

Britain's military intervention in Sierra Leone part of a new "Scramble for Africa"

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Britain's sending of over a thousand crack troops to Sierra Leone is a major turn to direct intervention in Africa that has serious repercussions for both the African masses and workers in the West.

As with previous military actions by the Blair Labour government in the Middle East and the Balkans, the Sierra Leone operation was never discussed in parliament until after the fact. Nor was there any attempt in advance of the troop deployment to inform the British people. The undemocratic manner in which the operation was launched is consistent with its character as a colonial-style adventure. Its aims are two-fold: to secure immediate British interests in Sierra Leone, and to demonstrate to London's great power rivals that Britain is a major player in Africa, with the military muscle to back up its economic and political ambitions.

To all intents and purposes, Britain has assumed de facto control of the government of its former colony. It effectively mounted a take-over of the United Nations mission, the Sierra Leone army and the pro-government militias by the simple expedient of sending a small number of British "advisors" and SAS men to take charge, and following this up with a substantial armed force.

Sierra Leone is the largest independent military operation carried out by Britain since Margaret Thatcher dispatched a British task force to the Malvinas (Falklands Islands) in 1982. Its forces are made up of 800 members of the Parachute Regiment, 40 Special Air Service operatives and a further 600 Royal Marines stationed offshore in combat readiness. The aircraft carrier *HMS Illustrious*, the helicopter assault ship *Oregon*, three support ships and a frigate are stationed in the capital Freetown's harbour.

The Labour government of Prime Minister Tony Blair has repeatedly redefined the mission since it initially promised the action would be limited to "non-combatant evacuation" of British nationals. It is now described by the government as an exercise in "military diplomacy".

Government spokesman at first insisted that British troops would not be involved in direct confrontations with the rebel forces of Foday Sankoh's Revolutionary United Front (RUF), but the Paras have already killed four RUF members, while Brigadier David Richards let it be known that he would interpret his "mission statement" liberally.

Notwithstanding its humanitarian rhetoric, the British government has spent next to nothing combating the desperate poverty in Sierra Leone or providing financial assistance to revive the economy. Almost all British aid has gone to training the army and police. The issue of who controls Sierra Leone's mineral wealth and, by extension, the far greater resources throughout Africa is the Blair government's central concern.

Sierra Leone, officially the least developed country in the world, is wracked by a civil war being fought over control of the country's diamond deposits. According to the US State Department, Liberia presently exports £200 million worth of diamonds a year, almost all of which come from Sierra Leone and are supplied by the RUF rebels.

Ahmed Tejan Kabbah's Sierra Leone People's Party was elected in February 1996, having promised to stabilise the country and make its safe

for international investors. But in May 1997, Major General Johnny Paul Koroma, an ally of the RUF, carried through a military coup. The West African countries sent in a "peacekeeping" force dominated by Nigeria, and the UN ordered a halt to the supply of arms and petroleum products to Sierra Leone.

Unhappy with restrictions on its ability to intervene directly in Sierra Leone, the Foreign Office in London came to an arrangement with the mercenary outfit Sandline International for the purpose of breaching the UN embargo and aiding pro-government forces. Sandline's specific remit was to help regain control of the diamond producing areas.

Kabbah was returned to power on March 10, 1998, but in May the Blair government was enmeshed in scandal after the agreement with Sandline came to public attention. With the RUF continuing its attacks, Sandline forced to withdraw, and the West African intervention force in disarray, the initiative in Sierra Leone passed to the US—with Jesse Jackson playing a key role in securing a July 1999 peace agreement with the RUF.

The rebel forces received government posts and an amnesty for war crimes, with Sankoh named Minister of Mines. But fighting continued between the RUF and UN troops, as did abductions, rapes and other atrocities. Sankoh was not prepared to relinquish his control of the diamond trade, and when this was threatened earlier this spring his forces took some 500 UN troops hostage.

At the time of the Sandline revelations, the Blair government claimed it was acting in the "spirit" of the UN's ruling—because it was seeking to return a democratically elected government to power and bring a military coup to an end. Now, however, Britain has sent in troops without so much as conferring with the UN. Moreover, the British troops are working directly with former coup plotter Koroma and his mercenary thugs, presenting as good coin Koroma's declared conversion to democracy.

There are echoes here of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, the classic depiction of colonial crimes during the Scramble for Africa in the nineteenth century, with British forces assuming the role of Mr. Kurtz in their willingness to recruit those who have tortured and raped civilians to further their designs. Like Kurtz, Britain would no doubt justify its behaviour with the claim that "by the simple exercise of our will we can exert a power and good practically unbounded".

This is the first such unilateral military action by a European power, after a decade in which the US has been able to either dictate to NATO and the UN, or bypass them altogether. In wars against Iraq, in Bosnia and Kosovo, in Somalia and the Sudan, the US has forced its European NATO allies into backing its initiatives, with scarcely a reference to the UN. That Britain has now followed America's lead demonstrates the extent to which the traditional mechanisms through which inter-imperialist relations were mediated have been undermined.

The UN has been thrown into a deep crisis as a result of the growing determination of the US and its European rivals to aggressively pursue their own interests. On May 10, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan chastised the more powerful UN member-states for not sending forces to

Sierra Leone, singling out the US for particular criticism. So desperate was Annan that he hailed Britain's unilateral action, declaring, "At least they have moved, they have done something."

Whatever the immediate response of the US and Europe's major powers to the British initiative in Sierra Leone, the unilateral action demonstrates the extent to which there is no longer a common position amongst the imperialist countries when it comes to defending their interests in Africa and elsewhere. This presages future conflicts of a potentially more serious character.

For most of the post-Second World War period, the ambitions of the Western powers in Africa had to take into account the Cold War conflict with the USSR. The differing interests of Britain, France and the US, in particular, were for the most part subsumed in a general effort to combat the growth of Soviet influence. There was a retreat from direct colonial rule, as nominal independence was granted to various bourgeois national governments. These often utilised socialist phraseology and limited reforms to placate the social and democratic aspirations of the workers and oppressed masses. This was combined with policies to safeguard corporate investments in Africa and repay debts owed to the IMF and World Bank.

Following the collapse of the USSR, the bipolar character of African policy has given way to a new scramble for Africa—in which America feels able to assert its interests more forthrightly and the former European colonial powers are less inclined to subordinate themselves to US foreign policy needs.

Western levels of trade and investment are still very low in Africa compared with the rest of the world. In an attempt to remedy this situation over the past decade the United States, Britain and France have each manoeuvred to gain greater influence on the continent.

All of the Western governments apply huge pressure on African regimes for "transparency" and "good governance", i.e., accountability to the demands of the major corporations, through the IMF and World Bank, which determine what debt payments have to be made. But there is now a high-profile competition between Western governments to make separate deals over debt forgiveness and aid packages.

Two years ago, the US decided to take advantage of a cutback in France's African operations and problems with Europe's Lome Convention, which regulates economic relations with Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific. Clinton announced an increase in the Peace Corps complement operating in 30 African countries from 6,500 to 10,000, and declared Africa a "new frontier".

A presidential tour of five African countries followed, alongside the drafting of the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act, proposing an end to customs barriers for 1,800 products from sub-Saharan Africa. Deputy Secretary of State for African Affairs Susan Rice described Africa as a barely explored market of 700 million, with huge and as yet unexploited wealth.

Since then America has intervened, directly or covertly, in many African countries. But it has suffered setbacks. Its military intervention in Somalia in 1992-93 was a debacle, and Clinton's initiative to establish "new leaders" in Africa who are more receptive to Western demands has suffered badly, as bitter civil wars and ethnic conflicts have exploded in Ethiopia, Eritrea and the Congo.

Nevertheless, the US continues its drive to control Africa, working through regimes like that of Museveni in Uganda, and Obasanjo in Nigeria. It has recently given a \$10 million military aid package to Nigeria, using a private security firm to revamp and retrain its army and paying for transport planes to intervene in regional peacekeeping missions.

Together with Britain, in January this year the US pushed for the UN peacekeeping initiative in both Sierra Leone and the Congo, against the objections of France, which wanted a far bigger force in which it could

play a leading role. Britain continues to work through its traditional Commonwealth connections, to which it has added Mozambique. France also works through its ex-colonies and is developing new diplomatic initiatives after it was exposed for its support of the Rwandan Hutu regime, which carried out the genocide against the Tutsis in 1994. France has signed a defence agreement with South Africa and is sending aid to Tanzania, now included in its "Priority Area of Solidarity".

An indication of intensified great power intervention in Africa is provided by a recent report noting that, from an admittedly low base, flows of foreign direct investment into sub-Saharan Africa trebled between 1992 and 1995, outstripping growth in other undeveloped countries.

Virtually all of the present conflicts in Africa are related to mineral resources, especially diamonds in the Congo, Sierra Leone (through Liberia) and Angola. This is the main interest for the West in Africa.

The US has shifted its approach towards Angola because of its oil wealth. In Angola, more offshore oil discoveries have been made in the last period than in any other country, and 75 percent of Angola's oil goes to the US. Libya, one of the world's biggest oil producers, is now making trade and investment deals with European Union countries, especially its former colonial power, Italy.

Recent calls for sanctions against diamond sales from these areas come mainly from the US and Britain—neither of which presently benefits from such sales. De Beers, the South African corporation, has a virtual monopoly over the diamond trade, and 80 percent of the world's diamonds are traded through Antwerp in Holland.

No progressive resolution to the social and political problems afflicting Sierra Leone and the whole of the African continent is possible until Britain and the other imperialist powers are forced to end their economic and military intrigues against the African masses.

Those who claim that British troops can be relied on to stop the suffering and bloodshed in Sierra Leone ignore the role played historically by imperialism in creating poverty and social deprivation and whipping up tribal conflicts. Once again, imperialism seeks to conceal its naked economic interests behind moralistic phrases, recalling imperial Britain's "White man's burden" rationalisation for the rape of Africa in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

An example of this type of apologetics for neo-colonialism, with its racist undercurrent, was provided by Richard Dowden, Africa correspondent for the *Economist*, who wrote in the May 14 *Observer* newspaper: "Perhaps we will look back in 20 years at this footage of British troops digging into African soil and smile ruefully—the world's last attempt to save Africa from itself. There will be a moving memorial to the men of the 1st Battalion, The Parachute Regiment, who died defending a piece of worthless soil once called Sierra Leone, a Rorke's Drift 100 years on that failed. Then we will be watching horrific scenes of fighting and starvation amid the smashed ruins of Johannesburg and Lagos and Nairobi."

Dowden's patronising musings say more than he perhaps intends. After the intervention in Sierra Leone, will Nigeria and Kenya be next? The imperialist powers are Africa's tormentors, not its saviour. Their renewed interest in its affairs will only produce further suffering, wars and economic deprivation. They will use the present crisis in Sierra Leone to secure their own interests in Africa, whether through stooges like Kabbah or tyrants like Liberia's Taylor.

Even if the RUF is curbed, nothing will be fundamentally altered in Sierra Leone. A way forward for Africa demands the independent political mobilisation of the African working class, leading behind them the oppressed masses, against the Western powers, their local political representatives and criminal outfits like the RUF. The real allies of the African masses in their fight for economic and social progress are not the Western powers, or the UN, but the workers of Britain, Europe and

America.



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