

# BEYOND THE TALL WALLS

## CHANGING LIVES BEHIND BARS

Prison Watch Sierra Leone

January - March 2012 Edition

In Partnership with RCT



“All persons deprived of their liberty shall be treated with humanity and with respect for their inherent dignity of the human person” – Article 10 ICCPR

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### STRANGE BUT TRUE

Sometime ago, I had an interesting conversation with a friend of mine. He asked me:

**Friend:** *what is your motivation of working for the prison force that has nothing to write home about.*

**Carlton:** *I don't work for the prison. I am a prisoners rights activist and I work with the prison service.*

**Friend:** *Ok what ever you call it is fine by me. But I just cant imagine why you chose to work with criminals who should be left to rot and die. He continues to give his thought about the Prison Service. He started with the usual and most common mistake many people tend to make that the Prison is a Force and that the Prison connotes dark images as an institution for dropouts, a place of torture and ill-treatment and a place worse than any living environment one can imagine.*

**Carlton:** *I had some hard time to change his mindset though I finally succeeded. I stated by asking the following questions.*

*Do you know that many people are in prison not because of guilty minds but because they are victims of circumstance.*

*Do you know that there is a man in prison who has been given a bail condition of 20 million when the really cost of his crime worth 3 million? **How can that be possible he exclaimed!***

*Do you know that a boy who is supposed to be on exams is currently in detention who has been convicted to 6 months or pay a fine of Le 400,000?*

*Do you that there are people who have been in prison for five (5) years and even more awaiting trial?*

**Friend:** *no that is wickedness he exclaimed!*

**Carlton:** *Do you know the majority of the people who form the prison population are between the ages of 18-40 years?*

*Do you know that many of our Prison Officers have Master degrees and other post graduate diplomas?*

**Friend:** *Are you serious? Hey buddy you definitely cant be serious.*

**Carlton:** *Do you know that our Prison Officers have participated in UN Missions and currently we have Prison Officers on UN Missions?*

**Friend:** *Oh really? Hope you are not kidding me?*

**Carlton:** *Do you know that the Prison is currently constructing a Prison school for the education of children of prison officers and the community an opportunity only the police and military institutions can boost of? The question that touched him the most was: Do you know that our National Prison Service have made history by producing a Gospel Musical Album whilst in Prison done exclusively by prison inmates at the Pademba Road Prison?*

**Do you know that prisons in Freetown Central Prison have access to TV and watch news items and live games in the prison?** At this point I can see this disbelief on his face. He started believing I am not only on a mission to convert him but now believing that am more than a liar. But he got further interested.

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**Friend:** *are you really serious? I can take all what you have said but not this. How can criminals sing? How is that possible? How was it done?*

**Carlton:** *Can I show you the proof? (I knew it was going to be difficult to convince him without the proof. I showed him the video. (whilst watching the clip, I observed tears in his eyes. He tried to hide his tears but he was betrayed because he couldn't hold back. At this point his voice tone was changed from that of suspicion to anger directed at the judiciary and the political leaders.*

**Friend:** *wow **this is too good to be true**. I cant deny the testimony of my own eyes now? Why is it not talk of the town? Do the authorities in high places know about it? What can we do to promote it? I answered all his questions but the one I did not answer was “To what extent have the Prison Service taken ownership of such novelty”? I did not answer because he quickly fired another question which he did in amazement: **But why we don't hear of all these good things happening in the Sierra Leone Prison circle? I mean the prisons school, the music stuff, our officers on UN Mission, prisoners having an opportunity to watch TV and live games inside the prison, but we only hear about escapes and bad things? Do you also know others prisons are faced with similar challenges in fact some even worse? ?***

**Carlton:** *To this I responded: This is because they are more specializing in pulling themselves down rather them promoting their own good works”. They do not seem to appreciate their own values. I agree with you that the prison institution have got a lot of challenges but they are not the only ones that are faced with challenges. The entire nation and even the international community is saddled with challenges. One thing they have not quite realized is that we attract what we constantly talk about. If you sound and talk too negative about yourself and your institution, you attract the negative attention. Public perception is*

*skewed about them because they feed the public with negative information. If they start telling the public about the good things and the positive side as well as their challenges but in constructed manner, then they can draw a lot of positives from the public.*

**Friend:** *I must confess, you have talked me in also becoming a prisoners right activist from today. Boy there is so much to write about the prison (**I laughed**) now that you have won me over tell me as Director of Prison Watch - SL, what is your dream about the prison system in Sierra Leone?*

**Carlton:** *my dream is very ambitious. I dream of a day where the prison will be in compliance with international standards.*

**Friend:** *Are you not been unrealistic. That a tall idea.*

**Carlton:** *Hey boy, that's exactly what I like. Been unrealistic. In my opinion, nothing is a tall idea. And beside it's too late to talk me out of it. In fact I am far too committed to this tall idea and I am determined to make it a short idea. When you set your self to tall ideas, you always wake up motivated and energized and committed to your tall dream. At this point I succeeded in making him believing that there is so much to write home about the prison. we ended our conversation on one final note and question*

**Friend:** *is it true that prisoners are subject to torture?*

**Carlton:** *what do you mean by torture?*

**Friend:** *I mean whether they are beaten.*

**Carlton:** *just been beaten does not qualify torture. To say they are tortured, it must have certain elements. Until you know what is torture, you cant determine a treatment to be torture. The good news is that our staff are allowed in all prisons without let or hindrance at all times.*

## CHANGING LIVES BEHIND BARS

### OUR WOUR - CHANGING LIVES BEHIND BARS

Most times a lot of people usually ask me what really have you done to live up to your motto: *Changing lives Behind Bars*. A lot more people are not too comfortable with us for the fact that we advocate for the rights of prisoners whom in their estimation do not deserve public sympathy and support and they should be lock out of society. I once told a friend of mine that prison is for everybody, I like the way a friend of mine (Andrew Jefferson Researcher—RCT) once put it in one of our conversations that: **“the prison start from your door”** unfortunate or fortunately, I really don't know which one to use, this friend of mine happen to be a guest at the maximum state prison. The day I met him was like the day he has been waiting for. After our brief discussion he now understands why Prisoners Rights Activists should exist. In fact he offered himself to work with Prison Watch when released. However for those who do not have the experience of this friend of mine, let me take you through some of our efforts to change lives behind bars

### MOMO PROGRAMME

The trend we have observed in Sierra Leone is a trend that prisoners when they are released instead of moving on, a number of them unfortunately youths move into the prison again. The aim of the MOMO (Moving out and moving on) is to work with prisoners whilst in detention to prepare them to move on rather than moving in again. *In the Freetown Central Prison, we are currently working with Prison Choir and have been able to produce a 12 song album titled ACROSS THE RIVER. We have produced a six clip DVD of the 12 songs. This was supported jointly by Fangekoret and RCT based in Denmark.*

Release of the DVD is still contingent on discussions with the Prison Authorities and the supervising Ministry. The introduction of music in prison is a novelty. It has led to reduction of tension as it provides a means of entertainment for inmates. We believe that peoples' talent should not die just because they have done wrong or are in prison. We hope that the Ministry of Internal Affairs will take lead on this. We must not only be concerned about reporting on prison condition. It is time Government start thinking positively about using music or other strategies to reduce the tension and improve detention conditions.

### HUSP (Humanitarian Support) PROGRAMME

HUSP targets, women, children and the indigent youths. As part of our corporate and social responsibility, we complement government's effort through social services. Our HUSP support includes: the collection and distribution of used clothing for women and children, sanitary pads for female inmates, baby

food for lactating mothers and food for the juvenile homes. *We believe that all persons deprived of their liberty shall be treated with humanity and with respect for their inherent dignity of their human person-(Article 10 ICCPR).* We want to acknowledge MEMUNATU PRATT, Head of Department peace and Conflict Studies University of Sierra Leone for her support to Prison Watch SL in this direction. We are also very grateful to the PENNY WILL-GERODT Prospect Hill foundation in the United States for her support to the women of Kenema Prison.



1-Top left - Gender Desk officer donating used clothing to the 2nd in command for female inmates in Port Loko state prison.

2-Top right - Director PWSL donating slippers and used clothing to juveniles in Approve School.

3- Below left - Gender desk officer distributing sanitary pads and other items to female inmate in Kenema prison supervised by the OC.

4-Below Right - Director donating musical equipments for inmates in the Freetown Central prison.

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### LINKING AND TRACING PROGRAMME

Contact with the outside world is a basic and fundamental human right. Even though persons under detention lose right to free movement does not imply they lose other rights. One of the most important rights is right to contact with their families. The prison rules and ordinance, UN minimum standards rules, Article 12 of the UNDHR, article 23 of the ICCPR, Body of principles for the protection of all persons under any form of detention or imprisonment and other standards is very clear and instructive on this. However, contact between detainees has posed serious challenges. This is due to the fact that, people are detained without the knowledge of their relativities; other whose families may be aware of their detention may not have the financial means to pay them visits.

Through our linking and tracing we have been able to get relatives informed about their relatives broker peace between families over lack of visit and bring family and the community to inmate through digital tele cast messages. Digital linking is like breaking a new ground in bridging contact between inmates and detainees. The effect has been very touching. Juveniles listening to video messages from their relativities and other family members' message of supports, message of hope and love. This has helped to reduce tension between inmates and family members. The importance of visit from family/friends/relatives is very crucial in psychosocial healing processes. Recorded digital messages from relatives, family members and friends restore faith of family support and love.



Child protection officer conveying a linking message to family members of a juvenile in the approve school. even without words the back ground tells it all.



Linking staff facilitating a cell phone communication between a brother in the juvenile home and his sister just from school with other family members at the background.



Mother been consoled by the Psychosocial Coordinator after been informed of her son's presence in the juvenile Home in the Approve School. Tears of the mother says it all. The pains, the anguish, the trauma, above all the love.



This is the home of one the juveniles before his detention. It was only when we arrived here that we knew his true story. He was actually staying here with his friend. He has both parents and he escaped from his village due to family feud. His uncle vowed to kill him anytime he sets his eyes on him. There is more to this than what you see. We credit it all to linking and tracing. It's trying but worthy of doing.