

Sierra Leone: Britain sends crack troops as hostage crisis worsens

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Britain is sending crack troops to Sierra Leone, following the seizure of United Nations soldiers by the Revolutionary United Front (RUF). About 700 troops from the 1st Battalion of the Parachute Regiment, which played a leading role in the NATO invasion of Kosovo last year, have already flown to neighbouring Senegal. They will be joined later this week by 800 Royal Marines on the new helicopter assault ship *Ocean*, which has set sail with a flotilla of three support ships and a frigate.

A Ministry of Defence spokesman insisted the troops were being sent only to evacuate British nationals. "There is no question of [being involved in] combative action," he said. This official position is open to question, given that there are at most 500 British civilians in Sierra Leone and that many will already have left, following warnings last week from both Britain and the United States.

At least 300 UN peacekeeping troops are now being held hostage by RUF rebel forces, led by Foday Sankoh. The UN troops are mainly from India, Zambia, Nigeria and Kenya, but include one British advisor. The whereabouts of a further 200 troops, mainly Zambian, is not known.

Initial UN reports said that RUF troops were closing in on the capital Freetown. Later reports stated that the rebels had stopped 50 kilometres outside the capital after a meeting with UN officials. An RUF spokesman said they were marching to defend Sankoh after they learned that his house in Freetown had been encircled by UN troops.

UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan had earlier called for a rapid response force to be sent to strengthen the existing UN mission in Sierra Leone force (UNAMSIL), which at about 8,500 is still below its mandated strength of 11,100. The immediate response of the US and European governments was to refuse to send any troops, although Britain did agree to send a team of 12 military advisors, thought to include SAS personnel.

The latest agreement to dispatch troops came after several days of top-level meetings in both the US and Britain. A US spokesman is quoted in the *New York Times* saying that Britain is expected to take the lead in the Western response.

He said, "The directive we have is to be helpful and to respond positively."

Earlier last week the UN reported that four Kenyan soldiers were killed in a clash at Makeni, a disarmament camp northeast of Freetown. At first about 100 UN troops and civilian staff were captured in Makeni. In a further incident 24 UN staff were taken hostage at Kailahun in the east of Sierra Leone, near the border with Guinea and Liberia.

Around 200 Zambian soldiers sent to the rescue of those taken earlier are also now in captivity. A UN spokesman reported that 13 UN armoured personnel carriers had been commandeered by the RUF.

Kofi Annan has called on African leaders to put pressure on Sankoh to intervene to release the hostages. Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo and Libyan President Colonel Gadhaffi have contacted him. But there is confusion as to how much control Sankoh has over his forces, and he has added to this by alternately ordering the release of the hostages and then denying any hostages were being held.

Britain and the US pushed for the creation of the UN force last year. Richard Holbrooke, US ambassador to the UN, declared at a special meeting in January that it was to be the "month of Africa". He has worked for a peacekeeping force of 5,550 to be sent into the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where a war involving at least eight surrounding countries is being waged over a far larger area. Both the US and Britain have put up tens of millions of dollars to finance the Sierra Leone operation, currently the largest UN "peacekeeping" force internationally.

Earlier in the year Britain's UN representative, Sir Jeremy Greenstock, said of the UN operation in Sierra Leone, "It's a big blow for peacekeeping in Africa." American State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said the US was consulting its allies to try to make the UN force more combative. He said, "what we're doing is considering ways to improve and support the UN presence there, including consideration of some sort of reaction force capability."

The latest British intervention is the result of these

considerations. Regarding Sankoh, Greenstock said “he will pay for this in due course. Sankoh's made his political position, his international position, untenable for the future.”

Under a peace deal signed last July in Lomé, Togo, the RUF was to give up its arms in return for a share in government, ending the civil war it had waged against successive regimes since 1991. From being imprisoned under threat of death, Sankoh was brought into the government with other RUF members alongside the Western-backed regime of President Ahmed Kabbah.

Britain and the US imposed this settlement after the attempt to prop up Kabbah with the UN-backed ECOMOG forces, predominantly Nigerian, had failed. By the beginning of 1999, the RUF controlled most of the country and was only narrowly prevented from taking Freetown. The British Labour government was caught up in a scandal, when it was revealed it had hired the mercenary company Sandline to arm and train Kabbah's army, and to defend the diamond operations in the east of Sierra Leone, in direct breach of UN sanctions.

Whilst in the early 1990s the RUF student leaders, who were trained in Libya, had a certain level of popular support against the corrupt Western-backed government, they soon adopted a particularly degenerate style of operations modelled on that of their mentor Charles Taylor in neighbouring Liberia. Unemployed youth and defecting soldiers were recruited and brutalised. The rural population was looted and terrorised. The RUF imposed forced labour and carried out mutilations and rape in the areas they controlled. Large numbers of children were made to fight in their army.

Such a venal outfit could only thrive in a country that has been driven into acute decline by a century of imperialist domination. In the post-war period, a corrupt elite was kept in power by the West. The iron ore and diamond mines were exploited for decades and provided Sierra Leone's main export earnings. These began to run out in the 1970s, and today only the surface, alluvial diamonds remain.

As in most of sub-Saharan Africa, the country built up huge debts in the 1980s. By the end of that decade there was hyperinflation of 30,000 percent, foreign debts became unsustainable, and per capita income was back to 1960s levels—with widespread poverty and unemployment.

The peace deal between Kabbah and the RUF could never provide stability for Sierra Leone. Most of the money paid out by Britain and the US has gone into the UN operation or attempting to rebuild the army and police force. What little remains will go nowhere near redressing Sierra Leone's economic collapse.

Events leading up to the hostage-taking of UN soldiers bear this out. Only a small proportion of the RUF have given

up their arms, despite promises that former combatants would receive food, training, \$300 and UN protection in exchange for disarming. Of the estimated 45,000 original combatants in the civil war, the UN reported on May 1 this year that nearly 24,000 have been disarmed—but of those only 5,100 were RUF members.

The RUF remains in control of about half the country by force of arms. Its strongholds are in the east, where it controls the still lucrative diamond mining activities, and it is not likely to surrender its position easily.

Some indication of the RUF's income from diamonds can be seen in the fact that over the last two years the value of official annual diamond exports from Sierra Leone has fallen from \$60 million to \$30 million. At the same time, Liberia, which has few of its own diamond producing areas, has begun exporting millions of dollars worth of diamonds. Even if Sankoh did want to solve the hostage crisis, his RUF rebels in the east have a strong incentive to act independently.

The Africa correspondent for the British *Economist* magazine provided a succinct indication of the thinking that prevails within British ruling circles, writing: “In the long run the only choices may be to hand Sierra Leone over to Mr. Sankoh or send in a strong army with a mandate to kill and conquer.”

British intervention will do nothing to alleviate the dire position faced by Sierra Leone's population. If London's intention is to take on Sankoh and the RUF, it will be in order to reclaim the diamond mining operations lost by Western companies during the civil war period. This would effectively return Sierra Leone to the status of a colony.



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