

The First Lady with a vision for Sierra Leone's recovery

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Sia Koroma hopes her nation can be as successful as the UAE **Says Sierra Leone is an attractive investment opportunity thanks to its miles of sandy beaches and natural mineral resources** On a mission to reduce the country's infant and maternal mortality rate by 30 per cent by 2010 **The president's wife denies her role is glamorous**

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—What is the purpose of your visit?
—This is my first visit to an Arab country, and frankly, I am amazed at what Dubai has achieved. This is a wonderful and beautiful city. My visit has been facilitated by Mathew Morgan-Jones of the Dubai-based charity All As One [AAO].

—What is Sierra Leone's connection with AAO?

—They have a Children's Centre in Freetown that runs an orphanage, medical clinic and school caring for vulnerable children. I think the work done by charities such as AAO is very important to my country. My dream for the children of Sierra Leone is to have access to education, health, water and sanitation as a right and not a privilege. I want my country to follow Dubai's model. I hope some day Sierra Leone will have the same wonderful infrastructure, the tall buildings and the business districts that Dubai has.

—But Sierra Leone is perceived as a poverty-stricken nation.

—No, that is a gross misconception. Sierra Leone has vast natural resources. We are known for our diamond mines. My family comes from the Kono district, which is a popular diamond district. Our vast expanse of land is rich for mining - gold, iron ore, bauxite and rutile [used to make airplanes]. It is partly because of these

resources our country had been embroiled in conflict.

—Has 10 years of political instability made it less attractive to investment?

—Sierra Leone needs genuine investors. We have miles and miles of golden, sandy beaches that are untouched. We are predominantly an agricultural country but the new government is working on opening it to tourism and real estate opportunities. Sierra Leone has a bright future ahead of it and we are seeking the right partners to build this future with us.

—What do you think about the latest trend of celebrities adopting children?

—I think genuine adoption efforts by famous people is good. Every child should be given the opportunity to better themselves and their situation. There are 25 million orphans in Africa. If through these stars the world becomes aware of their plight, I think it's good. Adoption in Sierra Leone is treated very seriously. We have rules and procedures, charities such as AAO work very closely with the Ministry of Health to ensure it's legal and there is a follow up system to monitor the progress of the child.

—As well as AAO, you are here to find financial support for another charity, Wish? Can you tell us more about it?

—Wish stands for Women in Safer Health, it is my pet project. This programme aims to support the healthcare needs of women and children in Sierra Leone. The infant mortality rate in my country is as high as 1,870 per 100,000 live births. My vision is to reduce the infant and maternal mortality figure by 30 per cent by 2010. The Wish framework outlines the needs of local communities and identifies specific interventions to support people most at risk of dying due to poverty.

—Tell me about your dream project, the Dankay Koroma Foundation?

—The Dankay Koroma Foundation is a memorial to my late mother. It is dedicated to working with women and children in need. This foundation will be an accountable and transparent entity managed by qualified professionals in the field of health development. Wish is the



Sia Koroma
First Lady of Sierra Leone

Born in the 1950s to famed politician Abu Aiah Koroma and his wife Dankay Koroma, Sia Koroma has always been surrounded by politics. Her father contested the 1996 presidential elections.

Educated in Sierra Leone and the United Kingdom, Koroma holds a bachelor of science degree in chemistry and a masters in organic chemistry. She is a qualified psychiatric nurse, was the first woman to work as chief chemist at the Kissy Oil Refinery and also provided private consultancy to the World Bank until the family had to flee Sierra Leone during the civil war in 1997.

first project undertaken by this foundation. I was recently in China addressing the China Women's Federation and they generously offered the Dankay Koroma Foundation a \$40,000 grant.

—Is being the First Lady a glamorous job? Designer clothes, official banquets, globe trotting?

—Sierra Leone unfortunately has not reached that level as yet. I do not have the opportunities that some of the first ladies across the globe have. I do have to attend

state banquets, travel on state visits and wear good clothes but at heart I am an ambassador of the poor and needy.

—From a nurse to the First Lady, how has that journey been?

—My journey has had its ups and down. I work with women and children who have suffered the trauma of the civil war, this makes my task challenging. The golden rule of nursing: 'Once a nurse, always a nurse' is so true. Not only has my training helped me cope with my change in position, I use the art of listening when I work with people, I use my art of assessment when I try to sort out disputes.

—Why are you called the mother of the nation?

—The people call me the mother of the nation out of their love for me. I work with the most vulnerable and disadvantaged sections of society, these people have nothing and all they can give back is their love and respect. My people look at the family as one unit. The president is a popular man, the people fondly call him the father of the nation.

—Lastly, who handles the finances of your family?

—My husband was an insurance executive, he holds the reins of the family budget. I am a simple floor manager. I am given funds to run the family and I am accountable for every single leone spent. If I want more, my husband says I need to justify every claim I make.