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**WAR AND STATE COLLAPSE: THE CASE OF SIERRA LEONE**

**BY**

**Lansana Gberie  
B.A. Hons., Fourah Bay College  
University of Sierra Leone, 1994**

**A THESIS  
Submitted to the Department of History  
Wilfrid Laurier University  
in partial fulfilment of the requirements  
for the Master of Arts degree  
1997**

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the crises of war and state collapse in the West African state of Sierra Leone, which has been devastated by a civil rebellion which began ostensibly as armed incursions from neighbouring war-torn Liberia in 1991. It critically examines current literature on the crises, including Robert Kaplan's use of the country as a case study for his views on the "coming anarchy", and concludes that the dynamics of the country's collapse are far less mysterious and more pedestrian than the spurious environmental and cultural essentialism which Kaplan ascribes to it.

The thesis argues that the failure of the Sierra Leonean state must be understood in terms of the failure of the political leadership since the advent of President Siaka Stevens in 1968 and his imposition of a one-party state in 1978. Steven's brand of one-party rule succeeded in subverting the state's institutional capacity and undermined respect for institutions of the state. Particular attention is paid to the development of the "Shadow State", and the subsequent failure of society to meet the basic demands of its citizens, especially the ability to provide meaningful and remunerative work for educated and volatile youth.

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## PREFACE

The West African nation of Sierra Leone has been in a state of war since armed incursions from neighbouring Liberia triggered a civil rebellion in 1991. The war has led to the death of more than 15,000 in a country of 4.5 million people, the displacement of a third of the population, the destruction of more than a third of the country's villages and towns, and the collapse of almost all formal state institutions.

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the recent history of Sierra Leone in the hope of better understanding the origins and development of the civil rebellion. It will offer a critical examination of the current literature on the crisis, especially Robert Kaplan's use of the country as a bellwether for his views on the "coming anarchy". The aim is to offer a mundane but historically accurate explanation of the rebellion and the collapse of the Sierra Leonean state.

My own interest in studying the war, beyond the bewilderment and outrage of almost every Sierra Leonean at what was commonly referred to as a "senseless war", began when I took up appointment as a journalist on the editorial board of the Vision newspaper in Freetown, Sierra Leone, and then later as correspondent for the Inter Press Service (IPS) News Agency, shortly after graduating from Fourah Bay College (FBC) with a degree in history in 1994. My job required me to travel extensively throughout the country, and report the war. Needless to say, this was an incredibly difficult assignment. This was a war without frontlines: the insurgent forces could pop up anywhere and cause extensive destruction to



civilian settlements, and then emerge somewhere else, to cause more destruction.

The wantonness of such attacks suggested a lack of serious political, never mind ideological, motive; but it seemed to me to be a bit outlandish to suggest, as David Keen, who visited the country from England to evaluate the relief needs of people displaced by the war, did in 1995, that the war was all about making money "while it lasts and, moreover, to ensure that it lasts long enough to make serious money"<sup>1</sup>. Resource rich as the country was, there wasn't much money to be made in most of the areas that the rebels attacked and sacked. In any case, for any serious money to be made out of resource exploitation, the rebels needed to hold on to significant territory for a reasonably long period of time. This they failed to do. Yet they persisted with their campaigns for more than five years. What was driving them to these inhuman actions? Why was the state so miserably incapable of effectively challenging and halting the brigandage? Who were the men behind these faceless forces of destruction?

For two years, I tried in vain to grapple with these disturbing questions. I had many interviews with villagers who survived rebel attacks; with soldiers who were engaged in combating the rebels; with government officials who were involved in decision making relating to the war; and even with captured members of the rebel forces. The accounts I got were no doubt useful, but hardly satisfactory. Most were self-serving. Then in April 1996, I had the opportunity of meeting, and interviewing, the shadowy leader of the rebels, Foday Saybanoh Sankoh, who emerged from his mysterious bush enclaves to begin serious talks with the Freetown government. The interview, in the Ivory Coast, was quite long and illuminating,

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<sup>1</sup>David Keen, "War Without Battles-The Strange Case of Sierra Leone", Unpublished paper, 1995 (in author's possession).

not so much by what he said, but what he could not say. Throughout the interview, Sankoh was clear about what he and his men did not want, but hardly about what he wanted. Even the proposals he put forward to the Freetown government as the basis for negotiations amounted to desires, not demands, and there seemed a phoneyess about the entire peace process which was chilling because of the importance attached to it by the traumatised nation. It was even worse talking to other officials of the RUF who were, however senior their ranks proclaimed them, simply functionaries. Sankoh seemed to be the embodiment and arbiter of the "struggle"; and just how this barely literate ex-army photographer came to hold such a sway on the destiny of a nation of 4.5 million souls was a thoroughly intriguing phenomenon for me.

I had an opportunity to reflect on all these matters when I came over to Wilfrid Laurier University to study for an MA in history in October 1996, but especially after taking the War and Society course taught by Professor Terry Copp who agreed to supervise this thesis. A scholar of conventional wars, Professor Copp's penetrating insights into the nature of wars, states and societies, and the motivations of men to fight and die, however, prepared me to try and understand the rebel war in Sierra Leone, perhaps the apotheosis of the unconventional war, as an historian not simply as a participant observer.

I was also helped by communications with other scholars who have studied the war and have written about it. In this regard, I am particularly grateful to Ibrahim Abdullah, a Sierra Leonean professor of history at the Illinois State University, Yusuf Bangura, who directs research at the United Nation's office in Geneva, Switzerland, my mate and colleague, Ismail Rashid, a Ph.D candidate at McGill and Patrick Muana, also a Ph.D candidate at Sheffield University, England. I am also grateful to Paul Richards, a professor of anthropology at the

University of London and a scholar who has written extensively about the war, for his encouragement and advice. In personal communications with him, we shared ideas about the nature of the conflict, but as will emerge from this thesis, I disagree with him on a number of key points. I tended to agree more with the views of Professor Abdullah, which he so well articulated in a forthcoming publication, "Bush paths to Destruction", first published on the internet discussion forum for Sierra Leoneans, Leonenet, about the composition and nature of the RUF. Indeed, a large number of the articles that I utilised in writing this thesis were obtained from Leonenet. One particular discussion, about the nature and character of the people who dominate the RUF, proved especially important. It began with Yusuf Bangura's review of Paul Richards' Fighting for the Rainforest, the first scholarly treatment of the war in book form. Dr. Bangura's review provided a discussion which I was able to contribute to and which continues to this day. Other colleagues on Leonenet who encouraged and assisted me in various forms are Saffa Kemokai (in New Jersey), Cecil Blake, a professor of mass communications at Indiana State University, and Peter Dumbuya of the Tuskegee University.

I must thank the Laurier Centre for Strategic and Disarmament Studies at Wilfrid Laurier University for providing me a research grant which enabled me to visit the Northwestern University Library (Evanston, Chicago) and the Sierra Leone Embassy in Washington DC. Northwestern holds issues of Sierra Leone newspapers since 1990. These proved remarkably refreshing and useful, not least because they enabled me to reconstruct and properly evaluate the crisis as it developed. Conversations with Sierra Leone Embassy officials in Washington, albeit at a time when the country was plunged into deepening crisis by the 25 May coup, were also very illuminating.

In the event, as Professor Copp kept reminding me, I have come to learn more about the

war outside Sierra Leone than when I was in the country directly involved with it! That in itself speaks volumes about the war.

I must also thank Dr. Douglas Lorimer, who read the draft of this essay and made very useful comments and suggestions. I am also grateful to Dr. George Urbaniak, whose International Relations course helped me to understand the dynamics of diplomacy in the conduct of war and peace. Finally, I thank all the members of the history department at Wilfrid Laurier University, particularly the graduate officer, Dr. David Monod, for their encouragement and great personal touch.

On a more personal level, I am grateful to my friends, Amanda Greenland (of the University of Waterloo), Vida Owusu (Wilfrid Laurier University), Tony Olajide in Kitchener, and my mate Brian Rawding and his wife, Cindy, another mate Chris Evans, my cousin Ansu Konuwa and his wife Musu (with whom I spent many pleasant moments in Philadelphia), Hashim Dabo (also in Philadelphia), my mates Lansana Fofana, Obinna Anyadike, Thomas Turay (of the University of Toronto), Dauda Massaquoi, and several others. It has been a wonderful experience for me.

Ketamia,

Lansana Gberie,

Waterloo, September 1997.

## INTRODUCTION

Komba, 11, had been caught in the bush by the rebels; he said he was carrying food to his relatives, rounds of ammunition were found in his bag. He was assaulted and caught at the shoulders with a machete and left to die...There were many others: a 16-year-old girl called Florence who had gone crazy after seeing a rebel mutilated by her commander; a 15-year-old boy commander crying from a bullet wound in the arm; a private of the same age who went about the centre with a toy revolver tucked into the top of his shorts<sup>1</sup>.

The proliferation of small but highly destructive wars in parts of Africa in the aftermath of the Cold War is often portrayed by the Western media as the reality of the continent. The media habitually portray Africa as a crisis-ridden continent sucked into penumbral savagery, with murderous despots, and inter-tribal and religious conflicts being the rule rather than the exception. The majority of the African population is presented as illiterate and impoverished peasants condemned to a life of suffering and brutal death. For the Western media, the dominant and recurrent themes of the African condition are wars, political instability, famine,

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<sup>1</sup>Jeremy Harding, "The Business: 'Executive Outcomes'", Review of African Political Economy, No.71: 87-97, 1997.92.

refugees and human rights abuses. This image of a crisis-plagued continent is not new and has deep-seated historical roots<sup>2</sup>. Thus when Victoria Brittain, respected liberal British journalist, recently speculated about a future for the continent in which "Conrad's Heart of Darkness will be read as straightforward description"<sup>3</sup>, one might be tempted to dismiss her statement as merely a rendition of an arcane Eurocentric trope on the African condition.

However, the portrayal of Africa as the "Dark Continent" is no longer the exclusive preserve of European writers. In fact, one of the most forceful restatement of this theme has come from a surprising quarter, an African American journalist, Keith Richburg. Richburg, a correspondent for the Washington Post, spent three years in Africa on assignment at the end of which he encapsulated his impression of the continent in Out of America: A Black Man Confronts Africa published in 1997<sup>4</sup>. What Richburg wrote could be construed as a requiem for the continent:

So what future do I see for Africa, this strange and forbidden place? What future can I see for a place where kids do Donald Duck masks and ball gowns before inflicting untold horrors on each other, and on innocent civilians caught in between? What future has a place where

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<sup>2</sup>It was sentiments such as these, as epitomised in Rudyard Kipling's "White Mans' Burden", which were used to justify colonialism. See introduction to Thomas Pekenham's The Scramble for Africa 1876-1912 (New York: Random House, 1991) where he states that Africa was pictured as a continent in need of redemption and governance, where "if there are states and rulers, they were African. If there were treasures, they were buried in African soil"! (xxi).

<sup>3</sup>V. Brittain, "Africa, the lost continent?", New Statesman and Society, 8 April, 1994.

<sup>4</sup>K. Richburg, Out of America: A Black Man Confronts Africa (New York: BasicBooks, 1997).

the best and brightest languish in dank prison cells? Where a ruthless warlord aims mortar shells into a crowded market place, and where teenagers strip down cars and fit them with anti-aircraft guns to roam through the streets terrorising and looting? Where a dictator begs the international community for food aid to avert mass hunger even as he erects a new international airport in his dirt-poor hometown? What future is there for a place where poets are hanged by soldiers, and where soldiers riot and kill when they are unpaid? Where entire villages are left ravaged by disease that only the very old and the very young still linger?. Richburg concludes: "I have looked into my crystal ball and tried to see some slivers of light. I've really tried. But all I can see is more darkness"<sup>5</sup>.

Richburg's prognostication may seem extreme, but it is not extraordinary. It is typical of a well-established genre of writing on Africa now labelled as Afro-pessimism. What is remarkable about Richburg's views is that they are coming from a "constituency", Black America, which has been traditionally known for its idealisation of Mother Africa. Much of the rave that Richburg perhaps hoped to generate by his highly provocative book had been taken by an earlier and more influential Afro-pessimist piece, however. This was Robert Kaplan's "The Coming Anarchy" article, published in the American magazine, Atlantic Monthly<sup>6</sup>.

Kaplan, a futurist, first made his mark in 1993 with an analysis of the collapse of the

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<sup>5</sup>K. Richburg, Out of America.237-238.

<sup>6</sup>R. Kaplan, "The Coming Anarchy: How Scarcity, Crime, Over-Population and Diseases are Rapidly Destroying Our Planet", Atlantic Monthly, February 1994.

Yugoslavian state and its anarchic aftermath in Balkan Ghosts: A Journey Through History<sup>7</sup>. He suggested that the event represents an uncontrollable trend provoked by culture clash, resource competition and environmental breakdown. Kaplan concluded that this trend will be the undoing of the developing world. In 1994, he extended his grim conclusions, much more forcefully, to Africa, postulating that the conflicts in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Rwanda and Somalia, were harbingers for a Hobbesian future for the continent in which criminal violence, as opposed to political, will lead to the collapse of its nation-states<sup>8</sup>.

While the reception of Richburg's book has been rather tepid, Kaplan's views generated much interest in the media and government circles. US President Bill Clinton took a copy of the Balkan Ghosts on a trip to the former Yugoslavia at the height of the crisis in the country, and the State Department faxed copies of the "Coming Anarchy" to every US embassy in the world<sup>9</sup>. The caption of one article in the Washington Post in July 1994, which was clearly influenced by Kaplan's article, was "Africa: Bloodied, Torn at its Ethnic Seams"<sup>10</sup>.

The strength of Afro-pessimism has been its ability to describe and forcefully convey the

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<sup>7</sup>R. Kaplan, Balkan Ghosts: a journey through history (London: Macmillan, 1993).

<sup>8</sup>R. Kaplan, "The Coming Anarchy".

<sup>9</sup>B. Bradshaw, "The Coming Chaos?", Moving Pictures Bulletin, Issue 25, February 1996. 18-19.

<sup>10</sup>Jennifer Parmlee, "Africa: Bloodied, Torn at its Ethnic Seams", Washington Post, 14 July 1994. A.14.



sense of crisis in afflicted parts of the continent. Afro-pessimists have been able to utilise the visible reality of suffering and crisis to drive home their arguments that Africa is a "dark" continent. It was this aspect that made Kaplan's article so influential and poignant, coming at a time when Rwanda, Liberia and Sierra Leone were crumbling under local wars. Yet Afro-pessimists necessarily overstate their case. Every crisis, however localised, becomes symptomatic of the general African condition. Countries that contradict their general perception of the continent are overlooked. More important, they tend to offer unsatisfactory analyses of what is going on in the afflicted areas and why.

But critics of Afro-pessimism quickly find their well-reasoned voices muffled by the sheer enormity of the catastrophes that so often strike at various parts of the continent. A Canadian analyst of African crises, John Pendergast, has spoken about "the contradictory realities of Africa" encompassing the "despair of a Rwanda" and the "elation of a South Africa"<sup>11</sup>. Pendergast conceded that by the end of 1994 there were still 6 million refugees in Africa. More distressing, he acknowledged, was that the 1990s which had promised so much has produced a large scale genocide in one of Africa's smallest states, Rwanda. Over half a million people were massacred in an ethnic-cleansing campaign in that state in a space of three weeks. Yet, he noted on the positive side that the literacy rate in the continent has more than trebled since 1960. Pendergast also pointed to 27 presidential elections in Africa in the late 1980s and 1990s, 21 of them for the first time. In the process, 31 opposition parties had been legalised. South Africa had attained majority rule without the self-destructive civil war that

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<sup>11</sup>J. Pendergast, Crisis and Hope in Africa (Toronto: Inter-Agency Center of Concern, 1997).3.

was feared. Pendergast was equivocal: "Africa has made tremendous gains since the 1960s, but the immensity of the remaining need gives the impression of stagnation"<sup>12</sup>.

Another such analyst, Philip Gourevitch, has also pointed to the bright spots in the African landscape to debunk Afro-pessimism. Writing in the New Yorker, a liberal American magazine, Gourevitch refers to a new generation of African leaders which is emerging from some of the seemingly mindless wars in Africa. This generation, he argues, is "defining a new chapter in African leadership, one that might be called post-post colonial". Included in this new pantheon of leaders are Yoweri Museveni of Uganda, Issias Aferworki of Eritrea, Nelson Mandela of South Africa and Laurent Kabila of the Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire). Museveni has successfully transformed his war-ravaged country into one of the few functioning economies in Africa. Gourevitch hinges his optimism on the fact that the conflicts are transitional and that more functioning states would come out of them. He posits that what we are seeing in Africa is not an irrational descent into barbarism but a "second liberation" movement. "A generation ago", Gourevitch wrote, "when Africans spoke of 'liberation', they meant freedom from European empires. Today, 'liberation' means climbing from under the client dictatorships of Cold War neocolonialism"<sup>13</sup>.

Gourevitch's argument is not new. Enlightened African leaders and writers like Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt, Walter Rodney of Guyana and Samir

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<sup>12</sup>J. Pendergast, Crisis and Hope.4.

<sup>13</sup>P. Gourevitch, "Kabila's march: Zairean rebels confront the West's legacies", New Yorker, 19 May, 1997.

Amin of Egypt had long ago expressed similar arguments in reaction to Afro-pessimists<sup>14</sup>. Reflecting on the continent's perennial cycle of poverty and underdevelopment, these leaders and writers concluded that Africa's problems were due to Western manipulation and a legacy of colonial rule. They argued that Africa was not really independent; there might have been symbolic changes of personnel, but it was still ubiquitous Europe which remote-controlled African states and their policies. For these theorists and leaders, Africa's condition was not one of unremitting darkness but of neo-colonialism and dependence.

The most vocal and consistent exponent of the dependency and neo-colonialism theories has been Samir Amin. Since the 1970s, Amin has forcefully applied the dependency theory, first enunciated by Andre Gunder Frank in his study of Latin American economies, to the African condition. In his study of some six West African (Ivory Coast, Senegal, the Gambia, Mali, Togo and Upper Volta, now Burkina Faso) economies, Amin put forward a number of straightforward conclusions. African "development" planning and policies depended on foreign demand and capital. This made real development planning meaningless, if not impossible. Furthermore, African states were governed by a class of colonially created petit-bourgeois "whose prosperity and power depended on external aid and who show no evidence of economic dynamism". Like Nkrumah and other dependency theorists, Amin believed that the way out of Africa's dependent and neo-colonial condition was the creation of a new generation of leaders who can break the cycle of dependency. Africa should move away from an export

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<sup>14</sup>See K. Nkrumah, Africa Must Unite (New York: International Publishers, 1972), W. Rodney, How Europe Underdeveloped Africa (London: Boyle-L'Ouverture Publishers, 1973) and S. Amin, Neo-Colonialism in West Africa (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971).

based economy to focus on indigenous development through African production and consumption:

the unambiguous conclusion must be that the fragmentation of the economic area which West Africa has undergone constitutes an irresistible pressure for the maintenance of colonial structures and policies and colonial 'development', and that these in turn no less irresistibly produce foreign domination and underdevelopment<sup>15</sup>.

Amin's argument is seductive, not least because it grapples with the factors inhibiting the development of a coherent, endogenous approach to Africa's problems. This is perhaps why the dependency theory retains its utility for Pan Africanist writers and activists. These activists and writers, however, put less emphasis on the manipulations of the "capitalist world economic system" and more blame on the failure of African leadership. The late Abdul Rahman Babu, a former government minister in Tanzania and writer, embodied this revised approach to dependency and neo-colonialism. Speaking at the 7th Pan African Conference in Kampala, Uganda, in 1996 on the "New world disorder", Babu maintained:

The real meaning of the African crisis is that our countries, collectively, are at a dead end, thanks entirely to the economic and "development" policies pursued since independence. The situation is so untenable that no 'reforms', whether inspired by the World Bank or IMF, or whether initiated locally can get us out of the mess. What is needed is not reforms but a different approach which calls for a decisive change of direction, a change from the primitive

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<sup>15</sup>Amin, Neo-Colonialism in West Africa, 274.

colonial structure of the economy to a national economy; above all, a change in the structure of the economy to a national economy; above all, a change in the structure of production. This entails a change from an outward-motivated to an inward-motivated development strategy, whose guiding principle must be one based on the recognition that external causes are only a condition of change and internal condition the basis of change<sup>16</sup>.

Resonating the ideas of Amin, Nkrumah and the earlier generation of radical Pan Africanists, Babu called for a "second Liberation" of Africa. Like other exponents of the dependency theory, his suggestions for the reorientation of African economies may yet prove to be of value if heeded. African leaders, especially the new ones, may attempt to craft creative policies for the continent's development. But Babu, like other dependency theorists, do not propose how the internal forces can be creatively mobilised without destructive consequences. Furthermore, they suggest a route of escape only for those African countries not already mired in self-destructive wars. They do not confront the issue of how to apply their remedies to those portions of Africa already sucked into horrendous civil wars or facing what Ali Mazrui has called "normative collapse"<sup>17</sup>.

Creative and useful as the dependency and neo-colonialism theories were in diagnosing Africa's problems and proposing remedies, they are flawed in their diminution of the African

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<sup>16</sup>A.M. Babu, "The New World Disorder-Which Way Africa?", in Tajudeen Abdul Raheem ed., Pan Africanism: Politics, Economy and Social Change in the Twenty-First Century (New York: New York University Press, 1996).92.

<sup>17</sup>A. Mazrui, "Global Africa: from Abolitionists to Reparationists", in ibid, 92.

agency. This diminution has two theoretical consequences. First, it underplays and minimises Africa's contribution, both positive and negative, to the relationship the continent has with the rest of the world. Secondly, dependency and neo-colonialist theories unwittingly provide alibis for some of Africa's most obdurate and corrupt leaders whose actions and policies have helped perpetuate dependency and the impoverishment of the continent. Dependency theory gives the impression that this leadership is devoid of choice<sup>18</sup>.

Let us take the example of Zaire, now the Republic of Congo. It is potentially one of Africa's richest economies with vast mineral and other natural wealth. For three decades after independence, Zaire's wealth, running into billions of dollars, seemed to have been siphoned off by foreign companies. The then president, Mobutu Sese Seko, who ruled the country for over three decades, connived in and profited from the reckless exploitation of his country's wealth, in the process transforming himself into one of the world's wealthiest men.

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<sup>18</sup>The view that greater account must be taken of the African agency, in this and related matters (colonialism and slavery, for example), which I share, is called "poststructuralism". The idea is to "deexoticise" and banalise Africa and to debunk the alleged "uniqueness" of the African situation and experience. This approach, however, can sometimes be pushed too far, as John Thornton did in his views on slavery. "The African role in the development of the Atlantic (slave trade) would not simply be a secondary one, on either side of the Atlantic", Thornton wrote, for "we must accept" both "that African participation in the slave trade was voluntary and under the control of African decision makers" (in Africa) and that "the condition of slavery, by itself, did not necessarily prevent the development of an African-oriented culture" (in America and the Carribeans). To this, Talal Asad retorted: "Even the inmates of a concentration camp are able, in this sense, to live by their own cultural logic. But one may be forgiven for doubting that they are therefore 'making their own history'". (In Mamood Mandani, Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996, 10). It is this kind of extremity that led Mamood Mandani, a professor of African Studies at the University of Cape Town in South Africa to scoff at the "strong tendency in poststructuralism to...to diminish the significance of historical constraint in the name of salvaging agency" (Ibid.). Mandani, however, does not provide a clearer approach to the problem.

Meanwhile, his people languished in poverty and major institutions of the state ceased to function in any meaningful sense. In 1960, the country had 88,000 miles of usable road. By 1985, the length of usable road had dropped to 12,000, of which only 1,400 were paved<sup>19</sup>. The billions of dollars could surely have been used to at least lay the foundations of an autonomous economy. It took seven months of armed struggle by disaffected forces in the country led by Laurent Kabila to dislodge Mobutu from power. On all counts, Zaire, with its corrupt and complicit leadership, presented the prime example of a dependent, enclave economy in Africa. Whatever blame may be heaped on foreign corporations for Zaire's impoverishment, it is beyond question that Mobutu and his agents bear equal responsibility. But Mobutu is only the archetypal, not an isolated, case in Africa. Elsewhere in other African countries, the situation has not been very different. African leadership in many respect has been a shackle on progress.

What Zaire and other African states demonstrate is the usefulness and limits of the dependency and neo-colonialism theories. They could only partially explain the collapse of the Zairean economy. The theories could not explain the specific manner in which Zairean institutions operated and why they were different from those of other countries. But more important, they fail to account for the prime agent of African leadership and the dynamic and complex nature of African societies. It is for this reason that the French political scientist, Jean Francois Bayart, has described the dependency theory as "the paradigm of the yoke", and a serious impediment to understanding Africa's historical development and problems. Bayart noted that dependency theory is "the failing of those who portray the poverty of Africa and

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<sup>19</sup>Basil Davidson, The Black Man's Burden: Africa and the Curse of the Nation-State (New York: Random House, 1992).257.

see it as the object rather than the subject of its future"<sup>20</sup>. Bayart is optimistic:

The contemporary orbit of politics south of the Sahara...is capable of change one day. Seen in this light, the long-term prison sentence is more like probation. It is, of course, never a mechanical reproduction of forms taken from the past but rather a theme on which the actors can improvise<sup>21</sup>.

That the post-colonial experience for many African states has been a disaster is admitted even by those Africanists, particularly British Africanists, who were so sympathetic to the African nationalist struggle for independence. They are now reconsidering their position in view of the decrepit condition of African states. Some, like the late Michael Crowder and Basil Davidson, have now conceded that the nationalist forces which wrested the state from the European colonialists have produced suffering rather than triumph and development for Africa. In a reflective and despairing article written in 1987, Crowder concluded that in spite of the initial promises of independence, African nationhood has failed. About African independence, Crowder asked: "Whose dream was it anyway?"<sup>22</sup>. Davidson concurred in a language as grim as could be imagined:

...the actual and present condition of Africa is one of deep trouble, sometimes a deeper trouble than the worst imposed during the colonial years. For some

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<sup>20</sup>J.F. Bayart, The State in Africa: the Politics of the Belly (London: Longman, 1993). 1.

<sup>21</sup>Bayart, The State in Africa, 263.

<sup>22</sup>M. Crowder, "Whose dream was it anyway? Twenty-five years of African independence", African Affairs, 86, 1987. 7-24.



time now, deserts have widened year by year. Broad savannahs and their communities have lost all means of existence, or else are sorely threatened...Cities that barely deserve the name have spawned plagues of poverty on a scale never known in earlier times, or even dreamed of. Harsh governments or dictatorships rule over people who distrust them to the point of hatred, and usually for good and sufficient reason; and all too often one dismal tyranny gives way to a worse one. Despair rots civil society, the state becomes an enemy, bandits flourish. Meanwhile the "developed" world, the industrialised world, has continued to take its cut of Africa's dwindling wealth<sup>23</sup>.

Davidson locates the African crisis primarily in the "curse of nation-statism", which he defines as colonially created entities which were described as states but were simply non-viable aggregations of disparate ethnic and even nationalistic groups which have failed to evolve into nation states. Independence, he argues, inspired high hopes of liberation. However, once the euphoria of the change waned, many African states have lost even the little internal legitimacy and economic viability that they had at the time of independence. "Where did the liberators go wrong?", Davidson asked. His conclusion is that post-colonial communities failed to "find and insist upon means of living together by strategies less primitive and destructive than rival kinship"<sup>24</sup>. Despite the sense of gloom which this

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<sup>23</sup>Davidson, The Black Man's Burden, 9.

<sup>24</sup>Davidson, Ibid, 291.

conclusion suggests, Davidson still retains his optimism and believes that Africans can yet resolve the crisis of nation-statism.

However, Davidson's concept of "nation-statism", the belief, now so infectious, that Africa's problems revolve around the fragile entities which the European colonialists created and made the defining instrument of their rule, the state, is contentious. No doubt, the afflicted condition of African states, including instability, mismanagement and in some cases even collapse, has become the defining feature of Africa's post-colonial era. But most of these same "fragile entities" functioned remarkably well at least in the first decade after independence, and certainly were liberating. Some still are. That the majority of them disintegrated, I argue, was due not so much to their intrinsic non-viability but simply because of political mismanagement. Certainly, corrupt and inept politicians who wreck the economy also destroy respect for the state. This, as Opala argued in his critique of Kaplan's article, is nothing new; "it is as old as politics"<sup>25</sup>. Colin Leys, a Left-leaning writer, sees it differently, however.

In an article entitled "Confronting the African Tragedy" in the New Left Review in 1994, Leys postulates that what is happening in Africa may be beyond its leadership to tackle. It is the "perhaps irreversible decline towards that capitalism-produced barbarism of which Rosa Luxemburg warned". Leys quotes Luxemburg description of this "capitalism-produced barbarism" as "the destruction of culture...the dictatorship of militarism...dissolution and an early decline in chaos and anarchy...a string of political and social disasters and

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<sup>25</sup>Joseph Opala, "Reflections on 'The Coming Anarchy'", Crosslines, July 1996.

convulsions...punctuated by periodic economic catastrophes and crises..."<sup>26</sup>.

Such a view, however, suffers from an even greater problem than dependency theory in that it does not offer indigenous solutions to the crises and, even more than the dependency theory, ignores the African agency. Little wonder that no African scholar has taken it up.

Like Davidson, the Nigerian Nobel Laureate, Wole Soyinka, is critical of the modern African state. Soyinka, who was forced out of Nigeria by the excesses of the military regime of General Sani Abacha in 1994, questions the efficacy of the terms "sovereignty" and "state" in Africa. In a recent book, The Open Sore of a Continent (1996), he argues that many African countries are "nation-spaces" worthy of the name "states" only because they issue passports or are recognised as such by international bodies. Soyinka confronts this reality by suggesting that

many nations on the African continent are only in a state of limbo, that they exist in a halfway space of purgatory until, by mundane processes or through dramatic events, their citizens are enabled to raise the nation reality to a higher level, then even higher still, until it attains a status of irreversibility-either as paradise or hell<sup>27</sup>.

Soyinka, however, does not elaborate on what constitutes "mundane processes" or "dramatic events" or how these may motivate ordinary people to act and achieve the "nation reality".

Even though Soyinka, Davidson and Crowder offer no clear resolution of Africa's

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<sup>26</sup>C. Leys, "Confronting the African Tragedy", New Left Review, No. 204, March\April 1994. 34.

<sup>27</sup>Wole Soyinka, The Open Sore of a Continent: A Personal Narrative of the Nigerian Crisis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).23.

problems, they have indicated, however hazily, where the answers may be found, the African state. By examining the nature of the African state, its central institutions, and how they have functioned and malfunctioned over the years, we can begin to discern the contours of the crisis as well as the remedies. The most crucial aspects of the African state in this regard are the security forces and the political leadership. This thesis will examine the Sierra Leone state, one of the smallest and weakest in Africa, with particular reference to the army and political leadership, to understand the origins and evolution of the current crisis in the country.

The military dimension of the crisis in Sierra Leone began ostensibly as a spillover from the Liberian civil war in 1991. In six short years, what became popularly known as "Sierra Leone's rebel war" engulfed the country with a destructive force. By 1996, over 15,000 people had been killed and two-thirds of the country's population of 4.5 million displaced<sup>28</sup>. The economy collapsed, with a negative annual growth rate of minus 6.24 per cent between 1991 and 1995. By March 1996, an estimated 75 per cent of school-aged children were out of school, and 70 per cent of the country's educational facilities, already troubled by the time the war began, destroyed. Only 16 per cent of Sierra Leone's 500 health centres were functioning by March 1996, almost all of these in the capital and its suburbs<sup>29</sup>.

Combatants on all sides made extensive use of children in combat and targeted civilians. The

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<sup>28</sup>Africa-Sierra Leone Progress, November 1996. Reliable casualty figures for the war are difficult to get. In 1994, the ruling National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC) junta released a statement putting the number of dead, both civilian and military, at just over 9,000. The war escalated after that, and it is reasonable to suggest a figure as high as 30,000 killed. The figure above is quoted from a speech delivered by the elected president, Ahmed Tejan Kabba, at the UN in October 1996.

<sup>29</sup>Ian Smillie, "Sierra Leone: NGOs in Complex Emergencies", Unpublished paper, 1996. (in author's possession).

war has been popularly termed "rebel incursions", "civil war" and "armed rebellion by Sierra Leone's dispossessed youth". These terms are questionable, given the nature of some of the atrocities committed against civilians by the combatants, extensive terror tactics, the senseless destruction of lives and property, and the absence of clearly expressed political goals. What kind of war is Sierra Leone experiencing? What is at stake in this war? Is this merely another post-Cold War conflict which has erupted as a result of aid cut-off and the subsequent collapse of patrimonial governments which depended on Superpower aid to maintain power? Who are the combatants?

Martin van Creveld, one of the most influential military theorists of our age, would definitely argue that Sierra Leone's war belong to a newer type of social and military conflict. In his book, The Transformation of War (1991), Creveld argues that the traditional notion of war, first postulated by Clausewitz, as a continuation of politics by other means, is now obsolete. He maintains that we must now consider a new kind of war which is waged by "new types" of organisations. These organisations are mostly "ragtag bands of ruffians out for their own advantage, hardly distinguishable from the ecorceurs ("Skinners") who devastated the French countryside during the Hundred Years War"<sup>30</sup>. Now and then, he wrote, "they have turned whole societies into bloody chaos":

Extensive conflicts of this nature will cause existing distinctions between government, armed forces, and the people to breakdown. National sovereignties are already undermined by organisations that refuse to recognise the state's monopoly over violence. Armies will be replaced by police-like security forces on the one hand and bands of ruffians on the other, not that the

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<sup>30</sup>Martin van Creveld, The Transformation of War (New York: The Free Press, 1991). 225.

difference is always clear even today. National frontiers that at present constitutes the greatest obstacle to combating low-intensity conflict, may be obliterated or else become meaningless as rival organisations chase each other across them. As frontiers go, so will territorial states.

Creveld maintained that unless such conflicts are quickly terminated, it would be difficult to differentiate the combating sides since they will increasingly become similar from imitating each other's tactics<sup>31</sup>.

Any student or observer of the Sierra Leone conflict would have find it very difficult to disagree with Creveld's postulations. In fact, the conflict would tend to provide a perfect test case for his conclusions. It was this particular reason which made Kaplan's article, "The Coming Anarchy", so poignant. For in the conflict in Sierra Leone and Liberia, Kaplan found two scenarios in which the van Creveld argument can be applied with shocking effect. By welding Creveld's military conclusions, Thomas Homer-Dixon's pessimistic environmental prognosis and Samuel Huntington's thesis on the unavoidable clash of cultures, Kaplan was able to draw the dire but impressionistic conclusion that

Sierra Leone is the microcosm of what is happening in West Africa and much of the underdeveloped world: the withering away of central governments, the rise of tribal or regional domains, the unchecked spread of disease, and the growing pervasiveness of war<sup>32</sup>.

Kaplan concluded that the crisis was not war. It was the product of social breakdown triggered

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid.

<sup>32</sup>R. Kaplan, "The Coming Anarchy".

by population pressure and environmental collapse. The conflict was not politically motivated but criminally driven by dispossessed urban youths, who were inflicting vengeance on a society which had failed them. Kaplan described these volatile urban elements as "loose molecules in an unstable social fluid". These youths were Africa's modern day ecorceurs who were roaming and ravaging the countryside, armed with cheap weapons, like their mercenary counterparts in medieval Germany during the Thirty Years War.

Kaplan's article derived much of its provocative force from the fact that it touched on some of the key contemporary preoccupations of academics, government officials and the public in the West, in particular, and the world in general: the environment, violence, urban decay, over-population and resource scarcity. That these issues are palpable and may well define our era is undeniable but whether or not Sierra Leone (and West Africa) is the bellwether of the crises of our times is another matter.

The foundations on which such a broad conclusion was drawn is anything but faultless. Kaplan's observations on Sierra Leone were formulated after a lightning stop in the capital, Freetown, a visit to the city's slums, and conversations with government officials. His arrival was no doubt opportune. Kaplan reached Freetown when it was most insecure (anti-government rebels were investing the capital) and when its government and citizens were on edge. He depended heavily on his impressions and rumours making their rounds in the city. Kaplan correctly observed that a group of formerly marginalised youths, in the form of the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC) led by a boyish Captain Valentine Strasser, held the reigns of government. Yet, he uncritically and falsely reported that the Deputy Chairman, Captain Solomon Musa, executed all his middle class sponsors to "efface" his shame at the benefaction. Other uncritical reproductions of rumours punctuate his entire article.

The net effect of Kaplan's dependence on vignettes and visual impressions is that he lacks a solid grasp of the nature of the Sierra Leone state, its institutions and culture. Nowhere in his influential article does he attempt to understand the state beyond its current leadership, its visible condition of crisis and cultural disorientation.

William Reno, a political scientist, who has also utilised Creveld's arguments to discern what he calls the "Shadow State" in Sierra Leone, offers a more scholarly viewpoint on the conflict. Reno looks at the "privatisation of war" by "rival warlords" in Sierra Leone and Liberia and argues that these warlords have subordinated their political aims to the logic of ruthless mineral extraction to enhance their power. Reno cites Charles Taylor's "Taylorland" or "Greater Liberia" as the apotheosis of this "warlord politics"<sup>33</sup>. For, Reno the military organisations set up by the leaders of the insurgencies in Sierra Leone and Liberia represent the archetypal "new type" of organisations mentioned by Creveld.

The merit of Reno's work lies in his attempt to grapple with the origin and character of the state that had fuelled, and was the object of, the conflicts in Sierra Leone and Liberia. Kaplan had ignored them. Yet Reno, like Kaplan, may have overstated his case by arguing that the conflicts and the organisations that were carrying on the war had no political agenda. Taylor is no longer a "warlord" but the elected president of Liberia, and his organisation, the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), which launched the Liberian civil war in 1989, a legitimate political party. In Sierra Leone, the criminal violence continues but the RUF has since clearly demonstrated that its ultimate objective is to capture and run the state. This raises

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<sup>33</sup>See William Reno, Corruption and State Politics in Sierra Leone (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), particularly chapter 8 "The changing character of African sovereignty". 177-188.



a number of critical questions with regards to Reno's and Kaplan's major arguments, and indirectly, Creveld's thesis. Is the conflict in Sierra Leone devoid of political motivations? Is there an alternative explanation for the seemingly anarchic and criminal violence that accompanied the conflicts?

It is precisely on these grounds that Paul Richards, a British anthropologist who has studied the war, has taken on Kaplan's views on the conflict in Sierra Leone. In Fighting for the Rainforest: War, Resources and Youth in Sierra Leone (1996)<sup>34</sup>, Richards suggests that what appears as random and anarchic violence in Sierra Leone is in fact anything but. The war, he maintains, "must be understood partly as 'performance', in which techniques of terror compensate for lack of equipment". The anthropologist aimed to look for "a more exclusively African perspective"<sup>35</sup>.

Richards offers Fighting for the Rainforest as a refutation of what he calls the "New Barbarism" thesis, the Kaplanesque contention that the war is a throw-back to the pre-modern era of banditism and anarchy. He analyses the war as a "crisis of modernity" caused in part by the failure of the APC "patrimonial system" to provide remunerative employment to educated youth. Richards claim that the rebel movement, the RUF, is, like the Shining Path of Peru, "incurably didactic" and is led by a group of embittered pedagogues"<sup>36</sup>. The

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<sup>34</sup>P. Richards, Fighting for the Rainforest: War, Resources and Youth in Sierra Leone (London: The International African Institute, 1996).

<sup>35</sup>Paul Richards first set his argument, very persuasively, in "Rebellion in Liberia and Sierra Leone: A Crisis of Youth?", in O. Furley ed., Conflict in Africa (London: Tauris, 1995).

<sup>36</sup>P. Richards, Fighting for the Rainforest, 28.

rebels' ultimate aims, he asserts, is to replace Sierra Leone's patrimonial system with a revolutionary egalitarian system"<sup>37</sup>.

There can be little doubt about the sincerity of Paul Richards' interest in refuting widespread misconception about the Sierra Leone war. However, the overly rationalist framework he constructs for the RUF, which led him into rationalising the movement's often misguided acts of terror against the country's citizenry, created serious problems of interpretation. For example, the only evidence he provides for the important claim that the RUF is fighting for "a revolutionary egalitarian system" is the rebel movement's redistribution of stolen goods to young recruits of the movement!<sup>38</sup>. In a review of the book, Yusuf Bangura, a Sierra Leonean scholar, took issue with what he believes is Richards' uncritical readings of the RUF's propaganda booklet, Footpaths to Democracy, to present the movement as "a revolutionary organisation", and the war as "highly rational". Bangura laments: "The resource exploitation, vandalism and random or barbaric violence are either ignored or not properly interrogated". Bangura believes that the RUF is a criminal organisation which uses "barbaric" methods against the country's citizens, the effectiveness of this method in terms of giving significance to the organisation does not make it less so<sup>39</sup>.

Ibrahim Abdullah, another Sierra Leonean scholar, arrived at much the same conclusion

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<sup>37</sup>Ibid. 59.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid.

<sup>39</sup>Y. Bangura, "Understanding the political and cultural dynamics of the Sierra Leone war: A critique of Paul Richards' Fighting for the Rainforest". Discussion paper for the Sierra Leone news group, Leonenet, 1997. In author's possession.

in an earlier essay, "Footpaths to Destruction: The origins and character of the RUF"<sup>40</sup>. Abdullah defined the RUF as dominated by socially uprooted and criminally disposed youths who are unrepresentative of Sierra Leone's young generation, as Kaplan claims they are, and who are not capable of revolutionary action, as Richards states they are. Abdullah sees the RUF as "a lumpen social movement", its "lumpenness" ensuring that the movement lacks any progressive or transformative agenda. We shall return to this tantalising point in due course.

What is lacking in all these evaluations, however, is a sense of how the crisis of youth and state developed over time in Sierra Leone, and why it imploded with such destructive force. Also, there is little sense of why the state and its agents, even with significant external support, failed to mobilise the country sufficiently enough to suppress the rebellion. In this sense, they could be said to be ahistorical.

This thesis offers a political narrative reconstructing the crisis of state as it developed in Sierra Leone since independence in 1961, and will focus especially on the period following Siaka Stevens' imposition of a one-party state in 1978. The one-party system itself may have been imposed in response to the institutional fragility of the Sierra Leone state, but the period after its declaration to the rebellion in 1991 saw the fragility intensify over time, as evidenced in the growing importance of the informal sector and the collapse of major institutions of the state. The root of the vulnerability of the Sierra Leone state can be traced to the one-party era. By the time the rebellion began, state disintegration was well advanced in the country; the RUF war completed this disintegration.

Chapter one will examine the cultural and ideological foundations of the Sierra Leonean

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<sup>40</sup>I. Abdullah, "Footpaths to destruction: The origins and character of the RUF". Also discussion paper on Leonenet, 1996. In author's possession.

state, and how it developed in the colonial period through independence until the emergence of Siaka Stevens. It will show that, however tenuous things might have been, the country was developing slowly but steadily under its first two postcolonial leaders, maintaining, almost alone in sub-Saharan Africa, a Westminster style of democracy in which an opposition party operated unfettered. Chapter two focuses on the Stevens' era (1968-1986), revealing the sources of deep social and political conflicts and the near collapse of the formal sector. It will also examine how Stevens' handpicked successor, Joseph Saidu Momoh (1986-1992), attempted to handle the problem and how this failed. The final two chapters will attempt to give an historically accurate reconstruction of the rebellion, beginning as an armed incursion by insurgents linked to the Liberian rebel leader, Charles Taylor, and failed attempts by successive governments to suppress it.

CHAPTER ONE

THE SIERRA LEONE SETTING AT INDEPENDENCE: THE "ENCIRCLING GLOOM"?

...in 1960 during the planning for independence, Sir Milton insisted that the hymn 'Lead, kindly light' be sung. After a brief silence the Archbishop of Sierra Leone spoke. "Mr. P.M., do you think that's appropriate? Remember that the next line goes "Amidst encircling gloom". Sir Milton looked around the table. "I think that there is a lot of encircling gloom". The hymn was sung<sup>1</sup>.

Analysts of African state collapse often argue that African states, because they were hastily and arbitrarily lumped together out of a motley of political, ethnic and even nationalist factors by the European colonialists, were intrinsically unviable. The functional pattern of such states were deemed to have depended solely on 'well-developed' coercive apparatus, including an army and police force<sup>2</sup>. Far from being nation-states, it has been argued, the different African territorial entities encompassed wide varieties of political, ethnic, cultural and even nationalist groups. "The African state is a new state, successor to a colonial, non-

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<sup>1</sup>In John Cartwright, Political Leadership in Sierra Leone (London, 1978).99.

<sup>2</sup>See Naomi Chazan et al, Politics and Society in Contemporary Africa (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1992).42.

sovereign creation", writes William Zartman in a book about African states' collapse<sup>3</sup>. Zartman maintains that these states collapsed because their new rulers were both incompetent and corrupt, and unable to maintain the instruments of coercion. Naomi Chazan agrees with Zartman and suggests that African states were headed for inevitable crisis. The states, he posits, were "aloof and surprisingly weak", and "penetrated and directly (often repressively) affected only portions of daily life and succeeded in bringing about changes in a very limited number of spheres"<sup>4</sup>.

The tiny West African state of Sierra Leone, which Sir Milton Margai, a British trained medical doctor, led to independence in 1961 after over a century of British colonial rule, seems, at first sight, particularly to fit this bland characterisation. In its modern form, Sierra Leone<sup>5</sup> began as a settlement for freed slaves who served on the side of the British in the American War of Independence and later found themselves in Britain, the United States and Canada. The settlement was founded in 1787 mainly through the efforts of British abolitionists, notably Granville Sharpe and William Wilberforce, as the place to repatriate the

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<sup>3</sup>I. William Zartman, "Introduction: Posing the Problem of State Collapse", in Zartman ed. Collapse States: The Disintegration and Restoration of Legitimate Authority, (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1995).1.

<sup>4</sup>Chazan et al, Politics and Society, 43.

<sup>5</sup>The country derived its name from the peninsular mountains overlooking the capital, Freetown. A Portuguese sailor, Petro da Cintra, called this range of mountains, which perhaps looked like a crouching mountain, as Serra Lyoa (Lion Range) in 1462. Then, Christopher Fyfe has noted, it was "corrupted through the centuries into many variants-as Sierra Lyonne, Sierra Leona, Serra-Lions, Sierraleon, Serrillion, Serrillioon-the form Sierra Leone...has eventually prevailed". See Fyfe, A History of Sierra Leone (London, 1962).1.

"Black Poor" who had arrived from the former British American colonies and were destitute on the city's streets. It was "intended...for the happy establishment of blacks and people of colour, to be shipped as freedmen...under the protection of the British government". These people were to enjoy "both civil and religious liberty as in Britain", and were to be governed by a "constitution, bound by a social contract, rooted in history, in the institutions of Anglo-Saxon monarchy, and of Israel under the Judges"<sup>6</sup>. That was in 1787. In 1808, the British government declared a Crown Colony over the Freetown settlement and appointed a governor to rule it. Thus, ostensibly Sierra Leone is Sub-Saharan Africa's oldest modern state.

In fact, however, this settlement was limited to the Peninsular area, bought from a local chief named Naimbana, and on which the capital, Freetown, stands. The rest of the country, what came to be known as the protectorate and then the provinces, remained fragmented into small entities each under a tribal chieftain, usually a warrior, until they too were brought under British imperial control in 1896.

In culture and ideology, the new colony set itself apart from other political entities in Africa by its strong commitment to the British Monarchy, liberalism and Christianity. Subsequent settlers in the Colony, with varying intensity, attached themselves to the founding creed. In 1792, the original settlers were joined by ex-slaves or Black Loyalists from Nova Scotia who had fought on the side of the British during the American War of Independence. The Maroons, another group of ex-slaves, arrived from Jamaica to boost the Colony in 1800. The Colony which subsequently emerged was a distinct community of Africans who had lost their cultural heritage during slavery. They spoke no African language but used instead a form

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<sup>6</sup>W.S. Marcus-Jones, Legal Development and Constitutional Change in Sierra Leone 1787-1971 (London, 1981), 15.

of patois composed predominantly of English words and imitated European values and patterns of behaviour. Following the passing in England in 1807 of the Abolition Act, almost 74,000 persons were rescued by the British from slave ships bound for the Americas and resettled in Freetown<sup>7</sup>. Largely through the efforts of the colonial government and the Church Missionary Society (BOUNDEN), the "recaptives" were socialised into the foundational values of the Colony. They were provided with free education and soon merged with the earlier settlers to become Creoles<sup>8</sup>. The British regarded the Sierra Leone as an experiment in "conversionism". According to Leo Spitzer, this was reflected

in the belief that the social redemption and elevation of submerged groups would not occur through the removal of legal disabilities alone: that the state or established religious, philanthropic, or educational institutions, would be required to bring about the integration and social adjustment of the emancipated<sup>9</sup>.

As early as the 1840s, higher proportions of Creole children attended primary schools than did children in Britain<sup>10</sup>. The emergent Creole community was highly educated and elitist,

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<sup>7</sup>Micheal Banton, West African City (London: Oxford University Press, 1957), 4.

<sup>8</sup>For a more thorough discussion of the emergence of this community, see Arthur Porter, Creoledom (London: Oxford University Press, 1963).

<sup>9</sup>Leo Spitzer, Lives in Between (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 24. The book is an interesting "cross-cultural" study of the travails of "emancipated" but marginalised groups which included the Creoles of Sierra Leone.

<sup>10</sup>Leo Spizer, Creoles of Sierra Leone (Ie Ife: University of Ile Ife Press, 1975), 79.



consisting at first of traders and merchants, then of lawyers, doctors, teachers, journalists, and clergymen who went out to other African colonies on a "civilising mission". It was a mark of Creole achievement that in 1892, they held 18 out of 40 senior positions in the colonial service in Sierra Leone<sup>11</sup>.

The Protectorate, on the other hand, was imposed in August 1896 on a diverse group of people already living under their own established political traditions. There were at least 13 language groups, or tribes, in the areas over which the Protectorate was declared. These language groups were fragmented into over 200 tiny political entities under chiefs, sub-chiefs and headmen. The largest groups were the Mendes in the south and the Temnes in the north, each accounting for about 30 per cent of the total population. The other 40 per cent was made up of the other language groups<sup>12</sup>. The British consolidated the heterogeneity and fragmentation of groups in the Protectorate by drawing administrative boundaries (and even personnel) to roughly correspond with those of the precolonial political entities. That the Protectorate was not intended to be a step towards creating a single nation-state out of these divergent factors was made clear by the August 1896 declaration, which simply described the area as "foreign countries adjoining the colony" and justified the annexation as "best for the interest of the people"<sup>13</sup>. The development of a single unitary state was not encouraged by the British policy of accommodating the interests of chiefs in the Protectorate.

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>This data is taken from the 1985 Population Census of Sierra Leone (Freetown: Central Statistics Office, 1986).

<sup>13</sup>Fyfe, History of Sierra Leone, 541.

An armed Frontier Police Force was hastily created, made up largely of ex- domestic slaves who were freed by the British in the areas over which the Protectorate was declared. This force became a willing tool for the British to enforce "order" and control over the Protectorate. In 1898, after the imposition of a "Hut Tax" by the British in these "foreign countries" triggered a violent rebellion led by a Temne chief named Bai Bureh, the British used the Frontier Police to crush the rebellion and bring the people in line<sup>14</sup>. The forerunner of the Sierra Leone army, the West African Frontier Force (WAFF), was constituted out of members of the Frontier Police, which was disbanded shortly after the 'Hut Tax War' following repeated protest by chiefs over their repressive and irresponsible behaviour. But the WAFF too was a purely colonial vehicle for enforcing "law and order"<sup>15</sup>.

The first attempt to bring all of Sierra Leone together in a political unit was the 1924 constitution. It made provision for a unicameral legislature with the Colony and Protectorate represented in the same chamber. The Colony was allocated five seats in the chamber, three representatives to be elected and two nominated from professional and other groups. The three representatives from the Protectorate, which was beginning to produce its own Western educated elites, were chiefs<sup>16</sup>. The disparity in representation between the small Anglicised Colony and the more populous Protectorate heightened tension between the two groups. The

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<sup>14</sup>See Fyfe, History of Sierra Leone, 545-600.

<sup>15</sup>See Thomas Cox, Civil Military Relations in Sierra Leone: A Case Study of African Soldiers in Politics (Harvard Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976).1-3.

<sup>16</sup>Gershon Collier, Sierra Leone: Experiment in Democracy in an African State (New York: New York University Press, 1970).82.

Creole elite were determined to perpetuate the imbalance. The Protectorate educated elite had a dual concern. It wanted to right the Legislative Council imbalance but they were also dissatisfied with the provision that chiefs, with whom they had little in common in political vision and ideas, were chosen as the representatives<sup>17</sup>.

In spite of their conflicting interests, the politics of the various elite groups did not challenge or threaten the stability of the state. Threats to the authority of the state and its institutions tended to come from subaltern groups who were always easily subdued. In 1919, urban unemployed youths rioted against rice scarcity, non-payment of war bonuses and the trading practices of Syrian merchants who dominated the retail businesses. The colonial government used the army to put down the riots<sup>18</sup>. In 1931, Haidara Korthofili, an Islamic cleric and agitator, led a peasant insurrection against the British colonial rule. The insurrection was the most direct and serious challenge to British rule since the Hut Tax War of 1898. Haidara mobilised the people of Kambia and instructed them not to pay the House Tax<sup>19</sup>. He declared war against the colonial order and armed his followers with machetes and guns. The British responded by sending a platoon of the Royal African Frontier Force against Haidara's forces. In the ensuing encounter on 16 February 1931, Haidara's forces were decimated and

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

<sup>18</sup>Spitzer, Creoles, 165.

<sup>19</sup>Martin Kilson, Political Change in a West African State: A Study of the Modernisation Process in Sierra Leone (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966), 116.

he himself killed. The commanding officer of the British forces was also killed<sup>20</sup>.

A more significant outburst of anti-colonial political activity in the period before the Second World War, which involved both the Colony and Protectorate, was the launching of the West African Youth League in 1938. It was led by I. T. A. Wallace-Johnson, a Creole trade unionist, journalist and Pan Africanist. The motto of the League was "Liberty or Death". The League posed a radical challenge to British colonial dominance when it called for independence from colonialism. Furthermore, its ventilation of labour and constitutional grievances helped to begin the process of bridging the deep cleavage between the Colony and Protectorate, and within a year after its inception, it claimed, probably extravagantly, 25,000 Colony and 17,000 Protectorate members<sup>21</sup>. Wallace-Johnson's inflammatory radical and Marxist rhetoric did not endear him either to the Creole elite or the Colonial government.

The Youth League, in its advocacy and actions, threatened to change dramatically the character of the state. The British, unwilling to concede independence, repressed the Youth League and its brand of political agitation. Wallace-Johnson was subjected to a number of futile libel actions for articles appearing in his newspaper, the African Standard, and in 1940 he was detained by the British for the duration of the Second World War along with almost all of the Youth League executive. Political activity subsequently collapsed. Sierra Leone emerged as the only country in colonial Africa where the war slowed, rather than accelerated,

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

<sup>21</sup>John Cartwright, Politics in Sierra Leone 1947-67 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970), 36.

the pace of anti-colonial nationalism<sup>22</sup>.

In the rest of West Africa, the late 1940s and 1950s signalled the end of the empire. Everywhere, the African elite, using the language of nationalism, began to wrest control of the state from the colonial powers. In 1951, the Gold Coast (now Ghana) achieved internal self-government under the leadership of Kwame Nkrumah and his Convention Peoples Party (CPP). Sierra Leone's Legislative Council still had a majority of colonial officials. This "political underdevelopment", as David Williams has termed it<sup>23</sup>, was caused entirely by the conflict between the Creoles and the Protectorate educated elites. The Protectorate politicians, led by Sir Milton Margai, were agitating to rectify the imbalance between the Protectorate and the Colony in terms of representation in the Legislative Council. The Creoles, led by Bankole Bright, opposed them, insisting that the imbalance was appropriate.

From this struggle crystallised two political parties reflecting the competing interests. The National Council of Sierra Leone (NCSL), led by Bright, represented the Creole elite. The Sierra Leone Peoples Party (SLPP) emerged as a united front for all the Protectorate educated elites, from diverse ethnic and regional backgrounds. The agitation of the SLPP for greater representation in the Legislative Council led to the 1951 constitution which gave the Protectorate majority control, and Sir Milton Margai was accepted as Chief (later Prime) Minister. Elections in 1957 confirmed the dominance of the SLPP in the Legislative Council and Milton Margai as Prime Minister of the country.

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<sup>22</sup>Spitzer, Creoles, 194.

<sup>23</sup>David Williams, "Politics and Personalities", West Africa, 5 May, 1986, 931.

This development politically subdued the Creoles but did not narrow the schism between the two groups. Shortly after independence in 1961, a group of conservative Creoles posed a legal challenge to the new state by suing in an English court to have the Constitutional Order in Council, under which the country gained independence, declared invalid on ground that the Colony and the Protectorate were "seperate countries". Technically, they had a point: the Protectorate declaration of August 1896 defined the Protectorate as "foreign countries adjoining the Colony". But the case was thrown out of court by Justice Wilberforce, a descendant of the philanthropist who had assisted in having the Freetown settlement established, as "legally hopeless" since it concerned the sovereignty of an independent nation which was beyond the court to question<sup>24</sup>.

Sir Milton's SLLP government attempted to bridge the gap between the Colony and Protectorate by incorporating a number of leading Creole politicians in the government. At independence the Creoles, with just about two per cent of the country's population, held five important posts in the SLPP, more than any other group<sup>25</sup>. This political balancing act was also extended to all the other ethnic groups, each of which was represented in the government. Sir Milton had begun taking the necessary steps towards forging a true nation state out of the fragile entity which was left behind by the British.

Students of African politics including William Zartman, have expressed wonder at the persistence of the African state, and its success in imposing itself on its citizens' lives in the

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<sup>24</sup>"Creoles case thrown out", West Africa, 16 May 1964.

<sup>25</sup>Kilson, Political Change.232.

first decade after independence<sup>26</sup>. In the absence of a strong institutional framework, politics had to be personalised, focusing on the Founding Father. Trouble began after these Founding Fathers were replaced by leaders less revered, and perhaps less capable.

Zartman's formulation is largely correct in the case of Sierra Leone. The post-colonial state of Sierra Leone weathered through the first decade inspired by hope as well as plagued by palpable tensions. Even before the Independence hymn was sung, some of Sir Milton Margai's allies like Siaka Stevens, had broken away to form a new political group, the All Peoples Congress (APC). They complained that the SLPP was dominated by the Mendes (Sir Milton was Mende). Stevens, a Limba from the north, was an ex-police constable and trade unionist. He tapped directly into this anti-Mende disaffection among northerners in the country as well as social discontent among urban unemployed youth. In contrast to the elitist SLPP, the APC drew its support largely from young men from the northern part of the country who had little education and means. However, Sir Milton's influence and political adroitness was such that the APC remained marginalised throughout his rule.

The SLPP's tenuous dominance of the country's politics was evident upon Sir Milton's death in 1964. The leadership of the party and government passed to his brother, Sir Albert Margai. The northern elites, who had hoped that John Karefa Smart, a leading northern figure in the SLPP, would succeed Sir Milton, accused the party of perpetuating "Mende hegemony"<sup>27</sup>. The APC became more assertive thereafter, and the problem was not helped by the new Prime Minister's handling of the situation. Sir Albert fired two prominent northern

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<sup>26</sup>Zartman, Collapsed States. 1.

<sup>27</sup>See Cartwright, Politics in Sierra Leone, 136.

figures, including Karefa-Smart, from the SLPP cabinet. These politicians later drifted to the opposition APC.

The brewing political crisis came to a head during the March 1967 elections which pitted the SLPP against the APC. The elections were marked by violence in which at least 100 people were killed<sup>28</sup>. Both sides claimed victory, and in the ensuing controversy, the army, led by Brigadier David Lansana, stepped in and seized power. Lansana himself was overthrown 48 hours later by a trio of majors, Charles Blake, Mohammed Jumu and Kutubu Kai-Samba, all southerners who had little sympathy for either the SLPP or the APC. They invited Lieutenant-Colonel Juxon Smith, a Creole and therefore outside the ethnic north against south divide, to head what they were pleased to call the National Reformation Council (NRC). The NRC was itself overthrown in April 1968 by some young northern non-commissioned officers in the army, probably the first time that non-commissioned officers succeeded in taking over a state anywhere. This coup marked a further stage in a destabilising trend in the country<sup>29</sup>. To their credit, however, the new army leaders invited Siaka Stevens, who was then in exile in Guinea, to return and handed over power to him a few months later. This, in itself, was a first in Africa. But what are we to make of this military foray into politics?

Obviously, the coups and counter-coups exposed the fragility of the state and the difficulty of maintaining a functioning democratic tradition in territories with diverse and competing ethnic groups. They also demonstrated that the military would not willingly and silently

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<sup>28</sup>West Africa, 2 April 1967.

<sup>29</sup>Cox, Civil Military Relations, 193.



conform to its expected role in the independence era. It had refused to act as a neutral, professional army. But this ugly development seemed to have been precipitated almost entirely by the failure of the political leadership to act decisively and competently to maintain the democratic tradition of which the country was justly proud up to that point. The military had all along been a compliant instrument of the state, apparently unaffected by the wave of coups taking place in other African states. In fact, Brigadier Lansana is credibly believed to have made his coup merely as a holding action for his friend and patron, Albert Margai<sup>30</sup>.

The 1967 string of coups represented a turning point in the fledging democratic culture and stability of the Sierra Leonean state. The 1967 elections were to become the last freely and fairly contested elections in the country for almost 29 years.

Stevens ruled the country from 1968 to 1985, during which time he crushed all elite opposition and imposed a one-party state (1978). By the time he handed over power to his handpicked successor, Major General Joseph Momoh, a fellow Limba, the country's economy was on the brink of collapse and the state itself had shrunk significantly<sup>31</sup>. Momoh presided over a further disintegration of the state from 1985 to his overthrow in a military coup in 1992. During this period, an event that was to accelerate the process of Sierra Leone's collapse occurred in March 1991: an armed invasion from neighbouring war-torn Liberia by dissident forces aided by that country's most colourful warlord, Charles Taylor, began. In the next chapter, we will examine the factors that helped sustain this armed rebellion, and finally

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<sup>30</sup>T. Cox, Civil Military Relations, 122.

<sup>31</sup>See Reno, Corruption and State Politics., 123.

led to the almost total destruction of the Sierra Leone state.

## CHAPTER TWO

### ONE-PARTY AND THE EMERGENCE OF THE SHADOW STATE

People ask me why is that such a good beginning as it seemed to be in the 1950s and 1960s with the independence of many African countries, should have ended in this really immeasurable disaster? Is it that the nationalist movements were unable to produce competent and honest cadres? Is it that they were cut-off from their historical base by becoming nationalists and therefore found themselves in opposition to the so-called traditional forces, in that they settled in the towns and did not give thought to what happened to the people in the countryside? Is it that the North-South relationship is of such a nature that Africa can't prosper no matter how competent Africans might be?<sup>1</sup>

This chapter focuses on Sierra Leone's 'governmentability'<sup>2</sup> as an independent state, and will show how the dynamics of Stevens' one-party system succeeded in shrinking the state and

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<sup>1</sup>Basil Davidson, "The Crisis of the Nation-State in Africa", Review of African Political Economy (Sheffield, 1996).

<sup>2</sup>The term is used in the sense suggested by the French philosopher, Michel Foucault, to mean power, the "way of acting upon an acting subject or acting subjects by virtue of their acting or being capable of acting"-essentially power relations within a given polity. In Bayart, The State in Africa, 267.

led to the emergence of what has been described as the Shadow State. It argues that recent scholarly analyses of the collapse of African states, which point at their precolonial and colonial fragmentation and non-viability<sup>3</sup>, are unhelpful in the case of Sierra Leone, and concludes that the problem is largely a failure of political leadership.

Although it now seems easy enough to catalogue the political, economic and social factors that allegedly condemned African states to underdevelopment and instability, few in the late 1950s and early 1960s when most of Africa gained independence, doubted that in general the African ex-colonies were viable<sup>4</sup>. At independence in 1961, Sierra Leone, a country about the size of New Brunswick, had an economic growth rate of 7 per cent, one of the best in the world<sup>5</sup>.

Unlike many other Sub-Saharan African states which suffered from a dearth of educated indigenes to take effective control over the administration of their countries<sup>6</sup>, Sierra Leone was rich in human resources. Through Fourah Bay College (FBC), which was established in 1827 (the first university in Sub-Saharan Africa), Sierra Leone had produced a large educated

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<sup>3</sup>See for example, Richard Sanbrook, "Taming the African Leviathan", in World Policy Journal, 7,4 (Fall 1990), 673-701.

<sup>4</sup>Colin Leys, "Confronting the African Tragedy", New Left Review, 33-47, No.204, March\April 1994.

<sup>5</sup>A.B. Zack-Williams, "Sierra Leone: Crisis and Despair", Review of African Political Economy, No.49, 1990.24.

<sup>6</sup>The whole of the French Central African Federation from which emerged four independent countries had only five university graduates, with the situation much worse in former Portuguese and Belgian colonies (See W. Tordoff, Government and Politics in Africa. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1982).

class since the 19th century consisting of teachers, lawyers, doctors, engineers, journalists and missionaries who had even gone out to other African colonies on a "civilising mission"<sup>7</sup>. It is true that this educated elite was dominated by the Creoles of Freetown who constituted just about two per cent of the population of 2 million but who enjoyed, at the time of independence, a literacy rate of 80 per cent<sup>8</sup>, but this disparity was being redressed at the time of independence with the rapid expansion of educational facilities throughout the country. Major educational institutions, like the Bo School (1906), were established in the Protectorate and by the 1930s, this area too had produced its own western educated elite of medical doctors, lawyers and teachers. In 1961, there were 86,224 pupils in primary, 7,512 in secondary, 1,183 students in technical\vocational, 629 in teacher training and 300 in higher educational institutions, including the university<sup>9</sup>. A year later, primary school enrolment registered a substantial increase to 100,000 and secondary to 9,111<sup>10</sup>. This pattern continued through the 1970s<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup>See Christopher Fyfe, History of Sierra Leone.

<sup>8</sup>Roy Lewis, "Sierra Leone: Independence Without Pain", Africa Report, April 1961. The Creoles constituted 2 % of the population of 2 million, but their literacy rate, 80 %, contrasted with 6% per cent for the rest of the country.

<sup>9</sup>Joe A.D. Alie, A New History of Sierra Leone (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990).203.

<sup>10</sup>West Africa, 9 March, 1963.

<sup>11</sup>The number of schools and institutions of higher learning nearly tripled, with the literacy rate rising to about 30 per cent in the late 1970s, up from about 10 per cent at independence. Education, however, stagnated in the country in the 1980s, with the system totally collapsing in the 1990s. See Ian Smlie, "Sierra Leone: NGOs in Complex Emergencies".

Sierra Leone's economy at independence contained two productive sectors. The first and more important was agriculture. Three quarters of Sierra Leoneans gainfully employed, that is 700,000 persons, were engaged in this sector<sup>12</sup>, but it accounted for only about 30 per cent of the GNP since it was a largely subsistence sector. The cash crops produced in the country were palm kernels, palm oil, ginger and groundnuts; in 1964, these were fetching some 4.8 million pounds sterling for the country or about a sixth of Sierra Leone's total export earnings<sup>13</sup>. Diamonds, discovered in 1930, and iron ore, also discovered at about the same time, were the mainstays of the export economy at independence. The diamond industry alone accounted for about three-fifths of the country's export earnings. The 1956 Alluvial Mining Scheme, which quashed the 90 year monopoly of the Sierra Leone Selected Trust (SLST) over the diamond mining areas and gave licenses to indigenous miners, ensured some order in the diamond mining areas<sup>14</sup> and helped minimise the extensive smuggling of the gems (about half of all finds in the 1950s), an operation colourfully described in Graham Greene's The Heart of the Matter<sup>15</sup>. This impressive financial base was expected to expand, as the Director of Geological Survey asserted just after independence,

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<sup>12</sup>Census of Sierra Leone 1963, (Freetown: Government Printing Office, 1964).

<sup>13</sup>Cartwright, Political Leadership.243.

<sup>14</sup>Armed illicit miners remained active around the rich SLST holdings, however. In April 1964, a group of these miners attacked a ten-man police patrol in Kono district seriously injuring four policemen, one of whom died later (West Africa, April 11, 1964).

<sup>15</sup>Graham Greene, The Heart of the Matter (New York: Viking Press, 1948).

...Sierra Leone will be an exporter of iron ore for many years to come. The diamond fields are so extensive that it is unlikely that they will be worked out in the immediate future even at the present rate of exploitation...Several mineral discoveries recorded by the Geological Survey in recent years may become exploitable in the course of time, and hope is entertained that regional geo-chemical prospecting surveys which are to be carried out over selected areas of Sierra Leone during the next four years may lead to the discovery of other mineral prospects<sup>16</sup>.

In fact, a few years later titanium was discovered, with Sierra Leone emerging as the largest producer of the valuable mineral in the 1980s.

In addition, there was no shortage of foreign aid. At the time of independence, Britain contributed 14 million US dollars in the form of Colonial Development and Welfare Grants; Philips Telecommunications of Holland extended a loan of about 5 million US dollars for telecommunications equipment; the Colonial Development Cooperation, the Commonwealth Development Finance Company, and the Diamond Corporation, all of Britain, extended loans totalling about 10 million dollars for the Guma Valley Scheme, a water conservation and distribution centre<sup>17</sup>. In addition, Britain offered 177,000 dollars for the purchase of an aircraft for the Sierra Leone Airlines. Further confidence in the country's future came in the form of a 750,000 dollars investment by the Aureol Tobacco Company to expand its cigarette

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<sup>16</sup>In George O. Roberts, The Anguish of Third World Independence: The Sierra Leone Experience (Washington: Washington University Press, 1982).23.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.5.

factory, and a decision by the Van Camp Seafood company to invest about 300,000 dollars towards its fisheries operations<sup>18</sup>.

The country's first two postcolonial leaders, Sir Milton Margai (1961-1964) and Sir Albert Margai (1964-1967), both of the Sierra Leone Peoples Party (SLPP), adopted a gradualist, middle of the road economic policy which avoided grand and costly economic schemes, like those embarked upon by Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah which created disaster for the country's economy<sup>19</sup>, and deliberately played down any unwarranted expectation of a radical change in the country which might have been unleashed by the prospect of independence. Sir Milton made this point clear in his Independence Message broadcast on the eve of British handover of power:

Independence will not result in any changes in our day to day life...life must go on all the same, with the same justice in our courts, the same taxes and other responsibilities, the same articles for sale in our stores...the significant change is that we are now in control of our destiny and for the formulation of our external as well internal policies<sup>20</sup>.

John Cartwright has observed that this approach failed to mobilise the people of Sierra Leone "for the many tasks of nation-building", but as he himself noted, mobilization by itself cannot

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid.55.

<sup>19</sup>For a discussion of this and related issues, see Naomi Chazan and Donald Rothchild, eds., The Precarious Balance: State and Society in Africa (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1988).

<sup>20</sup>In Joe A.D. Alie, Ibid.280.



produce a rise in living standards or lead to development<sup>21</sup>. More often than not, it creates instability and chaos when available resources do not match the broad expectations that are inevitably unleashed. The advantage in the SLPP's approach was that it helped maintain stability while ensuring gradual but steady development. A ten-year development plan announced in June 1962 proceeded steadily with the provision of treated water supplies to 21 provincial towns under a 2.4 million pounds contract signed with a French company, Degremont, in 1964<sup>22</sup>. The construction of feeder roads across the country, market places, schools and health centres were also notable achievements. Incremental though most of these projects were, they helped reinforced a sense of a functioning government, and therefore greatly contributed to forging nationhood out of the fragile and fragmented entity which became the independent state of Sierra Leone in 1961.

Perhaps equally important in this regard was the maintenance of a pluralist political system which was cohesive and restrained enough to prevent a breakdown of order or arouse destabilising ethnic animosities, but was competitive enough to allow even remote villagers to have their wishes heeded (or to reasonably perceive that they are heeded) by the ruling elites in their competition for their votes. At a time when authoritarian one-party systems and "African socialism" were the vogue on the continent, Sierra Leone maintained a Westminster style of democracy for well over a decade after independence, with a functioning and effective opposition party having a strong presence in parliament and elsewhere. The strength of the system, particularly under Sir Milton Margai, was that it made effective use of traditional

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<sup>21</sup>Cartwright, ibid.282.

<sup>22</sup>West Africa, 15 February, 1964.

rulers, who continued to have a strong hold on their people. A policy of "inclusion" by which all the country's myriad ethnic groups were made to have at least a representative in government also helped reinforce a sense of unity in diversity, a necessary condition for stability for the apparently fragmented state of Sierra Leone.

This system passed the critical test of democracy in 1967 when Sir Albert Margai, who succeeded Sir Milton in 1964, lost elections to the opposition All Peoples Congress (APC) and its leader, Siaka Stevens. Sir Albert had taken the unpopular step of suggesting the idea of introducing a one-party and republican constitution, which he dropped amidst widespread opposition in 1966. This, coupled with his image as an acquisitive and corrupt leader, did not endear him to the electorate. But the army stepped in at the critical moment and prevented the swearing in of Siaka Stevens as the new prime minister. Brigadier David Lansana declared that the Governor General had acted unconstitutionally in appointing Stevens since the elections of chiefs, who constituted an integral block in parliament, were still in progress. The brigadier himself was unseated a day later by a trio of majors who established the National Reformation Council (NRC). The NRC ruled for a year and half, and was itself unseated by junior rank and filers. The Anti-Corruption Revolutionary Council shortly after restored constitutionality by handing over power to Stevens in April 1968<sup>23</sup>.

Some scholars of African politics have attempted to portray the continent's drift from western style democracy after independence to autocracy and then collapse almost as a

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<sup>23</sup>See Thomas Cox, Civil-Military Relations in Sierra Leone.93-203 for a discussion of the dynamics of the power play which led to these coups and counter-coups.

deterministic process which followed the dictates of the continent's peculiar circumstances and nature. Thus Goran Hyden, in his analysis of Africa's failed one-party states, contends that having "just emerged successful from a struggle against external occupation and exploitation", Africans determined to "develop their societies without the pains and strains that had accompanied the march to modernity in other parts of the world". New kinds of political systems were therefore inevitable. "Rapid progress required national unity and unity, in turn, demanded a one-party system...Politics became an instrument of social engineering; the state an engine of change"<sup>24</sup>. And a recent evaluation of Sierra Leone's rebel war by one Ian Smillie asserted that shortly after independence, the country "drifted inexorably away from Westminster-style democracy toward a system of patronage and mismanagement"<sup>25</sup>, as if the process were preordained.

Any student of Sierra Leone politics is bound to be struck by the painful deliberation by which the one-party was imposed upon the country by the political leadership of Siaka Stevens, and the consistent efforts made by many in the country to resist this imposition. As we have noted, it was largely as a result of his flirtation with the idea of declaring Sierra Leone a one-party state that Sir Albert Margai lost the 1967 elections, and Sierra Leoneans demonstrated their continuing preference for democracy by consistently opposing the NRC

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<sup>24</sup>Goran Hyden, "Reciprocity and Governance in Africa", in James S. Wunsch and Dele Olowu, The Failure of the Centralised State: Institutions and Self-Governance in Africa (Boulder, San Francisco: Westview Press, 1990).245.

<sup>25</sup>Smillie, "Sierra Leone: NGOs in Complex Emergencies".

junta through mass rallies, petitions and newspaper campaigns<sup>26</sup>. When junior non-commissioned soldiers overthrew the NRC in 1968, they made sure, guided by the public mood, to hand over power almost immediately to the leaders of the party which was deemed to have won the 1967 elections, the All Peoples Congress.

Steven's first action in power, upon the advice of the army, was to form a "National Coalition" government which included four SLPP members and two independent MPs. The aim of this arrangement was "to project to the masses...that the new Government was a Government for chiefs and non-chiefs, A Government for rich and poor, and a Government for all tribes"<sup>27</sup>. In fact, in accepting the coalition arrangement Stevens was only bidding for the time to consolidate power. Once he felt himself secured in power, he quickly dismantled the coalition government and appointed an entirely APC government. Then he successfully reduced SLPP membership in parliament by mostly fraudulent elections petitions, an action in which the judiciary, dominated by the Creoles, a group that was now openly sympathetic to the APC, fully colluded<sup>28</sup>. The bye-elections that followed were marked by a wave of violence spearheaded by APC "youths". Stevens took the opportunity to declare a State of Emergency and had several SLPP leaders, including Salia Jusu Sheriff, S.T. Navo and Julius

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<sup>26</sup>See Cox, ibid.

<sup>27</sup>Siaka Stevens, What Life Taught Has Me (London: Kensal Press, 1984).286.

<sup>28</sup>For a thorough account of this period see Alpha Lavalie, "The SLPP in Opposition", Sierra Leone Studies (Birmingham) 1985).

Cole, arrested and detained<sup>29</sup>. APC candidates were then declared unopposed in most of the constituencies affected by the violence.

A further step in undermining existing state institutions was Stevens' action against the army. Stevens was in office less than two months before he purged the officer corps of the army of several key Mende officers and warrant officers. Mendes provided the core support for the SLPP and dominated the army's officer corps but there is no evidence that the charges against Captain Patrick Conteh and warrant officers John Kengenyeh and Emadu Rogers were legitimate. Their dismissal was followed by the forced retirement of Lieutenant-Colonel Ambrose Genda, also a Mende<sup>30</sup>. Other Mende officers, most of whom were key principals in the 1967 round of coups, who were dismissed and then put on trial included Brigadier David Lansana, Captain Mboma, Major Bockarie Kai-Samba and Lieutenant Hinga Norman. These officers were then replaced by northerners and command of the army was passed on Colonel John Bangura, a Temne, and Colonel Joseph Momoh, a Limba. The political "balancing act" which demanded inclusion of all the nation's ethnic groups in key decision making and strategic institutions, and which formed the basis of the democratic system nurtured by the SLPP, was critically subverted. But the Prime Minister did not stop there.

Stevens devised a patronage system by which only people connected to top APC members could be recruited into the army, as Koroma has pointed out:

Military enlistment slowly gave way to enlistment through political

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<sup>29</sup>West Africa, 30 November, 1968.

<sup>30</sup>Daily Mail, 14 June, 1968. See Cox, Civil Military Relations.206.

connections. Politicians and well-connected persons were given cards which they gave out to young men of their choice to join the army. This system produced a serious diminishing of standards since characters of all shades were now recruited irrespective of prevailing military requirements<sup>31</sup>.

If the SLPP's political system, as fragile as it may have been, was "hegemonial"<sup>32</sup>, Stevens' APC government, relying as overtly as it did on northern support, was clearly "factional". An inevitable feature of this kind of political system has been observed by Wunsch to be "extreme executive centralization and the erosion of formal institutions...(which) facilitate the rise of personalistic bargaining political patterns"<sup>33</sup>. Extra-legal institutions and channels are created which supersede the formal state institutions and lead to their collapse. While the state disintegrates and becomes dysfunctional, the wealth making capacity of the ruler and his cohorts is enhanced. This is what Reno has referred to

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<sup>31</sup>Abdul Karim Koroma, Sierra Leone: Agony of a Nation (Freetown: Androemeda Publications, 1996).18.

<sup>32</sup>The term is used in the sense suggested by Donald Rothchild to refer to a political system offering "a framework for coordinating and facilitating political exchange under conditions of frail institutions...along negotiable lines, making amicable agreement over conflicting issues more likely" (Rothchild, "State-Ethnic Relations in Middle Africa". In Gwendolen Carter and Patrick O'Meara, eds., African Independence: The First Twenty-Five Years (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1985).82.

<sup>33</sup>James Wunsch, "Centralization and Development in Post-Independence Africa", in Wunsch and Olowu, eds., Ibid.60. Wunsch, I think erroneously, asserts that this is also a feature of "hegemonial" systems

as the "Shadow State"<sup>34</sup>.

Perhaps the beginning of this process in Sierra Leone could be traced to Stevens' creation of a "shadow army", the Internal Security Unit (ISU) in 1974. The ISU was set up with Cuban assistance after a Guinean army contingent which Stevens brought into the country for his protection in 1971, following an abortive coup attempt, left in 1973<sup>35</sup>. It was made up almost exclusively of APC youths, or thugs, recruited mostly from the slums in Freetown, and was soon to gain notoriety for vandalism and thuggery against opponents of the government. While this unit was heavily armed and provided with every support, the army was starved of arms and logistical support to prevent them from attempting a coup<sup>36</sup>. Another aspect of this tactic, which helped politicise and weaken the army further, was Stevens' appointment of the army commander, Brigadier Momoh, as an unelected member of parliament and cabinet member. The army consequently lacked the capacity to make a coup, never mind confront the ISU in a serious engagement, throughout Stevens' 17 year rule.

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<sup>34</sup>See William Reno, Corruption and State Politics.

<sup>35</sup>Cox, Civil Military Relations, 216. The coup was led by David Bangura and was believed to have been sponsored by disgruntled northern politicians, mainly Mohammed Sorie Forna, a former APC finance minister, and Ibrahim Taqi, a former information minister. The two ex-ministers charged Stevens of dictatorial tendencies and "megalomania" and joined Karefa-Smart to form the United Democratic Party (UDP); the party was banned shortly after its formation. Bangura and the two ex-ministers (along with a few others) were executed after a treason trial lasting for several months. Linked to the coup, Corporal Foday Sankoh, who was later to lead a rebellion against the state, was imprisoned for seven years. Shortly after the executions, Stevens' introduced, and passed, a republican constitution (1971) and declared himself executive president.

<sup>36</sup>See Koroma, Agony. 61.

Stevens had already passed a republican constitution (1971) and declared himself executive president; General elections held in 1973, and marked by violence and open vote rigging, allowed Stevens to reduce the opposition presence in parliament further. But it was the 1977 election, which was called after students' demonstrations rocked the country, that allowed Stevens to demonstrate the effectiveness of the ISU. Armed units of the force were sent across the country in trucks to intimidate and persecute opponents of the APC. In Bo, the principal southern city and bastion of the opposition SLPP, the ISU engaged in full battle with local residents, leading to the loss of many lives<sup>37</sup>. Locals subsequently dubbed the ISU "I Shoot You", and many SLPP candidates withdrew from the polls. In the event, only 15 were able to make it to the 80 seat parliament. A bill to establish a one-party state predictably passed a referendum that same year with 97 per cent of registered voters voting in favour. Cyril Foray has described this entire process as "legal violence"<sup>38</sup>. SLPP members in parliament were forced to join the APC, as its leader Salia Jusu Sheriff did, or remain an outcast, as happened to Mana Kpaka who refused to be intimidated and had to flee into exile.

Elite political opposition may have been crushed by 1978 but as Reno has pointed out, there was still the problem of effective governmentability in the absence of strong state

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<sup>37</sup>Lavalie, "SLPP in Opposition".

<sup>38</sup>Cyril Foray, The Road to the One-Party State: The Sierra Leone Experience (Edinburgh, 1988).12



structures reaching the majority of the people in the country. The government's 'extractive' powers were severely constrained in many cases.

Fiscal pressures and administrative capacity prevented President Stevens from unilaterally imposing APC control upon inherited intermediaries. Once in power, APC leaders faced choices similar to those once facing British overlords: how does a ruler establish cheap and effective control over intermediaries who do not necessarily share the interests of their superiors? State House's new resident also quickly learnt that government's weakness and revenue shortfalls ruled out simply refashioning collaborative rule inherited from the colonial era. Stevens had to devise ways of building political authority<sup>39</sup>.

According to Reno, Stevens got around the problem by devising a new "elite accommodation" which empowered APC activists and supporters in the rich diamond mining district of Kono. This process ensured that rival "strongmen" remained in check and provided Stevens with direct access to the district's rich mineral wealth. This led to the further disintegration of formal state institutions and the expansion of the "Shadow State"<sup>40</sup>. What Reno does not mention, however, is that some of the president's own "factional" political activities helped to further constrain the state's limited capabilities and power. An example of such was his

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<sup>39</sup>W. Reno, Corruption and State Politics. 79.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid.

phasing out of the railway soon after taking office as Prime Minister.

The railway, built by the British in the early 1900s, ran mainly through the southern and eastern provinces from Freetown to Moyamba, Bo, Kenema and Pendembu, with a small spur line to Makeni in the north. The route selected was due to the fact these areas produced the major cash crops (coffee, cocoa, piassava and palm kernel), and it triggered tremendous economic and social activities in the areas<sup>41</sup>. With the discovery of rich mineral deposits in the 1930s and later the fall in the prices of cash crops, the importance of the railway had diminished and by the late 1960s, it was costing government a deficit of 500,000 pounds a year. The SLPP government, aware of its potential importance, balked at phasing it out. Thirty million pounds was needed to modernise the railway, money the government was not prepared to invest at a time of fiscal constraints<sup>42</sup>. When Stevens took office in 1968, he quickly closed it down. As Abraham has suggested, this was clearly done to undermine the influence and power of the SLPP especially in the eastern towns of Kailahun and Pendembu, whose only access to Freetown was through the railway. Stevens made sure that a network of tarred roads, constructed with German aid money to replace the railway, never reached these areas which were a hotbed of opposition to him<sup>43</sup>. Since then, the whole of Kailahun

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<sup>41</sup>The country's main provincial schools, like Bo Government Secondary School and Harford School for Girls, were clustered along the railway line; even Bo, the country's second largest city, owes its growth almost entirely to the railway.

<sup>42</sup>Cartwright, Politics in Sierra Leone. 181.

<sup>43</sup>A. Abraham and H. Sesay, "Regional Politics and Social Services Provision since Independence", in C. Magbaily Fyle, ed., The State and the Provision of Social Services in Sierra Leone since Independence, 1961-1991 (Dakar: CODESRIA, 1993).

district, as Richards has noted, remained "beyond the state" with locals maintaining more connection to Monrovia in Liberia, which could be reached by taxis in a day, than Freetown, which would take several days to reach, mostly by "bush roads"<sup>44</sup>. The dynamics of state recession in Sierra Leone, therefore, was deliberately enhanced by the APC.

The extent to which Stevens was prepared to go to maintain his grip on power by subverting the formal state could also be seen in the powerful role he ascribed to foreign businessmen, particularly Lebanese businessmen, in the running of the country's economy. Because they were not enfranchised, these foreign businessmen could pose no challenge to Stevens' political power, and he therefore had little hesitation in allowing them take over a large part of the country's economy. The major figure in this alliance was Jamil Sahid Mohammed who, at the height of his activities in the early 1980s, had vital stakes in the diamond, fisheries, tourism and manufacturing industries, paid the salaries of senior military and police officers, and even attended cabinet meetings. He was also allowed to maintain a well-armed 500-strong personal security force consisting largely of Palestinians<sup>45</sup>.

This partnership illustrated the extent to which Stevens' concern for political security overrode any longer term developmental aims. It also allowed him to acquire enormous wealth through shady deals with these foreign businessmen, as contracts awarded in the preparations for the Organization of African Unity (OAU) conference in Freetown in 1980 showed. The contracts were awarded almost exclusively to Stevens' Lebanese friends, and it turned out to

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<sup>44</sup>Richards, Fighting for the Rainforest.43.

<sup>45</sup>Jimmy Kandeh, "Sierra Leone and the 'Soft' State", Review of African Political Economy, 1990.

be "a 200 million dollars extravaganza of state spending, constituting half of budgeted outlays amidst further cutbacks on development and social services"<sup>46</sup>. A commission of inquiry which investigated Stevens' corruption in 1992 found the breadth of his assets far in excess of his earnings during his premiership and presidency. Stevens owned 11 houses, including a mansion, Kabasa Lodge, built at the cost of over 3 million leones, and a brewery estate consisting of four houses at Wellington<sup>47</sup>.

With the elite political opposition crushed, resistance to the Stevens system depended upon university students, the press and labour unions, the so-called informal opposition. Far less pliable and potentially more destabilising than a political party in democratic opposition could afford to be, the informal opposition, particularly the university students, consistently mounted direct confrontations with the government, in some cases leading to the destruction of property and the loss of lives. A foretaste of just how powerful and destabilising this group could be came in 1977 when students launched a violent demonstration when Stevens, as Chancellor of the University of Sierra Leone, visited FBC campus to confer degrees. The students waited until the president began his speech, and then they launched attacks on him with stones and missiles. Stevens had to be rushed out of campus by his security guards. The demonstration spread through the capital to the main provincial towns as unemployed youths, who had been having liaisons with the student 'radical' leaders, joined in and demonstration became a riot. Stevens called in the ISU who counter-attacked the students in their campus,

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<sup>46</sup>Reno, Corruption and State Politics, 137.

<sup>47</sup>Sahr Kpundeh, Politics and Corruption in Africa: A Case Study of Sierra Leone (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1995), 76.

raping female students and destroying property worth hundreds of thousands of leones. But the riot that spread across the country was quelled only after Stevens' announcement that there would be general elections a few months later<sup>48</sup>. The elections were followed shortly after by the declaration of a one-party state, with Stevens emerging as Life President.

Opposition to Stevens after this declaration was disparate and ineffective. Newspapers like the Tablet, edited by some ex-student radicals, which continued the spirit of informal opposition, were suppressed and its editors sent to exile. In 1985, Stevens, now 80, handed over to his handpicked successor, the forces commander Major General Joseph Momoh.

Momoh assumed office announcing that the nation's "kitty is empty" and made pronouncements suggesting a reformist approach to running the faltering state. He announced a "New Order" based on "Constructive Nationalism" which emphasised that "our concern should be directed, henceforth, towards defining the policies and actions that are required to resuscitate the economy and keep it going"<sup>49</sup>. It was clearly not the best of times. Revenue from diamonds, the nation's main foreign exchange earner, had fallen sharply over the years as export of the precious gem dropped from 2 million carats in 1970 to 595,000 carats in 1980

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<sup>48</sup>See Ismail Rashid, "Lumpen Youths and Student Radicals in Sierra Leone, 1977-1992" (Unpublished mimeo, 1996).

<sup>49</sup>Koroma, Agony, 55.

and just 48,000 carats in 1988<sup>50</sup>. This decline was largely due to the collapse of state authority and the acceptance of the underground economy by the Stevens government. Momoh, the new 49-year-old president, declared that he was waging a war against "profiteers, warders and smugglers"<sup>51</sup>.

Rhetoric of this sort could not fail to evoke euphoria in the nation's hapless citizenry. The president himself seemed to have been genuinely caught up in the exuberance. Shortly after taking office, he took the notoriously populist step of controlling prices and announcing vastly reduced prices for the nation's consumer goods, especially food and fuel. In reaction, the Shadow State made its strength apparent: businessmen simply hoarded their goods, and Momoh was forced to cancel the directive. In February 1986, he entered negotiations with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for a loan of 50 million dollars to help the country through the immediate crisis<sup>52</sup>.

IMF representatives had been having problems with Momoh's predecessor on the issue of the petrol price subsidy. Stevens had stated in 1984 that "What they (the IMF) want us to do is raise prices at one fell swoop, now that people are experiencing difficulties from rising prices. If you do that now, you will be in difficulties. They are asking us to commit political

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<sup>50</sup>A.B. Zack-Williams, "Crisis and Despair". 24.

<sup>51</sup>"Momoh tightens the screws", West Africa, 10 February, 1986.

<sup>52</sup>"Enter the IMF", West Africa, 10 February 1986.

suicide"<sup>53</sup>. Momoh, however, was popular and determined enough to pursue the negotiations. He approved harsh austerity measures that resulted in an 84.6 per cent drop that year on spending for subsidies, primarily rice and petrol, leading to a sharp rise in the prices of these essential commodities"<sup>54</sup>. The problem was not helped by the fact that Momoh's "New Order" cabinet was dominated by leftovers from Stevens' discredited regime, people Sierra Leoneans readily blamed for the economic collapse<sup>55</sup>.

In February 1986, a mercenary plot apparently aimed at overthrowing Momoh was uncovered. An ageing trawler, the Silver Sea, was captured off the coast of France on 24 February with 13 British mercenaries and 150 tons of explosives and munitions. The trawler was believed to have been on its way to Freetown. The exiled Sierra Leone Democratic Party (SLDP), one of several ineffective opposition groups formed in Britain to fight the APC, was reported to have sponsored the plot, a charge its leaders denied<sup>56</sup>. Later, the French Embassy in Freetown passed on a News Agency report to the government claiming that the weapons were "integrally meant for the IRA"<sup>57</sup>.

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<sup>53</sup>West Africa, 4 March 1984.

<sup>54</sup>Reno, ibid, 161.

<sup>55</sup>Kpundeh, Politics and Corruption. 26.

<sup>56</sup>West Africa, 10 March, 1986.

<sup>57</sup>Koroma, Agony. 117.

The incident had a sobering effect on the president, and he took steps to shore up his internal support. Without the resources to make the necessary reform short of imposing additional burdens on the people, the president opened up his own "Shadow State" network, but this time with a human face. He brought in first the South African company, LIAT, despite its dealings with apartheid South Africa. LIAT bought Sierra Leone diamonds and then imported goods, including machinery and rice, the nation's staple, into the country at greatly reduced prices. By using LIAT, Momoh fulfilled a double ambition: He succeeded in undermining the powerful Lebanese network on which his predecessor relied, and thus created his own partnership. By importing cheap goods, especially rice, he bolstered his support among the people<sup>58</sup>. But LIAT'S manager, Shaptai Kalmanovitch, was arrested in May 1987 in London and was extradited to Israel to face charges of selling state secrets to South Africa<sup>59</sup>. The ability of LIAT to sustain Momoh's government was now in question.

Momoh's move against the Lebanese Shadow State network, on whom many of the country's old politicians, still powerful in the "New Order", relied, did not go unresisted. In March 1987, the government announced that it had foiled a coup involving the Second Vice President, Francis Minah, who was at one time Stevens' finance minister. Minah was linked to the Lebanese network which included Jamil Sahid Mohammed, the principal businessman in the network, Mohammed Kai Kai, a senior police officer and an associate of Minah, and several junior army officers. Minah and five other accused, including Kai Kai, were executed

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<sup>58</sup>Reno, Corruption and State Politics. 159.

<sup>59</sup>See Trevor Parfitt, "Sierra Leone: Wide Open to South Africa?", Review of African Political Economy, No.38, April 1987.



after a trial lasting for several months<sup>60</sup>.

LIAT was replaced by an Israeli business, SCIPA. SCIPA continued the policy of buying the country's diamonds and then importing goods, particularly rice and fuel, and selling them at subsidised prices. The company claimed to have imported 27,000 tons of rice in 1989 and promised to bring in another 80,000 tons in 1990<sup>61</sup>. With SCIPA's help, Momoh made arrears payment to the IMF of some 500,000 dollars in June 1989. The Fund was sufficiently impressed to promise 280 million dollars in credits in 1990<sup>62</sup>.

But the prospect of a better economic future, with the promise of external donor assistance, was soon overtaken by a debate that produced an outcome altogether unforeseen by even its most virulent instigators: the need for a radical upheaval of the fiefdom which passed for the state of Sierra Leone under the APC. It is to this debate and outcome that we turn to in the next chapter.

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<sup>60</sup>See Siaka Massaquoi, The Treason Trials 1987 (Freetown, 1987) for an account of how the trial was conducted.

<sup>61</sup>Reno, Corruption and State Politics. 163.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid.

### CHAPTER 3

#### THE COMING ANARCHY?

I do not think emphasis should be put on the personality but rather on the system itself. It is the system which we should work hard to change. The very best of men brought into a bad system will become bad before long. So when we talk about old and new guards, if the system does not change, the result will always be same.

President Joseph Momoh<sup>1</sup>

Towards the close of the 1980s, the euphoria which accompanied Momoh's ascension to power was replaced by a national debate about the country's future which the president found impossible to control<sup>2</sup>. A vigorous and sensationalist press helped sustained the debate. The tone seem to have been set by an article appearing in the popular tabloid, For Di People, in March 1988. Captioned "A Decade of One-Partyism: Twenty-One Years of APC Rule", the

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<sup>1</sup>"Sierra Leone: 1961-1986", West Africa, 5 May, 1996.

<sup>2</sup>Momoh himself was to admit in 1990 that he had "failed the nation" and asked for more time to deliver. See Siaka Massaquoi, APC in Turmoil: Siaka Stevens Remembered (Freetown, 1991).7.

article hit at what Momoh himself insisted should be the essence of any debate about the way the country should be governed: the one-party state itself as the "system";

Twenty-one years after the accession to power of the APC and ten years after the declaration of the one-party state, Sierra Leoneans are still going for weeks in total darkness resulting from power cuts. Twenty-one years later, we are still operating in the realm of 'dig-hole-cober-holism'. When there is no fuel, we search for a few gallons whilst commerce and other allied industries come to a standstill. When the roads become unmotorable, we fill them up to keep them going until the next rains. Twenty-one years later, the rate at which our moral fabric is decaying is so alarming that it scares even the outsider...

In conclusion, the article called for a referendum "to offer our younger generation the opportunity to decide their political fate, a right they could not exercise ten years ago (when there was a return of 99.9 per cent in favour of the passing of the one-party constitution) by virtue of their age"<sup>3</sup>.

No doubt the government would have wished this comment to be passed over as some kind of wayward musing by an 'awkward' publication but it happened that this time the paper had gauged the public mood correctly. Several months later, the outspoken principal of FBC, Professor Cyril Patrick Foray, gave a much-publicised lecture at Edinburgh University in which he described the one-party constitution as a fraud foisted upon the people of Sierra Leone by an avaricious and corrupt Stevens. Titling his lecture rather innocuously as, "The Road to the One-Party State: The Sierra Leone experience", Foray described the 1978 one-

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<sup>3</sup>For Di People, 18 March 1988.

party referendum as "the greatest fraud in the constitutional history of Sierra Leone" and noted: "Sierra Leoneans now know that the so-called constitutional progress, from parliamentary democracy to republicanism and then to the one-party state, has been accompanied by a downward trend in the country's economic fortunes culminating in the schimozzle in which the nation now finds itself". Foray extolled the virtues of pluralism in politics, evoking an era of almost idyllic stability and steady economic growth when the country was governed by a multi-party constitution soon after independence<sup>4</sup>.

The general conclusion was that the one-party state had become a shackle on progress, it was bleeding the Sierra Leonean nation dry. This conclusion was reinforced by the publication, in 1990, of the United Nations Development Programme report which rated Sierra Leone last on the scale of human development and living standards<sup>5</sup>. The publication triggered a national outrage against the APC, and was used by many as an index on the performance, or the lack of it, of the one-party state.

A BBC Channel 4 TV documentary on Sierra Leone, "Trade Slaves", appearing not long after the publication of the devastating UNDP report dramatised this failure in the most memorable of terms. The film, shot by Steve Hewlett, related, in the words of the narrator, "a man-made tragedy brought by government mismanagement, corruption, and the misuse of millions of dollars by companies from the industrial world". The film showed a country where

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<sup>4</sup>Cyril Foray, The Road to the One-party State: The Sierra Leone Experience (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1989). 22.

<sup>5</sup>United Nations, World Report on Human Development (New York, 1989).

life expectancy stood at a dismal 42 years, and where "one in every four children die before the age of five; where vital operations at the country's best hospital are carried out under a rickety angle-poised lamp and suspended when the hospital generator breaks down; and where teachers are forced to eke out a living as labourers because their salaries had not been paid for months"<sup>6</sup>. Hundreds of Sierra Leoneans resident in Britain reportedly wept when the film was shown<sup>7</sup>, and copies were freely distributed in Freetown by opposition politicians and shown throughout the country in cinema halls as evidence of the APC's dismal failure.

More disquieting for the government was the fact that this time the outrage was not limited to the traditional "informal opposition", it was also articulated by that most elitist of all institutions in the country, the Bar Association.

In an surprise move, the annual conference of the Bar Association in July 1990 unanimously voted for a return to multi-party democracy. A memorandum issued after the conference was categorical in blaming the one-party state for engendering, ironically enough, "disunity, mistrust, hatred, tribalism, bitterness, dissatisfaction, poverty, ignorance and diseases among Sierra Leoneans to a level never before experienced in post-independence Sierra Leone". To these lawyers, the APC one-party state had "clearly failed to achieve any of the goals it set itself in the constitution of 1978".

On the contrary, there has been a devastating economic decline; a disastrous

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<sup>6</sup>For a review of "Trade Slaves", see Chris Simpson, "A Lost Cause?" (West Africa 14-20 October 1991).

<sup>7</sup>"Hundreds Weep in Britain as Film on Sierra Leone Viewed on BBC TV", New Shaft October 22-28 1991.

deterioration in the value of the national currency, the leone; a permanent shortage of all essential commodities such as rice, fuel, electricity and medicines; a disintegration of the educational system resulting in the non-functioning of most schools and colleges; rampant bribery and corruption in every aspect of public life; unabated misuse and mismanagement of public funds and property at every level of government; non accountability of members of government, civil servants and all other persons in positions of trust and responsibility in respect of their dealings with public funds and property while in the discharge of their duties; thinly-veiled nepotism and tribalism in every area of government and public life, and stagnation of political progress, all of which have contributed to reduce the standard of living and life expectancy of every Sierra Leonean...<sup>8</sup>.

The government evidently took the lawyers' criticism very seriously. Speaking at the conference, the Attorney-General and Minister of Justice, Abdulai Conteh, himself a member of the Bar Association, came close to endorsing what his colleagues were saying when he spoke of "the wheel of historical change (which) is inexorably on the move". No one, he said, "no power can stop it". He contended, however, that on the return to multi-party democracy "the verdict was still open"<sup>9</sup>. But the pungency of the Bar Association's rhetoric was hardly calculated to effect a compromise aimed at gradual reform; it seem aimed at inciting Sierra

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<sup>8</sup>"Lawyers Turn the Course of History: they Vote 100 per cent for Multi-Party", New Shaft 9-15 July, 1990.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

Leoneans against the failed APC one-party state. In that the lawyers were not alone.

This was after all the post-Cold War period when Western countries made aid to the Third World, and even IMF\World Bank loans, hostage to "good governance", meaning democratization. As the British Foreign Secretary, Douglas Hurd, declared in 1989, "Government's who (sic) persist with repressive policies, with corrupt management, or with wasteful or discredited economic systems should not expect us to support their folly with scarce resources"<sup>10</sup>. More categorical was the statement made by the U.S Under Secretary of State for African Affairs, Herman Cohen, in 1990, in which he blamed the one-party system in Africa for having "singularly failed to provide government based on the equality of all groups rather than dominance by or favouritism toward one; leaders interested in national development rather than the limited perspectives of patronage politics; economic policies that promote rather than preclude individual enterprise". He warned:

In this era of limited resources, we intend to pay special attention to Africa's democracies and to countries which are actively engaged in the democratization process...those countries which fail to respond to-or worse, suppress-popular demands for democratization will find themselves in an ever more disadvantageous position in the competition for US assistance and private investment<sup>11</sup>.

Significantly enough, the keynote address at the Bar Association conference was given by

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<sup>10</sup>In Adewale Maja-Pearce, Media For Democracy: Directory of African Media (Brussels:International Federation of Journalists.1995).12.

<sup>11</sup>A.K. Koroma, Agony.158-159.

the British High Commissioner in Freetown, D.W. Patridge. Although Patridge declared that the question of the country's return to pluralist politics was best left to Sierra Leoneans to decide, he left no doubt in the minds of his audience that his government favoured the scrapping of the one-party state and the institution of multi-party democracy<sup>12</sup>.

Momoh himself could hardly be described as a typical autocrat; he was a rather benign figure, if an incompetent one. Freedom of expression, in particular press freedom, flourished during his rule. On the issue of a free press, the president made his position clear in an interview in 1990 with a foreign magazine:

We believe that the media must be given every amount of freedom. If you muzzle the people for too long, it will get to a point when they'll not be able to absorb it, they will explode and there will be developments similar to what is now taking place in Eastern Europe. However, the media too should realise this in going about their duties, they must be responsible, they cannot afford to be reckless. We feel very worried when we see people using the press irresponsibly and recklessly. My argument has always been that the journalist's pen is as lethal as the rifle in the hand of a military marksman. This means the pressman should be extremely cautious about what he commits to paper. this doesn't mean he should not criticise...As long as the criticism is objective, there is nothing wrong with it. We sincerely hope that the people in such a noble profession as the media should carry themselves with decorum

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<sup>12</sup>See Koroma, Agony. 160.



expected of them<sup>13</sup>.

The president's concern about "irresponsible" and "reckless" reporting by the press was understandable. At the time he made the statement, there were 16 weekly newspapers in the country all but two, the misnamed Daily Mail and We Yone, the APC party paper, were small scale independent publications owned and edited by the proprietors themselves and all of them based in Freetown.

Few of the editors, never mind the reporters, were trained journalists. But what they lacked in professionalism they attempted to compensate for by enthusiasm. They had correctly gauged the public mood as against all that the APC stood for and in favour of a return to multi-party democracy. In order to gain a larger share in the restricted market (restricted by the low-level of literacy which was less than 30 per cent in what was already a small population, about 4 million), almost all the papers maintained an obsession with corruption in government, even where they had no evidence. Stories featuring sordid details about government ineptitude, nepotism and general corruption helped erode confidence in the state and all those involved in administration.

The most successful in this enterprise was the New Shaft, an eight-page tabloid edited by a mercurial ex-school teacher, Franklyn Bunting-Davies. From January 1989 to April 1991 when Momoh was ousted in a military coup, few issues of the New Shaft appeared without some corruption story on its front-page in blazing captions like "SCANDALOUS!" (September 24-30 1990), "AS FIVE YEARS GO DOWN THE DRAIN: BLEEDING THE SUFFERING MASSES CONTINUE!" (December 10-16, 1990), "ANOTHER APC

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<sup>13</sup>Interview with West Africa, 5-11 February, 1990.

MINISTER IN MONEY TROUBLE" (December 17-23, 1990)etc. The 24 April 1989 edition of the paper was deemed subversive enough by the authorities to have its, along with five others', licences suspended and therefore banned. The offending edition carried a front-page photograph of the information minister, Victor Mambu, in front of a 'palace' he was building for himself. As the paper did quite often, there was no accompanying story but the caption could leave little doubt in the minds of readers about the message: "Barely three years in parliament, former Works Minister now Information Victor Mambu is building himself a palace. When will these men start serving the nation?"<sup>14</sup>. But so popular had the paper become that public outcry against its banning forced President Momoh to personally intervene. He lifted the ban on all five papers less than a month later on 16 May 1989, whereupon Bunting-Davies reacted in his characteristically abrasive fashion:

While nations big and small are striving to raise their standards of living and entrenching their democratic gains, we here are busy doing the reverse.

A few greedy people have almost choked the economic life of this nation to death. The majority helplessly look on.

The press has been the only vocal organ crying for a new social and economic order in which the masses will improve their lot. That is freedom.

That is democracy.

A demi-devil feels that what Sierra Leone deserves is to import China's

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<sup>14</sup>New Shaft, 24 April, 1989. The Information's Minister's heavy-handed decision to suspend publication of the papers seemed to have been quite legal: a 1980 Newspaper (Amendment) Act required all newspapers in the country to be licensed by the minister, and empowered him to revoke a newspaper's license in the interest of "public morality, public safety and order". He did not have to justify his decision.

bamboo curtain so that behind it the big cows will eat all our grass.

What way to go, Mr Mambu?...

People know where they want to go. They will not allow people who have sneaked their way into politics to assume the role of God and King...<sup>15</sup>.

An indication of how completely the president had lost control of the situation was seen in his failure to co-opt the multi-party campaign. He had, in June 1990, said that "multi-party, in this point in time of our social and economic development, will only spell doom for us and take us right back to those dangerous days of divisiveness, conflict, victimisation and vindictiveness that we have happily left behind for well over a decade"<sup>16</sup>. To this a prominent opposition figure and the foremost campaigner for the return to plural politics, Desmond Luke, replied that "the evidence suggest that tribalism has never been more alive

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<sup>15</sup>"Shaft Speakers of Freedom", New Shaft, 29 May-3 June, 1989. Adewale Maja-Pearce missed the point when he noted in 1990 the failure of the Sierra Leone press to criticise the president, concentrating instead on 'soft spots' like unpopular businessmen and politicians largely for the sake of extortion and blackmail, as indicating a critical failure of the Sierra Leone press. "The bottom line is that Sierra Leone is a one-party state. The citizens of Sierra Leone are not free to choose their government, let alone their president. If the president can't be criticised in the press then that press cannot be said to be independent in any sense that ultimately matters" (in Index On Censorship, June\July, 1990.57). Even assuming that the press neglected to criticise the president, which is altogether not correct, Maja-Pearce failed to grasp the important point that 'governmentability' in the one-party state depended not solely on the president, but on a whole range of patronage network of which the APC party itself (which was severely pilloried by the press), and also ministers and prominent businessmen, occupied the nerve centre. Once these were sufficiently undermined, the whole one-party edifice, together with its president, stood ready to collapse.

<sup>16</sup>"Excellent Speech Mr President But: The People Want a Multi-Party; Your Men Will Never Change!", New Shaft, June 18-24 1990.

and well in Sierra Leone as it is today" because "the one-party state had become a system which serves only relatives and friends"<sup>17</sup>.

The students reacted with greater militancy. Shortly after Momoh's speech, some lecturers at the Makeni Teachers College distributed pamphlets calling for the immediate scrapping of the one-party constitution and the overthrow of the APC "oligarchy". Students in the college then went on the rampage, slaughtered the principal's livestock and threatened to strip him naked and parade him to town. The Special Security Division (SSD), the new name given the ISU<sup>18</sup>, was despatched to the campus to curb the riot. Some of the student leaders were subsequently expelled. The National Union of Sierra Leone students (NUSS) leadership, headed by Mohammed Pateh Bah, hailed the expelled students as "martyrs" for the multi-party cause, and launched a futile campaign for their restitution<sup>19</sup>.

Opposition reaction to the president's speech was so strong that in August 1990, after an extraordinary session of the Central Committee of the APC met, Momoh announced a Constitutional Review Committee, under Peter Tucker, a prominent lawyer linked to the opposition, to make recommendations about a return to multi-party democracy. The result was predictable: in March 1991, Tucker presented his report noting that "throughout the country

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<sup>17</sup>"Desmond Luke: What I Know", New Shaft 3-9 December, 1990.

<sup>18</sup>The name ISU was dropped in the early 1980s, the authorities perhaps aware that the unit's reputation to the general populace (as I-Shoot-You) had stuck well to the acronym.

<sup>19</sup>See "Warning by President Momoh: Government Ready for Students", New Citizen, 10 November 1990. Also editorial in the same issue.

(there is) overwhelming support for a return to multi-party democracy"<sup>20</sup>.

But that month, something else happened that was to radically change the course of the nation's history: a rebel invasion from neighbouring war-torn Liberia.

Liberia's war had begun precisely on the 24th December 1989 when a former Boston gas station assistant and later senior official in President Samuel Doe's government, Charles Taylor, led a band of about 150 ragtag fighters who advanced over the border from Ivory Coast to attack the town of Butou in Liberia's Nimba County. Like many so-called revolutionary leaders, Taylor has a colourful history. As head of a major agency in Doe's government, Taylor was said to have embezzled close to a million U.S dollars and fled the country in 1983. He was arrested in the U.S and detained pending a decision to extradite him to Liberia but managed to break out of prison by bribing officials in the prison with 50,000 dollars<sup>21</sup>. He then returned to West Africa where he managed to gain support from a variety of sources for his planned "revolution"<sup>22</sup>.

Taylor announced his aim to be the overthrow of Doe's government. But it was widely rumoured that the core group of his National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) fighters, who

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<sup>20</sup>Koroma, Agony. 162.

<sup>21</sup>Stephen Ellis, "Liberia 1989-1994: A Study in Ethnic and Spiritual Violence" (Africa Affairs, No.94, 1995).165-197.

<sup>22</sup>Ellis, "Liberia 1989-1994".

had been trained in Libya and Burkina Faso, consisted of "internationalist revolutionaries"<sup>23</sup> from Sierra Leone and the Gambia whose agenda was to launch similar movements in their respective countries once Taylor succeeded in his enterprise. A secret diplomatic despatch from Lagos, Nigeria, confirmed this fear to the Sierra Leonean authorities in November 1990. A Nigerian businessman in Liberia who escaped capture from the NPFL reported seeing Sierra Leonean and Gambian dissidents working with Taylor and plotting their own insurgencies<sup>24</sup>. Taylor himself was detained in Freetown in early 1989 when he entered the country using a Burkinabe diplomatic passport to seek Momoh's endorsement for use of Sierra Leone as a base to launch his rebellion, a request that was summarily turned down<sup>25</sup>.

The NPFL's vice-president was Kukoi Samba-Samyang, known in Liberia as "Dr Manning", a choleric young man who led a bloody coup against Gambia's President Dauda Jawara in 1981 with the alleged support of Libya just after he completed high school, and declared what he was pleased to call "the dictatorship of the lumpen-proletariat"<sup>26</sup>. The coup was overturned by Senegalese troops immediately afterwards, and Dr. Manning went

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<sup>23</sup>The phrase is used by Ellis. Ibid.

<sup>24</sup>Secret Diplomatic Despatch from the Sierra Leone High Commission in Lagos to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Freetown, 14 November 1990. In Koroma, Agony.142.

<sup>25</sup>Koroma, Agony. 141.

<sup>26</sup>See Byron Tarr, "The ECOMOG initiative in Liberia: A Liberian Perspective", A Journal of Opinion, vol.21.no.1, 1993.

underground. Also rumoured at the time to be involved in the NPFL project was Corporal Foday Sankoh, a fifty-something-year old functional illiterate who was cashiered out of the Sierra Leone army, after a spell in prison, for involvement in a failed coup against President Stevens in 1971<sup>27</sup>.

Doe's ill-disciplined troops launched a massive scorched earth policy against the insurgents in the whole of Nimba County. This only served to recruit more fighters for the insurgents. Local volunteers reportedly rallied to the NPFL cause "with little apparent hesitation; some were teenage orphans" whose parents had been killed by Doe's murderous soldiers<sup>28</sup>. The rebellion soon took ethnic overtones as the Gio and Mano, two groups that felt brutalised by Doe's Krahn-dominated government and army, rallied to the rebel cause and directed the rebellion towards a genocidal campaign against the Krahn and their Madingo allies. The war became "peculiarly horrible", with random violence and massacres becoming commonplace. By the mid-1990s, the NPFL forces were investing the outskirts of the seaside capital, Monrovia, by which time about 150,000 Liberians (of a population of just about 2 million) had been killed, a proportion higher than that of the Poles killed during the Second World War<sup>29</sup>.

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<sup>27</sup>For an account of Sankoh's involvement in the coup attempt and his grudge against the APC, see Koroma, Agony.142-143.

<sup>28</sup>Paul Richards, "Rebellion in Liberia and Sierra Leone: a Crisis of Youth?", in O.W. Furley (ed.), Conflict in Africa (Tauris Academic Studies, London, 1995).144.

<sup>29</sup>William Reno, "Humanitarian Crisis and Warlord politics in Liberia and Sierra Leone" (Unpublished Paper, 1996).

The war unleashed a humanitarian crisis on a vast scale. By the end of 1990, as many as 700,000 Liberians had fled the country<sup>30</sup>. A sizable proportion of the Liberian refugees, which included Doe's vice-president, Harry Moniba, made it to Sierra Leone. By August 1990, there were 80,000 Liberian refugees registered in Sierra Leone and the government was spending Le.80 million a month mostly to maintain the refugees and fund peace talks that were being held in Freetown<sup>31</sup>. That same month, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), led by Nigeria, hastily put together an intervention force, known as ECOMOG (the Economic Community Monitoring Group), to stem the tide of the carnage that had been leashed in Monrovia<sup>32</sup>.

Of the 3,455 troops who were despatched to Monrovia from their rear-base in Freetown, under the command of Ghanaian General Arnold Quianoo, Sierra Leone contributed 300, Nigeria 700, Ghana 800, Guinea 550 and the Gambia 105. The main rebel leader, Taylor, loudly opposed the ECOMOG intervention and vowed to resist it. But President Momoh defended the action in terms of a disinterested humanitarian assistance:

We view such initiative as both timely and appropriate and we hope that all the warring factions in Liberia will see reason and agree with us...Sierra

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<sup>30</sup>Ellis, "Liberia 1989-1994".

<sup>31</sup>"Le80m Spent on War", New Citizen, August 11 1990.

<sup>32</sup>Taylor's forces had by then split into two, with the breakaway, and better trained, faction led by his former forces commander, Prince Johnson. The remnants of Doe's heavily-equipped Armed Forces of Liberia remained trapped in the enclave around the Executive Mansion, the seat of power in which the president was holed up. A deadly battle ensued between the three factions, each wanting to take control of the Mansion or retain it.



Leone being one of the next door neighbours of Liberia is in a position to appreciate the seriousness of the Liberian situation as we are directly feeling the heat. The massive influx of refugees into our country with its attendant economic and social consequences is just one of the many grave responsibilities we are now called upon to shoulder...it is our duty as leaders to re-affirm to the world and all those involved in the Liberian conflict that the ECOWAS initiative is a genuine effort aimed at bringing peace and happiness to wartorn Liberia<sup>33</sup>.

The Sierra Leonean press was generally hostile to the country's participation in ECOMOG. The Vision, a somewhat more readable paper than most, even voted Charles Taylor "Man of the Year 1990" for launching a war against a repressive tyrant, something that the editor felt should be heralded in an Africa of phlegmatic and docile populations overwhelmingly under murderous "Life Presidents"<sup>34</sup>.

President Doe was captured on 9 September 1990 by the Prince Johnson rebel faction, the Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia (WARD). He was tortured in the most barbaric fashion, mutilated and killed; a film of the gruesome incident was subsequently distributed at the instance of Johnson as evidence of his right to take over the Liberian presidency since he, afterall, killed the dictator! But ECOMOG stood firm.

On 1 November 1990, Charles Taylor broadcast a threat over the British Broadcasting Corporation's (BBC) African Service to attack and destroy Freetown's airport, arguing that

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<sup>33</sup>"Sierra Leone's Position on Liberia", New Citizen 11 August 1990.

<sup>34</sup>See Vision 10 January 1991.

by allowing its territory to be used as an operational air and naval base for ECOMOG, Sierra Leone had robbed him of the final fruit of his invasion, the presidency of Liberia<sup>35</sup>. President Momoh responded by describing Taylor as "ungrateful". "Of all people Charles Taylor should appreciate the problems he has created for us here with his war in Liberia", he said. "We are overstressing our resources to care for his people, our social amenities have been over-tasked and even our economy dislodged. A man like this should not think of making statements like that"<sup>36</sup>. Then an "Army Spokesman" made one of those bluff statements that was to prove so disastrously misleading: "Sierra Leone has a trained army, with World War worth and success. We need not remind Charles Taylor of our performance at the Somalia drive in Monrovia to make our point"<sup>37</sup>.

Profoundly naive statements such as these may well have been intended merely for public relations purposes, but one is not so sure. In his address to the troops before they left for Liberia, the Armed Forces chief, Major-General Mohammed Tarawallie, a man not given to theatrics, made the following statements:

You come from a force which has an unparalleled record of service outside Sierra Leone. Burma in the Second World War and in more recent times in the Congo, Zaire...In both of these your forbears (sic) displayed an exemplary

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<sup>35</sup>Koroma, Agony. 140.

<sup>36</sup>"Taylor Ungrateful-Momoh", New Citizen 8 November 1990.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid.

sense of discipline, courage and valour. These attributes have been carried down the line to the present day and I have no doubt that you will, while in Liberia, display those qualities of discipline and valour even better than your forbears...<sup>38</sup>.

Tarawallie's historical account is hardly credible. The forerunner of the Sierra Leone army was constituted largely out of members of disbanded and hated Frontier Police, the force instrumental in the suppression of the famous Hut Tax War of 1896, in 1901 as a purely colonial vehicle. As part of the West African Frontier Force (WAFF), it certainly played a commendable role in the war against the fascist powers, 1939-45. But its performance in the Congo crisis was far less heroic. The small contingent of men that left Sierra Leone for the Congo as part of the United Nations (UN) peace keeping mission was attached to the fifth Nigerian battalion, and was assigned to guard duties at the Lovanuim University, ceremonial parades at Leopoldville Airport and some training at the Kitona military base<sup>39</sup>. The army's performance in Liberia hardly bore out the major-general's optimism. Barely three months after the ECOMOG force landed, the new no-nonsense Nigerian commander, General Dongonyaro, requested that the government withdraw the commander of the Sierra Leonean

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<sup>38</sup>"Mission to Glory", New Citizen 18 August 1990.

<sup>39</sup>Incidentally, Sierra Leone's only casualty during the operations occurred when a member of the contingent was killed in a traffic accident in March 1962. See Thomas Cox, Civil Military Relations in Sierra Leone: A Case Study of African Soldiers in Politics (Harvard Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976).43 and 247.

contingent, Lieutenant-Colonel Modu Hanciles, for gross cowardice and neglect of duty<sup>40</sup>.

Elsewhere in the country, reactions to the threat of war were also less than heroic. In Bo, when two Nigerian F14 fighter planes flew low over the city shortly after Taylor's broadcast, "some personnel of the Special Security Division (SSD), on hearing the sound of the planes, hid their red berets in their pockets for fear of being easily identified by Charles Taylor. Five police constables fled from the barracks to Messima village about half a mile away"<sup>41</sup>. Since the NPFL certainly did not possess fighter planes, the incident demonstrated the extent to which rebel propaganda could be demoralising.

A more sinister, if hardly more credible, threat was broadcast, again over the BBC, against the country in March 1991. It was from Corporal Foday Sankoh, who was remembered in southern and eastern parts of the country as a rather unsuccessful photographer who had moved in the early 1980s, for no apparent reason, from the rather more lucrative Bo to obscure Segbema to pursue his trade. Sankoh declared that if President Momoh did not quit office within 90 days, he would lead an armed invasion of the country<sup>42</sup>.

There had been some cross-border raids by Liberian rebels into Sierra Leone before March 1991. On 18 December 1990, about 100 NPFL rebels reportedly crossed into Sierra

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<sup>40</sup>"Liberian Crisis takes its Toll: Modu Hanciles is Sacked", New Citizen 8 December 1990.

<sup>41</sup>"Plane Scare Claims a Life", New Citizen, November 24 1990.

<sup>42</sup>Few in the country took the threat seriously. Sankoh was not known to be aligned to any serious opposition group in and outside the country. His BBC broadcast received scant mention in the country's otherwise sensationalist press which seemed to spoil for just such a "scoop". Author's note.

Leone and attacked the village of Kissy-Tongay, perhaps mainly to loot. But it was the Saturday, 23 March 1991 attack on Bomaru and Sienga, two obscure border towns in the Kailahun district, Eastern province, which signalled the beginning of the real conflict. The rebels numbering about 100, mostly NPFL commandos leading Sierra Leoneans recruited and trained in Liberia, carried out a surprise attack from their base in Liberia. They killed one Sierra Leonean army major, one lieutenant and eleven civilians, looted the towns and withdrew into Liberia when troops from the nearby Daru barracks counter-attacked. Foday Sankoh promptly broadcast a message over the BBC claiming responsibility for the attacks, and announced that his group, the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), had begun its war of "liberation" to oust the APC regime of President Momoh<sup>43</sup>. Momoh summoned an emergency cabinet meeting and issued a statement directly blaming Taylor for the attacks<sup>44</sup>.

Four days later, the rebels struck at other towns in the Kailahun district. On 27 March, Buedu was attacked and occupied by a rebel force of 300 heavily armed men; two days later, the main commercial centre in the district, Koindu, was taken and extensively looted and destroyed. But that same week, government troops recaptured the town, killing 16 rebels and

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<sup>43</sup>This broadcast received a greater attention in the country's press. Reporters stormed the Ministry of Defence in search of Sankoh's picture but no one appeared to have had a record of it; it is probable that officials of the ministry deliberately kept the picture away from the journalists to reinforce the myth, then cultivated by Momoh, that the war was purely an NPFL invasion. A full picture of Sankoh appeared over a year later, in a foreign magazine, the London-based New African in October 1992. It was taken by Addai-Sebo, a publicist for Charles Taylor.

<sup>44</sup>New Citizen, 10 April 1991.

capturing three of their commanders, all of whom turned out to be Liberians<sup>45</sup>. Rebel counter-attacks led to the recapture of town shortly afterwards, and almost the whole of Kailahun district fell to the rebels in less than a month of fighting. The rebels quickly opened another front, in the Pujehun district, another area where the government had rather tenuous control. The 3,000-man Sierra Leone army faced a challenge well beyond its resources.

A serious problem which seemed to have inhibited the army's effort, apart from the lack of equipment, was the very remoteness of the areas attacked by the rebels. Both Kailahun and Pujehun districts were, after the closing of the railway, among the most inaccessible in Sierra Leone's shrinking state.

When the rebels entered the country, they attempted to pass off their campaign as an uprising by the defunct SLPP against the hated APC. According to Richards, they went so far as to order villagers "at gunpoint to wave palmfronds (the symbol of the Mende-dominated SLPP...) and shout in favour of multi-party democracy"<sup>46</sup>. But these appeals to ethnic or political party solidarity backfired in part because of the brutality of the rebels but also

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<sup>45</sup>The three Liberians, Fallah Stallon Koluba, Harrison George and Max Noah Wossandor, were shown at a press conference in Freetown by Ministry of Defence officials as evidence that the war was a foreign invasion- an NPFL attack because of Sierra Leone's support of ECOMOG. Author's notes.

<sup>46</sup>Richards, "Rebellion in Liberia and Sierra Leone".139.

because the local populace could easily see that most of the invaders were not Sierra Leoneans. They were mainly Liberian and Burkinabe mercenaries "borrowed" from the NPFL<sup>47</sup>. The fact that the RUF leader, Foday Sankoh, is Temne, the ethnic group which dominated the APC, also did nothing to advance the RUF cause. In any case, following Peter Tucker's recommendations Momoh lifted the ban placed on political parties by the one-party constitution and the real SLPP re-emerged<sup>48</sup>. The ruse was exposed.

The rebels then embarked on a campaign of terror to win recruits and force the populace in the areas under their control into subjugation. This triggered a humanitarian crisis, and by the end of April 1991, the first waves of refugee movement from Sierra Leone to Guinea were

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<sup>47</sup>There has been some dispute about the presence of the Burkinabes (citizens of Burkina Faso, formerly Upper Volta, one of West Africa's poorest states) in the RUF. There certainly were Burkinabe commandos in the NPFL, and it is reasonable to suppose that some participated in the initial RUF campaigns. Sierra Leone's ex-Foreign Minister, Abdul Karim Koroma, asserts the presence of the Burkinabes in the RUF (Koroma, *ibid.*140) and villagers who fled the initial fighting told this writer that they saw "foreigners" among the rebels who they were certain were not Liberians as they spoke a "strange" language. They should know as they dealt, on a day to day basis, with Liberians before the war. However, to my knowledge, no Burkinabe was captured throughout the fighting, though Liberians certainly were. (Author's notes).

<sup>48</sup>Announcing the lifting of the ban on political activities, Momoh mentioned in passing the pointlessness of pursuing an armed struggle for political reform now that the way was open to achieve that peacefully. State radio harped upon this theme for over a week, incongruously calling on Sankoh to cease fighting and launch his own political party at the same time denying he was in control of the rebels. (Author's notes).

reported<sup>49</sup>. But the evidence suggests that the RUF won a sizable number of 'willing recruits', largely alienated youths, in the Kailahun and Pujehun districts. Fayia Musa, who was later to become one of the many spokesmen for the organisation, was a lowly paid agricultural extension officer in Kailahun, when the rebels entered the area and joined willingly<sup>50</sup>. Ibrahim Deen-Jalloh, who also became a spokesman for the organisation, was an instructor at the Bunumbu Teachers College when the rebels took the town and abducted his wife, Agnes. He joined the movement as a result, but he told the present writer that he was not forced to do so<sup>51</sup>. His wife too later became a senior official in the RUF. In the Pujehun district, quite a few people who were linked to the Ndorgborwusui, an armed peasant group which had launched an uprising in 1982 after a senior APC strongman threatened to exterminate the people of Sorogbema chiefdom, joined the rebels willingly. One such was Momoh Konneh, a functional illiterate who revived rebel activities in the district in late 1991

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<sup>49</sup>The news was first broke by the BBC African Service. In the first three weeks of the fighting, it was estimated that about 30,000 people from the Kailahun district had fled to Guinea. Three months later, the number swelled to 100,000. Momoh despatched a relief mission to Guinea in July 1991 with Le.30 million worth of food and medicines. The delegation was headed by the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Bubuakei-Jabbie, who hailed from Kailahun. (Author's notes).

<sup>50</sup>Author's Interview notes, Abidjan 1996.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid.



even after the original RUF\NPFL invaders had been crushed in the area<sup>52</sup>. But Pujehun also witnessed the most ruthless recruitment of teenage, mostly high school, boys and girls.

The character and origin of the RUF rebellion has been much debated<sup>53</sup>. The fashion seems to be to look for a more indigenous root for the war rather than to see it as a mere "spillover" from Liberia or a Machiavellian strategy employed by Taylor to undermine Sierra Leone's support for ECOMOG. Certainly this approach is seductive, but while it would be naive to ascribe a simple origin to such a complex war, the evidence suggests that most of the core members of the RUF were recruited in Liberia during, and not before, Charles Taylor's war. They are Sierra Leoneans who had long been resident in Liberia as migrant workers. Many were even born there. Others were persuaded to join when their areas of residence were overrun by the NPFL. This category includes Philip Palmer, an FBC graduate in engineering who was to become a senior battlefield commander and who later led an ill-fated coup against

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<sup>52</sup>Konneh is reported to have enthusiastically rallied to the RUF when Sankoh arrived at Soro-Gbeima and then went about "mercilessly" persecuting "all those he believed were against his Ndorgborwusui group, that is, all those who supported Demby". See "Pujehun: Who is this Momoh Konneh?", Vision, 4 February 1992. Later the NPRC Chief of Staff, Brigadier Jusu Gottor, who led the army to crush the Ndorgborwusui uprising in 1982, pointedly declared the fighting in Pujehun district to be a solely Ndorgborwusui affair. For this, the Vision, whose editor, Siaka Massaquoi, hailed from the area, berated Gottor for making "a cynical statement", "a terrible example of what psychologists describe as blaming the victim...This rebel war is Charles Taylor's and Foday Sankoh's war, and both of them are not natives of Pujehun district". In the writer's opinion, the Chief of Staff's statement could "goad...soldiers into a battle of indiscriminate bloody revenge against all the people of the district, rebel or not". See "The Chief of Staff is Wrong", Vision, 3-10 June 1993. The editor evidently found no contradiction in his earlier article attributing revival of rebel activities to an Ndorgborwusui, Momoh Konneh.

<sup>53</sup>See Ibrahim Abdulah, "Bushpath to Destruction"; Paul Richards, Fighting for the Rainforest and Stephen Riley, Liberia and Sierra Leone: Anarchy or Peace in West Africa.

Sankoh<sup>54</sup>. The brutal RUF Commanding Officer, Sam Bockarie (aka Maskita), was another. A high school drop-out and ex-diamond miner, Bockarie was hustling in Liberia when he was caught up the NPFL war; he was then recruited into the budding RUF movement<sup>55</sup>.

The case for deep rooted indigenous causes of the war has been made most persuasively by Paul Richards, who has suggested that the RUF may be a much older organisation than the NPFL, even dating its origin to 1982<sup>56</sup>. This claim appears to confuse the RUF with the Pan African Union (PANAFU), a radical group founded by some FBC lecturers and students and which was linked to a botched project in 1986 to train urban youths from Sierra Leone in Libya for a planned "revolution"<sup>57</sup>. Sankoh himself is believed to have been a nominal

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<sup>54</sup>Interview notes, Abidjan 1996. Following the signing of the Peace Accord, Palmer was chosen as one of the RUF members to sit on the Peace Council, established by the accord, in Freetown. The RUF members were then taken across the country by the government to meet the people and seek reconciliation. At a stop in Kenema, they were greeted by a delegation of over a hundred people who had their hands cut off by the rebels. The RUF members were apparently so shaken that they begged to be flown out of the town immediately. A week later, Sankoh ordered the war to restart, claiming that the Freetown government had reneged on terms of the accord; whereupon Palmer and his men announced that Sankoh was no longer leader of the RUF. The announcement coincided with Sankoh's arrest in Nigeria on charges of gun running. Palmer's coup was foiled by a Sankoh loyalist, Sam Bockarie, who was then in command of the RUF fighting forces. He had Palmer and his men, including Deen Jalloh and Fayia Musa, arrested when they went to the main RUF camp to explain why they ousted Sankoh and elect a new leadership for the RUF. They were later reported executed. See Concord Times, February 1997.

<sup>55</sup>Interview notes, Abidjan 1996.

<sup>56</sup>Richards, Fighting for the Rainforest.4.

<sup>57</sup>An account of this intriguing project has been convincingly made by Ibrahim Abdullah in "Bush Paths to Destruction: Origins and Character of the RUF" (forthcoming). According to Abdullah, the project began in 1987 after the expulsion of some 41 FBC students who were

member who was recruited into the organisation merely for the purposes of taking the training in Libya. But PANAFU has vehemently denied any link with the RUF, a movement that seems to have appeared much later to borrow the anti-establishment rhetoric of PANAFU<sup>58</sup>.

Of those who took the training in Libya, only three, Foday Sankoh, Abu Kanu and Rashid Mansaray, non of them a member of PANAFU after 1988, have been confirmed to have later surfaced in the RUF. Kanu and Mansaray were executed by Sankoh in the early stages of the war probably as a result of power struggle, leaving him the only member of the Libyan project still in the RUF<sup>59</sup>.

The origin of what came to constitute the RUF movement may be traced to a chance meeting between Sankoh and Taylor when the latter visited Freetown in 1989 to get Momoh's approval for use of Sierra Leone as a launching base for his war. Sankoh himself has claimed, in a recent interview, that it was after then that he put his organisation together for the "revolutionary liberation" war<sup>60</sup>. Indeed all the evidence suggest that the RUF is a military

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judged to have been ringleaders in a violent demonstration in 1986. Some of the students, led by their ex-president, Alie Kabba, made it to Ghana and then Libya. Under the patronage of Colonel Ghaddafi, the students were able to recruit and spirit to Libya mostly urban drifters and some high school boys for military and "ideological" training in preparation for an invasion of Sierra Leone. Foday Sankoh was one of those recruited and flown to Libya. The project, however, aborted in part because of want of leadership (Kabba's leadership was undermined by the suspicion that he was involved in corruption, and was dodging military training himself) but also because there was no coherent plan for the "revolution".

<sup>58</sup>Interview with PANAFU members Ismail Rashid and Olu Gordon, Freetown 1996.

<sup>59</sup>Abdullah, "Bushpath".

<sup>60</sup>See Interview with Concord Times 18 December 1996.

movement with a political agenda and not a political organisation with an armed wing<sup>61</sup>, and was created by Sankoh under the patronage of Taylor. It is not, strictly speaking, an indigenous mass movement although it has been able to attract an aggregation of disgruntled, alienated and nihilistic forces, which partly explains the movement's overwhelmingly destructive instinct, and why it has never been able to win the hearts of ordinary Sierra Leoneans.

Even the RUF's campaign strategies suggested its foreign nature. When the rebels entered Kailahun and Pujehun districts, they seemed to have particularly targeted ethnic Madingos and Fulas, two groups that were being exterminated by the NPFL in Liberia. In the Kailahun district, the rebels slaughtered at least 60 civilians, most of them Madingo and Fula traders. In the Pujehun district on 7 April 1991, the RUF murdered the Fula President of the Supreme Islamic Council and leader of Sierra Leone's Sunni Muslims, in an ambush near Zimmi. In April and May, they cold-bloodedly murdered 46 people in Pujehun town, 16 of them Fula traders and the rest mostly Madingo traders<sup>62</sup>. Richards has interpreted this murderous policy as an "anti-mercantile populism" deriving from the RUF's undigested readings of Ghadaffi's so-called "Third Universal Theory". The program of action outlined in the Green Book "percolated widely" among Sierra Leone's youthful radicals<sup>63</sup>, is hardly anti-

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<sup>61</sup>I am grateful to Olu Gordon for this pertinent observation. See "Hostages to the Gun", For Di People June 1997.

<sup>62</sup>Amnesty International, "Sierra Leone: The Extrajudicial Executions of Suspected Rebels and Collaborators". London, 1992.

<sup>63</sup>Richards, "Rebellion in Liberia and Sierra Leone". 154.

mercantilist and there is no evidence that it influenced the RUF. It is much more plausible to suggest that the killings were done by Liberian elements in the RUF in pursuit of the NPFL ethnocide against the Madingos and Fulas.

The RUF also targeted the Lebanese, known to be allies of "the government of the day". On 5 May 1991, the rebels beheaded five Lebanese in Sumbuya, in the Bo district. But such public brutalities merely served to cast the RUF as a particularly barbaric foreign force, further alienating them from the people they had allegedly come to "liberate". Madingos, Fulas and even Lebanese were well integrated in provincial Sierra Leone largely through inter-marriage with other ethnic groups and the RUF was unable to gain support for its cause through these actions.

The RUF seems to have initially had little trouble defeating government troops sent to combat them. Soon large swaths of territories in the Southern and Eastern provinces were under their control, if control is useful in describing what amounted to a state of perpetual chaos and banditry. The RUF made little attempt to institute administrative structures even in larger towns like Pujehun and Kailahun which they controlled for several months uninterrupted. What they did more effectively was to recruit teenage boys and girls by use of the most horrific methods imaginable into their movement. In Pujehun, many boys and girls of the St. Pauls Secondary School were abducted and made to commit atrocities against family members as 'initiation' into the RUF. Richards has provided a chilling enough account of how this was done:

Villagers report being required to witness the terrifying spectacle of public beheadings in which the victim's neck was cut, working from back to front with a blunt blade. The purpose of these atrocities seems to have been to bring about the irrevocable break between conscripts and their communities.

Subsequently, youth conscripts could not escape for fear of reprisals<sup>64</sup>.

The new conscripts were then branded with tattoos to identify them as members of the RUF, a mark which meant summary execution by government troops upon capture and which therefore served as an insurance against defection<sup>65</sup>.

Towards the end of 1991, with troops from Guinea, which has a defence pact with Sierra Leone and Nigeria, as part of the ECOMOG arrangement, arriving to boost the government's defence, the Sierra Leone Army went to the offensive. Momoh had elected to expand the army to about 6,000 by recruiting mostly vagrants in Freetown, "rural...unemployed, a fair number of hooligans, drug addicts and thieves", as his foreign minister at the time, Abdul Karim Koroma, has admitted<sup>66</sup>. These underwent a crash training programme which produced little more than a uniformed rabble which looked and acted much like the rebels they were sent to battle. But they were boosted by a new element that was to significantly affect the NPFL's military fortunes in Liberia: ULIMO.

ULIMO (United Liberation Movement of Liberia), was forged in Sierra Leone out of

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<sup>64</sup>Richards, "Rebellion in Liberia and Sierra Leone". 158.

<sup>65</sup>See Amnesty International, *ibid*.

<sup>66</sup>Koroma, Agony. 144.

remnants of Doe's disintegrated army, as well as Krahn and Madingo refugees from Liberia. They were trained and armed in Kenema under the command of General Karpah, a Doe loyalist, with political control exerted by Alhaji Kromah, a Madingo and also a former Doe official<sup>67</sup>. This force launched an offensive against the RUF in the Pujehun district and succeeded in pushing them back into Liberia within two months. They then entered Liberia and continued their march through Taylor territory to Monrovia. At the Eastern Front, where Sierra Leonean and Guinean troops engaged the rebels, the war reached a stalemate. Both sides were seriously under-equipped and poorly trained, and there was no prospect of decisive victory by either. We have an interesting, if bizarre, account of one of the battles fought during the period of the war, which illustrates the nature of the stalemated war:

On May 1 (1991)...we had to confront the rebels at the Mano bridge. They attacked Daru town, they recaptured Daru town and they were attempting to recapture the barracks. They wanted to cross the Mano bridge; and our defence were on the other side of the bridge. Mortar shells flew all over the place and we were aimed at. We saw the rebels themselves take position on the other side of the bridge...We told our boys to put their heads down. We got down, we thought that probably if he fires it would just come and go over our defence. Well, we miscalculated. The fellow was a good shot...and he aimed at the centre and launched. It came right into our midst. I was blasted with fragments which opened up my legs...<sup>68</sup>.

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<sup>67</sup>See "UILMO on the Grill", Vision, 25 June-2 July, 1992.

<sup>68</sup>"We Need Urgent Help", interview with Captain Valentine Strasser, West Africa 15-21 June, 1992.

This account, by a famous soldier who participated in the battle and was wounded, suggests how truly rudimentary the engagements were: Captain Strasser's unit seemed to have been decimated by just one rebel with an RPG!

With rebel advances contained in the Eastern Province by the end of 1991, attention turned to politics. After referendum results showed over 90 per cent of voters in the country in favour of a return to multi-party democracy in October, Momoh signed into law a multi-party constitution<sup>69</sup>. Political parties were organised, with many top APC figures quitting the party and forming their own or joining other more credible parties. After Momoh had announced a "Transition Cabinet" dropping many APC old hands and bringing in technocrats to oversee the democratic transition through elections set for later in 1992, these sacked ministers became the most vociferous critics of the government. The war was conveniently placed on the backburner as the politicians and the press went about the business of partisan politics.

In December 1991, a Private Member's motion recommending the declaration of a State of Emergency in the "wartorn" areas to "facilitate a timely and decisive victory" by giving

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<sup>69</sup>Recommendations for a new constitution were made by the Peter Tucker Commission to the government. The recommendations formed the basis of a new constitution under which the country was to hold elections later in 1992. Critics charged that the Peter Tucker recommendations were "mutilated" by the APC, and the new constitution, although pluralist, was flawed. Interview with Cyril Foray, 1992.



the Army sufficient teeth to pursue "rebel collaborators all over the country"<sup>70</sup> was defeated in parliament, even though prominent public figures and critics of the APC like Cyril Foray supported it. Opposition MP, Osman Kamara, of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) appeared to have spoken for most when he said that the APC would abuse the Emergency by using it to clampdown on opposition politicians "as had happened in recent past"<sup>71</sup>. The mouthpiece of one opposition party, the National Democratic Party (NDP), the New Breed, even accused Momoh of plotting to "prolong" the war in order to delay the elections planned for June 1992<sup>72</sup>. The article created much sensation at the time, and the paper was forced to apologise after it was established that a number of those it named to have attended the "meeting" were not even in the country at the time<sup>73</sup>.

At least two of the country's leading newspapers expressed the fear that the politicking was going too far. In an editorial "Getting Our Priorities Right", the New Citizen (9 December, 1991) warned that "Sierra Leoneans have allowed the euphoria of multi-party politics to blind their eyes to the realities of a possible catastrophe". And called for "all other activities to be shelved so as to allow government put in all its resources to bring this horrible war to a close". Hammering on the same theme, the Vision, which even campaigned to have the referendum postponed, warned about the "danger in not heeding the warning (that politics

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<sup>70</sup>"Government to Declare Emergency to Contain War?", New Citizen 16 December 1991.

<sup>71</sup>Ibid.

<sup>72</sup>"APC Secret Meeting to Prolong Rebel War?", New Breed, 19 December 1992.

<sup>73</sup>See New Shaft, 2 March, 1992.

might overtake the war) because if we don't...we might well get the rude and brutal shock just when we are in the middle of the fun. Guerrillas are an unpredictable element..."<sup>74</sup>.

Momoh himself got mired in the political manoeuvrings. The government was spending about Le.250 million each month on the army in the form of pay, rations and other support, but much of this was not getting to the frontline troops. Apparently, funds were being embezzled by senior officers<sup>75</sup>. By April 1992, frontline troops had gone for three months without pay. One group of soldiers led by 26-year old Lieutenant Solomon Musa abandoned their positions at the Eastern Front and descended on the capital on 29 April 1992. They were heavily armed and quickly took State House. By mid-day the mutiny escalated into a coup and President Momoh fled to Guinea. The coup makers announced that they had formed a junta, the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC) with a 27-year old army paymaster, Captain Valentine Strasser, as leader. The junta announced its aim to be to expeditiously end the war, rehabilitate the country and return it to civilian rule. Thus opened another chapter in the unravelling of the Sierra Leonean state.

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<sup>74</sup>"Politics and War", Vision 17-24 October 1991.

<sup>75</sup>Koroma, Agony. 149.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### ANARCHY OR WAR?

One could easily conclude that if some of our people were motivated and convinced enough that Sierra Leone is worth fighting for, the rebels would not have penetrated the heartland of the country with the rapidity with which they did. In some areas, whole villages were occupied by a mere handful of rebels for no other purpose than the fact that nobody was prepared to fight back<sup>1</sup>.

By the time the NPRC took over State House in April 1992, the war had been raging for just over one year and the destruction was already immense. Whole towns in the southern and eastern provinces had been razed to the ground, the number of refugees fleeing from Sierra Leone to Guinea alone had amounted to 120,000<sup>2</sup>. As the war-affected areas were the most productive in terms of agriculture (the Eastern Province is traditionally Sierra Leone's bread basket), the food situation in much of the country was becoming desperate. The brutalities associated with the war, the hacking of hands and limbs, rape, all forms of torture and even cannibalism, frequently reported in the country's lively tabloids, were causing a

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<sup>1</sup>"Sierra Leone should come first", New Citizen, 16 December 1991.

<sup>2</sup>Koroma, ibid., 147.

demoralisation in the nation's citizenry difficult to describe<sup>3</sup>. The war had seemingly settled into a self-destructive stalemate from which a breakthrough was impossible.

About four months before the coup, the respected editor of the New Citizen newspaper, Ibrahim Ben Kargbo, wrote a "commentary" in his paper focusing on the tragedy of a nation being torn apart by "the machinations of heartless armed bandits from a foreign country". His language was dark. He spoke about a nation being bled to death, of whole families being torn apart, of gruesome savagery, barbarism and terror.

But actually Kargbo was not writing about the war per se. He uses it merely to make a point. The editor was bemoaning the crucial absence of "that extra something (in the Sierra Leonean) which makes the man decide to fight and die for his fatherland".

One could easily conclude that if some of our people were motivated and convinced enough that Sierra Leone is worth fighting for, the rebels would not have penetrated the heartland of our country with the rapidity with which they did. In some areas, whole villages were occupied by a mere handful of rebels

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<sup>3</sup>The extent of the demoralisation was sharply felt at FBC, where I was a student at the time. Most of the students, particularly those staying at the student hostels, came from the provinces, quite a good number from the war-affected areas. In the first three months after the war began, two students who had gone on vacation and were caught up in the fighting were reported executed by the rebels. Another FBC student, Mustapha Brima, escaped capture and gave an eye-witness account of the gruesome murder of the two students and other atrocities committed by the rebels at a general meeting of students in May 1991. The execution of the students appeared to have been linked to a statement issued by the National Union of Sierra Leone Students (NUSS) in April condemning the rebel incursions and the brutalities associated with their campaigns. A deep sense of tragedy pervaded the campuses as students from the areas affected by the fighting realised that they could no longer go home, with these areas vandalised, their parents killed or displaced and the rebels still very much active in the areas.

for no other purpose than the fact that nobody was prepared to fight back"<sup>4</sup>.

The writer was arguing that with enough patriotism even unarmed peasants would be able to resist the ragtag rebels who were terrorising them and destroying their homes. This attitude was pretty common at the time. Many Sierra Leoneans were contemptuous of the rebels, who they regarded as mercenary bands of ruffians who should be hunted down and exterminated as threats to the very notion of society. The fact that this wasn't happening quickly enough was itself a source of demoralisation. The soldiers however thought the problem lay elsewhere.

The first post-coup broadcast by Captain Strasser spoke about "the patriotic officers and men of the Sierra Leone Armed Forces" coming together to rid the nation of "an oppressive, corrupt, exploitative and tribalistic bunch of crooks and traitors under the umbrella of the APC government". It was held that the Momoh administration had "failed the nation woefully" in terms of the "permanent poverty" it had inflicted on Sierra Leoneans and its inability to rid the country of the marauding rebels<sup>5</sup>.

Sierra Leone's vigorously anti-APC press hailed Strasser and his men as "redeemers" who had successfully launched "The Glorious Revolution"<sup>6</sup>. But in a more reflective mood Strasser revealed that his motivation was much more self-serving, charging Momoh of neglecting him and his men at the front and thus helping to prolong the war. He spoke about Momoh's failure

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<sup>4</sup>"Sierra Leone Should Come First", New Citizen 16 December, 1991.

<sup>5</sup>See West Africa, 11-17 May, 1992.

<sup>6</sup>See Siaka Massaquoi, The Glorious Revolution (Freetown, 1992).

"to give us the necessary support", that "there was no communications (sic), we were forced to use 1962 mortars, almost all of the missiles couldn't fire". Speaking about his own painful experiences after he was wounded at the front, he continued:

We thought that it was unfair for our soldiers to be out there at the front and when he (sic) is wounded or becomes a casualty, he cannot receive the kind of treatment he deserves. And so I said to myself, this cannot be allowed to go on, besides, when we look around we see those who are responsible for the situation live big, riding flashy cars, going around on spending sprees, expensive travels abroad and allowing us to live like second class citizens. We felt very terrible about this<sup>7</sup>.

The poor logistic capability of Sierra Leone's army had become legendary long before the NPRC seized power. A foreign newspaper correspondent who stopped by briefly in Freetown in January 1992 observed sarcastically that because the army lacked even rudimentary communications equipment, orders and messages were exchanged between frontline commanders by use of runners "as they did during the Trojan War"<sup>8</sup>. But from his new base in Guinea, Momoh indignantly challenged Strasser's charges:

...my government made available to the Army the huge sum of 250 million leones each month for rations, medicaments, petroleum products and spare parts for the prosecution of the war. Further, because of their unceasing

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<sup>7</sup>"We Need Urgent Help", West Africa, 15-21 June 1992.

<sup>8</sup>"Wake Up and It's Still There", New Shaft 29 January 1992.

demands for ammunition (sic), my government spent large sums of money, in foreign exchange, to purchase ammunition for the Army. Sadly, it has now turned out that instead of using this ammunition for the purpose for which it was intended, it (sic) was being stockpiled by these officers to be used for the illegal purpose of seizing power<sup>9</sup>.

No doubt most of the supplies sent to the front were routinely embezzled by senior military officers and Momoh, mired in politics fighting desperately to keep his party together in the face of massive defections following the lifting of the ban on political activities, was not sufficiently attentive to take action. But the force of about 100 mutinous soldiers which took Freetown on 29 April displaying rocket launchers, heavy machine guns and even anti-aircraft guns, could hardly be described as ill-equipped<sup>10</sup>. What ever concern the young soldiers had for the plight of their country under the lacklustre leadership of Momoh, self-interest seems to have been the bigger motivation. Indeed Strasser himself admitted in an interview with the London Observer that he joined the army primarily to make a coup<sup>11</sup>.

The coup was marked by widespread looting of homes of politicians and businessmen, and the NPRC later claimed that they were able to retrieve Le.41 billion in local and foreign currencies hidden in the homes of ex-ministers and senior APC functionaries. In the home of

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<sup>9</sup>"Momoh Answers Strasser", West Africa, 29 June-5 July 1992.

<sup>10</sup>Author's notes. The heavily-armed soldiers took the city by storm, and from all appearances, they were well prepared to battle any resistance to their coup. In fact, the takeover resembled more a military conquest than a mutiny turned coup. Heavy gun fire and looting continued throughout the first, to the second, day of the coup.

<sup>11</sup>Ann Busby, "The Quiet Coup of Captain Valentine", The Observer 9 August 1992.

one particularly avaricious and scheming minister, Abdulai Conteh, the NPRC claimed to have discovered over a million U.S. dollars and several hundreds of millions of leones in suitcases<sup>12</sup>. But in spite of assurances from the junta's spokesman, Lt. Karefa Kargbo, these monies were never accounted for to the public. Instead, Sierra Leoneans were treated to flamboyant displays of wealth by members of the junta in the form of the importation of new four-wheel drive vehicles, Mercedes Benz cars and other marks of a lavish lifestyle. One NPRC officer is reported to have incurred bills at a local hotel amounting to Le.786,000 in a week in the first weeks of the coup<sup>13</sup>. Newspapers reporting such excesses had their editors harassed. It was evident that the "revolution" was straying right from its conception.

Still, the coup seemed to have offered prospects for ending the war. In the first week of the coup, at least two RUF spokesmen broadcast messages through the BBC announcing a ceasefire and a readiness to work with the junta in the interest of peace and reconstruction. A ceasefire at the front reportedly held for well over a week after the coup. But the NPRC appeared to have had little regard for the rebels who were dismissed by Strasser as "bandits sent by Charles Taylor" to wreak havoc on the country<sup>14</sup>. Many of the leading NPRC figures, including its powerful Secretary General John Benjamin, hailed from the southern and eastern parts of the country, areas that had suffered heavily at the hands of the rebels, and

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<sup>12</sup>Africa Analysis, 29 May, 1992.

<sup>13</sup>For Di People, 27 November 1992.

<sup>14</sup>Massaquoi, The Glorious Revolution.4.



revenge may have been the motive behind this hardline stance. The NPRC also seemed to have believed that the rebels, confined to small swaths of territories in the Kailahun district, could be hunted down and crushed if the fighting forces were given adequate support. This they set about doing by importing sophisticated weaponry and communications equipment from Belgium and Romania, largely in exchange for diamonds<sup>15</sup>. In response to the RUF's call for dialogue, Strasser offered an amnesty in return for unconditional surrender, a virtual non-starter since the rebels considered the NPRC coup as a by-product of their "struggle" and therefore argued that their participation in the junta was imperative<sup>16</sup>. As Richards has noted, the RUF seemed to have totally underestimated the impact of its "unopposed mercenary terror on civilian attitudes in the war zone"<sup>17</sup>, and indeed in the country as a whole.

The NPRC coup was widely popular with the country's youth. Most of the coup leaders themselves grew up in Freetown's slums, a fact which helped them to understand early enough the value of youth mobilization and anti-corruption campaigns against the country's elites—the so-called "system men". A highly successful clean-up campaign organised, on every Saturday, in Freetown and other cities and towns across the country was the beginning of this process of youth mobilization. It later crystallised into a creative youth movement for the "beautification" of the capital and other cities by paintings of colourful pictures on walls and

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<sup>15</sup>"Revolution in Crisis?", West Africa, 7 December 1992.

<sup>16</sup>See RUF\SL, Footpaths to Democracy.

<sup>17</sup>Richards, Fighting for the Rainforest.12.

regular volunteer work in cleaning and repairing of some public spaces<sup>18</sup>. This "Ecstatic Renovation", as Opala dubbed it, seems to have severely undercut any potential support the RUF might have had from the country's marginalised youth population with whom they, as well as the NPRC, could claim a clear affinity<sup>19</sup>.

More important for the war was the mass mobilization of "Youth Volunteers" or "irregulars" in the war affected areas who received a week or two of training before being asked to battle the rebels. The hope was that knowledge of the local terrain and strong motivation, to liberate their villages and seek revenge, would compensate for lack of training.

The tactic of using such volunteers to fight the rebels predated the NPRC, however. Many of the Liberian irregulars who formed themselves into the factional army, ULIMO, including particularly their feared teenage commandos, were volunteers who were motivated by a desire for revenge against the NPFL which had destroyed their relatives and homes. The exploits of one such commando, simply called JUNIOR, a 13-year old boy, became legendary in Sierra Leone. An indigenous Sierra Leonean experiment was begun shortly after the war reached a stalemate in the Eastern Province in 1991 when a young officer, Captain Prince Benjamin-Hirsch recruited most of the idle young men and diamond miners in the area around Segbwema into a strong force known as the "Airborne Division". In this way, he was able to deny the RUF its potential support from the youth of the diamond fields alienated from the

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<sup>18</sup>Joseph Opala, "'Ecstatic Renovation!': Street Art Celebrating Sierra Leone's 1992 Revolution" (*African Affairs*, 93, 1994, 195-218).

<sup>19</sup>For a discussion of the sociological background of the RUF and the NPRC, see Ibrahim Abdullah, "Lumpen Youth Culture in Post-Colonial Sierra Leone: A Research Agenda" (Unpublished paper, 1996); also, Ismail Rashid, "Lumpen Youths and Student Radicals in Sierra Leone 1986-1996" (Unpublished paper, 1996).

state and virtually in a state of permanent rebellion against it. The area remained relatively free of rebel attacks until Benjamin-Hirsch himself was murdered by his own enemies in the army in October 1991. He is believed to have been a principal source of inspiration for the NPRC coup makers<sup>20</sup>.

The NPRC's new youth volunteer force contained many children, who were orphaned when the RUF rebels murdered their parents. By early 1993, over 1,000 boys under 15 years of age, some as young as seven, were reported to have been enlisted in the force<sup>21</sup>. It was only after persistent protest from rights monitoring groups like the London-based Amnesty International that the NPRC announced in June 1993 that these children were to be demobilised, a policy that took over a year to implement<sup>22</sup>.

But the fighting that broke out not long after the NPRC takeover saw major reverses for the junta. In June 1992, the RUF had captured Gandorhun, a diamond mining town from where forays could be made against the regional centre of Koidu, a city with an estimated

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<sup>20</sup>Richards, Fighting for the Rainforest.9.

<sup>21</sup>Amnesty International, "Sierra Leone: Prisoners of War? Children Detained in Barracks and Prison". 12 August 1993.

<sup>22</sup>The issue of child combatants became particularly controversial after the NPRC summarily executed 29 alleged coup plotters in December 1992, some of them in prison at the time the plot was reported foiled, and thereby help draw international attention to its human rights record. A special institution, Children Associated with War (CAW), was set up with funding from the Catholic Relief Services and UNICEF, to help rehabilitate the demobilised children. Psychiatrist Dr. Sahr Matturi was placed in charge of a branch of the institution in Bo, and another psychiatrist, Dr. Nahim, took over the one in Freetown. But quite a few children remained under arms in the fighting zones as "special" body guards of senior military officers until the signing of the Peace Accord in 1996. See issues of For Di People, December 1996.

population of 200,000<sup>23</sup>. Soldiers in Koidu appeared to have been busy mining diamonds when the rebels struck there in October 1992. The attack seemed to have been well-planned. Some of the rebels had infiltrated the town to reconnoitre and take strategic positions at least a month before the attack. Survivors reported seeing their former work-mates, friends and seemingly innocent residents firing AK 47 rifles and directing rebel movements in the town on the fateful day of the attack. Panic broke out as a result in the heavily populated town, with the soldiers stationed there taking the lead in running away.

It was a humanitarian crisis of gruesome proportions. The mass exodus of people, young and old, jammed the main exit road from the town to safer areas, like Makeni, in the Northern Province. Exhausted mothers abandoned their babies along the way; hardly any fled with possessions of any worth; and when all was over, hundreds lay dead. The town came under the control of the RUF<sup>24</sup>.

The capture of the principal town in Sierra Leone's premiere mining district was seen as a national tragedy, and it helped push the reality of the national carnage into every home in the country. Kono district accounted for over 60 per cent of the country's export earnings. Henceforth the war ceased to be seen as a purely "South-Eastern affair"<sup>25</sup>. The image of the NPRC as "gallant soldiers" was very badly seared too. Freetown's vocal press speculated that

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<sup>23</sup>A.K.Koroma, Agony. 180.

<sup>24</sup>For details of the RUF attack on Koidu, see ibid. 180-182.

<sup>25</sup>For comments on this "perplexing attitude", see "Tribalism: We Stand by Our Comments", Vision 6-13 November 1992.

these setbacks came about because most of the "gallant soldiers" were now away from the front, having taken positions in government, and therefore morale of the army was affected<sup>26</sup>. As a result, most of the NPRC officers announced that they were now leading the troops at the front in an operation they code named "Genesis"<sup>27</sup>. A detachment of troops led by the Deputy Defence Minister, Lt. Komba Mondeh, recaptured Gandorhun before the end of October. Koidu town itself was retaken after a fierce battle in which many civilians were killed. The soldiers then began to punitive actions against prominent Kono residents who were held to have collaborated with the rebels. The Paramount Chief, S.G. Fania, and other officials were arrested and detained at Pademba Road Prison. Another Paramount Chief, Songo-Mbriwa, died after he was severely tortured<sup>28</sup>.

Abdul Karim Koroma, a former APC foreign minister, has criticised the NPRC for what he feels were unjust persecution of "prominent Kono citizens"<sup>29</sup>. But the evidence suggests

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<sup>26</sup>See For Di People, 16 December 1992; Vision, 14-21 January 1993.

<sup>27</sup>See Vision, 7 March 1993.

<sup>28</sup>All these chiefs were former key supporters of the APC in Kono, and it is probable that they were specifically targeted because of that. Also probable is the fact that they might have cooperated with the rebels to wipe out the NPRC soldiers who were busy at the time of the rebel attack indiscriminately mining diamonds without due regard to the chiefs who claimed ownership of the land. The case of Chief Gborie was even more controversial. He was reported to have shot dead a senior NPRC soldier, Major Sankoh, who, the government's own Daily Mail reported, was found raping the chief's wife. For this report, the editor, George Khoryama, was promptly arrested and detained. He was later dismissed, and charged to court for sedition. See Daily Mail (14 November, 1992).

<sup>29</sup>Koroma, Agony.181.

that quite a good number of these "prominent citizens", disaffected by the NPRC's own cavalier forays into the district's rich diamond deposits, cooperated with the rebels for personal benefit<sup>30</sup>. One of them, Chief Konomanyi, left with the rebels to become their "Vice President" though he defected in 1995<sup>31</sup>.

"Operation Genesis" successfully pushed back the rebels from all of Kono district into the far east of the country, their original base, Kailahun district<sup>32</sup>. But Koidu town was to be retaken later, in 1993. This time again, NPRC soldiers were busy mining diamonds when the rebels struck at the town and took it<sup>33</sup>. The war had become a see-saw conflict with towns

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<sup>30</sup>See Reno, Corruption and State Politics in Sierra Leone. 175.

<sup>31</sup>Konomanyi's case was very controversial. He was "abducted" along with an American Red Cross worker, Micheal O'Neill. O'Neill was released a few weeks later, whereupon he called a press conference in Freetown providing clear, if highly coloured, descriptions of RUF camps. He described the RUF as an organised bush insurgent movement with youth-oriented training programmes, a claim which was understood to be a propaganda shot for the RUF and which generated a heated argument at the meeting (author's note, November 1992). He confirmed that Konomanyi was alive and was working with the RUF as a kind of liaison officer between Sankoh and captives from the Kono area. Later a captured rebel, Aiah Fengal, confirmed the report, stating that Konomanyi was even moving around without security. He was held as the RUF's number two. He later surfaced in Ivory Coast in 1995 and through the efforts of a senior NPRC official, Komba Mondeh (a fellow Kono), he was brought to Freetown as a RUF captive who had escaped.

<sup>32</sup>See Vision, 14-21 July 1993.

<sup>33</sup>The recapture of the town by the rebels almost coincided with reports that Strasser had flown secretly out of the country with 435 carats of diamonds, found by his men in Kono, and had sold them for 43 million dollars. The report was first carried by a Swedish tabloid, Expressen, and was later reproduced by the New Breed (13-19 October, 1993) newspaper in Freetown. Strasser denied the report and had the editors of the paper detained for a long period, during which time the paper closed down.

changing hands with dizzying rapidity. Popular euphoria for the "revolution" was waning rapidly. Worse yet for the junta, the summary execution of 29 people alleged to have plotted a coup in December 1992 continued to draw adverse international outrage, and a suspension of aid by the country's former colonial master, Britain<sup>34</sup>

Martin van Creveld has postulated that low-intensity conflicts, that is internal wars of the nature of the RUF rebellion, will cause the obliteration of "social entities". He suggests that to the extent that states are social entities with distinction between civilian and soldiers, combatants and non combatants, then states engaged in such wars will self-destruct because such distinctions would be impossible to maintain in the course of such wars. Combatants on both sides, the insurgents and "government soldiers", are pretty likely to behave the same way, targeting civilians rather than armed opponents, and engaging in banditry. "War being among the most imitative of all human activities", Creveld wrote, "the very process of combating low-intensity conflicts will cause both sides to look alike, unless it can be brought to quick end"<sup>35</sup>.

Creveld's fears appeared to have been realised in Sierra Leone by the end of 1993, but in a more sinister way than even he, with his brutally realistic notion of war, could perhaps

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<sup>34</sup>Author's notes.

<sup>35</sup>Creveld, The Transformation of War, 225.

imagine. NPRC soldiers, with the aid of the irregulars, had recaptured Kailahun, Koindu and even Pendenbu, the rebels' "headquarters" which Strasser visited in June 1993<sup>36</sup>. Sankoh himself was rumoured to have been shot and wounded during the attack on Pendembu, and eye-witnesses reported seeing a small, battered convoy of vehicles leaving Kailahun, loaded with RUF leaders and their effects and heading towards Liberia<sup>37</sup>. The RUF itself has admitted that at this stage "frankly, we were beaten and on the run", so "we dispersed into small units...destroyed all our vehicles and heavy weapons...and moved deeper into the comforting bosom of mother earth-the forest"<sup>38</sup>. In December 1993, Strasser announced a ceasefire and called on the remaining rebels to surrender<sup>39</sup>.

But barely a month later, the war escalated to a point never before imagined. The rebels recaptured Koindu (in the Kailahun district), moved on to take Kono district and threatened

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<sup>36</sup>Strasser's flight to Pendembu was given maximum publicity by the junta as evidence that the NPRC had finally won the war against the RUF. The town itself was empty at the time, with residents who had been held captive by the RUF having fled to the bush to avoid persecution at the hands of Strasser's reputedly brutal troops who always considered civilians living in "rebel territory" collaborators. A good number of civilians who were later discovered living in the bush and who appeared "well-fed" (taken as evidence of working with the rebels, and therefore getting access to their controlled food supplies) were executed by the troops (Interview with survivors in Kenema, January 1994).

<sup>37</sup>Richards, Fighting for the Rainforest, 13.

<sup>38</sup>Footpaths to Democracy. 11.

<sup>39</sup>The announcement was believed to have been influenced by Western donor countries anxious to see a negotiated settlement to the war and a serious beginning of a transition to civil rule process. In the speech in which Strasser announced the ceasefire, he also gave details of a long, meticulous transition process beginning with the setting up of an Interim Electoral Commission.



Bo, the second most important city in the country. Two reasons account for the renewal of the war at this stage. The first was that the ceasefire coincided with the annual Zone Two soccer festival, a hugely popular event which brings together soccer teams from other West African countries, and which was held in Freetown that year. Many of Strasser's troops, convinced that the war was over, abandoned their positions at the front to watch the matches, and thus provided an opportunity for the rebels to regroup and launch deadly offensives<sup>40</sup>. The other was that Strasser's forces, particularly the irregulars who were not receiving salary and stood no chance of being coopted into the army, felt betrayed by their superiors as a reinvirogated RUF overwhelmed previously liberated areas where they were beginning to resettle. They may have resorted to banditry or even joined the RUF in frustration. Also, in February 1994, over 400 disgruntled soldiers believed to be loyal to Major Yayah Kanu, who was executed by the NPRC in 1992 for allegedly plotting a coup, absconded from the Teko Barracks in the north of the country and were reportedly absorbed in the RUF<sup>41</sup>. Military

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<sup>40</sup>See Lorda Mercy, February 1994. This paper was published underground, by opponents of the junta and was distributed by post freely to selected targets, including registered newspapers, government officials and the diplomatic community. It was highly informative and was believed to be produced by journalists whose papers were closed down by a set of strident press guidelines announced in January 1993 by the NPRC information minister Hindolo Trye. Former APC members, including its vice-president Abdulai Conteh, who was then living in the Gambia, was also believed to be linked to the paper.

<sup>41</sup>The government vehemently denied this when the report of the defections became public, but relatives of some of the soldiers at the barracks, interviewed by the present writer (April 1994) could not account for their whereabouts. Major Kanu was a hugely popular officer under whose command most of the NPRC leaders served. A Momoh loyalist, Kanu was invited by NPRC leaders on the day of their mutiny-turn-coup to be their leader but, in an interview with the BBC that day, he dissociated himself from the coupists. He was arrested immediately after and detained at the Pademba Roads Prison. He was still there when the NPRC announced they had foiled a coup in December 1992 and had him executed as part of the plot.

disloyalty may also have been helped by the NPRC's summary retirement of the army's 12 most senior officers, including the Chief of Staff, Major General Jusu Gottor, and their replacement by far junior officers. Major Kellie Conteh, an articulate, but untested young officer and a friend of Strasser, was made Chief of Staff and quickly promoted to brigadier. There then followed a spate of promotions which saw NPRC officers rising from the ranks of captains to colonels, and one, Captain Julius Maada Bio, even to brigadier.

The RUF, no doubt aided by these disloyal soldiers, soon began to raid and set ambushes along the major highways in the country, indiscriminately burning down villages and towns, and taking hostages. They thereby created the impression of great power which was vastly disproportional to their actual strength. There also appeared little doubt that in the atmosphere of general insecurity and even chaos in the war-affected areas, groups of bandits (civilians) imitated rebel tactics, carrying out their own attacks on the highway for loot. During this period (that is 1994) there was a sharp drop in armed robbery and other forms of thievery in Bo, the "professionals" having found richer pickings in the more unstable areas of eastern Sierra Leone<sup>42</sup>.

The involvement of soldiers in this new wave of attacks gave rise to a new phenomenon called "sobels", that is, soldiers by day and rebels by night. They became perhaps the most important element in the war. In October 1994, one Freetown newspaper described the war as characterised by "naked banditry, the principal characters being undisciplined soldiers and

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<sup>42</sup>Interview with Bo residents and police, December 1994. It also appeared that most of illegal bars ('ghettoes') where marijuana was smoked were derelict during this period.

unpatriotic Sierra Leoneans"<sup>43</sup>. It was against this background that another set of volunteers emerged, or at any rate grew in importance: the Tamaboros and the Kamajoisia.

The Tamaboro "battalion" was organised towards the end of 1992 under the patronage of a senior NPRC officer, Lt. Komba Kambo. They were a group of traditional hunters from the mountainous Koinadugu district, an area known for occultism. Kambo, himself from the district, is believed to have had his body "washed" (to make it bullet-proof) by a powerful medicine man and ex-politician in the area, Daembaso Samura. The operation was believed to have been so successful that Kambo was convinced about Samura's supernatural powers. He decided to use it in the war effort by pleading with the old man to form a group made up of people like him to help track down the rebels and counteract their perceived special powers. This was how the Tamaboro "battalion" came to be set up<sup>44</sup>.

"Tama" in both Madingo and Koranko, the two linked ethnic groups from which the Tamaboro sprang, mean "to lead" and "boro" literally mean "bag". Put together, it could mean literally "bag that leads" which would imply the use of occult powers<sup>45</sup>. In fact the Tamaboros, whose duties were essentially those of scouts although they participated in

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<sup>43</sup>Editorial, Unity Now, 24 October 1994.

<sup>44</sup>Interview with Tamaboro leader Marie Keita, February 1993.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid.

combat, were a witchcraft "battalion". Samura put together the group but the actual battlefield leader appeared to have been Marie Keita, a fearsome looking woman who always held a mirror as a guide to the rebels' positions. Another powerful woman among the group was "Lieutenant" Willimina Bintu Fofana, who was said to have been a formidable specialist at the use of the Rocket Propelled Grenade (RPG). The prominence of women in the Tamaboro was a cause of fascination for the country's press which clearly exaggerated the impact of the group on the conduct of the war<sup>46</sup>. When in March 1993 the army's sixth battalion led by Kambo and another powerful NPRC figure, Lt. Tom Nyuma, recaptured Woama, a strategic town seven miles from Koidu and a rebel training base, this victory was held to have been achieved because of the lead provided by the Tamaboros<sup>47</sup>.

The instant popularity of the Tamaboros became a cause for friction between them and members of the regular army. In June 1993, 30 soldiers were arrested at Masingbi in the Tonkolili district in the rebel-free northern province for deserting the front and engaging in banditry in the area posing as RUF members. The operation was spearheaded by the Tamaboros<sup>48</sup>. So successfully had operations against the rebels at this time been that Nyuma boasted that "the rebels are now in complete disarray with no clear command structure"<sup>49</sup>, a claim that was to prove disastrously misleading. The Tamaboro "battalion" was disbanded

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<sup>46</sup>See for example Vision (4 February 1993) "The War: Women take the Lead".

<sup>47</sup>Ibid.

<sup>48</sup>"30 Soldiers Arrested", Vision 22 June-1 July 1993.

<sup>49</sup>New Breed 19-25 May 1993.

in October 1993 when the rebels, believed to have been aided by regular army units, surprisingly took Kabala where they were based and brutally murdered Samura and Keita. They were said to have been stabbed and clubbed to death because the bullets couldn't penetrate their body<sup>50</sup>.

Another irregular volunteer group that was to have a more lasting impact on the war against the rebels had by then emerged. This was the Kamajoisia "battalion" which was initially set up by the Eastern Region Defence Committee (EREDCOM) formed by Alpha Lavalie, a former University history lecturer, on 7 December 1992. A Sierra Leonean anthropologist and linguist, Patrick Muana, has provided an interesting account of the origin and character of the Kamajoisia in a forthcoming publication titled "Civil War, Internal Displacement and the Politics of Counter-insurgency: The Kamajoi Militia in Sierra Leone". What comes out of Muana's account is a combination of esoteric influences and the stark choice which these local, mostly villagers faced between taking up arms to reclaim their land, in a world in which they found they were on their own with the nation's army perceived to be either incompetent or in collusion with the enemy, or remain in horrible displaced camps forever.

"Kamajoi" is a Mende word meaning hunter, and the hunter in traditional Mende society carried with him the traditions of a warrior cult in which he is the guardian of his society. Founders of pre-colonial Mende towns were often famous warriors and hunters, and were masters of esoteric skills. Their fame rested on driving out the natural "lords of the forest", the elephants, and so securing space for the building of settlements which it was their duty to

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<sup>50</sup>This perhaps was part of the lingering myth surrounding the group, but a soldier who said he survived the attack on Kabala confirmed it to me (December 1993).

protect. It is an exclusively male thing<sup>51</sup>. According to Muana's sources, the Kamajoisia as a fighting force against the RUF and the Sobels emerged in this fascinating way:

Following an RUF attack on a village in the Jong (Jenge) chiefdom, the rebels are reported to have massacred people in the village including a great "kamajoi" and medicine man called Kposowai. His brother Kundorwai, is said to have been captured by the rebels, forced to carry looted goods and tied ("tabay") securely for the night whilst the rebels pitched camp. As he drifted to sleep in spite of his pains, Kundorwai is said to have had a vision of his brother who had been killed the day before. The rope fell loose and the elder brother invested him with the authority to take the message to all able-bodied Mende men that the defence of their own lives, homes, wives and children were a sacred duty. To assist them in that task, Kposowai is said to have shown Kundorwai a secret concoction of herbs and instructed that a strident initiation process should precede the "washing" of the warriors in the herbs. This concoction would make them invincible in battle, impervious to bullets, endow with powers of clairvoyance if all taboos are kept. Kundorwai is said to have then slaughtered the RUF rebels, freed the other captives, and trekked several miles to a secret hiding place where he initiated the first set of men<sup>52</sup>.

This mystical origin may have been ascribed to the Kamajoisia by its leaders in order to

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<sup>51</sup>See Mary Leach, Rainforest Relations: Gender and Resource Use Among the Mende of Gola, Sierra Leone (Washington, Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994.161-167.

<sup>52</sup>Muana, "Civil War, Internal Displacement, and the Politics of Counter-insurgency: the Kamajoi Militia in Sierra Leone" (Unpublished Manuscript, Sheffield 1996).

achieve the requisite psychological clout to effectively confront the RUF rebels who were themselves claiming a posture of invincibility. The significance of this initiation should therefore not be exaggerated. The Kamajoisia has a well organised command structure and are trained in the use of modern weaponry, but members still draw on the ancestral spirit and knowledge of a putative hunters guild<sup>53</sup>.

The Kamajoisia clashed with NPRC soldiers on a number of occasions in Kenema and in early 1993, the Kamajoi leader Alpha Lavalie himself was killed when his car hit a landmine believed to have been set by hostile soldiers who objected to his high-profile involvement in the war<sup>54</sup>. The murder of Lavalie was a set back for the budding militia. Members of EREDCOM, prominent among whom was Dr. Albert Joe Demby who was later to become the nation's vice-president, however continued to garner support for the Kamajoisia. In March 1994, over 500 Kamajoisia fighters were deployed at the war-front in Kenema and Kailahun

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<sup>53</sup>See Paul Richards et al, "Reintegration of War-Affected Youths and Ex-Combatants: A Study of Social and Economic Opportunity Structure in Sierra Leone", Report to the Ministry of National Reconstruction (6 December, 1996). Unpublished mimeo (in author's possession).

<sup>54</sup>The murder of Lavalie created considerable controversy in the country, with many believing that he was killed by soldiers. There was a military post very close to where he was killed, and in any case, rebels were not active in the area. Lavalie's men had apprehended a number of soldiers in recent weeks for looting villagers. In spite of repeated calls by the press for an investigation, the NPRC refused to set up a commission of inquiry to investigate the killing. This created further friction between the army and the militia group. In January 1994, the people of Kenema instituted Poro, the Mende secret society for men, to eradicate "people with evil intention" in the town. They subsequently arrested 25 "rebel suspects", including some soldiers, and had them detained. This triggered an open battle in the town between the Kamajoisia and soldiers in which a number of people were killed and a popular motel which soldiers frequented, Bracadi, was burnt down. The confusion was settled after a visit by a high-profile NPRC delegation led by John Benjamin, the Secretary-General. (See "The Kenema tragedy: How it happened and why", *Vision*, 3-10 March, 1994").

districts<sup>55</sup>.

A similar experiment was begun shortly after Lavalie's death by a retired army officer, Captain Hinga Norman, who had been appointed regent chief of Jaiama Bongor chiefdom in the Bo district. But on 30 June 1994, a large force of rebels and renegade soldiers from the Army Brigade in Koribondo descended on the Jaiama Bongor chiefdom headquarter town, Telu, slaughtered all the Kamajoi recruits and set the town ablaze. Over 100 people were killed in the attack. Norman, who was then in the town, escaped miraculously<sup>56</sup>.

Various local defence activities appeared through 1994 and 1995 but it was not until 1996, after Hinga Norman became deputy-minister of defence in the elected civilian government that a more coordinated effort made to recruit, train and arm the Kamajoisia all over the southern and eastern provinces developed. The aim was to create a civil defence capability for every war-affected Mende chiefdom.

The Kamajoisia launched an offensive against the rebels in September 1996, capturing Zogoda, the RUF's last remaining stronghold, and helped force the movement to sign a Peace Agreement in 1996.

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<sup>55</sup>Vision 31 March-7 April 1994.

<sup>56</sup>The NPRC's resident minister in the south, Captain Idrissa Kamara, later arrived in the town with a TV crew and filmed the destruction. The gruesome picture was shown on national TV to the disadvantage of the NPRC. Telu is about 16 kilometres away from Bo, where minister Kamara was based, and about 7 kilometres from Koribondo, which maintained a large detachment of NPRC troops. The attack on the town therefore seemed to reveal the worthlessness of the junta and its army. In fact, Bo residents speculated about Captain Kamara's involvement in the persistent attacks around the area. He was heavily involved in illicit diamond mining in the area, using soldiers, an activity which was believed to be aided by continuing instability in the area. (Personal communications with Hinga Norman, August 1994).



On 12 March 1994, a pattern for a new wave of senseless killings was established when a rebel group apparently based in the Panguma logging concession area attacked Panguma town and killed at least 11 Sierra Leoneans, an Irish priest, Father Felim McAllister, a Dutch doctor, Dr. Eelco Krijn, his wife, Karen van Goudoever, and their three year-year-old daughter, Zita during a raid near the hospital<sup>57</sup>. The attack was believed to have been facilitated by NPRC soldiers operating under the command of Lt. James Forbie, who feared that Father McAllister, who had lived in the area for a long time, knew too much about the atrocious activities of soldiers. Both Forbie and another soldier, Sergeant Mohammed Jawara, were arrested on the recommendation of a commission set up to investigate the killings and which was chaired by a prominent lawyer, Solomon Berewa<sup>58</sup>. Both men were later released and deployed at the NPRC department of defence on ground of insufficient evidence, a development that did nothing to extricate the NPRC's image from the atrocities.

In April 1994, the first rebel attack in the Northern Province occurred when a group of the insurgents struck at Masingbi and then moved on to sack Makalie, less than 20 miles from the main northern city, Makeni. The attack created a stir in the country with a prominent northern leader, Abass Bundu, who was then the NPRC's foreign minister, declaring that the

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<sup>57</sup>Amnesty International, "Sierra Leone: Human Rights Abuses in War Against Civilians", 13 September 1995.

<sup>58</sup>The findings of the Commission was never made public but Berewa told the present writer (Freetown, January 1995) that they found sufficient evidence to prosecute the two men for the murders.

war "has now reached where it should not", a comment which was interpreted as overly tribalistic by people from the south and east of the country which had already been ravaged by the war<sup>59</sup>. Shortly after this, Makeni exploded into violent confrontation between soldiers guarding the NPRC Resident Minister in the city, Major Fallah Sewa (from the Eastern Province) and residents of the town leading to some civilian casualties. Prominent citizens of the city shortly after announced the setting up of their own local militia with the patronage of Bundu and another prominent northern politician, Thaimu Bangura<sup>60</sup>.

On 5 August 1994, a civilian convoy of vehicles with a military escort was attacked by men in government army uniforms. At least three civilians were shot to death and the assailants stripped and raped the women travellers<sup>61</sup>. Another convoy was attacked on 25 August 1994 between Matotoka and Makalie resulting in the killings of Captain Nasiru Barrie and several civilians<sup>62</sup>. A group of about 100 lightly armed rebels attacked the southern city of Bo in December 1994 but were repulsed by civilians with heavy losses<sup>63</sup>. Reports of

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<sup>59</sup>See Vision editorial, 5-12 May 1994.

<sup>60</sup>See "Makeni tragedy: Why and how it happened", Vision, 5-12 May 1994.

<sup>61</sup>Amnesty International, 13 September 1995.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid.

<sup>63</sup>Author's note. I had the good fortune, or misfortune, of witnessing the Bo attack. Young men in the city spontaneously mobilised and repelled the rebels using sticks, machetes and some shotguns. A number of the rebels were captured and lynched. Citizens of the city, suspecting military complicity in the attack (the soldiers appeared helpless when the rebels struck), imposed a curfew and executed at least two soldiers who violated it. The curfew was monitored by groups of armed young men who instituted road blocks all over the city.

military complicity in these acts of banditry, which was making the junta extremely unpopular, led to the arrest and execution of 12 soldiers, all of them non-commissioned officers, in November 1994. A senior military officer, Lt. Col. Chernor Deen, was later sentenced to death for collaborating with the rebels, a sentence that was never carried out probably because of a threat by Sankoh to execute all the hostages he had captured should that happen<sup>64</sup>.

Terroristic attacks spread throughout the country. On 25 December 1994, government soldiers, acting as rebels, shot and killed a prominent lawyer in Kenema, Patrick P.B. Kebbie. Kebbie had just been appointed Director of Public Prosecutions by the NPRC and his murder was believed to have been connected to this. No official inquiry was conducted into the killings in spite of calls for such by rights monitoring groups<sup>65</sup>. The month before, the RUF abducted two British nationals, Robert d'Cruz and Calum Murray, both volunteers with the Voluntary Services Overseas (VSO) who were working on rural development projects in Kabala. Foday Sankoh then made radio contact with the British High Commission in Freetown demanding arms and recognition of his movement by the British government, a demand that was summarily turned down<sup>66</sup>. Then in January 1995, the country's last remaining economic

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<sup>64</sup>Sankoh made the threat via the BBC African Service. Deen was kept in prison until his release, just after the signing of the Peace Accord, by the elected government-probably as a result of pressure from the RUF.

<sup>65</sup>See Amnesty International, "Sierra Leone: Human Rights Abuses in War Against Civilians", 13 September 1995.

<sup>66</sup>Tim Rayment, "Foreign Office Turns Down Ransom Demand For Hostages", Sunday Times London, 20 November 1994.

stronghold, the bauxite mines at SIEROMCO and the titanium mines at Sierra Rutile, were closed down after the rebels attacked, looted and destroyed the mines allegedly with the active collaboration of the soldiers deployed at the mines headed by Major Johnny Paul Koroma<sup>67</sup>. Goods looted at the mines were later seen with soldiers leading to confrontations between them and the civilian owners. Seven Europeans, including James Westwood and Ross Milne from the SIEROMCO and Peter White and Andrew Young from Sierra Rutile were also abducted by the rebels. Several Sierra Leoneans, including Dr. Mohammed Barrie who later became a public relations officer for the RUF, were also abducted at the two mines. On 25 January, after a vicious attack on Kambia, the RUF abducted seven catholic nuns, six Italians and a Brazilian, along with over 30 school children<sup>68</sup>.

No doubt these hostage takings, of foreigners in particular, were aimed at publicising the RUF's political aims and drawing recognition for the movement as well as creating the impression of the NPRC's total lack of control in the country. The tactic was successful. Pressure began to mount on the NPRC from all quarters to begin negotiations with the rebels,

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<sup>67</sup>The NPRC had refused to allow the companies to bring in their own security, and one of the officials of Sierra Rutile, based in Switzerland, gave an interview to the BBC in February 1995 claiming that the attack was facilitated by the soldiers deployed at the mines, an allegation that was supported by more than two employees of the mines (Sierra Leoneans) interviewed by the present writer (March 1995). Major Johnny Paul Koroma was later (May 1997) to make a coup against the elected government with the active collaboration of the RUF.

<sup>68</sup>Amnesty International, 13 September 1995.

something that had never before been hinted at<sup>69</sup>. The call for dialogue was first made in November 1994 by the Catholic Archbishop of Freetown and Bo, Joseph Ganda, imploring Strasser to "explore the possibility of engaging in dialogue with the rebels in order to end the untold sufferings of helpless people, particularly women and children and the destruction of property throughout the country"<sup>70</sup>.

The NPRC responded by setting up a National Security Council (NSC) comprised of representatives from the government, army, police, the Bar Association, the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ), the Labour Congress and the University of Sierra Leone.

The NSC issued a statement on 25 November calling on the RUF leadership to accept a

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<sup>69</sup>In December 1994, an independent group of concerned citizens from the Pujehun district, led by a well-known politician, Manna Kpaka, met a group of the rebels at the Mano River Bridge to begin exploratory talks. The first meeting went well enough, but during a second meeting, the rebel group leader, Momoh Konneh, abducted his mother from the group (she had been brought to the meeting, from a Displaced Camp where she was living after her home was destroyed in Pujehun, to help in the talks). The government thereafter stopped the group from proceeding further (Author's notes). Many indigenous independent peace initiatives were also launched, one of which, led by Omrie Golley, a controversial lawyer and former associate of the NPRC, actually met Foday Sankoh in his forest enclaves and established contacts with the rebels. But he was summarily denounced by the NPRC as a "rebel collaborator". A group of women peace activists in the Eastern Province who ventured "mothers, sisters and husbands" into the RUF forest enclaves in Kailahun district to induce them to ceasefire was abducted; all were executed by the rebels. The proliferation of such controversial local peace initiatives created a situation which the Organisation of African Unity Secretary General, Salim Ahmad Salim, called "an anarchy of good intentions" (OAU Secretary General's Report, 1995).

<sup>70</sup>Concord Times, 15 November 1994. A conference of Paramount Chiefs held on 14 June 1994 had taken issue with the junta over the dubious role of the army in the war. The chiefs asked that soldiers be withdrawn from areas not directly affected by the fighting, and that they (the chiefs) "take active part in recruiting soldiers within their chiefdoms", a clear enough expression of a lack of confidence in the army. They also called on government to explore the possibility of a negotiated solution (see Vision, 21-28 July 1994).

ceasefire, release all hostages and organise itself into a political party in order to be able to participate in the transition to civil rule process then under way. Sankoh promptly declared that these demands were unacceptable on ground that they failed to recognise the intrinsic legitimacy of his "struggle"<sup>71</sup>.

The foreign hostages were released later in 1995 after the intervention, through a Ghanaian fugitive and publicist for Charles Taylor, Addai Sebo, of a London-based conflict resolution group International Alert (IA)<sup>72</sup>. Sebo made a roaring propaganda film of the event, which was shown on the BBC's Channel 4 news, showing Foday Sankoh in charge of an organised bush insurgency. The NPRC protested that Sebo took diamonds from the rebels to arrange new supplies of arms, a charge that carried some credibility<sup>73</sup>.

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<sup>71</sup>"Peace Moves-Sankoh Says NO!", Concord Times 29 November 1994.

<sup>72</sup>This version of the hostage story has been disputed by I.A's detractors, who accuse the organisation of a dishonest campaign of self-promotion. According to some, the British Foreign Office and the Scotland Yard had already reached an agreement for the release of the hostages before I.A became involved and deliberately delayed the process, in the process creating a publicity coup for itself. (See Ian Smillie, "NGOs in Complex Emergencies"). The involvement of the Scotland Yard in the hostage saga was well known at the time, and this version of the story appears credible to me.

<sup>73</sup>Sebo denied this to me in an interview in Ivory Coast (April 1996), but other RUF sources confirmed the story. Certainly Sebo's role in the RUF war goes above that of a disinterested peace advocate. He is a close confidant of Sankoh, a situation that at least two senior RUF members grumbled to me about as unhealthy "foreign influence". The RUF's first Public Relations officer, Alimamy Sankoh, resigned from the movement in December 1995 complaining of Sebo's controlling influence over Foday Sankoh. Alimamy Sankoh accused I.A of "treacherous meddling in the Sierra Leone conflict", and of using the war as a "money generating source not for the good of deprived Sierra Leoneans caught in the conflict...but for its own coffers. This smacks of nothing short of fraud and criminal dishonesty on the part of IA". He declared that the RUF had fallen prey to the manipulation of "unscrupulous international adventurers of the likes of...International Alert" (letter in author's possession).

In December 1994, Strasser sent a letter to the United Nations Secretary General imploring him to "use your good offices to assist in bringing about a peaceful settlement to the rebel war"<sup>74</sup>. The Ethiopian ambassador, Felix Mosha, was then despatched from the UN to Freetown to make preliminary contacts with all parties involved in the war and report his findings. Mosha was shortly replaced by Berkhanu Dinka who continued to make exploratory contacts with the RUF from Freetown. The Commonwealth Secretariat also sent a representative in the person of Moses Anafu to help facilitate the process of dialogue<sup>75</sup>. In the meantime, however, with the RUF remaining intransigent, and with the writ of the NPRC seemingly limited to the capital, the junta decided to bring in new forces to assert some control and perhaps force the rebels to the negotiating table.

Creveld has argued that most modern day wars, in situations where states no longer enjoy legal "monopoly over armed violence", will be conducted not by governments but by "war-making entities", organizations which unite military and economic functions. In such a situation, what is at stake is not "national defence" but "security". This would have to be provided by private mercenary bands or commercial organisations such as the old British East Indian Company which helped to bring what amounted to a whole continent under British rule.

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<sup>74</sup>Uniweek, 22 December 1994.

<sup>75</sup>Ibid.

He writes,

much of the day-to-day burden of defending society against the threat of low-intensity conflict will be transferred to the booming security business; and indeed the time may come when the organisations that comprise that business will, like the condottieri of old, take over the state<sup>76</sup>.

Sierra Leone appeared to have reached this stage of incipient anarchy and dissolution by early 1995. Anti-government rebels had besieged the capital preventing, any viable contact between Freetown and the provinces. Renegade soldiers had run amok, carrying out their own attacks against civilians mainly for loot. The government itself admitted in late 1994 that at least 20 per cent of its soldiers were disloyal. Strasser characterised the situation as "nothing short of banditry, looting, maiming and raping" and warned the public against "harbouring a soldier who does not possess his authentic document...strident action will be taken against all civilians found in possession of military uniforms and equipment"<sup>77</sup>. The "real" war, it was proclaimed, was over. What remained was banditry.

The NPRC's response to the problem was to bring in foreign hired guns to do the job of "flushing out the bandits", as the newspapers were fond of putting it. In February 1995 the junta contacted the UK-based Gurkha Security Guards (GSG), made up of demobilised units of Britain's famed Gurkha contingent, apparently for the more general task of training the

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<sup>76</sup>Martin van Creveld, The Transformation of War. 60.

<sup>77</sup>"The Rebel War: Strasser Warns Civilian", Vision 22-29 September 1994.



Sierra Leone army in counter-insurgency<sup>78</sup>. The cost of the project was never disclosed but it was believed to worth several million dollars. The GSA's Sierra Leone commander was Robert Mackenzie, an American who served in the Rhodesian Special Forces that battled Black Nationalist guerrillas in the Zimbabwean war of independence during the 1970s and was also involved in the South African military and private fund raising efforts for the murderous RENAMO rebels in Mozambique<sup>79</sup>.

The Gurkhas went into combat soon after their arrival in addition to establishing a training base for selected units of the regular army. They quickly helped to reduce rebel activities around Mile 91, a strategic outpost on the highway leading to the two most important cities in the Southern and Eastern Provinces, Bo and Kenema, and a main operational base for the rebels<sup>80</sup>. But in spite of all his experiences in such "dirty wars", Mackenzie made the mistake of working directly with a contingent of the Sierra Leone army which was apparently not sufficiently screened. He was killed in an ambush in late February, along with Strasser's aide-de-champ, Captain Abu Tarawallie. The ambush appeared to have benefitted from inside

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<sup>78</sup>Koroma, Agony, 196.

<sup>79</sup>Reno, "Humanitarian Emergencies and Warlord Politics in Liberia and Sierra Leone".

<sup>80</sup>Mile 91 had been constantly harassed by the rebels for well over two months, preventing all traffic flows, except heavily escorted military vehicles, from the capital to important provincial cities like Bo and Kenema. As a result, starvation hit the already traumatised cities. Rebels had prevented all agricultural activities in the south and east of the country, and therefore all food requirements for the area had to be got from Freetown.

information regarding Mackenzie's schedule<sup>81</sup>. The Ghurkhas had their contracts terminated and withdrew from the country<sup>82</sup>.

In March 1995, the rebels took Mile 38, another strategic post on the main highway connecting the capital to the rest of the country. It was also uncomfortably close to the capital, and the rebel takeover triggered a mass movement of people from the town to Freetown. The NPRC's responded with desperation. Ukranian-manned helicopter gunships and heavy artillery deployed by the Sierra Leone army fighting alongside Nigerian army units pounded the town to rubble. Many of the rebels survived the attack and fled to the bush. But the extent of the NPRC's firepower was evidently not lost on them. Henceforth, they made no attempt to occupy any town along the highway for more than a few days. The tactic was now hit, destroy and run. The carnage was unrelenting<sup>83</sup>.

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<sup>81</sup>A soldier who survived the attack told the present writer (Freetown, March 1995) that the ambush appeared to have been well-organised, with more than 200 rebels taking part in the assault, an unusual enough development (the amorphous rebels hardly had such a huge concentration at any one time) which suggested that they might well have been tipped off at least two days before. Needless to say that the junta made all efforts to keep the Ghurkha operations secret from all but its trusted military advisers. Another dire sign of rebel activities came when a Ukranian pilot, hired in April 1995 to fly a Russian-made helicopter gunship bought by the junta, was found murdered in his room at the Murray Town Barracks in Freetown. The government claimed that he had committed suicide but then curiously alerted its military intelligence to investigate the incident. No one was arrested in connection with the killing but it was rumoured that some soldiers were secretly executed for complicity in the murder. I was not able to confirm this.

<sup>82</sup>Reno, *ibid*.

<sup>83</sup>The scale of the destruction was perplexing. Small, insignificant villages, whose destruction would not attract attention anywhere else, were torched. A RUF commando I met in Ivory Coast (April 1996) told me, in reply to a question about the pointlessness of their nihilism, that the unit he commanded targeted only those villages which were "underdeveloped", that is "without any decent building". His point was that the country did not deserve such backwardness, and that

The magnitude of the unfolding chaos seemed beyond the capability of internal forces, even with the support of the Nigerians and Guineans, to handle. In May 1995, Strasser's search for help led him to the Executive Outcomes (EO), a South African mercenary firm. The EO employs black Angolans and Namibians from apartheid South Africa's old 32nd Battalion, with an officer corps of white South Africans and a white Rhodesian (Zimbabwean) brigadier. Harper's magazine has described the controversial outfit as "a collection of former spies, assassins, and crack bush guerrillas, most of whom had served for fifteen to twenty years in South Africa's most notorious counter-insurgency units"<sup>84</sup>. Colourful though their past may be, the EO has been phenomenally successful as hired guns. The mercenary outfit had first made its mark in Angola where it initially served with the UNITA rebels and later, after the elections which Jonas Savimbi lost, switched sides to the Angolan government after Savimbi plunged the country into war again as a result of his failed electoral bid. EO helped changed the tide of the war crucially against UNITA, forcing the intransigent rebel movement to seek the negotiating table once again. "It was the best fifty or sixty million dollars the Angolan government ever spent", a US defence expert is quoted to have said, speculating that EO is "the small wave of the future in terms of defence and security, because the international community has abdicated that role"<sup>85</sup>.

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a RUF government will build more modern structures. He appeared unconcerned about the troubles their campaign was causing the poor villagers who were then forced to live in horrible displaced camps. In fact, just every town or village along their way was torched.

<sup>84</sup>Elizabeth Rubin, "An Army of One's Own", Harper's Magazine, February 1997.

<sup>85</sup>Quoted in *ibid.*

Strasser was encouraged to hire EO by the British directors of Heritage Oil and Gas, an oil firm that had taken EO into Angola, and Branch Energy, a mining firm with interests in Sierra Leone's rich diamond deposits. The contract was signed by Strasser on behalf of the Sierra Leone government and Anthony Buckingham, the founder of Heritage and Branch Energy. EO's mission was to search and destroy the "terrorist enemies of state"; to restore internal security; and to help build and maintain an economic climate where new investment could be attracted. The price was 15 million US dollars but since Strasser could not pay immediately, Buckingham agreed to bankroll the operation in exchange for future mining concessions<sup>86</sup>.

In May 1995, 150 EO fighters, commanded by Colonel Roelf, a Namibian-born Afrikaner, were deployed in the country. Once in the country, they set about training selected units of the army in counter-insurgency and incorporated large units of the more reliable Kamajoisia militia into a formidable fighting machine. The EO came equipped with two M117s Helicopters and an M124 Hind-Russian helicopter gunship, a radio intercept system, two Boeing 727s to transport troops and supplies and an Andover casualty-evacuation aircraft. They were supplied in Freetown with Sierra Leonean army uniforms, three armoured personnel carriers equipped with 30-mm cannons and six Land Rovers mounting anti-aircraft

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<sup>86</sup>E. Rubin, "An Army of One's Own". This version of the EO story has been much disputed by various NPRC officials and even the elected government which took over after them. They insist that the EO was paid in cash; but quite how the cash-starved junta managed to do this has not been made clear. A senior official of the elected government told me (Washington, July 1997) that the 15 million dollars was a "loan" from Buckingham which would be settled by mining concessions but that this is a "security matter" which should not be publicised.

guns and other automatic weapons<sup>87</sup>.

The EO went on the offensive in June 1995, clearing the rebels around the Freetown peninsular area within a week and recapturing Koidu that month. The operation was also aided by the Nigerians and Guineans, who carried out simultaneous raids against rebel positions in the northern province. Within a few months, the chaos had abated somewhat. The Kamajoisia then led units of the EO in the far Eastern and Southern provinces on a "search and destroy" mission. Rebel activity was brought considerably under control towards the end of 1995<sup>88</sup>.

Local opposition to the deployment of the mercenaries was ruthlessly crushed by the desperate junta. On 12 July, Mban Kabu, a spokesman for the National Coordinating Committee for Peace (NCCP), a coalition of some 60 organisations formed in April 1995 to facilitate a negotiated settlement to the war, was arrested and detained for two weeks without charge for describing the EO as "hard core apartheid attack dogs" at a public meeting of his organisation. The editor of Standard Times, Ibrahim Karim Sei, who reported the comments was also detained for the same period. Both men were released without charge. EO itself mounted a public relations campaign, flying reporters to their "liberated" zones and showing how people in the areas appreciated their presence. The Standard Times was made to carry a few paid advertisers' supplement for the mercenaries, and it soon became a mouthpiece for the outfit in Freetown.

The EO was to be portrayed as a Pan African force formed to help African countries

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<sup>87</sup>Interview with Major John Milton, NPRC Army Public Relations Officer (Freetown, August 1995).

<sup>88</sup>The highways were considerably freed of rebel ambushes, and cities like Bo and Kenema were at last relieved of persistent rebel threats.

overcome their instabilities, an image which Col. Roelf insisted is the correct representation<sup>89</sup>. Few took this propaganda seriously, but the mercenary force was immensely popular in areas, like Kono district, where it helped establish some order where previously there had been only bloody chaos.

With the chaos at least brought under control, the junta moved on to conduct elections aimed at the establishment of civil rule under the direction of an ex-UN official, James Jonah. Strasser's clumsy attempts to manipulate the process by having himself metamorphosed into a civilian candidate led to his overthrow by his own deputy, Brigadier Juluis Maada Bio, in January 1996<sup>90</sup>. Rebel attempts to disrupt the polls included the amputation of limbs from at least 52 people around the country, a murderous campaign in which renegade soldiers objecting to the polls were also believed to have participated. But beyond such outrages, the elections in most parts of the country went ahead smoothly, an indication of the diminishing power of both forces, rebels and sobels<sup>91</sup>. The polls were conducted in March 1996, and

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<sup>89</sup>See "We Are Not Mercenaries-Col. RUFF", For Di People, 21 July 1995. For Di People was one of the few remaining papers which was consistently critical of the mercenary outfit.

<sup>90</sup>The junta had sponsored the establishment of a political party, the National Unity Party (NUP) and made its minister of finance, John Karimu, leader. But as elections came to a close, Strasser began to show increasing signs of wanting to hijack the leadership and contest the elections in the manner of Ghana's Jerry Rawlings. His brother, Reginald, and other henchmen, organised a demonstration of some youths outside a conference of the NUP shouting "No Strasser, No NUP". He was overthrown a few weeks later. The Bio junta explained that Strasser had wanted to tamper with the constitution by the lowering the mandatory age limit of 45 (he was only 30) for presidential candidates in order to be able to contest, "a development that would plunge our country into chaos again".

<sup>91</sup>The RUF leader has disputed this in an interview shortly after he signed a peace agreement with the elected government. He told the Concord Times (December 1996) that he ordered his men to stop the murderous anti-elections campaign because he realised that the NPRC was trying

Ahmed Tejan Kabba, an ex-UN bureaucrat, emerged as president at the head of the revived Sierra Leone Peoples Party (SLPP). Peace talks which had begun between the RUF leadership and Bio's junta climaxed on 30 November 1996 with the signing of a Peace Accord by Foday Sankoh and President Kabba in Abidjan, Ivory Coast. Both sides to the conflict agreed to end the war "with immediate effect", to ensure that "a total cessation of hostilities is observed forthwith" and to give "the establishment and consolidation of a just peace" a priority<sup>92</sup>. Kabba declared that the "common enemy" was now hunger, disease and poverty<sup>93</sup>.

But this well-choreographed statement was soon to prove as meaningless as the Accord after the Executive Outcomes withdrew from the country, at the insistence of the RUF, leaving the security of the state in the hands of the army. The experiment in democracy lasted until May 1997 when armed soldiers blasted open the Pademba Road Prison releasing more than 600 convicts and arming many of them. The force then attacked the State House, overcoming a detachment of Nigerian troops stationed there under a defence pact signed with the elected government. President Kabba was ferried out of the country to neighbouring Guinea, and the rebellious soldiers named Major Johnny Paul Koroma, who was freed in the prison break where he had been kept since August 1996 after a coup he plotted against the elected government was foiled, leader of the Armed Forces Ruling Council, AFRC.

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to take advantage of it to cancel the polls and perpetuate their stay in power, and not because he was handicapped to carry it out effectively.

<sup>92</sup>Peace Agreement Between The Government Of Sierra Leone And The Revolutionary United Front Of Sierra Leone, Abidjan 30 November 1996. Art.1 and 2.

<sup>93</sup>Expo Times, December 1996.

Koroma's first move in office was to announce that the RUF was part of his movement, and invited the rebels to join him in Freetown. Koroma's forces and the RUF were now described as "The Peoples Army". The RUF leader, Foday Sankoh, was appointed Vice Chairman of the AFRC but the Nigerian government placed him under house arrest, preventing his triumphal entry into Freetown<sup>94</sup>.

The aftermath of the AFRC coup followed a pattern of 'conquest' long established by the RUF. Looting and apparently aimless destruction of property, rape of women and general vandalism, were the order of the day through the first two weeks of the coup. Over 100 people were killed, and the National Treasury, parts of the Bank of Sierra Leone and other important public buildings in Freetown were burnt down. Freetown's cynical residents speculated that the burning of the National Treasury, which held accounts and documents related to the running of the state's finances, might have been instigated by elements in the military related to corrupt civil servants who were being probed by the Kabba administration for embezzlement of public funds<sup>95</sup>. But the arson sent home a more significant message. Formal bureaucratic state structures, particularly those related to accountability, were no longer to be party of the scheme of things in the country. The process of state disintegration now appears complete in Sierra Leone.

It is possible that the Nigerian-led forces in the country, which has sustained opposition

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<sup>94</sup>See James Rupert, "Sierra Leoneans resist new rulers", Washington Post, 11 June, 1997, for account of the coup. Sankoh was in Nigeria when the coup was announced, from where he broadcast a statement calling on his men to join Korma's forces in Freetown. The ragtag rebels poured into the capital immediately after, triggering a mass flight of the city's panicked residents to neighbouring countries, Liberia, Guinea and the Gambia.

<sup>95</sup>News item on Leonenet, May 1997.



to the coup, could restore the elected government but for how long? The Kamajor militia which, together with other local Civil Defence Forces also provide armed resistance to the Peoples Army may offer some hope to their people but a military campaign to recover Freetown seems unlikely. The AFRC ruthlessly crushed student-led demonstrations, killing over five people, in August and shows no sign of abandoning its grip on the capital<sup>96</sup>. If the international community continues to react with nothing more than resolutions and sanctions, the people of Sierra Leone, who, according to the World Food Programme, face the prospect of famine<sup>97</sup>, are confronted with the bleakest of futures.

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<sup>96</sup>Leonet, August 1997.

<sup>97</sup>Ibid.

## CONCLUSION

...but already the walls are closing around me  
 the rain has stopped and once again I am alone  
 waiting for them, the politicians of my country  
 to come for me  
 to silence my right to shouting poetry loud in the parks  
 but who can shut up the rage the melodrama of being  
 Sierra  
 Leone  
 the farce of seeing their pictures daily in the papers  
 the knowledge of how though blindfolded and muzzled  
 something is growing, bloating, volumptous and not  
 despairing...<sup>1</sup>.

This thesis has attempted to understand Sierra Leone's rebel war and collapse, and do so in terms of the failure of the country's political leadership and disintegration of the security forces. To the extent that Sierra Leone has functioned as a viable political entity since it was created by the British, it has been largely because of a reasonably collegial and integrated

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<sup>1</sup>Syl Cheney-Coker, "Letter to a tormented playwright". In Adewale Maja-Pearce ed., The Heineman Book of African Poetry in English (London: Heineman, 1990), 67. Cheney-Coker is Sierra Leone's best known writer.

political leadership which was always prepared, in the interest of "law and order", to use the security forces against more errant members of society. This political elite understood well enough, at least in the first decade after independence, the weakness of the state's institutional framework, and compensated for it by a "balancing act" in which the divergent political forces (read language groups) were made to feel a part of the "government". The Sierra Leonean state, like most states<sup>2</sup>, was socially and culturally heterogenous, but about a century of colonial rule succeeded in creating a political elite, made up of both traditional rulers and Western educated professionals, who had a shared interest of working together if only to maintain their elite status.

This ruling elite may have lacked a "national ideo-logic" in the sense that they were "above all preoccupied with separating their political fate from the hazards of a competitive game over which they were unable to exercise total control"<sup>3</sup>, but they clearly understood that their political fate depended upon the fate of the society over which they presided. The British had created a functional bureaucracy and a quite well developed coercive apparatus, including an integrated army and police, for holding the disparate groups within the fragile state together. They had shown by deeds what these coercive instruments were intended for. In 1898, British used the army to crush a profoundly destabilising uprising in the form of the Hut Tax War; they used it in 1926 to suppress the Haidara rebellion; and on many occasions to stamp out less extensive but destabilising expressions of discontent, like the 1955 riots. It is

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<sup>2</sup>Bayart has shown that the "cultural integralism" of even the French Third Republic, the Gramscian prototype of hegemony, was achieved rather late in its life. See J.F. Bayart, The State in Africa, 262.

<sup>3</sup>This is a general comment about African political leadership in J.F. Bayart, ibid, 263.

noteworthy that almost all these instances of "rebellion", with the notable exception of the Hut Tax War which was led by chiefs alarmed at the erosion of their power, were spearheaded by subaltern elements within the state, not the indigenous elite. Indeed both the 1955 and 1956 riots were directed against the chiefs as well as the Western educated political elites, rather than against the British overlords<sup>4</sup>. They, like the British colonialists, had come to embody the state. In this sense at least, the Sierra Leonean state remained "foreign" to majority of its charges long after independence<sup>5</sup>. The challenge of independence for the ruling elite, then, was not just how to mobilise the disparate energies of their people for the task of national development, but also how to maintain in its functional form the apparatus of power and government.

Sir Milton Margai, the country's first Prime Minister, seemed to have understood this more clearly than anyone else at the time of independence. Intensely conservative, with no time for political ideologies or radical rhetoric, Margai forged a political organisation, the SLPP, which brought together the country's elites, both traditional rulers and Western educated professionals. The party seemed to have catered, first and foremost, for the needs of this elite and pursued a gradualist "developmental" policy which was incremental in approach and which avoided mass mobilization. Three years after independence, the Sierra Leone army was still officered largely by a British expatriate staff because Sir Milton was

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<sup>4</sup>David Williams, "Politics and Personalities".

<sup>5</sup>Bayart has argued persuasively that the state in Africa "rests upon autochthonous foundations and a process of reappropriation of institutions of colonial origin which give it its origin; it can no longer be taken as a purely exogenous structure". See J.F. Bayart, The State in Africa, 260.

afraid that rapid "Africanisation" would erode standards<sup>6</sup>. This lacklustre but politically effective organisation held the nation together and ensured gradual but steady progress in the first half decade of independence. The challenge to its hegemony came from, logically enough, an organisation that drew support largely from subaltern elements in the country, the APC.

Organised by Siaka Stevens, an ex-Police Constable and trade unionist, the APC was dominated by young men who lacked the wherewithal and education to be accepted as part of the elite group which dominated the SLPP. Stevens himself was a breakaway member of the SLPP, but he claimed to have felt increasingly out of tune with the overly elitist and conservative nature of the party<sup>7</sup>. The APC, in its published statements, appealed directly to the "common people", as opposed to the privileged elites, and professed to be socialist, proclaiming its goal for Sierra Leone to be " a welfare state based upon a socialist pattern of society in which all citizens, regardless of class, tribe, colour or creed, shall have equal opportunity and where there shall be no exploitation of man by man, tribe by tribe, or class by class"<sup>8</sup>.

Rhetoric of this sort held little appeal for the majority of the citizenry who were still very much loyal to their traditional rulers and, by extension, to the SLPP. It was the APC's appeal to ethnic northern sentiments that threatened to subvert the tidy, conservative status quo which

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<sup>6</sup>Thomas Cox, Civil Military Relations.

<sup>7</sup>See Siaka Stevens, What Life Has Taught Me (London: Kensal Press, 1984).145-200.

<sup>8</sup>The Constitution of the All Peoples Congress (Freetown, 1965), Part 1, Section 3 (iii).

the SLPP was busy trying to maintain. The real problem began after the death of Sir Milton Margai and the succession of his brother, Sir Albert.

The appointment of Albert Margai as Prime Minister created immediate controversy for in doing so, the Governor General appeared to have reversed a decision made earlier to appoint John Karefa-Smart, then the leading northern figure in SLPP and a close friend of Sir Milton<sup>9</sup>. Sir Milton had not named a successor, but the speculation that he might have preferred Karefa-Smart over his brother in the interest of "the unity of the young nation"<sup>10</sup> appears credible. Sir Milton appeared to have been willing to go to every length to maintain the fragile unity he had forged out of the disparate political\ethnic entities. In 1962, he made his willingness to conciliate the divergent political interests in the country clear in a statement he issued in 1962 in defence of a "large" cabinet he appointed after the 1962 elections: "I know that it is expensive to keep the present number of ministers, but it is easier to run a country with Ministers from all the Provinces and from the Western Area"<sup>11</sup>. So, what Milton Margai had feared most now came to pass: the charge that the party he had created as a unifying front for his country's heterogenous population had become a front for the perpetuation of "Mende hegemony"<sup>12</sup>. The problem came to a head after Karefa-Smart, sacked from the cabinet by Sir Albert for protesting the Governor-General's decision, drifted

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<sup>9</sup>J. Cartwright, Politics in Sierra Leone. 186.

<sup>10</sup>Abdul Karim Koroma, Agony, 230.

<sup>11</sup>Daily Mail, 9 August, 1962.

<sup>12</sup>Cartwright, Politics in Sierra Leone, 187.

to the opposition APC. The country then came to be polarised between the Southern and Eastern Provinces (dominated by the Mendes) for the SLPP and the Northern Province (dominated by the Temnes) for the APC<sup>13</sup>.

It was as result of this fragmentation that Sir Albert attempted to pass a one-party constitution in 1965, and it was largely responsible for the controversy surrounding the 1967 elections and the subsequent Brigadier David Lansana coup<sup>14</sup>. It is reasonable to conclude, as Koroma has done, that these events "laid the tragic foundations for much of the country's future political turmoil"<sup>15</sup>. The emergence of Siaka Stevens, on the back of junior rank and filers in the army, as nation's Prime Minister along with the upstart politicians and desperados in his APC effectively subverted the foundations of the Sierra Leone state. All that followed afterwards, the destruction of the elite opposition, the rapid disintegration of the army and police force, state recession, and the emergence of the Shadow State, were the logical consequence of these actions.

The truly disturbing and crucial question about Sierra Leone's rebel war has been: why is it that the RUF, which many agree is a group of largely self-interested and even criminal characters, can both recruit support and inflict such violence and terror on the population, while the state and its agent appeared so ineffective in meeting the challenge? The answer, however, becomes fairly clear when given the background of a state whose very foundations

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>See Thomas Cox, Civil-Military Relations in Sierra Leone.98-117.

<sup>15</sup>A.K. Koroma, Agony. 230.

had been subverted, and which had consequently alienated majority of its citizenry.

On one level at least, the analysis of Robert Kaplan and Paul Richards seem particularly at odds, which is the difference between the sensational approach of the journalist writing to shock and the sympathetic weighing of evidence by the scholar writing to clarify a fundamental social and political problem. On another level, however, their approaches are pretty much the same. Both describe the problem of state disintegration and civil rebellion in Sierra Leone in an ahistorical fashion, and both failed to satisfactorily reconstruct the dynamics of crisis. Both, however, are correct in identifying Sierra Leone's alienated youth to be at the centre of the crisis.

The problem of Sierra Leone's volatile youth-the so-called "loose molecules"-, however, is not new in the 1990s. It followed on the heels of the rapid urbanisation of (especially) Freetown (itself the result of the centralisation of almost all capital investment and administrative machinery in the capital<sup>16</sup>) and was certainly visible as early as the 1940s. In 1943, when the population of Freetown was just over 60,000, the colonial authorities expressed alarm at the proliferation of "touts ranging in age from 10 to 30" who "are either homeless or living in a very undesirable environment". It was held that these "mosquitoes of society", who indulged in robbery, prostitution, gambling and all sorts of petty crimes, constituted "a grave social problem"<sup>17</sup>. Graham Greene's seedy portrayal of life in Freetown during the 1940s in his The Heart of the Matter makes mention of a specie of these youths whom he called "Wharf rats", because they operated mainly in the slum circles of Government

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<sup>16</sup>See Walter Barrows, Grassroots Politics in an African State (New York, 1976). 6-8.

<sup>17</sup>In Micheal Banton, West African City (London: Oxford University Press, 1957). 36.



Wharf in Freetown. They were

cowards but dangerous, boys of sixteen or so, armed with razors or bits of broken bottle, they swarmed in groups around the warehouses, pilfering if they found an easily open case, settling like flies around any drunken sailor who stumble their way, occasionally slashing a policeman who had made himself unpopular...<sup>18</sup>.

An explosion of the youth problem occurred in the 1950s following widespread discovery of diamonds in the country in the 1930s. The diamonds were discovered in the Kono district by the Geological Survey. In 1935, the colonial government concluded an agreement with the Sierra Leone Selection Trust (SLST), a subsidiary of the British Mining Company Trust, which gave the company exclusive mining and prospecting rights over nearly the whole of Sierra Leone for 90 years. In return, SLST was to pay income tax at the rate of 27 per cent (later increased to 45 per cent) on its profit, in addition to a small sum in a "special development" fund<sup>19</sup>. But by the early 1950s, local young men in the Kono district began to enter the company's holdings to mine illegally. Their success in turn inspired vast numbers of young men from outside the district, and particularly from Freetown, which was teeming with unemployed youths, to rush to the district and engage in the illicit mining. By 1954, an estimated 30,000 had been directed to the district. The figure rose to a stunning 75,000 in

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<sup>18</sup>Graham Greene, The Heart of Matter (New York: Viking Press, 1948). 34.

<sup>19</sup>Diamond Agreement and Licence (Ratification) Act, 1935 (Freetown: Government Printing).

1956<sup>20</sup>.

These young men soon had the areas verging on anarchy, "with armed gangs of as many as 400 to 500 men raiding the SLST and licensed mining areas and doing battle with the police"<sup>21</sup>. Officials referred to them as "Robin Hoods", a term which captured only the illicit nature of their activities since they never shared their loot with the peasants among whom they operated. Instead, their activities, including stealing and forms of violence, were disruptive of peasant life. It was mainly these youths, with their Robin Hood attitude to authority, who spearheaded the November 1955 and March 1956 riots in the Northern Province against chiefs and other traditional authorities<sup>22</sup>. The protest began in Port Loko with more than 7,000 youths attacking property belong to chiefs, and soon spread to other chiefdoms. The army was sent to the areas but by the time the riots were over, 23 people had been killed; three policemen were kidnapped and later murdered and property damage estimated at some 750,000 pounds done. The government categorically blamed the riots on youths who were involved in the illicit mining<sup>23</sup>.

A somewhat similar riot had taken place in Freetown ten months earlier in which

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<sup>20</sup>H.L. van der Laan, The Sierra Leone Diamonds (London: Oxford University Press, 1965). 65.

<sup>21</sup>Cartwright, Politics in Sierra Leone, 69.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid. 67.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

"anybody wearing a collar and tie", symbols of elitism, was targeted by marauding youth<sup>24</sup>. A mob of over a thousand young men, "hooligans...unemployed...and the dregs of the working class", as a pro-SLPP newspaper disparagingly described them<sup>25</sup>, surged through the eastern and central Freetown attacking policemen and looting shops and homes of prominent politicians. Again, the government called in the army who dispersed the rioters with automatic weapons. Eighteen people were killed, one hundred and eleven seriously injured<sup>26</sup>.

Such episodic outbursts of discontent by youth were common in many parts of Africa, however. They were held in check by what Bayart has called "the strength of the networks", principally "police raids and the truncheons of the commissariat"<sup>27</sup>. The APC, which tended to appeal to such marginalised youth, sought their "political socialisation" by recruiting some of them as thugs to be employed during election campaigns. On this tactic, Abdullah has noted:

If the youths were involved (in political activity) their role was simply one of foot soldiers. Their marginalisation was concretely expressed in the form of party youth wings...and arm of the party always peripheral to where real power was located. Their performance could therefore be read as ritual; it always begins with a crisis situation, and their mobilisation as thugs to do the

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<sup>24</sup>West Africa, 11 June, 1955.

<sup>25</sup>Vanguard, 18 February, 1955.

<sup>26</sup>Thomas Cox, Civil-Military Relations. 76.

<sup>27</sup>Bayart, The State in Africa, 264.

dirty work. Once the project is complete, they fall back to the status quo ante, as wings, waiting for yet another assignment<sup>28</sup>.

As we have noted, the "networks" which Bayart referred to were considerably subverted and weakened by the APC's practice of "factional politics" and the emergence of the Shadow State. In a forthcoming publication "Lumpen Youths and Student Radicals in Sierra Leone, 1977-1992", Ismail Rashid has shown how a subculture of resistance, a form of syncretic cult, developed among Freetown's lumpen (unemployed) youth and Fourah Bay College students in the period 1977-1992 based on the free in take of illicit drugs like marijuana (itself a form of sustained rebellion against the state) which occasionally expressed itself in the form of violent demonstrations against the APC system<sup>29</sup>. They were a kind of "organic intellectuals" who analyzed the problems of the country and concluded that the only way to restore their dignity and the dignity of their country was to uproot the APC "system". They formed the core of the group that took training in Libya in 1987 for the botched purpose of launching a "revolutionary war" against the APC<sup>30</sup>. That such a complicated and clumsily organised project took place at all, with most of the recruits returning home after it aborted without the country's security services showing any apparent interest, reveal the extent to which the APC state had disintegrated. Bayart's "networks" had by then all but collapsed.

It has been the error of many political commentators, including even renown revolutionary

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<sup>28</sup>I. Abdullah, "Bush Paths to Democracy".

<sup>29</sup>I. Rashid, "Lumpen Youths and Student Radicals in Sierra Leone, 1977-1992". Forthcoming, 1997.

<sup>30</sup>I. Abdullah, "Bush Paths to Democracy".

theorists, to underestimate the political agency of the so-called lumpens. Marx and Engels, for example, referred to them as "the dangerous class", "the social scum (lumpenproletariat), that passively rotting mass thrown off by the old layers, may here and there, be swept aside into the movement by a proletarian movement; its condition of life, however, prepare it far more for the part of a bribed tool of reactionary intrigue"<sup>31</sup>. It is this same error, I argue, that led Kaplan to dismiss the rebellion in Sierra Leone as criminal, rather than political, violence spearheaded by "loose molecules in an unstable social fluid". Worse, he tended to see the crisis as resulting from environmental, rather than state, collapse.

As I have tried to point out, the violence in Sierra Leone has often taken on a characteristic that can only be described as post-rational. It has certainly been barbaric, and in some cases driven by sheer criminal instincts. But it is wrong to dismiss the political motive of the insurgents. They certainly have an organisation, the RUF, if even it is overwhelmingly militaristic, and the fact that this organisation has committed atrocities and engaged in wanton destruction cannot by themselves overrule this important fact. Nihilism is a form of political expression. I argue that the violence in Sierra Leone has been a form of nihilism spearheaded by the country's despairing youth out to wreak vengeance on a state which they perceive as a source of their marginalisation and despair. And it has been possible simply because the "strength of the networks", that is the state itself, had collapsed after over two decades of APC misrule and corruption.

An important question suggests itself. Does this kind of extensive youth-led violence presage a mass dissidence in other African states which exhibit similar patterns of

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<sup>31</sup>K. Marx and F. Engels, The Communist Manifesto (1848), Samuel H. Beer ed., (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1955). 20-21.

disintegration and which have large outlays of unemployed and frustrated youth? Certainly the Liberian Civil War, which saw youthful militia men (or boys) wielding enormous power over the country's ruling elites, suggested to the Sierra Leonean youth, particularly those living in Liberia at the time (there were many), the extent of their own unrealised potential for inventiveness and power. Quite a good number of them, caught up in the Liberian war, joined Foday Sankoh and formed the core of the RUF which launched the rebellion in 1991. The incursions provided an opportunity for others living beyond the shrunken Sierra Leonean state, particularly the youths in the illicit diamond fields, already in a state of sustained rebellion against the state, to take independent "political action" to wrestle control of the state from the failed elites. The result has been in many cases banditism principally because the insurgents were not politically socialised enough. The RUF "struggle" has remained in essence an agitation. It never became a "revolutionary organisation" in the sense, as Gerard Chaliand has suggested, of " a new underground political infrastructure...constructed patiently by middle-ranking cadres"<sup>32</sup>.

So what lessons does the Sierra Leonean crisis have for the rest of Africa or for policy makers with Africa in mind? It seems clear that one of the most urgent tasks for most African states, if they are to avert the anarchy which has now gripped Sierra Leone as a result of mass youth dissidence, is to restore institutional capacity and create avenues to direct youth energy in a productive way. This, of course, demands tremendous external assistance as most of these states are at the moment running on a shoe-string. The expansion of education since independence, without a corresponding expansion of employment opportunities, has made the

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<sup>32</sup>G. Chaliand, Guerilla Strategies: An Historical Anthology from the Long March to Afghanistan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982). 15.

circumstance of many African states urgent indeed. In Sierra Leone, for example, between 1960-1969, there were 948 primary schools with 126,438 pupils; these figures grew to 1,806 schools with 391,152 pupils in 1990. The figures for secondary (high) schools were 62 16,414 in 1960-1969 to 270 with 96,709 pupils in 1990<sup>33</sup>. But in 1985, there were just about 60,000 in paid employment in the country<sup>34</sup>. So that when Foday Sankoh first entered Kailahun with his rebels, he is said to have appealed to the borderline youth of the area by condemning the government's inability to provide meaningful employment for them, and promising them that such "transparent injustices" would be addressed once the APC was dislodged. The APC, he said, had made young men "unemployed and unemployable" and it was time these young men rose up demand their rights to jobs<sup>35</sup>.

As Abdullah has argued, these frustrated "unemployed and unemployable" young men, the so-called lumpens, dominate the RUF, and this clearly accounts for the "despairing nihilism" which has characterised the rebel movement's military campaigns<sup>36</sup>. This development makes it clear that fashionable Western concern for the environment, which clearly accounted, at least in part, for the popularity of Kaplan's "Coming Anarchy" article, is misguided at least as far as the Sierra Leone war is concerned.

What this thesis has attempted to demonstrate, however, is that even this "lumpen

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<sup>33</sup>A.K. Koroma, Agony, 123.

<sup>34</sup>C.I.A World Book, 1996.

<sup>35</sup>P. Richards et al, "Report to the Ministry of National Reconstruction".

<sup>36</sup>See also *ibid.*

problem", although profoundly important, is merely a manifestation of the overall problem of state malfunction in Sierra Leone. For the lumpens could be found on all sides of the conflict in Sierra Leone. If they dominate the RUF, they also surely dominate the army which, at least in the first two years of the war, fought relentlessly to crush the rebels. Also, as we have seen, the lumpens were easily mobilizable by the NPRC in its first year in office for positive developmental programmes. The "Ecstatic Renovation" was their sole creation<sup>37</sup>. It certainly is wrong to ascribe an entirely demonic characteristic to the lumpens. Their creative campaigns against the APC hegemony in the 1970s and 1980s, as Rashid has shown<sup>38</sup>, produced such cultural landmarks as Purple Haze, Sabannah 17 and other forms of protest literature which dominated the Sierra Leonean scene for the period. Even their admittedly anti-social habit of smoking marijuana, which took root in the 1970s and 1980s, was itself a form of protest against the APC status quo<sup>39</sup>.

The net effect of the authoritarian and corrupt management of the Sierra Leonean state by the APC was that respect for the state was completely eroded. The state crumbled in the midst of an insurrection led by a group of people who, in any reasonably functioning society, would

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<sup>37</sup>Joseph Opala, "Ecstatic Renovation".

<sup>38</sup>Ismail Rashid, "Lumpen Youths and Students Radicals".

<sup>39</sup>Conversations with Cecil Blake, Indiana (July 1997). Professor Blake, who now teaches Mass Communications at Indiana State University in the US, was a youth leader in Freetown in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and was one of the founders of Purple Haze, a leading musical band in the 1970s. Blake recalled that the widespread use of marijuana by youths in Freetown was influenced by FBC students in the late 1960s. The students were in turn influenced by American exchange students from Kalamazoo College and the University of Wisconsin. But "its blatant use by youth in Freetown", he said, "was certainly a despairing form of disdain and protest against the APC government of President Stevens".



have been hounded and crushed as hooligans and bounty hunters.

Such a disastrous failure by the state, especially one as heterogenous as Sierra Leone, often leads its citizens to seek refuge in what Soyinka has called "cultural identities"<sup>40</sup>, the final step to the break-up of such states. Thus prominent Mendes, the ethnic group which has suffered most from the Sierra Leone war, are now openly blaming northerners for starting the war for the Machiavellian purpose of destroying their region and emasculating them politically. As Francis Simbo, a Mende intellectual currently in the US, recently put it,

the army, which is made up of more than 90 per cent of the soldiers coming from the north was destroying mostly the Eastern and Southern Provinces. Even right now, apart from Freetown, most of the destruction since the rebellion has been perpetrated against the Eastern and Southern Provinces<sup>41</sup>.

Simbo's figure for the army, and even his views, are patently wrong but no one can deny that sentiments such as his are behind the vigorous attempt on the part of many people from the Southern and Eastern Provinces to promote the Kamajoisia into the dominant armed faction in the country, perhaps as a prelude to the establishment of a Mende state<sup>42</sup>. Recently, a Mende group in the US, Tegloma, donated US \$10,000 to the Kamajoisia militia

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<sup>40</sup>Wole Soyinka, The Open Sore of a Continent. 75.

<sup>41</sup>Francis K. Simbo, "Examining the Reasons Behind the Rebellion in Sierra Leone", Democracy Now, August 1997.

<sup>42</sup>Many Mendes that I have spoken to in the US and the UK expressed support for such a state, and allegations of a Mende hegemonistic agenda in the formation of the Kamajoisia militia has been a hot topic of debate on Leonenet (See discussions in August 1997).

to buy arms<sup>43</sup>.

In most of Africa's failed states, such a development, also observed by Soyinka in Nigeria<sup>44</sup>, may yet herald the changing face of African sovereignty.

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<sup>43</sup>Leonet, July 1997.

<sup>44</sup>W. Soyinka, The Open Sore of a Continent. 76.

APPENDIX ONE

STATEMENT BY THE RUF's FORCES COMMANDER, "COL." SAM BOCKARI

( In the African Sierra Leone Progress, JULY 1997)

Fellow Countrymen,

For the past six years or so, we have been living in an environment of hatred and divisiveness. We looked at our brothers and killed them in cold blood, we removed our sisters from their hiding places to undo their feminity, we slaughtered our mothers and butchered our fathers. It was really a gruesome experience which has left a terrible landmark in our history.

But the atrocities that occurred must not be taken in the context of a personal vendetta. They were the result of a rottenness of a system which could not be uprooted except by brutal means. We did not take to the bush because we wanted to be barbarians, not because we wanted to be inhuman, but because we wanted to state our humanity to a society that looked at us as sub-humans. The APC had spread its tentacles so deep that had the RUF not emerged, we wonder if we would not have still been under the yoke of that wretched regime.

In the process of cleaning the system, however, we have wronged the great majority of our countrymen. We have sinned both in the sight of man and God. We therefore openly and publicly apologize to you, our Sierra Leonean brothers and sisters, for all the terror and the mayhem we unleashed on you in our bid to make Sierra Leone a country that all Sierra Leoneans would be proud of.

Today, we have rejoined you. We have come back as prodigal sons, brothers and sisters, to meet our families in our different homes, so that we all can sit in our houses in peace and tell tales to our young ones of how Sierra Leone was once cleansed of the mess that unpatriotic politicians brought to her in yonder years. Let the farmers take their tools and go to their farms in peace, let the young women go to the stream and swim in peace, let them sing to their loved ones under the moonshine in peace, let Sierra Leoneans walk in peace, let us talk in peace, let us travel in peace, let us live in peace. We have finally discovered the right atmosphere for a peaceful co-existence. We must accommodate each other if we want to live in peace, and that is the miracle that has occurred in Sierra Leone through the coming of the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC). We have accepted to join forces with this government because it is the first to demonstrate a genuine feeling of brotherhood for us - it is the government that has seen us as Sierra Leoneans who come together to stand for a cause for the general good. We want to assure everybody that we are sincerely and genuinely committed to the maintenance and sustenance of this miraculously achieved long-awaited peace. We have not come to terrorize you, our brothers and sisters, we have come to embrace you in love and harmony. Our members are not involved in the recent spate of armed attacks on residents of Freetown. No RUF member has so far been caught looting or behaving in any undisciplined manner. Perhaps what has delayed the wholesome practicality of this long-cherished peace is this threat of a Nigerian invasion. But the moment that chapter is closed, we are prepared to disarm and melt into the civilian populace and the regular army, because we are fully convinced that the foundation for lasting peace and true democracy has been laid.

We have all along been most willing to end this crisis peacefully, but the past

governments proved insincere and unfaithful to their words. The NPRC did not come with the desired reformation, and the SLPP made mockery of the Abidjan Peace accord. Instead of integrating us into the society as promised, the SLPP only tried to bring divisions into our camp by selling our leader Corporal Foday Saybana Sankoh to the Nigerians and staging a coup against him. This was a blatant disregard of the articles of peace accord. Even when some of our members surrender, they were still ostracized and treated as the dregs of society. And further still, even though we were abiding by the dictates of cease-fire agreement, Hinga Norman directed the kamajors to attack our bases. This clearly showed that the SLPP was not ready for peace, and so we prepared for the worst.

But we must give bountiful thanks to the Almighty for the refreshing fact that instead of the worst, it is the best that has come through the concrete unbelievable peace that has been attained through the AFRC. We have not therefore denounced attempts at bringing back Tejan Kabbah because we hate him, but it is because he is not willing to accept us as his fellow Sierra Leoneans. Ex-president Kabbah disappointed us gravely, and we can never trust him again. We were prepared for peace, but the SLPP was not.

We are therefore appealing to the international community, and all those that love Sierra Leone, to critically examine the Sierra Leonean problem before any unwarranted action is taken. For six years we have lived in bloodbath, let us now have fresh baths in our streams, swimming pools and beaches. We assure the international community and all Sierra Leoneans of the RUF's total and unflinching commitment to lasting peace. All that we need now is for the United Nations to take the lead in assisting the AFRC in demobilizing and re-integrating our combatants into the society for the ultimate achievement of true democracy through free and fair elections that will be conducted in the

whole country in peace. At least we can today sleep in peace with the thought that Sierra Leone has finally achieved its nationhood by being bold enough to tell the whole world that we are capable of solving our own problems.

## APPENDIX TWO

### AFRICAN REBEL WITH ROOM SERVICE

By Howard W. French (for the New York Times, 23 June 1996).

ABIDJAN, Ivory coast, June 21 - Until he emerged from the bush to engage in peace talks here recently, the most frequently asked question about Foday Sankoh, the leader of West Africa's most mysterious guerilla movement, was whether he really existed at all.

For five years under Mr. Sankoh's shadowy command, the so-called Revolutionary United Front indiscriminately burned Sierra Leone's villages, turned farmers into indentured servants and drove peasants like pack animals on long foot campaigns.

Anyone caught protesting this treatment risked amputation as punishment, villagers say. And for a villager deemed truly defiant, the Front's favourite punishment was to impale the person on a stake and leave the body in warning to others.

Beyond this bewildering cruelty, the mystery surrounding Mr. Sankoh was deemed by his own elusiveness. Throughout the obscure conflict, the guerrilla leader was never photographed. The voice of the man reputed to be Mr. Sankoh was heard only in rare radio messages to the International Committee of the Red cross.

All of this has changed since peace talks began here recently, and Mr. Sankoh, whose lightly armed guerillas frustrated a national army backed by regional troops and South

African mercenaries, left the bush that he had mastered and took up residence in one of this city's most luxurious hotels.

"Every Chateaubriand he eats will be a meal for peace", a senior Western diplomat said enthusiastically about Mr. Sankoh's stay here, speculating that the comforts of hot showers, ironed clothes and fine foods after years of life in mosquito-ridden camps made a resumption of the conflict increasingly unlikely.

But what emerged from a two-hour discussion with Mr. Sankoh, a squat, soft-spoken man of 59 who builds his sentences with almost painful deliberation, is a picture of someone still rolled by offended real and imagined that caused him to start his war.

Like other guerilla leaders throughout this continent, Mr. Sankoh comes across as a man so blinded by the "rightness" of his vague calls for social justice and his eclectic assortment of ideological influences that he has become oblivious to the pain his struggle has brought his country.

He does not seem especially concerned about the havoc he has caused.

"When two lions or elephants are fighting, who is going to suffer?" he said with a smile in response to a question about atrocities. "The grass, of course. I cannot deny it." He said that however impatient his countrymen are to get on with their lives, he is not in a hurry to reach peace with a recently elected Government that is his country's first democratic leadership.

The milestones of Mr. Sankoh's life are sources of the bitterness that remains with him today. He blames the British, the colonial masters in Sierra Leone until 1961, for his upbringing in poverty and the slow pace of his advancement in the colonial army, where it took him six years to reach the rank of corporal. He blames the United Nations for his

deployment in the early 1960's as apart of the peacekeeping force in Zaire in that country's turbulent early days of independence from Belgium, and sees the force as having betrayed the nationalist Prime Minister, Patrice Lumumba, who was assassinated.

Back in Sierra Leone, he was arrested a number of times in the 1960's on vague charges of association with coup plotters. But Mr. Sankoh, who spent several years in his country's horrible prisons, seems to bear more of a grudge toward the plotters for never having brought him into their inner circle than he does toward his jailers.

"They wanted to make coups, while I always wanted a real revolution'" Mr. Sankoh said, seated in his hotel room along with two aides. "But I was still a corporal and nobody listened to my suggestions because of my rank."

When he was released from prison in 1976, Mr. Sankoh began a new life as an itinerant photographer, snapping portraits and photo identity cards in one town after another throughout the countryside. As much as he enjoyed this work, he says the job was never more than a cover for his true passion; putting together his own revolutionary organization.

Like rebel movements that have spread across Africa, Mr. Sankoh's loose association of radicals absorbed the broadest variety of influences, from the ideals of the Boston Tea Party and the French Revolution to the Communism of Cambodia's Pol Pot.

His biggest model, however, he said, was the 19th-century leader of a rebellion against British rule in Sierra Leone, Bai Bureh, a mystic leader whose traditional nickname, Kebalai, meant "one who never tires of war." Mr. Sankoh has emulated both Bai Bureh's skill in setting ambushes against vastly superior forces and his messianic grip on his followers.



More than anything, however, Mr. Sankoh's movement drew upon an accumulation of resentments common throughout independent Africa that began with the legacy of colonialism and gathered weight with the bitter experience of corruption, deepening poverty and incompetence that came with self-rule.

"By 1983 we had cells all over the country," Mr. Sankoh said. "It wasn't so hard, really. All over Sierra Leone people were crying. Our country was dying and everyone wanted change."

His movement's big break came in December 1989, when a former government official named Charles M. Taylor launched a civil war in the neighbouring country of Liberia.

It is widely believed that Mr. Sankoh received training from Mr. Taylor, whose own efforts had been supported by Libya and several French speaking countries in the region. But Mr. Sankoh denies this and scarcely conceals his scorn for his Liberian counterpart, whose only agenda, he says, is personal power.

Where Mr. Taylor is widely seen as being consumed by his ambitions, Mr. Sankoh has befuddled representatives of Sierra Leone's Government and diplomats alike by inciting that he seeks no high-ranking post or any of the other traditional spoils of war.

"There is nothing on the table which we want for ourselves," he said. "What we want is justice for the people of Sierra Leone."

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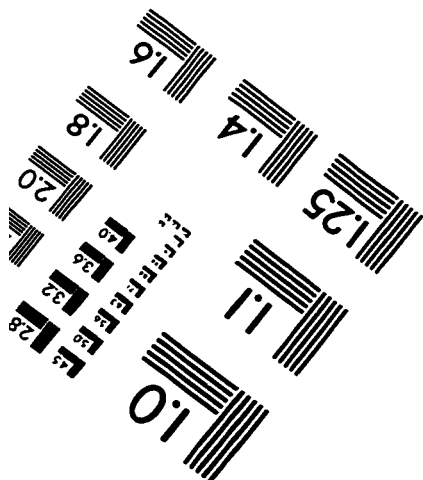
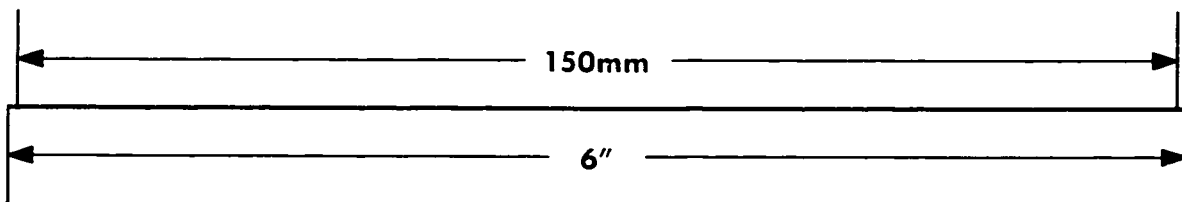
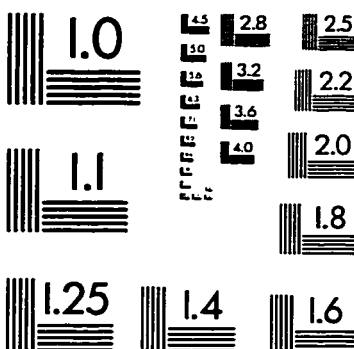
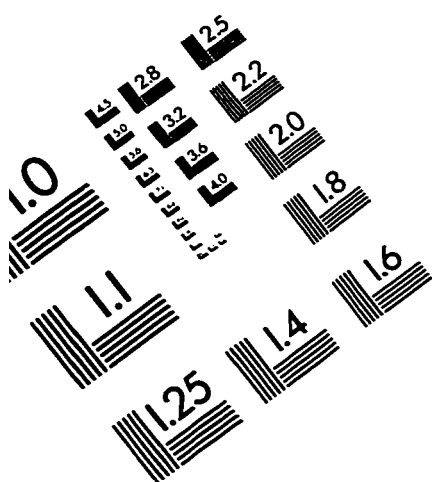
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