

The Sierra Leone peace deal

Chris Talbot
31 July 1999

On July 7, the warring parties in Sierra Leone's eight-year civil war signed a peace agreement. The deal was agreed in Lome, the capital of Togo, following six weeks of intensive negotiations. The main signatories were Foday Sankoh, leader of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) rebels and Sierra Leone President Ahmed Tejan Kabbah. African heads of state from Togo, Liberia, Burkina Faso and Nigeria were witnesses to the deal. The United Nations was represented, as well as the Organisation of African Unity and the Economic Commission of West African States.

The RUF were finally granted four full cabinet posts and four deputy ministers. Sankoh, who had been imprisoned and was awaiting execution for treason, was granted a reprieve and pardon. He is to be appointed as Chairman of the Commission for the Management of Strategic Resources, National Reconstruction and Development with vice-presidential status. This gives him responsibility for diamond mining, Sierra Leone's main mineral resource.

Since the United States and Western European governments have unofficially sanctioned the deal, it represents a remarkable about turn in accepting Sankoh and the RUF into the Sierra Leone regime. A British diplomat at the UN is quoted saying that the peace agreement was "a very dirty deal, but unfortunately the only one available". Until recently, the RUF were widely condemned as a criminal gang, responsible for looting the country's resources. There are many well-documented accounts of their brutal methods of intimidating the local population. In the last months, details of thousands of cases of killings, rapes and mutilations they have carried out have been collected by aid agencies.

Contained in the peace accord is a clause granting "an absolute and free pardon and reprieve" to all participants in the civil war since 1991. Whilst the UN representative at the peace talks attempted to avoid controversy by adding the disclaimer that the amnesty did not cover those guilty of genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity, it is clear that there will be no serious investigation of human rights abuses, or the deal would not stand.

ECOMOG, the West African peacekeeping force, made up mainly of Nigerian soldiers, was given responsibility by Britain and the US to reinstate the Kabbah regime and defeat the RUF. At the beginning of 1998, its small force in Sierra Leone was increased to over 12,000 and supplied with modern weaponry. Previously, it had been involved in the seven-year civil war in neighbouring Liberia. Although Kabbah was restored to office in March 1998—former army officers who had sided with the RUF had toppled him in a coup the previous year—the ECOMOG military offensive went disastrously wrong. At the beginning of this year, the RUF invaded Freetown, Sierra Leone's capital and

ECOMOG's headquarters, killing hundreds of civilians before they were repelled. The RUF have been able to take control of two-thirds of the rest of the country, including the diamond-producing areas.

Instead of driving out the RUF, the badly paid and demoralised ECOMOG forces were not prepared to take them on. They also have been accused of human rights violations. Kabbah, with British advice, attempted to take a hard-line military stance against the RUF and the large sections of the former Sierra Leone army that sided with it. He had 24 supporters of the RUF executed and brought Sankoh back from Nigeria to Freetown, where he was placed under a death sentence. This only encouraged the RUF to step up their attacks.

Conditions in the small country are now horrendous. As well as the thousands killed in the war, over a million people out of the 4.5 million population are internally displaced, or have sought refuge in neighbouring countries. Famine and disease threaten much of the population. Thousands of people have been mutilated or had their limbs hacked off, a tactic used by the RUF to create terror. Both the RUF and the government used child soldiers, with hundreds being abducted in the course of the war. UNICEF's statistics—compiled before the recent escalation of the war—state that 30 percent of children in Sierra Leone die before the age of five.

The United States and Britain have reversed their policy towards the RUF and brought it into the government of Sierra Leone because they fear that a continuation of the war will destabilise Nigeria. The largest country in West Africa, with considerable oil reserves, Nigeria is in the process of transition to civilian rule. Its economy is under detailed IMF supervision. Repayment of its huge debt is now the priority. The cost of ECOMOG's continued presence in Sierra Leone threatens to interfere with repayment of the debts to Western banks.

The Nigerian intervention in Sierra Leone has become a political as well as an economic liability for the new civilian government. After its humiliating defeat at the hands of the RUF, the Nigerian army was severely discredited and widely resented following the years of military dictatorship under General Abacha. Britain and America hope that by pulling the ECOMOG army out of Sierra Leone they will be able to more profitably exploit Nigeria's rich resources.

ECOMOG troops were withdrawn from neighbouring Liberia in July this year for the same reason. A similar deal brought the long-running Liberian civil war to an official end in 1997. Charles Taylor, whom the US had previously denounced him as a "warlord", was then put into power in 1997 with Western backing.

He has a long association with the RUF.

US Secretary for African Affairs Susan Rice made the connection between the Sierra Leone peace deal and the new regime in Nigeria explicit. In a speech to the House International Relations Committee in May, she explained that the US was now promoting a "diplomatic solution". US officials, and "Special Envoy for the Promotion of Democracy" Reverend Jesse Jackson, had facilitated talks between the Kabbah government, the Nigerians and the RUF, she said. Her concern was that "an honourable exit for Nigerian-led ECOMOG could improve prospects for a successful transition to democratic and civilian rule in Nigeria".

So swift has the change in policy been, and so stark is the contrast with the moralist rhetoric about war crimes in Kosovo, that it has provoked protests from human rights organisations and aid agencies. Many reports have appeared in the media about the barbaric methods of the RUF. What none of them have drawn attention to, however, is the role of the imperialist countries, particularly Britain and the US, in creating the RUF in the first place.

Moral repulsion is no substitute for understanding how this phenomenon has developed. The RUF are only a symptom of an economic and social collapse which has overtaken much of sub-Saharan Africa, where countries which were already poor after a century of imperialist exploitation have been devastated by the demands of the world financial system.

Like most ex-colonial countries, Sierra Leone was overtaken by the debt crisis in the 1980s as interest rates shot up on the cheap loans made readily available in the 1970s, and as the prices of their main export commodities collapsed. In Sierra Leone this was made worse as the country's iron ore deposits and deep-mined diamonds ran out in the mid-1970s. All that is left of these mineral resources are alluvial diamonds, which are found on the surface, and have become the means of financing the RUF, government corruption and various criminal operations.

During the reckless exploitation of Sierra Leone's natural resources on behalf of imperialism, no alternative industries were developed and agriculture was allowed to collapse. The minimal social gains made while the resources lasted were soon dissipated. The nationalist dictator Siaka Stevens, a former trade unionist, expanded education in the 1970s, but before he retired in 1985 the economy was in decline and the education system was collapsing—throwing many unemployed youth onto the streets. Successive Structural Adjustment Programmes imposed by the IMF plunged the country into deeper poverty. As early as 1977 USAID reported that 27 percent of children in rural areas were suffering from malnutrition and 60 percent from anaemia.

As agriculture declined, large numbers of peasants moved into the towns where they were increasingly unemployed, as jobs in mining dried up. By 1988 per capita income was back to 1960s levels, a 20 percent drop from 1981. One report states that by the mid-1980s, a typical wage income confined an urban family to deepest poverty, even lower than a farmer's income. There were no better-paid jobs. By 1989 the economy had largely disintegrated, with hyperinflation of 30,000 percent and huge foreign debts.

These were the conditions which led to what the *Economist*

magazine aptly called not just a civil war, but "the implosion of a state and its people". In 1991 the RUF, a small group whose student leaders were trained in Libya, started a guerrilla war against the hated Momoh regime, gaining some popular support. A military coup followed in 1992, led by Strasser, a 27-year-old junior officer, which gained support from large sections of the unpaid army. The RUF was now attracting more unemployed youth and defecting soldiers. In conjunction with its allies, led by Charles Taylor in Liberia, it turned to looting and terrorising the country areas.

Several attempts at negotiations with the RUF failed and the fighting continued. By 1995, there were reports of hundreds of people starving to death. His deputy Bio ousted Strasser in a coup at the beginning of 1996, who then called elections for March of that year. Kabbah, a former UN official with Western backing, was then elected president. His claim to democratic support is bogus. Less than a quarter of the electorate voted under the conditions of a continuing war. Just how little power he had was revealed when he was unable to enforce a peace deal negotiated with Sankoh at the end of 1996.

Kabbah was ousted by a military coup in May 1997 led by another junior officer, Koroma, who joined forces with the RUF. Britain and the US attempted to reinstate Kabbah in 1998, pulling the ECOMOG forces out of Liberia in an attempt to defeat the RUF. They employed the mercenary company Sandline to defend the lucrative diamond operations and train Kabbah's army, which, after three military coups in five years, was literally disintegrating.

The latest settlement holds out no promise of stability in Sierra Leone. The country is in the midst of an economic and social disaster. This is what gave rise to the civil war in the first place. But Britain and the US are unwilling to address this question. Their priority is to re-establish a military force in Sierra Leone to ensure "law and order". Of £10 million aid that Britain has made available this year, £5 million has gone to ECOMOG, £4.5 million to the Sierra Leone military, with just a pitiful £0.5 million for civilian purposes. This will not even begin to assist the homeless refugees, or provide artificial limbs for the thousands of amputees. It will go nowhere towards redressing the fundamental problem of Sierra Leone's economic collapse after such prolonged imperialist depredation.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact