

**THE POLITICAL CRISIS IN SIERRA LEONE:
ECOWAS SECOND BOLD ATTEMPT AT
CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN WEST AFRICA
(1991 – 2002)**

By

Ezeh Chinonso Kennedy

B.Sc., M.Sc., Ph.D.

The Sierra Leonean Civil War began on 23rd March, 1991 when the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) with support from the special forces of Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), intervened in Sierra Leone in an attempt to overthrow the government of Major General Joseph Momoh. The resulting civil war which enveloped the country for 11 years left over 50,000 Sierra Leoneans dead and 2.5 million Sierra Leoneans and foreigners both internally and externally displaced. ECOWAS, the regional economic organisation in West Africa had to intervene in Sierra Leone (the second of its kind in West Africa) after their first ever ECOMOG involvement in ECOWAS member state.

THE POLITICAL HISTORY OF SIERRA LEONE

However, other causes of the Civil War could be identified and located squarely in the political history of Sierra Leone, following

the death of Sierra Leone's first Prime Minister, Sir Milton Margai in 1964, which ushered in politics, increasingly characterised by superlative degree of corruption, mismanagement and electoral violence that led to a weak civil society and the collapse of educational system and values. By 1991, an entire generation of dissatisfied youth and impoverished civil society were attracted to the rebellious message of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF); ***(CNN Africa Report, 31st October, 2009).***

Sir Albert Margai, who incidentally succeeded his half-brother Sir Milton Margai, did not see himself as the servant of the state or steward to the people of Sierra Leone but instead positioned himself for personal gains and self aggrandisement. He even used the military to suppress multi-party elections and oppositions that threatened to end his rule.

This political downward trend became clear to the blind and audible to the deaf when one notes that Siaka Stevens entered Sierra Leonean politics in 1968 under a constitutional democracy but when he stepped down seventeen years later in 1985, Sierra Leone was a one-party state. This could be the reason why some Sierra Leoneans sometimes refers to Siaka Steven's tenure as ***"the 17 year plague of locusts"*** which saw destruction and pervasion of every state institution, Parliament was undermined, judges were bribed and the treasury was bankrupted to finance pet projects that supported insiders; ***(Bill Moyers Journal, 19th June 2009).***

When Siaka Stevens failed to co-opt his opponents, he often resorted to state sanctioned executions, framed-coup plots or

exile. In 1985, Siaka Stevens handed over power to Major General Joseph Momoh, a notoriously inept leader who maintained the status quo. During his seven-year tenure, General Momoh welcomed the spread of unchecked corruption and complete economic collapse with state unable to pay civil servants **(Lansana, 2005:6)**. But the government hit rock bottom when it could no longer pay school teachers that led to total collapse of the education system. Since only the wealthy few could afford to pay private teachers, the bulk of the Sierra Leonean youth during the late 1980's roamed the streets aimlessly **(Ibrahim, 2004:90)**.

Also, infrastructure and public ethics deteriorated and much of Sierra Leone's professional class fled the country. By 1991, Sierra Leone was ranked as one of the poorest countries in the world, even though it benefited from ample natural resources including diamonds, gold, bauxite, rutile, iron ore, fish, coffee and cocoa **(Ibrahim, 2004:93)**.

DIAMOND AND THE "RESOURCE CURSE"

Furthermore, the presence of diamonds in Sierra Leone led to civil war in several ways as "resource curse". First, the highly unequal benefits resulting from diamond mining made ordinary Sierra Leoneans frustrated. The Eastern and Southern districts of Sierra Leone, most notably the Kono and Kenema districts are rich in alluvial diamonds. More importantly, diamonds are easily accessible by anyone with a shovel, sieve and transport; **(John-Peter, 2005:45)**.

The phenomenon whereby countries with an abundance of natural resources tend to nonetheless be characterised by lower

levels of economic development is known as the “resource curse” Even as the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC) took power in 1992, ostensibly with goal of reducing corruption in the diamond mining sector and returning revenues to the state, high ranking members of government still sold diamonds for their personal gain and lived extravagantly off the proceeds, to the amazement and detriment of common Sierra Leoneans.

Diamonds and gold to a lesser extent also helped to arm the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) as they used funds from the alluvial diamond mines to purchase weapons and ammunition from neighbouring Guinea, Liberia and even from Sierra Leone Army (SLA) soldiers. The most significant connection between diamonds and the war in Sierra Leone is the presence of easily extractible diamonds which provided the motive and incentive for violence.

REBEL RECRUITMENT AND FOREIGN SUPPORT

As a result of the first Liberian Civil War, over 80,000 refugees fled neighbouring Liberia for the Sierra Leone through the border. This displaced population, composed almost entirely of children, proved to be an invaluable asset to the invading rebel armies because the refugee and detention centres were populated first by displaced Liberians and later by Sierra Leoneans who readily provided the manpower for the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) insurgency. The RUF also took advantage of the refugees who were abandoned, starving and in dire need of medical attention, by promising food, shelter, medical care and mining profits in return for their support. When and if this method of recruitment

failed, RUF often coerced the youths at the barrel of a gun to join the ranks of the RUF which led to child soldiers (***Ibrahim, 2004:106***).

It has been observed also that a lot of direct and indirect support came from foreign governments and state actors that fuelled the RUF rebel forces in Sierra Leone. Colonel Muamar al-Gaddafi of Libya both trained and supported Charles Taylor's NPFL in Liberia who in turn actively supported RUF insurgency in Sierra Leone (***Auty, 1993:47***).

According to General Agwai (2012), Col. Gaddafi of Libya helped Foday Sankoh, the founder of Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in Sierra Leone, who introduced the amputation of the arms and legs of men, women and children as part of scorched-earth campaign which was designed to take over the region's rich diamond fields. This inhumanity to man was also backed by Col. Gaddafi who routinely reviewed their progress and supplied weapons. The popular businessman Viktor Bout, who enjoyed protection of the Russian State, supplied Charles Taylor with arms for use in Sierra Leone and had meetings with him about the operations (***Lansana, 2005:59***).

In the beginning of 1980's, Charles Taylor worked for the United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) but the exact nature of this relationship is still uncertain (***The Economist, 5th July, 2007***).

THE IMAGE OF SIERRA LEONE ARMY; "SOBELS"

The poor conduct and sordid behaviour of the officers and men of Sierra Leone Army (SLA) coupled with their corruptive tendencies and general negative perception inevitably led to the alienation of many civilians and pushed some Sierra Leoneans to join the rebel cause. With the morale of the soldiers very low and their rations even lower, many SLA soldiers discovered that they could do and live better by joining rebels in looting the civilians in the countryside instead of fighting against them. The local civilians referred to these SLA soldiers as “sobels” meaning ***soldiers during the day and rebels at night*** because of their close ties with RUF. By mid 1993, the SLA and RUF became virtually indistinguishable and for these reasons, civilians increasingly relied on an irregular force called the Kamajors for their protection (***The Metro Magazine, 15th March 2011***).

THE KAMAJORS

The Kamajors are a group of traditional hunters from Mende ethnic group in the south and eastern part of Sierra Leone (mostly from the Bo District). They were originally employed by the local chiefs under the strong and able leadership of Samuel Hinga Norman who was actively used by President Ahmed Tejan Kabbah in 1996 to replace South African mercenaries called Executive Outcomes (EO) as the security force of the government (***Newswatch, 22nd December 1997***).

The Kamajors were a grassroot militia force that operated invisibly in familiar terrain and territory. They were significant impediments to the marauding Sierra Leonean Army and RUF troops but for the displaced and unprotected Sierra Leoneans,

joining Kamajors was a means of taking up arms to defend family and home front due to SLA's perceived incompetence and active collusion with rebel enemy.

NATIONAL PROVISIONAL RULING COUNCIL (NPRC)

With one year of fighting and violence, RUF remained in control of large territories in the Eastern and Southern Sierra Leone, leaving many villages unprotected while food and government diamond production were disrupted. Soon, the government was unable to pay both its civil servants and the Sierra Leone Army (SLA). As a result, the General Momoh regime lost all remaining credibility and a group of disgruntled junior officers of SLA led by Captain Valentine Strasser overthrew General Momoh's government on 29th April, 1992 (***Farah and Braun, 2004:164***).

Captain Strasser justified the coup and established the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC) by referencing the corrupt Momoh regime and its inability to resuscitate the economy, to provide for the people of Sierra Leone and repel the rebel invaders. The NPRC's coup was largely popular because of its promise to bring peace to Sierra Leone but the NPRC's promise was short lived.

With much help from ECOMOG troops provided by Nigeria in March 1993, the SLA recaptured the Koidu and Kono diamond districts and pushed the RUF rebels to the Sierra Leone-Liberia border. By the end of 1993, many observers thought that the war was over because for the first time, the Sierra Leone Army (SLA)

was able to establish itself in the Eastern and Southern mining districts (***Ibrahim, 2004:105***).

However the war dragged on as a “low intensity conflict” until January 1995 when the RUF forces and dissident SLA elements seized the SIEROMCO (Bauxite) and Sierra Rutile, which led to armed struggle and renewed RUF advance on the capital Freetown (***Lansana, 2005:72***).

EXECUTIVE OUTCOMES (EO)

In March 1995, with the RUF rebels within 20 miles of Sierra Leonean capital Freetown, Executive Outcomes (EO), a paramilitary group from South Africa was hired to repel the RUF insurgency and on their arrival in Sierra Leone, EO was paid to accomplish three goals:

- i.** Return the diamond and mineral mines to the government.
- ii.** Locate and destroy RUF’s headquarters and
- iii.** Operate a successful military propaganda programme that would encourage local civilians to support the government of Sierra Leone.

As a military force, the Executive Outcome was extremely skilled and conducted a highly successful counter insurgency against the RUF, that in just ten days of fighting, EO was able to drive RUF forces back, six miles into the interior of the country (***Lansana, 2005:74***).

With support from loyal SLA and the Kamajors Battalions, the EO outmatched the RUF forces in all operations. In seven months

EO re-captured the diamond mining districts and Kangari Hills, a major RUF's stronghold (***Ibrahim, 2004:108***).

Their second offensive captured the provincial capital and the largest city in Sierra Leone and destroyed the RUF's main operational base near Bo. This finally forced RUF to admit defeat and sign the Abidjan Peace Accord on 30th November 1996. This period of relative peace also allowed Sierra Leone to hold parliamentary and presidential elections in February and March 1996 which Ahmed Tejan Kabbah of the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) and a diplomat who had worked at the United Nations (UN) for more than 20 years, won the presidential election (***Lansana, 2005:93***).

THE ABIDJAN PEACE ACCORD FOR SIERRA LEONE

The Abidjan Peace Accord, piloted and landed by ECOWAS was a treaty signed between the Sierra Leone People's Party (government of Ahmed Tejan Kabbah) and the Revolutionary United Front (rebel group led by Foday Sankoh) to find solution to the Sierra Leonean Civil War. Discussions for peace began in May, 1996 in the city of Yamoussoukro. Although the initial talks failed but the channel of communication had been open leading to off and on talks which culminated in the November 1996 Abidjan Peace Accord (***ECOWAS Communiqué, 30th November, 1996***).

The Peace Accord mandated the Executive Outcomes of South Africa to be pulled out of Sierra Leone within five weeks after the arrival of a neutral peacekeeping force. The monitoring group did not get off the ground and the main stumbling block that

prevented Foday Sankoh from signing the agreement sooner was the number and type of peacekeepers to monitor the cease-fire **(Ibrahim, 2004:96).**

The continued Kamajor attacks and the fear of punitive tribunals following demobilisation kept many rebels in the bush despite their dire situation. However, in January 1997, the Tejan Kabbah government beset by local and international demands, ordered Executive Outcomes to leave Sierra Leone, even though a neutral monitoring force had yet to arrive. The departure of EO opened up an opportunity for the RUF to regroup for renewed military violence and by the end of March 1997, the Abidjan Peace Accord had collapsed **(Lansana, 2005:95).**

THE RUF COUP AND MAJOR PAUL KOROMA (AFRC)

After the departure of Executive outcomes, the credibility of Tejan Kabbah's government declined, especially among members of the Sierra Leone Army (SLA) who saw themselves being eclipsed by Revolutionary United Front (RUF) on one side and the independent but pro-government Kamajors on the other side.

On 25th March 1997, a group of disgruntled SLA officers freed and armed 600 prisoners from the Pademba Road Prison in Freetown. One of the prisoners, Major John Paul Koroma emerged the leader of the coup and established the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) which proclaimed itself the new government of Sierra Leone. After receiving the blessing of Foday Sankoh, who was then living under house arrest in Nigeria,

members of RUF were ordered out of the bush to participate in the coup and subsequent government (***Ibrahim, 2004:206***).

The joint new leadership of AFRC/RUF proclaimed that the war had been won and Major Koroma then appealed to Nigeria for the release of Foday Sankoh, (the absent RUF leader) whom Major Koroma appointed to the position of Deputy Chairman of the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC). Consequently, a great wave of looting and reprisals against civilians in Freetown dubbed “***Operation Pay Yourself***” by most of its participants followed and President Kabbah, surrounded only by his bodyguards, left by helicopter for exile in nearby Guinea (***Coalition Resources, 2000***).

The international response to the coup was swift, strong and overwhelmingly negative. The UN and the then Organisation of African Unity (OAU) condemned the military takeover, foreign governments withdrew their diplomats and some foreign missions in some cases, evacuated civilians and their citizens from Freetown. The Sierra Leone’s membership of the Commonwealth was suspended and the ECOWAS also strongly condemned the AFRC coup which in turn ignited ECOMOG forces demand that the new Major Koroma led junta return power peacefully to President Tejan Kabbah’s government or risk sanctions and increased military presence (***Ibrahim, 2004:118-119***).

ECOMOG INTERVENTION IN SIERRA LEONE

The ousted government of President Tejan Kabbah then appealed to ECOWAS for intervention to restore peace and democratic

governance. The Nigerian led ECOMOG response was swift and prompt because there were ECOMOG troops who could easily be deployed from Liberia to Sierra Leone. ECOMOG's intervention in Sierra Leone brought the AFRC/RUF rebels to the negotiating table where, in October 1997, they tentatively agreed to a peace accord called the Conakry Peace Plan (***Ibrahim, 2004:180***).

Despite having agreed to the plan, AFRC/RUF continued to fight and in March 1998, overcoming entrenched AFRC/RUF positions, the Nigeria led ECOMOG forces successfully restored the democratically elected government of President Tejan Kabbah back to power.

However, in January 1999, the AFRC/RUF once again set upon Freetown a bloody assault known as ***“Operation No Living Thing”*** in which rebels entered neighbourhoods to loot, rape and kill indiscriminately. Unable to consistently defend itself against the AFRC/RUF rebels, the Tejan Kabbah regime was forced to make serious concessions in the Lome Peace Agreement of July 1999 (***Lansana, 2004:107-108***).

LOME PEACE AGREEMENT AND DDR PROCESS

Given that Nigeria was to recall its ECOMOG forces with tactical victory over the RUF, ECOWAS and international community intervened diplomatically to promote relations between AFRC/RUF and the Kabbah led government. The Lome Peace Accord signed on 7th July 1999, was controversial in that Foday Sankoh was pardoned for treason, granted the position of Vice President and made Chairman of the Commission that oversaw Sierra Leone's diamond mines (***Lansana, 2005:112***).

In return, the RUF was ordered to demobilize and disarm its armies under the supervision of an international peacekeeping force which would initially be under the authority of both ECOMOG and the United Nations.

The Lome Peace Agreement was however subject of protests both in Sierra Leone and by international human rights groups abroad, mainly because it handed over to Foday Sankoh, the Commander of the brutal RUF, the second most powerful position in the country, coupled with the control over all of Sierra Leone's lucrative diamond mines.

As security situation in Sierra Leone was still unstable because many rebels refused to commit themselves to the Lome Peace Agreement, the Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) was a bold step and attempt to convince the rebel forces to commit themselves to the peace process. During the six week quarantine period of DDR, former combatants were taught basic skills that could be put to use in a peaceful profession after their return to the society. After 2001, DDR camps became increasingly effective and by 2002, they had collected over 45,000 weapons and hosted more than 70,000 former rebels (***Ibrahim, 2004:161***).

THE END OF THE WAR IN SIERRA LEONE

Several factors led to the end of the civil war amongst which are: ECOMOG strategic and tactical Guinean cross-border raids and bombings against villages believed to be hideouts and bases used

by RUF working in conjunction with Guinean dissidents, were very effective in routing the rebels **(Ibrahim, 2004:212)**.

Another factor that encouraged a less combative RUF forces was the new UN resolution that demanded; that the government of Liberia expel all RUF members, end their financial support of the RUF and halt the illicit diamond trade. Finally the Kamajors, feeling less threatened as the RUF was disintegrating in the face of a robust opponent, failed to incite and ignite violence like they had done in the past. With all their backs against the wall and without international support, the RUF forces signed a new peace treaty within a matter of weeks **(Ibrahim, 2004:213)**.

Finally, on 18th January 2002, President Tejan Kabbah declared the eleven-year long Sierra Leone Civil War officially over. By most estimates, over 50,000 people had lost their lives during the war while countless, defenceless and innocent people fell victim to the reprehensible and perverse behaviour of the combatants.

In May 2002, President Tejan Kabbah and his Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) won landside victories in the presidential and parliamentary elections.

President Kabbah was re-elected for another five-year term. Surprisingly however, the RUF's political wing, the Revolutionary United Front Party (RUFPP) failed to win a single seat in the parliament. Though, the elections were relatively marked by irregularities and fraud, but not to an extent that significantly affected the general outcome. The ECOWAS Observer Mission was on active standby to monitor the elections as well as, OAU,

EU, UN and other local and international organisations,
(ECOWAS Observer Mission Report 2002).