

PISCOH DON KAM BACK NA SALONE!

Six years of advocacy by the Friends of Sierra Leone pays off

by Judy Figi and Jim Sheahan

The Peace Corps has a long history in Sierra Leone, first arriving in 1962 with 37 secondary school teachers. Volunteers served the country in consecutive years until 1994, when the program was closed because of a civil war. During those three decades, more than 3,400 Volunteers served there in agriculture, education, and health-related programs.

This past June Sierra Leone welcomed Peace Corps again, the first time in sixteen years. Once again the government identified education as the most pressing need and Volunteers will serve as English, math, and science teachers to help fill a shortage of qualified individuals. Peace Corps Response will also maintain a presence. Having already served as Volunteers, these contributors will arrive at their posts already in possession of the appropriate technical and cross-cultural skills needed to make an important contribution.

Friends of Sierra Leone (FoSL) members worked diligently for six years to make the re-entry happen. In 2004 we held our annual meeting in Freetown. For most of us in attendance

it was the first time back in many years and we were devastated to see the destruction that had resulted from a ten-year war. Returning to the U.S. we felt frustrated by what we had seen and the stories we had heard. We knew the return of Peace Corps could play a major role in the country's efforts to rebuild. Our plan to achieve that goal began that year with a visit to Peace Corps headquarters in Washington, D.C. We were told many countries were requesting Peace Corps assistance and budget constraints posed a major obstacle to Volunteers returning to any of those countries.

We then began a campaign asking our members to contact and visit their Congressional delegation requesting that they support the return of Peace Corps to Sierra Leone. Members of our Advocacy Committee made numerous visits to Capitol Hill. Among our strongest allies was Senator Russ Feingold of Wisconsin, Chairman of the Africa Subcommittee of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. He was particularly active on behalf of our objective. He and Senator Johnny Isakson of Georgia, the Ranking

Minority Member, wrote letters urging Peace Corps to re-establish a volunteer program in Sierra Leone.

Numerous FoSL meetings with Peace Corps staff and visits with key senators and representatives were essential in our campaign. Over a six-year period, dozens of letters were generated by these members of Congress to the Peace Corps Director requesting a return of the Volunteers. Also essential was our effort to include Sierra Leoneans in our visits. Sierra Leonean members of the Board joined us on numerous occasions to give credibility to our statements regarding needs. Even the Vice President of Sierra Leone visited and met with the Peace Corps Director requesting that Volunteers return. This was followed up with a letter from the President of Sierra Leone asking for a new Peace Corps program.

Throughout this time we met on numerous occasions with the Sierra Leone Desk Officer at the State Department. And, importantly, we maintained contact with the Sierra Leone's ambassadors to the U.S. who met directly with Peace Corps officials requesting a return of volunteers to



Peace Corps trainees working with teachers at Friends of Sierra Leone/Schools for Salone sponsored teacher workshop in Bo, Sierra Leone this past July.

Sierra Leone. Two U.S. ambassadors to Sierra Leone visited Peace Corps headquarters and spoke on behalf of FoSL whenever they were in Washington.

Peace Corps was obviously concerned about security. To assure that this was no longer an impediment to Peace Corps returning, two separate assessment teams were sent to the country. Both reported favorably on conditions there. Several FoSL members who made trips to Sierra Leone for Teacher Training programs brought back dozens of letters from Sierra Leoneans, including government officials, school personnel and health care personnel asking for Peace Corps' return. These were all forwarded to Peace Corps in Washington.

Our advocacy efforts included much frustration, but with persistence they finally paid off. Peace Corps is back in Sierra Leone. Thirty-seven secondary school teachers are presently working in various schools and the government has already requested more volunteers.

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