

Channel 4 correspondent highlights censorship of Britain's role in Sierra Leone

Chris Marsden
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The May 29 edition of the *Guardian* newspaper provided a rare glimpse at the semi-official censorship of Britain's military operations in Sierra Leone.

The article is entitled, "It is time to end the media pretence that the SAS does not exist in Sierra Leone", referring to Britain's elite military unit specialising in covert counterinsurgency operations, and is written by Channel 4 News chief correspondent Alex Thompson. At a time when the Blair Labour government was still insisting that its decision to send hundreds of paratroopers into Britain's former colony was aimed solely at evacuating British and European nationals and guarding Lungi airport, Thompson paints a picture of the real extent of the involvement in the country's civil war.

Thompson lists the various armed forces active in the Sierra Leone capital, Freetown, and surrounding areas against the rebel Revolutionary United Front (RUF), the CDF (Citizens' Defence Force), the Kamajohs and the regular Sierra Leone Army. He contrasts these ragged bands, "out of their minds on grass, palm wine, fear, hunger, or all of them at once", with, "another militia altogether—white, well-equipped, three-convoy mud-coloured Land Rovers and seriously tooled up: the SAS".

He reports how his news team filmed around seven seconds of video of an SAS convoy just outside Freetown. They were then threatened by an SAS member, who warned them, "You f___ing know who we are. You know how we f___ing operate. You're taking the piss.... We'll smash your f___ing car and your f___ing camera—understand?"

The brief snatch of film by Channel 4 was anathema to the government and the military because it refuted claims of a "supposedly strictly limited airport/evacuation" mission in Sierra Leone. Thompson

points out that the SAS was "working miles away from either of those operations. Yet we are not supposed to film any of this, or tell our viewers and readers anything much about it," because, "We were taking sides. The SAS was a crucial element in proving we were taking sides."

Aside from the specific incident, Thompson makes some key observations that point to wider issues regarding the normally servile relationship between a supposedly independent media and the government. "The world of the Ministry of Defence and defence/diplomatic correspondents ensures that the secrecy of the SAS deployment here is preserved: it is simply considered somehow 'against the rules' to report it. You do not need military censors when reporters can be relied on to do the job themselves..."

"Thus, the pitfalls of playing the old game of gagging yourself when it comes to the SAS were shown up for what it is: a dismal and dangerous propaganda exercise," he concludes.



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