

Sierra Leone burns while the UN fiddles

Sierra Leone continues to suffer from its nearly decade-long war, and on the surface little has changed. The rainy season is ending and the war is sure to resume in earnest. The Revolutionary United Front (RUF) rebels are stronger than ever, and their godfather, President Charles Taylor of Liberia, continues to support them while deceiving the international community with spurious peace prospects. The United Nations force, UNAMSIL, lacks direction and languishes in Freetown begging for more troop contributions, while suffering a critical net loss as two key countries withdraw their battalions.

Behind the scenes, however, there are some new developments. Charles Taylor's regime has suffered some setbacks and the RUF is showing signs of breaking into smaller factions. The British have made new, stronger commitments to the government of Sierra Leone and to UNAMSIL. Nevertheless, the possibility of long-term peace remains elusive and may require more robust and unconventional efforts to secure a peace.

Political dynamics of the RUF

While the primary RUF leader, **Foday Sankoh**, remains in prison, his designated replacement, Colonel **Issa Sesay** talks peace. Few Sierra Leoneans trust Sesay, and recent fighting seems to be undercutting his offers. The RUF have initiated a number of skirmishes with government militia, and last month they made repeated forays into neighbouring Guinea, bolstered by Liberian soldiers.

There are signs of political divisions within the RUF. The rebels have never had a popular base within Sierra Leone; they have always relied on Charles Taylor for their support. It now appears that *Sesay may not have been Taylor's first choice to replace Sankoh*. Taylor preferred **Sam 'Maskita' Bockarie**, who, unlike Sesay, is based close to Taylor in Monrovia, the capital of Liberia. It appears that Sesay is more in control of the less organised RUF in the western part of Sierra Leone, while Bockarie and Taylor control the better-trained and better-equipped units in the east. The Kono diamond fields that fund both the RUF and Taylor are in the east as well, and the RUF are consolidating their grip on the area. There are frequent helicopter supply flights from Liberia (flown by Ukrainians), and numerous reports of rogue South African mercenaries and even Serbs, Israelis and an American running training camps and providing support.

Events in Liberia could influence what happens in Sierra Leone. A rebellion backed by dissidents in Guinea has

destabilised the north of Liberia. The Liberian army has not received pay for some time now and seems ineffective and unreliable. Taylor no longer trusts his handpicked bodyguards either, despite their new equipment, recent training and higher pay. Instead, he seems to increasingly rely on Sierra Leoneans from the RUF for his personal protection. There were also rumours that his treacherous son, **Chucky Taylor**, may have tried to assassinate his father a few weeks ago, and was 'demoted' as a result. Therefore, Taylor's days could be numbered, and if Taylor goes, so does the RUF.

The United Nations

A collapse of the Taylor regime could be just the thing needed to rescue the UNAMSIL peacekeeping mission.

Since the Lomé Agreement broke down spectacularly in May, when a number of peacekeepers were killed and hundreds disarmed and taken hostage by the RUF, UNAMSIL has been licking its wounds in Freetown and its troop numbers have shrunk as a result of political disagreements and *infighting*. The currently authorised strength of 13,500 troops will decline

when both the Indians and Jordanians pull out their battalions. UN Secretary-General **Kofi Annan** would like to increase troop numbers to 20,500, but few countries are stepping forward to offer soldiers to this ill-fated mission. In any case, no one seems to have any idea what UNAMSIL would do with the extra troops since the current troops are doing little beyond building and manning useless road blocks on the streets of Freetown. Sierra Leone's deputy defence minister, Chief **Hinga Norman**, aptly described UNAMSIL as 'an elephant without bones'.

UNAMSIL has a new commander, General **Daniel Ishmael Opande** of Kenya. He replaced Major-General **Vijay Jetley** of India who left after a disastrous political confrontation with his Nigerian lieutenants. The

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Nigerians have been involved in the Sierra Leonean war for many years and resented the fact that they were not given the leadership of the UNAMSIL mission. Worse, Jetley's accusations (largely true) that top Nigerian officers were colluding with the RUF in the diamond trade ensured that Jetley would not stay long. General Opande has his work cut out for him, but he will be substantially aided by the fact that a very capable British officer, Brigadier Alastair Duncan, has been appointed as his deputy. Duncan has experience in both Bosnia and Northern Ireland which can only be good for the mission. The British influence in the country is crucial.

The British

From the Sierra Leonean perspective, the British are the most respected of all the key players in the country. The UN is regarded with contempt as a result of their collapse in May 2000 and their refusal to fight the RUF even though the mandate specifically allowed for this. The Nigerians are somewhat appreciated due to their willingness to shoot at the RUF when necessary, but at the same time they are derided for their lack of discipline and their involvement in diamond smuggling. But the British are a different story altogether and many Sierra Leoneans openly call for 'recolonisation'.

The British are reluctant players but they raise the level of their involvement in Sierra Leone almost weekly. For several years they have been running essential programmes designed to reform the Sierra Leone Ministry of Defence, the police and legal system, and parliament. The collapse of UNAMSIL in May was a huge setback, and it meant that their programmes, designed for the medium and

long term were in danger of being undermined by short-term events. British troops were rushed in to bolster the UN mission and may have prevented total collapse. This may have forced the British to increase their involvement beyond what is politically tenable.

The incident in September 2000 where the British had to rescue British Army officers taken hostage by a military faction (the West Side Boys) resulted in the death of an SAS soldier and was politically expensive. Still, since May, the British have been retraining the unreliable Sierra Leonean army in an effort to fill the short-term gap. Opinions are mixed as to the success of the retraining programme, and it is important to keep in mind that the Sierra Leonean Army has changed sides more than once. The retrained units will soon be tested in combat. Expectations are low but it is hoped that they will eventually be able to stand up to the RUF. If not, it will be another severe blow to the British goal of stabilising the country.

More recently, the British have sent the HMS Ocean—along with 400 crack Royal Marines—to a position within striking distance of Sierra Leone. These troops are unlikely to see any combat, but they do make the point that Britain is not going to stand by if the RUF threaten Freetown. They will also do much to bolster the spirits of the beleaguered UNAMSIL mission. This increasing involvement could cause serious political problems in

Westminster if there is no quick resolution to the war. A British withdrawal would be a worst-case scenario for tiny Sierra Leone.

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Paying for peace?

Many members of Sierra Leone's civil society have called for a private solution. The South African private military company (PMC) Executive Outcomes virtually won the war back in 1997 but international pressure forced them to leave. Since then, more than ten thousand Sierra Leoneans have died as a direct result of the resumption of the brutal war.

Calls for a return of an Executive Outcomes-type company are strong, not just among Sierra Leoneans but also—off the record—among British and even UN personnel. From a military standpoint, ending the war in Sierra Leone is not a difficult proposition. PMCs have indicated that Sierra Leone could be secured in a matter of months with a few hundred professional soldiers—at a fraction of the cost of the current UN mission. Questions of transparency and accountability would have to be addressed first, but these issues seem trivial compared to the problems UNAMSIL is facing. The choice is between utilising a PMC to end the war, or watching the impotent UNAMSIL continue to dither while thousands more Sierra Leoneans die.



Conclusion

If the UN is left to find peace on its own, the result will most probably be a de facto division of the country between the RUF-occupied north and the government militia controlled south. UNAMSIL seems to be in no hurry to do anything, and is simply waiting for events to happen. If Taylor's regime were to fall, then perhaps inaction is the easiest action, since the RUF will probably not survive long without Liberian support. However, if Taylor holds on to power, the RUF will continue to cause havoc in Sierra Leone and exacerbate regional instability through their attacks on Guinea. If that happens, the outlook for Sierra Leoneans will be much, much worse.

The British clearly want a quick resolution, and their new deputy in UNAMSIL may be there to push for

more decisive action. The RUF are militarily incompetent, and sustained pressure by the better UN units, the retrained Sierra Leonean army, and the government militia could be enough to force a new peace agreement. Whether UNAMSIL is willing to become proactive instead of reactive remains to be seen. The quickest way to end the problem is for the UN to sub-contract the more robust military missions to a private company, but the political opposition to surrendering this role to private companies is formidable.

The most likely scenario is continued inaction by UNAMSIL; continued instability, but not collapse, within Liberia; continued friction, but not disintegration, within the RUF; and continued war for Sierra Leone.