

Carve-up of diamond and mineral rights exposed, as Britain continues recolonisation of Sierra Leone

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After his visit to the capital Freetown earlier this month, Britain's Foreign Secretary Robin Cook told parliament that the government's main objective in Sierra Leone was to take the diamond-producing area out of the hands of the rebel Revolutionary United Front (RUF). Proposing that international sanctions should be applied to RUF diamonds, he said, "the people of Sierra Leone remain among the world's poorest while the wealth of its diamonds goes to rebels".

A recent article in *Le Monde Diplomatique* exposes Cook's pretence that Britain's efforts are designed to benefit the people of this impoverished West African country. It points out that four international companies involved in diamond and mineral extraction made deals with Sierra Leone's President Kabbah last year, after the US-brokered peace settlement was struck between the RUF and the government. "One square metre after another, the whole of 'usable' Sierra Leone has been mortgaged off in the form of concessions for extracting diamonds, rutile (titanium dioxide), bauxite and gold," the article explains. "What is at stake is real and sizeable—over a billion dollars' worth of stones sold in the jewellers' shops each year, the world's second biggest field of rutile, and bauxite deposits that could have an effect on world prices..."

The companies involved are DiamondWorks (based in Canada, but its subsidiary companies BranchEnergy and BranchMining which operate in Sierra Leone are located in the Isle of Man tax haven), Rex Mining (Belgian), Global Exploration Corporation (owned by the businessman Rakesh Saxena of Thailand, who is being prosecuted for financial offences), and Sierra Rutile, which is allied with Nord Resources (US-

based). Both DiamondWorks and Rex were able to boost their capitalisation on the Toronto Stock Exchange when news of the abortive agreement between the Sierra Leone government and the RUF was first announced last year.

It is the interests of these companies that Cook is defending in Sierra Leone. The mining deals were struck with the heads of militias who are now part of the Kabbah regime: Johnny Paul Koroma, the coup leader overthrown by Kabbah, and Samuel Hinga Norman, head of the Kamajors (militiamen originally from a tribe of hunters). It is a coalition of these forces that British "advisers" are now leading to regain control of the diamond areas.

In May 1998, a scandal erupted when Prime Minister Tony Blair's government was shown to have broken UN sanctions and collaborated with a firm of mercenaries, Sandline International, which was then assisting the Kabbah regime. Sandline's chairman is Tony Buckingham, a major shareholder of DiamondWorks. Mercenary outfits like Sandline, the US-based Executive Outcomes and Levdan of Israel have been operating in Sierra Leone for several years to protect mineral interests. *Le Monde Diplomatique* points out that a meeting took place between representatives of these firms and top UN officials in March this year "to look at ways of working together" in Sierra Leone.

The article explains why the Kabbah-RUF peace agreement broke down this year when the RUF took UN peacekeepers hostage. "Barbaric, drug-crazed and dragooned by the warlords as they may be, armed and desperate young men could not have brought Unamsil [United Nations forces in Sierra Leone] to its knees all

on their own.” What is involved is “a struggle between two rival groups supported by businessmen intent on gaining control of mineral wealth”.

On the one side is the neighbouring regime of Charles Taylor, who has effectively turned Liberia into his own business empire. Taylor backs the RUF and diamonds worth about \$200 million are channelled through Liberia, “linked with the market in arms, drugs and money-laundering in Africa”. On the other side are the militia leaders Samuel Hinga Norman and Johnny Paul Koroma, now working with Kabbah and backed by the British.

RUF leader Foday Sankoh was appointed Minister of Mines in the coalition set up after the peace agreement last July. The idea, according to *Le Monde Diplomatique*, was that “the mining cake was to be sliced up and shared out between the RUF and the government”. Sankoh set up a commission to review the mining licences granted to foreign companies. However the civil servants in Freetown took no notice and the commission never met. As it became clear that Norman, Koroma and others were dividing up the country between them, and the UN began moving into the mining areas this year, Sankoh and the RUF launched their offensive for fear they would lose control of their diamond producing areas.

The withdrawal, after six weeks, of the 1,000 paratroopers and marines sent into Sierra Leone in May was said by the British government to show its intentions are strictly limited to establishing peace. But on a visit to Kabbah in Freetown, Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott said, “We aren't leaving. We've brought an element of stability and now we're moving to the second stage of restoring and helping in the democracy.”

This essentially means continuing what commentators are now describing as Britain's “second colonisation” of Sierra Leone. The 1,000 troops have been replaced with 200 “military trainers” from the Royal Anglian regiment and two British ships remain at Freetown. The new troops will train 1,000 raw recruits for the Sierra Leone army at a special camp. A further 90-strong British military training team will be sent by the end of the year.

Cook disclosed that only about a third of the Royal Anglians would actually be deployed in training, with the rest on “other duties”. A British official in Sierra

Leone is reported saying that these duties would be interpreted “imaginatively”. In less ambiguous terms, they will continue leading the Sierra Leone army and coordinating with the UN forces. Britain will also continue to supply arms to the various militias that make up the Sierra Leone army. Although no official comment was made on the use of Britain's “special forces”, such as the SAS, reports indicate that some of them will remain in Sierra Leone on “intelligence gathering” operations. In addition, there are 90 other “military advisers” and 78 civilians playing a leading role in the police, judicial service and government departments.

After returning from leading the first phase of the British intervention, Brigadier David Richards explained that the “rapid-response reaction” was the most successful way to intervene in situations like Sierra Leone. He boasted to the *Economist* magazine that Britain had “learnt a lot from looking at Somalia”. In contrast to the US, whose intervention in Somalia in 1992-93 turned into a debacle, Britain would “dispatch a capable military force with the appropriate strength so quickly that it paralyses the problem. We call it getting inside the enemy's decision cycle.”

Given the latest developments in Sierra Leone, there is every likelihood of further dispatches of British troops. British officials in Freetown were reported to be sceptical that the UN would be able to hold on to areas captured from the RUF. The Sierra Leone army has already been driven out of Lunsar, a key town 50 kilometres north east of Freetown, which it seized from the RUF earlier this month. A commentator in the *Guardian* newspaper noted that Britain was essentially committed to send in more troops “if the war should again go badly for the government and the United Nations proves unable to cope”. Its “exit policy” was more like a “re-entry” policy, he concluded.



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