

Let There be light!

By Arthur Sillah'10

Sierra Leone has been rated one of the poorest countries in the world for many years and the 11-year civil war in the West African country has added to the woes of development. Poor electric power supply is one of the major problems; only about five percent of the population has access to electricity. The capital city, Freetown, is the most deprived of the regions that have access to light.

Growing up as a kid in Freetown, I was always amongst the kids running down the street singing “light don kam” whenever we have light because it was a rare thing to see. Today this phrase is still sung by many kids as light still remains a precious gem. People have acclimated to sporadic blackouts because of the lack of a stable power supply from the National Power Authority (NPA). Despite the varying degrees of subsidies and help from the international community, maintaining NPA is costly, and this trickles down to the average user in the form of relatively high tariffs. Given the unreliable nature of the service, these tariffs pose major competitive problems to business enterprises, resulting in major companies refusing to invest at the nation’s capital. Even small business enterprises that rely on electric power to maintain their goods have to sell at high prices in order to be able to take care of bills from powering their private generators. This, of course, implies that consumers have to suffer in the hands of the entrepreneurs.

One major problem that could be attributed to the frequent shutdown of NPA is the lack of proper maintenance. The untimely payment of workers (which usually results into a strike), leaves NPA unattended for several days. The misappropriations of funds by top workers in the company also pose a major problem in the sustenance of NPA. Some people have resorted to using private generators and do not pay their electric bills, which is one of the sources NPA relies on to finance its operation; other people cheat NPA by bridging the current.

The only way out of this long standing problem is the Hydroelectric Power project. About 30 years ago, the All Peoples Congress Party (current ruling government of Sierra Leone) started the Bumbuna Hydroelectric Project, a 50 Megawatt water regulation and hydropower facility located on the Seli River in Bumbuna town, and today we are yet to see the fruit of this project. Different governments have come and gone but this project is yet to be completed. The total cost of this project is about US\$91.8 million, contributed by the World Bank, the African Development Bank, the Government of Italy, OPEC, the Netherlands Clean Development Facility, and the Government of Sierra Leone. Most of the delays have been attributed to the long civil war. However, with the huge

sum of money involved, corruption prevailed, funds being directed to mansions and fabulous cars for top officials. Among the major problems is the rampant looting of poles that have been planted.

Despite the many obstacles foreseen, the current government has targeted the completion of this project by February 2009. This could be the only chance they have to complete the project they started years back. If completed, the Bumbuna Hydroelectric power will accelerate economic growth by providing affordable power for domestic and industrial use in an environmentally sustainable and efficient manner and permanently replace NPA.

The people of Sierra Leone are looking forward to this major accomplishment as this will end many dark nights in Freetown and bring light for the first time to places that have been in perpetual darkness. The former ruling government (Sierra Leone Peoples Party) was unable to make this possible. It is now up to the present ruling government under the command of President Ernest Bai Koroma, who faces the daunting task of reviving the country's fortunes after years of corruption and economic mismanagement. People of Sierra Leone have a lot of expectations from this project. As the president says, "time for change of attitude" , we hope that they will live up to this expectation which will be the dawn of a new era in Sierra Leone's politics, wherein a ruling government accomplish what they promise to do in a timely fashion.

