



Pikin News student journalists like Hajaratu Sama (right) write about the troubles facing young people in Sierra Leone.

# WRITE STUFF

Young journalists from Sierra Leone tell tales of despair and hope. TEXT: SUSAN MCCLELLAND

She's 16, but Hajaratu Sama could easily pass for 12 in her royal-blue school uniform and matching beret. The diminutive young woman, chewing bubble gum and gazing out the window of the UNICEF boardroom in Kenema, Sierra Leone, is slumped in her chair, seemingly disinterested in the conversation going on around her.

The 20 youth in the room, including Sama, are student journalists for *Pikin News*, a national newspaper written and edited by young people in Sierra Leone. Speaking to the group is Sorious Samura, one of Africa's top filmmakers, about his experiences making *Cry Freetown*, the Emmy-award-winning documentary that chronicles the rebel

invasion of Sierra Leone's capital city during the country's 11-year-long civil war.

"So, how do you find your sources?" Samura asks the youth in his deep, gruff voice. Despite her seeming disinterest, Sama's hand flies into the air. "I just go talk to them," she replies when Samura looks in her direction. ▷



*Pikin News* addresses controversial subjects, such as rape, prostitution and the lives of street girls; in Kenema, Sierra Leone, filmmaker Sorious Samura (below) talks to the student journalists: "You're the future of this country."



"What kinds of stories do you do?" asks Samura.

"I write about rape in the villages," says Sama. "Oh, and the trafficking of girls as prostitutes."

Samura and his filmmaking partner, Ron McCullagh—who both acted as consultants on the Hollywood blockbuster *Blood Diamond*—are speechless. The seasoned journalists are well aware of the difficulty in

reporting on these subjects in Africa. "It must be hard to find girls that are willing to talk to you," says McCullagh. "There is often money involved and prostitution rings that control the young women. Aren't you frightened?"

"No," answers Sama matter-of-factly. "They're just girls like me. They want someone to talk to—they're alone and afraid."

"I have rarely seen such courage," says Samura, who is originally from Sierra Leone but is now based in London. "You are the future of this country."

High praise. But Samura may, indeed, be right. Sierra Leonean society is one in which young people are told not to talk back to their elders, let alone question traditions like early marriage for girls. But this is exactly why *Pikin News* was created: to give youth a place to publish their opinions on issues that may hold the country back. After all, Sierra Leone ranks at the bottom of the United Nations' Human Development Index, with one of the lowest life expectancies in the world and the fewest children attending school. From 1991 to 2002, the country was also engaged in a brutal civil war that involved child soldiers.

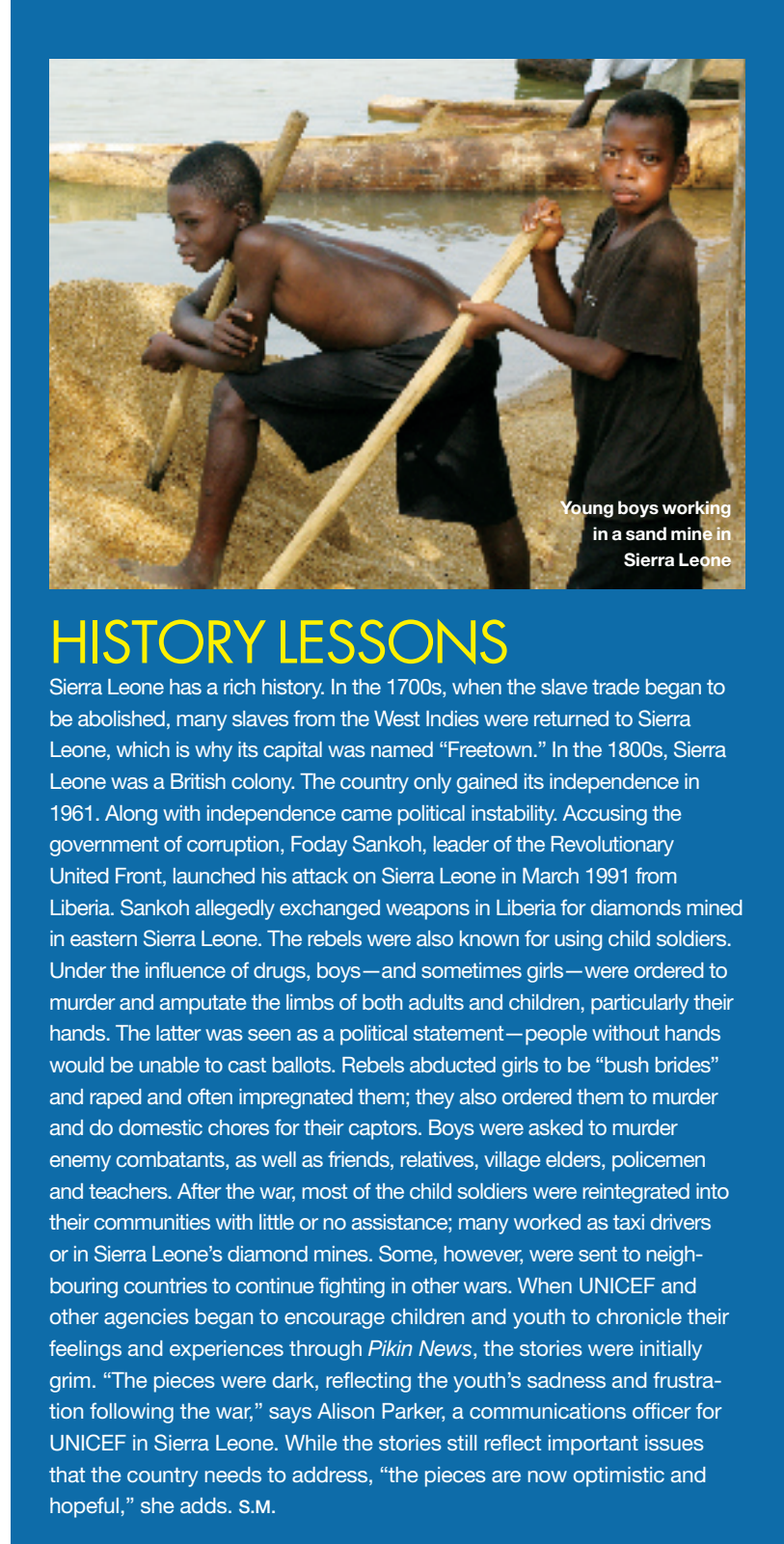
"Historically, children in Sierra Leone have not had a voice," says Alison Parker, a communications officer for UNICEF in Sierra Leone. "*Pikin News* helps these children think and use their imaginative capacities to express themselves."

The quarterly newspaper, which was launched in 2006, was an initiative from the Children's Forum Network (CFN). (The network, a child advocacy organization, was launched in 2000 with support from Sierra Leone's Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children's Affairs and UNICEF.) The newspaper followed earlier radio initiatives from the non-profit group Search for Common Ground called Golden Kids Radio and the Voice of Children project, which is sponsored by the UN Mission in Sierra Leone and UNICEF. The first initiative, the International Children's Day of Broadcasting, allows young people from across Sierra Leone to take to the airwaves for one Sunday every December as disc jockeys, presenters and news readers. The second initiative, the Voice of Children radio >

project, allowed youth to produce their own programs on the UN radio station based in Freetown. “Many of the students were interested in doing radio, but many members of the CFN said they wanted to write,” explains Isha During, who helps edit *Pikin News* in Freetown. And so, *Pikin News* was born. Youth reporters from across Sierra Leone submit their stories to their local CFN, and an editorial team of young people travel to Freetown to select the best entries. Topics range from hard news stories to comics to fiction, and the newspaper is circulated to schools and social service agencies that are working directly with affected youth, such as those in diamond-mining areas. Unlike Western student journalists, *Pikin News* reporters don’t have access to computers, so they write their stories out by hand and often share cellphones to contact sources.

There are pluses, though—namely access to stories that is often denied to professional journalists. Sama’s last article was on street girls involved in the sex trade. Almost all the girls she met had run away from their villages when they refused to take part in arranged marriages. “When the girls reached Kenema, they had nowhere to go but the streets, where they were preyed upon,” says Sama. “You can see why they have grown distrustful of adults. They saw me as someone they could trust.”

And for good reason. In addition to her youthfulness, Sama endures many of the same obstacles and biases as her sources. She, too, is from a small village and is now being raised by her grandparents in Kenema. They would prefer to see her married and doing domestic work. “My grandparents didn’t know what journalism was—let alone what a journalist did—when I joined *Pikin News*,” says Sama. “I have to explain to them why I’m talking to street girls. Like so many people in Sierra Leone, my



Young boys working in a sand mine in Sierra Leone

## HISTORY LESSONS

Sierra Leone has a rich history. In the 1700s, when the slave trade began to be abolished, many slaves from the West Indies were returned to Sierra Leone, which is why its capital was named “Freetown.” In the 1800s, Sierra Leone was a British colony. The country only gained its independence in 1961. Along with independence came political instability. Accusing the government of corruption, Foday Sankoh, leader of the Revolutionary United Front, launched his attack on Sierra Leone in March 1991 from Liberia. Sankoh allegedly exchanged weapons in Liberia for diamonds mined in eastern Sierra Leone. The rebels were also known for using child soldiers. Under the influence of drugs, boys—and sometimes girls—were ordered to murder and amputate the limbs of both adults and children, particularly their hands. The latter was seen as a political statement—people without hands would be unable to cast ballots. Rebels abducted girls to be “bush brides” and raped and often impregnated them; they also ordered them to murder and do domestic chores for their captors. Boys were asked to murder enemy combatants, as well as friends, relatives, village elders, policemen and teachers. After the war, most of the child soldiers were reintegrated into their communities with little or no assistance; many worked as taxi drivers or in Sierra Leone’s diamond mines. Some, however, were sent to neighbouring countries to continue fighting in other wars. When UNICEF and other agencies began to encourage children and youth to chronicle their feelings and experiences through *Pikin News*, the stories were initially grim. “The pieces were dark, reflecting the youth’s sadness and frustration following the war,” says Alison Parker, a communications officer for UNICEF in Sierra Leone. While the stories still reflect important issues that the country needs to address, “the pieces are now optimistic and hopeful,” she adds. S.M.

family thinks I should just walk away from these girls. ‘They’re nothing but trouble,’ my grandfather says.”

Nafisatu Boima, a 16-year-old journalist for *Pikin News*, explains why she and the others risk the wrath of their own families to continue to work for the paper. “It’s our job to help our parents, cousins, aunts and uncles understand the pain and

suffering of Sierra Leonean children,” says Boima. “That’s how we can contribute to our country. We hope that someone will read our stories and try to bring about change.” **n**

The Bite of the Mango (*Annick Press*), by Susan McClelland and Mariatu Kamara, will be released this month.