Recovering from Ebola, Sierra Leone communities strive for reconciliation

by Ryan Lenora Brown in the October 14, 2015 issue

(*The Christian Science Monitor*) The greatest betrayal of James Keppa's life took only as long as uttering these words: we need an ambulance.

The next day, village medics knocked on the door of the local chief, Nyuma Tommy, to inform him that they had come to take his son to an Ebola treatment center.

"At that time, most people weren't coming back from the treatment centers—they went there to die," Tommy said. "We knew letting him go was saying good-bye."

Sure enough, his son never returned, and at first his father raged at God, at the disease, and at the man—a friend—who had called for his son to be taken away.

"He was bitter, of course he was," said Keppa, who was the village of Kpondu's appointed "contact tracer," a community health worker assigned to track suspected cases of Ebola and all those who had come in contact with them. "But this was our protocol—when someone shows those symptoms, the vomiting and the fever and the diarrhea, you call for the ambulance. It gives them the best chance of survival."

Sierra Leone is one of the world's poorest countries, but it has resources developed in the aftermath of its decade-long civil war, which killed more than 50,000 people and displaced upward of 1 million before ending in 2002.

One of those resources is Fambul Tok—which means "Family Talk" in the local Krio language—an organization promoting community rebuilding in eastern Sierra Leone.

"We've been trying to help people speak to each other about their suffering," said Daniel Maekundu, secretary for a local branch. "This sickness brought a lot of conflicts, a lot of grudges."

The organization arranged talks between Keppa and Tommy.

"It begins with honest conversation," Keppa said. "I wanted him to know that by isolating his son, we prevented others from getting sick here. He died, but that was the last case we had in this village."

In the tight-knit West African communities at the heart of the Ebola epidemic, which killed nearly 4,000 people, the disease's particular cruelty was that it thrives on human intimacy. Those most likely to contract the virus were those who cared for the sick and buried the dead. Those who ran from the disease ran from their spouses, children, parents, friends, and neighbors.

"This is a disease you'll never get from your enemies," said John Caulker, Fambul Tok's executive director. "During the [civil] war, you knew your enemies because they came with guns. But with this war—against Ebola, I mean—the ones you came to fear the most were your loved ones."

After the civil war, Caulker recalls watching the flurry of aid pledges and promises of schools and clinics, wells and seeds, roads and tractors.

"I saw a huge amount of wasted resources simply because no one had bothered to ask local people, 'Is this what you really want?'" he said.

He watched, too, as efforts to punish the war's most notorious criminals dragged on at the UN Special Court in Freetown.

So Caulker set about asking community members to stand face-to-face and find a way forward, without judges or global media scrutiny. In reconciliation bonfires held in dozens of villages, Fambul Tok put killers in front of the relatives of those they killed. Rapists listened to survivors recount their assaults. Former child soldiers wept as they described the torturous path that had led them to torch their own homes with their families inside. Perpetrators asked for forgiveness and pledged material support to their victims.

The process stretched across years. Some ties would never be restored, but there was progress, said Mariatu Koroma, a community activist. "We were moving on with our lives."

Then people began to get sick. The Ebola outbreak is thought to have begun in a village in southern Guinea in December 2013. From there, it hopped borders to Liberia in March 2014 and to Sierra Leone in May.

Last August, Francis Korfeh, a motorbike parts salesman in the town of Koindu, went to visit his sick brother and days later woke up with a scalding fever. His wife also fell sick. Soon, they were in the back of an ambulance jolting toward the nearest

treatment center in the town of Kailahun.

“I was tormented by my wife’s pain,” he said. “I could do nothing for her.”

His wife died, then one of his sons, and he mourned alone.

“When I came home, people feared me,” he said.

Korfeh threw himself into running a local survivors group. Slowly, many of those who had shunned him apologized.

“Things are getting better for us now,” he said. “I don’t blame people for the way they acted toward me then. It was a difficult time, and everyone was very afraid. I forgive it.”

Today, billboards implore Sierra Leoneans to regard survivors and first responders as heroes, and artists are promoting reconciliation through films and radio. But even as local efforts forge ahead, many say international aid groups are unintentionally sowing division.

“When you go to a village, you see Ebola survivors and orphans are being brought aid, while all around them people are starving,” said Fatim Sesay, the head of a women’s cooperative outside Koindu that is supported by Fambul Tok.

Aid groups run the risk of breaking the social ties needed to recover, Caulker said.

“Some international organizations are promoting stigmatization—not willingly but because of their approach,” he said. “If an Ebola widow wakes up in the middle of the night, it will be her neighbors she runs to, not the aid organization that comes through once a week or once a month. If you only give aid to her, you may just break those bonds, instead of encouraging solidarity with those who have suffered.”

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