

Sierra Leone peace talks expose Blair's "ethical" foreign policy

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9 June 1999

British Prime Minister Tony Blair's moral justification for war obviously does not extend to the small West African country of Sierra Leone. A cease-fire was declared last month and peace negotiations with the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) rebels have now begun in Lomé, in nearby Togo. Both Britain and the United States have sanctioned these negotiations.

Only last year, Blair said that Britain was "quite right" to break a United Nations arms embargo in sending Sandline International, a mercenary force, to back the Sierra Leone government of President Ahmed Tejan Kabbah fighting the RUF. The Labour government faced down a major scandal, claiming what they did was justified because the Kabbah regime was "democratically elected".

Up until the present peace talks, British and world media reported extensively on RUF atrocities, while largely ignoring those committed by government forces. The South African *Mail and Guardian*, for example, states in a June 2 report that "independent aid workers and victims agree that the RUF's trademark tactics include hacking off people's hands, arms, legs, ears and noses, in addition to raping, kidnapping and burning people alive." A recent report from the French charity Médecines sans Frontières (MSF) stated that out of 56 war victims they were treating in Freetown, the capital of Sierra Leone, "ten had at least one hand deliberately amputated by machete". MSF point out that their report is about people who had survived such mutilations and were able to reach Freetown—the total of mutilated persons is far higher.

The moralistic propaganda which Blair and Cook used against their critics to explain the hiring of Sandline has now been dropped. Instead, the energies of the Blair government and Clinton administration are being directed towards promoting the idea of reconciliation. The Lomé talks between President Kabbah and RUF leader Foday Sankoh were attended not only by representatives of the UN and Organisation for African Unity (OAU), but by the Reverend Jesse Jackson. Jackson is described as the "United States Special Envoy for the Promotion of Democracy in Africa". He expressed satisfaction that the cease-fire had been reached on the eve of the African-American summit, due to be held in Accra. With no explanation of why the US and Britain were calling off their

support for the eight-year-long war, Jackson said, "We are coming back to our roots, our fatherland, which is facing several problems, but we are coming back with a lot of resources. In one week we are going to celebrate a new era in Nigeria. We will not rest until we celebrate peace in the DRC [Democratic Republic of Congo], in Ethiopia and elsewhere."

The Sierra Leone cease-fire and peace negotiations, it should be added, have received virtually no coverage in the British media. Throughout the pages of reports lauding the Labour government's war in Yugoslavia, no questions have been asked about how their self-styled "ethical foreign policy" has been applied in Africa. Very brief film clips of amputees in Freetown were shown on television news, but the viewer would think that this was another horrible African war with no obvious connection to Blair and Foreign Secretary Robin Cook. It was suggested that a "peace initiative" could bring some optimism to this war-torn country.

In reality, from the end of 1997 Britain and the United States organised a major military offensive in Sierra Leone against the RUF. Fifteen thousand ECOMOG (Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group) troops from Nigeria, nominally in Sierra Leone as "peacekeepers", were deployed against the RUF with modern equipment, including jets and helicopters. As well as financing the Nigerian involvement, thousands of Sierra Leone government troops were regrouped and armed. Tens of thousands of traditional hunters (kamajors) were supplied with modern weapons to fight the RUF. British and US-based mercenaries, or "private security firms" as they are euphemistically called—Pacific Architects and Engineers as well as Sandline International—were also deployed in training, logistics and, in some cases, in direct combat. Over a hundred British military advisors and intelligence experts have remained in Sierra Leone throughout this period.

Whilst a civil war has raged since 1991 between the RUF and a series of British and US-backed regimes—with ECOMOG support—the intervention last year was a major offensive. A section of the Sierra Leone army, led by Major Johnny Paul Koroma, had defected from the Kabbah regime, sided with the RUF, and seized power in May 1997. Although official UN diplomacy arranged negotiations with Koroma and imposed an arms embargo, the British and US response was to mount a

military operation. Kabbah's regime was reinstalled in the capital and the RUF pursued into the northern forests.

Kabbah was encouraged by his British advisors to institute a hard-line policy against the RUF and its supporters. Under the slogan "no peace without justice", two dozen soldiers were executed and 40 civilians sentenced to death for supporting the Koroma regime. Foday Sankoh, the long-standing RUF leader, was imprisoned under sentence of death.

What has transpired since the beginning of this year has been a military debacle for the ECOMOG forces, the Kabbah regime, and their British and US backers. The RUF has taken control of large parts of the country, and in January this year was even making a push for the capital, Freetown. BBC reports of the Lomé talks now speak of protracted negotiations with the RUF representatives, a possible power sharing government with the rebels, a possible amnesty for soldiers who supported Koroma, and discussions about the release of Sankoh.

A few reports are emerging regarding the scale of the humanitarian disaster brought about by this yearlong military intervention. An indication of how the war was escalated by the British and US is that whilst 20,000 people are estimated to have died in the civil war since 1991, 5,000 of these deaths occurred since January this year when ECOMOG stopped the RUF taking Freetown.

A May 20 report from the Office of US Foreign Disaster Assistance states that almost one half of the country's 4.5 million inhabitants have had to flee their homes. It estimates that between 700,000 and 1 million people are now officially "internally displaced persons". UNHCR report that approximately 460,000 Sierra Leoneans are refugees living in neighbouring countries. 12,000 of these have registered as refugees in Guinea since last December.

The January attack on Freetown left the city without electricity, telephones and very little food or water. With the rainy season approaching (May to November), aid agencies have been airlifting plastic sheeting to provide temporary shelter for the displaced persons camps around Freetown. A serious outbreak of cholera is anticipated, due to the large concentrations of people living together without proper sanitation.

The plight of people in the rebel-held areas, where aid agencies had no access before the cease-fire, is likely to be dire. Fighting has disrupted the economy in a country where most people live off the land, growing vegetables, nuts, cocoa and rice. The scale of the terror tactics of the RUF is not yet known in terms of civilian casualties, but it has certainly exacerbated the food crisis.

How did the RUF return from their jungle bases in the north of Sierra Leone to mount a country-wide offensive, pushing a large military force with far superior weaponry to the brink of defeat? The RUF were able to do so because ECOMOG had little control over the rural areas in the north. The traditional kamajor hunters, armed to fight against the RUF, are only

based in the south of Sierra Leone. From their northern retreats, the RUF advanced its guerrilla offensive on major towns and roads towards the end of last year, scoring a series of victories against ECOMOG. Increasing casualties amongst the underpaid ECOMOG troops, fighting a war they had little interest in, led to demoralisation.

Having gained control of the key diamond areas, previously defended by Sandline on behalf of international corporations, the RUF were able to trade diamonds as well as palm oil and cacao for arms, ammunitions, foodstuffs and petrol. With apparently no Western backers, their only foreign support is in neighbouring Liberia, where President Charles Taylor has unofficially allowed them to establish bases in return for such lucrative trade. Although they started out as a small group in the 1980s with Libyan backing and a policy of overthrowing the corrupt and hated Western-backed regime of Joseph Momoh, the RUF has long since abandoned any pretence of winning political support on a popular programme. They have looted the regions where they are based and terrorised the local population into forced labour, as well as to fight for them.

The deeper reason for the turn in the RUF's fortunes lies in the historic legacy of colonialism and imperialism. Regimes like that of Kabbah, based on a tiny rich elite, can only survive with Western military backing. Sierra Leone's economy was driven into an impoverished and indebted state in the 1970s and 80s. External debt grew to \$1.2 billion, as the IMF attempted to squeeze even more repayments out of Kabbah's regime when it was first installed in 1996. Diamond production, the country's only valuable asset for world markets, was sold off to international corporations.

Britain and the US have no intention of following up the latest peace initiative with anything other than further crippling IMF programmes and the restoration of diamond production to global companies—even if under a different regime. The other major interest of Western powers in this part of Africa that has cut across the war with the RUF is the long sought after "democratic" transformation taking place in Nigeria. As the dominant country in West Africa, Nigeria provided the ECOMOG forces in both Sierra Leone and Liberia. This was a major undertaking for Nigeria's military rulers, for which they obtained substantial financial backing from Britain and the US. The delicate transition from military to civilian rule in Sierra Leone has brought to the fore extensive grievances against the use of the Nigerian army as an agency of imperialism, including their loss of credibility and the mounting death toll in this impoverished African country.



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