Building Sierra Leone’s first Peace Museum

Ten years have passed since Sierra Leone’s conflict ended. The Special Court for Sierra Leone is one of two transitional justice institutions – the other is the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) - established to usher in peace, reconciliation and accountability to the country. With the Charles Taylor trial going into the appeals phase, the Court is expected to complete its mandate in late 2013 and become the last of the two institutions to close.

At the same time, the Court will be handing over the remaining site to the Government of Sierra Leone. The future uses of the site is of vital importance to the legacy of the Court because it epitomizes the collective resolve of Sierra Leoneans to address the issue of impunity.

It is against this backdrop that the Court and its partners including the Sierra Leone Human Rights Commission and the Amputees and War Wounded Association are establishing a Peace Museum on the Court Site which will be an independent national institution that will honour the victims of the war and preserve the history of the conflict and the story of the peace process. Moreover, it will deal with the causes of the war and promote the legacy of the court.

Therefore, since January of 2011, the committee of national stakeholders called the Peace Museum Project Management Team drawn from government ministries and agencies, national institutions, civil society groups, the United Nations and the Special Court for Sierra Leone has been designing the Peace Museum and its institutional set-up; which will be completed in time to coincide with the closure of the Court.

With funds from the United Nations Peace-building Fund, the committee has been working on the design content of the Peace Museum which is made up of three components:

The Archives will be a resource for research into the nation’s conflict. They will comprise of the public records of the Special Court, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and many other records from the United Nations and human rights organizations. It will also include audio tapes covering five years of activities by the international peace-building non-governmental organization, the Search for Common Ground /Talking Drum Studio in Sierra Leone.

The Exhibition component will narrate the history of the war, its causes and the story of the peace process through artifacts and interactive displays. It will ensure those who cannot read or write are able to learn about the war just as much as those who are literate.

The Memorial Garden will be a place of quiet reflection where visitors will also be able to honour the victims of the war. It will fulfill one of the recommendations of the TRC by serving as a form of symbolic reparation to the war’s victims.

Progress on this front includes the launch of a Memorial Design Competition in August 2011 to encourage discussion on the importance of the memorial regarding honouring the war’s victims and celebrating progress in peace consolidation and building a culture of human rights in Sierra Leone. In addition, it also gave people the opportunity to put their vision of the memorial into a design. Designs were received from around the country and abroad.

The panel of Judges announced the winners of the competition on 3 May 2012 at a ceremony at the Special Court. The ceremony provided a forum for the judges to explain the reasoning behind their decision and members of the public the opportunity to view and discuss the entries.

The committee has also organized a series of awareness-raising events and consultations around the country to ensure that Sierra Leoneans are part of the designing processes of the Peace Museum so that at the end of the day it will be nationally designed, nationally owned and nationally managed.
The committee meets with members of civil society groups at the monthly Special Court Interactive Forum meeting to report to and consult with them on the implementation of the Peace Museum Project. The meetings are convened by the Special Court to discuss issues around the mandate of the Court with civil society groups.

In November 2011, the committee organized a sponsored walk to raise funds and awareness and to engage the public on the aims and objectives of the peace museum which includes consolidating the peace, advancing justice and building a culture of human rights in the country. The walk saw supporters of the peace museum march through the streets of the capital Freetown in T-shirts inscribed with messages, distribute leaflets and sing peace songs.

The Committee went round the country in December 2011 to meet with civil society groups and members of the public to: introduce the Peace Museum Project and sought their views, set-up taskforces that will assist in project activities and do some publicity on radio. The taskforces are leading efforts in engaging communities on issues around the peace museum in their respective districts. In future they will lead efforts in collecting artifacts.

In December 2011, the Sierra Leone Union of Photographers received funds from the Committee to collect war photos – those of the war and peace process and important historical sites relating to the same - around the country. To kick start the collection, a consultative conference was held in the provincial headquarters town of Bo on 2 December 2011 to discuss the relevance of the collection to preserving the history of the conflict and the peace process and by extension peace-building efforts. The collection exercise is complete and the photos have now been handed in to the committee. This will be followed by a verification exercise to authenticate the collection.

Looking into the future, efforts will now focus on collecting artifacts, photos and the names of the tens of thousand of people who died as a result of the war, designing the exhibition and the Memorial Garden and collecting photos of the 800 war amputees around the country. For this the committee will be relying on partners across the country to assist with these tasks in their respective districts. To this end, the committee will be seeking support from donors which could be in the form of funds to complete the building of Peace Museum or expertise to assist with designing the exhibition and the Memorial Garden and developing an Archival Policy.

If you are interested in the Peace Museum or wish to support our work, please email: slpeacemuseum@gmail.com

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