

Britain outlines its colonialist ambitions in Sierra Leone

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This weekend sees the replacement of Britain's 600 Paratroopers in Freetown with 1,000 Royal Marine Commandos. The transfer has been interpreted as proof that British forces will be in Sierra Leone for considerably longer than the nominal mid-June date given earlier for withdrawal.

One ex-Guards officer noted, "The paras are short-term, get-them-in and get-them-out pathfinder troops. The Marines are a much more long-term operation, armed with artillery. They are in for a much more sustained job."

Lieutenant-Colonel Andy Salmon, commanding officer of 42 Commando, now on board the Royal Navy's Amphibious Ready Group 16 miles off Freetown, told the press that if necessary he could put the bulk of his forces, weapons, ammunition and 110 vehicles "into theatre" in less than six hours. Earlier the Royal Navy and Royal Marines mounted a display of firepower off Sierra Leone for the benefit of the media.

The decision to send in the Marines follows last week's announcement by the Blair Labour government detailing the full extent of Britain's long-term plans for Sierra Leone. This amounts to an effective take-over of military and, hence, political affairs in Britain's former colony. It includes:

- * The "short-term" presence of British troops;
- * Sending a team of military advisers, 90-strong, made up of 50 percent senior British officers, to run and train the Sierra Leone Army (SLA) for at least three years. There would be a continued presence by 15 British military observers.

- * Supplying arms and ammunition to the SLA..

The *Guardian* newspaper wrote of Britain's plans for Sierra Leone on May 19, under the headline, "Whitehall launches second colonisation". It drew attention to the military aspect of Britain's takeover of Sierra Leone, but went on to note that "months before this crisis, a quieter British invasion was underway. There is barely a

government ministry in the African country that does not have some Whitehall bureaucrat checking the books or offering what is euphemistically called 'advice'."

Citing the British High Commission as its source, the *Guardian* noted that the Accountant General in the Finance Ministry is British, alongside other advisors in departments dealing with revenue, economic organisation, finance, customs and, of course, in the Ministry of Defence. The Commander of the Sierra Leone Police is Inspector General Keith Biddle, formerly of the Greater Manchester and Kent forces. A British official comments, "I wouldn't say we're running the country but it is fair to say that it's better run because we're here."

Britain's Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon justified the decision to arm the SLA by stating, "We have strong interests there and we want to help in whatever way we can." Asked whether that could mean "many, many months", he replied, "Indeed."

Labour's plans have cross-party support and have been generally welcomed by the British media. The Conservative Party pressed the government to go even further in "extending the duration". Conservative defence spokesman Francis Maude said, "We don't want the government to be constrained."

A BBC correspondent wrote on May 19, "Much has been made in the British press of alleged 'mission creep'; the dangers of Britain being drawn into Sierra Leone's insurrectionary conflict. Such reporting draws in large part upon the apparent lack of precision of Britain's goals—with its commander on the ground seemingly able to interpret his mission in the most liberal terms. But this ambiguity—at least in public statements—proved to be one of the mission's fundamental strengths."

The right-wing *Daily Telegraph* was even more blunt. It said of the decision, "It represents perhaps the most ambitious attempt by Britain to involve itself in an African nation's affairs since the colonial era. It also

reflects the view in Sierra Leone that the country was better off as a British colony.”

To justify this assertion, the newspaper quotes Brigadier David Richards, the commander of Britain's forces in Sierra Leone, saying, “I am constantly surprised by the number of people who come to me and ask that Britain recolonises Sierra Leone.” Richards has made similar assertions on several occasions.

The attempts by Britain's ruling elite to justify their colonialist ambitions in Sierra Leone and throughout Africa are becoming ever more threadbare. Indeed the parliamentary debate on the government's decision on May 23 was characterised by forthright statements from all sides. For Labour, Tony Worthington MP said, “I do not have the slightest doubt that the lead responsibility with regard to Sierra Leone lies with us.” He contrasted this recognition with past reliance on “a pariah state—I am speaking of Nigeria.... ruled by corrupt military thugs.”

He insisted that from now on Britain and the imperialist powers should take the lead in military operations in Africa, even if they were nominally carried out by the United Nations: “If the United Nations cannot cope with Sierra Leone, it cannot cope with anything. It is important that it does cope, because many other tasks await it—for instance next door in the Congo.... UN forces should not include the appallingly trained and ill-equipped forces of parts of the developing world. There must be some first-world involvement because of our logistics and strategy.”

Worthington was equally frank about what Britain's strategic concerns were, stating, “Enormous skill will be needed to tackle the central problem of Sierra Leone—control of the diamond industry.”

For the Conservatives, Crispin Blunt MP felt emboldened to argue: “The Government has made it clear their great distaste for the private sector-military companies, but if such companies had been used in Sierra Leone, they would have realised the objective, which we share, of ensuring victory for the democratically elected Government of Sierra Leone and they would have secured the country's wealth-creation area—the diamond mines—which could have been handed over to a major mining corporation.”

Replying to the debate on behalf of the Foreign Office, Peter Hain rejected reliance on mercenary forces, but agreed that “control of the diamond trade is crucial. That is true for Angola, the Congo and especially Sierra Leone.”

The United States responded to Britain's initiative in Sierra Leone by despatching presidential envoy Jesse

Jackson to Nigeria as part of a five-nation tour of West Africa. Jackson, who negotiated the failed 1999 Lome peace agreement with the rebel Revolutionary United Front, is seeking to involve the Nigerians in Sierra Leone as a proxy representative of America. West African ministers decided on Thursday to send an additional 3,000 troops to work with the UN.

Britain's intervention will do nothing to halt the bloodshed and suffering in Sierra Leone. Both sides in the conflict will continue to carry out atrocities against the civilian population in order to secure their own grip on the country's mineral wealth.

Prime Minister Blair has already been forced to order the British High Commissioner in Freetown, Alan Jones, to make a formal protest to the Sierra Leone government after child soldiers were seen carrying British Army rifles. Children as young as seven have been seen carrying guns and foraging for food with pro-government forces in Masiaka, east of the capital Freetown. According to the UN they constitute 25 to 30 percent of the Sierra Leone Army/Civil Defence Force militia in the town. One child soldier told the press that he had killed so often he could not remember how many people he had shot.

On Wednesday, four government soldiers and two foreign journalists, Kurt Schork and cameraman Miguel Gil Moreno, were killed in an RUF ambush while travelling in army trucks near the strategic Rogberi Junction about 80 kilometres (50 miles) outside the capital Freetown. The junction is near where six bodies wearing UN uniforms were discovered on Monday. The UN has confirmed that six of its troops, from Nigeria and Kenya, had been killed in earlier clashes this month. The RUF is still holding upward of 250 UN troops hostage.



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