

Criminalized, Brutalized, Stigmatized: How Deportees from Germany struggle to make their voices heard in Sierra Leone

Presentation by Tejan Lamboi at the Medico International Symposium, 11 May 2012, Frankfurt

Introduction

I want to start this presentation by saying that I am actually not the expert in this field – the experts are those who have gone through the marathon and painful experience of being deported but whom unfortunately cannot be here today to tell their stories. I will try to tell this story using their words as much as possible.

Between 1991 and 2002, Sierra Leone witnessed a very brutal war which led to several people fleeing the country, not only coming to Germany or the West but also to several neighboring countries in West Africa and elsewhere.

Most of those who came to Germany and sought asylum were rejected but because the war was still raging, they were not readily deported. However, once the war ended in 2002 and the then President of Sierra Leone came to Germany on a visit aimed at “marketing” the war-ravaged country said that the war was over and that the country was now very peaceful. He also said publicly that because the situation was now normal, all Sierra Leoneans who had fled the war to seek protection should now return and help with his government’s post-war reconstruction efforts. Such pronouncement led to the German authorities started targeting Sierra Leoneans who had been “tolerated” to stay (Duldung) to return home. This was very problematic because, after living in Germany for a while, been forced back to go to a country like Sierra Leone just after a decade-long conflict, posed enormous challenges for those targeted.

Research

My research interest was to try to find out what happens once the deportees are back in their countries because most of the research you will find is actually based on what is happening in Germany – the asylum laws and policies with a very little information on what happens in deportation flights or events in home countries.

After some brief work here in Germany, I travelled to Sierra Leone and stayed for three months to work with the deportees. I however should add here that it was a very challenging undertaking because when I initially arrived in Sierra Leone, nobody wanted to talk to me because it’s like a taboo to be deported and speak openly about deportation in the West African state. Someone I wanted to speak with for example asked me, “Why do you want to talk to us about this? I don’t trust you! What if you are a spy for the German

government?" This made it very difficult to recruit interview partners for my research project. However, after several weeks, I was slowly able to build some trust and started the project the results of which I am going to present here.

Deportation and its Phases

According to my findings, deportation is a very brutal and long-winded process employed by states to regulate migration that contains three related phases – criminalization, brutalization and stigmatization.

I. The Criminalization Phase

The criminalization process begins when the asylum seekers flee to Germany to seek protection – they are not trusted and are treated in a somewhat discriminating and humiliating manner as a result of such distrust. One of my interview partners, Abdul Kanu (all the names used here are not real), explained what happened when he arrived in Germany to ask for asylum:

"I had a lot of fear because it was my first time to have handcuffs around my hands and to be stripped naked. They even forced me to bend down so they could look into my anus to determine if anything else was inside like money or drugs... Was I a criminal? I don't know what they were searching for..."

The criminalization process continues when the asylum seekers are taken to isolated asylum homes which are sometimes far removed from any form of livelihood. As a result of the "Residenzpflicht" – a law which you can only find in Germany – they are not allowed to move, without permission, outside their "Landkreis" even when they want to associate with friends, families and other networks. It is like an open prison.

If they are lucky - most are not - during the asylum process, they could be granted a resident permit which means the experience ends at this point. However, according to my results, a little over 95% of those who applied for asylum actually failed meaning the process continues to the brutalization phase.

II. The Process of Brutalization

Brutalization refers to the brutal techniques employed by police officers and other State officials who are escorting deportees for refusing court orders to voluntarily leave the country.

Oluwole Olu, who had lived in Germany for over a decade, explained to me what happened when he resisted a police officer as he was being taken from Berlin to Brussels during an attempted deportation which failed because the pilot refused to take him:

“They swept me, swung my hands towards my back! They tied my feet and my hands. I sustained a broken hand in the process. I was shouting but no one was listening to me. I cried and I cried...”

Furthermore, in the deportation prison, the police officers, once they know no one is around, they sometimes use racist words against those awaiting deportation. Dominic Conteh, deported in 2006, explained to me how after the first attempt to deport him via a commercial flight had failed because he had sternly resisted, the day he was deported, the police officers came to his prison in the morning, opened the doors and chained his feet. One of the officers then said to him, *“I don’t know what you are finding in our country but today you are going, you can’t resist anymore. We don’t want you here!”*

III. The Stigmatization Phase

Stigmatization begins once the plain has taken off at the airport in Germany and landed at the Lungi Airport in Freetown or wherever the deportation is conducted to. Once the deportees have arrived and are handed over to the immigration officers mostly with nothing, because they were not even prepared to go. Sometimes they just go to the “Ausländerbehörde” to renew their “Duldung” and they are arrested and taken to a deportation prison and few days they are in Freetown, where they are abandoned and left to find their way home.

The biggest challenge now becomes how to go back to the community – I have been away for ten years, people know I was not here but all of a sudden I am back and with nothing! How do I get back into my community? How do I prevent people from knowing that I have been deported in order not to become a laughing stock?

Mustapha Jaward explained his ordeal when he arrived in Sierra Leone:

“Neighbors were looking at me with disrespectful eyes, saying this is a deportee. He was unsuccessful. They are among those who failed to make it up in Germany.”

A female deportee, Mayalie Kamara, also recalled her bitter experience with stigmatization:

“Everyone was saying, she was deported! She was deported! She is crazy! When they deported her, she became crazy... She was selling cocaine in Germany.”

The fears of such stigmatization and discrimination make deportees dimply withdraw from public attention and therefore do not have the voice to speak out even though they have a lot to say regarding what has happened to them during asylum and deportation. According to my study, reason for such mindset is because most people in Sierra Leone think once you are in Germany or Europe, you get rich. Therefore, once you are sent back

with nothing they think that it was your fault because you were not serious enough to make a better life, with little or no idea of what the asylum process looks like here in Germany.

NEAS-SL

It was against the backdrop of addressing some of these difficulties that deportees in Sierra Leone face that the Network of Ex-Asylum Seekers Sierra Leone (NEAS-SL) was established in 2010. The 45 deportees from Germany who started the network are of the conviction that they have to speak out and let people understand what they have gone through and how they became victims of migration control in Germany should not be blamed on them in Sierra Leone.

The Network has lined up activities it intends undertaking and these include:

Community awareness programs to reduce stigmatization of deportees within their localities; development of a website which could be used as a resource that could be utilized by researchers as well as asylum activists and human rights organizations that want to understand what happens to people once being deported; and also to engage with the Sierra Leonean authorities to understand how and why they collaborate with the German authorities to effect deportation.

Medico International Contact

Finally I want to add that after my research trip to Sierra Leone I contacted medico but initially the organization was not so sure how to partner with the group but after two colleagues made a work visit to Sierra Leone, they met with NEAS-SL and were able to understand what some of the issues were. One year after such contact, Medico has approved a public education project in Sierra Leone where the deportees themselves with support from facilitators and a human right lawyer will develop the messages they want to discuss publicly to let the public in Sierra Leone understand what transpire in Germany during the asylum process which led to rejection and subsequent deportation.

The project also aims to develop stories about events during detention and deportation flights to be published here in Germany as a way of throwing light on some of the secret happenings during forced removal, which sometimes even violate the already restrictive laws.

Thank you for your attention!