

**MATTHEW MORGAN-JONES INTERVIEWS  
H.E. MRS ALICE SIA KOROMA  
THE FIRST LADY OF SIERRA LEONE ON THE EVE OF HER  
FIRST VISIT TO THE UAE**



H.E. Mrs Alice Sia Koroma at home in Sierra Leone and (right) with Matthew Morgan Jones



**M**atthew Morgan-Jones is inextricably tied to the tiny African nation of Sierra Leone. His first visit there in 2004 to adopt two young children from the All As One orphanage changed the course of his life for good. Now the proud father of four; David and Dauda, both 5, Magdalene, 4 and Mariama, 18 months, he persists with his tireless campaign to raise funds for the orphanage and to create awareness for the issues under which Africa, and Sierra Leone in particular, continues to struggle.

When Matthew decided to return there a few weeks ago to assess the progress of the African Aid Organisation's work with All As One, he was also invited to meet H.E. Mrs Alice Sia Koroma, the new First Lady of Sierra Leone.

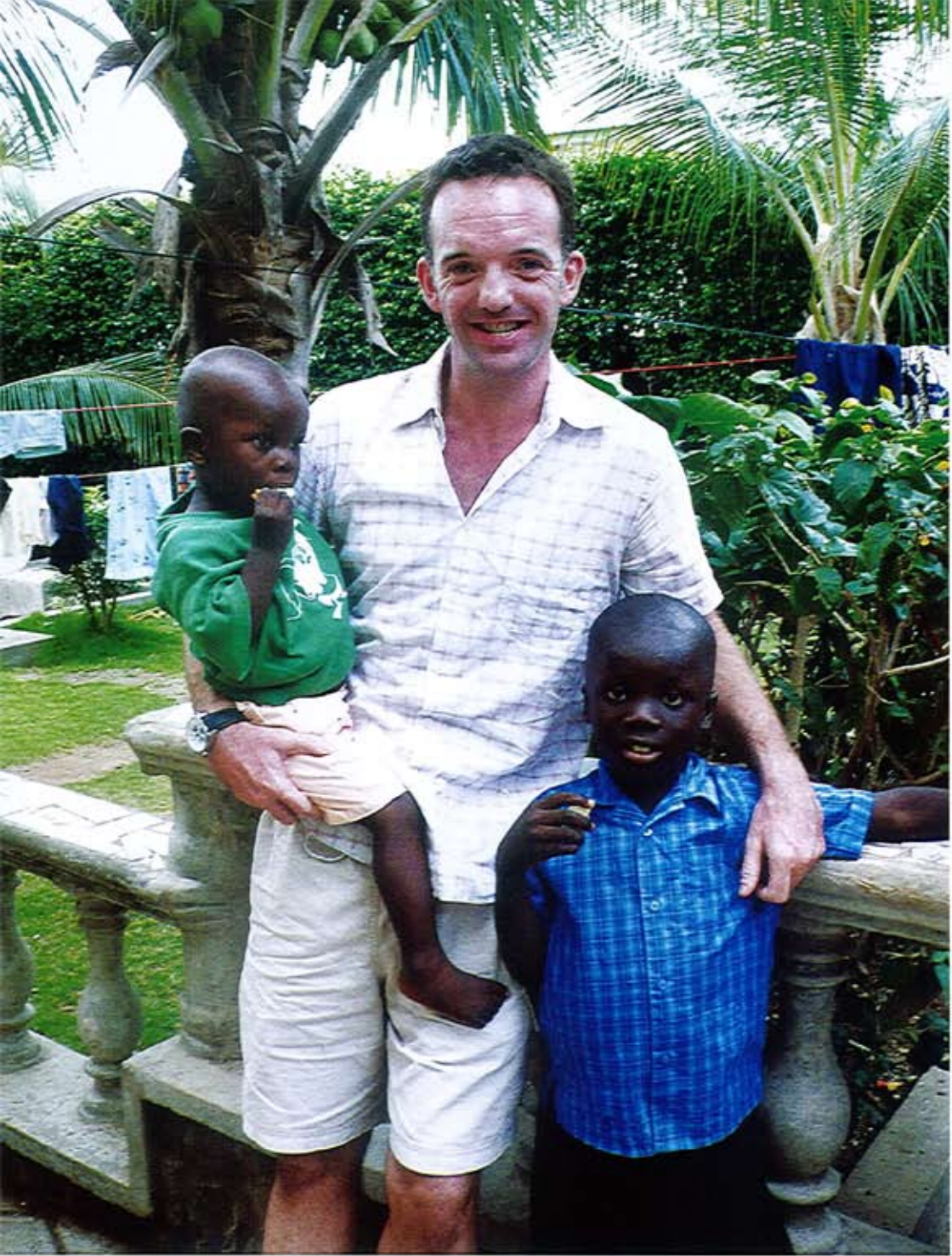
"The trip was my first back to Sierra Leone in a year," he

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explained on his return to Dubai. "The children's centre has been moved to a temporary location while the new purpose-built compound prepares for its completion in 2009." It was the first time Matthew had visited with representatives from Dubai, there to report on the centre and meet the children who so enchanted the charity campaigner on his first trip. "The new centre was fantastic. Although the building is smaller than the previous premises,

the condition and layout was so much better with a larger outside area for games and play. The outside play area has really improved the recreational opportunities for the children and they are all looking so much happier in their new home. The bedrooms are light and airy with space for the children's personal items by the side of the beds. It was wonderful to see that the older children had put up pictures, drawings and letters from their sponsors and pen pals."

Every morning and afternoon, the children attend school. It is a valuable gift that they treasure, wearing their uniforms with pride. After lessons, their 'aunties' organize playtime with group activities, storytelling, singing, dancing and crafts. At the end of Matthew's visit, the children put on a show; the toddlers sang at the tops of their voices, the older boys danced and rapped and the older girls, dressed in bright, traditional robes, performed a rousing folk song. Matthew admits to being amazed at how far the children had come since his last visit. "It was so wonderful to see the children so happy in their new environment," Matthew recalls. "Sia the resident nurse at the centre was saying how being outside more has helped improve the health of the children too. It was so brilliant to see."



Matthew shares a moment with Maurice and his brother Francis in Sierra Leone



Dubai to promote this day. In Sierra Leone the Ministry of Welfare, Gender and Children's Affairs will be using the day to educate children about child trafficking. This is something that unfortunately is a problem in our country. Through the use of the media they bring awareness of the related issues and what children and parents need to know to stop this happening."

**When you recently visited the All As One centre, what were your impressions?**

"It was wonderful to see the children looking so happy and well cared for, and I enjoyed their wonderful singing! The centre provides the children with an education and an opportunity to be children. I support their work and their vision to open an expanded centre in Grafton."

**In your role as First Lady, how do you support your husband's vision for building the nation?**

"My husband's vision for building the nation is centered around attitudinal and behavioral change. This vision calls people to work for a better country by re-assessing their approach to work, family life and relationships, so that the development of the country is given priority over selfish aims or individual goals. I support this vision by spreading the message wherever I go and have an opportunity to address my people. I also support the government's objectives by working, for example with our Ministry of Health to reduce infant and maternal mortality by 30% by 2010. I have translated their targets to a challenge and we are asking our development partners to do something practical to see the goal achieved."

A few days later, Matthew visited the new site in Grafton where the AAO has purchased six acres of land just outside the capital, Freetown, for the development of the new orphanage. The site is a local beauty spot on high ground surrounded by a lush, green valley. "After so many years talking about the project it was an amazing feeling to be standing on the land that will really shape the future for so many Sierra Leone children," Matthew explained. Aside from the children's centre that will provide a secure and loving home for over 120 children, the school will teach over 330 and the hospital will provide much-needed medical assistance to women and children in the local area.

Matthew recognizes that much still needs to be changed in Sierra Leone. With high unemployment and rising food prices, he wasn't surprised to see

people begging in the street for water and just a ration of rice. It's a huge task for any leader to undertake and at his inauguration in September 2007, the new president, former insurance salesman Ernest Bai Koroma, vowed to fight the corruption that had bankrupted his nation and save Sierra Leone from crushing poverty. His wife, Mrs Alice Sia Koroma, is a strong advocate of her husband's principals and has dedicated herself to helping her country's most vulnerable. On the eve of her first trip to the Middle East to help raise awareness for Sierra Leone's plight, she invited Matthew Morgan Jones for an informal chat at her private residence, to discuss her vital role in healing her war-torn country, revealing what life is like as the wife and mother of Sierra Leone's First Family.

**Have you been to the Middle East before, in particular Dubai?**

"I have never been to the Middle East before. I have good expectations of Dubai as I have heard so many positive things about it. In particular it has made great strides in developing infrastructure especially in terms of providing facilities for its citizens."

**The International Day of the African Child is celebrated on 16 June. What is the message behind this important day?**

"It marks the tragic day in 1976 when hundreds of children from Soweto died after they protested against the lack of education. Thousands took to the streets and the South African army shot them. In 1991 the United Nations declared this day the International Day of the African Child to remember the rights of all African children. I'm pleased to be in



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**What causes or initiatives are you personally involved with in developing Sierra Leone?**

"I have always made it clear that as First Lady, I want to work to improve the life chances for women and children in this country. I have particular focus to reduce infant maternal mortality in Sierra Leone as part of this commitment. According to the UN Human Development statistics, Sierra Leone has the worst record in this area in the whole world. I am also involved in a local NGO organization called Women in Need, which supports women at risk of poverty, social neglect or under threat of domestic violence."

**As the First Family of Sierra Leone, what are your priorities?**

"Just as in any family, to see that every member is well cared for. That is my husband's aim and I support that entirely."

**Tell us about your family. We understand that your children are studying in the UK. What are they studying and do they have ambitions to follow their father into politics?**

"I hope you will understand that we guard the privacy of our family dearly. We do have two daughters studying in the UK. As for their aspirations, we leave that up to them to decide. As a family, we care about providing a supportive environment for them."

**How has your family changed since your husband became President?**

"Our family was always ready for this to happen so we had always agreed on what changes we needed to make. The imperative is that I have to work side by side with my husband as he tends to matters of state. I have a civic duty as First Lady and I am now carving a development role to

enhance the life chances of the citizens of our country. These duties you will agree call for the sort of sacrifice to family life that our family, together, had always agreed to make."

**What do you hope to be remembered for at the end of your time as First Lady of Sierra Leone?**

"The main focus for me right now is to support children affected by the war or those who are now suffering as a consequence of the war. I want to be able to do practical things to reduce infant and maternal mortality. For example, I aim to build or refurbish health posts in every village in the country. This will provide

women going through the birth process with access to facilities closest to where they live. At present, pregnant women have to walk up to 15km to get to their nearest health facility. My focus now is to do all I can to change people's lives for the better. I will leave the issue of how history judges me for later."

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