

Seizure of British troops in Sierra Leone provokes demands for withdrawal

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The abduction of 11 members of the Royal Irish Regiment and one Sierra Leonean soldier on Friday has led to demands by the Conservative and Liberal parties on the government to withdraw the 300-strong British force. Five of the 11 officers were released late on Wednesday. They were part of over 200 British troops from the 1st Battalion of the Irish Regiment helping train the Sierra Leone Army as part of continued attempts to subdue the rebel Revolutionary United Front (RUF). Britain sent 1,000 troops to Sierra Leone in May to prevent the RUF taking control of the capital, Freetown. The bulk of the troops were withdrawn in June, but 300 soldiers and numerous civilian personnel were left behind to train the Sierra Leone Army and pro-government militias and to take effective charge of the country's government.

The embarrassment of Prime Minister Blair's Labour government is heightened by the fact that the soldiers were seized by a militia known variously as the West End Boys or West End Niggaz, rather than the RUF. The West End Boys are at least nominally loyal to the government of President Kabbah, having been aligned to Major Johnny Paul Koroma.

Koroma launched a successful coup against the Kabbah government in 1997, but signed a peace accord last year and sits in Cabinet. The Blair government has boasted the democratic credentials of the Kabbah regime and embraced the pro-government militias in order to create a proxy force through which it can regain control of the lucrative diamond-producing areas of the country from the RUF. In reality, however, there is little politically to distinguish between the criminal gangs led by RUF leader Foday Sankoh and those who have aligned themselves with the Kabbah regime.

The West End Boys show no indication of being politically motivated. It is made up of pro-Koroma

troops, deserters from the Sierra Leone Army and freed convicts who engage in criminal activity such as operating protection rackets and looting. Under conditions of the desperate poverty gripping the country, their ransom demands are for food, medicine and the release of one of their leaders, Brigadier "Bomb Blast" or "General Papa"—arrested following a shoot out over a stolen truck.

On Tuesday, Conservative Party defence spokesman Iain Duncan Smith accused the government of allowing British troops to become victims of "mission creep". "We do think that the government needs now to take very, very serious action and have to contemplate whether or not it's worth keeping British troops out there at all," he said. His remarks were echoed by Liberal Democrat defence and foreign affairs spokesman Menzies Campbell, but rejected by Blair who insisted that Britain's policy in Sierra Leone had been "very successful".

As well as mounting domestic difficulties over its mission in Sierra Leone, there are clear indications of antagonisms between Britain and the United Nations. Britain's May intervention effectively bypassed the UN mission in Sierra Leone, UNAMSIL. This temporarily sidelined the interests of the other major powers—most notably those of the US which was utilising the Nigerian led west African contingent of the UN force as its proxy in the area.

This week UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan recommended that UNAMSIL be increased from its present strength of 13,000 to 20,500 troops and expressed confidence that this would be acceded to. He did so in the knowledge that the US had this month agreed to send several hundred Special Forces troops to train a 5,000-strong African force from Nigeria, Ghana and elsewhere for despatch to Sierra Leone. A pro-

French force made up of troops from Senegal or Mali has also been promised.

A further sign of tensions between Britain and the UN was the open challenge by the deputy commander of the UN peacekeeping force, Nigerian General Mohammed Garba, to the British account of how the soldiers came to be abducted.

According to Gordon Hughes, the brigadier commanding British forces in Sierra Leone, the soldiers were taken hostage while driving back to base after meeting Jordanian UN peacekeepers in the town of Masiaka, 40 km to the northeast of Freetown, to coordinate security arrangements. Garba countered that the British had been travelling in a dangerous rebel area without telling the UN what they were doing. He added that the British did not meet the Jordanians, stating, "They call it a liaison mission but it was really a military patrol on a Rambo mission."

It is not possible to say what the British troops were doing, though there have been repeated allegations that members of the elite SAS counter-insurgency regiment and others have been actively engaged against the RUF. Army spokesman have confirmed that some of the captured men have had training with the special forces.

The face-to-face talks between Colonel Simon Fordham of the Royal Irish Regiment and Brigadier Kallay of the West Side Boys has had some success with the release of the five officers. But there have also been reports that SAS personnel have been sent to rescue the soldiers. The Ministry of Defence refused to confirm such reports, but admitted that "a few staff officers" had been despatched to work with the Sierra Leone government. Britain has issued repeated warnings of serious consequences if all the officers are not released.



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