# Britain steps up military intervention in Sierra Leone

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Recent events and official statements confirm that the British government intends to use its troops in Sierra Leone for far more than just rescuing a few British nationals. Some 800 crack troops from the Parachute Regiment have already taken over Sierra Leone's main airport and shipped out about 300 British and other European nationals—significantly fewer than the figure of 500 originally given. The official statement proclaimed that this was just a "non-combatant evacuation operation".

On Thursday, May 11 the paratroops were joined by 800 Royal Marines on the new helicopter assault ship *Ocean*, which arrives in Sierra Leone together with a flotilla of three support ships and a frigate. *Ocean* carries an artillery battery and can be used to supply the paratroopers, who are at present lightly armed, with more weapons. Britain's aircraft carrier, the HMS *Illustrious*, will arrive at Sierra Leone within days.

As it became clear that Sierra Leone was plunging back into civil war, following the seizure last week of 500 United Nations troops by the rebel Revolutionary United Front (RUF), Foreign Secretary Robin Cook stated that the situation was being constantly reviewed, and that, "If by remaining there and securing [Lungi] airport for a period of time, we can help the UN to build up, then that is a situation we will weigh."

This change of remit for the British troops means they are committed to staying for at least two weeks, as 3,000 additional soldiers are shipped in from India, Bangladesh and Jordan to join the 8,500 UN troops already in Sierra Leone.

Cook repeated his claim that "These are not going to become combat troops as part of the UN force." Within hours of Cook's statement, however, it became clear that the troops would not remain at the airport.

News pictures showed them patrolling the streets of Sierra Leone's capital, Freetown. According to the *Daily Telegraph* correspondent, 180 paratroopers are no longer at the airport but in the suburbs of the capital where they were seen on foot patrols and setting up 81mm mortars. Their rules of engagement have been changed to enable them to take part in combat, provided that they first fire warning shots. In addition, the British troops are using their four Royal Air Force Chinook helicopters to transport UN troops to defensive positions near Freetown. The BBC reports that British troops have been seen helping UN forces fighting the RUF at the town of Waterloo, about 20 miles east of Freetown.

Last week Britain dispatched 12 military advisers, whose role is apparently to help organise the UN troops. Many reports have indicated that the UN were completely unprepared to take on the RUF. They were lightly armed and uncoordinated, their ostensible role being to supervise the disarming of RUF troops following the peace agreement reached last July between the RUF and the Sierra Leone government. There are also reported to be 40 British SAS soldiers in Sierra Leone, whose role is normally that of intelligence gathering and working behind enemy lines.

The whereabouts of Foday Sankoh, the RUF leader, is unknown. On Monday thousands demonstrated outside his house in Freetown. His guards fired into the crowd killing four people, and he is believed to have escaped into the jungle.

All week there have been reports of RUF soldiers advancing towards Freetown, with the UN being forced to abandon positions. Thousands of civilians are fleeing from the countryside into Freetown for safety. The BBC reports that the RUF has up to 10,000 troops, conscripting more child soldiers as needed. They are armed with machine guns, rocket propelled grenades,

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surface to air missiles and anti-tank weapons, posing a serious threat to the UN troops.

There is still no news of the UN troops taken hostage. Most of the 8,000 UN troops are now concentrating on the defence of Freetown and the approach to it through Waterloo. Fred Eckhard, spokesman for the UN in New York, said, "We hope that it won't come to a pitched battle, but in effect we are preparing for one".

There are reports that Sierra Leone President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah has authorised pro-government forces to fight the RUF. In recent months the government army has been reformed and trained by British advisors. Fighting with them are troops of the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC). The AFRC is led by Lt. Colonel Johnny Paul Koroma, who was previously allied with the RUF and who overthrew the Kabbah government in a coup in 1997. AFRC forces claim to have retaken the town of Masiaka, 40 miles east of Freetown, from the RUF.

Although Sierra Leonean Information Minister Julius Spencer is said to have complained that Britain was not doing enough and asked for more "men and materials" to assist the UN, evidence points to an increasing British role. They are the only Western government involved, in what is clearly regarded as a British sphere of influence in its former colony.

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan complained that the United States and European governments other than Britain “are not running forward to contribute to this force”. Canada has now agreed to ship in 1,700 more UN troops from India and Bangladesh within a few days, but according to the *New York Times,* the US would only agree to transport soldiers if they were paid by the UN at commercial air transport rates.

Monday's debate in the British parliament revealed the language being used by the Labour government to justify what could easily become a virtual re-colonisation of this supposedly independent African country. Robin Cook stressed the "brutal, nasty nature of the RUF" and made it appear that the aim of the military intervention was a humanitarian one.

In reply to the Conservative opposition spokesman, Francis Maude, who warned that Britain should not get involved in "shoring up a UN operation that appears close to collapse", Cook said, “The message should not be that we are about to accept the collapse of the UN operation, or that, reading between the lines, we might secretly be grateful to see its collapse." Echoing the nineteenth century concept of the "white man's burden", he declared, "We accept our obligation."

The Liberal Democrat spokesman Menzies Campbell warned that the objectives of the British expedition had been ill-defined and the operation was falling prey to what was called “in that inelegant but illuminating American expression 'mission creep'". Cook brushed him aside and insisted that the government would do all it could to assist the UN.

The words of caution from the Tories and Liberal Democrats indicate the extent to which the British operation in Sierra Leone is a departure from the accepted practice of recent times. It has the character of a dangerous adventure that threatens to destabilise both Africa and relations between the major imperialist powers, who cannot sit idly by while Britain lays claim to important resources on that continent.

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