

Report reveals the catastrophe in Sierra Leone and Liberia

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A recent report on Sierra Leone and Liberia reveals that both West African countries are still in a catastrophic condition after United Nations intervention supposedly brought about peace and restored democracy. In Sierra Leone British troops intervened in 2000 to crush a rebel movement and for over five years the country has been occupied by the largest ever UN force (over 17,000 troops at its peak). Since 2000, Britain has effectively run the civil and military administration of the country.

Liberia, after an intervention by United States marines in the summer of 2003 and the removal of President Charles Taylor, is now occupied by a UN force of over 15,000 troops overseen by retired US air force general Jacques Paul Klein.

The report points out that life expectancy at birth in Sierra Leone is 34 years and that a quarter of the country's children die before they reach five. Despite these acute health needs, a recent World Bank study estimated that only 5 percent of pharmaceuticals in the state health system make it to their intended destination. Corruption amongst the political elite and the lack of any control over the country's economic activity accounts for the other 95 percent—medication that is then sold at a price that most citizens can't afford.

Sierra Leone is now the world's poorest country, according to the UNDP Human Development Index. Whilst Sierra Leone is rich in diamonds, the British-advised government has failed to collect most of the customs duties on diamond exports. Last year, supposedly after an improvement, only 15 to 30 percent of the total duty was collected. Again corruption is responsible. In a typical case in 2003 the then minister for transport and communication was found guilty of unlawful possession of \$26,000 in diamonds. He was

sentenced to two years in jail but successfully appealed against the judgement.

The report points out that this level of corruption and economic mismanagement, along with the highest levels of poverty in the world, gave rise to the civil war. A western diplomat cynically states that in the years since the peace deal, "all our resources have gone toward recreating the conditions that caused the conflict."

Whilst three quarters of Sierra Leone's workforce is agricultural and 45 percent of GDP is in agriculture, the country is still a net importer of rice. Land ownership in both Sierra Leone and Liberia is in the hands of village elders with no security of tenure for young men and women returning home after the fighting. Together with lack of investment and no viable infrastructure the report concludes that the Sierra Leone government and its western backers do not take agricultural production seriously.

Roads damaged during the war have gone unrepaired. A road trip from the town of Bo in the east of Sierra Leone to Freetown, the capital, used to take under two hours. Today it is a five- to eight-hour ordeal.

In Liberia conditions are even worse—there is no electricity and no landline telephone system or sewerage anywhere in the country. Drinking water is delivered to wealthier areas by tankers that top up roof tanks while the impoverished population buy it in containers carried by handcart.

In both Sierra Leone and Liberia many functions that would normally be carried out by the state are financed by Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs). The health sector in Liberia is entirely run by NGOs.

The report considers the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration process now taking place with former combatants in Liberia's civil war. Whilst it has

disarmed more than 100,000 people, the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) has collected less than one weapon for every three combatants. This is despite the estimate that each combatant probably had on average three weapons before the process began.

Although disarmament was conceived of as a three-week process to deal with ex-combatants psychological, social and health needs it has turned into a gun-for-cash transaction—\$150 payment for a weapon. Most of those handing in arms are registered as “other” combatants and not members of either the rebel militias or Charles Taylor’s government supporters that took part in the civil war. The report concludes that the hardened fighters are not the ones being demobilised. Only 3.3 percent of weapons being handed in are classed as heavy weapons—despite their widespread use in the war. There is little doubt that militias are either keeping fighters and weapons in reserve—anticipating future battles in Liberia—or exporting conflict to neighbouring Guinea and Ivory Coast.

The present political elite running Liberia under US direction is responsible for the crimes of rape, murder, mutilation and other atrocities against the population. Yet candidates for the forthcoming elections will largely be drawn from these warlords and their accomplices. Elections are going ahead in October 2005 at the insistence of the United States, even though it will not be possible to properly register voters.

In Sierra Leone some indication of the corrupt nature of the government of President Ahmad Kabbah is given in the report—despite the fact that Kabbah was elected in western-backed elections in 2002. Kabbah sentenced journalist Paul Kamara to two years imprisonment for seditious language. Kamara wrote a series of articles in 2003 about a 1967 commission of inquiry into fraud allegations at the Sierra Leone Marketing Board, an organisation overseen by Kabbah, then finance minister. The newspaper that published his articles was suspended from publication for six months. The report states that the people in Sierra Leone often describe the political evolution of the country by the phrase, “same car different driver”.

The report is produced by the International Crisis Group, a key advisory body to western governments, and a full supporter of United Nations peacekeeping interventions in Africa. They admit that “five years of intervention in Sierra Leone have failed to ensure

sustainable security” and that “at best Liberia is on the path Sierra Leone entered upon several years earlier.”

Their advice to western governments on how to achieve more stability and effective exploitation of the mineral wealth of these two countries is a simple one—more consistent neo-colonialism. The only way to bring stability to Sierra Leone and Liberia, they suggest, is for the west to intervene in them economically for the next 15 to 25 years. Western governments should manage revenue collection in Liberia for a considerable period because ports, airports, customs and other sectors have been the sources of income for the corrupt elites who control the state. They admit this may be seen as stripping Liberia of its sovereignty but say that it could be justified in terms of preventing further collapse. Sierra Leone, they claim, could benefit from a similar scheme especially if it were seen to work in Liberia.

Such a blatant return to colonialism is the only the next logical step in the “peacebuilding” process initiated by Britain, the United States and the United Nations that has manifestly failed to bring any economic development or real security to the people of West Africa.



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