



# Personal Statement

**By Claudia A. R. Anthony**

A real threat to my life began in January 1998 after a report of mine was aired over the British Broadcasting Cooperation (BBC) Network Africa breakfast magazine concerning the break down of law and order in Sierra Leone and in particular, the new wave of summary and indiscriminate arrests, torture and killings of by members of the (Johnny Paul Koromaled) Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) junta, comprising soldiers of the Sierra Leone Army (SLA) and fighters of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF).

At a Supreme Council meeting of the AFRC later that day, it was announced that my report was 'coined' to "give the regime a bad name", adding that they "must put her under control".

A female member who happens to be my acquaintance, a medical doctor by profession and with whom I studied in what was formerly the Soviet Union, stepped in and saved me by volunteering to meet me and warn me herself which she did through her fiancée because she was aware of my stance on the then political atmosphere.

Another risky encounter with the AFRC occurred when as acting editor on the Unity Now newspaper I published a story which we investigated about some AFRC Supreme Council members including Brigadier 555 and Captain Blood, who looted stores in daylight at gun point.

As soon as the tabloid hit the streets, thirteen armed men and minors in military fatigue stormed the office demanding the whereabouts of the editor.

From my personal experiences and accounts from colleagues, I was at this period in question moving in disguise. My attackers fell for my bait that the editor was not at work, nonetheless, they threatened to shoot at me if I did not disclose the whereabouts of the editor.

About ten minutes into the tensed encounter, the proprietor, also president of the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists, arrived and after a heated argument, he promised to do a front page retraction which we did the following day against my protests.

In July 1999, coming from a press conference at the Ministry of Health and Sanitation, I noticed Brigadier 555 holding open the door of a car. I changed my direction and doubled my steps but he shouted distinctly after me: "We know you. There is no where you can hide".

Threats to my life and to the continuity of my work do not come only from RUF and SLA. The ruling Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) government has also subscribed top these threats.

In December 1998 after investigating activities of SLA renegade soldiers that were approaching the capital city (about 24 kilometres east), I published my account of what I called an eminent rebel attack and massacre on the city.

The SLPP government in a press release (repeated half-hourly) on radio later that day referred to my report as "irresponsible journalism that aims to threaten state security" and added that "everything was under control".

I received this press release with tremendous apprehension not only because earlier in August the government had transformed an emergency decree into a press law about the "publication of information against state security", but also because it targetted the credibility of my image and career in the news-media arena.

One week later the rebels hit Waterloo where I resided, killing, looting and maiming civilians they had awoken from sleep. In the chaos that followed, a group of people stood in front of our house and shouted out my name amongst names they were calling from a supposedly hit list.

Several shots were fired at our house sending inhabitants into hiding. It was then that I stealthily opened the back door and walked to safety in the dark of the night. For several seconds the group loudly accused me of disclosing their movements and attempting to prevent them from achieving their goal of over running the capital.

They succeeded to break into our house and put my daughter and mother at gun point. They ransacked the roof and the entire house and took away publication archives and other important documents.

ECOMOG forces managed to force the rebels to retreat on and off. On Boxing Day (December 26) I was having my bath when the rebels attacked us again. I had run about 200 metres heading to Freetown before I realised I was half naked. I resurfaced again after some hours and I began to think seriously about travelling to the capital before roads would be blocked, as the rebels' entry into the capital could not be reversed based on personal observations at that time.

In another attack on December 31, the rebels burnt down our house. I walked 22 kilometres to the city with my daughter and mother. From that day to present, my family and I have been internally displaced persons (IDPs) in our own country.

On our arrival in the city, I warned my son and daughter not to disclose that I am their mother to either friend or foe and I have been very selective in disclosing my children's identity to colleagues and others.

My decision for this approach is based on the fact that in the Sierra Leone context, the journalist does not suffer alone: family and friend also suffer, and almost always, tragically.

On January 7 1999, armed men and minors completely burnt the office and equipment of the newspaper I was founder and publisher of, Tribune of the People. Since then I have not been able to restart publication but in the meantime, I work freelance on local newspapers including Salone Times, For di People and Wisdom.

On January 11, a group of armed men in military fatigue used machette to hack off (unsuccessfully) the left leg of my father, an incident witnessed by my son who later quoted the attackers to me that they were teaching my father a lesson for his daughter. My father died from his wounded leg on January 16 as it was impossible to reach hospital.

The worse form of brutal killing I saw was committred on my girlfriend who lived in our house for several years of her life. Apart from hacking off her limbs and ankles, a four-foot long stick was thrustred into her vagina, a scene I later witnessed.

I cannot really conclude that she met her death because of her relationship with me and our household, but I know that I will forever think I am responsible for the horror she met. In March this year an unidentified caller telephoned and asked me: "You consider yourself a heroine?". Why? I queried.

She explained she had visited a pub the previous day where she heard people commending my newspaper report of December 1998 and how they also commented that had the authorities been more media sensitive, the January massacre could have been thwarted. She dropped the receiver before I could reply.