

CONCLUSION

INTERRUPTING THE CYCLE

The lethal combination of corrupt or destructive leaders, porous and unmonitored borders and rootless or hopeless young men has made some of these regions incubators of international terrorism and contagious diseases like AIDS. Others are sanctuaries for swindlers and drug traffickers whose victims can be found throughout the world.

—New York Times editorial page, 27 February, 2005.

Making peace popular

In Monrovia in 2004, UNMIL made a deal with 60 of the city's video parlour owners. These parlours in Liberia, as in many other African countries, consist of very basic rooms or even outdoor setups where people can pay a small fee to watch double or triple features on the small screen. Televisions and VCRs are mounted on a table or, if outdoors, sometimes wedged up in a tree, and viewers sit on hard wooden benches or plastic patio chairs to enjoy the show. Genres are fairly limited: Nigerian movies combine violence, chase scenes, romantic betrayals, and a heavy dose of juju and witchcraft. Kung-fu movies and action flicks feature Chuck Norris, Sylvester Stallone, and Arnold Schwarzenegger along with a host of other muscled tough-guys whose careers fizzled out sometime in the mid-1980s.

UNMIL's five-minute video-clip-for-peace is to be played before and after the main attractions at each of the video parlours that became party to the deal. The clip is meant to instil the values of peace and reconciliation in viewers, with an introduction by Gyude Bryant, the leader of the NTGL that begins: "We have fought for a long time. Look at what fighting has done to our country." The short message is followed by a montage of images showing the destruction of weapons and featuring former commanders and faction leaders smashing what some audience members seemed surprised to point out looked like perfectly functioning guns. Words on the screen reinforced this observation: "UNMIL will destroy all weapons, for true." After the public service message, it

was time for the main feature, that infamous 1987 Vietnam War movie *Jungle Rats* (advertised on a sign outside as “Non-Stop War Action!!!”).

Can five-minute messages of peace make a difference when they are followed by hours-long images of extreme fighting, shooting, and blood? Rebel commanders used war movies to train troops throughout the civil wars in both Sierra Leone and Liberia,⁶⁹ and the cheap, wide availability of violent films has been cited in use in both tactical training and recruitment for gangs and criminal elements in urban slums from Freetown to Nairobi. This does not imply that the movies themselves are the cause of heightened violence; but they are a symptom of a culture where poverty is endemic, life is cheap, and young people want to build lives that are globally connected and free from subjection to arbitrary power. In trying to use a popular medium to spread a different message, UNMIL’s outreach team has at least acknowledged the power of audio-visual communication to reach the most involved, and the most vulnerable, population in the post-war context. Sierra Leone’s Minister of Youth and Sport believes that installing a satellite dish, generator, and refrigerator at a youth centre in Kailahun (where the rebel war began) could mean the difference between war and peace:

If they don’t want to go back to their homes, most of them it’s not because they don’t want to go home—it’s just because home does not provide some of the basic things they want. They wouldn’t mind to go home if they have a good football field and if they can watch Manchester United and Arsenal... that guy is not staying here [in Freetown]; he is rolling up there. It’s so simple, I tell people; but they feel it’s so complicated. They feel the youth problem is so complicated, it needs a big construct. And this is not what they need. These people, they need something to attract them *now*.⁷⁰

Catalysts and disruptors

Conventional discourse on conflict in the Mano River Basin nearly always includes a standard lament about porous borders. The movement of people, goods, and guns across national borders that fatten localised conflicts into full-scale wars is a problem. It is also part of a much larger cycle of supply and demand that must be interrupted in several different locations to be stopped. The catalysts of conflict cycles are poverty; unemployment; lack of education and literacy; unethical corporate behaviour; lack of oversight and control over natural resources; and high-level political manoeuvring.

If poverty is alleviated through targeted and well-monitored programmes, young people will become less likely to end up committing human rights abuses on the orders of “Big Men” who pay them by commanding them to loot for themselves. If economies can be built beyond 70 percent donor dependence, jobs may become available from the private sector, especially to those who have been able to take advantage of at least a primary school education (which should, eventually, become free). If the private sector is regulated by government according to high standards of human rights compliance, conflict with communities will become avoidable, or at least manageable. If reintegration receives the funding and attention it needs to reach the remaining 42,000 ex-combatants in Liberia, elections there are more likely to go smoothly, interrupting the opportunity for high-level political meddling by dictators or appointed leaders. Finally, if the international community, particularly the African Union, pushes with funding and diplomacy for the development of democracy and the oversight of natural resources, perhaps the culture of impunity that today fosters corruption and organised crime will begin to recede.

It is unlikely that illicit weapons trafficking, mercenary activity, and warlordism can be stopped simply by promising more border patrols or, for that matter, by distributing videos about peace. It will take the smart maintenance of sanctions against diamonds and timber in Liberia, more and smarter funding for post-conflict reintegration and rehabilitation, and real coordination between the sub-regional UN presence in Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Côte d’Ivoire to plant the seeds of peace in the soil of war.