

The Communiqué from the workshop on

**“Memory, Truth & Justice —
Dealing With the Burden of the Past”**

convened in

Freetown, Sierra Leone

31st August — 4th September 2009

organised by

The Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Sierra Leone

And

**The German Commission for Justice and Peace
(Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Germany)**

in collaboration with

**The German Association for Development Cooperation
(AGEH)**

From August 31st to September 4th 2009, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Sierra Leone, the German Commission for Justice and Peace and the AGEH (German Association for Development Cooperation), organised a workshop in Freetown, the capital of Sierra Leone, to consider the issues of memory, truth and justice, and the problems inherent in dealing with the past.

As a group of Christians from Africa, Europe, South America and Asia working in the field of civil peacebuilding in many different countries, we spent an intense and instructive week together during which we met victims of the war and representatives of civil society groups, witnessed the Special Court for Sierra Leone in action, and shared experiences from our own lives.

Over the course of this week we developed a strong impression of the problems faced in establishing a sustainable peace in the aftermath of war, and of the balance that people must strike between coping with memory, seeking truth, rebuilding trust, achieving justice, and living from day to day while trying to rebuild lives marred by a legacy of violence and corruption.

From our faith, we recognise in the victims of violence the crucified Christ, and how His passion continues today in them. We also recognise the force of the resurrection in their capacity for facing their difficult situation, and in all the solidarity they receive from others. We feel with Christ a deep compassion for them, and feel moved to commit ourselves to sustainable peacebuilding and reconciliation as a key component of our faith.

“Blessed are the peacemakers; for they will be called children of God”
- Matthew 5:9

We accept the invitation of the Lord to become ministers of reconciliation (2 Cor 5: 18), while recognising that there can be no reconciliation without true repentance and reparation.

We present here a summary of our impressions, and some reflections on ways in which the process of peacebuilding could be improved.

Many things become necessary in the aftermath of war. There is of course the need to reestablish the rule of law and enhance social possibilities, which includes coming to terms with what happened, dealing with those who bear the most guilt, and bringing justice to those who have been wronged. But there is also a strong need to give the victims of that war back their livelihoods, and to help them regain their dignity. We perceive an imbalance between the resources that go into the former, while the latter is not always given the priority it deserves.

A sense of frustration has left the victims of the war in Sierra Leone that we met less concerned with abstract concepts such as justice, memory or truth, and more interested in achieving some degree of economic sustenance and equality. The burden of the past that they are dealing with is primarily economic, a burden of everyday survival, and the main

needs that they identified were for economic support, education for their children, medical care, and advocacy to make sure that their voices are heard.

When a war ends, during the rush to secure peace, the strongest voices speak the loudest while those who suffered the most can easily remain unrepresented. Perpetrators are brought into the process with Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) packages, and this is necessary to stop the fighting. The victims, those who suffered the most, are often left with little more than the empty promises of reparation packages that never materialize. Reconciliation should not be at the expense of the victims; forgiving should not mean surrendering the need for justice and restitution.

As a result, the war may be over, but peace is not secured. While the victims are still suffering, can we really say• -that--we have achieved peace? How are we to ensure that they are able to rebuild their lives, and secure a future for themselves and their families? Perhaps it is natural for society to wish to move on from the horrors of the past, but this cannot be done at the expense of the victims of that past. To do so is to re-victimise them, and perhaps even to create a fertile ground for the next generation to repeat the cycles of violence.

While acknowledging the efforts that have been and are continuing to be made by the Government of Sierra Leone, the international community, NGOs and people of all faiths, we hear very loudly the cries of those who claim that much more still needs to be done. For how can we expect people to deal with the burden of remembering the past without resolving the problems they face in the present? In his last Encyclical, “Caritas In Veritate”, Pope Benedict reminded us of the words spoken by Pope Paul VI in the nineteen-sixties that development is new name for peace, and those words are still true today. Development, then, offers the strongest hope of moving Sierra Leone to a position where it can truly deal with its past.

Based on the things we have seen and heard, our group would like to share the following suggestions:

1. The Catholic Church as a body should do more to advocate on behalf of, and offer succour to, the victims of violent conflict. It should also work with perpetrators to facilitate their reintegration into society.
2. The Catholic Church should develop a “do no harm” approach, and focus on projects that meet the developmental criteria of sustainability rather than on charitable giving, which inevitably leads to dependency.
3. Dignity is not restored to those who have lost it; they must reclaim it for themselves. A feeling of purpose in life has been proven to be very conducive to regaining self-esteem and developing a strong sense of future-orientation and proactivity, which can then extend into other areas of a person’s life, and projects which adopt this approach should be encouraged.

- 4.** The Catholic Church should work in an ecumenical manner that embraces inter-religious dialogue and cooperation, recognising the fact that the victims of the war come from different religious backgrounds.
- 5.** The International Community should spend more effort on evaluating and monitoring the true impact of aid that is given, ensuring that the aims of aid projects are really being met, and are specifically designed to meet the needs of the victims.
- 6.** When the actors in a conflict are brought together to create comprehensive peace agreements, they should include representatives of the victims and of civil society, to ensure that their voices are heard.
- 7.** That there should be a better balance struck between the resources put into the whole peace process, including DDR activities, and programs that work with the victims of violence.
- 8.** The Government of Sierra Leone should commit itself to providing the reparation packages that were agreed in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) report before the elections due in 2012.
- 9.** All parties with the power to effect meaningful change should do more to address the specific needs identified by the victims of violent conflict. Namely, education, health, shelter, and economic empowerment.
- 10.** There is an urgent need to tackle the root causes of the war, and to ensure that the natural resources of Sierra Leone are exploited for the benefit of the poor.

Freetown, Sierra Leone, 4th September 2009