

EDITORIAL

Reflections on the Liberian Civil War, 1989-2003

Ulrich Laaser¹

¹ Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Bielefeld, Bielefeld, Germany.

Corresponding author: Ulrich Laaser

Address: Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Bielefeld, POB 10 01 31, D-33501, Bielefeld, Germany;

E-mail: ulrich.laaser@uni-bielefeld.de

Conflicts of interest: None.

The generation which experienced war in Europe – World War II – is passing away and with it those who can tell ‘in their own words’ from war experience and trauma. On the other hand accelerating globalization confronts us with a series of armed conflicts all over the world. The civil war in Liberia was one of these. All of the possible fuelling factors were brought to bear on it: ethnic differences, economic domination by a ruling class - the progeny of the freed slaves in 1822, and the long litany of misrule by various administrations crowned by the execution of predominantly people of American descent in the 1980 coup d’état, all set the stage for a final showdown.

The conflict involved eight armed factions fighting for dominance and lasted with a short interruption from 1989 to 2003. Whereas, for example in Germany, there is an abundance of literature describing and analyzing personal and social experience during the war[for example translated into English (1)]; it is not so in Liberia. The veterans of the various rebel groups and even former members of the regular army usually live in very poor conditions and those invalidated populate begging the streets. Furthermore there are thousands of civil victims and especially an estimated 10-15% of the female population raped, more than half a million (out of a population of about four million at the time) were killed (2) and close to one million dislocated.

Although people have generally enjoyed peace in Liberia for over a decade by now that peace can still be described as fragile. Every year one can observe signs of simmering instability when ex-combatants make threats on radio and in newspapers that they will disturb the peace in the country for claims of perceived benefits they have against the Government - in concert with left behind widows and children and their disabled comrades. The condition of those who are physically or mentally disabled is appalling, the standard of living at the edge as usually there is no income; the acquisition of a daily meal becomes a problem. They are considered by the national community to be responsible for the atrocities and the suffering of the civilian people although they were often in the child and adolescent age when entering the armed factions, hardly mature enough to discern between what was right and what was wrong to do even in a war situation (3).

Different from the reaction on the Ebola epidemic (4) which posed a threat to themselves, the international community has rarely taken notice of the victims of the civil war in Liberia and few people seem to be concerned about the abundance of psychiatric disease including Posttraumatic Stress Disorder. Even less realized is the threat of further social disruption as any organized reconciliation process involving ex-combatants is missing. Documented experience in Europe and notably Germany shows war traumata handed over through several generations, from the parents experiencing war to their children and even grand-children, a threat for social stability and cohesion: ‘Because of the war my parents simply did not experience that the world is a safe place where one can feel well and protected. And exactly the same feeling I ascertained in myself although there was no external inducement’ [own translation (1)].

To listen to the ostracized invalids from the civil war and take note of what they have to say is the aim of the explorative study by Aloysius Taylor hoping to initiate public discussion aimed at healing the Liberian society.

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