

# Implementing the Lomé Peace Agreement

by Dennis Bright

Dennis Bright is country director of the 'Institut Regional de Cooperation' (IRCOD), a Sierra Leonean NGO working with youth, women and social issues. He is a Commissioner on the Commission for the Consolidation of Peace (CCP) and holds a PhD from the University of Bordeaux, France.

The situation in Sierra Leone in the months following the signing of the Lomé Peace Agreement clearly demonstrated that the road to peace was going to be long and tortuous. It would be full of risks and obstacles and demand extraordinary courage to make concessions, not only from the belligerent parties, but especially from the people themselves.

The Lomé Agreement was intended to be a plan of action. It proposed a schedule for the cessation of hostilities and a series of measures related to governance, political, humanitarian, socio-economic as well as military and security issues. These were to be implemented by a range of institutions established under the agreement. But the framework for peace had its own shortcomings that rapidly became apparent as attempts were made to put it into practice. Perhaps most crucially, attempts at implementation were beset by profound levels of mistrust between the various parties involved and, ultimately, the dissolution of what political will had existed to make Lomé work.

## Joint Implementation Committee

The Joint Implementation Committee (JIC) established by the agreement was to review and assess its application. The committee, chaired by ECOWAS, was to meet at least once every three months and include members of the Commission for the Consolidation of Peace (CCP), regional diplomatic representatives and officials of the agreement's 'moral guarantors' – Togo, the UN, the OAU and the Commonwealth. However, the agreement did not spell out how the JIC was to relate to other institutions established under the agreement, such as the CCP or the Council of Elders.

Military problems began to appear soon after the signing. The role of ECOMOG, the West African peacekeeping force, needed to be reviewed in light of the transformation of the mandate of the United Nations Observer Mission (UNOMSIL) to peacekeeping status (UNAMSIL). Pressures on the Nigerian political leadership



to remove their majority contingent in ECOMOG led to the decision to pull out. The option of two separate entities under separate commands in the same theatre of military operations was not seen as being viable. The UN, for policy reasons, refused to give financial support to a regionally constituted force. The compromise adopted was to phase out ECOMOG and absorb part of it into UNAMSIL. This changeover presented an opportunity for those wanting to test both the capabilities and resolve of the newcomers.

The tense and ambiguous situation in the country that brought the conflict parties back to the battlefield in May 2000 was ignited by confrontation between the RUF and UNAMSIL, climaxing in 500 peacekeepers being taken hostage by the RUF forces. From the start, the RUF contested the legitimacy of UNAMSIL and then obstructed its operations. Even before the hostage-taking incident, the RUF had demonstrated its rejection of the UN peacekeepers by seizing large quantities of arms, ammunition and heavy military equipment in two separate incidents. According to Oluyemi Adeniji, special representative of the UN secretary general in Sierra Leone:

*From its induction in Sierra Leone, Sankoh had displayed an antagonism which proved implacable to the UN Mission UNAMSIL. He denounced its deployment as illegal and inconsistent with the Lomé Agreement, done without his agreement and threatening to his party. Every effort made to explain the link between UNAMSIL and article XVI of the Lomé Agreement met with a pretence at understanding, only for UNAMSIL to be denounced again shortly thereafter. With that posture, RUF obstructed UNAMSIL from deployment throughout the country, protection of innocent Sierra Leoneans and others from gross violation of their human rights and assisting the extension of the authority of the Government of National Unity throughout the entire country. (report to 3rd JIC meeting, 13 May 2000)*

At the political level, the JIC appeared to have little effect in mediating disputes arising from the agreement. At the second committee meeting, held on 24 January 2000, the RUF representative Solomon Rogers suggested that during the life of the current government and until general and presidential elections, the Lomé Agreement should take precedence over the constitution. Rogers' contention was summarily dismissed on the grounds that

the Lomé document's section on 'governance' situated the agreement squarely "within the spirit and letter of the constitution". However, rejecting the RUF position conveniently ignored the fact that, in one area at least, the designers of the Lomé Agreement had been obliged to bend the constitution. In their effort to carve out a niche within the country's power structure for the RUF, they had offered Sankoh a "status equivalent to vice president," even though only one vice president is provided for in the constitution. This political surgery, done in the name of peace, was apparently perceived by Sankoh as the opening of a dam of privileges and powers for him. When this did not happen, he constantly complained, as he once did to parliament, that his VP status was just a 'white elephant'.

Some of the other major problems were related to the inclusion of the RUF in the Government of National Unity, the RUF's establishment as a political party and the setting up of key structures created by the agreement. On several occasions, including the last press conference called by Sankoh before he fled into temporary hiding on 8 May, the RUF reiterated their claim that the government had not honoured its commitment to offer the RUF Party all the political, diplomatic and para-statal posts provided for in the agreement. The agreement had reserved for the RUF "one of the senior cabinet appointments such as finance, foreign affairs or justice" and not one of these was offered. Instead, the government conceded the ministries of trade and industry, and of energy and power. It leaned on the semantic argument that the expression 'such as' should not mean 'that is' and it could therefore designate any posts considered to be of the same standing as those indicated.

The real bone of contention, however, was to become the allocation of diplomatic and para-statal jobs. The government claimed that it had decided to privatize the para-statals due to their poor management and that it was unnecessary to make fresh appointments to their boards. As far as diplomatic appointments were concerned, one can only interpret the eagerness of the RUF to get these posts as the expression of a desire to test their international 'acceptability', taking into account that the blanket amnesty granted by the Lomé Agreement was not fully endorsed by the international community. One surprising aspect of the tussle was that some cabinet members dismissed as a trivial detail what the RUF considered to be of crucial importance. Government claims of insufficient funds to set up diplomatic missions due to the continued occupation by the RUF of the country's revenue base – the diamond-rich district of Kono – were contradicted by the appointment of new ambassadors to Libya and Ghana.

## The Commission for the Consolidation of Peace

While it was assumed that the AFRC–RUF alliance of 1997 still held at the time of the signing of the Peace Agreement, it soon became apparent that there had been a divorce and that the AFRC–SLA leadership, a major stakeholder in the conflict, had been left out of the deal. To rectify this, accommodation was found for Lt Col Johnny Paul Koroma, former AFRC leader, as chair of the CCP.

Under Lomé, the CCP was to be responsible for supervising the implementation of the peace process and monitoring all the other commissions and committees created by the agreement, including the ceasefire Joint Monitoring Commission, the Commission for Strategic Mineral Resources, National Reconstruction and Development (CMRRD) headed by Sankoh, the Human Rights Commission, and a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). It was also to ensure somehow that all the institutions set up under the agreement were "given the necessary resources for realizing their respective mandates".

The five commissioners were to be drawn from civil society (2), the RUF (1), the government (1) and parliament (1), and the institution was to have its own offices, adequate communication facilities and staff. It was also intended to look after the victims of the war and the issue of reparations.

Initially, with Koroma as its chair, the CCP was politically and financially marginalized by both the government and the international community. While its original plan of action identified fundamental issues underlying the conflict and proposed practical solutions to ensure the security and welfare of the people, it eventually pared down its scope to focus on confidence-building at all levels as a strategy for enhancing the peace process. With its broad membership it enjoyed the relative confidence of all parties. As Koroma's public and political rehabilitation outpaced Sankoh's and with growing recognition that multi-level confidence-building was crucial to the peace process, the commission began to attract greater attention and financial support.

The CCP scored a major success in April 2000 when a confidence- and trust-building conference for ground and battalion commanders held in the southern town of Bo ignited mass voluntary disarmament by pro-government militiamen. This provoked deep reflections by young combatants from all the factions on the catastrophic effects of the war on the country and their own future.

The institutional problems related to the very survival of the CCP, however, were symptomatic of the precarious situation of the agreement itself as the implementation of an agreement of this type costs money. Where funding is largely external and depends on the choices or areas of interest of the donors, there is bound to be unequal support to the structures provided for, and therefore uneven application of the peace plan.

## **Commission for Strategic Mineral Resources, National Reconstruction and Development**

The appointment of Sankoh as head of the CMRRD was regarded as the biggest risk taken and concession made to the RUF leader by the Kabbah government because of the importance of resource control throughout the war.

The agreement set out a new approach to the exploitation of gold and diamonds and the use of their proceeds, but there was some confusion and conflict related to the role or powers of the CMRRD. While the agreement called for the Ministry of Mines to carry out its normal functions, including the issuing of mining licences, it also nullified all previous concessions and banned “all exploitation, sale, export or any other transaction of gold and diamonds except if allowed by the CMRRD”.

On paper, the CMRRD was to be an autonomous body, whose head was responsible only to the president. Amidst such confusion, the CMRRD was never really constituted and Sankoh simply ignored his appointment and continued to fund his military and political programmes through mining proceeds from RUF activities in Kono District.

## **National Commission for Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration**

The process of disarmament under the NCDDR was much in the limelight and criticized for being slow. Among the various agencies set up under the agreement, the NCDDR was to receive the lion's share of external funding in an effort to stabilize the security situation in the country as quickly as possible and by peaceful means. Nine months after the signing of the agreement, however, there was still a US\$20 million shortfall in funding for the Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) process.

But shortage of money was only part of the problem. The NCDDR complained regularly about the lack of co-operation from the RUF leader, who always found reasons for refusing to order his men to disarm. In some cases, in

spite of major sensitization efforts, it was realized that combatants received too little or distorted information about the benefits of the DDR programme. Some observers also warned about the dangers of encamping large numbers of fighters, because it kept them at battalion strength and helped maintain their fighting spirit. Within the camps, disgruntlement about living conditions, negative peer pressure and mob mentality sometimes combined to transform simple misunderstandings into ugly incidents.

Clearly, one of the weaknesses of the DDR structure was its inflexibility and incapacity to fully decentralize its operations and offer limited ownership of the process to the conflict parties themselves. The financial element that came to be associated with the process – money for weapons – ended up creating not only great expectations among ex-combatants, but also great suspicions on the part of their leaders. They believed that huge sums of money were being spent on a handful of technicians, ‘experts’ and their gadgets, instead of on their men. Their argument was that only faction leaders could really and truly disarm those they had armed, and should therefore be entrusted with the wherewithal to do so.

## **The Council of Elders and Religious Leaders**

The serious disagreements that arose during the first ten months of the life of the agreement, and the disastrous effect they were to have, point to fundamental negligence on the part of the government to provide for an effective dispute resolution mechanism. Under the agreement, a Council of Elders and Religious Leaders was to be established to settle differences arising from conflicting interpretations of how it should be implemented. One would assume that potentially explosive misunderstandings could have received special attention from this mediating body. Unfortunately, the government never set up the Council of Elders, even though its establishment would not have been costly.

## **Failure to build trust**

The problems outlined above were not mere hitches. They represented the concrete difficulties that were bound to appear after the initial euphoria lifted and which could only be resolved if the spirit of the agreement was preserved, all parties were willing to make concessions, and trust, confidence and sincerity were maintained.

One of the main impediments to peace in Sierra Leone has been the total lack of trust, as well as the fear, among the conflict groups, especially at the leadership level.

## RUF and government

At a meeting with the CCP, Sheikh Nabih a senior RUF member, openly declared his movement's distrust of government by referring to a statement allegedly made by Attorney General Solomon Berewa at a treason trial in which Nabih himself was an accused. According to Nabih, Berewa described the Conakry peace plan signed by the government in 1997 as a ploy intended to pacify RUF members before prosecuting them. On several other occasions, including the commanders conference in Bo, the RUF maintained that threats of revenge were being made against them by senior government officials.

On the other hand, the RUF, and especially Sankoh, proved to be extremely unreliable. The RUF leadership vowing one thing and doing another became a common feature of the peace process. This attitude increased suspicion that the RUF was not interested in peace and was moving towards seizing power by force. This in part explains why government representatives were increasingly unenthusiastic about the systematic and thorough application of some sections of the Peace Agreement.

Sankoh's lack of trust in UNAMSIL, according to one of his senior aides, is rooted in his overall suspicion of international agencies' unreliability in ensuring protection. This goes as far back as the betrayal and assassination of Congo's Patrice Lumumba in the 1960s and of Samuel Doe in Liberia.

Essentially, the behaviour of the RUF and, to a point, the AFRC in literally sticking to their guns, despite verbal commitments to disarm, is indicative of their fear of being brought to justice. Psychologically, their hesitations, misgivings, reluctance to disarm, and arrogant behaviour betrayed a deep sense of guilt and an unwillingness to face their victims.

## RUF and AFRC—SLA

The collaboration between these two parties during the nine-month junta rule in 1997 collapsed with the restoration of democracy in 1998, when they fled into the bush. AFRC leader Koroma was held prisoner for 18 months at the RUF base in Kailahun, eastern Sierra Leone. Reports abound of very bad treatment meted out to the AFRC men by the RUF under the local commander, self-styled general Sam 'Maskita' Bockarie. It would appear that the two groups never succeeded in patching things up. This deep-seated grudge between the two groups contributed to the massive turn-out in early May 2000 when Koroma called all soldiers, old and new, to join the Civil Defence Forces and other pro-government forces to fight against the common enemy, the RUF.

## CDF and RUF

For months after the Peace Agreement was signed, the RUF complained persistently that the CDF were secretly training fighters in the southern towns of Gbangbatoke and Bonthe in order to launch an attack against them. Whereas the AFRC and RUF had once been allies, the CDF and RUF generally remained sworn enemies, despite instances of peaceful, though wary, co-existence in some mining areas. During the war, the CDF constituted the backbone of resistance to the rebellion. Stories from the warfront ascribe to the CDF a capacity to unleash terror and commit atrocities comparable to those of the RUF, which has contributed to the mistrust and suspicion between the two armed factions.

The examples cited above are part of a larger web of suspicion that seemed to haunt the peace process. Illustrative of this are perceptions of the relationship between Sankoh and chief Samuel Hinga Norman, national co-ordinator of the CDF and Deputy Defence Minister. They are seen as two old army boys both implicated in coups in the 1960s and 1970s; as knowing each other well from their army days; as rumoured to have worked together for a while in Liberia to plan the 1991 insurgency against the APC government; and as subsequently finding themselves on opposite sides in the rebel war.

## Conclusion

The search for peace in Sierra Leone has been pursued against daunting odds. Implementation got underway in a complex context that affected how the words and ideas in the agreement could be translated into reality in a severely damaged nation. The physical devastation within the country, the exodus of skilled Sierra Leoneans, the disruption of schooling, high numbers of traumatized war victims, the destruction of authority systems, and deeply rooted social problems, particularly the neglect of youth, were all part of the environment in which the Lomé Agreement was to succeed or fail.

The focus of the Peace Agreement on Sankoh and the assumption that he could be relied on to successfully lead his combatants through the peace process proved to be tragically flawed. The inconsistencies of the RUF leader in word and deed were largely responsible for the ups and downs of implementation. If the war had really been waged on the grounds of an ideology of some sort, perhaps the agreement could have addressed substantive issues and then might have enjoyed a better destiny. It seems that Sankoh's commitment was not to peace, but to state power and a share in the country's wealth, involving the connivance of some interested neighbours. Given Sankoh's arrest in early May and the



possibility of judicial action being taken against him, it remains to be seen if the agreement can survive the man.

Imbued with such a heavy dose of violence it is only natural for society to experience sharp withdrawal symptoms during the healing process. It is not an easy business for young men and women who have been conditioned (and sometimes drugged) to fight for their survival to be converted to a more orderly form of existence based on adherence to the law and respect for life and property.

In general, RUF and AFRC combatants have had little trust in the civilian populace, largely out of fear of retribution for atrocities and other crimes committed during the war. During the ECOMOG intervention in February 1998, which restored legitimate democratic rule, mob justice was meted out to supporters of the junta, some of whom were 'given the necklace' – burnt alive by pouring petrol on a tyre hung round their necks. Similar revenge killings were carried out in the provinces, particularly in Bo. In the circumstances, it is easy to understand why RUF and AFRC combatants found it hard to believe that people would ever embrace them.

However, the search for peace can only be done within the framework of an agreement such as Lomé. It is worth stressing that one of the basic weaknesses of the agreement at the outset was its failure to include all the

parties, particularly the remnants of the SLA. Furthermore, all implementation structures should be set up in a businesslike manner, if not the partners will lose their trust in the process and a mood of triviality will be created around the peace process, with dangerous consequences. Confidence-building should be a permanent feature of the process because true reconciliation is difficult to achieve when suspicions based on past animosities and betrayals continue to thrive. Reconciliation efforts must not only aim at bringing together warring parties, but also at bridging gaps created during the conflict between fighters of all factions and the civilian population. This is where civil society organizations assume all their importance – in acting as a mobilizing force and as guides during the healing process.

Implementation of the agreement has also underlined the need for flexibility, not only in terms of technical fixes, but also in the minds of stakeholders who should be ready to tackle unforeseen problems as they arise. Negotiators and conflicting parties should count on unexpected hurdles springing up at any time. When that does happen, they are required to muster enough courage, tact and imagination to surmount them. In that respect, the Sierra Leone government was under a moral obligation to lead the way in the search for peace – an obligation it did not always fulfil.

