

This week in history: January 8-14

7 January 2024

25 years ago: Nigerian reinforcement troops arrive in Sierra Leone

On January 10, 1999, hundreds of Nigerian troops arrived at Luni International Airport to reinforce the military operation that was being conducted under the auspices of the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group, ECOMOG, the West African regional organization.

Sierra Leone's 12-month civil war reached a new intensity over the previous weeks, as anti-government rebels took control of the capital, Freetown. Nigerian soldiers made up the bulk of the 15,000-strong force. Heavy fighting continued while ECOMOG regained control of Freetown, but not without substantial human costs. The Nigerian government played down losses, but eyewitnesses reported uniformed bodies strewn around the capital. Since Christmas, the Nigerian Army had been returning its dead and wounded home. A week prior, 45 ECOMOG soldiers were interred on the second day of what was described as a "series of burials."

The human cost of the war went far beyond the military casualties on both sides. The United Nations World Food Program issued an emergency report warning that hundreds of thousands of Freetown residents, trapped in their homes for almost a week, faced starvation as fighting continued. The International Red Cross made similar warnings.

Nigeria had long functioned as a proxy for the imperialist powers in Africa, most notably the US and Britain. The civil war began after the military junta of Major Johnny-Paul Koromah was toppled in a military offensive led by Nigerian troops, which restored the government of President Ahmed Tejan Kabbah in February of 1998. Britain's support for Kabbah went as far as helping to organize the counter coup that brought him back to power.

In August 1997, Canada's Globe and Mail newspaper reported a plot to use mercenaries to overthrow Koroma. This involved the exiled Kabbah government, Rakesha Saxena, head of the Vancouver-based Tidewater Management Corporation, and Tim Spicer, head of Sandline International, a mercenary group operating out of London. Subsequent reports revealed high-level contact between Sandline and five officials at the Foreign Office, including the British High Commissioner to Sierra Leone, Peter Penfold. On his return to power, Kabbah praised Britain "for their support and assistance in every respect."

Nigeria's intervention in Sierra Leone proved to be no less tragic than its previous claim to the role of "peacekeeper" in Liberia. ECOMOG was created as the vehicle for Nigeria's intervention into the eight-year-long civil war in that country. Nigeria began its intervention in Liberia in 1990 with the stated aim of preventing warlord, Charles Taylor, from coming to power. After seven years of fighting and tens of thousands of deaths, elections placed Taylor, who

had subsequently struck a compromise with Nigeria's ruling regime, in the presidency.

50 years ago: Mutiny of soldiers in Ethiopia marks beginning of civil war

On January 12, 1974, Ethiopian soldiers of the Negele Boran garrison in southern Ethiopia staged a mutiny against poor food and water quality. The event was the first in a series of many mutinies, strikes, and protests against the US-backed government of Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie, who would be ousted later in the year.

The Negele Boran garrison had gained a reputation among soldiers for its remote location and desolate conditions involving intense heat, near inedible food and unclear or inconsistent water supply. The mutiny was sparked when the pump used by rank-and-file soldiers for drinking water broke down. When the officers refused to grant access to their own well, of much cleaner quality, the soldiers placed the officers under arrest. The men sent a petition to Selassie demanding improvements to their conditions and other grievances.

The emperor responded by sending his leading military commander, Lieutenant-General Deresse Dubale, to restore order. Upon arrival he was arrested by the soldiers who made him eat and drink the poor-quality food and water which they had been protesting.

Once word that Dubale had been arrested reached back to Selassie, in a fury he ordered that bombers be sent to fly over the base threatening a massacre. Eventually, the soldiers agreed to release the general so long as no disciplinary action was brought against them.

The period was one of immense economic crisis within Ethiopia. Major prices increase had created widespread conditions of hunger and inequality. Militant opposition to Selassie and the semi-feudal system of government was growing widespread. Under these conditions, the Negele Boran mutiny ignited protests and rebellions throughout the country.

In February, Air Force technicians and non-commissioned officers also mutinied, taking their officers hostage. Days later university students in Addis Ababa went on strike demanding reforms to the educational system. College and high school teachers joined them shortly after demanding improvements to wages. In March, the Confederation of Ethiopian Labor Unions launched a general strike.

Influenced by Stalinism, the trade unions conceded political control of the situation to the military and worked to prevent the independent intervention of the working class to take power. In April, rebelling officers would form the Coordinating Committee of the Armed Forces and began carrying out arrests of government officials. The Committee would soon become the Provisional Military Administrative Council, known as the Derg, and launch a coup on

September 12 that would remove Selassie from power.

Once in power, the Derg proclaimed their regime to be “Marxist-Leninist” in order to curry favor with the Stalinists in Moscow who they needed to back their government in the civil war that followed. The Derg would hold power in Ethiopia amid a continual state of civil war until 1991, when the restoration of capitalism in the Soviet Union denied it Moscow’s patronage.

75 years ago: Truman unveils largest ever US budget, massive military spending

On January 10, 1949, Democratic Party President Harry S. Truman submitted his government’s budget to Congress. It called for \$41.858 billion dollars in spending, the largest in peacetime, and forecast a deficit of \$873 million. The projected expenditure reflected American imperialism’s commitment to an aggressive militarist program, including the Cold War against the Soviet Union, aimed at ensuring its hegemony in Europe and internationally.

In an analysis of the budget proposal, the *Militant*, publication of Socialist Workers Party, then the Trotskyist organisation in the US, noted: “Topping the budget list is \$14.3 billion for direct military expenditures—an increase of \$2.5 billion over last year’s budget. For ‘international affairs’—that is the conduct of the ‘cold war’—another \$6.7 billion is added.” This meant that “one half of the entire budget—the largest war budget in peacetime history—will go to feed militarism at home and abroad.”

Contrasting the bonanza for the military with limited social spending, the *Militant* pointed out: “The A-bomb alone will get nearly seven times as much as Truman’s much-vaunted low-cost housing program.” Among the top four budget items, moreover, were interest payments on war debts held by the major banks and corporations.

Truman had sought to camouflage the class character of the budget, with a program he dubbed the Fair Deal. This attempted to harken back to the limited reformist measures of Roosevelt’s New Deal during the 1930s Depression. Truman’s posturing was a response to a wave of working-class struggle at the end of World War II, motivated by anger over the rising cost of living and inadequate wages.

The *Militant*, however, exposed the inadequacy of Truman’s social measures. For instance only \$129 million was allocated to public housing, amid ongoing shortages and overcrowding in the urban centres. His government had rejected proposals to substantially increase taxes on the wealthy, instead increasing imposts on some working-class households and boosting payroll tax.

The budget, it stated “spells ‘guns instead of butter,’ a heavier and heavier tax load on the masses, militarism and war.” Amid an economic downturn later in 1949, Truman would further slash taxes for the rich.

100 years ago: Ramsey MacDonald gives pro-imperialist speech in advance of first UK Labour government

On January 8, 1924, Ramsey MacDonald, one of the founders of the British Labour Party and a veteran parliamentarian, spoke to a packed

crowd at Royal Albert Hall in London as he prepared to become the country’s first Labour Prime Minister. In the December 1923 elections, the Tories had lost their parliamentary majority and King George V had asked Labour to form a minority government.

MacDonald’s speech was, in the words of the *New York Times*, “remarkable for its moderation and avoidance of such contentious topics as the capital levy and nationalization.”

Much of the speech was devoted to international affairs. Germany had been suffering hyperinflation and was in danger of defaulting on its war reparations, and France still occupied the industrial Ruhr Valley. The country had come to the brink of a workers revolution in October and had witnessed an attempted putsch by Adolf Hitler. The relationship between France and Britain had deteriorated badly under the previous government over the situation in Germany.

MacDonald—who was to be not only Prime Minister but Foreign Secretary of the new government—called on the British ruling class to work through the League of Nations “without reserve as the main instrument for securing international justice.”

MacDonald was a representative of the apparatus of the Labour Party and an opponent of socialist revolution. He had resigned from the chairmanship of the Labour Party in 1914 when the party voted for 100 million pounds in war credits, though he remained party treasurer. He visited the Western front, with the approval of the British high command during the war but maintained an opposition to the war from a pro-imperialist point of view.

As prime minister in the summer of 1924, MacDonald was able to implement the withdrawal of the French from the Ruhr and a schedule for reparations payments by Germany with the massive infusion of American capital under the Dawes Plan.

The most advanced British workers, though, had no illusions about him, a viewpoint that was articulated by Leon Trotsky when he called MacDonald in a speech in April, “conservative, in favor of the monarchy, private property and the church.”

Speaking of the Labour government, he added, “British Menshevism is thoroughly imbued with the priestly spirit. All of this is merely the church’s way of adapting to different groups and layers of the proletariat—a complex division of labour in the service of the bourgeois order. ... This so-called Labour government is weighed down totally, to the very limit, with the worst petty-bourgeois prejudices and the most disgraceful cowardice in relation to the big bourgeoisie.”



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