

Sean Devereux Program Hard Hit

Hard hit during recent rounds of fighting in and around Monrovia, the Sean Devereux Children's Educational Project has been counting the cost of its losses, and it's like starting all over from scratch.

It's like we are starting all over again, all because of that ugly nightmare called war! Between June and July this year, three major wars erupted in and around our capital, Monrovia. The Sean Devereux Children's Project in Brewerville escaped none of the infernos emanating from the wars. Our premises were looted and destroyed and we are still counting our losses. Hardest hit are the children whom we have been helping.

The ECOWAS military intervention force, ECOMIL, landed on August 4th, and on September 2nd it became safe and possible for us to visit our site. On arrival, we were greeted by the overgrowth of small trees and long grass. We had just before these wars begun constructing a building to be used as our self-help "Sales Outlet" to be used for sale of items such as tie and dye and agricultural products produced by the Project. Unfortunately, all the purchased building materials had been totally looted.

The skills training building which accommodated the pastry, tie and dye, tailoring, and blacksmithing departments was thoroughly looted. Among the items taken were our construction materials for our retail outlet house then under construction. The stolen items included seven bundles of zinc, planks, ceiling tiles, packs of nail, ten cartons of floor tiles, doors, window

glass and 25 gallons of paint. Our stolen agricultural implements included ten shovels, ten wheelbarrows, and 25 cutlasses. Others items taken away by the looters were several oven items, sports equipment, benches, chairs, black-



Displaced people queue up a Sean Devereux campus

boards, educational materials, mattresses, bedding, cooking utensils, among other valuables.

We are now picking up the pieces by brushing our compound, hoeing the yard, sweeping the rooms, and cleaning up in general.

While we cleaned up in September we were at the same time planning to reopen so that we could begin helping our beneficiaries, more than 300 in number.

Interestingly, we are working in close partnership with our UK based friends, the Sean

Devereux Fund. Additionally, through the instrumentality of Mrs. Clare Walters and Maureen Devereux of the Sean Devereux Fund, we in Liberia established partnership with the UK-based Feed the Children International, a child wel-

fare charity working in Africa, Asia, Latin America and other parts of the world.

Feed the Children UK in collaboration with the Sean Devereux Fund in late September dispatched a 40ft. Container to Liberia, containing assorted food and non-food items for needy children and adults. Two more shipments were scheduled for late November and late December 2003.

By Amadu Sarnor



DON BOSCO LINK

The country's children who should be in the classrooms have for more than a decade been recruited and used as active combatants, porters, cooks, and concubines.

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Menace of Child Soldiering

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Editor: John T. Monibah
Computer: Aaron C. Sleh

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The Editor
DON BOSCO LINK
Don Bosco Homes
PO Box 2751
Monrovia, LIBERIA

Tel: (231) 330690
Fax: (231) 226165
Email: dbmedia2000@yahoo.com

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Welcoming back the Child Soldiers

Child soldiering is truly a menace. It is a menace because it is a troubling phenomenon. Gun-totting children, some of them no taller than the guns they carry — and in many instances high on drugs and drunk on alcohol — committed some of the worst forms of atrocities during the Liberian civil crisis. Nothing could be more menacing than this.

Worse still the involvement of children in war can have disastrous long term effects on their upbringing: Child soldiering diverts children from the path of their normal upbringing to the meandering course of abnormal, anti-social, and sometimes violent behavior. Liberia today finds herself in that situation. Something must be done to free the country of this scourge.

Sadly though, the issue of child soldiers is a global one. According to Amnesty International USA, "Around the world today, children are increasingly not only war's victims, but also its combatants. An estimated 300,000 children under the age of eighteen are currently participating in armed conflicts in more than thirty different countries on nearly every continent. While most child soldiers are in their teens, some are as young as seven years old."

In the case of Liberia, there must be a concerted effort aimed not only at disarming and sending them back home but also finding a lasting solution to the problem. Demobilizing the children and giving them the proper incentives such as academic and skills training opportunities is a sure way of welcoming them back from their "army world".

Together with the three Catholic Funding agencies, CAFOD from the UK, TROCAIRE from Ireland, CORDAID from Holland, as well as UNICEF, and other child friendly organizations, Don Bosco Homes is already working on several child soldiers rehabilitation programs. UNICEF's Executive Director Carole Bellarmine has said the return of the children to school would mean a big step forward not only for the children but also for their parents. Hence, parents, neighbors, communities and "all stake holders" should lend a hand to the effort. Parents and communities can do so by welcoming them back home or by reopening their homes and hearts to the children.

Some people are suggesting cash incentives as inducements for the children to lay down their guns. While this idea might sound good, the troubling part of it is that the moment the cash-in-hand finishes, the children begin thinking of getting more money. Then armed robbery and other vices might come in. It may also be interpreted as paying the militias for fighting. This is why we are calling for a rehabilitation package that will prepare them for a productive future role in society. There is no better way of welcoming back the child soldiers other than giving them tools and pencils and copybooks, laying a firm foundation for them through the class room setting. Education is the only way out. JM.

LOOTED BARE!

The indiscriminate acts of banditry experienced by the Don Bosco institutions during recent armed hostilities in Monrovia transcended usual acts of loot and carry. They bore all the hallmarks of plunder, vandalism, and lack of patriotism. The scars left are still visible.

Some Liberians are saying that people who engaged in acts of looting and vandalism were the real enemies of the Liberian nation. Others are blaming little or no education for the level of destruction the country has experienced since war first broke out in Dec. 1989. A friend of mine once described the looting and destruction of property as "actual banditry". Another called it "plunder for greed" while a third said it was "vandalism". For me it was a sheer lack of patriotism.

Recent armed hostilities in Monrovia from early June to early Aug. took their toll on our Don Bosco institutions. The Don Bosco Polytechnic, a tertiary institution providing both academic and technical education, received the brunt

of it all. The level of destruction done to the school was so massive and unimaginable that it would require several months if not years for it to resume operation in full.

Upon the landing in early Aug. of the ECOWAS Vanguard Force, ECOMIL, it became rather safe for people to visit places. Hence, on Aug. 6th, without any discernible schedule, Fr. Jose Valiplackel SDB, Polytechnic President Sr. Mary Laurene OSF, Aaron Sleh of the Polytechnic's Computer Department, and myself visited the school's main campus.

It was like a mission to a strange land: everything was actually different as looters had either taken away their spoils of war or had deliberately destroyed doors, tables, generators, books, and just anything. The first actual shock came when Fr. Jose and Sr. Laurene saw in broad day light a man in ATU (Anti Terrorist Unit) government army uniforms in the

parish office of St. Joseph's Parish gathering his treasures. On seeing the pair, the soldier took to his heels and Fr. Jose went after him. Mr. Sleh soon joined in the chase. The soldier ran faster. Fr. Jose chased harder. Mr. Sleh drew his sleeves to elbow-length and increased his speed. Sr. Laurene and I were far behind. Serving as an obstacle at the main gate, Father pre-



One of the Polytechnic's looted buildings

vented the interloper from getting out. Fully uniformed but wearing sneakers, the soldier dodged the now sweating and almost breathless priest. Panic stricken, the soldier ran faster and ascended the little hill toward the administrative building area. Not relenting, Father and Mr. Sleh gathered more speed and galloped there. The whole drama ended when the priest apprehended the intruder. The soldier was later allowed to go.

This was just part one of a morning-long duel. Part two of the drama came when we reached the office of Sr. Laurene: we saw through the window another man busy packing his booty. Asked "Who's there?" the rogue disappeared in thin air. Our guess was that he had hidden himself in the attic. To make things more difficult for us in finding him, he had bolted all the doors before beginning his plunder. Every effort to find him proved futile.

We then went on a thorough tour of the school only to find what we had expected. The campus was looted bare. The once prestigious computer literacy department only had papers and diskettes on the floor for us to see. The nearly fifty computers and accessories and spare parts were gone. Also, the offices of the Technical, Teachers, Business as well as those of the Deans, the President, the Library, the labs, the book store, the store rooms were all looted and vandalized.

The looting was more an act of targeted banditry and malicious destruction on a scale still unimaginable for many of us.

On the campus of the Mother Patern College of Health Sciences of the Don Bosco Polytechnic, looting was not as massive. The College lost three Yamaha motor bikes.

The Don Bosco Youth Center where 1,500 persons had taken refuge suffered the loss of one double cabin Toyota pick-up truck. Nearly a dozen armed soldiers turned out there in late July and demanded the key of the pick-up. The two front tires had been removed to prevent the vehicle from being taken away. Once they had the key, they brought their own tires, fitted them on the it and drove it away.

Don Bosco Homes also suffered. Savio Transit Village where we provide home care for orphans and separated children was looted. Monte Carlo girls' skills training center located on Broad Street was looted and vandalized. Also hard hit were the Women's Empowerment Center and the Duala Reception Center.

The scars of these conflicts are still vividly visible not only on the Don Bosco institutions but also on the Liberian nation as a whole.



children by armed factions. Speaking on Radio Veritas in early November 2002, Archbishop Francis said child soldiering was hurting the country and endangering the children's future.

Despite all of these campaigns against the use of children in war, Liberia remains firmly in the grips of a child soldiering quagmire.

According to the UN and other organizations working with children, about 25% to 40% of the nearly 40,000 fighters involved in the recent war were children, recruited by the government, LURD, and the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL).

Child Soldiers Eager to Demobilize

Several child soldiers with whom Don Bosco Homes is in contact told *DON BOSCO LINK* they were tired of fighting. They said they wanted to return to school should there be the means to do so. Mohammed, 13, (mentioned earlier in this article) said he stopped in grade three before taking up arms, and wanted to return to the classroom. "I want to go back to school. When I reach 9th grade, then I can go and learn a trade." Stephen, 15, said he fought on the government's side in Foya, Lofa County for one and half years, in a war he neither knows its beginning nor its objective. Asked how he got recruited he said, "They catch me in

Red-light, Paynesville. Then they sent us to fight the dissident forces". Hit in the leg and badly wounded, he was brought to Monrovia and put in a hospital. Not receiving proper care, he left the hospital and ended up at a Don Bosco Homes-run shelter. "I don't know where my pa and ma go. Don Bosco is helping me". He too wants to do skills training. John, 16; James, 14, and many others still bear bullet wounds sustained while fighting.

The Don Bosco Homes DDRR Plan

As a child rights organization, Don Bosco Homes in collaboration with the UK-based Catholic Fund for Overseas Development (CAFOD) has put together a neatly woven disarmament and rehabilitation package for ex-child fighters. This package is known in Don Bosco Homes as the DDRR. Funded by CAFOD, the DDRR is a process of disarming, demobilization, rehabilitation, and reintegration not only of ex-child combatants but also of those children affected by the troubled past.

Don Bosco Homes Program Director Allen Lincoln told *DON BOSCO LINK* the DDRR package is holistic and practical and is aimed at helping the ex-child fighter move from a state of war to a state of

normality. "It involves a whole package of disarming the child, tracing his/her family and reunifying the child."

Don Bosco Homes, Mr. Lincoln added, has started opening interim care centers (ICC) to receive the ex-combatants during the process of DDRR. "While at the ICC, they receive trauma counseling, meal, clothing, recreational materials, and medical care".

To avoid the mistake of the past wherein many children were only disarmed and sent home, Mr. Lincoln said the DBH is this time around going all out. "Those who are reunified and whose families are unable to send them to school, DBH puts them in school. For those who are 14 years old or over who would find it hard going to academic school will be placed in skills training programs." Then comes follow-up visits for the DBH to regularly hold meetings with family members "to maintain contact so that the integration process cannot fail".

For children whose families are not found, they are taken to the DBH-run hostel called Savio Transit Village, a long term care center; and they too will go to school until their families can be traced.

John T. Monibah is Media Officer, Don Bosco Liberia

Don Bosco Homes is Ready

...for DDRR program; takes in 70 ex-combatants on Day One of disarmament exercise



Dec 7th 2003: many combatants queue up to be disarmed on day one

The long-awaited disarmament, demobilization, rehabilitation, and reintegration program for some 40,000 Liberian armed fighters officially began Dec. 7th at the Camp Schefflin military barracks just outside Monrovia, with thousands of gun-carrying fighters queuing up to be disarmed.

Don Bosco Homes (DBH), a leading child rights organization in the country, is heavily involved in the DDRR program. According to DBH Program Director Allen Lincoln, the Homes is ready to accept disarmed children forthwith. "It is our duty by our mandate and mission to assist these children. We have the staff, the interim care center (ICC) facilities, feeding, medical services, recreation, and other necessities to make sure the children have an opportunity to start experiencing normal life again."

On the commencement of the DDRR program on Dec. 7th Don Bosco Homes was the only organization ready with ICC facilities to take in children. As a result, the Homes immediately took in 70 disarmed child soldiers who were conveyed to the 11th Street ICC in Monrovia and to the Savio flexible care center in Virginia outside Monrovia. To date DBH has more than 95 CAFF's (children associated with the fighting forces), including those that spontaneously disarmed earlier.

According to Don Bosco Homes, as soon as the disarmed children are removed from the containment site and transferred into the ICC, DBH immediately begins the process of family tracing and reunification. Normally, each child is expected to stay at the ICC for a period of three months during which their families are traced so that they can be returned home. For those whose families may not be

found within the allotted three month period, DBH already has also in place facilities for long term care at Savio Transit Home in Virginia. Under this long term program, the children are introduced to skills training and apprenticeship programs for older ones while young ones (14 years and under) are encouraged to attend academic schools. The long term care program may last up to two or more years – until a family member can be found for reunification to take place.

For children who are immediately reunified, DBH hopes to work through community structures with follow-up mechanisms wherein not only ex-combatants but also other war affected children can be assisted with trauma counselling, medical services, recreation among others.

DBH is not alone in this initiative. We are working in collaboration with other child protection agencies including UNICEF, but our main donors for this DDRR program are the Catholic funding agencies for Overseas Development, CAFOD, Trocaire and CORDAID.

A child rights organization of the Catholic Church in Liberia, Don Bosco Homes was established by the Salesians of Don Bosco from UK in the early '90's in response to the growing needs of street and other needy children. The Homes provides vocational, academic, family tracing and reunification, street work, as well as legal aid, counselling, and transit home care services to children.

by John T Monibah

"Only Don Bosco Homes could have done this!"

Here is the story of a dramatic rescue effort that saved the life of a former female soldier, and a young boy.

The disarmament exercise started on Dec. 7th as planned. The UN, Don Bosco Homes and other relevant parties were all present from the start. Don Bosco Homes (DBH) had at least a dozen specially trained staff at the demobilisation site at Camp Schiefflin, home to Liberia's First Infantry Battalion.

Although DBH and other child protection organizations were operating under the single child focal agency (or CFA) banner, we had all been briefed on our individual terms of reference. In the middle of the disarmament process, signs and symptoms began emerging indicating that some, if not all, of the combatants were becoming dissatisfied and so losing hope in the process. First they discussed it among themselves; later on they started openly voicing out their grievances. They were complaining that UNMIL did not deliver in full its promised disarmament package and for many they had been there since early morning without eating.

By 7:00 PM it became evident that Don Bosco Homes alone was still there as a local NGO with UNMIL.

Because we had not eaten all day ourselves, we decided cooking some rice and succeeded in doing so at 2:30 AM. However, we could not eat the rice as the former fighters overwhelmed us and so we gave

it to them.

When morning came, we thus decided giving them the balance of our rice to cook and eat. While cooking it, a palaver erupted around the fire place between a 24-year-old woman and a 14-year-boy. The



Joe Wiah

confusion centered on who should be the first to use the cooking pot. Suddenly, the boy reached for an iron bar and struck the woman with it on the back of her head. She fell down unconscious and blood began oozing out.

We called for the UNMIL ambulance. But soon the woman's boyfriend appeared, vowing to kill the 14 year old boy. Somehow or other we were able to get them both in the ambulance, but when we arrived at the Camp's gate, we were stopped by UNMIL soldiers and told that the ambulance was

solely for the use of UNMIL personnel and nobody else. They added that in view of the prevailing security situation in the Camp, anything could happen that might lead to their losing the vehicle. They thus refused to convey the woman to the hospital. Despite interventions from UNICEF, the Camp Manager, and others we were prevented to leave, **with the woman in a pool of blood and her boyfriend and comrades wanting to kill the boy.**

The Bangladeshi UNMIL commander said he needed a convoy of two war tanks and two pick-up trucks full of soldiers, and we needed our own car which had already left. Fortunately for us, a car bearing government number plates was heading for Monrovia, and also needing an escort, allowed us to transfer the blood-soaked woman and the boy in to her car. With angry combatants throwing stones and shooting in the air all around us, we drove through them to ELWA Hospital's emergency unit. The woman was treated and she regained consciousness. The boy was taken to our 11th Street ICC while the woman was later taken to our Savio Transit flexible Care Center in Virginia. "Only Don Bosco Homes could have done this, and thank God we were there", a friend later told me.

*By Joe Wiah
(DBH Social Worker)*

Menace of Child Soldiering

Liberia is now firmly in the throes of a troubling child soldiering quagmire. Is there a way out?

Mohammed, 13, was as late as August 2003 a frontline soldier fighting on the side of the government. Speaking to Don Bosco Media, the boy soldier said he participated in several daring battles. "One day, me and my friend the late Tito creep up the hill on the LURD men them; they were cooking their food under the kitchen. We creep back to tell our commander. He told us to go and do something about it...I was assigned with Chief Sheriff in Bopolu. I was the deputy Small Boys Unit commander for the whole group. I was in charge of 12 men. During world war three [in Monrovia], I was assigned on the old bridge with Gen. Marcus". Another boy who asked not to be named said he was the only government soldier to have come half-way on the then heavily contested Gabriel Tucker Bridge in July during fighting between government and LURD rebels, and returned to base.

Menace of Child Soldiering

In early 2003, on the campus of a tertiary school, a friend told me that Liberia was now "a child soldier country". He went on to say "Don Bosco people" should do something about it. He continued, "This thing is now a real menace."

He's right. Child soldiering is now a national menace. What Liberia as a nation is confronted with today is a bizarre scenario in which the country's children who should be in the classrooms have for more than a decade been recruited and used as active combatants, porters, cooks, and concubines. These youngsters have to a large extent taken the places of adult men

who should be serving as soldiers. Many of the children don't even know that they are being exploited and used. They think they are performing heroic national duties.

More menacing is the use of girl child soldiers. They used to be seen in the back of roving pick-up trucks and in the company of boy and adult fighters.

Gun-toting children, calling themselves strange names preceded by military tags like general, lieutenant, captain and so forth are prevalent all over the place. The recent LURD rebels' onslaught on Monrovia gave us a clearer view of the involvement of LURD in exploiting children through the unsafe enterprise of child soldiering. A conservative estimate would be that

LURD's child soldiers are twelve years old.

The question that should now be asked or answered is this: "Is there a way out of this menace?". Can the government, LURD and MODEL now take the lead in taking away the guns from these children? Surely the pen is mightier than the sword!

Anti child Soldiering Campaigns

In recent years, Don Bosco Homes and other child rights groups like FOCUS (Forerunners of Children's Universal Rights) have intensified and reinvigorated anti-child soldiering campaigns. Don Bosco Homes has repeatedly said that child soldiering cannot be good for Liberia, that the practice is an unsafe enterprise that has the propensity to either send the country's young to their early graves or leave them scarred for years to come.

It is estimated that some 14,000 children fought as soldiers for various warring factions in the 1989 - 97



Early 2003: government boy and girl child soldiers in Gbapolu County

wars. Barely half of them were said to have been demobilized. Poor demobilization incentives coupled with the harsh economic conditions of the country were said to have largely contributed to children returning to the battle fields.

In order to discourage the recruitment and use of children as soldiers, Don Bosco Homes in late 2002 started a vigorous community-based anti-child soldiering campaign using football to bring the children together and then telling them that it was wrong to take up arms.

Additionally, His Grace Archbishop Michael K. Francis is on record for speaking out against the use of

Fr. Joe Brown SDB: Still Working for Liberia

He worked in Liberia as a missionary, educator, humanitarian, and pastor from 1980 to 2001 when he returned home to the UK. Now he's there as an ambassador for a country he says is an integral part of his life.

The idea of Fr. Joe Brown coming to Liberia as a missionary was God-inspired. Once in the country he served the people with untiring dedication, commitment, and zeal. For 21 years he worked as missionary, educator, humanitarian, and pastor. He was very instrumental in the establishment of the Arthur Barclay Technical College



Fr Joe Brown on 8th Street in October

which by an Act of the Liberian Legislature became the Don Bosco Polytechnic.

Father's last post of assignment in Liberia was president of the Polytechnic. He departed Liberia in March 2001 for his native UK. Even at that he is still earnestly serving the people of Liberia. He's like our ambassador: interceding, speaking, and soliciting for funds and materials, as well as presenting Liberia's case to the British public.

Back in Liberia for a week in early October 2003, Father said he was still working for Liberia in as much the same way he did when he was in country. Basically, his job is twofold: "The first thing is that the British public knows very little about Liberia. I am letting them know what the Salesians of Don Bosco are doing in the country...The second thing is

that if they are moved to assist us in any way including prayers, funding, and materials I coordinate that activity."

Liberia is a little country with big problems. Helping to solve such problems from a European country through the coordination of several activities is both uphill and tedious. Speaking to DON BOSCO LINK, he said he has to first get in touch with the people and that too requires unlimited energy. "Each week, I go to a different parish. This year I have visited 41 different parishes at weekends. This means that I sometimes have to travel 300 miles to these parishes."

More than that, Father also visits schools to give presentations to students, using overhead projectors, letting them know about the Salesian work in the country.

Asked about the purpose of his trip to Liberia in early October, he said because of the recent fighting in Monrovia in June and July, the Don Bosco institutions were badly hit. The Polytechnic was thoroughly looted and stripped down. Don Bosco Homes, Don Bosco Youth Center, and the Don Bosco Technical High School need help. He thus came to get first hand information on the

various needs of the institutions for possible assistance. He said he had suggested to the various Don Bosco administrators to submit projects to some partner agencies; and he was there to help coordinate all of these project negotiations.

On the future of the Don Bosco institutions in Liberia, Father said he believed that for the next two or three years, the name of Don Bosco will continue to exist, and "I hope there will be some young Liberians joining the Salesians by becoming priests, brothers, and sisters to continue with the work of Don Bosco".

Concluding, Father said he was returning to the UK to continue working for Liberia, something he has done for the past years. "Liberia is part of my life. Some of the happiest moments in my life were spent in Liberia."

Needy children and adults receive Shoes from Don Bosco Youth Center

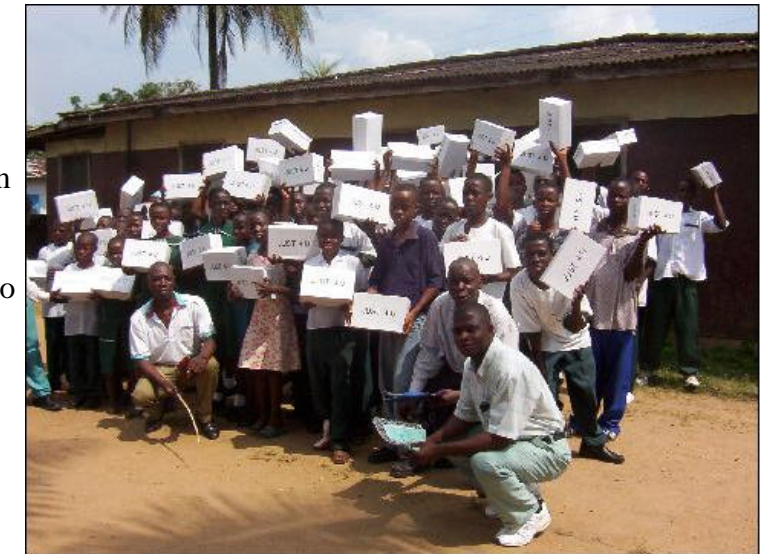
At the helm of the huge distribution exercise was the Don Bosco Youth Center Program Director himself. Fr. Blamoh Harris, SDB went from school to school, class to class as well as to displaced centers and personally handed over the shoes to the beneficiaries.

Speaking to the students just before undertaking each distribution, Fr. Blamoh said the Don Bosco Youth Center (DBYC) was happy to share with the students regardless of school, creed or tribe. "We are from Don Bosco and we are sharing with you these little gifts we have received from our friends in the USA". He said the shoes were donated by the Salesians of Don Bosco in Arlington, Virginia, USA through the instrumentality of Ms. Karlene Webster who works with the SDB's there.

After receiving the shoes, the beneficiaries expressed words of gratitude and appreciation to both the USA SDB's and the Salesians in Liberia. Regina Saysay, a student of the Isaac McCauley School in Monrovia, thanked the Don Bosco family for the shoes and said she will use them for church and school. Jemima Dennis of the Logan town Central High School said she will keep her shoes for the Christmas Season before beginning to use them. For Peter Yarngo, he said he believed both boys and girls can use the shoes and so he will use his everywhere he goes.

The distribution exercise which lasted for the best part of three weeks took place in Montserrado and Bong counties. Beneficiaries included the young, old, schools, displaced centers, and orphanages.

Also speaking during the distribution exercise was Don Bosco Youth Center Program Supervisor, Mr. Aloysius Klou, who called on the recipients not to sell the shoes.



"These shoes are not for sale, so don't sell them. The idea behind giving you these shoes is to enable you come to school".

During the distribution exercise, 500 students at the Calvary Temple Assembly of God Mission School, 300 students at the New Georgia School, 300 from Star of the Sea, 200 students of the St. Matthew Methodist School received shoes. Others included 200 students from the Barclay Nyenfueh institute, 80 from the Tomorrow's Children School among others. Displaced people in the Manu One Displaced Camp in Bong County received 1,200 pairs while those at the VOA Displaced Center near Monrovia received a similar number. In total, 15,250 pairs of shoes were distributed.

Father Blamoh said the Salesians in the USA and Liberia were happy to identify with the needy in these times of emergency. He then asked the recipients to offer prayers and thanksgiving to God who made the whole effort possible.

In many of the places we went during the distribution, many children and adults were seen wearing worn out shower slippers. Upon receiving the brand new shoes free of charge, beams of laughter mixed with happiness signaled that Don Bosco had made their day fruitful.

1, 500 Take Refuge at Don Bosco Youth Center

Dubbed "World War Three" by Monrovia residents, the third and last round of fighting in Monrovia forced nearly 250,000 people to moved elsewhere for refuge. Fifteen hundred were at the DBYC.

According to the United Nations and other humanitarian organizations working in Liberia, nearly 250,000 people were forced to leave their homes to seek refuge elsewhere in and around the city of Monrovia. From July 6th to August 4th, three major wars were fought in Monrovia between government troops and rebels of the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD). Occasioned by these clashes, the displacement of people triggered a major humanitarian concern not witnessed in Monrovia for over a decade. People, including children, women and the elderly, moved from the suburbs of Virginia, Brewerville, parts of Gardnersville, Duala as well as areas surrounding the seaport; and thronged the city center, in school and abandoned buildings as well as the main SKD football stadium in Paynesville on the outskirts of Monrovia.

The Don Bosco Youth Center (DBYC) which is located within the Sinkor sector of Monrovia did not expect to become a major venue for displaced people. But that's what it turned out to be. IDP's came in their hundreds. Hungry, tired, sick, and homeless, many of them were residents of Brewerville, Virginia, Duala and nearby areas; and a lot of them had been displaced more than once since the eruption of full-scale war between the two belligerent groups in 1999.

DBYC Program Supervisor, Aloysius Klön, told *DON BOSCO LINK* that as of late July, 1,572 people were seeking refuge at the DBYC. This figure, Mr. Klön added, comprised 250 family heads; including 877 females and 695 males. Among them were



August 2003—a group of displaced people at the Sean Devereux Center

nursing mothers, pregnant women, elderly of over 60 years old, handicaps as well as children. Additionally, the Red Cross brought in four more patients who were wounded by rocket shrapnel, Mr. Klön disclosed.

The DBYC Program Supervisor said food was the biggest task the Center encountered in catering for the displaced. "We wrote letters to a few NGO's and as a result WFP brought in some maize meal, peas, oil, and salt. Equally so the Red Cross helped us with buckets, maize meal, peas, oil, and salt. While the Sisters of Charity came in with some cooked food, a French NGO called Action Contre la Faim (ACF) provided Corn Soya Blend for children under five years. However, in general, each family head was responsible to cater to its own family."

Unfortunately, while at the Youth Center, the war displaced encountered some level of harassment from men believed to be government troops. "They even came on July 22nd riding in two pick-ups, bulldozed the gate and took away a brand new Toyota

double cabin pick-up truck. We were also happy to provide shelter for some youths of the Matadi community including girls fleeing from rape and boys who were trying to avoid conscription."

Despite all of the odds, Mr. Klön said, the displaced people kept trusting in God that He would deliver them from the dark days of war. "We attended Mass everyday and on Sundays, we celebrated two Masses."

Established in 1991, the Don Bosco Youth Center is a recreational and youth development center that is operated by the Salesians of Don Bosco, a Catholic Religious Order. The Center's sole objective is the rehabilitation, reconciliation and empowerment of youths through the provision of rehabilitative skills training, sports, counseling, and cultural troupe performances. Located near the New Matadi Estate in Sinkor, the DBYC welcomes youths from the local communities of Lakpazee, Fiamah, New Matadi, Central Matadi, Old Matadi, and other parts of Monrovia. Membership of the Center is free.

Meet Sr. Comfort Davis, FMA

One of Liberia's first Salesian Sisters was back home for vacation in early August. She tells *DON BOSCO LINK* that while her heart bleeds for her country because of the war, a glimmer of hope is now on the horizon

The Salesians of Don Bosco came to Liberia in 1979, and since then several Liberians have joined them in their work in schools, parishes, youth centers, and in other youth-related work. These Liberians who joined the Salesians were all males. Then all of that began to change in the late '90's when the first Salesian Sisters joined a religious Congregation that has in a short space of time distinguished itself as a pace setter in youth development and empowerment work.

Sr. Comfort Davis FMA, a Liberian from Lofa County, answered God's call in 1996 and became a member of the Salesians of Don Bosco. Back in Liberia in early August for vacation, she told *DON BOSCO LINK* that in the beginning, although she was not too sure, she always felt an urge to serve the youth. "I did not really know what I was up to but what I knew all along was that I wanted to give my life in the service of others—my brothers and sisters". Sister added that deciding what Congregation to join was not a hard thing to do. "Because I knew I wanted to work for young people, and it is the vocation of the Salesians to work for young people, I thought they were the right community for me".

Making up one's mind to join a religious community is one thing and taking the bold step of actually acquiring membership is another thing. "So I started up by being the parish secretary. As time went by I was observing them and seeing them go about their youth work. As I worked in the parish I was also involved with youth activities, the choir and so forth."

Shortly thereafter, Miss Comfort met her friend Jacqueline George who also expressed her desire to become a Salesian Sister. She now had a companion.

A 1996 graduate of the Leigh Sherman Secretarial School in Monrovia, young Comfort did her



Sr. Comfort FMA in Monrovia during August

primary schooling in Liberia and her secondary education in Sierra Leone before returning to her parish, St. Joseph's, in Monrovia where she met the SDB's. According to her, the SDB Community in Monrovia was from the beginning very open and welcoming to them.

"Fr. O'Brien and the other members of the community really encouraged me and Jackie. They used to talk to us. Fr. O'Brien often told us that the final decision had to come from us...And then little by little we finally decided to give our lives in the services of others."

Because there were no Salesian Sisters in Monrovia when young Comfort made her final decision to join, the SDB's in Monrovia contacted the Salesian Sisters in Abidjan, Ivory Coast and they agreed to take in Comfort and Jackie; the two of them then formally began their Novitiate.

After six months of studies in the Ivory Coast, Sr. Comfort was transferred to the Republic of Gabon

where she started her two-year long religious formation in earnest after which she returned to the Ivory Coast for another two years. Then on Aug. 2, 2000 she made her first profession. "After that I was sent to Mali and Jackie was sent to Benin where we stayed two years doing pastoral work. This year—2003—makes it three years since I was professed a Sister", she added with a smile.

The Salesian Sisters in Mali are involved in a lot of youth-development activities, according to Sr. Comfort. "We run a primary school, a junior high school as well as a vocational center for young women, and a clinic." There are four nuns in the Mali Mission with each person having a specific role to perform; and Sr. Comfort has oversight responsibility over the education department.

Calling on Liberian youths to be open to God's call, she says although Liberians are

nowadays viewed with skepticism by their West African neighbors because of the ugly chapter of war, there is still hope at the end of the day. "What brings joy to me is that I sometimes meet people who embrace me for choosing the religious life and then say to me 'something good still comes out of Liberia'. Yes, there are a lot of youths who can bring good things out of Liberia."

Now back in Abidjan from Mali, Sr. Comfort enters university this year to pursue a four-year degree course in education. She expressed optimism that with the end of the war on the horizon the Salesian Sisters may soon come to Liberia. "When that happens, we hope to come home and work. So Jacqueline George (now studying youth ministry in Kenya), Felicia Goe (now in Togo), and myself would be in the position to serve our Church, youth, and nation here at home".

By John T. Monibah