Children in Bo District, March 2000

Source: Global Witness

Introduction:

the struggle for power and peace in Sierra Leone

by David Lord

In early 1991, on the eve of the outbreak of its civil war, Sierra Leone was economically and politically on the verge of collapse. Twenty-four years of manipulation and misrule under Siaka Stevens and his chosen successor, Joseph Saidu Momoh, had left the country heavily dependent on foreign aid and loans. Mismanagement and corruption was rife, and the state was deeply divided between the clients of the All People's Party (APC) regime and a growing number of embittered political and business rivals.

A house of cards

Beyond the increasingly feeble but sometimes brutal grasp of the government in the capital Freetown, rural Sierra Leone's potentially rich productive activities – agriculture, artisanal diamond and gold mining, and fisheries – were operated mainly for the benefit of 'Big Men' and their networks. The merging of politics, violence and personal business interests secured access to resources for redistribution only to supporters and so undermined any attempts to satisfy broader national needs. The use of gangs of youths and older thugs to settle political scores and intimidate opponents was a common practice of the APC, as was the purging of the military and police of members with suspect loyalties.

Under the APC, the state was unable or unwilling to gather taxes and effectively redistribute resources beyond its own networks. It became increasingly dependent on international financial institutions but this did not lead to any improvement in the provision of basic services such as affordable education, health care, and road or rail links. It also failed to control the rampant smuggling of Sierra Leone's highly valued gem diamonds and other commodities. Eighty per cent of Sierra Leone's population was illiterate and only twenty per cent participated in the wage economy. With more than half

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of the population under fifteen years old, the country also contained a vast pool of young people with few opportunities for education or employment. They tended to be acutely aware of an ostentatious ruling elite bleeding the country of its natural wealth and potential for development.

During the 1980s, the 'clientelist' system of governance in Sierra Leone came under even greater pressure, due to demographic and socio-economic changes in the country as well as global economic liberalization. The 'Big Men' found controlling the country's affairs and keeping their networks together increasingly difficult. Competition for resources grew more relentless and the house of cards began to crumble.

The Revolutionary United Front

On 23 March 1991, a handful of Sierra Leoneans, supported by some Liberians and Burkinabes, struck Bomaru in Sierra Leone's eastern-most Kailahun District. A few days later another small force of the previously unknown Revolutionary United Front of Sierra Leone (RUF) crossed the Mano River from Liberia into southern Pujehun District to strike border villages there. Led by a little-known former corporal in the Sierra Leone army, Foday Saybana Sankoh, the RUF's stated intention was to overthrow the corrupt APC government, revive multi-party democracy and end exploitation. Initial attacks, however, seemed to have a number of other short-term goals: to persuade or force young people into the RUF; to loot food, drugs and other goods to sustain the fighting force; to kill figures of local authority such as government officials, extension workers, and traditional leaders; and to execute Fula and Mandingo traders. New recruits and captives were led off to forest camps where they were coerced or indoctrinated into the movement.

Borrowing a tactic used by rebel fighters in Liberia, RUF commanders forced captives to murder or mutilate officials, community elders or family members to prevent their being accepted back into their communities or families. Some had the letters 'RUF' carved into their chests.

Looking for diamonds in Makeni River, Bo District, March 2000

Source: Global Witness

While tens of thousands of villagers fled or hid from the RUF insurgents, others saw opportunities to seek personal or political vengeance or economic gain. In the words of political scientist Earl Conteh-Morgan and historian Mac Dixon-Fyle:

The rebel factions in Sierra Leone's civil strife may have attracted more young men not because of any love of violence and war but because warfare offered more hope and opportunities (through looting, control and the impression of being powerful), than during the days of stability, when graduation from high school seemed the end of life in a crisis-ridden economy.

According to Freetown youth worker Dennis Bright:

The long years of neglect of youths in the development programmes of successive governments in Sierra Leone has been widely acknowledged as a major cause of the war. Indeed, during the dictatorial rule of the APC, youths were groomed in violence and used as hired thugs in election campaigns but abandoned afterwards and left to sink into drugs, crime and other vices on the margin of society. By the time of the outbreak of the war, the conditions were favourable for manipulation and mass mobilization of such marginalized members of society into organized crime and violence. The massive looting, rape, use of drugs and arson is partly due to the background of the young recruits.

In southern Pujehun, the APC had used the army to crush supporters of the rival Sierra Leone Peoples Party (SLPP) during the 1982 election campaign in events known locally as the Ndogboyosoi (bush devil) war. The still-prevailing resentment provided the RUF with some ready recruits when it swept through the region in 1991. Young people who had suffered abuses from chiefdom authorities (such as forced labour, exorbitant fines for misdemeanours, exile from their communities) or who had no real opportunities to gain an education or employment also turned to the RUF. The insurgents attracted hundreds of itinerant diamond diggers in the remote, lawless mining camps of eastern and southern Sierra Leone.

Throughout the course of the war, the RUF mutated from a handful of poorly armed dissidents to a much larger, highly mobile and destructive guerrilla force. It also slowly evolved into a recognized interlocutor in negotiations and, with the signing of the Lomé Peace Agreement in July 1999, a component of an otherwise elected government. While the RUF began with a more broadly based leadership, Sankoh has been the most visible leader of the movement from the outset. Eventually it was able to establish a semblance of a civilian administration in some areas under its control, while remaining primarily a coercive military organization. At its core was Sankoh as the 'director of ideology', as well as a War (and later Peace) Council made up of senior members of the movement. Often riven by internal dissent and rivalries, the RUF managed to retain a fairly high degree of cohesiveness through more than nine years of war.

It is now estimated that as many as 20,000 may have joined or been forced into the RUF during the course of the conflict. The vast majority of these served to supply fighting units with food and in a variety of other non-combat roles, such as diamond miners, porters, or 'wives' of fighters. Actual numbers of fighters have been notoriously unreliable, although demobilization and disarmament plans have used a figure of 15,000 RUF combatants.

Diamonds and the war economy

Both the RUF insurgents and subsequent governments have sold diamonds to help finance their war efforts. The proceeds served to buy weapons, pay fighters and hire mercenaries. Some of the war's most intensive fighting has been for control of mining areas. Yet such control has never been complete and much of the diamond mining has remained in private hands.

Many of Sierra Leone's diamonds are found in gravel deposits from rivers and streams and can easily be dug or dredged. Others are embedded in hard-rock volcanic formations known as kimberlite pipes and require costly, mechanized digging. Until the 1950s the government shared in revenues from a monopoly on exploitation reserved for the Sierra Leone Selection Trust, a De Beers subsidiary. But the illicit mining and trading of diamonds was a constantly growing problem. In reaction to this huge illegal trade and political pressure to open mining to Sierra Leonean diggers, the pre-independence Margai government transformed the industry in 1956 by cutting back SLST's concessions and allowing African diggers to acquire licences under the Alluvial Diamond Mining Scheme. Miners sold gems to dealers who, in turn, sold to the government buying office. While some observers claim that the major alluvial deposits may now be largely depleted, it is estimated that substantial deposits of diamonds remain in the east, south and north of the country, valued in the billions of US dollars.

In the early stages of the war, the control of diamond mining areas often changed hands between the RUF and army units loyal to the National Provisional Revolutionary Council (NPRC) military regime. In 1995, the NPRC turned to mercenaries to help them regain control of rutile, bauxite and diamond mining operations that had been overrun by the RUF. In the south and east of the country, militias were formed around traditional hunters – *Kamajors* and other traditional guilds – to protect rural communities and battle with the RUF. As well as Sierra

Leoneans, Liberian mercenaries and regional peacekeepers also have an interest in the rivalry for political supremacy and control of diamonds. All have relied on shifting networks of backers, suppliers and diamond traders to mine and transport their diamonds to markets. Most Sierra Leonean diamonds reach the world market via Liberia because of its proximity to the main Sierra Leonean diamond fields and the absence of border controls. The trade is traditionally in the hands of some thirty licensed Lebanese families who settled in the country in the 1930s, as well as by a smaller number of unlicensed Guinean businessmen.

In the recent stages of the war, RUF staying power has been largely attributed to its control over major diamond fields in the east of the country and the ability to traffic gems through Liberia in exchange for weapons and supplies.

The costs of the war

With few conventional battles, except those for control of diamond mines or strategic bridges or highways, much of the military action was directed at civilian targets. Looted goods from homes, businesses and farms were openly traded in Freetown and provincial markets. Repeated ambushes of unprotected road traffic and even convoys under military escort created siege conditions in provincial towns and drove up the price of fuel, food and other necessities. Relief supplies (mainly food and medicine but also construction materials, office equipment, cash, vehicles and communications equipment) have also been prime targets for armed raiders. Peasant families fled for towns and cities, adding to food scarcities.

By 1993 relief organizations estimated that about 1 million Sierra Leoneans of a total population of 4.5 million had been displaced within the country or forced to take refuge in Guinea and Liberia. This tremendous uprooting of people produced shattered families, brought agriculture to a halt in many parts of the country, eliminated opportunities for education and put extreme pressure on existing infrastructure in urban areas where hundreds of thousands sought refuge.

Civilian casualties continuously mounted. Current estimates range from 30,000 to 75,000 war-related deaths, although these figures are impossible to confirm. Reliable, comprehensive figures on the numbers of people wounded or psychologically traumatized by the war do not exist. Atrocities such as the amputation of limbs, ears and lips with machetes, decapitation, branding and the gang rape of women and children have been common. In March 2000, the UN's Humanitarian Co-ordination Unit reported that the number of survivors of amputation was approximately 600, rather than previous estimates ranging from 3,000 to 5,000. It is assumed that the survivors represent only about a quarter of all amputees.

Hotel outside Freetown, March 2000

Source: Lennart Johansen

An estimated 5,000 under-age combatants, some as young as eight years old, were forced or volunteered into the various armed factions. Many were provided with drugs such as marijuana and cocaine and forced or encouraged to take part in atrocities.

The psychological and social effects of the war on combatants and civilians are only beginning to be systematically assessed. A May 1999 sampling of civilians in Freetown carried out by Médecins sans Frontières indicated that almost all of those surveyed had suffered from starvation, had witnessed people being wounded or killed, and half had lost someone close to them.

The psychosocial and mental health consequences of war on civilians are all too often neglected. Even after hostilities cease, the war may continue in people's minds for years, decades, or possibly generations. To address only the material restoration and physical needs of the population denies the shattered emotional worlds, ignores the destruction of basic human trust and benevolence, and leaves the moral and spiritual consequences of war unaddressed.

Another legacy of the war has been an increase in sexually transmitted diseases, prostitution and the social ostracism of rape victims and other women and girls associated with various fighting factions.

In material terms the war has kept Sierra Leone on the bottom rung of the UN Development Programme's Human Development Index. The UN's Food and Agriculture Organization states that the country's Gross National Product, the value of all goods and services produced within the country, declined by an average of 4.9 per cent each year from 1992 to 1998, while the population was increasing by about 2.3 per cent annually. At the time of writing, 90 per cent of the population were said to be living in poverty.

An all-out attack on Freetown by the insurgents in January 1999 left about 150,000 people homeless in the capital. More than eight years of war in the county's provinces had already destroyed many thousands of homes and businesses, as well as schools, health clinics and administrative buildings. The country's road and ferry network, dilapidated before the war, suffered more damage and neglect through the war years.

Responses to the war

This issue of Accord provides a necessarily incomplete account of the attempts at peacemaking in Sierra Leone, starting with the NPRC's half-hearted effort to enter into dialogue with the RUF in the early 1990s, through the failed Abidjan Accord negotiated in 1996 between the RUF and the newly elected civilian government of Ahmed Tejan Kabbah, to another failed attempt by ECOWAS to broker the restoration of Kabbah in 1998 and, most recently, the severely compromised 1999 Lomé Peace Agreement.

Under Lomé, Foday Sankoh had been pardoned of treason, granted the status of vice president in the cabinet and made chairman of a commission with ostensible powers to regulate the country's diamonds. Yet in early May 2000, the RUF took hostage hundreds of UN peacekeepers who were in the process of being deployed throughout the country to implement and monitor the peace agreement. This, and the overall lack of progress in disarming the RUF, triggered a popular demonstration in Freetown that chased Sankoh from his residence and forced him into hiding. Dozens of RUF officials were put in protective custody at the same time. Sankoh was captured ten days later and taken into detention, while fighters loyal to the government, with a rapidly deployed British task force at their backs in the capital, began to take the war to the RUF outside Freetown.

The successive peace initiatives and agreements in Sierra Leone raise many fundamental questions: Is peacemaking a definable, controllable and rational

process that can be accelerated, deepened and made more effective? How can understanding of the dynamics of violence and peace be improved for those attempting to create peace from war? And how can greater understanding be translated into political agreements and social relationships that counteract the recurrence of widespread violence? What can and should be the roles of ordinary people in shaping the peace they will have to live? Does deepening peace processes necessarily imply more meaningful participation by ordinary people through civil society organizations? In the pursuit of peace, is it morally or politically defensible to forgo applying retributive justice and to instead offer protection and economic status to perpetrators of atrocities?

British anthropologist Paul Richard has noted that for a durable peace to take hold in Sierra Leone, one thing that will be needed is concerted sensitization of civilians:

Such sensitization needs to be based on a realistic appreciation of the suffering and desire for revenge of civilian victims of the war, while at the same time clearly recognizing that many of the under-age human rights abusers of the RUF are themselves products of human rights abuses.

The RUF's horrific human rights abuses are often (perhaps even mainly) committed by abducted children. Those who command the movement (and perhaps order the atrocities) are themselves the product of earlier cycles of abduction. Now in their late teens or early twenties, these leading fighters are the human rights abusing products of human rights abuses. The original leadership is mainly dead or disappeared. The movement continues to protect itself by waging war and abducting vulnerable children.

While many observers attribute the collapse of the Lomé Peace Agreement to the duplicity of Sankoh and his ambition to rule either through violence or guile, it can also be seen as a failure of traditional peacemaking and diplomacy, leading to an agreement that was doomed from the start. At the time of writing, the struggle for power in Sierra Leone has entered another phase of violent confrontations: between government forces and the RUF; between factions within the forces backing the Kabbah government; between the RUF and peacekeepers. The outcome of these struggles is uncertain. Amidst the renewed fighting, the struggle for peace also continues, both in state politics and in civil society. Drawing lessons from the successes and failures of previous stages is part of the challenges that lie ahead.