

(Excerpt from the book)

## **1. A Town Named for Freedom**

The moment I stepped out of the small old-type passenger plane, I felt the sweat spurting out all over my back. The sun blazed down on the humid air. The heat was sweltering. I felt relieved to have arrived at last, and yet I was nervous about what lay ahead, the people I'd encounter and the events that awaited me.

Here I was in Sierra Leone, a country in West Africa. For almost 10 years, a civil war had been going on between the government and the rebel forces.

"Are you Japanese?" A young man with gold-rimmed black sunglasses came up to me.

"Yes. And you?" I answered curtly in a slightly suspicious tone.

"I'm Sierra Leonean. What brings you here? Is it your first time? You have friends or contacts?"

Since this was my first visit to Sierra Leone, I didn't know anyone, so I asked him to show me how to reach the city from the airport. He led me to a somewhat dated helicopter, and we boarded together. There were 14 passengers. I was the only Asian. The helicopter shook and roared wildly, making me even more nervous than before. I peered out from the dirty round window and saw a grey British warship, floating on the blue sea. It looked like a miniature model ship.

After about 15 minutes, we landed at the heliport of Freetown, the capital city of Sierra Leone. With a population of 1.5 million, Freetown was once the most prosperous city of all West African countries. However, 10 years of fierce fighting had devastated the city, leaving it completely changed. There was no trace of the old days when the city was bustling with traders of diamonds and other minerals. It's been said that 7 out of 10 residents of Freetown lost their homes during the civil war.

What prompted me to take a close look at Sierra Leone was a single photograph. It showed someone wearing plastic casts on both arms. Sticking out from the wrist at each end of the casts was a piece of shiny metal, bent in the shape of a hook like the top of a clothes hanger. The person in the picture looked neither happy nor sad; he had vacant eyes and looked completely expressionless.

It was obvious that he was wearing casts because he had lost both his hands. But how did he come to have such a vacant look? I felt compelled to find out what had happened to him. The picture showed a victim of war in Sierra Leone. With the strong urge to see with my own eyes and find out what was going on in this country, I grabbed by video camera and headed for Sierra Leone.

## **2. People Who Lost Their Hands and Feet**

I ended up asking the young man from the airport and his friend to help me with my research. I told them that I'd first like to interview people who had their hands or feet cut off by soldiers during the war. "Ah, you want to talk to the amputees," they said. "Amputees" meant people who had their limbs amputated, or cut off.

After hearing that there was a place where refugees from village attacks were living together, I headed for the site which was on the outskirts of Freetown. It was called the "amputee camp." We saw a sign on the side of the road that said "Amputee and War Wounded Camp." As we entered, we saw people with casts on their arms and people walking with crutches. They all had that vacant expression, just like I'd seen in the picture. These were people who had their limbs cut off by rebel soldiers; it was a camp intended for such war victims and their families.

There were about 700 families, or 2000 people, living at the camp. The number of victims increased as the fighting that had erupted in one region spread across the whole country. The camp was run by NGOs of French origin, Doctors Without Borders (MSF) and Handicap International. For those who had lost their arms or hands or legs, it was not easy to find employment. So the United Nations World Food Program (WFP) provided food aid to the camp once a month, which consisted of wheat flour (9kg per person), corn and soy bean flour, beans, and vegetable oil. It took a whole day to distribute the food to 2000 people, which meant that the residents of the camp had to wait hours and hours in a long line, under the blazing sun.

"Can I have a sip of your water?" asked a man, looking at my bottle of mineral water.

"Oh, this? Please, have some," I said.

"I haven't eaten anything since morning," said the man. "This water is the first thing I'm putting in my mouth today." He then took my bottle and drank it up thirstily.

The man's name was Sakubar Kuyateh. He was 38 years old. His right arm was cut off between the wrist and the elbow. He had been attacked by the rebels while he was working in a diamond mine in the provinces, owned by a French Jewelry Company. When the rebels raided the mine in an attempt to occupy it, their soldiers cut off his right arm and both his ears.

I asked him if he could recount the day of the attack.

"I can never forget that day," he said. "There were more than 5000 of them. At least it seemed like there were. One soldier grabbed hold of my hand and cut it off. It was all so sudden."

While I was listening to Sakubar, other people started gathering around us. Every one of them was missing a limb or a part of the body. Behind them, I could see others walking

around, and they, too, had parts of their body missing. I could also see an old woman with a bandaged wrist, sitting absentmindedly in front of a shabby building made of galvanized sheet metal.

“Can you imagine what it was like?” continued Sakubar. “I tried to resist. Then they cut off my arm. They cut off my ears. And they even shot me in the leg,” and he showed me his wounds.

“Why would they cut off your ears?” I asked.

“Because I resisted,” he said. “After that, I walked for 11 miles from where I was attacked. Can you imagine? Eleven long miles with my wounds untreated.”

I couldn't help asking him several times if he really walked that long. Even though his wounds had healed, Sakubar looked so painfully disfigured. He must have had unbelievable strength, as well as an incredible stroke of luck, to have survived.

“I slept in the bushes during the day, so they wouldn't find me. Then I walked all night. For four whole days, I just kept running away, with no treatment.”

Sakubar had been working in Kono, a district which had the largest diamond mine in Sierra Leone. He was a hard-working man, who earned more than three times as much as an ordinary worker. The diamonds of Sierra Leone are considered top quality in the world, crystal clear and dazzlingly bright. Yet the diamond industry that had supported the country's economy became a source of money for the rebels to wage war against the government. To obtain diamonds, the rebels raided the mine regions, and seized them one by one. They captured those who resisted and cut off their arms or legs. By repeating such atrocities, they terrorized the people, and forced them to obey.

### **3. Families Were Attacked by Child Soldiers**

At the distribution point, people were waiting in a long line, holding their ration cards. I could see people quarrelling when someone tried to cut into the line. I could also see a young teenage girl waiting for her turn, leaning against her crutches. Men around Sakubar's age were all standing at the very end of the line.

“I've been waiting more than an hour,” said Sakubar. “It's so hard to receive food. Even harder for a big family, because if you need food for three or four or more, they tell you to line up at the back. That's why I have to wait and wait and wait.”

Since the day he came to the camp one year earlier, Sakubar had been living with his wife and five children in one room. Among his children was an adopted daughter called Memuna. She was the child of his wife Elizabeth's elder sister. Memuna was only three years old, but she, too, had her right arm amputated by the rebels.

*Why?* I said to myself. *A little girl like this wouldn't even resist. The soldiers must be crazy...* And as I thought of her, I felt a dull pain lingering on my own arm.

Memuna was attacked that same previous year, when the rebels had strengthened their hold over the provinces and came surging up to the capital Freetown. The extent of their brutality was becoming worse and worse; they would shoot randomly, burn houses, capture people desperately running for their lives, and order them to stand in a line. And then, one by one, the rebels chopped off the people's arm or leg, almost systematically. Neither Memuna's family nor Sakubar's family could escape the attack.

Sakubar's wife Elizabeth decided to adopt her niece who had lost her right arm and both her parents, and to raise her as her own child. When I asked Elizabeth about the day of the attack, she told me that the rebel soldiers were a group of children around 10 years old.

"The group was called Jonta," she said. "They said the leader was 12 years old."

"They were *child* soldiers?" I asked back, unable to believe my ears.

"All the soldiers with guns were boys around the age of 10. At first, we were hiding in the mosque with Memuna's family. But a child soldier of the Jonta group found us. We were all dragged outside and told to line up. The soldiers were still kids, their bodies still small, but they had big guns, and they suddenly started shooting at us. Memuna was crying, and when her mother ran to protect her, they shot the mother, snatched Memuna, and took her away with them, laughing."

The child soldiers left the whole town completely terror-stricken, and Memuna was gone. When she was found three days later, she had already lost her right arm. It was fortunate that she survived, thanks to the person who found her and treated her wound.

"Even now," said Sakubar, "as I'm talking to you, I feel pain. When the wind blows, I feel pain on my ears and my arm. For you, it may be just a breeze, but for me it's painful wind. This pain will never go away as long as I live."

I listened to his story, and all I could do was nod, his pain echoing in my body.

"Every time I look at my right hand, it makes me sad. It keeps reminding me that I don't have a hand anymore. This is the reality that our family has to bear. Even if the war ends, we can never ever forget what it has done to us."

We can never forget what happened---

We can never erase the past---

I was somewhat bewildered by the fact that such bitter feelings of a grown man was inflicted by children.