

Paul, a 19 year old Liberian refugee living in Freetown, Sierra Leone

Paul comes from a small village called Yaindawoun, situated about 200 kilometres from Monrovia, in Liberia. There are only 52 houses in the entire village which is situated on a rocky hill. The land slopes down from the village and is covered with grass. In the rainy season, mud swirls through the village. Large trees shelter the village from storms.

The communal village life is strengthened by strong family ties. In Paul's family, there are 50 children born by many wives. He is the third child out of six children from his mother's side.

Paul is a real country boy. His happiest memory of home is of the harvest season on his father's rice farm. He reminisces, "The dry season is the season of abundance. Birds would come to steal the rice. On weekends, I did not have to go to school and so could help on the farm. I used to enjoy driving the birds away from the fields. I would put a stone in my sling shot, twirl it around three times and let the stone go. It made a lot of noise when it landed in the midst of the birds, causing them to fly up. We used to lay traps for animals. I remember the joy on everyone's face whenever an animal was caught in one of the traps."

For the moment, those carefree days are over. Paul cannot return home because of the ongoing fighting between government soldiers and rebel soldiers of the movement known as LURD: Liberians United for Reconstruction and Development.

"My elder brother, Jerry and I had travelled to Monrovia to do shopping when the towns near Yaindawoun came under heavy rebel attack. Fleeing civilians advised the driver and passengers on the bus we were travelling in to return to Monrovia. We could hear heavy gunfire in the distance. It was too risky for me to go on to the village to find out what had happened. Besides, I could see that everybody had fled. Jerry decided we should leave."

Paul was able to make his way to neighbouring Sierra Leone and lives with a host family. He does not know what has happened to the other members of his family. "I hope they are alive and doing fine somewhere in Liberia. I am happy to be in Freetown where I do not hear any gunshots."

Paul works during the day but he does not earn any money. "I have to fetch water from the nearby street pump and help my host packet the water into plastic bags which are then put into the freezer for sale to the neighbours. It is very difficult to get the water. The tap is often overcrowded and sometimes I spend hours waiting in the queue. My host also sells soft drinks as well as cold water. He uses the money he earns to buy food for his family and for us."

Like so many refugee youth, Paul yearns to go to school. "When I fled Liberia, I had no time to pack my books and other learning materials to take with me. I don't go to school now. I cannot afford to go. If I could go back to school, I would like to study to become a nurse. I would like to go to school because it means I can become self-reliant and hold a responsible position in society. I feel I am an idler here because I am not going to school. I am not doing anything that will help me earn a decent future."

He waits eagerly for the opportunity to return to Liberia. "I will go back immediately if there is peace and security in my country. I would pack my bag, express my gratitude to my hosts for letting me stay with them, and return to Yaindawoun."