

# Nigerian military topples Sierra Leone junta

**Bill Vann****21 February 1998**

Following a nine-day offensive and a bombardment of the city of Freetown, Nigerian military forces succeeded in toppling the military junta which seized power in the West African state of Sierra Leone in May of last year.

Nigerian troops, operating under the auspices of a West African peace-keeping force known as ECOMOG, took control of Freetown on February 13. The fighting left thousands dead and wounded and turned tens of thousands into refugees. Sierra Leone faces the most severe famine threat of any African country, with as many as half a million in danger of starving. Looting broke out in the capital and other cities and there were reports of crowds killing supporters of the junta in the streets.

This is the second major intervention by Nigerian forces in West Africa in the guise of peace-keepers. ECOMOG was created as the vehicle for Nigeria's intervention into the eight-year-long civil war in Liberia. It began its Liberian intervention in 1990 with the principal aim of preventing warlord Charles Taylor from coming to power. After seven years of fighting and tens of thousands of deaths, the mission was declared a success following elections which placed Taylor, who had reached an understanding with Nigeria's ruling clique, in the presidency.

In Sierra Leone, the stated mission of the Nigerian-dominated peace-keepers was to restore the country's elected president Alhaji Ahmad Tejan Kabbah to power. Kabbah was overthrown on May 25 of last year, in the third coup attempt launched by the military during his 14 months in office.

Nigerian commanders claimed that the decision to launch a final offensive against the military junta of Major Johnny-Paul Koromah was provoked by an incident in which a Nigerian soldier stepped on a land mine. In reality, Nigeria had grown increasingly impatient with the junta's stalling on an accord reached

last October calling for the disarming and demobilization of both the junta's forces and militias backing Kabbah, and the reinstatement of Kabbah's government by April 22.

Nigeria has assumed its internationally-recognized role as the chief enforcer of constitutional order in West Africa despite the fact that the country itself is ruled by a corrupt and despotic military regime. Headed by General Sani Abacha, this dictatorship came to power following the abrogation of the election won by Moshood Abiola five years ago. Abiola remains imprisoned as do hundreds of other opposition leaders, trade union officials, journalists and accused military opponents of the regime. To retain its power the regime has resorted to mass arrests, terror and executions, such as the 1995 hanging of Ken Saro-Wiwa and his associates, as well as assassinations, as in the case of Abiola's wife.

For Abacha and his cronies, the peace-keeping role has proven a godsend. Just as their regime has robbed Nigeria of staggering amounts of wealth, so too it has managed to turn war into a very profitable business. Nigerian business interests connected with the military have carved out a major role in Liberia and are doubtless pursuing a similar path in Sierra Leone. Others have grown rich through war profiteering, supplying arms, food, fuel and other supplies both to the ECOMOG forces and the various factions in the war-torn West African countries themselves.

Nigeria's function as peacekeeper has likewise helped legitimize the regime internationally. There might seem to be a contradiction in Abacha playing the role of chief enforcer of United Nations Security Council resolutions in West Africa at the same time as the Clinton administration is denouncing Saddam Hussein as a "tyrant" and invoking the resolutions of the Security Council as a pretext for launching an attack on Iraq.

One word, oil, goes a long way toward explaining this apparent anomaly. In the case of Iraq, military action helps solidify US control over the vast reserves in the Persian Gulf. In Nigeria, however, Abacha is already safeguarding the profits of the US oil conglomerates, while the fate of the other impoverished countries of West Africa is of little consequence to Washington.

However, as Saddam Hussein's case proves, there is nothing permanent in such relations. Abacha may find himself one day transformed into Washington's bogeyman and a target for US attack, should the interests of the US-based multinationals so require.

Most of the approximately \$12 billion in oil pumped out of Nigeria every year goes to the US. Oil accounts for 95 percent of Nigeria's foreign earnings. The exploitation of this natural resource, however, has benefited only the oil companies and Nigeria's ruling clique, at the expense of the country's 90 million people.

More than 30 percent of Nigeria's national income presently goes to service a \$30 billion foreign debt, incurred under a structural adjustment program imposed by the International Monetary Fund. Unemployment has soared as the value of the Nigerian currency has plummeted.

Under the Abacha regime Chevron and Mobil oil, which are tied to Bank of America and Citibank respectively, have managed to strengthen their grip over Nigerian oil, at the expense of their French, British and Italian competitors.

As long as these interests are served, the Clinton administration and Congress are content to use Nigeria as a regional policeman and instrument for suppressing the strivings of the Nigerian workers and oppressed.



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