Nigerian Intervention in Sierra Leone

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When ECOWAS decided at its Abuja summit to reinforce the sea and air blockade of Sierra Leone, instead of using more direct military action against Johnny Paul Koromah's junta, it was apparent that key members of the Nigerian military government led by General Sani Abacha were not pleased. Abacha, in the run-up to the summit August 26–27, expended considerable military and diplomatic energy to persuade ECOWAS to formally endorse the use of force to drive the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council/Peoples Army out of power in Sierra Leone and reinstate ousted President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah.

Abacha did come away from the summit with an agreement on the nature of a blockade, a commitment from ECOWAS to seek UN Security Council assistance to make the sanctions universal and mandatory, and a second term as ECOWAS Chairman. However, ECOWAS denied Abacha a commitment to actively support a Nigerian–led assault on the AFRC/PA and agreement that Nigerian General Victor Malu become commander of a new joint command of both the ECOMOG forces in Liberia and Sierra Leone.

Tough rhetoric from Gen. Malu, Nigerian Foreign Minister Tom Ikimi and the Nigerian commander at Lungi, and repeated tactical clashes since the coup took place have kept the Freetown regime on edge and often sparked panic among the population. During the May 25 coup, small numbers of Nigerian troops guarding State House (and, later, would–be evacuees at the Mammy Yoko Hotel), were overwhelmed by the coupists and their Revolutionary United Front reinforcements, severely embarrassing the Nigerians. Since then, the Nigerians, currently estimated to have about 4,000 troops in SL, are generally credited with seriously mauling the AFRC/PA in tactical encounters around Lungi, in part to repel and deter AFRC/PA probes of their positions, to ratchet up the military pressure on the junta and redeem their embarrassment in the early days of the coup.

Initially, many Sierra Leoneans who fled the country, those in areas not controlled by the AFRC/PA and even some who remained under the gun in Freetown called for a military offensive aimed at removing the coupmakers and restoring Kabbah. But with the passage of time and the apparent lack of Nigerian political and military will to accept the ramifications of a unilateral or a partially–supported offensive against the junta, it has become increasingly evident that any progress towards removing the junta and restoring the ousted government hangs more on the effectiveness of
sanctions and a negotiated settlement, than on a Nigerian invasion. A fourth and probably more distant option is the removal of the AFRC/PA through the combined efforts of Kabbah loyalists from the military, combined with Kamajors and Kapras, and supported covertly or overtly by Nigeria.

**Tale of two juntas**

The irony of Nigeria's foray into Sierra Leone's political crisis is glaring. Abacha, who came to power through a coup and appears to be orchestrating a self-transformation process from military ruler to democratic president, has been the most committed and visible proponent of the use of force to restore the democratically elected government in Sierra Leone. However, solid democratic credentials are sparse among ECOWAS heads of state -- nine of the 15 came to power through coups. Critics, including the SL junta, have had something of a field day with Abacha and the Nigerian military as champions of democracy.

Nigerian officials have been forced to justify their lead role in the manoeuvring to restore the Kabbah government by pointing to the existing ECOWAS mandate to prevent cross-border insurgency from neighbouring Liberia, the bilateral defence agreement with the Kabbah government, and international support for the removal of the junta and restoration of the democratically-elected government. As part of ECOMOG, Nigerian soldiers were stationed in Freetown and other strategic locations to provide logistic support for operations in Liberia and help prevent cross-border activities. A separate bilateral defence agreement between Nigeria and Sierra Leone was renewed during the 14-month Kabbah administration. The new agreement, signed in Lagos on March 7, 1997 between Chief Hinga Norman, SL's deputy defence minister, and General Abdulsalam Abubakar, Nigeria's chief of army staff, was to provide presidential protection, training for the RSLMF and strategic support for the Kabbah government.

Nigeria's initial attempt to reverse the coup by frightening off the putschists in Freetown on June 2 with mainly blank shells went disastrously wrong. Civilian deaths from several live shells that fell in and around the Murray Town neighbourhood, the capture of some Nigerian troops and the futile defence of the Mammy Yoko Hotel handed the AFRC and RUF their first major propaganda victory and evidence that the Nigerians might just be more bark than bite.

In the wake of these embarrassments, some Nigerian newspapers pointed out that there had been no emergency meeting of Nigeria's Provisional Ruling Council, the junta's decision-making body. Neither were the military brass consulted before the intervention order was given. The Joint Chiefs of Staff were effectively handed a fait accompli.

Nigerian views on the military intervention in SL remain divided, as was the case when former Nigerian dictator General Ibrahim Babangida engineered the establishment of ECOMOG to intervene in the Liberian civil war. (At the
time, Babaginda's interest in Liberia was largely seen to be an attempt to save his friend President Samuel Doe, who came to power in a bloody coup in 1980, from warlord Charles Taylor and his forces. Now, Abacha has staked out Nigeria's position as defending a democratically-elected president, Kabbah, against a military faction backed by RUF forces loyal to Foday Sankoh, a former protégé of Taylor, recently sworn in as Liberia's own democratically-elected president.

Domestic supporters of Abacha's position, (but not necessarily of the man himself), argue that he has acknowledged that democracy is the only way forward and is signalling his intention of relinquishing power. Should Abacha renege on the promise, he could be more vulnerable to attempts to oust him. Other observers have noted that that since Nigeria has been seen as the power behind coupists in Niger and The Gambia and their subsequent transformation into civilian leaders, with Sierra Leone it appears to be now saying that coups in the region should stop. The more cynical have noted that the real message from Abacha to coup leader Johnny Paul Koromah and others in the region is that regional coups can only succeed with Abacha's prior approval.

Nigeria, currently facing threats of more international economic sanctions, is leading a comprehensive air, land and sea blockade of Sierra Leone. Sierra Leone has joined Nigeria on the Commonwealth list of suspended member countries -- a pariah leading the fight against a new kid on the pariah block. It appears that Nigeria's ECOMOG leadership in Liberia and now in Sierra Leone is one reason why the UN has found it difficult to take any decisive action in support of the ECOWAS strategy.

So far, Nigerian troops in Sierra Leone have not been reported to be engaged in substantial illegal activities, as was the case in Liberia when the acronym ECOMOG was derisively translated as 'Every Car Or Moving Object Gone'. This is probably because of the tense military situation, the level of destruction and previous looting by the AFRC/PA and civilians, the bad blood between the AFRC/PA and the Nigerian troops and the fact that the majority of the Nigerians are based outside Freetown at Lungi, Jui, Kenema and Bo.

Nevertheless, there is the possibility that Nigerian soldiers might be engaged in some economic activity, since some are quartered in Kenema. To date, there have been no serious clashes between the AFRC/PA and the Nigerians around Kenema.

Officially, the Nigerian junta claims to have no economic interest in Sierra Leone, apart from ensuring that the region is stable enough to encourage intra-regional trade and development and, by extension, protecting Nigerian nationals and economic interests in Sierra Leone, which are now being targeted by the Koromah junta. Some Sierra Leoneans have praised Nigeria's big stick, little carrot approach, while condemning the preference for dialogue demonstrated by Ghana and even promising that Ghanaian
fishermen would face a tough future when the crisis is resolved for tacitly supporting the junta.

**Nigeria's political transition and SL**

 Barely 12 months to Abacha's promised return of Nigeria to civilian rule through elections, the domestic political landscape is muddy. At a time when the transition programme should be generating frenetic political activity, little is discernible. The pre-election timetable has been modified and manipulated, with only the October 1998 deadline remaining unchanged. There are still no publicly confirmed presidential candidates, although the unofficial campaign for Abacha's transformation into a civilian president continues unabated, despite the incessant reports of his ill-health. Abacha, 55 years old, is said to be suffering from cirrhosis of the liver, a condition he has reportedly lived with for more than 10 years and is aggravated by his habitually heavy, late-night drinking sessions with his 'kitchen cabinet'. However, rumours of his being incapacitated were dampened last week when he made a brief appearance in public.

 Abacha's expected switch to a civilian presidential role has polarised the armed forces. Military brass in support of the grand plan argue that Abacha's presence in government would be a stabilising factor, which will allow 'genuine' democracy to germinate. This argument is predicated on the belief that because Abacha is a coup specialist (having been a key player in the last three successful coups and helping to foil others), power-hungry young officers would be dissuaded from plotting coups. Opposed military voices argue that Abacha must do the honourable thing and hand over power as promised to an elected civilian president. This would enhance the credibility of the military establishment as a corrective regime and also help rehabilitate its badly dented image engendered by the failed Babangida programme. They argue that Nigeria should lead smaller African states by example.

 With the amendment of the political timetable and the continuous campaign for Abacha to stay on, it appears that the hawks in the junta have the upper hand. In fact, the postponement was not unexpected, it only confirmed Abacha's pervasive authority. Since his palace coup in 1993, Abacha has increasingly drawn more power to himself, progressively weakening the cohesion of the military by mass purges and constantly consolidating his own position. He has effectively frustrated political opposition by jailing or detaining more people than any other Nigerian dictator. His tenure has also featured mysterious and brutal murders and a growing exile population, enhancing his aura of power and fear.

 A few of the prominent Nigerian players in the Sierra Leone crisis are linked to Abacha's personal domestic agenda. Speculation is rife that Abacha has contingency plans very similar to that of his erstwhile mentor, Babangida, should his mutation be thwarted next year. According to this scenario, it is thought that Abacha will try to install another stop-gap administration, like
the Interim National Government he toppled in 1993. This will be headed by a loyal civilian -- the names of Chief Michael Ani, the finance minister, and the combative foreign minister, Chief Tom Ikimi, key members of Abacha's kitchen cabinet, are mentioned -- until a trusted military officer could be found by Abacha to take over. General Abubakar, a distant cousin of Abacha and close confidant of his wife, is being suggested for this role. General Malu has Abacha's confidence in his role as ECOMOG commander, but there is no indication yet of a post-ECOMOG role for him. If precedents for former ECOMOG officers are followed, Malu would be retired because the military brass is often wary of soldiers who have been in active service overseas.

Military options

Despite the sabre-rattling by Abacha, Ikimi, Malu and others, the odds are heavily weighted against a sustained military offensive by Nigeria or a Nigerian-led ECOMOG force.

Nigerian military personnel admit privately that they do not want to fight to dislodge the AFRC/PA from Freetown, calculating that it would be too costly militarily if there was substantial resistance. That view was reportedly made clear to ECOWAS at the first summit following the coup.

Longer-term, Nigerian military planners are aware that even a conclusive victory over entrenched RUF and AFRC forces on the Freetown Peninsula, would not necessarily prevent some RUF and AFRC fighters escaping to fight another day, nor eliminate the threat of RUF units now outside Freetown or of AFRC resistance around up-country bases. In the absence of a national police or military capability to continue to suppress the RUF, AFRC elements, criminals and ensure border control, or a politically and financially sustainable multi-national peacekeeping force, Nigeria is unlikely to take that first step on the slippery slope of an open-ended commitment to occupy Sierra Leone. It is generally accepted that even with an estimated 78,000 men under arms in 1995, the Nigerian military is top-heavy and its fighting capacity grossly overrated. Nigeria is not an arms and munitions manufacturer. Western-supplied until the imposition of the arms embargo on Abacha's junta, Nigerian materiel is now being sourced from China and North Korea.

Politically, ECOWAS is unlikely to come to a consensus to endorse the military option. The split between Ghanaian President Rawlings and General Abacha is indicative of the stresses within the organisation. Although Rawlings took power by force in 1981, he has since transformed himself into a 'democrat', and appears to be constrained by the dictates of democracy -- he cannot unilaterally go to war without parliamentary endorsement. The dissatisfaction of some francophone leaders was apparent in Abuja: Blaise Campaore of Burkina Faso, who was to have taken over the chairmanship of ECOWAS left the summit before it ended for unknown reasons. Guinea and Liberia have indicated they do not want their territories used as a launch pad for
intervention. Guinea, which has been the destination of choice for exiled SL presidents, is uneasy about the instability along its own borders and among its military. President Lansana Conté has good reason to fear both an external and domestic backlash if he actively supports military action. ECOWAS newcomer Charles Taylor, the original political and military backer of the RUF and its leader Foday Sankoh, is currently attempting to consolidate his democratic mandate in Liberia and complete his own transformation from warlord to statesman with the interim support of Nigerian–led ECOMOG.

Constrained politically and militarily, Nigerian actions have amounted to responsive defence of its current positions around Freetown and threats against or attacks on sanction-breaching vessels. It remains highly unlikely that Nigeria would launch an all-out military offensive