Fresh fighting in Sierra Leone capital intensifies crisis in West Africa

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As the first anniversary of the toppling of Sierra Leone's military junta by Nigerian troops approaches, a human catastrophe is unfolding in the West African state and surrounding region.

Sierra Leone's 12-month civil war has reached a new intensity over the last weeks, as anti government rebels took control of the capital, Freetown. Hundreds of Nigerian troops arrived at Luni International Airport on January 10 to reinforce the military operation being conducted under the auspices of ECOMOG, the West African regional organisation. Nigerian soldiers make up the bulk of the 15,000 strong force. Heavy fighting has continued since, with conflicting reports as to the outcome. ECOMOG troops are said to have regained control of Freetown, but not without substantial human costs. The Nigerian government is playing down any losses, but eyewitnesses' report uniformed bodies strewn around the capital. Since Christmas, the Nigerian Army has been returning it's dead and wounded home. Last Thursday, 45 ECOMOG soldiers were interred on the second day of what was described as a "series of burials".

The human cost of the war goes far beyond the military casualties on both sides. The United Nations World Food Programme issued an emergency report last Monday warning that hundreds of thousands of Freetown residents, trapped in their homes for almost a week, face starvation if fighting continues. The International Red Cross has made similar warnings.

Nigeria has long functioned as a proxy for the imperialist powers in Africa, most notably the US and Britain. The present civil war began after the military junta of Major Johnny-Paul Koromah was toppled in a military offensive led by Nigerian troops, which restored the government of President Ahmed Tejan Kabbah in February last year.

Britain's support for Kabbah went as far as helping to organise the counter-coup that brought him back to power. In August 1997, Canada's *Globe and Mail* newspaper reported a plot to use mercenaries to overthrow Koroma. This involved the exiled Kabbah government, Rakesha Saxena, head of the Vancouver-based Tidewater Management Corporation, and Tim Spicer, head of Sandline International, a mercenary group operating out of London. Subsequent reports have revealed high level contact between Sandline and five officials at the Foreign Office, including the British High Commissioner to Sierra Leone, Peter Penfold. On his return to power Kabbah praised Britain, "for their support and assistance in every respect."

Nigeria's intervention in Sierra Leone is proving to be no less tragic than its previous claim to the role of "peace keeper" in Liberia. ECOMOG was created as the vehicle for Nigeria's intervention into the eight year long civil war in that country. Nigeria began its intervention in Liberia in 1990 with the stated aim of preventing warlord, Charles Taylor, from coming to power. After seven years of fighting and tens of thousands of deaths, elections placed Taylor, who had subsequently struck a compromise with Nigeria's ruling regime, in the presidency.

There are growing concerns that Nigeria's involvement is destabilising not only Sierra Leone but Nigeria also. In its editorial of January 13, the *Financial Times* commented:

"It is nearly a year since the west African peace force known as Ecomog launched its onslaught on the Sierra Leone capital of Freetown, paving the way for the return of the democratically elected government of President Ahmed Tejan Kabbah.

"They won the capital, but have lost the country. Ecomog's military campaign lacked a political strategy

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with which to secure a settlement with the rebels, while the government appealed in vain to the international community to help provide the resources to rebuild a collapsed state."

The *FT* states that the outcome of the intervention for Nigeria has been "humiliating and dangerous", adding that the drop in oil prices to the lowest for 12 years has had a deeply destabilising role within Nigeria.

"To make matters worse, protesters in the oil-producing Delta region who are demanding a higher share of government spending have managed to cut production by a third.

"General Abdulsalam Abubakar, Nigeria's military leader, has hinted that more troops may be deployed in the Delta. But an army fighting on two fronts and an economy in crisis are not conducive to a stable transition or a secure democracy," they say.

"Instability in Nigeria would be a devastating blow to a continent already beset by conflict. The war in the Congo, formerly Zaire, has sucked in troops from at least six other countries. Sudan's civil war shows no sign of ending, Eritrea and Ethiopia remain on the brink of resuming their futile border battle, while Somalia has been all but abandoned to its fate, " the *FT* concludes.

The ongoing crisis in Sierra Leone is intensifying tensions throughout the region. Ghana President Jerry Rawlings condemned Liberia and two unnamed North African countries for supporting the rebels in Sierra Leone, describing it as "a stab in the back of West African countries who sacrificed to bring democracy to a country that went through seven years of civil war."

Despite repeated denials by the Liberian government, these charges have become the basis for further direct involvement by the US and Britain. The United States have directly accused the Liberian government of support for AFRC/RUF rebels in Sierra Leone. "We have told the government of Liberia that we know they are supporting RUF activities, and we condemn support from any source to the insurgence," State Department spokesman James Rubin said.

The threat of imperialist intervention was heightened on January 13, when the United Nations Security Council extended the mandate of the UN Observer Mission in the country to March 13. The mission was established to help in "national reconciliation" and the demobilisation of former soldiers, following Kabbah's restoration. With the increased conflict around the capital in recent days, the role of the UN in the region could quickly transform from that of observer to open military involvement.

Britain, for its part, has no intention of leaving its former colonial possession in the hands of either Nigeria or the UN. The Royal Navy frigate HMS Norfolk has been despatched to Sierra Leone to support Kabbah's government. On a refuelling stop at Dakar port, the commander of the 181-strong British "reconnaissance and liaison team", Brigadier David Richards told Reuters, "Our aim is ... to see whether or not we can do something more to assist the restoration of stability in support of Mr Kabbah and the democratically elected regime there. How we are going to do that is really my business."

Earlier the UK announced an extra Â£1 million to support the Kabbah government and the ECOMOG force. This is on top of Â£2 million already made available to the UN Trust Fund for Sierra Leone. A Foreign and Commonwealth press release says that, "the logistical support provided to ECOMOG will depend on the list of requirements given us by ECOMOG." But adds, "It will not comprise arms or ammunition."

Far from "restoring stability", the aim of British capitalism is to secure its grip over a nation rich in natural resources with a plentiful supply of diamonds, bauxite and other minerals.

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