

Back Where He Started

Last winter, Abdul Sankoh, a victim of Sierra Leone's machete-wielding rebels, left the amputee camp in Freetown where he was living with his wife and children and came to New York with four other double-arm amputees for prosthetics and medical treatment. He hoped to return and once again be able to provide for his family. But things haven't quite turned out that way.



In January, Sankoh, right, whose upper lip was nearly severed by the rebels who also cut off his arms, lighted a cigarette for a fellow amputee, Abu Bakar Kargbo, outside the Manhattan 3 Decker restaurant in Brooklyn, where they ate each day. Local church members took them sightseeing, provided warm clothes and arranged for free dental visits at N.Y.U., the first ever for the men. "New York, let me say, is second to heaven," Sankoh says.



Sankoh begged his attackers to kill him after losing his arms; he says he felt useless without them. But Sankoh, formerly a teacher, quickly gained a measure of independence with the prostheses. During his nearly three-month stay, which had been arranged by the Ostberg Foundation and by Friends of Sierra Leone, he did his physical training at Long Island College Hospital in Brooklyn and started computer training.



Back home, Sankoh doesn't use his prostheses all of the time, in part because of the heat but also because, he says: "I have to train myself using the stumps. If my hands get damaged, we have no way to repair them." Sankoh, shown here with family, feels both lucky and guilty to have been chosen for the trip, but he says that some of the other amputees are envious. As Sankoh puts it, they say, "we are eating the money without giving them any."



Sankoh, here with Kargbo, right, and another friend, is despondent about his return. He left New York before finishing his computer training and can't continue it here. Although the foundation gave him \$450 to rent an apartment in Freetown, almost all of it has gone to care for his ailing parents. Back sleeping on his grass-stuffed mattress, Sankoh admits that he's discouraged. His wife's business, selling boiled eggs, sustains the family for now.