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After Liberia's war: 'Sometimes you wonder if peace is worthwhile'

When Liberia's 14-year civil conflict came to an end, its people looked forward to a better life. But the fragile peace means the aid organisations are packing up, leaving those who are sick without treatment.

By Kate Thomas

Leaning back in a chair in his office, Dr Walter T Gwenigale looks tired. Liberia's Health Minister was out late on Saturday. "The theatre," he explains. He doesn't mean that he had front-row seats at a kora concert or tickets to see something by the West African playwright Wole Soyinka, however. There are no playhouses in Liberia. Instead he spent Saturday evening on duty in the operating theatre of Phebe Hospital, some 130km away in rural Bong county.

Liberia's healthcare resources were stripped to the bone by a brutal civil war that lasted 14 years. Fuelled in part by conflict diamonds, the war was led by the former President Charles Taylor, who will be in the dock at the war crimes tribunal at The Hague next month. By the time the conflict ended in 2003, the country's health system was on its knees, 300,000 people were dead and half of Liberia's population of 3 million were homeless.

Four years on, peace in Liberia remains fragile. The emergency aid agencies that came in droves at the height of the conflict are pulling out. Liberia is "stable, but tense" they say, as they move on to the next African crisis - to Darfur, Somalia and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

But Dr Gwenigale and the rest of the country cannot leave. With one Liberian doctor per 100,000 people, the Health Minister is taking matters into his own hands. It is not unusual for him, a former surgeon in his 70s, to spend his weekends on duty at Phebe Hospital, where some patients with minor conditions wait weeks to be seen and others die on the operating table during the frequent power cuts.

Dr Gwenigale leans forward, his voice as soulful as that of a West African blues singer. "Some people are wondering whether peace is worthwhile. If during the war you have access to health care and all of a sudden that disappears when peace comes, you start to wonder if only conflict is worthwhile."

On the wall of his office, a gold-framed portrait of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Africa's first female president, elected in 2005, vies for place with a poster of a traditional Liberian saying, outlined in cheery paintbox blues and pinks. "The sun shines on those who are standing before those who are sitting" it says.

It is a philosophy that is echoed by the aid agencies working here. "Liberians are already living right on the poverty line," Susan Grant, the programme director for Save the Children in Liberia, says. "If people are unwell, poverty is only going to increase. Health care must be a priority."

During the long years of war, 80 per cent of Liberia's health care was in the hands of emergency non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Some had provided free medical care to isolated communities since the conflict began in 1989. But most of these emergency aid outfits are now packing up, leaving the clinics at worst empty, at best staffed by doctors and nurses who are not being paid. With a health budget of only \$10m (£5m) for 2007 and less than 30 Liberian doctors at their disposal for a population of 3 million, the Government cannot offer any funding. In February, the Ministry of Health took a giant leap forward when it scrapped consultation fees in all Liberian hospitals. If it is to sustain that, it cannot afford to take any more facilities on.

The few aid agencies that are staying in Liberia are forming longer-term strategies to ensure that the country does not disintegrate. But without enough interest from the international community, even they cannot ease Liberia's post-war pains. Post-conflict countries like Liberia fail to excite donors. The positive influence of the President - or Ma Ellen as she is known - and the nolitical stability that she stands for does not tug at heart

needs it now" Nigel Clarke, a consultant in humanitarian aid working with Save the Children, says. "If people don't see the peace dividend in two or three years time, Liberia risks destabilising."

At the end of a dusty track on the outskirts of Monrovia is Careysburg Clinic, supported by Save the Children. The courtyard is teeming with noisy toddlers waiting to be vaccinated, their bellies on their way to being swollen. Today is market day, the busiest of the week, and the two nurses will see about 80 patients. "It is a clinic but it should be a hospital," Julius Arma Raynes, who lives nearby, says. "See this?" he says, gesturing at the bullet holes that grace the clinic's walls. "It means, just by the grace of God, we have survived the war. In times of conflict, people suffer. But people suffer after wars too. It hurts to have a building this size with no doctors."

As more of the foreign agencies prepare to leave, Liberia's health system is crying out for funds. The maternal morbidity rate here is one of the highest in the world. Life expectancy is one of the lowest, at 41 years. One in four children do not reach their fifth birthday and the morgues are full. In the maternity ward at Phebe Hospital, statistics are concealed behind curtains, blankets and thin wooden doors. There is no ambulance service; patients walk for days to reach Phebe. Some do not make it.

Three kilometres away from the hospital in Maliki is Charles Taylor's ranch. It has become a jungle. Acres and acres of neglected land - wild, unruly mango and palm trees, kola nut plants and cassava bushes - stand untouched. "It's fertile land. But nobody knows what to do with it," Alphonso Zezey, who owns nearby land, says. "Taylor's family were looking after it for years." He is talking about the farm but he could be talking about Liberia. Taylor, the man human rights groups accuse of being the cause of instability across west Africa for more than a decade, has left his ranch and the rest of Liberia for other people to clean up.

Liberia, literally "land of the free", was established as a colony for freed African-American slaves in 1821, with the government modelled on that of the US. Tensions have always existed between the Americo-Liberians - or the congos, as they are known - and indigenous tribal groups, not least when the US purchased a million acres of land for Firestone rubber plantation in 1926. In 1980, an uprising led by Samuel Doe, an ethnic Liberian, ousted the Americo-Liberian government from power. Doe's authoritarian regime was at the helm until 1989, when he was brutally killed by rebel factions.

Taylor came to power in 1997 after an electoral campaign marked by the slogan: "He killed my ma, he killed my pa, but I will still vote for him." When the former president steps into the dock to begin his trial for war crimes in 10 days' time, he might spare a thought for Liberia and what it has become. As the tribunal begins, he might remember Liberia's once-flamboyant music scene, and how the "cane juice tunes" of soul strummer Molly Dorley were drowned out by mortar fire and shelling. He might remember how streams ran red with the blood of his people. He may think of the cassava fields of Bong county, and how, as he fled to Nigeria in August 2003, they were still shingled with the skeletons of those who lost their lives in the conflict.

On the streets of Monrovia, hand-painted signs scream motivational mantras. "Do something to get something," shouts one. "Don't be a bush by the side of the road," says another. New York-style yellow taxis with missing number plates rev their engines in traffic jams outside bombed buildings and teeming squats. Open sewers run down to Westpoint beach, where discarded petrol cans have turned the white sand brown. It is the rainy season and the hot sun filters on to the sea through swollen clouds, spotlighting the battered fishing vessels that bob up and down. These are all healthy signs. Traffic jams indicate that the roads are getting busier. Discarded petrol cans mean people can afford to buy fuel. The fishing vessels may be fragile, but they are just about afloat. For now, the healthcare system is just about up and running. But all this could change in a heartbeat. There are no promises, no guarantees. This may be the "land of the free", but everywhere Liberians are in chains. "Unless funds are directed towards the health system in the very near future, the consequences for Liberia could be very grave," Ms Grant says.