ISHMAEL BEAH: ON BEING A CHILD SOLDIER

Interview conducted by Haviva Kohl[a]

Africa Policy Journal (APJ): Describe your life in Sierra Leone before the civil war.

Ishmael Beah (IB): I grew up in a village near a small town. I would often walk to my grandmother's village to visit her, and to hear her tell stories. I never traveled to the city. My house didn't have electricity or tap water so I went to the river to fetch water and I cooked my food using firewood. It was a very happy life, nonetheless. There was nothing to worry about, such as "What am I going to be in 10 years?" Instead, I went to school, played soccer, went swimming and caused some trouble since I was a very mischievous child. At the age of eight, I encountered American hip hop so I used to dance and try to write the lyrics down, memorize them, and recite them. Then, I started writing my own lyrics. Alongside this was also my love for Shakespeare, which came out of the British colonization influence so that's one of the pieces of literature that I learned as a kid from primary school. I even recite soliloquies. I also grew up with a single father, which was unusual at that time. Overall, it was a very nice life- simple and nice.

APJ: Many genocide survivors say that their life changed within minutes. Was that your experience?

IB: It was instant. We initially heard about a war starting in the eastern part of Sierra Leone known as Kailahun Kenema, which is on the border of Liberia but we disbelieved what we heard because of

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the kind of country we lived in, and the kind of people we were. No one believed that this was actually happening in this country, in a place where people were so kind to each other. One day we left for a variety show in which we wanted to perform, located in a place called Matru. After performing, we couldn't return to our home village because it was too dangerous. This was when the war hit home. So, immediately, overnight, it changed like that, in a minute.

In that situation, each minute, things are different but, as time goes on, you learn to expect the worst: that pessimism actually makes you survive because you're not disappointed. It's also a way of normalizing the situation. I think many people have difficulties, sometimes, when they see people in a war -- they think, perhaps, Africans embrace a lot of violence. It's not that. It's that when you live in that context, you have to normalize the situation very quickly, otherwise it will kill you. So, for example, when I was in the capital in 1997, people would hide under their beds when guns were shot because stray bullets would kill you. But after two, three or four days, you have to go out to look for food so you're not afraid of the gunshots any more, or the stray bullets coming to kill you, because there's something bigger at stake. You go to look for food under the shower of bullets because you need food or you will die of hunger. Therefore, you kind of normalize the situation. Kids would start playing games, saying "I will bet you that was an AK-47 that was shot. I will bet you that was a G-3. I will bet you that was a machine gun." Kids didn't have any other way of playing, so they had to play with this madness. If you do not do this, the conditions of war become too unbearable.

APJ: How old were you when all of this really started to affect you?

IB: Well the war started in 1991. I was born in 1980, so I was 11. In 1993, when I was 12, that's when the war started affecting my life. I lost my immediate family. They were killed- my mother, father and two brothers. And then at 13 I was recruited in the army, and I was in the army until I was over 15 when I was removed.

APJ: In **your book, "A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier," you describe how some of your friends made it out okay, and some didn't. What would you say were some of the characteristics that you have that made you a strong survivor?**

IB: Well first of all, I think surviving that war had nothing to do with what I did or what I didn't do. I tend to think of it as pure luck and the grace of God, and somebody looking out for me because the chances of dying were so much greater for everyone. Nevertheless, I think one of the reasons that some of my friends died along the way is that some of them lost hope. You have to always hold on to something even when everything else collapses. At times, when I lost hope, I had friends who still had some hope so they were able to drag me along with them, and say "Come on, let's go." In Sierra Leone, people were so hopeful during the war. People would say, "Oh, this won't last for a week. Oh, this will only last for two months." After it had been going on for two months, "Oh, this won't last more than three months. Oh, this won't last more than a year." People made themselves believe that, to have some shred of hope to hold on to because sometimes it seemed so hopeless.

Also, I think the reason why I survived is because of the values I was instilled with as a child: the storytelling, being aware of other people, respecting elders, tremendous love for your life, however simple it is, and appreciation for whatever you have. Even though that changed during the context of war, I think after you're removed from that conflict they start to come back. To somebody who meets Sierra Leone just through the violence doesn't know those things. Whenever people are introduced to Africa or to some other countries, they know them through some kind of violence, some sort of disease. That becomes their image of that place, but to me, that's not all there is. There was Sierra Leone before the war, and there will be Sierra Leone after the war. So, before the war, I hold those beautiful times that I had.

APJ: How do you manage your memories in terms of the flashbacks?

IB: Well, I always live with these memories, unless I can find some brain surgeon who can fix it, but I wouldn't want that, either. I still get nightmares sometimes. A lot of bad things are in my head, and I can never completely clean them up or forget them. I see people, I see things, and I remember details. Even though it is difficult, I've learned to come to terms with them and to transform them so that I use them positively rather than negatively. If I don't, they will kill me. I think oftentimes people think healing is almost like cleaning your brain off. It's not cleaning, it's just coming to terms with whatever you are struggling with and transforming it.

APJ: What motivated you to write this book?

IB: Well, I think it's very important to me, and it is something that I will continue to do as much as I have the time and energy to do it. After having lived that life, I know what it's like to lose my humanity, to suffer tremendously, to lose family, for people to distrust my humanity, and for me to try and regain it again. I know it's possible, but I know the process is difficult. And I know why it's difficult, because if you're alone, it's even worse. So I don't want that for a lot of people. That's where my obligations come in.

When I came to the United States to live, I quickly learned that most people didn't even know that Sierra Leone was a country. Some people thought of it as a mountain climbing company or something. For me, this really hurt me a lot because I came in 1998, and the war had been going on for over seven years, and a lot of bad things had already happened there. And it wasn't even in the major newspapers or anything. No one knew so that really made me sad, so tremendously sad, that I felt obligated to start speaking about Sierra Leone, leaving my experience out of it for a little bit.

APJ: What made that change?

IB: Well as I kept doing that, I said to myself, "You know what? I need to put a human face to this." Because when you tell people, they would say, "Wow. Did that really happen? I can't believe it." People don't believe that these things can really happen, because they've never been there. They haven't seen it. I encountered a few people who still had this idea that children who are in war cannot be rehabilitated ever, that they are gone. And that was when I said I have to speak about my experience, because I don't want that idea to be believed by anyone, because it's not true. If people believed that thought, I would have perished, so I started speaking about my experiences. Since I was at the U.N. School, I started doing U.N. events where I would speak in front of the Security Council, General Assembly, Kofi Annan, and the list goes on.

I wanted to let people know that it's possible, although the process is difficult, to let people know that their work does help people. People will sit together and try to write resolutions and put things together to move governments, even though sometimes it seems like it's not happening or so slow.

But it does change some lives, like mine, you know. But I also wanted to create hope. So I started speaking about it. But every time I would speak for 10 or 15 minutes, I didn't really feel like I had enough time to explain and give the context of how this comes about. So I decided, when I started college at Oberlin, to write about this. At some point, after the second year in college, I decided I should start writing. So I wrote a few things, and people liked it. It's a very difficult process remembering all of that.

APJ: You once wrote that you lost compassion for others. How did you regain your compassion?

IB: It wasn't easy. I think it was the people at the rehabilitation center. There was a woman called Esther who was very dear to me. Regardless of what we had been through and what we had done, these people cared so deeply and so generally for us, that they were only willing to see us as human beings, as children, and nothing more.

In the beginning we hated it because after you've been in the life of violence, you've been trained to think as a soldier. When somebody doesn't think of you as a soldier or that what you did was not your fault, it's almost like belittling your capacity as a soldier so you get very upset when you're still in that mindset. But we began to respect these people because of their persistence and perseverance. By just selflessly giving their time to care for us, they made it clear that we were capable of feeling, of relearning how to be human beings again.

Soon after that, some of the people I met in my life, especially my mom, Laura Simms in New York, simply wanted me to be an individual. When I first came, she didn't want me to talk about my background to anyone and I agreed with her. I don't know how that would have gone, to start high school, meet friends and go, "Hi, my name is Ishmael. I used to be in the war." People wouldn't know the context, and it could be a very bad introduction. So when people get to know me as an individual before they learn about my story, they still see my humanity. I want people to see that my life during the war is not the only thing that defines me as a human being but, of course, some people latch on to only that and I can't help them.

APJ: Do you ever wonder what it would have been like if you had never experienced the war and been a child soldier?

IB: If the war hadn't come to Sierra Leone, I probably would have gone on to school, finished secondary school, and probably gotten a job. I had wanted to be an accountant or an economist because those were the kinds of professions parents wanted their children to enter, even though I was very poor in mathematics. I'm still very poor in mathematics. I did love literature but I didn't necessarily dream of it.

APJ: What would you want the world to know about Sierra Leone right now?

IB: When the war ended in Sierra Leone, there were many people who actually lived next door to people who had killed their families in the war, and have now adopted children who actually massacred most of their families. Not many people have that capacity elsewhere. But you don't hear this about Sierra Leone in the news because that's not the perception that the media wants you to get. That's not newsworthy.

I also want people to know that just because the war ended in Sierra Leone doesn't mean that the problems that caused the war have ended. Those problems still exist and they require attention. If we are going to stop the use of children in war, we should not only focus on short-term goals, which is to take the children who are in the war and to rehabilitate children. We should also focus on preventing the conditions that actually led to the war and to the recruitment of children.

Most important is that when wars end, all the cameras leave. That is actually the most critical part because it is when attention needs to be paid on these places so that people are not given the chance to repeat those things that cause war. In Sierra Leone, when international attention was there, programs were working because there were always cameras -- there was always a journalist somewhere. That actually makes these corrupt leaders behave because they want to show the international community that they are not as bad as people make them out to be. The attention works.

APJ: What are your plans for the future now that you have written a best seller?

IB: I'm still trying to find myself. I lived through this war, and I survived it. It gave me a certain understanding and appreciation of life. But I'm also 26, I really don't know very much about life. I'm still learning. Before I wrote this book, I wanted to go to law school so I was studying for the LSAT. I'm still interested so I'll pursue that at some point. I also want to do a master in international affairs. And I want to write some more.