

# courage

## **The life of a refugee...seen from a wheelchair**

Of the 120,000 refugees who fled death and destruction by pillaging rebels in the West African state of Sierra Leone in 1991, 3,000 still remain in three UNHCR camps around Monrovia, Liberia. One of them is Jebbeh Gbesseh, a 51-year-old Sierra Leonean woman who crossed into Liberia in 1992. She lost everything: her home, parents, friends and even partial use of her body. But what she has never lost is her indomitable spirit.

### ***From the frying pan into the fire***

First escaping to neighbouring Liberia from civil war in Sierra Leone, these unfortunate refugees found themselves ten years later caught up in the Liberian civil war that climaxed in June 2003. During this tense period, UNHCR frequently had to relocate the Sierra Leonean refugees to safer areas, and when rebels fighting the Liberian Government of then President Charles Taylor attacked the refugee camps in Sinje, Grand Cape Mount County and Zuannah Town, UNHCR was forced to give the refugees the choice of either being repatriated or moved into the remaining camps of Banjor, VOA and Samukai Town. The Sierra Leonean refugees, who themselves were seeking shelter in Liberia, then had to play host to internally displaced Liberians who had been forced from their homes by the fighting.

### ***Repatriation at last***

Meanwhile, Sierra Leone's civil war ended peacefully in 2001, and with the holding of democratic elections, conditions for the safe and dignified return were assured. UNHCR therefore began to promote the voluntary repatriation of the Sierra Leonean refugees. Today, a small fraction of those who fled Sierra Leone in 1991 still remain in Liberia under the protection of UNHCR. Jebbeh Gbesseh is one of them.

### ***Jebbeh's story***

14 years ago, Jebbeh was living happily with her husband and two children, Hawa and Lamie, in a peaceful Sierra Leonean village, growing rice and cassava. But one fateful day in 1992, it all changed. Seven months pregnant, she was working that morning as usual in her field. Suddenly Jebbeh heard the sound of gunshots getting closer and closer to her village. Concerned about her children, she threw down her tools and ran home – where she discovered the terrified pair hiding under two kitchen chairs. Suddenly aware of an ominous silence, she realized that the village was deserted: clearly it was time to get out.

"In few minutes I packed some clothing for myself and my children, and I ran away with them to the bush," Jebbeh explained. It was too risky waiting for her husband to come back from the market – and she has had no news from him ever since. Jebbeh has resigned herself to the probability that he died.

### ***Miscarriage – and crippled***

While the three of them were hiding in the forest, waiting to cross the rebel-held Jendema bridge, Jebbeh started to feel a strong pain; there and then, with the help of some other women, she gave birth. The baby was dead. "The pain I felt is unforgettable. If I think about that terrible moment, I can still feel it now," Jebbeh remembers, her eyes filling with tears.

The injuries from the miscarriage were so traumatic that Jebbeh was unable to walk, and crossed the river on the shoulders of another refugee. "I don't remember the journey very clearly. My pain didn't cease – it was like having a fire in my stomach. But," she adds, "the important thing was to be safe and alive."

Once they reached the safety of Liberia, some people helped by carrying her in a wheelbarrow as far as Joseph Town in Bomi County, where she met up with other Sierra Leonean refugees. They were then transported in a UNHCR convoy to VOA camp. Jebbeh is still there, having never left since she arrived in 1992.

### ***Determination***

Despite her disabilities, Jebbeh is determined to be useful both to herself and to society in some way other than farming. So when UNHCR gave the camp residents the opportunity to subscribe to different vocational training skills, Jebbeh registered immediately for a tie-dying course. "Thanks to UNHCR I felt active again, and I was the first to arrive for the classes with my new wheelchair."

Jebbeh went through different counselling and medical treatments provided by UNHCR and MERCI respectively. "At first she was even afraid to talk to people, screaming at them saying 'do not lie on me!'" reports UNHCR Community Services Officer Alexina Rusere. "Now Jebbeh is totally a different person who has found confidence in herself again," she adds.

### ***More trauma***

Just as Jebbeh began to enjoy a breath of freedom and independence, yet another atrocity traumatized her life. In June 2003, fighting flared up again in Liberia, and one night, armed men overran the camp. Jebbeh was in bed with her daughter, her son and her grandson, when she was awakened by people screaming. Her door was forced open by three men and she was raped. "They didn't kill me," says Jebbeh, "but I felt like I had been killed. They didn't have pity for a poor and old woman." They also raped her 22 year-old daughter, Hawa, in front of her child and her brother. "Before it happened, I could stand all by myself sometimes, with the help of two sticks. But after that night I couldn't stand up anymore."

### ***Breadwinner***

Despite the shocking events she has been through, Jebbeh has never lost her courage. She remains the sole provider for the family, though the only activity she is able to do is to help her children to clean the brooms that they make and sell to generate income. The market is located 20 km away, and the children walk there and back every day. It takes 2 to 3 days to make a broom and each one is sold for the meagre sum of 5 Liberian dollars.

### ***"...my life has to go on."***

Asking Jebbeh what she misses more since her life has been confined to a wheelchair, she says, "Doing things on my own, and together with other people. The world is different seen from a chair. I feel bad watching women of my age who are still active, helping their husbands and taking care of the homes."

You can see the strength in Jebbeh's eyes as she talks with determination and dignity about her dream to walk again. Most of all, she would like to go back, on foot, to her village, and take up farming once more. Gently caressing the head of her grandson, Jebbeh pauses, and then says forcefully, "I am not ready to die now. If I didn't die the day I lost my child, or when I was raped, it is a sign from God that my life has to go on."

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