

# Chronology

## The pre-colonial period

Sierra Leone's earliest known inhabitants lived in small fishing and farming communities along the Atlantic coast and scattered settlements in the interior. In the mid-fifteenth century, Portuguese explorers make their first contact with the coastal tribes and give the territory its name. Contacts with Europe are followed by African invaders, the Mane. Sierra Leone's two largest ethnic groupings, the Mende and the Temne, both have Mane antecedents, as do a number of the country's fifteen other ethnic groups.

## The colonial period 1787–1961

### 1787

British philanthropists and merchants found the Colony of Sierra Leone on the Freetown Peninsula as a haven for freed slaves, who eventually become British subjects. Throughout the eighteenth century, holy war, trade, missionary activities and Koranic teaching spread Islam throughout the country, although many retain their animist religion or opt for Christianity, propagated by Westerners based in the colony of Freetown.

### 1895

Britain declares a Protectorate over the hinterland of the colony. Colonialism provides the underpinnings of a state, but societal divisions are also apparent. Rivalries set off the Krio descendants of freed slaves from ethnic groups from the Protectorate, rural Sierra Leoneans from the wealthy and powerful inhabitants of Freetown, northerners from southerners, members of one ethnic group from competing chieftaincy lineages, and restive youths from authority figures. By the use of force and indirect rule through loyal chiefs, Britain is largely able to control ethnic and communal antagonisms, although violent resistance to the colony's administration and its Sierra Leonean proxies flares up occasionally. A two-tiered system of British common law and traditional public consultation and arbitration provides a means of mediating social and economic conflicts, although both systems are prone to discrimination and abuse.

Economically, the colonial era sees transformations in agriculture, transportation and, after 1945, mining. Economic development is, however, unevenly concentrated in the capital and south and east of the country. It is predominantly extractive and export oriented for the profit of foreign companies. The discovery of diamonds and other minerals in Sierra Leone leads to the diversification of exports. There is a shift from agricultural products to unprocessed minerals – diamonds, iron ore, bauxite, rutile, platinum, chromite and gold. By 1957, mining contributes seventy-two per cent of exports. The lure of illegal diamond mining sharply reduces the number of agricultural workers. It

also leads to the increasing involvement of Lebanese merchants, who had migrated to West Africa at the turn of the century. Rural Sierra Leoneans who can not strike it rich in the diamond fields join the growing masses of urban unemployed.

## Early years of independence

### 1961

Under the conservative leadership of Sir Milton Margai, a Mende medical doctor, the country's transition to independence is peaceful. Sierra Leone has become a hub of education and commerce on the Atlantic. With a population of 2.5 million, government revenues of US\$39 million and trade worth about US\$126 million in 1961, the former British possession is markedly better off than its West African neighbours.

### 1964–1967

Sir Milton's death in 1964 leads to the contested succession of his stepbrother, Albert Margai. When Margai's Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) wins fewer seats than the opposition All People's Congress (APC) in the 1967 election, the army commander, Brig. David Lansana, steps in and arrests Siaka Stevens, the APC leader, as he was appointing a cabinet. Lansana, a Margai appointee, is subsequently arrested by some of his junior officers, along with Sir Albert. The junior officers set up Sierra Leone's first military government, the National Reformation Council, marking the emergence of the military as a force too-often ready to interfere in Sierra Leone's politics.

## The Stevens era

### 1968

A second coup leads to Siaka Stevens's civilian government being installed.

### 1971

Guinean troops help stave off a coup attempt in Sierra Leone. Stevens declares Sierra Leone a republic and becomes president under the new constitution.

### 1973

Stevens is returned to power in an election boycotted by the opposition.

### 1977

The SLPP contests the election but wins only fifteen of eighty-five seats. Students demonstrate against APC one-party rule and deteriorating economic conditions.

### 1978

Through a referendum, Stevens transforms Sierra Leone into a one-party state, with the APC as the only legal

political party and Stevens as first president for a seven-year term. SLPP members of parliament join the APC.

### 1980

Stevens spends borrowed millions on hosting an OAU conference, contributing to the country's mounting debt.

### 1983

The Ndogboyosoi (bush devil) war between APC and SLPP supporters racks Pujehun District in southern Sierra Leone. The localized rebellion is linked to electoral manipulation and rivalries over control of cross-border smuggling into Liberia.

### 1985

Major-General Joseph Saidu Momoh is appointed as successor to Stevens. Momoh receives ninety-nine per cent of the vote in national elections and is inaugurated president. Attempts at financial, administrative and political reform fail.

### December 1989

Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) launches an insurgency from Côte d'Ivoire in an attempt to overthrow Samuel Doe's brutal regime, beginning the six-year Liberian civil war.

## War in Sierra Leone

### 23 March 1991

About sixty Sierra Leoneans, Liberians and Burkinabes led by Foday Sankoh attack two border villages in eastern Sierra Leone from neighbouring Liberia. Four days later, 300 fighters capture the town of Buedu.

### April 1991

Sierra Leonean forces strike into Liberia's Lofa County. Fighting ensues in Kailahun, Sierra Leone's Eastern Province. Despite the backing of 1,200 Nigerian troops and 300 Guineans, efforts by government forces to contain the insurgents fail for lack of equipment, pay and political support. Anti-Taylor Liberians in Sierra Leone and Guinea offer their military support to the Sierra Leone government and form the United Liberation Movement for Democracy in Liberia, ULIMO. Guinea reportedly begins secretly training ULIMO fighters. ULIMO advances into the diamond mining and timber areas of eastern Sierra Leone and western Liberia.

### August 1991

Momoh revises Sierra Leone's Constitution to reintroduce a multi-party system. Sixty per cent of voters approve the change in a referendum. Elections are scheduled for May 1992.

## The NPRC regime

### 29 April 1992

Disgruntled front-line soldiers take their grievances to Freetown. Fearing a coup, Momoh flees to Guinea. The young officers – most of them in their mid-twenties – seize power. The newly formed National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC) is led by Captain Valentine Strasser, a twenty-six-year-old. Civilians rejoice in their eagerness to see the back of Momoh and a regime marked by mismanagement, corruption and political repression.

### May 1992

The NPRC declares a state of emergency, dissolves the legislature and bans all political parties. The RUF ‘extends an olive branch’ to the NPRC, calls a halt to ambushes, and invites the NPRC to hold talks on developing a joint programme aimed at bringing the war to an end. According to the RUF, the initiative gets no response and NPRC representatives travel to Nigeria and Ghana seeking military aid.

### December 1992

An alleged coup attempt by former army officers leads to nine suspected coup plotters and seventeen other prisoners being executed by the NPRC. The UK cuts off £4 million in aid in reaction to the executions. Strasser promises to end the civil war and work towards the restoration of democracy, but fighting intensifies.

### July 1992

Strasser dismisses his vice chairman, S.A.J. Musa, and replaces him with Lt Julius Maada Bio. Musa seeks refuge in the Nigerian Embassy and then is granted asylum in the UK.

### October 1993

In response to international pressure, Strasser announces a two-year transition to democratic rule, with elections to be held at the end of 1995.

### January 1994

The NPRC decides to go to the streets of Freetown to increase the strength of the army. Youths, some only twelve years old, are trained in a few weeks and assigned to units in the provinces. Numerically, the army doubles in size to an estimated 6,000, later to grow to about 15,000. Yet, it appears that the street-children of Freetown are being armed and set loose in the country’s provinces, where, to survive, they quickly adopt RUF tactics to live off the civilian population.

The NPRC declares “total war” on the RUF, but by April the insurgents are active in the centre of the country and the army launches new offensives. The rebels change tactics, opting for a policy of lightning raids on the centre and the north.

### October 1994

It is estimated that as much as 40 per cent of new recruits to the army have defected. Public and international goodwill towards the NPRC melts as the young soldiers indulge in drugs, corruption and abuses against opponents and ordinary civilians. In the countryside, evidence grows of some soldiers milking the war economy for personal gain and collusion with the RUF in attacks on civilians.

### November 1994–January 1995

Two UK aid workers are abducted near Kabala in the north of Sierra Leone. RUF leader Sankoh contacts UK diplomats and unsuccessfully demands recognition of the RUF and weapons in return for the release of the hostages. Meanwhile, the RUF launches attacks on the provincial centres of Bo and Kenema, as well as a major refugee camp near Bo guarded by Nigerian troops. The insurgents attack rutile and bauxite mines further south, seizing more hostages, destroying plant equipment and carrying off loot. The RUF takes control of hills near Freetown. Expatriates are advised to leave the country by their governments.

A government-sanctioned peace initiative is undertaken by local leaders in southern Pujehun, who cross the Mano River Bridge to make contact with RUF members in the bush. Talks between the civilian delegation and RUF units are unsuccessful. The RUF accuses the government of insincerity.

### March 1995

A number of expatriate and Sierra Leoneans taken captive by the RUF are released to the International Committee of the Red Cross through the intervention of International Alert, a London-based non-governmental organization. IA draws on its access to the RUF to become a key actor in subsequent peace negotiations along with regional diplomats, the OAU, the UN and the Commonwealth.

### April–July 1995

The NPRC turns to mercenaries to shore up their military fortunes. After a contingent of Gurkhas is mauled in an ambush and leaves Sierra Leone, a South African led mercenary group, Executive Outcomes, is hired for cash and diamond concessions. EO clears the RUF from the environs of Freetown, retakes the bauxite and rutile mines and secures the Kono diamond fields within a few months.

### August 1995

Following massive street demonstrations in Freetown by women’s organizations, a National Consultative Conference is held in Freetown. Political leaders, traditional chiefs, labour organizations, women’s groups and religious organizations, encouraged by the UK and

US governments, press for elections to be held in February 1996 and for the NPRC to pursue a negotiated settlement with the RUF.

## Civilian government

### February–March 1996

In early February, a palace coup ousts NPRC chairman Strasser. He is replaced by Bio, who agrees to allow elections to proceed on schedule. Financed by Western governments and opposed by the RUF and some segments of the army, the voting is marked by attempts at intimidation of voters, including the amputation of limbs. In relatively secure areas of the country, thirty-seven per cent of the voting age population turn out to elect a new legislature. In a run-off vote, former UN bureaucrat Ahmad Tejan Kabbah is elected president. Kabbah sets up a multi-party and multi-ethnic cabinet and follows up on preliminary discussions begun by the NPRC with the RUF about peace negotiations.

### November 1996

A peace agreement brokered by Côte d'Ivoire, with the support of other regional governments and international organizations, is arrived at, triggering jubilant street celebrations in Freetown and in provincial towns. The Abidjan Accord promises, in part, a cessation of hostilities, conversion of the RUF into a political party, amnesty for RUF members, disarmament and demobilization of its combatants, downsizing of the armed forces, and the withdrawal of Executive Outcomes from the country.

Peace, however, proves ephemeral. The cessation of hostilities stipulated by the Abidjan Accord is breached by all sides. Within weeks the war has resumed and intensified. In mid-February, Kabbah complains in a letter to one of the 'moral guarantors' of the accord of the RUF's refusal to release women and children who had been abducted during the war, of road ambushes on civilians, attacks on villages, 'and the illegal harvesting of cash crops and mining of precious minerals, particularly in the Kailahun District'. Equally ominous is the increasing number of clashes between *Kamajors* and soldiers throughout the country in an apparent struggle for tactical advantage and control of diamonds and other resources.

### March 1997

The Peace Agreement collapses when Foday Sankoh is arrested in Nigeria on weapons charges. In rapid succession, several of Sankoh's lieutenants claim leadership of the RUF and that they will press ahead with the peace process, only to be captured by Sankoh loyalist Sam 'Maskita' Bockarie. The arrest of Sankoh leads to stepped up attacks by the RUF, while increasing government support for the civilian militias prompts the army into open revolt.

## The AFRC coup

### 25 May 1997

Junior military officers calling themselves the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) stage a coup in Freetown, overwhelming Nigerian ECOMOG troops and forcing President Kabbah to flee to Guinea. In a move that only serves to confirm suspicions of collusion between soldiers and the RUF, the junta quickly invites the RUF into Freetown. From detention in Nigeria but still with access to communications, Sankoh gives the go ahead for his movement to join the coup and RUF fighters stream into Freetown.

Freed from jail, where he was being held on previous charges of attempting a coup, Major Johnny Paul Koroma emerges as the nominal leader of the junta. Koroma suspends the constitution, bans all political parties and calls for the return of Sankoh from Nigeria. The absent RUF leader is named vice-chairman of the junta. AFRC soldiers and RUF fighters say they have merged into a new People's Army.

### June 1997–January 1998

The junta takeover is met by civil disobedience by civilians and widespread condemnation from around the world. Nigerian and Guinean troops remain in their positions within Sierra Leone and ECOWAS attempts to force the junta to hand power back to the civilian government with a combination of military and diplomatic pressure. Nigerian and other West African troops arrive to reinforce ECOMOG. In the provinces, civil defence units attempt to harass junta forces and cut off lines of supply.

In July 1997, the junta calls for a national conference and new elections that will be 'truly democratic'. In late August, ECOWAS imposes sanctions on the junta aimed at forcing it to relinquish power.

A six-month peace plan, signed in October by junta representatives and Nigerian and Guinean foreign ministers for the ECOWAS Committee of Five member states, calls for an immediate cessation of fighting, a one-month disarmament and demobilization programme, the resumption of humanitarian aid, the return of refugees and displaced persons, and a restoration of the constitutional government, effective from 22 April 1998. The agreement says Sankoh is expected to return to Sierra Leone to take part in the peace process. A final clause notes that it is essential that unconditional immunities and guarantees from prosecution be extended to all involved in the May 1997 coup. Despite the peace plan, skirmishing continues between ECOMOG and junta forces. Civil defence units launch a campaign to immobilize junta activities in the provinces.

## Restoration of Kabbah

### February–July 1998

In February Nigerian forces, backed by CDF units, launch an offensive against the AFRC and RUF alliance that controlled the country for nine months. The junta is quickly forced out of Freetown and several provincial towns. In March, Kabbah returns to Freetown, but is still faced with the military threat of the undefeated RUF rebels and renegade AFRC soldiers, many of whom have retreated into the north of the country, where the civil defence movement is weakest. Attempts to mop up the junta remnants bog down, while the restored government prosecutes and executes captured junta members. Sankoh is returned to Freetown in custody. But the vulnerability of the government increases as Nigeria inches towards restoring a civilian government. Junta loyalists remain active in the north and east of the country. In June, Nigeria's military ruler Sani Abacha dies and is replaced by Gen. Abdulsalami Abubakar, who pledges to return the country to civilian rule. In July, the UN Security Council agrees to send a military observer group to Sierra Leone.

### October–December 1998

Twenty-four Sierra Leone soldiers are executed by firing squad for taking part in the 1997 coup. Sankoh is sentenced to death for treason and former president Momoh receives a ten-year sentence for conspiracy. The executions and sentencing of Sankoh trigger more violence in the north and east of the country and a push by junta forces towards Freetown.

By mid-December 1998, despite rebel attacks within fifty kilometres of Freetown and a spate of attacks in the east and north of the country, President Kabbah tells Freetown residents in a radio broadcast there is no reason to panic. "ECOMOG has assured us one hundred percent that they are completely on top of the situation and that the rebels are no match militarily for them."

ECOMOG brings reinforcements into Freetown, while the junta forces register a string of battlefield gains in the Kono diamond fields and in the north. RUF field commander Bockarie states what the rebels' aims are in a satellite phone interview, demanding the 'immediate and unconditional release' of Sankoh and peace through dialogue.

Echoing accusations made by the Sierra Leone government and ECOMOG of official Liberian involvement in the offensive, the US calls on Liberia to 'stop support for RUF activities emanating from its territory'. ECOMOG commander Maj. Gen. Timothy Shelpidi says: "We have a destabilizing situation in the sub-region, and if it's allowed to continue, it's going to be very, very serious. It won't end in Sierra Leone, it's going to

spill over and affect every country in the sub-region". Liberian Foreign Minister Monie Captan admits there are Liberians in Sierra Leone but denies Liberian government involvement.

## Battle of Freetown

### 6 January 1999

After weeks of severe fighting in the north and east, AFRC and rebel fighters, mingling with civilians fleeing into Freetown, infiltrate the east and centre of the capital. The attack shows careful planning and co-ordination and underscores military bungling and low morale among Nigerian ECOMOG defenders. But ECOMOG and CDF retain a hold on the west end of the city and fierce fighting erupts to push the attackers out of the city. More than two weeks of street fighting, machete attacks on civilians, summary executions and vigilante killings of suspected rebels leave 5–6,000 people dead and much of the housing in the eastern end of the city destroyed. Hundreds of men, women and children are mutilated. Sankoh remains a prisoner.

The demonstration of the rebellious soldiers and RUF's military capabilities immediately provokes new international efforts to broker a negotiated settlement. At the end of January, West African leaders hold an impromptu meeting in Guinea. The consensus is for dialogue. A Nigerian spokesman says that ECOMOG has finally retaken control of Freetown, but would not be able 'to clean up the whole country'. Abubakar himself says he hopes to have all Nigerian troops out of Sierra Leone by the time he hands over to a civilian government in March.

### February–March 1999

A flurry of diplomatic activity involves pressing Kabbah to agree to participate in negotiations with the RUF. American diplomats say they favour all the parties being at the negotiating table. Nigerian diplomats enlist the public support of Libyan leader Muammar Ghaddafi as a possible host of face-to-face talks between Kabbah and Sankoh. Also involved in efforts to encourage negotiations are the UN, the Commonwealth and the OAU. Ultimately, ECOWAS remains the focal point for negotiations and Togo's President Gnassingbé Eyadéma, then chair of ECOWAS, the convenor.

Late in February, Francis Okelo, the UN Secretary General's Special Representative in Sierra Leone, meets with RUF representatives in Abidjan to discuss conditions for substantial negotiations. The Abidjan meeting leads to preliminary talks in Lomé reuniting Sankoh with some of his field commanders and civilian backers. Freed from detention for the meeting, Sankoh stays on in the Togolese capital.

## The Lomé Agreement

### 25 May 1999

Detailed negotiations begin in Lomé after the promise of eventual freedom to Sankoh and introduction of a ceasefire.

### 7 July 1999

After two months of negotiations, the RUF and the government of Sierra Leone reach a settlement. It includes power-sharing between the elected Kabbah government and the rebels, a blanket amnesty for crimes committed up to the signing, disarmament and demobilization, and the establishment of human rights and truth and reconciliation commissions. The UN special representative attaches a disclaimer to the agreement saying: "The United Nations interprets that the amnesty and pardon shall not apply to international crimes of genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and other serious violations of international humanitarian law".

Sankoh is granted the 'status of vice president' and chairmanship of a Commission for the Management of Strategic Mineral Resources, National Reconstruction and Development. Other RUF and AFRC members receive several cabinet posts and places within the administration. The parties also agree to the deployment of a neutral peacekeeping force, leading to a shift from reliance on ECOMOG to a more diverse UN contingent of peacekeepers and military observers.

### July 1999–April 2000

Implementation of key areas of the agreement is painfully slow. Disarmament and demobilization deadlines are not met and deployment of peacekeepers is blocked. The UN force retains contingents from Nigeria, Ghana and Guinea, as well as new contributors Kenya, India, Jordan, Bangladesh and Zambia. Humanitarian access to rebel controlled areas is limited. Nonetheless, all sides claim publicly that they are committed to peace and making the agreement work.

### May 2000

RUF fighters begin seizing peacekeepers and UN military observers at a demobilization camp at Makeni after a dispute over the return of disarmed combatants. The confrontations spread to other areas in the north and east. Within days, about 500 peacekeepers are captured or surrounded by the RUF, leading to accusations that the deployment of poorly equipped and trained peacekeepers was foolhardy, when implementation of the Peace Agreement and the RUF's commitment to disarm were so uncertain.

In talks with the UN's Special Representative to Sierra Leone, Nigerian Oluyemi Adeniji, Sankoh accuses the UN of triggering the crisis by attempting to forcefully disarm combatants. The RUF leader is unmoved by diplomatic pressure from Nigeria, Algeria, Libya, Burkina Faso and others. Women protest in front of Sankoh's Freetown residence, calling for the RUF to abide by the Lomé Agreement. UK troops begin arriving to secure the international airport and evacuate their nationals.

Sankoh flees from his residence after a second demonstration turns violent and shoots are fired by his bodyguards. Nineteen people are killed, including several RUF members. Unfounded reports suggesting the RUF is moving towards Freetown create panic in the city. Johnny Paul Koroma, former junta leader and RUF ally, now chairman of the Committee for the Consolidation of Peace, publicly calls on current and former soldiers and CDF to go on the offensive against the RUF. Liberian President Charles Taylor is asked by regional leaders to help free the hostages and get the peace process back on track. After a few days on the run, Sankoh emerges from the hills behind Freetown and is captured. He is taken into custody and later to an undisclosed location.

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan recommends immediately reinforcing the peacekeeping force from 9,250 to 13,000 and expanding it further as soon as possible.

### June 2000

By the beginning of June, Taylor has succeeded in using his influence with the RUF to secure the release of the hostages. However, fighting continues north of Freetown and pressure mounts for Sankoh and other arrested RUF leaders to be prosecuted for alleged crimes committed since the signing of the Peace Agreement.

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*Source: Lennart Johansen*







