

On the role of imperialism in Africa

11 September 1998

RE: Private Armies Involved in Congo War

Thanks for your article dated: 2 September 98. It was a well written synopsis of the crisis in Central Africa and the participation of foreign organizations. But, there is a point which I want to have corrected, and that is that the government in Sierra Leone was restored with the help of West African governments, and not the US and European governments. The West African governments and primarily Nigeria, were directly responsible for restoring the democratically elected government to Sierra Leone. Nigeria committed the bulk of troops and resources that were used in that process. The US and European governments, helpful as they may be in Africa, gave moral and some other forms of assistance to the effort but in no way contributed troops or resources near the magnitude of Nigeria's effort. It is lamentable and downright suspicious that the efforts of African countries such as Nigeria are overlooked while those of US and European governments are perpetual front page material.

Thanks.

HCD

11/09/98

Dear HCD:

Thank you for your e-mail and appreciation of the article on the Congo. I cannot agree, however, with your points that the Nigerian and West African governments were 'directly responsible' for operations in Sierra Leone, that they have been overlooked compared to the US and European governments, or that the latter can in any genuine sense be considered 'helpful' in Africa.

It is true that the ECOMOG military force of ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States), led by Nigeria, acted in Sierra Leone without the assistance of troops from the US or European governments. The mercenary outfits, Sandline International and Executive Outcomes, were involved in supplying arms and training Sierra Leone troops as

well as in protecting diamond mine assets. But the whole operation to restore the Kabbah government in February this year was at the behest of and directed by the western governments.

ECOMOG's 'peacekeeping' role in Sierra Leone was carried out under the auspices of the UN from the start. The removal of the Koroma regime was planned and carried out under the supervision of British and US government officials.

In the usual run of events this involvement of the western powers would have been hidden behind a diplomatic smokescreen, only to be revealed by historians decades later. In this case the revelation that arms were being shipped out to Sierra Leone from Britain by Sandline--contravening the UN arms embargo--created a major scandal for the British Labour government. As a result a parliamentary committee carried out an investigation which was extensively covered in the media. It turned out that the British Foreign Office had been discussing the coup since August 1997 and its officials were involved throughout.

In order to get the Labour Government off the hook it was claimed that government ministers were unaware of the operation. The media gloss--supported by UN officials--was that the arms embargo should really have been directed only at the Koroma regime, and Britain was perfectly justified in supporting the 'democratically elected' Kabbah. This, of course, was not the position agreed at the Conakry peace deal struck in October 1997 when an arms embargo was placed on both parties to the conflict. Throughout the British parliamentary investigation, no suggestion was made that ECOMOG was anything other than a willing accomplice to British and US plans. Surely if there was any evidence that ECOMOG and Nigeria were 'directly responsible' as you suggest--and not merely acting proxies for imperialist powers--the British government would have broadcast it far and wide to downplay their own

involvement.

Moving to more general considerations than the Sierra Leone coup, I think that you are seriously misinformed about the nature of African regimes and about US and European involvement in Africa. A serious study of African countries in the 30 years or so since independence from colonial rule reveals no real improvement--in fact in recent years a marked deterioration--in the living conditions of the mass of the African population. Half of the population live on less than a dollar a day. There are numerous statistics from the UN and other sources testifying to the grinding poverty, acute cases of famine and outbreaks of disease throughout sub-Saharan Africa.

Western-based transnational companies have meanwhile extracted billions of dollars in profit from their operations--including oil in Nigeria and diamonds and minerals in Sierra Leone. Under the structural adjustment programmes imposed by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, governments have plunged deeper and deeper into debt so that debt repayment claims as much as 80 percent of their foreign exchange earnings.

Notwithstanding the moral platitudes from their leaders, the US and European governments have done nothing to stop the development of this catastrophe. Their concern at every stage has been to protect the interests of the transnationals and banks. For their part the African regimes which replaced colonial rule have failed completely to achieve any real independence from this imperialist domination. Based on a narrow elite, they have now all abandoned the socialist rhetoric of the '60s and '70s and fully support the IMF free market policies dictated by the US and Europe.

It is true that the western governments are now pushing 'democratic values' and respect for 'human rights' by African governments, and are calling for minimal 'debt relief' for regimes which adopt pro-market strategies. Insofar as this is more than rhetoric, it is in order to promote a more stable environment for transnational investment. Even when a government is elected--as in Sierra Leone--the same wealthy elite has stayed in power, western investments are assured of their profits, and no provision whatsoever is made to eradicate the poverty of the mass of the population.

I hope these points answer your reservations and provoke a further study of our articles on the subject

listed below.

Chris Talbot
WSWS editorial board

See Also:

Private armies involved in the Congo war
[2 September 1998]

As the sun sets on Abacha: The immediate tasks before workers and youth
[11 July 1998]

Death of Moshood Abiola increases tensions in Nigeria
[9 July 1998]

Abacha's death fuels crisis in Nigeria
[10 June 1998]

British Labour government accused of helping organise counter-coup in Sierra Leone
[14 May 1998]

Nigerian military topples Sierra Leone junta
[21 February 1998]

A discussion on political perspective with a Nigerian correspondent
[19 May 1997]



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