

In June 2007, newspapers in Freetown, the capital of Sierra Leone, carried stories that international donors had halted support to Sierra Leone because of “endemic corruption.” Great Britain, the largest single provider of bilateral assistance that month, stopped the provision of 15 million Pounds Sterling (US\$30.4 million) to Sierra Leone’s national treasury. A couple of days before the story broke, a government press release informed the public about the non-receipt of 85 billion leones (US\$28.5 million). Chatting in pubs, taxis or commuter mini-buses, people largely agreed that donors had withheld the funds because of corruption in the government.

One newspaper reported that a key reason why donors withheld budgetary support was the government’s hesitation to prosecute high-office corruption offenders. Bringing to justice high-level corruption cases had been one of the benchmarks of progress in the fight against corruption that the government reached with donors in the Improved Governance and Accountability Pact of June 18, 2006.

The government run by the Sierra Leone People’s Party (SLPP) loves to pride itself with an optimistic view of its fight against corruption. Is it not therefore strange that the government did not put up any forceful defense against the latest incriminations on how it handled corruption?

A grim picture of a country backsliding on its fight against corruption has emerged in international corruption reports. The World Bank’s Doing Business Survey 2006 says that Sierra Leone is the eighth most difficult place to do business in the world. Transparency International’s Corruption Perception Index 2006 ranked Sierra Leone in the fifth tier of countries perceived as most corrupt in the world.

A report prepared for the British Department for International Development (DFID) stated that the government’s efforts to curb corruption through the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) were seriously ebbing. Based on an annual review of the ACC, the report acknowledged external constraints, such as delays by the office of the attorney general in prosecuting cases and “the ineligibility of the Accountant General to publish reports under parliamentary Standing Order 75.” But most disturbing in the report were shortcomings internal to the ACC, “indicating an organization with serious management problems.” The report concludes that “the ACC has

deteriorated in terms of its effectiveness, capacity and the morale of its staff.”

Is it not troubling that, of all institutions, the ACC has been so discredited? When I visited the ACC with this question, a senior official who asked not to be named, did confirm that the institution had serious internal problems.

Here’s one example among the many he cited to prove his point: The director of community relations and prevention, who was supposed to be suspended at the time of my visit, was at her desk. She apparently ignored her boss’ suspension order for the second time in a year. But even before this visit, I knew of some irregularities, including that the 2004 ACC report came out in only mid-2006. There is certainly plenty of room to agree that there is something not quite right at the ACC.

Amongst ordinary Sierra Leoneans, however, there is hardly anyone to argue that corruption doesn’t exist. ‘Hotspots’ for corruption can be found everywhere in various forms: unending bribes at customs to clear goods; doctors’ extra charges at government hospitals; on-the-spot payments to traffic police for fictitious and real offences; kickback payments for public officials offered by businessmen for preferential contract-awarding.

At corruption hotspots, the only arguments ordinary citizens can make are whether the bribe was ‘too much’ or ‘manageable.’ It seems, however, that some government agencies have put an end to such arguments by claiming certain fixed amounts in kickbacks.

The Ministry of Education has a project called Sababu Education Project, funded largely by the African Development Bank, which has been building schools around the country. Contractors who have worked with the ministry on this project say that officials demand 10 percent of the entire cost of a project as a kickback. “This 10 percent is paid upon receipt of the first installment of funds by a contractor. This is why you see many unfinished projects around,” said one businesswoman who has implemented Sababu contracts.

During the reconstruction era following the end of the war in January 2002, Sierra Leone received large amounts of donor financial assistance. Serious questions have risen, however, both locally and internationally, on why the situation in Sierra Leone does not reflect the huge monetary support the country has received. Accusing fingers have mostly pointed at corruption in government, but questions are now also being asked about the role of

NGOs, as they have handled huge amounts of development assistance money in Sierra Leone. Dr. Sama Banya, a senior adviser to former President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah, said last year that NGOs equally have to explain what happens to the funds they receive.

I have my own story to tell. In June 2006, an international NGO advertised a consultancy opportunity for which I applied. As required, I sent two application packages; one to the local office in Freetown and the second to the London headquarters. A couple of days later, somebody in the Freetown office called me to say that I had been shortlisted, along with four other people, for an interview. His call was not official. We arranged to meet. At the meeting, he showed me an e-mail correspondence between London and Freetown, in which the officer in London supervising the recruiting process expressed preference that I be chosen. The man from the Freetown office assured me that he was going to press the necessary buttons for me to get the job. Of course, I also gave assurances that I would “behave” when I landed the job. “Behave” means to give a kickback to somebody who facilitates a deal or contract.

A day after the interview, I received a call from another man asking that we meet at a restaurant. We met. He was not a worker at the NGO, but apparently an agent of one of the people who had interviewed me. The man spoke about the interview, saying that I did well. “You are, however, facing some opposition from two or three members of the interviewing panel, who obviously want somebody else,” he said. He told me not to worry, however. We are talking about a 9,000 Pounds Sterling (US\$18,250) consultancy in the poorest country in the world! I also assured this other man that I would “behave.”

Later that afternoon, the NGO employee I first spoke to called me to say that somebody else got the job. He was disappointed because his bosses were going to be in charge when the consultant would “behave.”

When talking about corruption in Sierra Leone, it is only fair to mention the small efforts that are made to curb this phenomenon. In 2007, a couple of newspapers announced the emergence of a new NGO called Accountability Alert, with a mission to tackle corruption in NGOs. “Accountability Alert will be developing accountability standards, and playing a devil’s advocate for NGOs to own up,” read one article.

I must also mention the trade bill passed in parliament that seeks to shorten business registration and other

procedures. The head of the World Bank-funded Sierra Leone Business Forum told me in an interview for this report that the new procedures would cut down much of the bureaucracy for those who are looking to rent a place.

Finally, I must add that Sierra Leoneans smiled when the minister of Transport and Communication was suspended and later arrested over the crash of a private-sector helicopter that killed 22 foreign nationals on June 3, 2007. The helicopter business, operated by Russians, had been grounded a couple of weeks before, because the machines did not meet safety standards. When the helicopters started flying again, the public was not informed whether or not they were air-worthy. One of the helicopters crashed a few days after it resumed flying. Sierra Leoneans shouted in one voice that the minister was bribed by the helicopter company to allow the rotten machines to fly again.

On June 20, 2007, when the minister resigned, the DFID may not have laughed that a 'big fish' had been caught. Ordinary Sierra Leoneans, however, had reason to laugh, because they hardly remembered the last time a high-profile government official resigned amidst accusations of corruption.

