Britain steps up presence in Sierra Leone as UN Force crumbles

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Britain is once again increasing its military presence in the African country of Sierra Leone. Its original force of over 1,000 troops in the intervention last May was reduced to about 400 after the United Nations peacekeeping force was increased to 13,000—the largest UN operation in the world.

Now Britain has dispatched the warships HMS Ocean and HMS Fearless, together with three Royal Fleet Auxiliary vessels, as a naval rapid response unit. It has 500 troops from the 42 Royal Marine Commando Unit on board. This latest initiative follows a crisis in the UN forces as India and Jordan, with the largest and second largest contingents—3,150 and 1,800 troops respectively—have declared they will pull out by the end of this year.

Britain is currently training the Sierra Leone government troops fighting the rebel Revolutionary United Front (RUF), with covert SAS units providing a backup. It has a large number of “advisers” to the government in place, making the regime of President Ahmed Tejan Kabbah effectively a British colonial administration.

The pro-government forces rely on the UN peacekeeping force (UNAMSIL) to police government-controlled areas and without the UN presence they would have no hope of defeating the RUF. But the Indian and Jordanian withdrawal reflects growing disaffection with their role as a British proxy force. According to a BBC report, “UN officials say their pullout reflects a concern amongst developing countries that they do not want to be seen as ‘mercenaries' doing the richer nations' bidding.”

This concern about Britain's intervention in the area does not reflect a fundamental opposition to imperialist control of Sierra Leone on the part of India and Jordan, but is more likely the result of pressure from the United States. US officials have made it clear that they are backing Nigeria as a regional power in the area so that it can function as America's political proxy. In October the US sent 250 troops from the Third Special Forces Group to Nigeria to train as many as five battalions of Nigerian and Ghanaian troops for peacekeeping duties in Sierra Leone, allocating $20m for the purpose. Nigerian and Ghanaian troops will make up the main UNAMSIL forces after the Indian and Jordanian withdrawal.

President Kabbah's announcement that his government will meet with RUF representatives this week in possible peace talks is the result of another US initiative. The RUF's backer, Liberia's President Charles Taylor, is under considerable pressure from the US to accept a political settlement in Sierra Leone.

As well as sending more troops, Britain has responded to the Indian and Jordanian withdrawal by attempting to reassert its control of the UNAMSIL forces. The higher-ranking Lieutenant-General Daniel Ishmael Opande from Kenya has replaced the present head of the UN force, the Indian Major-General Vijay Jetley. Kenya currently has one battalion in the UN mission and has offered to send another. A British army officer Brigadier Alastair Duncan has been appointed chief of staff under Opande.

Kenya is one of the main African countries under British domination, with an army that is British trained. Also 3,500 British troops train each year at a base near Nairobi.

The UN is planning to replace Jetley's deputy, the Nigerian Brigadier-General Mohammed Garba, with another as yet unnamed Nigerian commander. This would appear to be in line with British demands to sort out the crisis ridden UNAMSIL troops following a UN Security Council investigation in October headed by

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British Ambassador to the UN Sir Jeremy Greenstock.

Jetley's replacement was announced following the publication of a leaked report, in which he denounced his deputy Garba, as well as the Nigerian's Major General Gabriel Kpamber and Oluyemi Adeniji. Adenjii is the special representative of the UN Secretary General and chief of the UN mission in Sierra Leone. Jetley accused the Nigerians of trying to "scuttle the peace process" because it not only conflicted with the interests of the RUF but "also the major players in the diamond racket like Liberia and Nigeria." Jetley alleged that the Nigerians colluded in the abduction of 500 UN troops by the RUF earlier this year and that they were involved in drug smuggling and diamond trading with RUF forces.

Britain began its direct involvement in Sierra Leone in May this year, after the RUF broke the peace deal signed in Lome in July 1999 and recommenced its war against the government in order to keep its control over the diamond producing areas. British intervention followed immediately after the RUF took the UN troops hostage. Divisions within the UN forces became apparent at the time, as many of the UN troops appeared to have surrendered their weapons without a fight. US pressure on Charles Taylor secured the release of the hostages, but the fighting has continued since then and has now spread into neighbouring Guinea.

Despite the British claim that they were defending the people of Sierra Leone against the notorious brutality of the RUF, material leaked earlier this year showed that the Kabbah government, with British backing, was handing out concessions to international diamond companies as well as rutile (titanium ore) mining corporations. The RUF pulled out of the coalition when it became clear that they and their Liberian backers were not included in the carve-up.

The current intervention demonstrates an increasing recklessness by Britain's Labour government in pursuit of its interests in Africa. In a Parliamentary debate on October 30, Conservative opposition spokesman Iain Duncan Smith expressed the growing concern in British ruling circles: "Earlier Government policy hinged on an effective UN force being in place with the right numbers to be able to keep the peace. However, that force has proved ineffective. As the Secretary of State knows, it will not take the action that is necessary. Now, with the departure of the Indians and the Jordanians, it is beginning to look even more ineffective than it was when British forces were deployed earlier this year to support it. That leaves us with a vacuum that, as Labour Members have already said, may well suck us deeper into the conflict."

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan only recently made calls for the UNAMSIL strength to be increased to 20,500. Now, however, it is unlikely that the force can even be kept at 13,000. Annan's recent appeal for troops to replace the Indian and Jordanian contingent has only met with a response from Bangladesh, Ghana, Ukraine and Slovakia, none of which can match the expertise of the Indian and Jordanian troops.

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