

Meet the Former Warlord Christ Transformed Into a Loving Pastor

Everyone likes a good redemption story, and there are few more remarkable than that of notorious Liberian warlord “General Butt Naked,” who repented of his atrocities and became a preacher.

The “general”, who earned his nom de guerre from fighting street battles naked during Liberia’s 14-year civil war, killed or mutilated thousands of people—sometimes by his own hand, other times using his army of mostly child soldiers.

After rebels ousted his foe, ex-president Charles Taylor, in 2003 and peace returned to Liberia, the general begged for forgiveness—and quickly found that the charismatic personality that made him a natural rebel commander was well suited to preaching.

So while Taylor does time for war crimes, Joshua Milton Blahyi, 45, has remodeled himself as a popular street pastor—a quick, and often financially lucrative, way to gain respect in West Africa.

Now Blahyi wants funding for a charity that he says is training former child soldiers and drug addicts in farming and construction—spurring mixed feelings among Liberians, some of whom question whether he isn’t doing it all for the notoriety.

“When I got converted, I tried to show how sorry I was and how I can give back to the society. I tried to go after my kind, the most dangerous guys,” said the burly and deep-voiced Blahyi, who bristles at suggestions his motives may not be sincere.

“The country we destroyed is the country we want to rebuild.”

His Journeys Against Violence NGO has, he says, trained about 1,000 former combatants and street kids in activities such as farming and bricklaying since 2007, but has been hampered by a lack of funds.

At his training camp in a suburb of the capital Monrovia, lush vegetation threatens to overrun half-built houses abandoned for want of funds.

Blahyi says he is appealing to donors to support him and is asking for half a million dollars to complete the units and carry out farming programs.

Liberians were remarkably forgiving of the war's atrocities—Blahyi got hugs on the streets of Monrovia after being the first warlord to approach the post-war Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in 2008, where he admitted to killing 20,000 people. He was then recommended for amnesty.

His public apology also shot him to fame. Newspapers ran stories on him, one documentary got 10 million views, and a parody villain was named after him in the hit Broadway musical comedy The Book of Mormon.

“I do want it to be written down in history that I ... went to the TRC and also faced the court,” he told Reuters.

Luke Barren, an ex-combatant, says he has found work as a mason thanks to Blahyi's NGO.

“We have come here to do something good for ourselves. Sleeping on the streets and doing bad things to other people is not necessary,” said Barren.

But some in Monrovia, a city that was repeatedly attacked during Liberia's civil war years, are not convinced.

“This is aimed at getting attention for people to have

sympathy for him,” said university student William Dickerson. “His statements are not serious.”

James Rennie, a 28-year-old taxi driver whose grandfather was shot dead by Blahyi at a roadside checkpoint, expressed doubts about his redemption.

“I’ve been hearing that Butt Naked is a pastor, but for me he is not a real pastor,” said Rennie. “Unless I see my grandfather, I will never forgive Butt Naked.”

However the authorities, at least, seem willing to give him a chance.

“If it’s intended to help young people, I think it is commendable,” national human rights commission head James Torh told Reuters. “We should encourage him to continue.” {eoa}

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