

# First lady

**T**HE FIRST LADY OF SIERRA LEONE, Alice Sia Koroma, certainly has her work cut out for her. Here's how the African president's wife hopes to bring healing to her war-ravaged nation

By **Suchitra Bajpai Chaudhary**

Mention Sierra Leone, and most people think of violence, bloodshed and orphans. Sandwiched between Guinea and Liberia, on the edge of the North Atlantic Ocean in Africa, this nation is known for its wealth of minerals and diamonds, yet it is one of the poorest nations in the world.

Sierra Leone is a land of contradictions and irony. Who can forget the images of pre-pubescent boys toting rifles across their rib baring chests during the civil war of the 1990s – taking their first lessons in violence before they'd even learnt to read?

But just as every dark cloud has a silver lining, Alice Sia Koroma insists that the people of Sierra Leone hold much promise for themselves. Alice, the First Lady of Sierra Leone, wife of Ernest Bai Koroma who was democratically elected to lead the country in 2007, does not believe in resting on her husband's laurels. Having worked as a qualified scientist and biochemist for a decade before switching to nursing, Alice is a determined woman who wants nothing but the best for her country and will work hard to achieve that.

She came to Dubai last month on the invitation of the Institute of International Research in the Middle East (IIRME) to address the Fifth Corporate Social Responsibility summit. She also combined this occasion with the opportunity to express solidarity and support for the Dubai based charity, All as One, that raised Dh500,000 for an orphanage in Freetown, Sierra Leone.

Years of relentless struggle and hard

work have not worn off the edges of a keen sense of humour that she possesses. As she talks, the country that is usually little more than a statistic slowly gets a human face. Alice Sia Koroma's compassion and articulate expression help one to feel the pain of a people who are a continent away. You come to understand the struggle of a country to stand on its feet, feed its orphans and make education its priority.

As the daughter of politically active parents, Alice was groomed in statesmanship from childhood.

"I am a Sierra Leonean from Kono District, the breadbasket of Africa. From childhood I have had the opportunity to watch politics and statesmanship at very close quarters. My father was the first lawyer in Kono district and a very active politician. He belonged to the Democratic Party and contested the first Presidential election in 1996. He passed away three years ago.

"My mother was a primary school teacher. Because of my background, I had the opportunity to meet many people in society and interact with them on various issues that were pressing national concerns. It was a humbling experience and it has made me very down-to-earth. I have seen the best and worst of politics."

Alice thinks her upbringing and environment naturally drew her to

care for people and she feels it is a blessing that as First Lady she has the opportunity to do so. "Nurture and caring is innate in me. I cared for the younger ones in the family."

**"I want to bring a change in this generation so that the future of the leaders of tomorrow is secured," says Alice Sia Koroma.**

She also went through rigorous studies to become a scientist. "Originally I am a scientist. I did my BSc honours in Biochemistry and Chemistry and did a Masters in Organic Chemistry in the UK. My master's degree was related to the synthesis of organic phosphorus in pesticides and nitrogen. After completing my studies I worked in Sierra Leone in the

Petroleum Refinery as the chief scientist. I worked at the refinery for eight years as a consultant."

She fondly recalls her whirlwind romance with the President. "That was the time Ernest courted me and we fell in love. We were both young and enthusiastic. We got married and I have two girls Alice and Denke who are 21 and 19."

**Razed to the ground...** Prolonged civil war has rendered Sierra Leone completely incapacitated. The crumbling infrastructure and lack of funds have forced millions to seek refuge in neighbouring countries.

## THE WISH INITIATIVE

**WISH, an acronym for Woman in Safer Health,** is a programme initiated by Alice Sia Koroma. It envisions the provision of health service delivery to both mother and child. It is a framework that aims to reduce infant and maternal mortality by 30 per cent between 2005 and 2010. Currently the rate is very high and because of the high female mortality rate, more and more children are abandoned or orphaned.

The framework has four clear objectives, namely:

- Community sensitisation and advocacy – to reach up to two million women countrywide
- Training of community-based health workers
- Creation and maintenance of pregnancy support groups
- Construction and equipping of birth waiting homes.

By providing better health choices, better health facilities and the availability of trained health workers, we can help mitigate the core problems that besiege Sierra Leoneans today.



But given the mercurial nature of the country's politics, a sudden military coup jeopardised life and people were forced to flee. The Koromas were one such family. "In 1997 there was a political upheaval," recalls Alice. "There was a mass exodus. I literally escaped death with the two girls in tow. I lost everything that I had – my home, my wealth... I boarded the flight to UK barefoot with just the clothes we were wearing. I was under great stress and trauma. I had to live in a council flat and face poverty. But I didn't lose hope. I was confident that I would be able to return to my country one day."

"To make ends meet, I had to retrain myself in doing what I was best at – nurturing and caring. I took a course in psychiatric nursing at King's College in London. I worked as a staff nurse in a busy hospital in London. I worked day and night at the hospital as I was determined to give my girls a good education at all costs."

In the meantime, as things settled, her husband continued to hold parleys with the statesmen of Sierra Leone and kept commuting from London. When the time was right, he filed his nomination and was democratically elected the President of his country in 2007.

That's when Alice returned to her beloved country, more than

determined to put the pain of her struggle behind her and embrace the responsibilities her office brought with it. Having earned her way through life and struggled to uphold the ideals she held close to her heart, Alice is determined to provide the same for the children of her country.

"My main concern has been the health and well-being of women and children. I have launched a campaign called WISH for the safer health of women and am trying to bring the female mortality rate down by 2010. That will also help the issue of orphaned and street children."

Alice believes that when women are protected and their lives conserved, they are able to give stability to the life of children. "There is so much work to be done. There is poverty and illiteracy to be tackled. I want to bring a change in this generation so that the future of the leaders of tomorrow is secured," she says.

It is these sentiments and her dynamic leadership that have earned her the title Mother of the Nation.

## IN PURSUIT OF A DREAM

**IIRME, as part of its closing ceremony,** had organised a charity gala ball on June 16, as part of its Corporate Social Responsibility strategy. The goal was to raise as much as Dh500,000 that night and the funds were to go to the Dubai-based charity All as One that works for the orphans of Sierra Leone. However, the organisers fell short of raising their target fund and efforts are still on to collect the designated amount through donations.

However, that did not dampen the enthusiasm of the First Lady, who was very impressed by Dubai and

expressed her desire to take a leaf out of the UAE experience as she sees obvious parallels in the natural resources of the two countries.

"Sierra Leone is very rich in natural resources. We have large mineral resources, particularly gold and diamonds. We have long beautiful, unspoilt stretches of gold beaches. We need genuine investors and training. I am hoping to advertise my country as an opportunity for business. I have seen the UAE. I want to know how you did it."

*If you would like to make contributions to All as One for the orphans of Sierra Leone, you can contact them at [info@aadubai.org](mailto:info@aadubai.org).*

But Alice realises the enormity of the tasks that lie ahead in the reconstruction of the heart and soul of her war-ravaged nation.

That's why she is here: to make the presence of her nation felt keenly among the corporates and conglomerates of the world. Sierra Leone is a poor country that has just come out of a brutal civil war, fuelled in part by the illegitimate political power struggle over the control of the



**Prince Charles (centre),** with the President of Sierra Leone, Dr Ernest Bai Koroma and his wife Alice, during their three-day visit to the UK in January this year.

## ISSUES

country's rich diamond deposits.

The country's pre-war economy was largely dependent on foreign companies engaged in the mining of minerals such as iron ore, bauxite, rutile, gold and diamonds. Today, it is vital that the nation rebuild relationships with major corporate organisations and foster bonds between big corporates and the local community.

Alice realises the onerous responsibility on her shoulders and is eager to partner with her husband on the commitments and vision they share for the country – especially regarding the rehabilitation of thousands of children who have been orphaned in the civil war. “We have consolidated peace and stability in Sierra Leone. The government is working with the international charities to eliminate poverty and illiteracy. Children leave schools and beg on streets, many of them are orphaned and overburdened. There is a lot to be done and I think the charity organisation All as One is doing commendable work.

“I always refer to myself as the ambassador of the disadvantaged, disabled and poor. I am proud to be their ambassador. I feel the less fortunate in the society must be given an equal opportunity and not stigmatised.

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### Alice Sia Koroma...

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educated. All these things should not be a privilege but a right for the people of Sierra Leone.

“I am working hard in tandem with the existing charities. We intend to have a Ministry of Social Welfare where all such activities will be streamlined and integrated. I have come here to support the act of raising funds for the orphans of Sierra Leone, a brave initiative taken up by All as One. The work to be done is colossal,” she concludes restlessly.



SILVIA BARONINHI

“*A luta contínua,*” she sighs, repeating an Angolan wartime slogan borne out of the liberation movement of the '60s. The full saying, *a luta contínua, a vitória é certa*, translates as a spurring motto: the struggle continues, our victory is certain. “The troubles may continue unabated,” she concedes, “but I have the will and determination to succeed – and I will.” ■

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