

WEDNESDAY JANUARY 6 1999. AN UNFORGETTABLE DAY IN THE HISTORY OF SIERRA LEONE.

In the days leading up to that fateful day, the whole country had collapsed like a pack of cards under the combined invasion of the RUF and the AFRC. By Christmas Day 1998, the rebels led by the late Solomon A.J. Musa were at Waterloo and Freetown was under siege. As though by some divine intervention, S.A.J Musa died a mysterious death on the outskirts of the city before the year rolled over. His death delayed the attack on the city as we were later informed. Following reports of his death, we knew it was just a matter of time before all hell broke loose. The civil society coalition was now working with ECOMOG, the Kamajors and many more people. We no longer had an Army. Our military had turned against us and they were on the move to slaughter us. Several street demonstrations and meetings were held at various parts of the city to strategize on how to protect the city. The city was completely full and later we learnt that a chunk of the rebels had already entered in the city as civilians and were just waiting for instructions to attack.

When I visited State House on 5th January together with Allie Bangura and others (after we came from the check point mounted at Rokel) to inform the government that even the Gbethis who had been asked to man checkpoints had no torchlights, not to talk of arms and ammunition, the chaos we met at State House told me that it was all over. We were sitting ducks. There was so much panic at State House and people were running helter-skelter. We could not talk to anybody. I went home feeling extremely despondent and accepting for the first time that the city was about to fall. I got a call that evening from Alpha Timbo who was then Secretary General of the Teachers' Union informing me that he was not going home to Kissy after spending the day at the Ministry of Education negotiating for teachers' salaries. He told me he had information that that night was crucial for us. I shared with him my experience at State House. He was worried that his family was still at Kissy and he had no idea what he could do to keep them safe. That evening I gave a defiant interview on VOA and BBC attacking the invading rebels. Nobody went to sleep.

I got my first call at around midnight from Alpha Timbo breaking the news that the rebels had entered with an attack in Wellington. I got out of bed, got dressed and decided to monitor the invasion on outskirts of the city. My next call came from the late Hassan Barrie, President of The Sierra Leone Labour Congress who called to inform me that his neighborhood had fallen. I also received calls from coalition members when Clay Factory fell, and all the IDPs were pushed out onto the streets. Shortly thereafter, when the checkpoint at Kissy Dockyard Ferry junction manned by ECOMOG (which we thought was a very strong defence) fell, we knew we were in trouble. The ECOMOG soldiers had been overwhelmed by the number of civilians on the streets and just could not open fire. My next call was from Marie Bangura (now Marie Bob Kandeh). She was staying off Fourah Bay Road and came out to watch the movement of people. She was the first person to give me a clear description of the strategy the rebels were using.

The rebels had actualized their assault on the city by using innocent civilians as human shield. Thousands of people were on the move, marching towards the city center some with vehicles but carrying most of their belongings, whilst the rebels hid amongst and behind them. I asked Marie not to leave her location, but to stay behind and monitor the situation and give us more details. She agreed and became a very good source of information for us.

Prior to December 1999, the Civil Society coalition that had fought the RUF/AFRC government had been reactivated. This particular morning, we were frantically making phone calls. Dr. Julius Spencer and Allie Bangura had mostly been working with the ECOMOG troops to keep their morale up and also coordinating with our Ambassador in Nigeria, Joe Blell for more support and reinforcement. The Head of ECOMOG based in Freetown was General Amadu. The Head of ECOMOG West Africa was General Timothy Shelpedi.

Mrs. Fatou Jalloh, who was my landlady at my Liverpool Street office was the next person to call me. Central Freetown had fallen. The size of the human shield had doubled according to reports from Mrs. Jalloh. It was at this point that we realized that if we did not make a stand, the entire city would fall. We coordinated with ECOMOG and advised them that the defense of the city must be strengthened at the Congo Cross bridge. Based on our advice, ECOMOG decided to deploy all

tanks and artillery at the Congo Cross bridge.

By dawn, the entire city was awake and continuously on the phone. ECOMOG had assembled all its troops at Congo Cross Bridge to defend the rest of the city. As the history books have recorded, that was where the final battle for Freetown took place. When the crowd of civilians arrived at the bridge, they were commanded to lie on the floor and ECOMOG cordoned off that area and all civilians were detained for several hours. Later, I was informed that the battle at Congo Cross was quite a fierce one and very destructive. Allegedly, my name was one of the names on the "most wanted" list the rebels had drawn up as they prepared to march on the city. Our names were found in the pockets of some of the slain rebels.

As the rebels retreated from Congo Cross bridge, we got reports of civilians who had been forced to come out and wave white bed linens, or any white material as a sign of peace and also to dance for the rebels in rebel controlled areas in Eastern and Central Freetown. We kept receiving information about people who were being slaughtered in their homes, houses being burnt alive with people still inside, incidences of rape, and the amputation of civilians by the retreating rebels. Some of the rebels from the battle at Congo Cross bridge fled into the Ascension Town vicinity, others headed towards Hill cut Road and some ventured into Tengbeh Town. On that gloomy Wednesday morning, even the military barracks at Wilberforce came under artillery attack. At some point, I had cause to call for reinforcement at Tengbeh Town and two armored cars were deployed about two hundred yards from my house at Tengbeh Town. For two days, series of battles took place around the city. By the end of the first day, Freetown was divided into two parts - the east and central part under the control of the RUF and AFRC coalition, and Western Freetown starting from Congo cross under the control of ECOMOG. People in rebel controlled areas started using all known as well as discovering all unknown side roads to move to the western part of the city.

Those 48 hours after the initial invasion of the city were the most nerve-wrecking for me because the electricity supply had been cut off and the phone lines had given up the ghost. I was totally incommunicado.

On the third day, I sat my twelve-year-old son down and tearfully informed him that there was a great possibility that I would not survive the rebel incursion. I handed him a notebook with all the names of my friends around the world who he was to contact should he make it out alive; all the foreign currency I had on me; my cheque book in London and gave him directives to jump the fence and hide in our neighbor's compound when the rebels came for me, and subsequently find a way to go to Guinea. He had instructions on who to contact when he got to Guinea.

On the 10th January, the much expected knock on my gate came. I was in the process of saying my final goodbyes to my son and dispatching him to the neighbor's compound when I heard Dr. Julius Spencer's voice. Our gate was opened and he entered fully dressed in military attire. He informed me that the government had fled and that we are on our own. I got dressed and we all assembled at the Wilberforce Military Headquarters. Within the day, we reached out to all our coalition members including Alpha Timbo, Allie Bangura, Festus Minah and many others. An office was given to us and FM 98.1 became our main means of communication to mobilize people. Hundreds of young people responded and we set up shop at the Vine Memorial Secondary School and developed strategies as well as rallied support for a demoralized ECOMOG, who were being sent reinforcement from Nigeria. Nigerian soldiers were being parachuted by helicopters into the city in their hundreds. We were defiant and determined to win back total control of our city.

We managed to open the National Stadium after the rebels were pushed back beyond St. John and made an announcement for all IDPs to assemble there. I walked from the National Stadium beyond Ascension Town bridge to inspect the queue of people, picking out old people, mothers with young babies, wounded people, to bring them up front the queue at the Stadium. It was a very painful experience. All these people had lost their houses and had barely managed to escape to the west end to seek refuge. The next biggest task was to pick up the corpses on the streets and

to bury them in mass graves. We turned to young people with "omolankes" who volunteered to pick up the corpses littering the streets, which by now were being devoured by stray dogs and vultures. We requested help from the British war ship along the Atlantic Ocean, which delivered disinfectants in 5 gallon containers to clean the city and rid it from the stench of the dead corpses. Our Ambassador in Nigeria, Joe Blell, played a crucial role in helping us to negotiate with the Nigerian government to send us reinforcement. Nigeria at this time was undergoing its own transition after the death of General Abacha in June 1998, but General Abubakar the Interim President was gracious enough to send thousands of young Nigerian men, who came to rescue us and made the ultimate sacrifice to bring us peace.

With no government to man the affairs of the State, the Civil Society coalition had to stand in the place of a government and stir the ship. We visited Cline Town with ECOMOG tanks to inspect stores that had food supply. By this time, the rebels were on the retreat out of the city. We contacted several NGOs to provide blankets and other items to the thousands of people at the stadium.

After a few days, President Kabbah resurfaced and we held a joint meeting between the Civil Society coalition that had managed the crisis and the Government at his Hill Station residence. The meeting was chaired by a humiliated and subdued President. The most angry member of our team was Alpha Timbo, who did not mince his words in lambasting the incompetence of the government and their failure to listen to all the warnings that had been given to them. President Kabbah apologized and we all asked him to call President Abubakarr of Nigeria to thank him for his response to our request to send more troops without even a phone call from our own President. The rest my dear friends is history.

We lost a lot of young people during the assault on Freetown who came out to join the Nigerian troops who were parachuted into Freetown. State House for instance was lost and taken more than 5 times. These young men and women drew maps of the city to help the Nigerian troops to acquaint themselves and understand the streets and geography of Freetown. These were thousands of young volunteers. My greatest regret is that we have never celebrated these heroes and have never tried to document them. In hindsight, it is undeniable that it was the people of Sierra Leone, thousands of them who paid the heaviest price of the war.

Today, on this very solemn day, I want us to remember all those we lost to the war especially the students and civil society members who stayed behind to confront the AFRC, when most of us fled into exile in Guinea after the 1997 coup; the civil society members and people who gave their lives to save the city after the January 6th attack and finally the people who confronted Foday Sankoh at his house in May 2000 and got killed, when it was realized that he intended to derail the peace process.

As we remember January 6 1999 as one of the worse days during the 12 year civil war in our country, I want to use this opportunity to thank all the thousands of Sierra Leoneans, mostly young people, but also men and women who responded to our call all those years ago to save our motherland. Most of them were killed and we never got the opportunity to mourn them properly and document their story and heroism. We owe it to them to protect Sierra Leone.

Zainab Hawa Bangura