

The sierra leonean civil war



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Africa has been subjected to a lot of devastation for many of years under slavery, colonialism, decolonialism and imperialist regimes. This continent has in excess of 9 million displaced people and refugees with this figure growing at a steady pace. This desolation however had a more crippling effect on sub-Saharan Africa as civil war has become rife in the region since the end of the Cold War. The focus of this paper is on the West African country of Sierra Leone. This is a country that went through a decade long Civil War in an attempt of bringing economic stability and a democratic political system for the Sierra Leonean people. There are many deep-seated aspects that are apparent when looking into the decade long war in this small African country, from the reasons why the war started, the numerous participants in the war and the dissolution as well as the effects there after. For the purposes of this paper, the main focus will be the direct involvement of the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) in the civil war and how it is questionable whether they were participants in the war rather than peacekeepers.

The History of Sierra Leone is in itself quite unique as liberated and freed slaves were dispatched to their freedom land in a city that was named accordingly, Freetown, the capital city of Sierra Leone. By 1951, there was framework in place for decolonization to take place and despite various discontents between the Sierra Leonean people about the British rule; independence was achieved peacefully in April 1961 by Sir Milton Margai and the Sierra Leone's People Party (SLPP). This was the pivotal point in the country's history as although independence had been achieved, it was from this point on that the instability of the Sierra Leonean government be rife.

After a short lived parliamentary system and the succession of Margai by his half brother Sir Albert Margai, the All Peoples Congress (APC) won the much contested elections in 1967 and Mayor of Freetown and APC leader Siaka Stevens assumed position of prime minister. It was from here on that the conditions in Sierra Leone continued on a downwards spiral in a rather domino effect as in 1978, Stevens amended the constitution turning the country into a one party rule and all other political parties were therefore banned. The APC government ruled over the nation of Sierra Leone for over two and a half decades with Stevens in power for 20 years. Skipping the party hierarchy and choosing his own successor, Stevens handed power to Joseph Saidu Momoh who was the brigadier of the army in August 1985. In doing so he skipped the natural order of engagement which should have passed to the vice president.

These are crucial factors in why it was inevitable that the country ended up in a civil war as political decent was not allowed, which led to opposition mentors either being imprisoned or executed at the end of staged management trials for treason. The people were deprived of their democratic rights as they were secluded from the political and economical activities. The fact that the people were being oppressed under a totalitarian regime was not the only contributing factor into the destabilisation. The reality of the situation is that the economy was in ‘tartars’, partly due to the corruption and mismanagement, but also due to the adverse IMF conditions. According to Yusuf Hassan, “ Once these elections were over, it was business as usual for Sierra Leone’s élite and its Western backers. No provisions were made for the eradication of poverty or for the reconstruction of the shattered

infrastructure. Instead the new government called in the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, which were quick to impose their discredited structural adjustment programme. The poor continue to wallow in their misery"[1]

This therefore led to there being mass unemployment throughout the state as well as a decline of educational standards and a lack of basic health facilities. The road conditions fell far below that of roadworthy and the electrical supply to the country was nonexistent dubbing Sierra Leone as the darkest country in Africa. Tribalism played a great part in dividing the people of Sierra Leone as well as distabalising the social structures. One of the reasons for this is that when the countries in Africa were being colonised, the imperial leaders did not take into the account the existing governing structures and the distinctions between tribes. This meant that when they decided to draw borders distinguishing the countries, tribes that had not previously coexisted in the same boundaries, were now forced to do so. This ultimately led to the problems of who governed the country as the Mende's and Krio's for instance were irritate at the thought of a Temne led party ruling over them. This is why the excluded peoples thought the only way they could have any change was through force of arms.

The war in Sierra Leone was started by the late Foday Sankoh and the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) when they invaded Sierra Leone from the eastern border with Liberia in 1991. Sankoh was a military corporal in the army before he was imprisoned by the APC government for his alleged involvement in an abortive military coup. Sankoh and few of his lieutenants received training in Libya in guerrilla warfare where he met Charles Taylor

and his aids. It has been said that Charles Taylor sponsored the RUF as a means to destabilise Sierra Leone. “..... We suggest we have an important supplement to Azar’s model and perhaps a qualification in those cases like Sierra Leone after 1991 where it may be external formation that is seen as a prime cause of war....”[2]Both groups returned to wage war in Liberia and then Sierra Leone successively. At this same time a small group of soldiers called the National Provisional Ruling Party (NPRC) led by Captain Valentine Strasser overthrew the government in a military coup sending Momoh into exile in Guinea and became the ruling authority in Sierra Leone. At this point it was apparent that there would be a continuous cycle of change in government whether willingly or by force. Not surprisingly, the British government and their imperialist interest convinced Strasser to stand down and hand over power to a civilian government and Ahmed Tejan Kabbah, a United Nations worker for over 20 years, became the new president of Sierra Leone. Dejection did not end there as the people were still not satisfied with the government’s lack of ability to stop the advancements of the RUF towards the capital from the eastern towns. This led to Major Johnny Paul Koroma and the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) waging a military coup against the democratically elected government.

As a consequence of this, ECOMOG troops were sent into Sierra Leone in an attempt to bring peace and stability to the country and to remove Koroma from his self appointed position as president. This peacekeeping force which was formed in 1990 by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) was mandated to reinstate Kabbah by military means. “ The primary goal of the ECOMOG peacekeeping operation was to halt armed

conflict and prevent its recurrence. And this goal was to be achieved by acting as the physical barrier between hostile parties and monitoring their military advancement. Their secondary goal was to create a stable environment for negotiations, which could lead to a peaceful resolution among parties involved”[3]. The intervention started in a timely manner and could have ended the war much earlier, but lacked the logistics and financial means and numbers to be able to effectively control the situation in Sierra Leone. In spite of all the criticisms about the involvement of ECOMOG, the fact remains that Nigeria was the one country willing to send its soldiers to fight and sacrifice lives in the name of democracy in Sierra Leone when nobody else was prepared to do that. ECOMOG succeeded in removing the commanders who had staged a military coup but they were unable to contain the RUF rebels who took control of Freetown.

There was a discussion on how much support ECOMOG should be given, bearing in mind the position of Nigeria at the time as Sani Abacha was president. Nigeria was somewhat shunned by the international community and also had sanctions that were imposed upon it which resulted in the lack of dialogue going on between military and military with the United Kingdom. This was a difficult time which meant that assisting ECOMOG which was predominantly being led by Nigeria seemed highly impossible. “ Different political agendas among member states hampered ECOMOG’s effectiveness. Over Liberia, tensions emerged between states which supported warlord Charles Taylor and those, such as Nigeria, which opposed him. Nigeria’s dominant position within ECOMOG led other states to suspect it of using the force to further its own agenda”[4]. But nonetheless the British officials were

persuaded that despite what was currently the situation in Nigeria, what ECOMOG was attempting to achieve in Sierra Leone was a force for good. It is also recognised that if the other West African countries had sent troops to support the ECOMOG in bringing peace they would have been more successful quicker. “ But other Ecowas nations lacked the resources to undertake significant action without Nigeria. ECOMOG contingents were often poorly-equipped. This reflected the inability of member countries to provide adequate funding for their own militaries”[5].

The effort that ECOMOG soldiers put into destabilising the country when they were there, with more support and more coordination, ECOMOG could have been able to solve a lot more of the problems that the country faced at the time. Although they were there simply to work with the government to protect the government as well as the citizens especially those within the government controlled areas, but the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) helped to make the people understand that indeed the ECOMOG soldiers were there as a peacekeeping force that could not fight with either side on the conflict, however, this did not settle well with the people of Sierra Leone. “ Our first set of critics, exemplified by David Shearer’s analysis of ‘ conflict resolution in Sierra Leone’ (1997), question whether a conflict resolution consensus-promoting strategy, based on impartial mediation and negotiation by the international community, is appropriate in cases where war is fuelled by greed rather than grievance (Berdal and Malone, eds, 2000)”[6]. This was seen as a problem as they were there with all the arms and ammunitions but they could not fight, even when the rebels attacked civilians with all atrocities.

It can be argued that the mandate was just not strong enough to undertake the task as only 6000 troops were permitted by the UN. “ The UN mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) was deployed to help implement the 1999 Lome Peace agreement between Sierra Leonean warring parties”[7]. The RUF were aware when the UN first came in and when it became apparent that they realised that the UN were not going to take them on, they bettered their tactics tremendously and became more aggressive. The UN are said to have come to the conflict merely as observers and this is ludicrous as you cannot observe in a situation of war and the general feeling amongst the people were that the UN and ECOMOG soldiers should have sided with the government as they were being attacked and the people killed. Therefore it was not understood why any well meaning force would sit back and try to be neutral and only negotiating agreements for peace. “ The peacekeeping operation was to defuse tension between concerned parties by giving each party time to calm down without of imminent attack by their opponents. Nevertheless, the ECOMOG approach was not always the best because no approach to peace is ideally suited to every situation”[8].

Sierra Leone introduced the international community firmly into the world of the ‘ privatised peacekeeper’ where mercenaries step in to keep or, as Sierra Leone demonstrated, to enforce the peace. The involvement of mercenaries, or private military companies, as they prefer to be called, is not a new phenomenon in Africa.

The use of private military companies is part of a growing trend in international peacekeeping where states, because of the cost and risk involved in sending national armies, turn to bodies that are able and willing

to do battle in volatile regions of the world. The use of international peacekeepers is still apparent, but claims about the efficiency and cost-effectiveness of privatised soldiers have increased their involvement in managing several conflicts[9].

“ In February 1998, ECOMOG, responding to an attack by rebel/army junta forces, launched a military attack that led to the collapse of the junta and its expulsion from Freetown. On 10 March, President Kabbah was returned to office”[10].

The effects of the civil war:

Opening of opportunities of drugs and arms smuggling.

Erosion of national and regional security and facilitates crime between Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea.

Use of conflict diamonds to fuel the war.

Over 50, 000 people were killed in a country where the population was just under 6 million.

Thousands more were abducted, raped and had their bodies mutilated.

Children were recruited, trained and drugged to become brutal child soldiers.

2009 Human Development Index ranks Sierra Leone at number 180, just third from the bottom.

A continuous cycle governments being overthrown followed: In 1992 Momoh was overthrown by Captain Valentine Strasser of the National Provisional

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Ruling Council (NPRC). Strasser was overthrown in 1996 by his deputy, Brigadier Julius Maada Bio.