

## News Story

### Ernest Koroma's Government Wants Refugees Deported from Germany

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HAMBURG, GERMANY: DR BEN SANNOH- The news that the APC Government had surreptitiously reached agreements with the German Federal Government aimed at the repatriation of Sierra Leone asylum seekers in the Federal Republic of Germany hit the Sierra Leone community in German like a devastating nuclear bomb. Many greeted this action of the APC government with a combination of scorn and despondence. Yes, many people are still astounded. Those who have received documents revealing the contract put in place by the Sierra Leone and the German governments have made frantic efforts to find out why the APC government could do such a thing. They have invariably condemned the APC government and damned the APC delegation that has arrived in Germany for the issue of identity and travel documents.

I had a telephone conversation with a senior civil servant who is a member of the delegation from Sierra Leone. He confirmed from the northern German city of Hamburg that they were on the mission of issuing identity and travelling documents to Sierra Leonean refugees in this country, refugees whose application for asylum had been rejected. He put it that the German government had accepted to give ample time to those Sierra Leonean refugees who have the possibility of regularising their stay in Germany. He couldn't however shrink from stating that "unpeaceful" refugees may be sent away soonest. This is the hard fact.

**Scheming, spiteful, and tribalistic?**

Objectively, no government in Sierra Leone can irrevocably hinder the German government from deporting refugees from Germany if the latter so chose. This fact cannot be contested. In fact, the idea of repatriation of Sierra Leone refugees in Germany is not a new one. The German immigration authorities (Auslaenderbehoerde) in the various states and cities have been relentless in sending refugees back to their respective countries, the sooner situations in those countries ease off, even if for just a while. Refugees from eastern European countries such as Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo etc. who lived in Germany had been sent back, sometimes *en masse*, after reaching agreements with authorities in those countries. The same is true for West African states such as Liberia, Guinea, and Senegal to name a few.

The German government has been sending Sierra Leoneans away after the rebirth of democracy in 1996. However, almost all of those who have been sent back to Sierra Leone were the "unpeaceful" asylum seekers. The "peaceful" refugees had always enjoyed temporary protection.

In 2002, after the official declaration of the end of the rebel war in Sierra Leone, the German government intensified moves to send back all Sierra Leonean refugees in Germany, both "unpeaceful" and "peaceful" refugees who do not possess minimum prospects of getting permanent residence. The then Sierra Leone ambassador to Germany was summoned severally to sign agreements that would effect the same. Ambassador Amadu Wurie, now Director General of Foreign Affairs in Freetown, had consciously procrastinated the signing of any such treaty for obvious reason. That, supplemented with technical huddles, kept the German government at bay in its drive to repatriate Sierra Leoneans.

However, in early 2002, the Sierra Leone embassy in Bonn was forced to issue travelling certificates (TC) to some "unpeaceful" Sierra Leoneans, engendering into their deportation from Germany. The action was greeted with aggression by some members of the Sierra Leone refugee community. The accusation was that the Sierra Leone embassy in Bonn had clandestinely connived with the German government to send back Sierra Leone asylum seekers. In summer of the same year, a member of the Sierra Leone embassy was physically molested by a group of outraged Sierra Leoneans in the northern German city of Hamburg. That action was unwarranted as the idea behind it was bogus. In the same vein, the then chair of one of the Sierra Leone Unions in Germany, the PANHECS Association, called state house and spoke with President Kabbah on the matter. He rebuked the SLPP government for undertaking an "unprogressive action" bent on deporting Sierra Leoneans from Germany and categorically promised the president that they were going to burn down the Sierra Leone embassy in Bonn, Germany, for that sake. Fortunately, the embassy was not torched.

It is worth taking the pains to highlight some of these facts to allow the reader to imbibe with ease the scope and degree of fear that is running down the spine of affected Sierra Leoneans like it was the case in 2002. And there may be potential dangers in some of those fears. The show of desperation in 2002 should not be underestimated and a recurrence cannot be ruled out. We believe therefore, that an analysis of the totality of the situation would have been most appropriate.

In May, 2005, the German Federal Police Headquarters (Bundespolicieidirektion) in Karlsruhe issued a document which stated that Sierra Leone was now peaceful and safe. The implication was that the German Federal Government would be legally covered if it sent Sierra Leone citizens back home. We will remember that the final contingent of the UN peace keeping forces pulled out of that country in December 2005 after the UN certified that the country was peaceful.

In early November of the same year, the present Sierra Leone ambassador to Germany (also sent by the then SLPP government) was summoned to a meeting with the German Federal authorities on the issue of the repatriation of

Sierra Leonean refugees in Germany. Ambassador Foday Sesay also played the same temporization game, much to the distaste of the German government. The SLPP government was abreast with the implications of a premature and improper repatriation activity, so they stayed put. They always acted with ingenuity, and never acted against the interest of Sierra Leoneans the world over.

Towards the end of November, 2005, a communiqué prepared by the German Foreign Ministry was sent to me as secretary general of the Federal Council of Sierra Leone Unions in Germany, via the Sierra Leone embassy in Bonn, for onward transmission to all Sierra Leone Unions in Germany. Copies of the document were relayed to all Sierra Leone Unions here. The document suggested that the German government was providing free flights for those Sierra Leonean refugees in Germany who wanted to willingly return to their mother country. People did not take the document or its contents serious; we believe it was devoid of any arrangement that was enticing.

The point to note is that the German government's strives to send back Sierra Leonean refugees home is not a new thing. New is only the fact that APC government has concluding arrangements for sending back home Sierra Leonean refugees in Germany, even as they have not an iota of knowledge on what it all entails. More grave is the information reached us that the Sierra Leone embassy in Bonn, the sole institution that would have handled the matter properly, conveniently and satisfactorily by virtue of its vast knowledge on the issue, was not informed on the APC government's arrangements until it was done. Sad enough.

The row that this action of the APC government has caused amongst Sierra Leoneans living in this country is immense. We believe that those who are condemning the APC for this action have a point. My opinion is that the APC government has acted in bad faith; it has acted against the will of Sierra Leoneans living in Germany. And, I am hugely inclined to believe that the APC government has acted out of lack of experience on the international diplomatic arena. Unprepared Sierra Leoneans have been taken unawares and unfortunately, affected individuals wouldn't even have time to contemplate on the issue well. They will soon be dragged along. The consequences we fear, may be far reaching. This is an unprecedented action that history will invariably damn.

Like I stated at the beginning, no one can outwit the German government if it wanted to repatriate Sierra Leoneans. No, you can't. But you can negotiate with them so that those unfortunate ones, those who would eventually have to board the plane, those who are going to suffer the brunt, will have something to benefit from on arrival. It is not enough to say that "Bona fide Sierra Leoneans can count on protection and support from the APC government, regardless of where they may find themselves in the world" like Dr. Salieu Turay would want us to believe, except if you have made concrete arrangements for repatriated Bona fide Sierra Leoneans. It is however incontrovertibly clear that no such arrangements have been made for the benefits of those who will eventually be deported. I know of a development projects that have been put in place by the German authorities from which the Senegalese refugees returning home directly benefit. An arrangement of this type would have been pain-relieving. The APC government has definitely not given a thorough consideration to what they are up to, and we say that is bad. Contracting to send home your fellow country men impromptu, and in exchange for money dubbed "development package" is a crime against humanity, in spite all pressures. It borders on selfishness and sounds like exchanging the basic human rights of individuals for a pantry price. The Federal Council of Sierra Leone Unions in Germany unreservedly rebukes this action, which we unhesitatingly describe as an intention to punish Sierra Leonean refugees in this country.

As it would now take only some divine intervention to avert an imminent calamity, this is what I would personally say to those Sierra Leoneans who will be affected by the disastrous agreement: as we sit and watch with awe a potentially calamitous circumstance unfold, let's put our hopes and trust in God for the best. He always has a way.

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