examines " Good Governance" as a criterion. One doesn't need a textbook to talk of good governance. The easiest way out is to imbibe the absolute standards that will save society from total collapse and degeneration:

absolute Honesty;

Absolute Purity;

Absolute unselfishness and

Absolute Love.

As we start talking too, let us remember that, what Africa needs is:

- i) Free, just and peace loving societies;
- ii) Democratic and harmonious societies and
- iii) Morally disciplined societies.

We must start thinking in terms of building more task oriented societies where public officials will be assed on their performance in accomplishing clearly defined tasks rather than by the yardstick longevity of service and anachronistic general orders.

Africa needs to develop a philosophy based on free will and sincerity that gives people the freedom to speak their minds at will. To resist oppression and dehumanisation, to build a more humane world through communities of solidarity, the affected people i.e. the oppressed, the poor and deprived, the marginalized, must speak for themselves. For it is only through transformative participation i.e. the practical experience

of being involved in considering options, making decisions and taking collective action to fight injustice and overcome problems- that the poor and powerless, the oppressed and marginalized can be fully involved in activities which affect their lives, and speak for themselves in defence of their own rights.

Youths must be opened to facilities leading up to confidence building in them. They must be given opportunities that will enable them to identify the sources of their problems and find strategies to solve them.

We strongly believe that, all is not lost in Sierra Leone. We must be hopeful. For in the words of Peter Howard (who was in charge of the world programme of MRA):

"Africa is going to be the mother of tomorrow's world. The world is waiting with an eager heart and hungry mind to listen to the voice of the new Africa. A voice so revolutionary, that China, Russia, America and Europe; black men and women, yellow men, white men say with one accord, that is the way God's earth is meant to be."

It is with this hope the Vision Of Hope- Sierra Leone was given to our brother, John Bangura by God. The establishment of Hope-Sierra Leone, with its agenda for reconciliation is our initiative for change. An initiative we believe that will not only change Sierra Leone, but the entire African continent.

We are therefore asking for your prayers and moral support to realise our vision.

On behalf of the Hope-Sierra Leone delegation, we wish you all a very nice and successful conference and may God bless you all.

Thank you.