

US reasserts its interests in Africa, sending troops to Nigeria

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16 August 2000

Several hundred United States Special Forces troops will be sent to Nigeria in the next few weeks to lead an extensive training mission. The move is the response of the Clinton administration to being sidelined by the British intervention in Sierra Leone in May this year, when the Labour government of Prime Minister Tony Blair deployed a thousand troops and several warships, after the virtual disintegration of a United Nations peacekeeping force.

To reassert its own interests in diamond-rich Sierra Leone, personnel from Fort Bragg will train five Nigerian battalions and one battalion from Ghana as a proxy force loyal to the US. The decision to deploy over 5,000 American-trained African troops in Sierra Leone alongside the existing UN presence is a significant new departure for US policy. A Pentagon spokesman said, "It would require several hundred US trainers and support personnel to train several battalions in Nigeria, Ghana and maybe another country."

How many American troops will be directly involved is still under discussion and awaits a report back from 40 US troops already in Nigeria. A French counterweight to the British will also be deployed in the form of one battalion from Senegal or Mali.

The decision to create this new force comes after a visit by Under Secretary of State Thomas P. Pickering to Nigeria and other West African countries last month to discuss the US intervention in the region. Pickering, along with American ambassador to the UN Richard Holbrooke, explained the plan to individual members of Congress over the last month. Pickering told them it would cost between \$50 million and \$100 million to pay for the initial stage of training and equipment. A Pentagon spokesman said that a longer term commitment of at least two or three years duration was envisaged.

The US move follows the pattern established in Sierra Leone, where Britain is now financing, arming and training a new army of over a thousand troops. British troops and advisers have also directed the assorted militia backing the Sierra Leone government against the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) forces and taken over the running of the government with a battery of advisers. However its soldiers have not taken a direct part in combat operations, apart from a small number of SAS special forces. This new *modus operandi*—of training and leading an African force—means that the Western powers do not have to rely on ill-disciplined and underpaid African forces, such as the Nigerian-led Ecomog, that proved unable to stop the RUF taking over much of Sierra Leone at the beginning of last year. It also avoids causing adverse publicity arising from the death of Western troops, as in the US intervention in Somalia in 1992-93.

Washington opposed making a direct intervention in Sierra Leone last year, concentrating instead on a diplomatic initiative in Togo that produced an agreement between the present regime of Sierra Leone, the neighbouring regime of Charles Taylor in Liberia and the Liberian-backed RUF. It was intended to bring the RUF, including its then leader Foday Sankoh, into the Sierra Leonean government. This would have brought the diamond-rich regions of Sierra Leone under government control, thus securing them for exploitation by Western corporations. But the RUF had no intention of relinquishing its control of the diamond areas and continued shipping stones out via Taylor's personally run state business empire. When UN peacekeepers were taken hostage by the RUF, after appeals from UN Secretary General Kofi Annan for more backing, Britain used this as a pretext to mount its own military intervention.

In contrast, the US administration refused to assist the UN, and dispatched Jesse Jackson, a personal friend of Taylor, who had brokered the 1999 Togo agreement, to Liberia. Under US pressure, Taylor intervened to get the UN hostages released, but Jackson caused a stir by praising Sankoh and equating the RUF with the African National Congress of South Africa. He was stopped from visiting Sierra Leone and was publicly criticised by the US ambassador. As well as obvious divisions within the US administration over policy in Sierra Leone, there were also reports of “angry exchanges” behind the scenes between the American and British governments. Criticism also came from right-wing Republican congressmen for lack of an aggressive US intervention in the region.

According to an official quoted in the *New York Times*, the US administration has now “gone through an agonising reappraisal” on Sierra Leone policy. The resulting proposal for a US-trained regional West African force was accompanied by a demand for Taylor to stop supporting the RUF, thereby cutting him off from much of his supply of “conflict” diamonds. After his visit to Liberia, Pickering said that Taylor was given “days and weeks, not months” to change tack; otherwise there would be “significant negative consequences to our bilateral relations.” The possibility of Taylor abiding by a dictat that would lose him millions, or of the RUF disarming as the US is apparently demanding, is remote. The US as well as Britain could therefore both be on a collision course with Liberia.



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