

Life after deportation

Deported Sierra Leone immigrant raised in the US speaks out

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Samuel is a 27-year-old man who was born in Sierra Leone. His family fled the country in 1999 because of a violent civil war in the country. They came to the US legally through a resettlement program when Samuel was just 9 years old. After being convicted of a crime, and serving time in a US prison, Samuel was picked up by ICE and held for 14 months. He was finally deported back to Sierra Leone where he now resides, without official citizenship to any country, including “his own” of Sierra Leone. Samuel told his story to WSWS reporters. His name and certain details of his life were changed to protect his identity.

WSWS: Can you tell me about where you were born and how you and your family ended up in the United States?

Samuel: There was a war in the country I was born in, Sierra Leone, for 11 years. It started in 1991. My family had to leave the country mainly because of the war. There were other factors too: the general situation of the country, the struggles taking place, the injustice, there were so many reasons. We did not enter the US illegally. We came there legally on resettlement.

WSWS: Could you explain the events leading up to your deportation?

Samuel: It was several years ago when everything started. I was accused of crime and I was convicted and did eight months in prison. I was picked up by immigration a little while after I was out of jail. They detained me for over a year, about 14 months. They were trying to get my documents from Sierra Leone in order to send me back there, but they could not get anything. The country could not identify anything of mine in Sierra Leone partly because I was only 9 when I left and partly because this country went through an

11-year war. Any document of anybody was destroyed.

WSWS: What was your experience like in the US detention facilities?

Samuel: To be detained for 14 months is distressing. The worst part is they don't tell you when you will be released. You don't know anything. They don't tell you what is going on. You don't know when you will get out, or if you will get out. That waiting and not knowing is very depressing and very stressful, so, so very depressing and stressful that I cannot explain. I went through that everyday for 14 months.

They provided tee shirts and underwear which is good but they were not in very good shape. They don't wash them very often and when they do they always smell very bad unless you wash them yourself. There was an 'outside' but there are walls and fences all around so that you cannot see anything from the real outside, no trees or anything... only the sky.

WSWS: What was your experience with the court system?

Samuel: I tried to fight the deportation. I tried to plead my case to the immigration judge. I mean yes, Sierra Leone is 'my country' but leaving your country at the age of 9? Come on, man, what could I even remember? I do not have any family members here. During the war all of my family members were separated. We cannot find them. We do not know even know who is alive or dead. I told the judge that my life would be in danger if I was deported and right now my life is in danger. I am currently living with strangers. I do not know who these people are.

When I was brought to Sierra Leone I was stranded at the airport for nearly two days because I was at a complete loss of what to do. I had nowhere to go; I had

no one to contact. Luckily, two Americans who knew I was stranded decided to bring me into their place.

I have no Sierra Leone IDs, nothing. To them I am not Sierra Leonean. I am just simply in this country. What immigration did, somehow somehow, is they made what is called an 'ETC', emergency travel certificate so that they could transport me without my documents. I recently found out that it was illegal for them to do that. Now, without an ID, if anything would happen to me nobody would know who I am. If anything bad happened to me the government would not know who I was. It is outrageous and it is wrong. I am basically a lost person in this country.

WSWS: Could you tell me a little more about what life is like for you now compared to your life before in the United States?

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Samuel: I was at the age of 9 years old when my family immigrated to the US from Sierra Leone. When we arrived in the States I started school in fourth grade and continued all the way to college. I studied psychology and minored in communication. I was a full-time student in college in the US. I was on the track and field team. I had a part-time job. I am a reader. I love to read books. I spent most of my free time reading. When you're in college it is vital to keep your brain sharp. I loved to play basketball with my friends in the park.

And my life now? You know, right now I don't even know what my life is like. I don't know which direction it is going in right now. I am all alone. My mother and father are in the US, and all of my friends. I feel like a foreigner in 'my own' country. Everything is so different. I am struggling very much right now. I am finding it very difficult to cope. It is very tough. I plead my case to the immigration judge. I tried to make him understand. They did not have any sympathy. Every day I wake up here I pray for my life. The country is still going through 'the post war' and is still not very stable.

My life is very tough now. If you are going to make it in Sierra Leone or if you want a job it must be in politics or the police force or the army. Here is not like the US. In the States there are factories where you get a job. Here is not like that—if it is not politics, the police force, the army—you won't have a job. As far as me getting a job it will be difficult without any of my

documents. And I was not able to finish my degree! I had only one semester left to graduate. If I had been able to finish my degree, oh man that would have been beneficial to me in this country. The truth is that my life is wasting right now.

WSWS: Is there anything else you would like to share with our readers about what is going with immigration in the US and around the world?

Samuel: There are so many immigrants in the States. There so many. You have working immigrants. You have immigrants who dare to better their life, to better their family's lives. They are doing their best to survive, to help themselves and their families. And yes, there have to be consequences if you commit a crime of course. But an immigrant is still a human being just like the other citizens of the United States. I feel that if it is your first ever crime that you have committed there should be a second chance. For someone who is poor—a poor guy like me or a poor guy like my friends in detention—you have no chance. It is sickening and it is unfair. It is vital that people understand what is going on with immigrants.



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