

The Lomé peace negotiations

by Ismail Rashid

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The Lomé Peace Agreement of 7 July 1999 was forged from the competing concerns, interests and, at times, the very personal diplomacy of a wide range of players. These included the Sierra Leonean populace and government; the AFRC–RUF alliance; regional and international organizations (such as ECOWAS, OAU, the UN and the Commonwealth); and the governments of Nigeria, Guinea, Liberia, Burkina Faso, Libya, Togo, the US and the UK.

Military and political background

Although the Lomé Agreement could be seen as an extension of the earlier Abidjan Peace Accord of 1996, its immediate origins lay in the invasion of Freetown on 6 January 1999 by AFRC and RUF combatants. As pro-government forces sought to stop, contain and push back the AFRC–RUF fighters, the battle for Freetown and its environs lasted more than six weeks, leaving large portions of the city devastated and its civilians deeply traumatized.

The Freetown attack radically changed the national political landscape as well as international responses to the country's situation. Nationally it intensified divisions within the populace, the government and parliament. Initially there was relative unanimity around 'flushing' AFRC–RUF fighters from the city. But, in the long run, there was disagreement on when to stop the ECOMOG counter-offensive and begin negotiations with the AFRC–RUF. Many advocated the elimination of any AFRC–RUF presence from all highways and economic and urban centres before dialogue started.

International responses were equally mixed. On one hand, the ECOWAS countries, the UK and the US did not want to see a democratically elected government overthrown by a rebel movement with a very dubious record. For ECOWAS, the Freetown attack dented the

Sankoh (left) and Kabbah (right) sign the Lomé Agreement, July 1999

Source: Sierra Leone on the Web

prestige of its ECOMOG peacekeeping force by reviving criticisms of the effectiveness of the regional peacekeeping mechanism. Nigeria and Guinea sent fresh troops and military equipment to strengthen ECOMOG, while the US and the UK provided additional funding, military support and advice to the force. Apart from helping to maintain security and democracy in Sierra Leone, the Western countries wanted to deflect criticism of their allocating disproportionate resources to Kosovo at the expense of conflicts in Africa.

On the other hand, the same governments and international organizations increased the pressures on the Kabbah government to resolve the conflict peacefully. The war had claimed the lives of over 800 regional peacekeepers by the end of May 1999 and was costing Nigeria about US \$1 million daily. Public opinion in other West African countries turned against military involvement in Sierra Leone. Nigerian presidential candidates, after the death of General Sani Abacha, pledged to withdraw Nigerian troops if they were elected. The small Malian contingent withdrew to Freetown after suffering losses in Port Loko. The Ghanaian ECOMOG contingent confined itself to the area around Freetown's international airport at Lungi. President Lansana Conté of Guinea, a staunch supporter of Kabbah, became concerned by the economic and security burdens created by new waves of Sierra Leonean refugees. Liberia's president Charles Taylor, standing accused of supporting the AFRC-RUF onslaught on

Freetown, tried to position himself as peacemaker by calling for dialogue. The UN, the UK and the US had bankrolled the Kabbah government in exile and during the restoration. Though they were horrified by the violence and supportive of securing Freetown, they were also weary of sinking more resources into an endless conflict. UN Secretary General Kofi Annan gave active support to the efforts of his special representative Francis Okelo to broker a ceasefire and initiate fresh peace talks between the two parties. The US State Department and Congress, actively lobbied by RUF officials and sympathizers as well as pro-government Sierra Leoneans, sent strong signals to Kabbah to take the path of dialogue.

Pressure on the government intensified as ECOMOG pushed back the AFRC-RUF combatants and helped re-establish government authority in the Western Area, the Southern Province and pockets of the Northern Province. Pursuing negotiations meant the possibility of ending the conflict, providing peace and stability for the people and the government, and hopefully unifying the country. The government still enjoyed national and international recognition as the country's legitimate and constitutional authority. Despite its lack of an army, it still had the solid support of the Civil Defence Forces. It knew that considerations of regional security, pride and humanitarianism might keep ECOMOG in the country. Refusal to negotiate would mean accepting de facto partition of the country, the potential loss of regional and





international sympathy and support, and continued instability and violence – especially since all parties were beginning to conclude that the war was unwinnable.

The AFRC–RUF alliance was caught in a similar bind. On the alliance's plus side, the Freetown attack had weakened the government and strengthened its own case as a force to be reckoned with. Prior to April 1999, ECOMOG operations had failed to dislodge the alliance fighters from the major urban centres in the Northern and resource-rich Eastern Province, where they still controlled and profited from the diamond fields.

Yet, the invasion had its minuses. The alliance had failed to oust ECOMOG, which instead had put them on the defensive and had slowly pushed them back from the Western Area. Foday Sankoh remained imprisoned and condemned to death and they had lost over 2,000 fighters. The invasion further tarnished the image of the rebels and sparked off a wave of national and international condemnation of their atrocities. The invasion had not won them any support among the Sierra Leonean masses; rather it had deepened their unpopularity. Internally, the relations between AFRC and the RUF factions were rapidly deteriorating and some of the ex-soldiers wanted to return to their barracks and families.

Presidents Taylor of Liberia and Compaoré of Burkina Faso, who allegedly had supported the rebels with training facilities, fighting men and rear bases, came under considerable international pressure to terminate their support and convince the alliance to negotiate with the Kabbah government. For the AFRC–RUF, refusal to pursue negotiations meant holding territory illegally, risking unrest within the army faction and offending its regional supporters. The alliance could either transform its control over these areas to freedom for its leaders, amnesty for its war crimes and legitimate political power through negotiations, or continue to fight an unwinnable war and be treated as pariahs.

Reopening the peace track

While the military track continued on the ground, diverse personalities and groups worked to rebuild the peace bridges that had been burned in the aftermath of the Abidjan Accord in 1996 and the expulsion of the AFRC–RUF regime from Freetown in 1998. Between January and March 1999, Kabbah met regularly with Sankoh. While these meetings did not stop the fighting, they did result in opportunities for Sankoh to communicate with his commanders, the release of some abducted children and Sankoh's acknowledgement of the legitimacy of the Kabbah government. Kabbah

allowed generals, foreign diplomats, ministers, parliamentarians and religious leaders to meet Sankoh and urge him to end the war. The rehabilitation of the RUF leader signalled a cautious return to the two-track approach that had characterized the Abidjan process.

Kabbah and Sankoh also gave tacit support to UN envoy Okelo to establish connections with the wider RUF movement. Consequently, Okelo and his political officer, Modem Lawson-Butem, flew to Abidjan on 27 January 1999 to meet RUF legal adviser and spokesman Omrie Golley and Ivorian Foreign Minister Amara Essy. Two days of meetings resulted in a communiqué reiterating the legitimacy of the Kabbah government but emphasizing the need to resolve the crisis by dialogue.

The communiqué unleashed a storm of protest from the Freetown press. People wanted a ceasefire and dialogue but from a favourable military position. Okelo retreated and for some time followed the lead of the Inter-Religious Council of Sierra Leone (IRCSL) who prevailed on Sankoh and Kabbah to demonstrate some mutual trust and to endorse reviving the peace process.

Despite the absence of a formal ceasefire, Kabbah consented in March 1999 to a consultative and preparatory 'family meeting' between Sankoh and his commanders. The RUF wanted the meeting to be held in Côte d'Ivoire or Burkina Faso. The government, resentful of Burkinabe and Ivorian sympathy and support for the RUF, refused. Togo, whose president Gnassingbé Eyadéma held the chair of ECOWAS, emerged as a compromise. The Kabbah government saw ECOWAS – which was divided by competing interests but still strongly influenced by Nigeria – as their strongest supporter and the main arbiter in the conflict. The RUF, though suspicious of ECOWAS, knew Eyadéma had excellent relations with Côte d'Ivoire, one of their key allies. Though unknown to the public then, Sankoh was related to Eyadéma, by virtue of his daughter's marriage to the Togolese leader's son. Eyadéma saw it as an opportunity to advance his stature as an elder statesman. A successful peace treaty could also provide Togo with much-needed positive international attention, as well as foreign investment, following its tumultuous democratic struggles and economic recession of the 1990s.

Before the Kabbah government released Sankoh for the meeting, the Togolese foreign minister, Kokou Joseph Koffigoh, guaranteed the RUF leader's security and accommodation in Togo, as well as his speedy return to Sierra Leone to continue his appeal against his death sentence. As part of the agreement, Okelo guaranteed that the UN Observer Mission in Sierra Leone (UNOMSIL) would safely and securely transport Sankoh and his allies between Sierra Leone and Togo. Sankoh's departure in a UN aircraft on 18 May 1999 and the lavish reception he

received in Lomé marked another crucial step in his political rehabilitation. Four Togolese ministers met him at the airport and later Koffigoh honoured him with a grand reception. Personal relations, always a crucial element in West African diplomacy, had intersected deftly with high politics: Eyadéma welcomed Sankoh as an eminent foreign dignitary and an in-law.

Preparatory meetings

Within a week, UNOMSIL flew ten RUF and four AFRC members from the Sierra Leone–Liberia border and Monrovia to join Sankoh in Lomé. Neither AFRC leader Johnny Paul Koroma nor Sam 'Maskita' Bockarie, the RUF second-in-command, showed up. As a security measure, Sankoh insisted that only one of the top three RUF commanders – Bockarie, Ibrahimah Bah or Eldred Collins – should attend and they agreed on Bah. Sankoh, Bockarie and the leadership of the RUF then deliberately kept Koroma out of the meeting to preclude any challenge to Sankoh's leadership. In fact, the AFRC–RUF alliance and Koroma's number two position in it were a façade as Bockarie had effectively arrested Koroma and put him under constant surveillance after their retreat from Freetown in 1998. He had also isolated him from his supporters, the ex-SLA soldiers, and from any role in military planning. The RUF leadership pruned AFRC representatives to the Lomé meeting and included only those seen as potentially amenable to the RUF position. Thus Pallo Bangura, Idrissa Hamid Kamara and Sahr T. Kaibanja were included, while the senior ex-SLA commander Brigadier Gabriel T. Mani was not.

The AFRC–RUF consultative meeting started on 25 April 1999, was expected to last for a week and ran for twenty-one days. The reconsolidation of Sankoh's leadership and the preparation of a common negotiation position took longer than anticipated and the RUF used part of the time to sell its position to its supporters in West Africa, Europe and the US. Golley had also pleaded with Eyadéma not to return Sankoh to Sierra Leone immediately, but to keep him in Lomé until the start of substantive negotiations. Eyadéma agreed and convinced Kabbah to accept the proposition.

The AFRC–RUF preparations produced a fifty-nine-page proposal titled *Lasting Peace in Sierra Leone: the Revolutionary United Front (RUF–SL) Perspective and Vision*. The document, presented to President Eyadéma on 13 May 1999, demanded: a blanket amnesty for all AFRC and RUF fighters; the release of all prisoners; a power-sharing arrangement based on a four-year transitional government until the next elections; recognition of AFRC–RUF control over certain areas of the country; participation in a new Sierra Leonean army; the withdrawal of ECOMOG troops; and the creation of an independent peacekeeping force. It set a single

precondition for the commencement of the negotiations – the ‘immediate and unconditional’ release of Sankoh.

Within the government, little preparation took place beyond cabinet meetings and discussions among senior ministers and the president. The government equivalent of the RUF family meeting was a consultative conference organized by the National Commission for Democracy and Human Rights at the Bintumani Hotel, on 11–14 April 1999. The conference pulled together parliamentarians, paramount chiefs, political parties, civic and women’s groups, professional associations, students and trade unions. Delegates reiterated the legitimacy of the Kabbah government, supported democracy and endorsed the Abidjan and Conakry agreements as the bases for any peace negotiations. They strongly opposed any form of power-sharing with the AFRC–RUF. The government never officially endorsed the conference report but did print and send copies to the Togolese government. Some of the conference resolutions were very much in line with the government’s position throughout the process in Lomé.

Ceasefire

The peace process received a major boost on 18 May 1999 when Kabbah and Sankoh unexpectedly agreed a ceasefire in Lomé. The agreement officially silenced the guns, allowed for humanitarian aid deliveries and proposed the start of substantive peace talks six days later. The move surprised some of Kabbah’s senior ministers, the ECOMOG High Command and the Sierra Leone populace, who had consistently advocated that the major economic and urban centres in the north and east of the country should be secured before a ceasefire. But the agreement had been instigated by the Rev. Jesse Jackson, US Special Envoy for the Promotion of Democracy in Africa, whose intervention in Sierra Leone had been influenced by Donald Payne, the chairman of the US Congressional Black Caucus. Payne had been heavily lobbied by Taylor and Golley to push for negotiations, rather than backing congressional support for military assistance to ECOMOG. Jackson met with Kabbah during the African–American Summit in Accra, after which the president reluctantly flew with him to Lomé to sign the ceasefire agreement. Jackson’s aggressive diplomacy, designed to counter public criticism of US complacency towards Sierra Leone, kindled resentment among international peace mediators, although the signing ceremony, hosted by Eyadéma, did acknowledge the efforts of the US, the UN and ECOWAS.

Within a week of the ceasefire both parties had assembled their negotiation teams in Togo. Based on external advice, the government chose Solomon Berewa,

the minister of justice and attorney general, to head its team, rather than the hawkish minister of finance, and former UN assistant secretary general, James Jonah. Berewa had good negotiating skills and could be accommodating without exceeding his mandate. Most importantly, he had a good grasp of constitutional issues, which was crucial in the government’s overall negotiation strategy. The team also included Sahr Matturi, the deputy foreign minister; Sylvester Rowe, Sierra Leone’s permanent representative to the UN; Sheka Mansaray, the national security adviser; and Colonel Tom Carew, a senior army officer.

Solomon Y. B. Rogers led the AFRC–RUF team. Although an abductee, he was fiercely loyal to Sankoh and was chairman of the RUF War Council. Other team members included Pallo Bangura, a former college lecturer and AFRC foreign minister; Golley, a barrister, international businessman and subsequently RUF legal adviser; Sahr Kaibanja, ex-AFRC education minister; Brigadier Mike Lamin, a senior RUF commander; Colonel Idrissa Hamid Kamara, alias ‘Leatherboot’, an ex-SLA officer; and Major Agnes Finoh, an abducted former college student.

Structure and process

The mediation committee, made up of international stakeholders in the conflict, was chaired by Togo’s Foreign Minister Koffigoh and comprised Okelo of the UN; Adwoa Coleman of the OAU; ECOWAS Executive Secretary Lansana Kouyaté; and diplomats from the ECOWAS Committee of Six on Sierra Leone (Guinea, Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Liberia, Ghana and Mali) and Libya. The Inter-Religious Council and other civil groups, their attendance partially funded by the US, complemented the committee. American diplomats, as well as UK and Commonwealth officials, were active throughout the negotiations to ‘ensure a continuation of dialogue’, in the words of one State Department spokesman. The US also provided three consultants to help with the negotiation process.

In the first three days, the committee worked with the parties to develop a convenient and flexible structure, rather than imposing any particular negotiation model. It was accepted that the parties bore the primary responsibility for reaching an agreement and should therefore negotiate directly as much as possible. The mediators provided the necessary support, advice and communication between the two sides and, when an impasse was reached, they called in Eyadéma and the other West African presidents. This resulted in an array of open and closed meetings. The plenary sessions chaired by Koffigoh were open to all, whereas some meetings involved only the parties and the mediation committee. There were also exclusively Sierra Leonean meetings,



Jusu – aged 10

interviewed by Ambrose James in March 2000

I was captured in Freetown during the AFRC coup by the Sierra Leone Army and taken to Kono where I was trained to use a gun – an AK-47. We used to do monster parade – loot. We also smoked marijuana and cooked for the squad. From Kono, we were taken to Makeni, to Rogberi Junction, Port Loko and then to Freetown for the January invasion. I was given cocaine on my forehead every day and asked to kill people who I thought were enemies. Cocaine was also put into our food when we cooked. [My squad] killed 35 ECOMOG soldiers during the January invasion. During the invasion, I was captured by ECOMOG...and taken to the Family Homes Movement, an NGO, which deals with child combatants. My mother was traced and reunified with me. I now stay with her. I was going to an Arabic school before the war. I am now in class two and want to continue school until I go to college and then finally go to America. I think that if everything is put in place by government, for example, employment facilities, scholarships or free education, I think youths will have a bright future.

involving the RUF and government representatives, and members of civic groups, when appropriate.

The talks were structured around three main topics – military, humanitarian and political – each one being dealt with in a committee with equal representation from the RUF and the government. Coleman, Okelo, Kouyaté and the other mediators helped facilitate and draft the provisions relevant to the different issues, and the IRCSL and other members participated actively in the discussions.

The military and humanitarian committees completed their work by 8 June. The two parties quickly reached agreement on the issues of amnesty, ceasefire, humanitarian operations, socio-economic matters, human rights, disarmament, demobilization, and the new army. The swift agreement on an amnesty reflected the decision by the two parties to use the 1996 Abidjan Accord and 1998 Conakry Agreement as bases for negotiations, in spite of subsequent atrocities. Both documents had granted a blanket amnesty to the RUF.

Instead of the estimated ten days, the talks dragged on for six weeks. Sporadic outbursts of fraternity and optimism could not prevent deadlocks. The three main

issues of contention were: Sankoh's freedom and status; the RUF notion of transitional government and power-sharing; and the role of ECOMOG in post-war Sierra Leone.

Sankoh's freedom

Despite prior assurances to Eyadéma, the RUF refused to start negotiating until the Kabbah government freed Sankoh. The government team refused and made the RUF–AFRC signing of a peace agreement a precondition for a presidential pardon. Following an intervention by Eyadéma, the RUF relented but Sankoh refused to participate personally in the daily discussions. He insisted that a condemned man could not negotiate freely and that he would only participate if Kabbah did. This complicated the talks since it meant that decisions agreed in committees subsequently had to be scrutinized and approved by Sankoh.

Transition and power-sharing

Nothing came closer to scuttling the talks than the AFRC–RUF demands for power-sharing, in a four-year transitional government, and the speedy removal of

ECOMOG troops from Sierra Leone. Both issues were not new. The RUF had floated the idea of an interim government of national unity in 1995 but the election of Kabbah and the Abidjan Peace Accord had submerged it. From 12 June to 6 July, when these issues were decisively resolved, they taxed the energies of the negotiators, the mediators and the West African regional leaders.

The RUF knew that the major obstacle to their entrenchment in Freetown had been the presence of a government with both popular and constitutional legitimacy. These two elements gave Kabbah the continued support and sympathy of many governments in the region (and beyond) and led to the continued presence of the Nigerian-led ECOMOG force, which repeatedly thwarted RUF efforts to overrun and hold the capital. Even when the disloyal national army had invited the RUF to Freetown in May 1997, it had failed to sustain the takeover. What it could not gain through violence and terror, it now sought through aggressive negotiating tactics. The RUF knew that if it succeeded in wresting any major concession, either on the constitutional issue or on ECOMOG, the government's position would quickly become unsustainable.

For the AFRC–RUF, power-sharing and transitional government meant substantial control over the state apparatus. At the request of Eyadéma, they provided an extensive shopping list of government posts in which they demanded the expansion of the cabinet to twenty members and asked for eleven ministerial and four deputy-ministerial positions, including the posts of vice-president, defence and finance. They also asked for six top diplomatic posts including ambassador to the US, deputy high commissioner to the UK, high commissioner to Nigeria, and ambassador to Liberia. Furthermore, they wanted eleven key para-statal offices, including the governorship of the Bank of Sierra Leone and the head of the Port Authority. They also demanded one of the three resident minister posts – for the north – as well as the mayor of Freetown and head of a post-war reconstruction commission.

The government delegation saw through the RUF strategy to gain control of ministries, other state institutions and the capital's administration and rejected, not only the AFRC–RUF demands, but also the very notions of a transition government and power-sharing. The delegation cited the government's inability to create a transitional authority outside the constitutional framework and argued that 'the government itself is a creature of the 1991 constitution (and) derives its powers and authority only from that constitution'. The negotiators offered the RUF four ministerial posts (two full and two deputies) in a sixteen-person cabinet, suggesting that these would include justice, defence, foreign affairs or finance, and the chairs of some of the committees proposed in the draft accord.

The limited concessions made by the Kabbah government showed the pressure it was under at home. Parliamentarians and some hard-liners within the cabinet, defensive of their positions and the constitution, threatened revolt and impeachment. Fearful of losing their hard-won democratic gains, workers, human rights activists, teachers, students, women and civil groups shut down the capital in protest on 17 June 1999.

Despite popular disapproval, the RUF fought tenaciously to push through its political proposals deploying adversarial negotiating tactics such as holding up negotiations, reneging on compromises, reintroducing old issues, spectacular public outbursts, threatening pullouts and shifting final authority.

These methods were used effectively twice between 23 June and 5 July. By 21 June, after a week of intense regional diplomacy, coaxing, compromising and a bit of arm-twisting, it was felt that a mutually acceptable formula had been found to break the deadlock, namely 'power-sharing within the framework of the 1991 Sierra Leone constitution'. The RUF had accepted a total of four ministerial and three deputy ministerial positions and the Nigerians had agreed to halt their troop deployment in Sierra Leone. The mediators were optimistic. Two days later, Sankoh shocked everyone by rejecting the formula in a BBC interview. He maintained that the RUF had not fought for nine years for four cabinet posts: "We are still demanding a transitional government. The RUF leadership will never back down." He restated the RUF original demand for an expanded cabinet and more ministerial positions, arguing that what they wanted was a 'real' transition regime, not entry into a 'corrupt SLPP' government.

The RUF used similar tactics again on 5 July, when an AFRC–RUF delegation headed by Rogers and sent to sell the final draft to the commanders on the ground, returned to Togo with a new draft agreement. After Sankoh's BBC outburst, Eyadéma had resorted to using the influence of Nigerian President Obasanjo. Newly elected and wary of the Sierra Leone conflict, Obasanjo wanted to bring Nigerian troops home and focus on pressing domestic issues, but not at the cost of Nigeria's pride and regional hegemony. Within these constraints he and Eyadéma had pulled the parties together at Kara, northern Togo, on 25 June. Together, they ironed out what they thought were any wrinkles in the final draft and agreed that Sankoh would head the Commission for the Management of Strategic Resources, National Reconstruction and Development. They also agreed that Nigerian troops would remain part of ECOMOG with a revised mandate of peacekeeping until peace was consolidated and a UN force put in place. Obasanjo left the meeting at 3:00 am on Saturday 26 June, exhausted but optimistic. After his return on 4 July, Rogers reintroduced the RUF's old demands of transition government, vice-presidency and ECOMOG withdrawal.

Final phase

When Eyadéma was informed, he knew that the peace process was in danger of collapsing. He shifted regional diplomacy into top gear. The three regional leaders, Obasanjo, Compaoré and Taylor, who held the balance of power in the conflict, were mobilized by Eyadéma to exert pressures on the two parties to compromise. The key to the final deal lay in the sequencing of meetings held over 5 and 6 July. Taylor and Compaoré, the main regional backers of the RUF, met separately to reach a common position on the draft accord and a strategy for handling Sankoh. Eyadéma and Obasanjo, who had worked closely together, met to formulate a common position. The four then met and endorsed four ministerial and four deputy ministerial positions for the AFRC–RUF and Sankoh's chairmanship of the Resources Commission. They agreed on ECOMOG participation in peacekeeping and demobilization operations until their replacement by a UN force.

The four presidents then met Kabbah and Sankoh, individually and together. Sankoh's allies convinced him to accept the final deal, pointing out the pitfalls of

intransigence and the consequences of the failure of the talks. They told him to lead rather than follow and not be overtaken by events. He was advised to think more of a transitional phase rather than transitional government. The four leaders convinced Kabbah to symbolically add the status of vice presidency to Sankoh's chairmanship to assuage his supporters and to elevate him slightly above other ministerial representatives in the government. Kabbah accepted, granted him a pardon, and the deal was done.

On 7 July 1999, Kabbah and Sankoh, flanked by Eyadéma, Obasanjo, Taylor and Compaoré, signed the Lomé Peace Accord. The witnesses and guarantors added their signatures. Although the UN was a guarantor, it signed with the understanding that the amnesty and pardon did not apply to international crimes. Kabbah posed for the cameras holding Memuna, a three-year-old girl whose arms had been amputated by the RUF. He later he gave Sankoh a brotherly embrace.

On paper, the nine-year long conflict in Sierra Leone was over. On the ground, peace was to continue to be elusive.

Young Kamajors in Freetown, January 2000

Source: AFP/Corbis

