

British-backed forces in Sierra Leone accused of attacks on civilians

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The New York-based Human Rights Watch (HRW) has accused the Sierra Leone government forces of the wanton killing of civilians. The Sierra Leone Army, together with pro-government militia, were organised under British leadership in May this year for the purpose of defeating the rebel forces of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF).

In a July 12 statement, HRW reported that at least 27 civilians died and 50 were injured in May and June this year. The towns attacked were Makeni and Magburka about 120 miles northeast of Freetown, and Kambia north of Freetown near the Guinea border. Targets of the attacks included crowded markets and other public places.

On May 31 a government forces helicopter gunship attacked Makeni. It first dropped leaflets warning the RUF that bomb attacks would be made at a future date, but bombing and gunfire began only minutes later. The victims included a young pregnant woman.

The HWR report quotes 31-year-old Khalil who witnessed the attack and was forced by RUF fighters to bury bodies:

“Close to where I was staying a house was hit. I went out and just near the house were the bodies of two young boys between the ages of 12 and 16. I then went out to the lorry park and saw the dead body of a man who used to sell tyres at the Makeni market. Then about 15 rebels approached me and a few others and ordered us to bury the dead. When we arrived at the graveyard after carrying two bodies, I saw four other bodies of civilians lying there waiting to be buried.”

Sahr, a 17-year-old market vendor, witnessed the attack on Magburka on June 7. “The bombs and the leaflets came at just about the same time. I fled into a neighbouring house to seek shelter. The bombardment seemed to last for about 30 minutes and when it was

finished I went back to the market to take a look. I saw nine dead bodies; men women and one child, a baby. I saw about eight injured people as well.”

Kambia and surrounding villages and towns were attacked in mid-June. Aid workers reported a doubling of numbers of refugees from 100 to 200 a day seeking shelter in bordering Guinea in this period, as people fled in front of the attacks. Tens of thousands of people have been displaced.

The report also explained how refugees fleeing the fighting were made to make payments when entering government controlled areas and had to make similar payments when entering rebel controlled areas.

In response to the HRW report, the BBC interviewed members of the helicopter gunship crew who claimed they were forced to fire on civilians because the RUF were using them as human shields. British officials told the BBC that “one of the reasons why British soldiers were running training courses in Sierra Leone was to help ensure that local troops respected human rights.”

Around 200 British military experts and advisors are training and directing the Sierra Leone forces. The helicopter gunships are a key part of their operations to defeat the RUF. Britain is also supplying arms to government forces, including 10,000 rifles with 10 million rounds, and 4,000 mortar rounds.

In May this year HRW sent a letter to the Blair government expressing concern that military equipment supplied by Britain could end up in the hands of forces allied to the government with proven records of past atrocities. In particular the letter cites the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) led by Major Johnny Paul Koroma. Although now fighting alongside government forces, it previously fought with the RUF. It took part in mass mutilation, rape and killing in 1998 and in the January 1999 occupation of Freetown.

The letter also indicts another pro-government militia, the Civilian Defence Forces (CDF), for “indiscriminate killings, summary executions and torture.” It expresses concern about the use of child soldiers by forces allied to government troops and by the Sierra Leone Army. A United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) human rights officer claimed a quarter of troops fighting with the AFRC, CDF and the Sierra Leone Army were under 18, including some between the ages of 7 and 14. A previous HWR report alleged that government-allied forces had been torturing and executing those suspected of being RUF members.

To secure its recolonisation of Sierra Leone, Britain is using forces equally as brutal as the RUF. Virtually all the British aid going to Sierra Leone is for military purposes. Rather than providing any economic assistance to the people of this country, which according to UN statistics is the poorest in the world, control of its mineral sources is the primary consideration. Recent material in *Le Monde Diplomatique* revealed that virtually the whole of Sierra Leone, including areas not yet taken from the RUF, has been divided up between diamond and mining corporations.

A report in the *Independent* newspaper states that the British government is about to announce a further military aid package for Sierra Leone, following the recent visit of Geoff Hoon, Secretary of State for Defence. In order to prevent the possible collapse of the government campaign against the RUF, British military advisers are requesting a further £10 million for heavier weapons, 50 trucks as well as more ammunition for the helicopter gunships.



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