

Olney—Newton Link

May 2012

Registered Charity 1117694

ONL



“To advance education and to relieve poverty in the village of Newton, Sierra Leone, by the provision of charitable assistance”

www.olneynewtonlink.org.uk

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CLAIRE LINTERN'S TEACHING TRIP

OLNEY - NEWTON LINK

From September I will be living and working in Freetown. With an NGO called Extra Mile I am volunteering in a school teaching science to the

equivalent of our years 7-9 and have a contract for about 10 months. As you can see from the photo's the school is a little different- the classroom is actually the science lab! It's not exactly well equipped but that's all part of the challenge. I will be teaching a whole range of subjects under the Sierra Leone curriculum and may also become involved in agricultural science as well as teacher training.

And, of course, I will be helping ONL by helping where needed with the



committee and reporting back to the UK. If you would like more details about my trip please do contact me at

clairelin1@aol.com

I am also running a scheme where for a minimum of £2 a month or £20 for my 10 month stay I will send you

monthly emails with details of my experiences as well as photographs of what I get up to. The money will help me access the internet as this is incredibly tough to do without own access to the mobile network. Again please email me if you would like more details. I will of course write things for the newsletter to keep people up to date with developments in Newton! Wish me luck!

Claire Lintern, ONL Secretary



OLNEY/NEWTON LINK COMMITTEE UK /SIERRA LEONE
30th April 2012

REPORT ON THE ACTIVITIES OF THE LINK

A meeting was held at the Newton Health center on Friday 21 march 2012, launching the Health center solar project. Present were:

Community stake holders	Representatives from the link
Patients (beneficiaries)	Representative the ministry of health
Community people	Representative Safa future
Health committee members	The press

The meeting was chaired by James Kabbia who incidentally is the chairman of the health committee. He welcomed all present. He expressed thanks, and appreciation for the success of this project, to all those who are concerned. Joseph Charles the C.H.O made a brief statement about the development of the solar project and justified its relevance. He extended so many thanks and appreciation to the Olney/Newton link both home and abroad for the good work. The village headman in his contribution praised the link. He mentioned that they have witnessed so many gestures the link has made especially for the health center and the community at large. He also stated that he has been one of the beneficiaries of this prestigious and humanitarian organization. He extends his prayers and blessings to all those who may have contributed in diverse ways to make this link a success.

The councilor of the community was also asked to make statement. In her responses, she acknowledged that Olney committee has indeed helped Newton in diverse ways rebuilding lives of the people of this community. After the war Newton experienced total impoverished deplorable living condition in the community. She thanked Olney very much, yet did state that Olney committee needs to continue rescue this community. The government by itself can do, but very little to help with such acute and difficult condition.

Speaking within the same context is a former beneficiary of our housing project, Madam Fudia Kargbo. She told members present that this committee has helped to house herself and her family including other vulnerable beneficiaries. She is now a beneficiary of the new solar project. Expressing her happiness, she presented a locally composed song in our local language sending praises to the people of Olney UK

Faithfully submitted

By: Abubakarr Fofanah

Secretary

Where do we go from here?

The report from Bakarr went on to report on the development of the Skill Training Centre. There is a desperate need for improved water supplies and sanitation in the village and we have already sent some funds that have allowed them to start digging latrines. Water contamination has caused outbreaks of typhoid and dysentery recently so there is an urgent need for a new waterwell.

Please continue to support us as we try to improve the lives of these desperately poor people. Our next major event will be the concert on June 23rd.

Rachel Lintern, Chairman

Sheila serves soup....



Friday 2nd March saw over 25 people enjoy a soup lunch at the home of Sheila Woodhead. On offer, to tempt the palate, a choice of five different homemade soups. For those with a sweet tooth, delicious cup cakes were available to either eat as a dessert or take home to savour later. As well as food there were stalls for people to shop at including jewellery, photographs, biscuits and a bring and buy.

Altogether the event, the first of its kind, raised £210.62 which will be used on projects to assist in health and hygiene in Newton, Sierra Leone.



The Chairman lends a hand in Sheila's kitchen

On the 4th March, Adam Palmer - the Head of Science at St Paul's Catholic School and a keen amateur runner - ran the Milton Keynes Half Marathon in a time of 1 hour 43 minutes. He had to run through pretty dire weather, although he

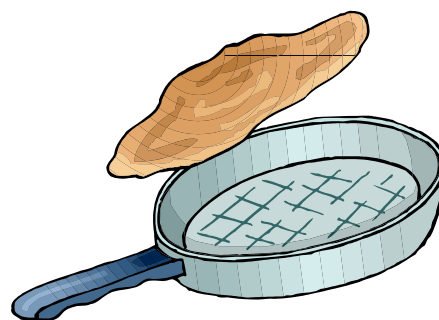
managed to finish just before the snow came! He raised a total of £131.25 which is a superb total and we say a huge THANK YOU to Adam for doing this run in our name. If you know of any other runners who would like to follow in Adam's footsteps and raise money for ONL please tell us. You can still sponsor Adam at:

www.virginmoneygiving.com/adampalmer1



PANCAKE DAY

Olney is always busy on Pancake Race day, and this year was no exception. The ONL stall raised a pleasing £51.67, and we were also given a further donation of £10.00 towards the work of the Link



The Link is very grateful to **MK Marking** for donating the new ONL Banner.

It's large, waterproof, professional and eye-catching, and will enhance our events.

Olney-Newton Link

www.olneynewtonlink.org.uk

Registered Charity Number 1117694



So we thought we would install some solar panels?

The next time you put the phone down on the very nice lady trying to persuade you to install solar panels on your house because in 20 years time you might get your money back you might like to know what happened when the Olney-Newton Link said YES. Not, of course, to the very nice lady mentioned above but to a request from the Community Health Officer in Newton, Joseph Charles for solar panels to provide lighting for night time births and refrigeration for the drugs which are becoming more widely available. This was quickly followed by a Bill of Quantities drawn up by a contractor already involved in the installation of such equipment for UNICEF. The amount being asked for was £5,300 at the current exchange rate.



The trustees committee decided we would try to do this provided we could get a grant from 'somewhere' to help. And then we moved on to other things as most of us thought it wouldn't happen anyway. Imagine my astonishment when, 6 months later I received a cheque for £3,000 from the Souter Foundation in Scotland who I had optimistically contacted 5 months previously on the advice of Community Action MK. Oh er—we now had to find another £2,300 to go with it! PANIC!

A letter to the local Lions quickly brought us £500, a further £150 came in donations and a donation of £200 from the local Freemasons so in February we made the decision to

offer Newton £4,000 to get the project started. This was accepted so we transferred that amount into the banking system. This is huge money to the committee in Newton, we do not usually send more than £2,000 at a time. There followed several days silence and nail biting began at this end.

£4,000 is approximately 26 million leones. How were they going to collect it from the Bank and hand it over? Who to? We know how we would do it in UK! We would not pay a contractor for anything until at least the project had started but if the contractor has no money or bank account how does he get started? Text messages began to fly.

First we were told that the Newton Link committee would be in overall charge of this project, not the Health committee as we had thought but first they needed to see the BOQ. This was in line with all the other projects we have done so we understood that. Several days went by. More texts—what is happening, where is the money? Various replies indicated that everybody involved was waiting to have a meeting with everyone else involved. At 3000 miles away I didn't see how I could organise it but I threw a text message hissy fit. Another couple of days and then a message to say that it had been agreed to hand over 20 million leones to get the project started. Hooray!! But how do they do that? Another few days of silence followed by the information that there would be a handover ceremony attended by the great and the good and the local media. Then we read on the internet that we had been mentioned in the SL Parliament! Another few days silence followed.

In the meantime we were absolutely delighted to receive a donation of £1,200 as the result of a legacy. We now had the money to complete the project. Fantastic! I was in the middle of a Nature Reserve in Beds when I received a text saying that 2 of the people involved had been waiting since 8am in Newton for the treasurer to turn up with a cheque (yes, a cheque!) for 20 million leones but she hadn't appeared. I was again wondering what I could do about that when a message was forwarded from her in KRIO, not a language I am very familiar with but it seemed to indicate that her boss hadn't turned up at work and she was stuck there. How did I get involved with this?! Time for another sharp text message and fortunately this was picked up by Val King, the acting Chairman, who happened to have a day off—and a car. The cheque was collected and the process of handing this over to the local Health committee and then the contractor began. 3 days later a text beginning "Rachel, be informed I am a happy man today". This was followed over the next 3 or 4 days with reports of the panels being delivered, tested and then WORKING! Or at least Phase 1 was. Ah, I see, there is another phase still to be done.

Rachel Lintern, Chairman

More on the solar panels!

A text from Val King, Acting Chair of the Link in Newton

Received: 31 Mar 2012 16:22

Subject: Meeting yester day at the health...

Meeting yester day at the health for the lunching of the sola panel.chair man was brim James Kabia who futher the introduction by introducing members of the high table especially olney newton representative and also ask member of paliament Hon Claude Kamanda to say some thing about panel and he also good things for all that the U K link has done and also give advice that panel should be properly taken care of and the chair man ask Valecious who is acting chairman to lament brifl about olney Boston link and I also explain all that we have done for the people of newton and also give peace of advice that panel must properly taken care of and chair man also ask Abu Baker and he also explain to gathering all that the link has done,then later ask D M O rep to some thing and she also thank the people of U K and newton link and give advice for panel's to be taken care of and we do the handing over of 20,000,000 million cheque transfer slip to her and the vote of thanks was done by Nourse Betty Caulker. From Val.

CORPORATE MEMBERS SCHEME

We are already fortunate to receive support from local businesses, both financial and practical. We have decided to formalise this arrangement and to offer the opportunity to join the scheme to a wider range of business within the area who may not be fully cognisant with the charity. The scheme will provide existing supporters with greater and more tangible recognition as well. Corporate members will be requested to sponsor the Link's work through a series of packages, briefly:

Bronze Membership, £50 per annum – Benefits:- your website link and name on ONL's website.

Silver Membership, £100 per annum – Benefits:- your website and name and description on ONL's website and your company name and logo in our newsletter.

Gold Membership, £150 per annum – Benefits:- your website name and link and profile (maximum 30 words) on ONL's website and listing as sponsor in newsletter and logo.

Platinum Membership, £500 per annum - Benefits; link, profile (maximum 200 words) on ONL website, logo and advert carrying their logo in newsletter

Our very grateful thanks to those who have already joined the scheme—**David Coles, Heron Opticians, J Garrard & Allen, Souls Garages and Stephen Oakley.**

GOLD



Heron Opticians, a friendly, professional family business.

J. GARRARD & ALLEN
SOLICITORS

J Garrard & Allen, Solicitors, has been established for over 200 years. The firm has a local and international clientele. We like to provide a friendly, efficient and prompt service to our clients, many of whom have been with us for years. The firm is pleased to sponsor the Link's work. For more details of the areas of law covered by the firm, please view the website—www.jgalaw.co.uk

SILVER



David Coles Architects

BRONZE

**Souls Garages
Stephen Oakley**

There'll be no excuse not to Keep Fit in Newton

The parents of Olney Infant Academy have been very generous with their support for their Link School recently, and this has enabled a wonderful collection of skipping ropes, tennis balls and tennis racquets to be sent to the children at the REC school in Newton. Also in the carton is a set of football kit kindly donated from Olney Football Club. Oh, we have also sent some First Aid equipment—no connection of course!



Another Table Top Sale

On 24 March we held our second Table Top Sale at the Carlton Club, Olney.

The 'strategy talk' pictured above must have been successful because a healthy £149 was raised for the Link funds!

FORTHCOMING EVENTS 2012

Sunday 17 June	STRAWBERRY FAIR Come and support our stall at Newport Pagnell
Saturday 23 June	MIDSUMMER MUSIC AND VERSE AT THE CHURCH An evening of music and poetry inspired by Africa. St Peter & St Paul, Olney
Saturday 30 June	OLNEY CHERRY FAIR The Glebe, Olney Hope to see you at this annual fun afternoon!
Saturday 14 July	SUMMER FAIR Newton Blossomville, 2—4pm

More details can be found on our website: olneynewtonlink.org.uk

Items for the next Newsletter will be welcomed by the Editor, Sheila Ware.

Email: swandsw@btinternet.com

The next deadline is:
Friday 3 August 2012



ONL Annual General Meeting 2nd May 2012

The Link's AGM was well attended with representatives from the schools, churches as well as trustees and supporters. The refreshments had an African theme—foofoo, sassava crisps, fried plantain, fresh coconut, pineapple and mango, and coconut biscuits.

There hasn't been room in the newsletter to publish the accounts, but if you'd like a copy, please ask!

CHAIR'S REPORT—Rachel Lintern

It seems a very long time since we were here last year being very excited as we welcomed 3 teachers from Newton to our meeting. Poor souls, I wonder what they have told their nearest and dearest about us all since then.

You have already had an opportunity to see the reports of the various groups who make up the Olney-Newton Link and you will be aware that a lot of people are involved. All with one aim, helping the people of Newton in Sierra Leone to improve their lives, but more about that in a minute.

We have been working in 3 main areas, the schools, the Skills Training Centre and the Newton Health Centre. The work being done in the schools is extremely important and also very difficult. I don't want to go into details but suffice it to say that the withdrawal of the DFID grants just as we and many other schools in the UK involved with linking, were beginning to make progress has not been helpful. The Government seem to be paying lip service to the principle of support for Third World Countries but are not supplying the financial support needed for schools to do this. I hope you agree with me that the education of our young people in the problems faced by people in the 3rd World is extremely important and we ignore it at our peril.

As for the Skills Training Centre, very good progress has been made here. It was planned that the centre would open last summer but as usual problems arose not the least of which was a hitch in our banking arrangements. It became apparent that there was a serious shortfall in the amount appearing in the bank account in SL compared to the amount we had actually sent. This led to further investigations by INTL, the organisation involved in transferring the money, the committee out there, my husband getting cross on the phone and eventually the money mysteriously reappeared. Consequently the bank account had to be changed to another bank. So it was September before the Centre was opened and it now employs 3 IT tutors and a caretaker. Already students have started passing IT exams and we have agreed to continue to support them financially for a few more months until they can work out the best way of becoming self-financing. This is an extremely poor community, many living on less than a dollar a day and they are trying to improve their skills so that they can improve their employment chances so that they can improve their income etc etc. Not surprisingly they also need facilities such as toilets and these are presently under



construction. They have also requested a photocopier so they can use it as a source of income and, of course, we need to develop the remaining 2 parts of the Centre so that other skills such as carpentry can be taught.

The Newton Health Centre has also been receiving some attention. The Community Health Officer is Joseph Charles and he is dedicated to trying to improve the conditions in his community. At the moment he is not very computer literate but is learning fast but he is very good at texting! They have been absolutely delighted to have the solar panels up and running. One member of the committee reported that he had seen it and it is lit up like a modern building. We have also been able to supply a computer and an assortment of medical books and DVDs from Teaching Aids at Low Cost based in St Albans. I would also like to thank Cobbs Garden Surgery for their support in allowing us some display space in the waiting room.

We are also delighted that we have been able to award the Dyson Bursary again this year to enable Mabinty Sessay to continue her Business Studies course.

We have sent out several cartons containing books, computers, sports equipment and various other items although this is getting increasingly difficult due to swingeing customs duties being imposed.

I would like to take the opportunity to thank a few people for their help in achieving all this. To Sheila Ware and Sheila Watts for producing our lovely Newsletter, to The Phonebox and MKPulse for giving us free publicity, and to the Carlton House Club and Sutcliffe Church for allowing us to use their premises free of charge. Other venues also only charge us a minimal amount and this is very helpful indeed to us.

But enough of this. Why do we do it we keep asking ourselves! April 20th was Counter Culture Day, ie doing something to go against society which sounds like a recipe for mayhem but one can do this and keep within the law!

Sierra Leone remains one of the poorest countries on earth. A few weeks ago many of you may have watched a TV programme in which a Cornish Trawlerman went out to an SL fishing village and returned somewhat chastened, declaring 'WE MUST HELP THESE PEOPLE'. He kept repeating that

these were lovely people trying desperately to make a living, not in any way sitting around waiting for handouts. Sport Relief carried a visit by John Bishop to a children's hospital in Freetown and one remark was that it was the only such hospital in the country. No surprise to us of course. The recent conviction of Charles Taylor for crimes against humanity has also highlighted just some of the unspeakable atrocities perpetrated on the people of Sierra Leone.

In spite of all the moans and groans about how deprived we all are nowadays the vast majority of us do have enough to eat, clothes to wear, a National Health service and something to look forward to in our lives. Of course we have to ensure that the most vulnerable in our society also have all these things but there is enough money to enable destitute people in countries such as Sierra Leone to also achieve basic welfare needs if we apportion it carefully. We need to Disturb the Comfortable without comforting the disturbed!



TREASURER'S REPORT—Tricia Selwood

This year's accounts have been prepared in a format which is more in keeping with those of other charities, but less detailed than previous years.

Income for 2011 has, in general, been similar to last year's. However, this year we had no legacy donation but funds received from other charities and sponsors have increased by £6,500.00. Most of this was requested and used for specific projects.

Thanks must go to our Chairman and spouse who have put a great deal of effort into submitting requests for funding for the various projects.

SECRETARY'S REPORT—Claire Lintern

We have had 4 meetings since the previous AGM - June, March, September and December. As always we cover a wide variety of topics including money transfers, advertising, financial report, the implications of any correspondence from Newton, application for grants etc. We were delighted to have Tony Locke join us for 1 of the meetings after his visit to Newton and his views and ideas on the future of the

STC were invaluable. Many of the trustees have roles in the other aspects of the Link and bring their expertise to the group. The trustees are Rachel Lintern, Tricia Selwood, Anne McCallum, Sheila Ware, Sheila Woodhead, Marilyn Watkins, Janet Howe, Paul Collins, Brian Partridge, Andrew Betts, oh and me!

We have spent a lot of time discussing the future of the financial supporting of the Link, and how we can train the SL committee in using templates to not only track information but inform us of their future plans. This is something I will be taking on when I join them in September.

The Olney committee will be having some restructuring. If this meeting support the motion we would like Rachel to continue as Chair with Anne McCallum as vice-chair. This role is to assist Rachel in the ever expanding job, with Rachel maintaining the communication with Newton and Anne supporting in other areas such as fund raising. With myself leaving we will need a minute secretary and Janet Howe has offered to take on this role. These will require voting in a moment.

We are sorry to say that Andrew Betts has decided to leave our group. Andrew has been with us from the start of the ONL and has been an invaluable member of the team. However due to time pressures he has handed in his resignation. As a result there is an opening for a trustee and if anyone would like to join us please do!

And then there's me..... The trustees have asked that I continue to be a trustee under secondment to the Newton committee. My role in SL is still a little uncertain but I will certainly be invited to their meetings and their acting chair - Valicious King - would like me to support their current secretary and treasurer in preparing documents and reports to aid transparency between the 2 committees.

NEWSLETTER REPORT—Sheila Ware

In 2011 we have continued to produce the Newsletter four times a year, and we are grateful to everyone for their contributions. It is sent out to approximately 84 people, who have shown an interest in the Charity, including Trustees, Sponsors and Members.

The Newsletter is delivered to most people by email, but there are still a small number who have a hard copy (in black and white). It is hoped that the emailed copies are printed so it reaches a wider number of people.

FUND RAISING GROUP—Rachel Lintern

This group meets 3 or 4 times a year to plan and organise the various fund raising events. Since the last AGM these have included several local school fetes, Olney Cherry Fair, Newport Pagnell Strawberry Fair, Newport Pagnell Carnival, a sponsored walk to Weston Underwood, Quiz Night, Carol Singing, a Barn Dance and Hog Roast, a Homemade Soup

Lunch, Pancake day, 3 carboot sales, 2 Table Top Sales. We are very grateful to Olney Town Council, the Carlton House Club, Olney Rugby Club and Sutcliff Baptist Church for allowing us to use their premises either free of charge or at a very competitive rate and The Phonebox and MKPulse for giving us free publicity.

It hardly needs saying that a lot of work goes into the organisation of all these events. Posters have to be produced and distributed, tickets produced, the gazebo and tables transported and erected, food organised, etc etc. Many people are involved but thanks go particularly to Sheila Ware for storing and sorting the items needed for the stalls, raffles, and tombolas, Brian Lintern for doing a lot of the fetching and carrying, Rob McCallum for providing the Quiz, Winnie and the Whirly Pits for the Barn Dance and various other husbands and friends who get drafted in from time to time.

We are always looking for new ideas and offers of help. Sponsored events such as the various marathons and half marathons can be very lucrative and small events such as coffee mornings can provide a good excuse to bring people together for a chat as well as raising some much needed money. Many people also have one of our collecting boxes and there are more available!

Our friends in Newton follow our activities on Facebook and the web-site and often send their thanks and appreciation via text messages and emails, so thank you everyone and please keep up the good work.

SCHOOLS REPORT—Marilyn Watkins

We continue to have regular meetings on a half termly basis and recently another local school has joined us- Newton Blossomville. They are hoping to link with Samuyu C of E Primary School. Lisa Heavens their Head has made contact with Doris Momo, the Head in Newton. They are planning to send out some school T shirts and exchange correspondence.

Last October, Olney Infant Academy, Lavendon, Olney Middle and Ousedale put on a concert in aid of their link schools. It was wonderful to see all four schools working together. We even sang one song together. We are all looking forward to taking part in the concert in June at St Peter's and St Paul's church, where the local community can hear our choirs singing, as space was limited at the October concert.

All the schools have been busy fundraising and learning more about Newton and Sierra Leone. Communication continues to be slow for some schools. It is hoped that one of the Heads in Newton, Komba, can train the two women Heads on how to send e mails and use the computer.

Olney Infants had a mufti day, collected money at their Christmas performances and concert. They were able to buy a lot of sporting equipment for their school, which has now

been sent out. With it they sent PE planning and photos of children using the equipment. They have some money left and are planning to send it out so that their school can buy a metal cupboard to store equipment/books in.

In October the whole school had Africa week where they looked at various aspects of African life. Year 2 have also had a Contrasting localities topic where they compared Sierra Leone to the UK.

Ousedale School had a stall on the market Square on Pancake Day where they sold pancakes. They raised £138. They have also had a mufti day to raise money.

At Olney Middle, Year 5 have looked at Africa. As part of this, they designed and made some African masks. Some of these were displayed in Olney library along with work from Lavendon School to celebrate Black History month.

Olney Middle has sent out money for two metal cupboards. These have now been purchased by their link school, Christ Evangelical, as they are now using the permanent buildings built by the church which runs the school.

At Lavendon School, Years 5 and 6 linked some of their curriculum to Sierra Leone, by comparing things like water sources and supplies. All the classes now have a folder to hold all the snippets they receive from their link school, such as the pictures brought by Mrs Sherriff last May. Fundraising has been done throughout the year in the form of donations at school productions.

The future:

The grants from the British Council have been stopped. At the moment there is no news about whether anything will replace these. It was hoped that future visits with different teachers could take place, so that we can continue to learn from each other. Our vision was to have a Sierra Leone week here with visiting teachers helping to deliver the curriculum and a UK week in Newton with our teachers helping to deliver the lessons.

MARKETING GROUP—Anne McCallum

This year the marketing group has reviewed and amended the 3 year engagement strategy, to ensure that it remains user friendly. Amendments were made to methods of approach, such as the removal from the plan of the Book Bag Express, as this was found to be impracticable to put into effect. Other lines of engagement which were taken out of the strategy were felt to be too ambitious or no longer feasible.

The strategy has, on the whole, worked well. The School and Church links are well established and were found to be working without the need for any review. We have this year reviewed sponsorship generally, and are particularly anxious to increase sponsorship from individuals. If anyone is interested in becoming an individual sponsor of the Link, we will be very pleased to hear from you. Please contact our

Treasurer, Tricia Selwood, in the first instance.

The Corporate Members Scheme has also been reviewed and various changes made, to the approach to new members, in particular. We are pleased to advise that all our existing Corporate Members have renewed their membership. In addition we have welcomed to the Scheme one fully paid up new member and have two potential members, in the wings!

Some of the Trustees have been able to suggest further contacts, who have been approached and whose response is

currently awaited. It is also hoped that people who have shown an interest in the Link in the past and who are involved in local businesses will also consider joining or arranging for their firm to join the Corporate Membership Scheme.

Indeed if any of you here this evening either run your own company, or business, or are connected with any local business, please let us know if you think that you/they might be willing to join the Scheme. The more, the merrier.

The Guardian, 26 April 2012

Aminatta Forna

There will be celebrations in Sierra Leone following the conviction of Charles Taylor at The Hague, not least because April 27 is independence day and a public holiday. And there are other reasons to celebrate. Ten years after the end of a decade-long civil war, Sierra Leone is undergoing an economic boom. For years the bottom-ranking country on the UN human development index, Sierra Leone is predicted by the IMF to experience economic growth of a world-leading 34% this year.

On my last visit there, the plane was full of oil workers from Aberdeen following the discovery of offshore oil reserves. In the capital, Freetown, Chinese investment was carving a major traffic route through the city and new beachfront hotels were going up. The boom has been largely resource-driven – primarily by iron ore, but also gold, titanium and aluminium. The Taylor verdict will bring the country full circle from a war that left thousands dead and maimed. People will certainly welcome the verdict of guilty on 11 counts of aiding and abetting war crimes in Sierra Leone, but for most people in the country the war was about much more than Charles Taylor.

I was in Freetown when Taylor was arrested in Nigeria in 2006, accused by the special court for Sierra Leone of backing RUF rebels in an attempt to gain control of the country's diamond and mineral wealth. I heard about his imminent arrival and drove to the court, but found no waiting crowds. Later that evening I was at a reception at the British High Commission when the fleet of helicopters carrying Taylor flew in low over the hills that surround the city. It was certainly a moment of drama: everyone stopped to watch from the veranda, and then went back to drinking.

I wrote about the special court when it opened in 2004, with its brief to try those most responsible for the war in Sierra Leone. I canvassed opinion from everyone I met: working girls, unemployed young men, soldiers, a government minister. Feelings about the court were mixed; many people felt the wrong men were being tried – that the men they wanted to see on trial, those truly responsible, were not and would never be held to account.

The court prosecuted the leaders of the fighting groups. The people I spoke to were referring to the political leaders, whose corrupt and inept governance brought the country to its knees long before Taylor took advantage of the vacuum, and brought hell down on the civilian population. I followed David Crane, the special court's chief prosecutor, on an outreach mission to take the court's message to the populace. In Makeni deaf school I watched a girl of 14 dare to ask Crane what everyone else was thinking. "Are you," she signed through an interpreter, "going to indict the president?" Crane ducked the question.

People want the court's net cast wider and deeper, as far back as the 1970s when Siaka Stevens, the country's long-term dictator, dispensed with the rule of law, emptied the government coffers and ran up huge debts with the IMF and the World Bank.

When it declared independence 51 years ago on 27 April, Sierra Leone was more fortunate than most African countries, as it possessed a middle class of administrators and professionals. But in the years to come, the middle class would choose apathy over action. Stevens had emasculated both the police and the army, from whom he feared rebellion. Hence by the time Foday Sankoh's embryonic Revolutionary United Front (RUF) went to Liberia for training by Taylor (backed, lest we forget, by Muammar Gaddafi), they walked back into a country incapable of defending itself. There they found a generation of angry and disenfranchised young men without jobs or prospects, with nothing to lose. The background to the civil war has been established by the special court, and the road map to how a country implodes may be the court's most important legacy. Democracy requires eternal vigilance. Sierra Leone learned the lesson in the hardest possible way.

Elections are in November, but there is already sporadic violence. One of the main opposition candidates is a former coup leader, Maada Bio. Now a businessman, Bio says he has "grown up a lot" since then. A return to war is highly unlikely, but for the Taylor verdict to mean anything, the country has to grow up politically too, learn to hold its leaders accountable, and say "never again".