

British Paratroops kill at least 17 in Sierra Leone hostage shoot-out

Chris Talbot

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In a dawn raid, British soldiers raided the village controlled by the West Side Boys militia, 45 miles east of the Sierra Leone capital Freetown. Soldiers from the elite Special Air Service (SAS) rescued the six British troops and one Sierra Leonean soldier being held hostage by the militia. A barrage of covering fire was provided by the 1st Battalion the Parachute Regiment, along with RAF and Royal Navy forces. At least 25 of the West Side Boys, including three women, and one British soldier were killed in the operation. A dozen British soldiers were injured. According to Defence Staff General Sir Charles Guthrie several prisoners were taken, including West Side Boys' leader Brigadier Foday Kallay. Guthrie refused to give any details of the military operation, claiming it would be a security risk.

The West Side Boys consist of a thousand or so disorganised ex-soldiers, often high on drugs, who like several other such militia, including the main rebel group fighting the government in Sierra Leone, the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), survive by looting and brutalising the local population. Earlier this year the West Side Boys joined up with pro-government forces under British leadership, fighting the RUF. But in June they fell out with other pro-government forces and fought a series of battles with them. They seized the British troops on August 25.

At first the West Side Boys demanded the release of their members held by the Sierra Leone government, as well as recognition along with the other militia who are now included in the government. Latest reports, however, stated that they had dropped these demands—which had been refused—and were instead simply asking for safe passage out of Sierra Leone and the provision of scholarships to study abroad. The release of the hostages seemed imminent.

Britain's decision to abandon discussions in favour of

a military option appears to have been taken in order to reassert its authority and control over the Western intervention in Sierra Leone's civil war. The country is currently the world's largest UN peacekeeping operation, involving 13,000 troops and a further 7,000 are planned. New revelations show conflicts between the UN military contingents and the British in Sierra Leone, even though all are nominally supporting the regime of President Kabbah against the RUF. The predominant concern behind the divisions is clearly over who should control the country's diamond and mineral wealth.

From its initial 1,000 strong intervention in May, the British government—behind a smoke screen of humanitarian concern—have effectively taken over the running of the Sierra Leone regime through hundreds of “advisers”, and have made no secret of their intention to take control of the diamond producing regions of Sierra Leone out of the hands of the RUF. Over 200 British troops are now involved in training the Sierra Leone army in the war against the RUF. An investigation by reporters from French monthly *Le Monde Diplomatique* showed that the Sierra Leone government has already sold concessions to international diamond and mineral companies; dividing up the mineral-rich areas of the country, including those still controlled by the RUF, between them.

One of the companies, DiamondWorks based in Canada, is associated with the British mercenary outfit called Sandline International. The revelation that the British Labour government was employing Sandline to aid the Kabbah regime and defend diamond interests had created a scandal in May 1998. It was in breach of a UN arms embargo applied to both the rebels and the Sierra Leone government at that time, as peace negotiations continued. British Members of Parliament

are now questioning Foreign Secretary Robin Cook over new revelations made in the *Independent* newspaper. According to these, mercenaries who were formerly working for Sandline are now being employed by the “international community”—which the *Independent* report says is a euphemism for diamond corporations—flying two helicopter gunships ostensibly used by the Sierra Leone government against the RUF. Now called Sierra Leone Air Wing, a senior Royal Air Force officer coordinates the mercenary operations. US-based civil rights group Human Rights Watch have condemned the use of the mercenaries, who in one operation killed between seven and nine civilians when the gunship fired into a crowd. The UN has also objected to their use as being in breach of the UN convention on mercenaries, a document Britain has refused to sign.

Britain is not alone in seeking to assert control over the diamond trade. An unofficial report circulating UN Security Council members strongly condemns the leaders of the Nigerian contingent of the UN force. The report, written by the Indian head of the UN forces in Sierra Leone Major-General Vijay Jetley, was leaked to the British *Guardian* newspaper. It particularly singles out Kofi Annan's special representative in Sierra Leone, under-secretary general Oluyemi Adeniji, Brigadier-General Mohammed Garba who is Jetley's deputy, and Major General Gabriel Kpamber, former head of the Ecomog forces, the West African troop presence in Sierra Leone from which Jetley and the UN took over this year.

Jetley accuses the Nigerian's of attempting to “scuttle the peace process” because it conflicted not only with the RUF but “also the major players in the diamond racket like Liberia and Nigeria.” He alleges that Adeniji and Garba “cultivated the RUF leadership, especially Foday Sankoh, behind my back”. Kpamber and Brigadier-General Maxwell Khobe, who died earlier this year, did not want to withdraw from Sierra Leone because of the huge amounts of money they were making from illegal diamond mining and from the RUF. Khobe was known as the “Ten Million Man” because “it is alleged that he received up to \$10 million to permit the activities of the RUF.” Kpamber regularly travelled with Foday Sankoh to diamond towns from which the UN was barred.

When 500 UN troops were taken hostage by the RUF

in May, no Nigerian troops were included. Jetley alleges that the Nigerians colluded in the abductions. He also alleges that as well as involvement in diamonds, the Nigerian army are involved in drug smuggling—with drugs being exchanged for RUF diamonds.

The *Guardian*, which describes the report as an “embarrassment” to Nigerian President Obasanjo, fails to point out that by implication the report attacks the United States, which has consistently pushed for a Nigerian lead in the Sierra Leone intervention. Several hundred US Special Forces troops are now training a further force of 5,000 troops, mainly Nigerian, to join the UN troops in Sierra Leone.

Given the real interests at stake in Sierra Leone, it raises questions over a possible Nigerian involvement in the British troops being taken hostage by the West Side Boys. There is evidence that the British troops had expected friendly cooperation from the West Side Boys. The main criticism of the British presence in the area came from the deputy UN commander Brigadier-General Mohammed Garba of Nigeria.



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