

INTERNATIONAL

United Nations calls Sierra Leone 'unlivable'

FREETOWN, Sierra Leone (AP) — Rebel fighters randomly kill and hack off limbs of villagers in this West African nation and government forces reply with scorched-earth bombing raids.

Combine that with disease and poverty, and the average citizen has a life expectancy of just 34 years. The United Nations considers Sierra Leone the world's most unlivable country, yet its churches, markets and discos are filled with people trying to salvage normal lives.

"Even if there is a rebel fighting in my parlor room, I would never live anywhere else," says James Fulah, a taxi driver who spends his days negotiating the crowded streets of Freetown, the capital.

A former British colony filled with lush forests, fertile fields and bountiful diamond and mineral wealth, Sierra Leone should be a land of plenty. No one should go hungry here — mangos,

bananas and other fruit grow like weeds and rice used to be an export crop.

Today, however, many villagers are unable to tend their fields for fear of rebel attacks. Food aid is trucked and airdropped in by the ton. Coups, beheadings and rebel atrocities that have marked Sierra Leone's recent history have spawned gallows humor.

A rebel advance in recent days once again has shaken Sierra Leone and insurgents vow to storm Freetown any day. Despite U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan's appeal Sunday for rebels to lay down their arms, rebel commander Sam Bockarie warned "it's too late for talking and listening."

Still, relentless hardships and seven years of fighting that have destroyed countless homes and livelihoods have not crippled a lively national spirit. Flag-waving citizens eagerly turn up for rallies staged by the elected government, which was

restored after the widely reviled rebels and their military allies were deposed in February.

Impoverished villagers donate generously to the ragged government-backed traditional militiamen who guard countless villages and roadblocks and often are the only defense against rebel attack.

And the veneer of everyday life continues.

Shops often open early and close late. Until Freetown's 10 p.m. curfew was imposed last week, candlelit stalls lined dark Freetown streets until after midnight, filling the air with the smell of chili and fresh fish.

Couples crowd dance floors. At curfew time, the proprietors lock the doors and those inside party until dawn.

The suffering, however, is obvious. People with limbs hacked off in a rebel revenge campaign fill hospitals. In the eastern town of Kenema, abandoned and orphaned youngsters, many of whom

watched their parents being killed, crowd a children's home — a hut covered with plastic.

For the past three years, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) has ranked Sierra Leone last among 174 countries assessed for their quality of life — a measure of income, education, life expectancy and health care.

"There are many other countries with serious problems, but we believe Sierra Leone is the worst," New York-based UNDP analyst Gul Tanghe said.

Up to a quarter of Sierra Leone's 4.7 million people have fled their homes since the rebels were driven from the capital by a Nigerian-led West African force. Seeking revenge against a government restored after 10 months in exile, the rebels have randomly mutilated, raped and murdered thousands, witnesses and aid workers say.

(See Leone, Page 13)

Mbeki preparing to lead South Africa after Mandela

By Gumisai Mutume

JOHANNESBURG (IPS) — As the reign of Pres. Nelson Mandela draws to a close, he is quietly paving the way for Thabo Mbeki to steer the country into the next millennium.

Mbeki, now the deputy president, has said he will not make any major changes when he takes over. But, South Africa without Mandela will definitely be a different place.

Mandela will step down as head of state after the next general elections this year.

At age 56, Mbeki spent the better part of 1998 preparing for his eventual takeover of Mandela's office, if the ruling African National Congress wins at the polls.

Mandela has discretely slipped out of major presidential functions, sending Mbeki on what he calls an introductory world tour to meet with international leaders.

"South Africa has had five years to consolidate the new government, and I don't think there are going to be any major policy shifts," said Alfred Stadler, a political scientist at the University of the Witwatersrand.

However, Stadler added that Mbeki is among the new breed of politicians. In political circles he is considered a man who gets things done.

"Mandela belongs to the generation of leaders who rose in the politics of rallies, demagoguery and fine speeches, and that generation is out," Stadler told IPS. "Mbeki is a confident, well-trained British university graduate, although he is not as charismatic as Mandela."

But, the road ahead for Mbeki as South Africa's second president will not be an entirely smooth one.

Mbeki may have to deal with a more militant labor movement. A rift between the labor movement and government that widened in

1998 is expected to deepen this year.

The 1.8 million-strong Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) is an ally of the ANC but has major differences with the party over macro-economic policies. These rumors have fueled speculation that Cosatu may run candidates on its own ticket in the upcoming elections.

Jobs are also hard to come by. According to research by the South African Institute of Race Relations, the rate of unemployment is growing by eight percent yearly and could

reach 43 percent by 2006.

Perhaps the biggest challenge facing Mbeki's government will be the AIDS epidemic. South Africa has one of the fastest growing AIDS rates in the world, with 1,500 people infected daily. More than three million people currently have the virus in South Africa.

"For too long, we have closed our eyes as a nation, hoping the truth was not real. For many years, we have allowed HIV to spread, and at a rate in our country which is one of the fastest in the world," Mbeki said.

WORLD BRIEFS

DENMARK CANCELS DEBTS OF POOR NATIONS

UNITED NATIONS (IPS) — Denmark, one of the world's most generous donors, has written-off nearly \$635 million in bilateral debts owed by the world's poorer nations. Countries whose debts have been forgiven include Angola, Ghana, Cameroon, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Zimbabwe, Egypt, Bolivia and Nicaragua. The debt cancellations have accelerated since 1995 when Denmark introduced a number of criteria for writing-off bilateral debts, Danish officials revealed. Any country qualifying for a debt write-off by Denmark should either be a least developed country (LDC), described as the poorest of the poor, or a Highly Indebted Poor Country (HIPC). Of the 48 LDCs, about 32 are in sub-Saharan Africa including Benin, Burundi, Chad, Equatorial Guinea, Niger, Rwanda and Zambia. The 41 HIPCs include Uganda, Bolivia, Guyana, Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast and Mozambique. The definition of the two categories of countries, as laid down by the United Nations and the World Bank, takes into account density of population, gross national product, external debt and per capita incomes.

GRENADIAN ELECTIONS SCHEDULED FOR JAN. 18

T. GEORGE'S (IPS) — When Grenadians go to the polls on Jan. 18 to elect a new government, Prime Minister Keith Mitchell says citizens will be called upon to choose between a "blessing and a curse." The blessing is of course his ruling New National Party, which won the last elections in 1995 by one seat. The curse is the opposition, the Grenada United Labor Party. He described it as a "pick-up team." It will be the fifth general election in this Caribbean state since a 1983 coup. Since then, voters have changed the government every five years. Mitchell's administration has lasted three and a half years. The national party is a minority government, which now controls only seven seats in the 15-seat House of Representatives.

DEER INVADING JAMAICA'S BLUE MOUNTAIN RANGE

KINGSTON (IPS) — The Blue Mountain range in Jamaica has long been one of the Caribbean island's major tourist attractions for visitors seeking beauty off the beaten track. While not very popular with North American vacationers, the Blue Mountains have been a hit with Europeans, who enjoy hiking along the trails and taking in the tropical flora and picturesque scenery. But, now the Blue Mountains have been invaded by a different type of visitor. Hundreds of what are suspected to be American whitetail deer are beginning to overrun the mountain range. These animals, who normally inhabit snow-capped mountains in North America, are reproducing in great numbers. Farmers, who have complained of crop loss, have taken to shooting the deer.

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