

British Labour government accused of helping organise counter-coup in Sierra Leone

Chris Marsden

14 May 1998

Recently British Prime Minister Tony Blair dismissed as "hoo-ha" a series of charges in the press that his Labour Party government had collaborated with a mercenary-led force in deposing the military regime in Sierra Leone. But on May 11, Blair shifted his tactics. Having for weeks denied any official knowledge of the counter-coup that ousted Major Johnny Paul Koroma, he declared that his government had been "quite right" to help reinstate the elected government of Ahmed Tejan Kabbah.

In fact, Britain led the international campaign to depose Koroma. When he returned to power, Kabbah praised Britain "for their support and assistance in every respect."

The coup that brought Koroma to power was carried out on May 25, 1997, and was opposed by Britain, Europe, the US, the United Nations and the Organisation of African Unity. The official position of the UN was that the Kabbah government should be restored to power through peaceful methods.

In October 1997 the United Nations imposed sanctions on Sierra Leone under UN Security Council Resolution 1132, based on a motion submitted by Britain, banning the supply of arms and oil products. As a result, Sierra Leone's already fragile economy was in a state of collapse by December. Gross Domestic Product fell by 27 percent, Government revenue was down 60 percent, inflation rose to 250 percent and the value of the country's currency was halved against the dollar.

Koroma was finally brought down on February 21, 1998 by Nigerian troops. The military dictatorship of General Sani Abacha in Nigeria was acting under the auspices of the West African peacekeeping force, ECOMOG, and through it, the UN. Abacha's military functioned as a proxy for the major imperialist powers, particularly the US, who dictated its actions behind the scenes.

The scandal now haunting the Blair government first came to public attention as early as last August. Canada's *Globe and Mail* newspaper reported a plot to use mercenaries to overthrow Koroma. This involved the exiled Kabbah government, Rakesh Saxena, head of the Vancouver-based Tidewater Management Corporation, and Tim Spicer, head of Sandline International, a mercenary group operating out of London.

Saxena is presently fighting extradition to Thailand in connection with charges of embezzling \$2 billion from one of the country's largest banks. He holds bauxite concessions in West Africa. In his letter to Spicer, Saxena made clear that "our offer of assistance to the Sierra Leone government is undoubtedly motivated by our desire to establish and perhaps consolidate our position in that part of the world." Sandline International's chairman, Tony Buckingham, is a major shareholder in DiamondWorks Ltd., a company that owns six diamond-mining properties in Sierra Leone.

Momudo Koroma, Minister of Presidential Affairs for the Kabbah government, told Spicer that he wanted "strategy, logistics, and training that would convert 40,000 militia into an effective fighting force." Saxena made an initial payment of \$1.5 million to Sandline International in return for flying in guns and supplies to Sierra Leone from Bulgaria through

Nigeria. But problems developed in February 1998, when Saxena was arrested in Vancouver after Canadian authorities discovered he was carrying a Yugoslav passport in the name of a dead man. This not only delayed a second payment of \$3.5 million for helicopters and heavy weaponry, but prompted a British Customs and Excise investigation into Sandline International for breaching the UN embargo.

A search of Sandline International's offices revealed documents showing that the Kabbah government had paid them £10 million to train 40,000 members of a Civil Defence Force and supply 35 tons of Bulgarian guns and ammunition to the Nigerian-led ECOMOG forces, which they did in February.

Faced with prosecution, on April 24 Sandline International's solicitors sent a confidential letter to Foreign Secretary Robin Cook stating that the firm had collaborated with leading Foreign Office personnel and Ministry of Defence officials, as well as representatives of the US government.

Nearly two weeks ago the Labour government announced a wider and "independent" investigation into the affair. Cook denied that ministerial approval had been given for any plan to organise a coup.

On May 4 Cook again reiterated that "there is no ministerial approval, for any activity by Sandline, no contact by ministers with Sandline, no discussion by ministers with Sandline and we will robustly resist any claim that there was." The Minister of State for Africa, Tony Lloyd, told the Commons Foreign Affairs Committee that Cook was only made aware of the allegations on May 1. The *Times* newspaper refuted this, reporting that Cook was informed of Sandline's operations in February by the Liberal Democratic peer, Lord Avebury, who had read about it on the Internet!

On May 6 Cook responded by stating that Lloyd had been shown papers on the Customs and Excise investigation in mid April, but was not informed of allegations of Foreign Office contact until May 1. Cook had been informed of the Customs and Excise investigation into Sandline International on April 28, but not of allegations of Foreign Office involvement. Blair promised that ministers or officials found to have colluded in any breach of the UN would be disciplined.

On May 7 "well placed officials in Sierra Leone" were cited in the *Guardian* claiming that the Foreign Office was discussing a coup as far back as last August. On May 8, Sandline International's solicitors released the "strictly private letter" they had sent on April 24 to Cook, with copies to George Robertson, the Defence Secretary, Margaret Becket, the Trade and Industry Secretary, and Dawn Primarolo, Financial Secretary to the Treasury.

The letter named five officials at the Foreign Office who had met with Sandline: Peter Penfold, the British High Commissioner to Sierra Leone, John Everard, then assistant head of the Africa Department (Equatorial), Craig Murray, who succeeded him, Lynda St. Cook and Tim Andrews. Also briefed were Lieutenant-Colonel Peter Hicks, who was in Conakry, Guinea to support Penfold while he was in exile, and Colonel Andrew Gale, British Military Adviser to the UN special envoy to Sierra Leone.

"Our clients were led to believe that clearance had been given at head of department level," the letter stated.

Cook claimed that while Sandline's letter was sent on April 24, he had only returned to the country on April 28 and had only got around to reading it on May 1. For this story to be credible, one must believe that not only Cook, but three other ministers and their departments had not bothered to read a letter charging the government with collusion with mercenaries in organising a coup.

The pro-Labour press began to urge a shift to a more aggressive stance by the government. On May 9, the *Independent* newspaper wrote that the UN Security resolution on sanctions served to "prevent aid going to the ousted President..."

"If Britain is to run an ethical foreign policy, it should include helping restore legitimate democratic rulers where possible. But preferably without subterfuge. Mr. Cook should in future try to ensure that the UN's knee-jerk reaction--an arms embargo--is tempered by the need for flexibility when dealing with genocidal, illegal regimes."

This line was embraced by Blair and his press team, who declared that thanks to New Labour, "the good guys won." On May 12 Cook rejected calls for a public inquiry into the affair and defended the Foreign Office from "wild allegations" by Sandline. He said that no "prior approval" had been given to a breach of the UN arms embargo. While denying that any official backing was given to Sandline's activities, the government is not denying that contact took place.

The Labour government calculates that, in the end, no one will shed tears for the organisers of a coup that left a quarter of a million people starving and drove tens of thousands into exile. But Labour's supposedly humanitarian motives and claim to have upheld democracy do not stand up to examination.

The present tragedy of Sierra Leone is the end product of centuries of imperialist oppression that have left a nation rich in natural resources in the grip of grotesque poverty and internecine conflict. Sierra Leone has a plentiful supply of diamonds, bauxite and other minerals. Rex Diamond Mining Corporation, which owns the rights to the area, says that the Tongo Fields are amongst the richest in the world, with an estimated grade of \$140 per ton.

In contrast, the country's people are amongst the world's poorest. Out of a population of 5 million, 80 percent live below the poverty line, and are unemployed or underemployed, earning less than \$18 a month. Of these, 50 percent live in extreme poverty. Average life expectancy is 34.4 years, compared with the overall figure for Africa of 51.8. The death rate during childbirth is a staggering 1,800 per 100,000 live births.

Britain has interests in the area stretching back hundreds of years. In 1896 it declared Sierra Leone a Protectorate in order to block French domination of the region. It was not until April 27, 1961 that Sierra Leone was granted independence as a Commonwealth nation. It has been ruled by corrupt governments--reflecting the regional, religious and tribal antagonisms assiduously cultivated by the British--and has suffered one coup after another.

In 1985, the regime of Joseph S. Momoh set out to abandon all policies based on economic self-sufficiency and liberalise foreign and domestic trade in order to attract overseas investment. But the outbreak of civil war in the south, led by the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) of Foday Sankoh, a British-trained army officer, prevented this from being carried out. Momoh was overthrown in a coup led by the British-trained Captain Valentine EM Strasser in April 1992.

Britain urged Strasser to restore civilian rule in order to stabilise a political and economic crisis that was crippling investment and trade. Sierra Leone's Gross Domestic Product actually shrank by 10 percent in 1995, under conditions where Africa's overall economy grew by 2.9 percent.

By this time Sierra Leone had over 30,000 combatants in its civil war

and the army was consuming one-third of the national budget. The main mining companies, Sierra Rutile and Sieromco, had closed down their operations. The country's external debts had risen to \$1,226 million, more than 160 percent of Gross National Product. Over 60 percent of food had to be imported, with much of this coming as food-aid packages.

Strasser did not implement his promise to hold free elections or bring about peace with the RUF, and was overthrown in January 1996. His replacement, Brigadier Julius Maade Bio, took power shortly after finishing a "Management of Change" course run by the British Civil Service, for which he was recommended by the then-High Commissioner Ian McCluney.

Under Maade Bio the transfer of power to a civilian government, led by the Sierra Leone People's Party, was organised in March 1996. Thus the Kabbah government owes not only its restoration, but also its birth, to a coup. In November a peace agreement was signed with the RUF, bringing the five-year civil war to an end.

Whatever the popular illusions in Kabbah's government, its programme was dictated by the interests of the major international corporations with trading links and investments in the country. The government set out to create the conditions necessary to re-establish mining and other ventures. In return for \$139 million in loans from the IMF, the government pledged to increase tax revenues, cut the military budget, reduce government involvement in the economy, rationalise legal requirements for foreign and domestic investment, provide greater protection to economic operators and deregulate the prices of petroleum products. Workers paid for this pledge immediately, as fuel prices were hiked by 20 per cent.

A South African mercenary outfit, Executive Outcomes, employed by the outgoing military regime, continued to receive over \$1 million a month for protecting diamond mining assets. The diamond companies resumed operations and, in the first months, reported mining stones weighing as much as 550 carats.

The Kabbah government dealt ruthlessly with potential opponents. It was involved in the arrest and internment of RUF leader Sakoh by the Nigerian government. When this was criticised by one newspaper, President Kabbah instigated a prosecution for its "unfriendly line" towards Nigeria. The government proposed a bill to regulate newspapers, demanding, amongst other things, ten years experience and a degree in journalism for all editors. This would have closed all but 8 of 46 newspapers in Freetown.

The biggest threat the government faced was from the army. Any attempt to cut military spending would inevitably provoke opposition. To offset this, the government cultivated a civilian militia as an alternative power base. To ensure the loyalty of at least a section of the army, Britain sent advisers to train two battalions and Nigeria increased its contingent of trainers.

Kabbah announced that his government would slash the subsidised rice provided to the army by two-thirds. This was a major attack on its privileges. Army personnel received varying amounts of rice depending on their rank. They only paid \$1 a bag, compared with the civilian price of \$20. All of this laid the basis for the May 25, 1997 coup that overthrew Kabbah, and the events that followed.

The overriding aim of the Blair government and its counterparts in Europe and America in placing Kabbah back in power is to restore the stability necessary for economic restructuring and penetration by the major transnational corporations. The Nigerian army and mercenary outfits like Sandline International and Executive Outcomes are mechanisms employed by the imperialist powers and their client regimes to safeguard their global interests. In every corner of the globe the major powers cultivate governments that are prepared to defend the operations of the transnational corporations against their own people or those in neighbouring countries. If these regimes need assistance, then mercenaries can be brought in with the tacit agreement of the major powers, rather

than sending in an occupation force. At least 10 such firms operate out of London, with overseas contracts worth more than £100 million and over 8,000 soldiers on their books.

Commenting on the lessons of Sierra Leone, David Shearer of the International Institute of Strategic Studies told the Times on May 9, "British foreign policy is being shaped more by international corporate policy. Today's mercenaries don't fight bush wars to win back countries, they just protect vital assets."

Millius Palayiwa, a Zimbabwean-born lawyer involved in the Sierra Leone events, said, "[W]hen we talk about Executive Outcomes and Sandline, we are not talking about the dogs of war of the 1960s. They are very sophisticated. They have excellent public relations, excellent intelligence. They are well trained with sophisticated weapons. They operate as businesses.... (and) are powerful enough to dislodge any government in Africa."

Blair's invocation of an "ethical foreign policy" is every bit as hypocritical as the 19th century claims that Europeans had assumed the "white man's burden" in their drive to "civilise Africa." That he can dismiss the revelations of the past month as "hoo-ha" only confirms that British imperialism is again engaging in its traditional policy of lying by day and murdering by night.



To contact the WSSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact