

The Ebola story is not over: Sierra Leone needs the world's help to rebuild lives shattered by deadly virus

Sierra Leone needs the world's help to rebuild lives shattered by deadly virus

By Myron Glick, M.D. and Edward Mezvinsky



After everything they have gone through, the people living in the Kono District of Sierra Leone were singing praises to God. Yes, hearing the songs on the African plain brought tears to the eyes of even the most experienced diplomat and a physician with a wealth of human experiences. The people whose lives have been changed by Jericho Road Community Health Center were celebrating to the almighty the fact that people who were once total strangers truly cared for them. Our team from Buffalo and these special individuals of Africa were one people brought together in the moment.



We were all exhausted as we boarded our plane in Freetown, Sierra Leone, and headed back to the United States. In our tiredness, we knew that better days of possibility were ahead for this troubled West African nation. The people whose music, smiles and words of thanks are ingrained in our memories are survivors. Their lives are dramatically changed because in this truly small world in which we reside, there are those of us, thousands of miles away, working hand in hand with them to make a positive difference for life.

The world is acutely aware of the fact that the people of Sierra Leone have been victimized by Ebola; the dreaded virus has affected the lives of every man, woman and child in that nation and killed over 4,000 of their countrymen. Although the sadness and suffering continue, there is a sense of the possibility of a better future that just a year ago would never have been dreamed of.

Freetown is the capital for our friends in Sierra Leone, and on our past trips to and from the airport it was not unusual to see corpses lying openly in the streets; the casualties of the frightful epidemic. It was dangerous to come in contact with people stricken with the disease, even after their death.

As Americans, the images of our media can only convey a very limited sense of the reality that the people of Sierra Leone live with. We can turn the channel and we can think of those on our screens as just images in passing, but when you go and when you hear, your heart is torn. We listened with aching hearts as two teenage twin sisters opened up to us. Teenage girls who should be looking forward to life's possibilities told of how their parents were taken away from them to a hospital because their mom and their dad each had Ebola. As the sisters' tears flowed and the sound of their sobs shook us, they shared that both parents had died without either of them having a chance to say goodbye. They were actually forbidden from attending their parents' double funeral.

The story of these sisters is not uniquely theirs. Ebola has left far too many children without parents, and the stories of grief and suffering amongst everyday people is the real reflection of Ebola's catastrophic impact in Sierra Leone, as well as in neighboring Liberia and Guinea.

The long-awaited good news has arrived in recent days. The World Health Organization (WHO) has declared Sierra Leone to be Ebola-free! That announcement followed a period of 42 days during which no new cases were reported, thus meeting the standard set by health officials. There was dancing in the streets of Freetown. We were already safely back home in the United States by that time, but we could readily visualize the joy on the faces of our friends and contemplate the songs of hope that were lifted up by that news. It was welcome news around the world, too, because of the frightening warnings that were issued and the testing that was required of travelers who had visited any African country. The news also moves the story of Sierra Leone to the back pages.

But the story isn't really over; need and hurt are daily realities. While the threat has subsided, the possibility of a reoccurrence remains. These are poor countries. They need help from the rest of the world. One out of every six babies born in Sierra Leone dies before the age of 5. The valiant native physicians, nurses and other medical staff did their best to cope as the epidemic grew and now they will be called on to be the healers for their people. They have been supported by medical teams from our global community, including medical personnel from the Jericho Road Community Health Center here in Buffalo.

In February, the medical clinic that Jericho Road's staff began building in the midst of the Ebola crisis opened. Our clinic is only the second medical facility in a district where more than a half million people live. During our recent visit, as we woke up in the morning hours with the sun rising, we saw people already lined up to receive quality medical care that they could not have easily accessed before our clinic's doors opened. Men, women and children lined up, sensing that at the end of the line, someone with love in his or her heart would be doing what's necessary to bring each individual 21st century medical care in a place where care had been left to untrained individuals without the needed medication and testing for diagnosis and treatment.

The Jericho Road medical team, supported by the people of Western New York, who are operating our clinic in the village of Koidu in the Kono District, are giving each of the 100 or more patients they see each day the medical care, information and preventative measures that will help protect them in the coming days. During our brief visit, we saw complicated births where mothers and children survived because of the professional care of the clinic.

The Ebola story is not over. There are orphans to care for whose future and that of Sierra Leone is in front of them. The best solution for our fellow humans in Sierra Leone would be the development of a program, funded by the major nations, modeled after the Marshall Plan created by the United States at the end of World War II. Some American isolationists argued against providing funds to rebuild a devastated Germany after the defeat of the Nazi regime. But Congress, after much debate, approved major funding to help rebuild the very country that had plundered and bombed Europe and murdered millions. The Marshall Plan proved to be critical to the rebuilding and recovery of Germany.

There is no similar villain in this scenario. Rather, we have a villainous virus that must be defeated and small countries that have been defiled.

No, the Ebola story is not over.

A bold health care worker named Yusuf Kamara was asked to join public officials and dignitaries in addressing an outdoor ceremony in Freetown after the WHO announcement. His personal experiences qualified him for such a prominent role. He had lost 16 members of his family to the disease and survived the sickness himself. His speech was widely reported in the international press. He concluded this way: "For us, Ebola is not over. Remember those who died of Ebola and especially the children who have been affected. We need help to treat the many, many health problems we still suffer from."

And then there was a Jewish man from Buffalo's Jericho Road Community Health Center. He has traveled the world throughout his lifetime, blessed in so many ways, but on this day he stood in the midst of those whose lives have been touched by a clinic that had grown out of an empty African plain in the Kono District of Sierra Leone. A pastor at the gathering turned to him and asked him to pray. The prayer, which had been learned many years before on the American plain state of Iowa, came from the book of Deuteronomy and it was lifted up in Hebrew, but the translation resonated that day: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is One."

There was jubilation in Freetown tempered by grave concern about the continuing epidemic in Guinea. It is an ideal time for the people of the world to seize an opportunity to demonstrate their humanity and defeat a ruthless enemy. And each day we can still hear the songs of praise from our friends and fellow humans who live in Sierra Leone knowing that people connected with Jericho Road in Buffalo are showing them our love every day. We fully understand that "there but by the grace of God go I." We are blessed, but through those blessings we are called to care for all of our neighbors.

Myron Glick, M.D., is founder and medical director of Jericho Road Community Health Center. Edward Mezvinsky is a former member of Congress from Iowa who also served as U.S. representative to the U.N. Human Rights Commission.