Britain: Inquiry attacks Blair government over "arms-to-Africa" scandal

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Prime Minister Tony Blair and Foreign Secretary Robin Cook have led an unprecedented attack against the all-party Foreign Affairs Select Committee report criticising the government's handling of the "arms-to-Africa" affair. Blair and Cook brushed aside the verdict of the 10-month inquiry as "unfair and disproportionate". They accused the MPs on the committee of having found no significant new facts to those uncovered in the investigation under Sir Thomas Legg last summer, which the government set up as a spoiler to the Select Committee inquiry.

The coup that brought Major Johnny Paul Koroma to power in Sierra Leone on May 25, 1997 led to a campaign by Britain, Europe and the US to restore the government of President Ahmed Tejan Kabbah. In October 1997 the United Nations imposed sanctions on Sierra Leone under UN Security Council Resolution 1132, including the prohibition of supplying arms. Koroma was finally brought down on February 21, 1998 by Nigerian troops, under the auspices of the West African peacekeeping force ECOMOG. In this, the Nigerian military dictatorship functioned as a proxy for the major imperialist powers, who dictated its actions behind the scenes.

Prior to this event, a plot was hatched by Kabbah's supporters to overthrow Koroma using the British-based mercenary force, Sandline International. This included using it to supply weaponry, military equipment and personnel. This came to the attention of the British Customs and Excise in February 1998, which launched an investigation into Sandline for breaching the UN embargo. Faced with prosecution, on April 24 Sandline International's solicitors sent a confidential letter to Cook stating that the firm had collaborated with leading Foreign Office personnel and Ministry of Defence officials, as well as representatives of the US administration. The government was forced to announce the setting up of the Legg inquiry, with Cook strenuously denying that ministerial approval had been given for any plan to organise a coup.

The Select Committee was also set up at the end of April last year. Tony Lloyd MP, the Minister of State responsible for Sierra Leone, appeared before the committee on May 5. On May 14 it took the evidence of Britain's most senior diplomat, Sir John Kerr, the Permanent Under-Secretary of State, who indicated that Ministers knew of the Sandline operation by March 12, 1997, but subsequently retracted his statement later the same day.

The Select Committee was stymied when Cook quickly announced the Legg inquiry and gave this priority. Even after this was concluded, Cook's department obstructed the Select Committee's work. Nevertheless, its verdict on the affair is still devastating. It charges Sir John Kerr with failing in his duty to ministers and making serious errors of judgement. The committee established that on at least two occasions Kerr had been informed about his department's contacts with Sandline and that he did not inform Cook for four weeks. Officials at every level of the Foreign Office were criticised for having kept Cook ignorant of plans by Sandline International to ship weapons to Sierra Leone early last year in defiance of the UN embargo.

Peter Penfold, the British High Commissioner to Sierra Leone, is censured for exceeding his authority. Other senior officials criticised include Richard Dales, the former director of Africa Command at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), now the British ambassador in Norway, and his successor Ann Grant, then in charge of the Equatorial Africa section of the FCO.

A more probing report would have raised explicit questions regarding Cook's professions of ignorance regarding Sandline's operations. Kerr is widely suspected of trying to protect Cook and the FCO by playing the role of patsy, confident that his back will be covered in return. Labour appointed him Permanent Under-Secretary of State, after he left his post as British Ambassador to the US.

Cook claims that he knew nothing until Sandline's solicitors complained to him that they were under investigation by the Customs and Excise for sanctions-busting on April 28. But the report details extensive contacts between the Foreign Office and Sandline, mediated by Peter Penfold.

It is true that many of the facts were set out in the Legg report last July, but this was designed to minimise their impact once they became public knowledge. That report cleared ministers of colluding with Sandline to make illegal arms shipments to Sierra Leone. The Select Committee of MPs said Legg had "trod softly" in his conclusions. The Committee also criticised the Foreign Secretary for lack of co-operation with its inquiries, particularly denying it the right to question MI6 head, Sir David Spedding. This was condemned as "pointless obstruction".

Britain officially rejected the use of force to restore Kabbah. In June 1997 Blair himself specifically said military force was not appropriate. The government also faced serious difficulties in overtly supplying military aid. The Select Committee notes this, writing, "Supporting a military operation led by a Nigerian regime, itself a massive abuser of civil human rights, and subject to international sanctions, was politically untenable. Secondly, officials emphasised considerable concern that arming President Kabbah's Kamajors would only intensify and prolong the civil war." It also notes, "Sierra Lone came hard on the heels of a scandal involving alleged arms supplies to Rwanda in 1996 in defiance of a UN embargo" by the previous Conservative government. A repeat of such practices would have been politically embarrassing, particularly in light of Cook's claim to an "ethical foreign policy".

The use of force was explicitly prescribed by UN Security Resolution 1132, which was drafted by Britain. This asserts: "All states shall prevent the sale or supply to Sierra Leone, by their nationals or from their territories, or using their flag vessels or aircraft, of petroleum and petroleum products and arms and related materiÃ©l of all types, including weapons and ammunition, military vehicles and equipment and spare parts of the aforementioned, whether or not originating from their territory."

It is revealing that UN legal representatives have since said that ECOMOG *was* considered exempt from the resolution, but the FCO avoided any possible difficulties by proceeding to secretly flout the embargo through encouraging the operations of Sandline.

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The head of Sandline International, Tim Spicer, is cited as saying he did not know the supply of arms to ECOMOG forces was illegal. He says he was in constant discussion with Penfold and on December 23, 1997 told him of the agreement to supply arms to Kabbah. This was, he says, given the go-ahead by FCO officials on January 19, 1998. The report comments, "It would have been entirely reasonable of him to assume that Mr Penfold was acting with the full authority of HMG [Her Majesty's Government]." Penfold is criticised for his supposed "ignorance and lack of due diligence in ascertaining the true legal position on arms supplies to Sierra Leone". "Mr Penfold left himself open to accusations of encouraging Sandline."

The report then explains, "Whatever problems or excuses there may have been in relaying information earlier, Mr Penfold had by February 2 clearly and unequivocally informed management in the FCO that Sandline had a contract to supply arms to President Kabbah. He understandably expressed surprise that he received no response to that minute--and, in particular, no indication that Sandline was engaged in illegal activity."

The report cites two earlier warnings "which the FCO did not take seriously". An article on Sandline's plans in the *Toronto Globe and Mail* on August 1, 1997, which was sent to them on February 5 in a letter from Lord Avebury and a second, even more explicit report direct from Sandline. "Mr Spicer telephoned Mr Everard [one of the FCO officials singled out for criticism] on 5 January 1998 to say he had signed an agreement to give support worth $10 million to President Kabbah and the Kamajors. Mr Everard was not told that arms formed part of this contract, and does not seem to have deduced that they would have done. Mr Penfold told us that a sum of this size would have meant arms to him."

A third document reviewed was an even more explicit notification by Sandline of its intentions. Penfold handed a document to the FCO on January 29 given to him by Sandline. This detailed "Project Python" as being designed to "return the democratically elected government to Sierra Leone", with Sandline playing a "supporting role" including "procurement and delivery" and a "direct action role". An accompanying note written by a Mr Andrews of the FCO to his superiors--Grant and Dale--reads, "The paper gives details of proposed support for the Komajors and President Kabbah. Spicer is proposing a 55 man team including 5 helicopters." The report comments, "Quite extraordinarily, there is no evidence in any of the papers the Committee has seen of Ms Grant and Mr Dale responding to their receipt of the Sandline Project Python document."

Of Sir John Kerr, the report's authors say, "We conclude that the Permanent Under-Secretary of State failed in his duty to Ministers. The Foreign Secretary was first informed about Sandline on 28 April--more than four weeks after Sir John Kerr had first been told of the Sandline affair and three weeks after he had learned of the Customs raid on his own Department. Moreover, the Foreign Secretary was informed, not by his own officials, but by Sandline's solicitors' letter."

The report goes on to condemn Foreign Secretary Cook for his refusal to release some documents and of delaying others on the grounds of the earlier Legg inquiry. It says, "It would be quite wrong and an unacceptable precedent for a Government in the future to be able to argue that any Select Committee inquiry could be superseded, or perhaps blocked for a considerable period of time, by a whistled-up departmental inquiry."

It explains how the Select Committee wanted to clarify "accusations during the Sandline affair that the intelligence services have been involved, or complicit, in the supply of arms." Legg and his associate Sir Robin Ibbs had access to 102 intelligence reports, but they only released one they considered relevant to the Select Committee. Cook refused repeated requests to let them check the documents for themselves. They comment, "This sounds very much like a Minister determined to defend his own position."

The Select Committee also wanted a private evidence session with the head of MI6, Sir David Spedding, referred to in the report as the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) and "C" respectively. The Foreign Secretary also refused this because it would damage "operational capability". MI6 is directly responsible to Cook, yet the report does not point out that this undermines his supposed ignorance of the Sandline Affair. It does conclude, however, that "From the point of view of government, we are not able to say that, in the Sandline affair, the SIS has a clean bill of health. We can neither condemn nor exonerate it."

The Select Committee concludes by proposing to make sure that any future arms embargo is properly understood and publicised within and outside the Foreign Office, that legislation is implemented to control the activities of mercenaries operating out of Britain, and to clamp down on illicit arms trading.

The contempt for all democratic norms exposed by the Select Committee did not cause the government to so much as blush. Its response to the exposure of its clandestine support for the Nigerian/mercenary operation in Sierra Leone has been to place its intervention on an open basis. Cook already announced on January 20 that Britain had given the ECOMOG force an additional Â£1 million worth of trucks and equipment earlier that month and was sharing intelligence with it. A British naval frigate, HMS *Norfolk*, is now permanently stationed off the coast of Freetown, with Sir Peter Penfold operating as Britain's go-between with the Kabbah government.

The civil war has continued, with 3,000 deaths this year. The Revolutionary United Front (RUF), which supported Koroma's coup, has systematically murdered civilians and terrorises its opponents using rape and amputations. Tens of thousands of homeless have been forced to take shelter in a football stadium, which has seen outbreaks of disease. The ECOMOG forces have also been criticised by Amnesty International for carrying out summary executions of those suspected of being rebel sympathisers.

The plot thickened on Thursday February 11, when Liberal Democrat leader Paddy Ashdown told parliament that British firms have been supplying arms to the RUF rebels. The Customs and Excise department launched an inquiry last month into two companies suspected of supplying arms, such as portable mortars and AK-47 assault rifles from Slovakia. Ashdown did not name the firms involved, but the *Sunday Times* newspaper has already alleged that Sky Air Cargo and the partly British-owned Occidental Airlines were using ageing Boeing airplanes to transport AK-47 rifles and 60 mm portable mortars to the rebels.

Britain is not alone in having imperialist designs on Sierra Leone. With a pro-British government installed in power, France has now been accused of intervening on behalf of the RUF rebels. The RUF is supported by Burkina Faso and Cote d'Ivoire, as well as Liberia. A French politician told Agence France Presse, "The arms that Burkina Faso's President Blaise Compaore has supplied to [Liberia's President] Charles Taylor could not have been delivered without the green light from French secret services in Cote d'Ivoire." This charge has been echoed in Sierra Leone, with one of the country's newspapers, *For di People*, writing, "French commercial and imperialist interests are the real hidden instigators behind the attack against Freetown and behind wars waged by rebels in Liberia and in Sierra Leone."

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