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HEADLINE: Window of African Promise Amid Great Suffering

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The writer is secretary-general of the United Nations. -

A day spent this month in Freetown, Sierra Leone, brought home to me the extreme suffering but also the resilience and hope that form the reality of Africa today.

In more than 30 years of work for the United Nations, including recent visits to sites of genocide in Rwanda and to victims of ethnic cleansing in Kosovo, nothing had quite prepared me for this.

I visited a rehabilitation center for "amputees." The word suggests an operation under anesthetic to save a patient's life, but this was the opposite. These had been healthy people until they were forced to lie on the ground while their limbs - and other parts of their bodies - were hacked off, sometimes with blunt farm implements. Many other victims had not survived.

I saw an 86-year-old woman who had lost her feet in this way. I held in my arms a 2-year-old girl whose right arm had been cut off. These atrocities were meant to terrorize the population. As a result, almost a quarter of Sierra Leone's 4.5 million people are now refugees.

What comfort can we offer such people? How can we begin to explain such acts? They make all our fine speeches about peace and humanity seem inadequate, even futile. And yet I could not help being impressed by the courage of these victims, and by the dedication of the people caring for them.

The next day I met some of the refugees in neighboring Guinea. They have swollen the population there, already desperately poor, by more than 10 percent, yet they have been received with great generosity. They welcomed us with songs of yearning for their homeland. They rejoiced at the help that their "brothers and sisters" in Kosovo were getting, and hoped that their own plight would now receive similar attention. I cannot forget such courage, nor turn my back on such need.

Outside the rehabilitation center, in the streets of Freetown, some of the world's poorest people were celebrating the agreement signed the previous day by their country's leaders, ending eight years of civil war. Yet they knew, and I knew, that the price of peace was an amnesty and a power-sharing deal. The leaders of the movement which had seized power illegally would now sit in cabinet alongside the elected president, and be given charge of gold and diamonds - the country's economic lifeline.

Such a peace is very hard to reconcile with the goal of "ending the culture of impunity," which inspires the United Nations tribunals for Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia, and the future international criminal court. That is why my representative had to enter a reservation when he signed the peace agreement, making it clear that, for the United Nations, the amnesty cannot cover crimes such as genocide or other grave breaches of international humanitarian law.

Yet at the same time, the United Nations cannot stand between Sierra Leone's people and their only hope of ending such a long and brutal conflict.

No one can feel happy about a peace obtained on such terms. Yet we should recognize the real effort of African solidarity that lies behind it. Troops from Nigeria, Ghana, Guinea and Mali, acting on behalf of the Economic Community of West African States, drove the rebels out of Freetown and restored the elected president. Togo and other West African countries then patiently brokered the agreement.

In Central Africa, a similar combination of military and diplomatic interventions has produced a cease-fire agreement, tenuous as yet, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. And in East Africa, Eritrea and Ethiopia have accepted, at least in principle, the peace plan worked out by the Organization of African Unity.

At this month's OAU summit in Algiers, Africa's leaders agreed, in a welcome change from earlier years, on the importance of the rule of law, respect for the will of the people and human rights, and on the need to focus on social and economic development.

Many individuals are not waiting for their leaders but acting on their own to solve their problems. I think of women like Maggy and Beatrice, a Burundian Tutsi and a Rwandan Hutu, who both lost their families in ethnic massacres, and who now run an interethnic orphanage together. Or of Priscilla Misihairabwi, leader of an AIDS support network, who led a successful campaign to make female condoms available throughout Zimbabwe.

If such people got the international support that the people of Kosovo are now getting, Africa would have a real chance to turn the corner.

The boy soldiers can be disarmed, demobilized and turned into useful members of society - if there are schools for them to go to and jobs for them to do. So many things have to be built or rebuilt, in such a short time. Without timely help, countries like Sierra Leone may soon fall back into the cycle of violence and despair.

Never has Africa been more in need of political and financial help. But never, perhaps, has it been better placed to benefit from it. The right kind of aid now, carefully directed to those best able to use it, could pay off a thousand-fold.

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