



## ***A Country at Risk***

Civil war in Sierra Leone (1991-99) brought tragic consequences: 75 thousand killed among a population of 4.5 million; two-thirds of the population forced to flee to Guinea and Liberia, thousands abducted and deliberately mutilated. Horrifying human rights violations struck especially hard at children: recruited as soldiers as early as the age of eight by the warring factions, they were drugged and sent to murder even friends and family. Many of them had limbs cut off with machetes. The horrific conditions in which the vast majority of Sierra Leoneans were forced to live cut life expectancy to some 37 years. The healthcare situation remains alarming. Infant mortality is among the highest in the world. Vaccination programs disrupted by the war are being resumed only with great difficulty with the aid of international organizations, and poliomyelitis remains common. The number of malnourished children requiring aid and hospitalization remains high. Public medical facilities remain poorly equipped and qualified personnel willing to work for low wages, in precarious conditions, are in short supply. The medical care that is available is not provided free; there are fees for all treatments, medicines, operations and doctors' services – fees that many are not in a position to pay.





## ***A Countrywoman's Response: a New Relief Organization***

Mrs. Bernadette Kamara-Bangura, *(at right, photo in native dress)* a native of Sierra Leone who has lived in the United States since 1974, recalls how the Lord told her in a dream that it was her duty to contribute to the welfare of suffering people in her motherland. Mrs. Kamara-Bangura, a business owner in Alexandria, Virginia, responded by establishing the Sierra Leone Relief and Development Outreach Incorporated (SLRDO) in December 2003. Bringing together Sierra Leoneans in America and elsewhere, SLRDO attempts to address critical needs in the areas of health and education. Initial funding was provided by Mrs. Kamara-Bangura and her family, supplemented in a variety of ways as the organization grew: car washes, yard sales, donations of money and goods



from concerned individuals and organizations, and a charity dinner-dance held in September 2004 that formally launched SLRDO on its mission. SLRDO is a registered charity eligible to receive tax-deductible contributions under U.S. tax law.

Volunteers play an important role in SLRDO's activities. They are drawn from the local Sierra Leonean community and from the City of Alexandria's Volunteer Bureau. The volunteers provide office support and assist with fund-raising events. They help with the collection, storage and packing of materials, including medical supplies, textbooks, and clothing that SLRDO has provided to those in need in Sierra Leone.

*(At right, volunteers pack a container for shipment to Sierra Leone.)*

SLRDO maintains contacts with a wide range of organizations that are helping it accomplish its mission: Among those that make ongoing in-kind donations to SLRDO are Oneness Heart Tears and Smiles (New York), surgical and medical supplies; Meditech (Maryland),



pharmaceuticals; and the City of Alexandria Public Library (Virginia), books. A key partnership was forged in December 2004 when Ms. Kamara-Bangura visited California to coordinate efforts in the healthcare sector with Lighthouse Medical Missions, which sends medical teams abroad to provide care to those in need. To date, Lighthouse has made eight visits to Sierra Leone. (*Below, the team that visited in March 2004.*)



### ***A Clinic Opens Its Doors***

As part of a 56-member medical team from Lighthouse, Mrs. Kamara-Bangura visited Sierra Leone in March-April 2005, her fourth visit to her homeland since she emigrated to the United States. Her primary objective was to open a community clinic to provide medical care to those in need, using a container load of medical and other supplies that SLRDO had shipped from the United States.



Mrs. Kamara-Bangura clears the goods through Sierra Leone's customs

Mrs. Kamara-Bangura also distributed used clothing to the Door Fellowship Church in the Ferry Junction district of Freetown, and textbooks to St. Joseph's Secondary School in Brookfields.

The clinic opened its doors on June 27, 2005. To date, it has registered some 800 users. Although the clinic is located in the capital city of Freetown, in the country's Western district, patients from Sierra Leone's other three districts – Northern, Southern and Eastern -- use the clinic's services as well, making it a truly countrywide operation. Among the ailments/conditions most frequently treated are malnutrition, typhoid, hypertension, infections and the consequences of malaria. Furthermore, the clinic has plans to establish a program for voluntary HIV-AIDS testing and counseling in the near future. *(At right, a clinic nurse checks a patient's blood pressure).*



SLRDO maintains responsibility for the clinic's continuing operations. In addition to paying the rental on the eight-room house that is currently the clinic's home, SLRDO provides funds for staff salaries, and for medicine and supplies, on an ongoing basis. Discussions are underway to secure a grant of land from the government so that a new facility can be built specifically tailored to the clinic's activities, to include more space to receive patients, as well as medical offices, examining rooms, and a laboratory. The United States Ambassador to Sierra Leone will visit the clinic in October.

### ***Serving the Sierra Leonean Community in the Washington Metro Area***

Mindful of the needs of Sierra Leoneans who have taken up residency in the Washington metropolitan area, SLRDO has begun a program of community outreach and assistance. Even before the tragic aftermath of Hurricane Katrina underscored the need for community members to be prepared for a disaster, whether natural or man-made, SLRDO had taken steps to help the immigrant community to plan for and respond to disaster conditions. A disaster preparedness seminar directed at members of the Sierra Leonean community, but open to all interested persons, will be held at Alexandria's Beatley Library on September 26, 2005, featuring speakers from the the National Capitol Region Emergency Preparedness campaign, the Alexandria Chapter of the American Red Cross, the Alexandria Police Department, and Alexandria's Office of Multicultural Affairs. SLRDO has made a contribution to the American Red Cross to assist victims of Hurricane Katrina, and has assisted in the hurricane relief efforts of We Care America.



SLRDO has furthered both the material and spiritual welfare of community members. It makes monetary contributions to those most in need, and collects used clothing for distribution in the community. It acts as a referral service to help those in need gain access to local government services in the areas of housing and medical care, and assists its clientele in obtaining assistance from non-governmental organizations such as the Salvation Army. SLRDO has made its premises available free of charge to a Bible study group whose members were hard put to come up with funds to pay for rented space.

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