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## Rapid Intervention and Conflict Resolution: British Military Intervention in Sierra Leone 2000-2002

Richard Iron

*Serving our Nation*





# Army

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## **Rapid Intervention and Conflict Resolution: British Military Intervention in Sierra Leone 2000-2002**

Richard Iron

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# Contents

List of Illustrations .....vii

Glossary of Terms ..... ix

Introduction ..... 1

**Chapter 1**

The Road to War .....5

**Chapter 2**

The Sierra Leone Civil War ..... 17

**Chapter 3**

The British Decision to Intervene .....53

**Chapter 4**

Operation Palliser .....67

**Chapter 5**

Operations Basilica and Barras .....103

**Chapter 6**

Operation Silkman .....123

Conclusion .....147

About the Author .....159

Endnotes .....161

Call for Submissions.....177



*Figure 1. Gunboat diplomacy. HMS Argyll, a Type 23 Duke-Class frigate, cruises past Free-town houses into the Sierra Leone River. © Crown copyright. IWM (UKLC-2000-049-006-025)*

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## List of Illustrations

Figure 1. British soldiers patrol through the Sierra Leone countryside .....	Front Cover
Figure 2. HMS <i>Argyll</i> moves past Freetown .....	vi
Figure 3. Sierra Leone's location in Africa .....	xiv
Figure 4. Sierra Leone's national and internal boundaries.....	7
Figure 5. Location of Sierra Leone's key diamond mining regions .....	8
Figure 6. Illicit diamond mining.....	15
Figure 7. The locations of the eastern and southern fronts .....	20
Figure 8. The Rape of Freetown.....	46
Figure 9. A British Paratrooper patrol Lungi Airport .....	52
Figure 10. HM Ships <i>Illustrious</i> & RFA <i>Fort Austin</i> .....	65
Figure 11. An L118 105mm Light Gun.....	65
Figure 12. Royal Marine Commandos fast rope onto a beach in Sierra Leone as a show of force.....	66
Figure 13. The maritime deployment areas .....	87
Figure 14. The JTF component structure .....	94
Figure 15. Operation Khukri operation plan diagram .....	112
Figure 16. British troops meet with UNMASIL troops .....	119
Figure 17. British troops patrol Freetown in a Land Rover .....	122

Figure 18. Brigadier Riley’s campaign plan .....134

Figure 19. A British soldier teaches Sierra Leonean  
soldiers aspects of fieldcraft..... 142

Figure 20. The continuum of relative interests ..... 149

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## Glossary

1 Para: 1st Battalion The Parachute Regiment  
1 R Irish: 1st Battalion The Royal Irish Regiment  
1st Mech Bde: 1st Mechanised Infantry Brigade  
5/8 GR: 5th/8th Battalion, Gurkha Rifles  
18 Gren: 18th Battalion, The Grenadiers (Indian Army)  
2 R Anglian: 2nd Battalion The Royal Anglian Regiment  
42 Cdo: 42 Commando Royal Marines  
ACC: Administrative Commission Courses  
AFPC: Armed Forces Personnel Centre  
AFRC: Armed Forces Revolutionary Command  
AFTC: Armed Forces Training Centre  
AMC: Air Mounting Centre  
APC: All People's Congress  
APOD: Airport of Disembarkation  
ARG: Amphibious Ready Group

ATG: Amphibious Task Group

ATO: Air Tasking Order

C2: Command and Control

CDF: Civil Defence Force

CDS: Chief of the Defence Staff

CINC LAND: Commander in Chief Land Command

CIS: Computing and Information Systems

CJFORT: Chief of Joint Force Operational Readiness and Training

CJO: Chief of Joint Operations

CO: Commanding Officer

COBR: Cabinet Office Briefing Room

COG: Current Operations Group

COMARG: Commander Amphibious Ready Group

COS: Chief of Staff

CTG: Carrier Task Group

DCMO: Defence Crisis Management Organisation

DDR: Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration

DfID: Department for International Development

ECOMOG: ECOWAS Monitoring Group

ECOWAS: Economic Community of West African States

ELINT: Electronic Intelligence

EPs: Entitled personnel

EW: Electronic Warfare

FCO: Foreign and Commonwealth Office

FIBUA: Fighting in Built Up Areas

FSA: Fire Support Area

G Bty 3 RHA: G Battery 3rd Royal Horse Artillery

GCHQ: Government Communications Headquarters

GF: Government Forces

HQRM: Headquarters Royal Marines

HUMINT: Human Intelligence

IMATT: International Military Advisory and Training Team

IMF: International Monetary Fund

INDBATT: Indian Battalion

ITA: Inner Transport Area

JFAC: Joint Force Air Component

JFACC: Joint Force Air Component Commander

JFC: Joint Forces Command

JFHQ: Joint Force Headquarters

JRRF: Joint Rapid Reaction Forces

JSC: Joint Support Command

JTF: Joint Task Force

JTFHQ Fwd: Joint Task Force Headquarters Forward

LCC: Land Component Commander

LO: Liaison Officer

LUDF: Liberian United Democratic Front

LURD: Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy

MATT: Military Advisory and Training Team

MCC: Maritime Component Commander

MILOB: UN Military Observer

MOD: Ministry of Defence

MODAT: Ministry of Defence Advisory Team

MRP: Military Reintegration Plan

NATO: North Atlantic Treaty Organization

NCO: Non-Commissioned Officer

NEO: Non-combatant Evacuation Operation

NGS: Naval Gunfire Support

NPFL: National Patriotic Front of Liberia

NPRC: National Provisional Ruling Council

NSA: National Security Advisor

OAU: Organisation of African Unity

OC: Officer Commanding

OLRT: Operational Liaison and Reconnaissance Team

ORBAT: Order of Battle

OTA: Outer Transport Area

OTHR: Over the Horizon Reserve

PANAFU: Pan-African Union

PJHQ: Permanent Joint Headquarters

POL: Petrol, Oil and Lubricants

PVT: Personnel Verification Team

RFA: Royal Fleet Auxiliary

RSLAF: Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces

RUF: Revolutionary United Front

SACEX: Support Arms Coordination Exercise, or fire coordination

SATCOM: Satellite Communications

SDR 98: Strategic Defence Review of 1998

SDR: Strategic Defence Review

SILSEP: Sierra Leone Security Sector Reform Programme

SLA: Sierra Leone Army

SLAF: Sierra Leone Armed Forces

SLAF: Sierra Leone Armed Forces

SLPP: Sierra Leone People's Party

SNCO: Senior Non Commissioned Officer

SOP: Standard Operating Procedures

SSCC: Short Service Combatant Commission

SSD: Special Security Division

STTT: Short Term Training Team

TOW Missile: Tube Launched Optically Tracked Wire Guided Missile

TRAP: Tactical Recovery of downed Aircraft and Personnel

ULIMO: United Liberation Movement

UN: United Nations

UNAMSIL: United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone

UNPROFOR: United Nations Protection Force

UNSCR: UN Security Council Resolution

VERTREP: Vertical Replenishment



Figure 3. Sierra Leone, on Africa's western coast, was a former British colony in which freed slaves were settled. It is divided into four provinces with the capital, Freetown, situated in the Western province. (Image by Major Conway Bown)

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## Introduction

The British operation in Sierra Leone is regarded as a rare success for Western military intervention. In the popular narrative, British paratroopers deployed to Freetown over a weekend and, through a mix of professionalism, organisation and chutzpah, '[saved] the UN from disaster and [hastened] the end of an exceptionally nasty war.'<sup>1</sup>

As Alex Renton later wrote for the Observer:

*... the Sierra Leone intervention worked – uniquely well, in the history of modern military interventions in Africa. The rebel forces were scared away from the city, the UN got off its knees and the government army was revitalised. Eighteen months later, Sierra Leone's 11-year civil war was brought to an end. In the streets of Freetown at the time the graffiti read: 'Queen Elizabeth for king!' ... Tony Blair remains more popular here than anywhere else on the planet.'*<sup>2</sup>

The reality, like all realities, was more complex than the popular narrative suggests. The British presence certainly helped stabilise the situation in May 2000 when there appeared to be a high risk of a Revolutionary United Front (RUF) attack on Freetown, and equally the continuing British presence certainly contributed to the end of the war. But there was a wealth of circumstance and other factors, which even now are poorly understood,

that also contributed to what remains a lasting peace. Such factors include: exhaustion after eleven brutal years of war; international pressure on Charles Taylor's regime in Liberia, the RUF's principal sponsor; greater regulation of the diamond trade to limit insurgent funding; highly significant regional military interventions, in particular by Nigeria and, later, Guinea; and the determination of members of the UN Security Council that the UN's largest military mission up to that point had to succeed.

Nevertheless, the British intervention was an extraordinary achievement by any measure. Although, at its maximum, the UK deployed nearly 4 500 personnel into theatre (of whom 1 300 were ashore), most of the success was achieved by about 300-400 British personnel in Sierra Leone at any time. During two years of intervention in one of Africa's bloodiest wars, there were two British fatalities, of which only one was in action.

Although most public attention is focused on Operation Palliser, the original intervention in May 2000, and Operation Barras, the SAS-led hostage rescue operation of September 2000, the British intervention consisted of four separate but connected operations in Sierra Leone:

- Operation Palliser: 5 May to 15 June 2000. This was the original rapid reaction operation that was mounted in response to a deteriorating situation in Sierra Leone. It started with the evacuation of British and other non-combatants but evolved into an operation to stabilise the situation by giving confidence to the in-place UN force and the Sierra Leone Government while initiating full-scale retraining and reorganisation of Sierra Leone's armed forces so that they could eventually defeat the RUF.
- Operation Basilica: 15 June to 12 October 2000. This operation stood up as Palliser was wound down. It inherited the training and reorganisation mission from Palliser, but without the accompanying operational responsibilities and capabilities.
- Operation Barras: 10 September 2000. This was the operation to rescue a number of British personnel who had been taken hostage by the West Side Boys in the Occra Hills.

- Operation Silkman: 13 October 2000 to 31 July 2002. This was the final operation designed to coerce the RUF to surrender to the UN-sponsored Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) programme; it included continued development of Sierra Leone's armed forces and design and leadership of the counter-insurgency campaign to force the RUF into peace.

It is important to understand the relationship between these four operations and the impact of each on the final outcome. Operation Palliser was necessary to prevent the fall of Freetown in May 2000 and to turn the military tide in the government's favour. But it did no more; it did not defeat the RUF and it certainly did not end the war. Operation Basilica was the UK's attempt to limit its exposure in Sierra Leone to a training role; but the deteriorating situation in Sierra Leone in September and October demonstrated that this approach was a mistake. Without UK leadership and coordinating machinery the counter-insurgency operation faltered. Operation Barras was a 'one-off'. While its success is frequently credited with having a significant impact on the war, most impartial evidence suggests that its influence was much more limited than most British observers claim.

It was only during Operation Silkman that British strategy matured and an operational approach was designed that led to the ending of the war. Silkman continued the emphasis of earlier operations on building the capability of the Sierra Leonean armed forces but coupled it with the development of an effective counter-insurgency campaign plan that would wrest the initiative from the RUF and, eventually, win control of the main diamond producing areas which provided the RUF with the wherewithal to fight its war.

The popular narrative is absolutely right in one regard: British military intervention in Sierra Leone was highly successful. Why it was successful is rather more difficult to ascertain.

First, it is important to understand that the war was fought and won by Sierra Leoneans, not the British. The British helped, yes, but it was Sierra Leoneans who took the risks and made the sacrifices. And, although the Silkman campaign plan successfully forced the RUF to surrender to DDR, it was able to do so largely because of other circumstances, such as the failure of the RUF's invasion of Guinea at the end of 2000 and international

efforts to control the sale of uncut diamonds, leading to the Kimberley Process\* in 2003.

This discussion looks at each of the four British operations, how they were mounted and conducted, and assesses the impact of each. But first, it looks in some detail at the causes of the war and describes the various twists and turns of a war which was characterised not just by violent cruelty, but also by numerous spins of fortune, assorted peace treaties and outside interventions. It is only by understanding the war up to May 2000 that one can understand why British intervention at that point had the impact it did

The paper attempts to explain the circumstances that allowed the British intervention to be so successful. After each chapter are a number of key insights that may assist the reader to draw appropriate lessons from the Sierra Leonean war and the British intervention.

It is a truism that no two wars are the same. It is easy, from this truism, to draw the facile conclusion that there is little point in drawing lessons from one war to apply to another. The differences between, for example, Iraq and Afghanistan are so significant that it would be a mistake to apply the lessons from the Anbar Awakening to Afghanistan, or so the argument goes. The answer, of course, lies in understanding the context and circumstance of the war in question. If we understand what worked, why, and in what circumstance, then we would be in a much better position to apply appropriate and relevant lessons to other circumstances in the future. It is hoped that this work, on a particular war and for a particular intervention, can add to that understanding.

\*The Kimberley Process Certification Scheme is an international scheme designed to remove the trade in rough diamonds that might finance illegal activities while still allowing for legitimate trade.

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# Chapter One

## The Road to War

### Early History <sup>3</sup>

Sierra Leone's first contact with Europeans was with the Portuguese in 1462, who gave the area its name due to the supposed lion shape of the mountains overlooking present day Freetown. Later Sierra Leone played a major part in the Atlantic slave trade but by the late eighteenth-century public opinion in Great Britain had turned against slavery, and in 1787 a philanthropic organisation<sup>4</sup> established a colony for freed slaves, calling it Freetown. This became the main base for the return of captives freed by the Royal Navy. Thousands were landed each year until the final shipment in 1863.<sup>5</sup> The new inhabitants developed a unique culture totally distinct from the inland tribes, normally with British names, Western-educated, largely Christian, with professional trades and wearing European clothes. They developed their own colourful Krio (or Creole) language and evolved into Sierra Leone's well educated and affluent Westernised elite.

In 1896, Britain claimed the rest of Sierra Leone and named it the Sierra Leone Protectorate, as an administrative entity separate to the Colony of Freetown. The British ruled through traditional tribal chiefs rather than exporting the British model of government,<sup>6</sup> primarily to reduce cost. Expanding Western-style government from the colony to the protectorate would have required expensive administrative infrastructure which, in general, the UK avoided throughout its African empire.

In pre-colonial Sierra Leone, as in much of sub-Saharan Africa, authority was wielded by kings, chiefs and elders, with an emphasis on people rather than territory; reciprocity between rulers and ruled; and traditional religion that encouraged a deep belief in the spirit world. These concepts differed from European and Krio notions of governance in the colony, which focused on written law, Christianity and land ownership.<sup>7</sup> Traditional chiefs in the new protectorate benefitted from being the agents of colonial rule; their authority was enhanced and they were personally enriched. They became more ensconced in their roles and the bonds of reciprocal duty between chiefs and tribes were replaced by a system more closely aligned to rule by divine right.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, two very different systems developed in parallel: in the Colony of Freetown, western political, social and economic ideas prospered among the well-educated Krios; in the hinterland of the Protectorate, traditional beliefs and cultures continued to hold sway, albeit under the veneer of a centralised state whose main impact on the rural populations was to encourage a growing gap between rulers and ruled.

Colony and Protectorate were amalgamated by 1951. The 1947 Constitution specified that, in the Legislative Council, fourteen members represented the Protectorate and only seven the Colony – institutionalising a considerable loss of power for the Krio community. Thus, by the time of Sierra Leone's independence in 1961, the Krios had already been marginalised as a political force; the 1991-2002 war was not defined by differences between Krio and inland tribes. However, the colonial experience had created other fractures in Sierra Leone. Rural society was imbued with ethnicity, communalism and traditional spiritual beliefs; whereas in Freetown, the new Sierra Leone state had ostensibly adopted Krio-style politics with a sense of citizenship, liberal democracy and the rule of law.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, tribal chiefs had become dependent on the authority of the state for their own legitimacy, rather than from the people they ruled, creating a dangerous gap between the elite and the population. Although Sierra Leone's transition to independence was deceptively peaceful, the fault lines that were at least partly responsible for the ensuing war had already been established.



Figure 4. Sierra Leone and its national, provincial and district boundaries with provincial capitals shown. (Image by Major Conway Bown)

## Geography

Sierra Leone has a geographical area of 71 740 square kilometres; it is a bit larger than Tasmania and a bit smaller than Scotland. Most of the country is an upland plateau, rising to a series of mountains in the east, the highest of which is 1 948 metres. There are a number of major rivers, generally running from north-east to south-west. It is largely forested and is populated by multiple small rural communities which have cleared small areas of jungle around their villages for agriculture, mainly rice production. In 1991, less than 8 per cent of the land had been cleared in this way.<sup>10</sup> The rivers, which have few bridges across them, limit road movement; while the large forested areas open up multiple routes for combatants operating on foot.

What makes Sierra Leone different from many other countries is its mineral wealth: diamonds, iron, bauxite, rutile<sup>11</sup> and gold.<sup>12</sup> Most diamonds are in the south and east, close to Liberia and distant from Freetown. The two main centres are Koidu Town and Tongo Field ; both became treasured prizes in the Sierra Leone war.



Figure 5. The principle diamond-mining areas of Sierra Leone with significant output from the mines in the northern part of Eastern Province. (Image by Major Conway Bown)

A significant feature of Sierra Leone is the geographic split between the City of Freetown and its international airport at Lungi. They are 16 kilometres apart, but are separated by the wide estuary of the Sierra Leone River, necessitating a long detour inland on poorly maintained roads – the journey can take at least six hours to drive. In peacetime, helicopter, hovercraft and boats provide passenger transfer across the river. The main military

consequence of the separation of city and airport was that the capture and holding of Freetown by one faction did not necessarily mean that the airport was also held, and vice versa. For example, during the time when the military junta usurped the democratic government in Freetown in 1997-98, Lungi Airport was held throughout by opposing ECOMOG (Economic Community of West Africa Monitoring Group) forces; this denied the junta government access to an international airport and provided the means for ECOMOG's counter-attack.

### **The People**

There are no accurate figures for the population of Sierra Leone on the eve of war in 1991. In 2013 it was estimated at about 5.5 million. There are sixteen different tribal groups. The two largest are the Temne, which make up about 35 per cent of the population, and the Mende, at about 31 per cent. Temnes predominate in the north, Mendes in the south and east. The Krio are about 4 per cent of the population and are primarily found in Freetown and the west. English is the official language, although the lingua franca is usually Krio, understood by about 95 per cent of people.<sup>13</sup>

According to the US Department of State, the religious breakdown of the population is 77 per cent Muslim, 21 per cent Christian, and two per cent indigenous beliefs.<sup>14</sup> These figures are misleading: although most profess to be either Muslim or Christian, a very significant number also believe in the traditional spirit world. What in the West would be regarded as black magic is widely believed and practised in Sierra Leone and had a significant impact on the war. Unusually, perhaps, in an era of religious conflict, the Islam/Christianity divide was not a significant factor. The RUF for example, observed both Islamic and Christian rites.<sup>15</sup>

### **The Failure of Government**

When Sierra Leone achieved independence in 1961, the future was bright. The country was stable and the potential division between Krio and interior tribes had been neutralised. Unlike Ghana and Nigeria, political debate was not radical; communism and Marxism never became popular. The state's educational system was highly developed. The land was fertile and agriculturally self-sustaining. There were ample mineral reserves that

promised economic stability. Nobody at the time realised that this blessing would later become a curse.

The seeds of Sierra Leone's destruction were sown shortly after independence as the two rival political parties, the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) and the All People's Congress (APC), relied increasingly on tribal constituencies for their backing: the SLPP looked to the Mende while the APC's power came from largely Temne support. By 1968 the APC had gained power and began the process of solidifying its political position to such an extent that by 1978 they pronounced Sierra Leone a one-party state.

Coupled with the APC's concentration of power within Parliament was the systematic destruction of civic opposition. Suppression of opposition was enforced by widespread state-sanctioned violence, including the use of official state organs such as the new 'Internal Security Unit' (later the State Security Division), and using urban youth mob violence against those who opposed the APC government.<sup>16</sup> The president, Siaka Stevens, also targeted the judiciary and vested in himself the power to appoint and remove judges.<sup>17</sup>

The government destroyed the country's formal institutions, including the mechanisms to transfer revenues to the state.<sup>18</sup> This was the result of widespread patrimony; where distribution of resources is determined by personal relationships between 'patrons' and 'clients', rather than through state organs, and where greater importance is attached to personal loyalties than to laws and regulations. This was particularly marked in the extraction of minerals; the state iron ore industry collapsed due to lack of inward investment as profits were given directly to individuals. By the war's start in 1991, it is estimated that 95 per cent of diamonds were being smuggled, significantly reducing the state's capacity to meet its financial obligations.<sup>19</sup>

By the 1980s, Sierra Leone was in fiscal crisis. The 1973 rise of oil prices, the drop in commodity prices and the collapse of state revenues through patrimony, all contributed to a huge national debt. Spending on health, housing and education collapsed. For example, in 1975/76, spending on education had reduced from 15.6 to 8.5 per cent of GDP.<sup>20</sup> This led the government to state in 1986 that education was a privilege, not a right.

Education is particularly important in Sierra Leone, where the main pathway to escape poverty had been through education and then employment in

government administration or other professions. By making education a privilege, not a right, the APC government had brought education into the patrimonial system and removed it from dwindling state provision. In one stroke, the government removed any hope of betterment from the vast majority of Sierra Leoneans.

So, by the late 1980s, Sierra Leone had become highly fragile. The country was in a deep fiscal crisis; state provision of services had almost disappeared; and there were high levels of unemployment, in particular among the nation's youth. There was no outlet for any form of opposition: government-sponsored violence against its own people, to quash dissent, was widespread. This meant that, in the words of Yusuf Bangura, there 'was a highly repressive, anti-developmental political system, which rewarded sycophancy (or what Sierra Leoneans like to refer as *lay belleh*), and punished honesty, hard work, patriotism and independent thought.'<sup>21</sup>

### **The Crisis of Youth**

One of the main factors behind the war was what can be termed 'the crisis of youth'.<sup>22</sup> One commentator uses the term 'lumpen', which he describes as:

*...the largely unemployed and unemployable youths, mostly male, who live by their wits or who have one foot in what is generally referred to as the informal or underground economy. They are prone to criminal behaviour, petty theft, drugs, drunkenness and gross indiscipline ... they are to be found in every city in Africa.*<sup>23</sup>

In Sierra Leone, such youths were called rarray boys.<sup>24</sup> Their numbers swelled as the economy collapsed and unemployment grew. The rarray boys developed a distinct culture: gathering around the pote, historically popular urban rendezvous spots, and enjoying drugs and reggae. In the 1960s they were on the margins of society, but during the 1970s their cult status attracted some from the well-educated middle class. This injection of intellectuals resulted in the rarray boys becoming more politically conscious as a class, which, given the nature of the APC state, was opposed to the government. The pote became the centres for discussion against 'de system', half-informed by the writings of Marcus Garvey, Kwame Nkrumah,

Bob Marley, Haile Selassie, Frantz Fanon, Fidel Castro, Marx and Lenin.<sup>25</sup>

The intellectual leadership of the pote at this time was centred among the student body of Fourah Bay College, the principal university in Freetown. It was inevitable that student radicalism and repressive government would clash: in 1977 students disrupted the university's convocation ceremony, protesting against corruption, brutality and larceny. The government responded by organising a counter-demonstration, using about 500 unemployed youths from Freetown to attack Fourah Bay students on campus. The Internal Security Unit followed the counter-demonstration 'to restore order' and arrested a number of student leaders and lecturers. This resulted in widespread protests across Freetown and forty people were killed. The government declared a state of emergency and took some time to restore order.<sup>26</sup>

The 1980s saw an acceleration in social and political unrest in Sierra Leone as the economy collapsed, public services dwindled and unemployment soared. At Fourah Bay College a number of new radical groups emerged including the Pan-African Union (PANAFU) and the Green Book Study Group. Both were important in catalysing the ensuing war. PANAFU advocated 'total unity, liberation and development of Africa and a just and egalitarian system' and drew its inspiration from the liberation struggles in southern Africa.<sup>27</sup> The Green Book Study Group was funded by Libya and was dedicated to Muammar Gaddafi's political philosophy of 'direct democracy'.<sup>28</sup>

Further student unrest in Fourah Bay in 1984-85 led to temporary closures of the college and the mass expulsion of radical students and faculty.<sup>29</sup> This effectively ended political protest at the college and the centre for activism moved off campus into Freetown.<sup>30</sup> This had a number of consequences: PANAFU in particular found a large and ready audience among the rarray boys; opposition leadership became less intellectual; and the APC government found it more difficult to suppress the now dispersed and underground radical movement.<sup>31</sup>

As the economy imploded in the 1980s, unrest increased. The army, State Security Division and unions grew restless, principally because they had been underpaid or not paid at all. The APC government sought assistance from the International Monetary Fund, but the terms of their loan included massive retrenchment of government workers, flotation of the leone (the

country's currency unit), and privatisation of government corporations. This offered rich opportunities to the corrupt under the system of patrimony and the results were very different from that envisaged by the IMF's economists.<sup>32</sup>

Beleaguered by a crumbling economy, a divided party and attacks from constituencies across the country, the APC government conceded defeat and announced multi-party elections for 1991. But then the RUF attacked and the elections were postponed. The APC would fall not in an election but to a military coup in 1992.<sup>33</sup>

### **The Birth of Revolution**

The RUF was created in Libya. A number of the expelled students from Fourah Bay College made their way to Ghana where its military regime was, at that time, well disposed to Gaddafi's Libya. Ghana allowed Libya to fund scholarships at the University of Ghana for Sierra Leonean student radicals. While there, the Libyans offered the Sierra Leoneans commando training at the World Revolutionary Centre.<sup>34</sup>

The Sierra Leoneans in Ghana passed this offer to PANAFU in Freetown, who, suspicious of Gaddafi, decided not to pursue the Libyan route to armed revolution. A minority disagreed and made their own way to Ghana, from where they were sent to Libya for training.<sup>35</sup> PANAFU's decision hindered the building of a solid ideological base for the RUF's revolution, since volunteers for Libyan training were now sought from the pote. As Yusuf Bangura explained:

*Recruitment for the Libya project became a random exercise – ie, anybody who expressed interest to go to Libya could do so irrespective of ideological status or competence ... Instead, the hard-core RUF 'intellectuals' [are] drawn from a stratum of Sierra Leonean society that is hooked on drugs, alcohol and street gambling. They have very limited education and are prone to gangster types of activities.*<sup>36</sup>

Foday Sankoh was an ex-corporal in the Sierra Leone Army, who had been convicted at court martial for his part in a coup attempt.<sup>37</sup> After his

release he attempted to organise an underground opposition to the APC government with little success, so when he was approached by one of the first group of Sierra Leoneans to be trained in Libya, he was ready to join the new enterprise. In April 1988 he travelled to Ghana and was met by former Fourah Bay College students. Within three days, he and three others were on a Libyan cargo aircraft bound for Tripoli.<sup>38</sup>

Forty-two Sierra Leoneans trained at the World Revolutionary Centre in 1987.<sup>39</sup> There was little debate of what to do after training; the only apparently ideological document produced was *The Basic Document of the Revolutionary United Front of Sierra Leone (RUF/SL): The Second Liberation of Africa* which was a simple re-editing of an earlier PANAFU critique of neo-colonialist regimes. It was produced in Ghana in 1987 before departure for Libya and was the first known use of the term 'RUF'.<sup>40</sup>

The World Revolutionary Centre in Libya has been described as the 'Harvard and Yale of a whole generation of African revolutionaries',<sup>41</sup> when actually it was more like West Point or Sandhurst. The syllabus included fitness, weapon training, drill, and fieldcraft as well as lessons in the ideology of *The Green Book*. The course, which lasted eight months, was particularly vigorous. It was physically and psychologically demanding. Trainees suffered frequent beatings, the stated aim of which was to 'remove the civilian blood from inside' them.<sup>42</sup> For years afterwards, those trained in Libya were given the highest status in the RUF, and described as 'Special Forces'.<sup>43</sup>

Gaddafi took a personal interest in the students at the World Revolutionary Centre and visited a number of times. He seems to have personally appointed Foday Sankoh as the leader of the united Sierra Leonean contingent.<sup>44</sup> Sankoh only ever had a shaky grasp of revolutionary ideology,<sup>45</sup> but he was charismatic, a powerful orator, tactically astute, understood how to motivate people and was the oldest of the group.

While in Libya, Sankoh befriended Liberian revolutionary Charles Taylor. Taylor persuaded Sankoh that a revolution in Sierra Leone could not work as long as its neighbours, Guinea and Liberia, supported the APC government in Freetown. He needed a secure route to get Libyan weapons and ammunition into Sierra Leone, preferably via Burkina Faso, now ruled by Blaise Compaoré – another alumnus of the World Revolutionary Centre. So Sankoh was persuaded that the first step to revolution in Sierra Leone was to support Taylor's movement in Liberia. In return for his support,

Taylor would assist Sankoh with his Sierra Leonean revolution.<sup>46</sup> Importantly, Sankoh would be helping to secure an area in the western forests of Liberia, which would then form a base from which to mount an attack into Sierra Leone.



*Figure 6. Illicit diamond mining by two Sierra Leonean men using the traditional shakers to find alluvial diamonds. (Image by Brian Harrington Spier. Used under Creative Commons licence CC BY 2.0)*

## Key Insights

**Key Insight 1.1. The origins of the war were complicated, but it was probably the collapse in the economy that was the most significant factor.**

Patrimony, lack of political expression and massive population expansion all played a part in building dissent. However, it was the collapse of the economy, largely caused by corruption, that prevented the Sierra Leone Government from sustaining its support base. The withdrawal of state funding for education, in particular, created very high levels of resentment that sustained the RUF for most of the civil war.

**Key Insight 1.2. External support from Gaddafi's Libya professionalised the rebellion.**

Libya's intervention transformed the situation in Sierra Leone from civil dissent to a destructive civil war. Attendance at the World Revolutionary Centre outside Benghazi had a galvanising effect on Sierra Leonean would-be revolutionaries and gave them exposure to other revolutionaries from Africa and elsewhere. The friendships created at the Centre between the leaders of various national movements helped sustain their individual conflicts over the next ten years. Furthermore, Libyan practical assistance, both financial and weaponry, was essential in sustaining the RUF.

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## Chapter Two

### The Sierra Leone Civil War

*Nature itself was afraid of what was happening.*

Ishmael Beah <sup>47</sup>

On 28th February 1991, Coalition forces re-captured Kuwait and enforced a ceasefire on the Iraqi military. At the end of the year, the Soviet Union was formally dissolved and the Commonwealth of Independent States was created, marking the end of the Cold War and independence for many ex-Soviet states. In South Africa, negotiations for the dismantling of apartheid were underway between FW de Klerk and Nelson Mandela, culminating in the first elections with universal suffrage in 1994. It is no surprise that this was a period of optimism and self-confidence in the West.

Yet in 1991 dark shadows lurked. In late March, at the Plitvice Lakes in Croatia, the first killings heralded the bloody wars of the breakup of Yugoslavia. In the same month in Sierra Leone, the first attacks took place in Kailahun and Pujehun Districts, in the east and south of the country, marking the start of the eleven-year Sierra Leone war.

## **The Liberian Civil War**

When Foday Sankoh returned to West Africa from Libya, he joined his friend Charles Taylor and became a senior commander in Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL); he fought for Taylor for the next two years.

All the fighters who invaded Sierra Leone in 1991, both Sierra Leonean and Liberian, had fought in Liberia for up to fifteen months previously, or were trained by those who had. They brought into Sierra Leone the customs and systems they had adopted in Liberia. Therefore, the way that war was fought in Liberia deeply influenced the later war in Sierra Leone.

The NPFL's stated purpose was to end President Samuel Doe's corrupt and nepotistic government, which had divided Liberia on tribal grounds. Doe supported the Krahns and Mandingos and had brutally discriminated against the Gio and Mano tribes, reportedly killing 3,000 civilians when putting down a rebellion in 1985.<sup>48</sup> Taylor found the ethnic Gios and Manos a ready source of recruits, eager for revenge against Krahns and Mandingos. Thus, from the start, the Liberian war was characterised by tribalism and motivated by revenge, which provoked extreme levels of violence, especially against civilians.<sup>49</sup>

By mid-1990, the NPFL controlled over half of Liberia, including much of its timber, gold and diamond resources becoming an armed commercial organisation, with Taylor taking personal control of its finances. Thus the RUF found itself unwittingly part of someone else's commercial organisation, with Taylor actively promoting the 1991 RUF invasion of Sierra Leone at least in part as an expansion of his commercial empire, as well as a way in which to strike at a state that supported ECOMOG's opposition to him in Liberia.<sup>50</sup> The RUF was to become almost exclusively dependent on Taylor for weapons, ammunition and, initially, manpower. Taylor used this monopoly to establish a highly profitable trade in Sierra Leonean diamonds. Regardless of the RUF's early idealism to right the wrongs of the corrupt APC government and political system, it was corrupted by being an agent in the illegal trade for diamonds.

During this phase in Liberia, Sankoh built the strength of the RUF through recruiting Sierra Leoneans held prisoner by the NPFL in occupied Liberia.

Using threats, enticement and persuasion, Sankoh recruited 378 people in this way, to add to the twenty or so from Libya who were already fighting for the NPFL.<sup>51</sup> The new recruits were called the 'Vanguards' of the RUF and, unlike many recruited before or since, tended to be professionals, not lumpen, employed as expats in Liberia. Some were to rise to prominence during the course of the war, such as Sam Bockerie (alias 'Mosquito') who became Sankoh's second-in-command. The Vanguards were trained by experienced NPFL fighters. Among their numbers were five boys, aged between ten and fourteen years old, who were to form the RUF's first Small Boys' Unit. Three of them would later become commanders in their own right of future Small Boys' Units.<sup>52</sup>

The vanguards were organised into two battalions for the attack on Sierra Leone. But the vast majority of the attacking force were experienced NPFL fighters loaned by Charles Taylor. Some were to remain with the RUF throughout the rest of the war.

So, when the RUF invaded Sierra Leone in 1991, it was already largely composed of fighters inured to high levels of violence. Since some 80 per cent were Liberian, they had little or no vested interest in the future of Sierra Leone. They were used to abducting children for use as soldiers and enslaving civilians. They had limited experience of a political or ideological agenda, or of understanding its role if they genuinely sought political change. Sankoh had also observed the way Taylor used the media to promote himself and he appears to have consciously emulated him.

## **Conventional War: March 1991 to December 1993**

### **The Initial Invasion**

By early 1991, the NPFL had secured most of north and west Liberia, including much of the border with Sierra Leone. Foday Sankoh now had a secure line of communication for men and supplies with which to support an attack on Sierra Leone.

The RUF invasion of Sierra Leone started on 27 March 1991. This first phase of the war, which lasted until December 1993, can be characterised as broadly conventional: RUF and government forces fought each other

directly; they contested control of villages and towns; and both forces were largely road-bound. There were identifiable front lines between the two forces, albeit along roads rather than across the countryside.

The RUF divided its 1991 offensive and subsequent fighting into two 'fronts'. The Eastern Front was in Kailahun District and the Southern Front in Pujehun and then Kenema Districts. Each included one of the Vanguard battalions, but mostly consisted of Liberians and had Liberian commanders.<sup>53</sup> Although the two fronts were self-contained conflicts, independent of each other, Sankoh maintained overall command, initially from an operational headquarters in Liberia.



Figure 7. The two fronts of the RUF campaign that emanated from Liberia. Both drove towards the diamond producing areas of the country. (Image by Major Conway Bown)

On the Eastern Front, initial progress was steady rather than spectacular, advancing 20 kilometres in two weeks. The Army resisted the attack as best they could, but detachments were easily isolated and defeated. As one Vanguard said, the Sierra Leonean Army 'would repel you if you attacked them; but they were not strategising, so they could be easily defeated in battle.'<sup>54</sup>

On the Southern Front, the commander pressed his forces to advance much more quickly. Within a few days, Potoru, some 30 kilometres from the border, had been captured; by 27 April, RUF forces were attacking Koribundu, some 75 kilometres from the border as the crow flies. Koribundu, although a relatively small town, sits in a strategic position between Bo, Sierra Leone's second largest city, and Pujehun Town. Its capture would have threatened both Bo and the whole of Pujehun District.

Sankoh first entered Sierra Leone, in the south, on 7 April. He addressed a crowd at Gendema, on the Liberian border, and the first to be 'liberated' by the offensive on the Southern Front into Pujehun. He spoke passionately and convincingly to the civilian population to mobilise them into supporting his revolution and appears to have been well received. This was the first in a series of speeches he gave to local communities in the occupied areas.<sup>55</sup>

The RUF, both Liberians and Sierra Leonean Vanguards, mostly drove to war, using a variety of vehicles looted during the Liberian fighting. Trucks, pick-ups, and SUVs were all used. The fighters were equipped with light weapons: AK-47 and G3 automatic rifles, light machine guns and RPG-7s, provided by Taylor and sourced originally from Libya or captured from the Liberian Army. Wearing a combination of camouflage and brightly coloured civilian clothing, the RUF adorned themselves with a variety of magical charms, including shells, wigs and face paints. The purpose was to make themselves look 'fearful', principally to the civilian population. This is common in African warfare, but making the civilian population afraid of them was a long way from the RUF's self-image as liberators. It is another example of how the RUF's strategy was undermined by its methods.

## **RUF Discipline Breaks Down**

Today Sankoh tried to control the behaviour of his fighters, but abuse of

civilians was endemic from the start, including murder, rape and theft. Much of the blame could be placed on the Liberian fighters from the NPFL – according to one Sierra Leonean RUF fighter:

*The first collapse of political ideology in the RUF should be laid at the door of the NPFL. Look at the behaviour of most of their fighters; you will see they have no good ideology. Many of our young boys used to imitate the actions of the NPFLs and never understood what we were trying to do.*<sup>56</sup>

There were at least four other factors encouraging the breakdown of discipline in the RUF. First was the experience of senior Sierra Leoneans in the similarly violent Liberian civil war and the training of the Vanguardians by the NPFL, shaped by the violence in Liberia. Second was the lack of a properly trained and experienced command structure; there were no non-commissioned officers to ensure that orders were followed, discipline was maintained and transgressions were punished. Third was that many fighters had been 'conscripted' after the initial invasion, forcibly abducted from their villages. Although some became dedicated members of the RUF, others proved difficult to control.<sup>57</sup> Fourth was the nature of many of the voluntary recruits. Such Sierra Leoneans recruited and trained in Sierra Leone were known as 'Junior Commandos'. The proportion of volunteers to conscripts was about equal in the early years of the war. Many volunteers, who were young, disadvantaged and part of the lumpen culture, were swayed by Sankoh's speeches that highlighted the crimes of the APC government and its mismanagement of Sierra Leone's natural resources.<sup>58</sup> As Ibrahim Abdullah argues, referring to the high levels of wanton violence used by the RUF, 'a lumpen social movement breeds a lumpen revolution'.<sup>59</sup>

Many Junior Commandos were attracted to the RUF by the promise of power and the possibility of becoming 'big men'. Boys commented that handling a weapon 'made them feel like somebody'.<sup>60</sup> Indeed, there was a noticeable trend of humiliating those previously in authority. Chiefs and elders were a frequent target. One teenage boy describes an attack by the RUF:

*We decided to go to our grandfather's place, a chief. When we got there, the rebels came. My grandfather was killed by the rebels in*

*front of his house ... They gathered his wives, and they shot him. They asked the wives to laugh.*<sup>61</sup>

Much of the sexual violence witnessed in the Sierra Leone war fits into this category of revenge and humiliation. The majority of RUF recruits had just entered sexual maturity and sex on demand was one of the attractions of joining. But sexual violence was primarily about humiliation: not so much of the women involved, but of their husbands, fathers and brothers, against whom RUF fighters harboured grudges either as individuals or because of what they represented. As Keen comments:

*In many ways, rebellion involved a direct and immediate transfer of power from the 'haves' to the 'have nots' and very often from the old to the young. If revolutionary ideology was often thin, this transfer of power – though it sometimes concealed manipulation by older people behind the scenes – was a dramatic change in itself.*<sup>62</sup>

The lumpen youth, both urban and rural, became the core membership of the RUF. This core sustained the organisation through military setbacks and when many of the political changes they originally fought for had been achieved; the struggle gave power and relevance to those who had none, and to give it up would mean a return to where they were before. This explains not just the seeming intractability of the Sierra Leone war, and why it was so difficult to achieve a diplomatic solution, but also much of the excessive violence used.

### **The APC Government and Sierra Leone Army Response**

The Sierra Leone Army bore the brunt of the initial attack. Its defence in the border regions consisted primarily of isolated platoon bases at the major towns and the RUF found it easy to defeat them in most locations. The reasons for the Army's poor performance are many but are rooted in neglect. It appears to have been APC government policy to under-invest in the Army over the previous two decades in order to reduce the threat of coups. Instead, the government invested resources in the paramilitary

police, the Special Security Division (SSD), who became better trained and equipped than the Army.<sup>63</sup>

At the outbreak of war the Army consisted of two infantry battalions with a fighting strength of less than 3 000 infantrymen.<sup>64</sup> Its training and equipment had suffered under the APC government. Many soldiers had not fired their rifles in years.<sup>65</sup> The Army also struggled with having to fight a war for which it was neither trained nor educated. As a battalion commander at the time stated:

*The problem was that the whole thing was new to us. We were not prepared for it, in terms of training, in terms of arms and ammunition, in terms of getting the right structure to support a war machinery; and a lot of other things were against us in the system. Quite apart from the fact that the manpower itself was not there. The operations too were very new to us, because the conventional nature that is taught within the system was not what was applied by the rebels then. So it takes you some time before people rethink to respond to the type of warfare that was introduced into the country. [sic]*<sup>66</sup>

Many rifles were initially bolt action from the colonial era, rather than the automatics used by the RUF. Units had less than 30 per cent of the vehicle establishment, and less than 20 per cent of the support weapons. There was little or no working communications equipment at unit level; information was transmitted by messengers on foot or vehicle. Logistic support was very poor; deployed units had to make do with whatever ammunition they had lacking both the communications to ask for re-supply and the vehicles to move it. These are the principal reasons why, in the initial invasion, the RUF found it easy to overrun Army positions. The Army units were isolated and, once they had used all their ammunition, they had no choice but to withdraw.

Although there is no evidence that the APC government ever articulated a strategy for dealing with the RUF, it did initiate three strategic strands that were to have an immense impact over the following ten years. First was the rapid expansion and re-organisation of the Army; second was internationalisation of the conflict, by recruiting anti-Charles Taylor Liberians and encouraging the involvement of ECOMOG in the war effort; third was

a simultaneous localisation of the conflict, by encouraging civil defence in villages and towns.

The initial expansion of the Army increased its strength by about 50 per cent over twelve months. It also re-organised into a force designed for counter-insurgency. In the belief that the traditional battalion structure was too inflexible for what the Army now faced and that more, smaller and self-contained units were required, they created a number of self-contained commando units, 50 to 100 strong, led by young and dynamic officers. Although some were effective militarily and were largely responsible for recovering many of the RUF's initial gains, they lacked the disciplinary, logistic and administrative support of the battalion structure. As a result, 'self-contained' meant exploiting the civil population for food in the same way as the RUF, with limited accountability for their actions. This exploitation was encouraged by the fact that, due to APC selection procedures, most officers were northerners, operating in the south among Mendes for whom they had little sympathy, leading to the Army's subsequent brutalisation of the population. A further consequence of the new structure was that it encouraged loyalty to the commando group commander, rather than to the state or Army. This resulted in an 'us and them' mentality among the frontline troops that contributed to the military coup the following year.<sup>67</sup>

The APC government internationalised the conflict in two ways. The first was recruitment of Liberian refugees who had fled the NPLF advance, into what was to become the 'United Liberation Movement' (ULIMO).<sup>68</sup> By 16 April, ULIMO was fighting alongside the Sierra Leone Army in all main combat zones. The second way was by encouraging ECOMOG involvement. There were a number of ECOMOG forces, mostly Nigerian and Guinean, already in Sierra Leone, in support of ECOMOG's deployment in Liberia. A small but well-armed Guinean unit would soon prove its worth in the fighting around the Daru training centre in Kailaun. Although Nigeria's initial involvement was modest, it was to intervene twice, in massive strength, later in the war.<sup>69</sup>

The third initiative that was to have a strategic impact was the early growth of civil defence forces. Localised civil defence was a direct response to depredations against civilians by both the RUF and the Army. Rather than fighting each other for support of the population, as in a classic counter-insurgency, both sides alienated the people for whom they should have been fighting:

*The RUF ... did not learn how to relate to the people in the area under its control. Instead of implementing a revolutionary programme, it embarked on a campaign of terror in the countryside. This aspect of the RUF explains why the peasantry, the natural ally of most revolutionary movements in the so-called Third World, deserted the movement.*<sup>70</sup>

Civil defence forces grew out of traditional tribal secret societies such as the kamajors in the Mende tribe. Selected by local chiefs, kamajors were purportedly imbued with magical powers. They owed their allegiance to the local community. Every tribe or district had its own version of the kamajors, all of which later formed the basis of their own civil defence forces as the war spread across the country: kapras and gbetes in the Temne Tribe, donsos in Kono District, and tamaboros in Koinadugu District.<sup>71</sup> They were to have a major impact later in the war.

### **The RUF's Momentum Stalls**

The decisive battle of 1991 took place on the banks of the Moa River at Daru, the site of the Sierra Leone Army's training centre in Kailahun and its main base in the west of the country. It controlled one of the few bridges across the Moa River and its capture would have cleared all of Kailahun District of APC government forces, thus opening the way for an attack on Kenema District from the north-east as well as a south-west assault from Pujehun District.<sup>72</sup> The Sierra Leonean Army was also aware of the strategic importance of Daru and, unlike the forward bases that had fallen easily to RUF attack, reinforced its defence and prepared for attack.<sup>73</sup>

The RUF gathered most of its available strength in the east for the attack; about 1 000 fighters. The defenders included the Sierra Leone Army, Liberian United Democratic Front (LUDF), SSD, and a detachment of about 200 well-armed Guinean troops who, crucially, had heavy-calibre weapons to dominate the Moa River bridge across which the RUF had to attack. The attack failed and the RUF suffered heavy losses. The Daru battle was to prove to be the largest and most intense in the first years of the war. Daru was to remain in government hands for the duration of the war and, although the RUF was to occupy much of Kailahun District, the presence of government forces at Daru limited its ability to expand further.<sup>74</sup>

Whereas in the east the RUF's momentum stalled due to the government's stalwart defence of Daru, failure in the south was self-inflicted. Despite rapid early advances deep into the hinterland, Liberian commanders could not resist the lure of the diamond fields at Zimmi, near the border. RUF forces pulled back and concentrated to the east of the Moa River, permitting the Sierra Leone Army to re-occupy towns, such as Pujehun and Potoru, to the west. One Vanguard commented:

*[The NPFL commanders] were only interested in looting and taking properties back to Liberia. We started getting concerned: 'Are these people here to help us fight our war or are they just here to take all our peoples' properties?'*<sup>75</sup>[sic]

By the end of June 1991, the RUF's early momentum had stalled. Despite the widespread unpopularity of the APC government, especially in the Mende areas where the war was being fought, the RUF's barbarism prevented spontaneous popular uprising. Yet the weakness of the Sierra Leone Army was such that it was unable to take advantage of the RUF's loss of momentum. Although the Army reported in June that it had halted the progress of rebel forces, in fact there was very little fighting apart from the Daru battle. The Army simply occupied areas abandoned by the RUF; it did not have the strength to contest the heavily-defended RUF areas in Kailahun and Pujehun Districts. Furthermore, the Army adopted a number of self-defeating policies such as announcing, in late 1991, that anyone found behind enemy lines would be considered a rebel. They were suspicious of those who may have collaborated with the RUF, leading to arbitrary executions.<sup>76</sup> By such acts of brutality and repressive measures the Army lost the opportunity to galvanise the support of the civilian population against the RUF.

### **The Army Takes Over**

On Wednesday 29 April 1992, the APC government that had ruled Sierra Leone for twenty-five years, fifteen of them as a virtual dictatorship, was toppled in a single day. It fell to a group of junior army officers in a well-planned coup, who formed a new government under the banner of the 'National Provisional Ruling Council' (NPRC), led by Captain Valentine Strasser, aged 26. Although the driving force behind the coup was dissatisfaction with the APC government's mismanagement of the war and its lack of support for the Army, it was widely supported by other factions of

the population who were suffering from record unemployment, high inflation and continual shortages of fuel and electricity. Indeed, as Maada Bio, one of the coup plotters, commented:

*A coup is not just about taking ground; it is a mental battle. You are working together with people and you have to know that they are ready for it. If they are not ready for it, don't try because you are going to lose.<sup>77</sup>*

In April 1992 the people of Sierra Leone were ready for such a coup. Later attempts to seize power by force, in 1997 and in January 1999, failed largely because there was no popular support. The NPRC government massively increased the size of the Army, and in 1993 launched a major counterattack against the RUF.

The RUF was tearing itself apart in a conflict between its NPFL and Sierra Leonean members. Confrontation was inevitable: the damage being done to the movement's reputation by Liberian excesses was obvious and, as more Junior Commandos were recruited, the Sierra Leonean contingent was growing in size and confidence and beginning to challenge the Liberians' authority. This resulted in conflict between the two factions ending eventually in the expulsion of the NPFL in mid-1992.

Without Liberian numbers and firepower however, the RUF was unable to defend the ground it had previously captured and, by the end of the 1993, was on the verge of defeat. On the Eastern Front they were confined to a small jungle enclave on the Liberian border; on the Southern they just maintained a foothold on the banks of the Moa River. The success of the Army's 1993 counter-attack was due not just to increased numbers, but also to significant support from the Alpha Jets of the Nigerian Air Force, the use of local guides and reconnaissance provided by civil defence forces and, critically, ULIMO operations inside Liberia which were effective in interdicting RUF supply lines across the border. The Army was now able to defeat the RUF's conventional war strategy.

At first, RUF leaders contemplated withdrawal across the border into Liberia, but their escape routes were blocked by ULIMO. So, instead, they adopted a complete change in approach and tactics, eschewing conventional warfare and moving into the jungle to prosecute a more classic form of guerrilla warfare.<sup>78</sup>

## **The RUF Changes Strategy**

On 13 November 1993, after the capture of his headquarters, Sankoh announced the change of strategy to guerrilla warfare conducted from the jungle. This heralded a completely new phase of the war. It allowed the RUF to recover from defeat and enabled the movement to reach levels of success higher than it had so far enjoyed.

Sankoh's decision is cited in RUF lore as a stroke of genius; but, once the possibility of escape to Liberia no longer existed, it was the only choice open to him other than surrender. The move to the jungle necessitated a dramatic, and for some difficult, change in culture. For example, all vehicles were left behind with movement now being on foot. Camps, known as 'zoo-bushes',<sup>79</sup> were improvised from whatever could be found in the jungle. By moving into the eastern Kailahun District jungle, the RUF made it difficult for the NPRC's new, albeit conventional, army to attack, and thereby assured its own survival.

The RUF's survival was aided by Valentine Strasser who, in December 1993, announced an immediate and unilateral ceasefire. He thought the war had been won and that the RUF had no choice but to surrender. A ceasefire might have worked: if it had been accompanied by a simultaneous political initiative to encourage fighters to surrender and to win over the population of Kailahun District; if it had been seen to take seriously the continuing causes of the conflict; and if it had opened a dialogue with the movement's leaders. None of these things occurred. Instead, the Army continued its repression of the civil population. Without a comprehensive political programme to bring the war to an end, the ceasefire proved to be a strategic blunder that enabled the RUF to disperse unhindered into the jungle, re-organise into zoo-bushes, establish training camps and re-arm with re-supply from Guinea. The RUF took advantage of the respite to engage in, using the words of RUF commander Gibril Massaquoi, a 'sustained period of intensive self-criticism and self-examination. They learned from their mistakes and laboured hard to correct them.'<sup>80</sup>

## **Guerrilla War 1994-1995**

By the end of 1993, Valentine Strasser's NPRC was on the verge of victory over the RUF. The newly expanded Sierra Leone Army, with assistance from the Guinean Army, Nigerian Air Force, ULIMO and civil defence militias, had captured nearly every town previously occupied by the RUF and had driven the insurgents to the very edges of Sierra Leone. Yet within a year the RUF was back, stronger than ever, and had spread its insurgency to every part of Sierra Leone, not just the Mende-dominated south and east in which, up to now, the fighting had been confined.

Some commentators, seeking an explanation for this extraordinary turn-around in the RUF's fortunes, have blamed the Sierra Leone Army which, they assert, colluded with the rebels on a massive scale. They argue that soldiers had too much to lose by an early end to the war, so deliberately aided and incited the rebels, and conducted attacks themselves and blamed the RUF. This led to the widespread use of the moniker *sobels*, meaning 'soldiers by day and rebels by night'. In fact, evidence suggests otherwise. It is true that individual soldiers deserted to the RUF primarily because captured soldiers were given a stark choice: join the RUF or be killed immediately, but it is also true that Army units exploited the population and the country's natural resources for profit. But the very widespread belief in the *sobel* phenomenon was largely fuelled by RUF 'false-flag' operations: wearing Army uniforms for attacks on civilian populations and deliberately putting blame on the Army.<sup>81</sup>

Despite the likely reality that many in the Army worked conscientiously and courageously to combat the insurgency, its reputation was badly damaged by continuous accusations of collusion. This impacted heavily on the Army: many had joined, as those who had volunteered for the RUF, in search of self-respect. Lack of respect for, and trust in, the Army fed a dangerous spiral: the Army responded by complaining about lack of gratitude from the civilian population they were trying to protect which escalated into military suspicion that civilians were collaborating with the rebels thus leading to further exploitation and bad treatment of civilians that in turn led to greater mistrust of the Army. This goes a long way to explain why many communities preferred to recruit and rely on their own civil defence militias rather than the national Army, and why the relationship between the militias

and the Army was to break down so dramatically in the lead up to, and during, the 1997 AFRC coup. This coup was, itself, largely a reaction to the Army's loss of self-confidence following the sustained attack on it as a national institution.<sup>82</sup>

Meanwhile, the RUF was establishing itself as a national institution, re-structuring into five operational areas that covered the entire country including, for the first time, the Western Area that incorporated Freetown. Jungle camps were established in each operational area and the RUF adopted a strategy of raids and ambushes, rather than the previous conventional war strategy of holding ground. The principal purpose of operations in this period was to capture war materiel, in particular ammunition. Lines of communication to Charles Taylor in Liberia were still interdicted by ULIMO, and Guinean sources of supplies were unreliable at best. The RUF's operations to seize weapons and ammunition from the Army were highly successful and largely made up for lack of external supply during this period. For example, by mid-1995, it had seized significant quantities of weapons and ammunition, including seventeen heavy air defence machine guns and 3 123 boxes of RPG-7 warheads.<sup>83</sup>

Foday Sankoh established his headquarters in a jungle village known as 'The Zogoda' in the Kambui Hills, some 15 kilometres south-west of Kenema and 230 kilometres inland from Freetown. An insight into life there is given by an ex-RUF clerk:

*Yes, I went there in 1995. The place is big but you will not see it from the air, thinking that it is just bush, seeing only trees and rocks. The houses in the camps have plastic or zinc roofs but these are covered with grass so that you cannot see it from air. Before you reach the camp you have to cross seven or eight check points. The checkpoints are manned with both big men and small children. The security is very tight. The guards will interrogate you and if you answer wrongly they will kill straight away. They have radio sets, so they check with the commanders in the camp and with the commanders outside if you were indeed ordered to come to the camp. It is not a camp where people go in and out all the time; only few people will enter the camp ... The people in the camp are heavily armed, but the atmosphere was relaxed. But as for the rest it is just like a village, some people are cooking, others are dancing or just talking. Well, it is not completely*

*like a village, because all the looted goods are in the camp. And it was cleaner than in a village. So we had generators running all the time and we could watch television. There were medical facilities. We had captured a good doctor from the Rutile area. There were also medicines. These were brought by civilian traders, although they could not enter the camp, so they had to leave items behind at the checkpoint. There was a lot of trading going on with the civilians. All the food and medical care was free of charge. There was a church and a mosque in the Zogoda and everybody either had to go to one or the other, compulsorily. There was also a school in the camp. We had some teachers teaching there, but not all of the children went to school. I think about 30 percent of the children who were in the camp went there. It was mainly the children of the commanders and such ... They were teaching the same things that they were learning in ordinary schools, but they also learned about the RUF ideology and the reasons why the RUF was fighting.<sup>84</sup>*

Sankoh also established a more effective and centralised command. Never again would he allow the divergence which had appeared between the Southern and Eastern Fronts in 1991-93. He was also determined to wield much greater control over the conduct of his field commanders.<sup>85</sup> He instituted regular meetings at The Zogoda, usually monthly, at which all key field commanders had to be present. Such meetings reviewed progress and agreed strategy for the next period; but, most importantly, they permitted Sankoh to maintain his authority over his field commanders.<sup>86</sup> He also instituted a RUF-wide HF radio net and ensured that all dispersed groups remained in daily contact with him at The Zogoda.<sup>87</sup>

## **Mercenaries and Democracy 1995-1997**

By early 1995 it was clear to the NPRC government that the Sierra Leone Army was incapable of meeting the security challenge posed by the insurgency. The RUF had by then rendered much of the interior ungovernable and had captured all the main mining areas in Sierra Leone; on 9 April 1995, the RUF attacked Newton, some 40 kilometres from Freetown, and directly threatened the capital. The Army had failed against the RUF's guerrilla tactics and its ill-discipline had caused it to lose the

support of a large proportion of the population. As a result, Valentine Strasser signed a contract with a private military company: South African-based Executive Outcomes. It was to assist the Sierra Leone Army drive the RUF from Freetown and stabilise the Freetown region, regain government control of the diamond regions of Kono, help stabilise the country and retrain the Army and civil defence forces.<sup>88</sup>

Executive Outcomes deployed 150 personnel to Sierra Leone. Within a month of arrival in May 1995 they had achieved significant tactical success against the RUF, securing the Freetown area, and within three months had secured the main diamond-mining areas around Kono. Through the rest of the year and into 1996, Executive Outcomes took the war to the RUF by locating and destroying the RUF's bases in the jungle.

The largest of the attacks in this period took place in January 1996 on the RUF base in the Kangari Hills, overlooking the main Makeni to Koidu road. Rebels from this base had been conducting hit-and-run attacks and ambushes on this road and then withdrawing back into their jungle holdfast. Its approximate location was known, but it was so well hidden that it took some time for aerial reconnaissance to pinpoint it. This was done at night, using Mi-17 helicopters and a Cessna light aircraft, whose crews used night vision goggles to locate the heat sources of the rebels' fires. The search sectors were carefully coordinated to ensure that the aircraft looked as though they were on routine flights to Koidu, to prevent any warning being given to the RUF. About seventy Executive Outcomes personnel were drawn from all parts of the country for the attack; they were to form cut-off groups that would infiltrate the jungle prior to the attack and surround the RUF base. Once they were in position, the Nigerians bombarded the base with BM-21 rockets and Alpha Jets. Supported by the Mi-24 attack helicopter, the Mi-17s flew in Sierra Leonean infantry who swept the base, while Executive Outcomes personnel in cut-off positions captured any who tried to flee.<sup>89</sup>

This string of successes by the Army and kamajors, supported by Executive Outcomes and the Nigerians, wrested back control of large parts of the rural hinterland, and significantly undermined the morale of the RUF. The security situation was transformed to such an extent that the NPRC was able to keep a pledge when it seized power in 1992: to return to civilian rule within four years. Elections were held successfully in March 1996, despite RUF obstruction, and civilian Ahmed Tejan Kabbah was elected president.

The military successes achieved with the help of Executive Outcomes also directly led to Foday Sankoh agreeing to negotiate with the government for the first time in the five years of war. This led to the Abidjan Peace Accord, signed in Côte d'Ivoire in November 1996, prompted by the destruction of The Zogoda in an Executive Outcomes-led operation in October when Sankoh's second-in-command was killed.

The Abidjan Peace Accord specified: an immediate ceasefire; the creation of an all-party National Commission for the Consolidation of Peace; a Neutral Monitoring Group consisting of 700 troops; the disarming and reintegration of RUF combatants; and the withdrawal of all foreign mercenary groups. As a result, Executive Outcomes' contract was terminated and it withdrew in January 1997. Yet, Sankoh was duplicitous: like Strasser's unilateral ceasefire in December 1993, the Abidjan accord permitted the RUF to reorganise and rearm.<sup>90</sup> When Foday Sankoh visited the RUF's main surviving jungle bases in Sierra Leone, to explain to his fighters the need for peace, he 'sensitized [the] men on parade to the need for giving peace to the people of Sierra Leone', presumably for the benefit of accompanying officials from the International Committee of the Red Cross, who had agreed to provide the helicopter for his jungle journeys. However, when alone with his commanders, he explained that he was in Abidjan to gain breathing space for the RUF and allow time for a resupply of ammunition.<sup>91</sup>

In these circumstances, Kabbah's agreement to withdraw Executive Outcomes from Sierra Leone was to have drastic consequences: not only would Executive Outcomes' presence have exerted military pressure on the RUF to ensure it kept its part of the Abidjan agreement, it would also have provided a brake on the Army and, probably, have prevented the May 1997 coup that unseated Kabbah for some eight months.

### **The Junta 1997-1998**

The Abidjan Peace Accord was never implemented. Sankoh argued about the numbers of the UN Monitoring Group, to such an extent that it never deployed. He also delayed nominating RUF members to the Joint Monitoring Group and the Demobilisation and Resettlement Committee: both mechanisms that had been agreed to at Abidjan. Although a few RUF

members did emerge from the bush, voluntarily joining the disarmament programme,<sup>92</sup> the organisation as a whole made no effort to disarm. For its part, the government maintained military pressure on the RUF, primarily using kamajors under their national director, Chief Sam Hinga Norman. Kamajors, rather than the Army, seem deliberately to have been used since their actions were, arguably, more deniable if the government was accused of infringing the ceasefire.<sup>93</sup>

In an attempt to raise funds to purchase arms, Foday Sankoh travelled to Lagos on 1 March 1997, where he was promptly arrested by the Nigerian authorities for carrying ammunition. He was to spend more than two years under house arrest in Nigeria.<sup>94</sup> Nigerian intelligence was perfectly aware of his intention to evade the terms of Abidjan and Sankoh betrayed his naivety in travelling there. Sankoh's arrest removed the RUF's strategic leadership and much of the cohesion that bound it together. His new deputy, Sam Bockerie (alias 'Mosquito'), was a feared and brutal operational commander but he lacked Sankoh's personal charisma and strategic outlook. He was also unable to stop the factional in-fighting that affected the movement during the course of 1999 that did much to undermine it from within.

## **The Coup**

Meanwhile, dissatisfaction within the Sierra Leone Army was rising, leading to a military coup that evicted President Kabbah on 25 May 1997, just over a year after he was democratically elected. There were five main grievances in the Army that led to the coup: a perceived disparity between senior and junior ranks; the cutting of the rice ration; the government's planned reduction in the size of the Army; great resentment at the preferential treatment received by the kamajors at the expense of the Army; and a general feeling of being unappreciated by the state, including poor support to retirees and bereaved families.

Whereas the 1992 NPRC coup was conducted by junior officers who had been fighting the RUF in the field, the 1997 coup was led by non-commissioned officers in the Sierra Leone Army's football team.<sup>95</sup> They exploited the widespread dissatisfaction of the majority of the soldiery and within several hours President Kabbah had to be airlifted by Nigerian helicopter to Conakry, Guinea.<sup>96</sup> The coup perpetrators elected Sandhurst-

trained Major Johnny Paul Koroma, whom they released from Pademba Road Prison in Freetown, as head of State and Chairman of the newly-formed Armed Forces Revolutionary Command (AFRC).

The international community, led by British and Nigerian High Commissioners, Peter Penfold and Mohammed Abubaker, attempted to persuade the AFRC commanders to stand down and permit the peaceful return of President Kabbah. Although early signs were hopeful, by 1 June it was clear that attempts at mediation had failed. By then several thousand foreigners had been evacuated: most Americans were evacuated by US Marines to the amphibious assault ship USS Kearsage; the French used the corvette Jean Moulin to evacuate their personnel on 31 May; British, Indian and Lebanese flights evacuated many of their personnel on 29 May. However, there remained about a thousand foreign civilians in the basement of the Mamy Yoko hotel, near the beach in the western corner of Freetown, protected by Nigerian troops.

On early morning 2 June, the AFRC attacked the Nigerian positions around the hotel and directly threatened the lives of the civilians inside. In a battle that lasted nearly all day, the attacking forces were held at bay partly by the heroics of a single man: Will Scully, an ex-SAS soldier who had arrived in Sierra Leone shortly before as a private security contractor. He was joined on the hotel roof by British Army Major Lincoln Jopp, the leader of the small British Army training team, until he was wounded. Eventually, the British High Commissioner managed to persuade the AFRC officers to stop the attack.<sup>97</sup> This allowed heavily armed marines from the 22nd Marine Expeditionary Unit from USS Kearsage, with LAV-25 wheeled armoured vehicles on the ground and Super Cobra attack helicopters in the air, to evacuate the final 1 261 people the following day.<sup>98</sup> This included the staff of the British High Commission which had been the last western diplomatic mission left in Sierra Leone.<sup>99</sup>

Within two days of the coup, Johnny Paul Koroma invited the RUF to join the AFRC in a new Sierra Leone government, known as the junta. This was agreed by Sankoh in Nigeria and he recorded, by telephone, a message to be played on national radio to explain and give RUF fighters instructions to come out of the jungle and join the AFRC in a 'People's Army'. Sankoh subsequently gave an interview with the BBC, re-affirming his recorded statement.<sup>100</sup>

This was Sankoh's last external communication during the junta period. After junta forces had assaulted Nigerian Army positions around Mammy Yoko hotel, the Nigerian authorities cut off the telephone lines and television in the guest house where he was being held.<sup>101</sup> In the view of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, committing the RUF to join the junta was his last independent act as leader of the RUF.<sup>102</sup> From now on he became a pawn for other parties in the search for an end to the war and his deputies did not trust what he was saying. As Sam Bockarie later reported to him after one such contact from captivity in 1999:

*After the initial joy of hearing your voice on set for the first time in a long time, military instincts alerted me that you were under duress and that slowly the Kabba [sic] Government would use you to diffuse the explosive state of affairs and move us from our position of strength...*<sup>103</sup>

## Life Under the Junta

The AFRC genuinely believed that inviting the RUF to join the junta government would end the war. One soldier stated at the time 'we are professional soldiers who have done a good job bringing peace to our country by joining with our rebel brothers.'<sup>104</sup> This feeling was apparently mirrored by the RUF. Sankoh appealed to its members to cooperate with the AFRC to bring peace to Sierra Leone. Eldred Collins, a senior RUF member and junta minister, told a journalist: 'we are a people's government. We are a government for the people by the people. We have peace in Sierra Leone because JP Koroma brought the RUF from the bush.'<sup>105</sup>

The junta's control of the country was tenuous. ECOMOG remained in charge of Lungi and Hastings Airports, allowing the free flow of Nigerian troops into the country for the February 1998 intervention which ended junta rule. It also permitted Kabbah to maintain a government presence at Lungi Airport, secured by ECOMOG and some loyal Sierra Leone Army and SSD forces.<sup>106</sup> The south of the country remained largely under the control of the kamajors although the junta held some of the major towns such as Bo and Pujehun where there were in-place Army garrisons. The RUF's former stronghold in eastern Kailahun remained under junta control, as did the diamond-producing areas of Kono District.<sup>107</sup>

Both AFRC and the RUF were mistaken in thinking that the formation of the junta would bring peace to Sierra Leone. Instead, the character of the conflict and its participants shifted. Before, the nation—along with international and regional support—was more or less united against a deeply unpopular, if effective, guerrilla movement, albeit with a national army that was also largely mistrusted. Now, the junta, combining the unpopular RUF with the untrustworthy army, provoked widespread resistance. Internationally, the new regime was regarded as illegal and prompted the imposition of sanctions. Regionally, ECOMOG forces were now arrayed against the new government. Internally, local civil defence forces, including the kamajors, were committed to the military overthrow of the junta and, for the first time in the Sierra Leone war, there was widespread civil resistance to the government.

### **The Kamajors and Civil Defence**

It was Nigerian-led ECOMOG forces that were eventually to liberate Freetown from the junta in February 1998 and they rightly claim much of the credit for the restitution of democracy in Sierra Leone. But, deep in the rainforest, there were also large numbers of Sierra Leoneans who contributed equally to the restoration of President Kabbah. These were the kamajors of the Civil Defence Force (CDF) who, by their continuing armed resistance to the junta, allowed Kabbah, in exile, to claim that the junta was not only illegal but also lacked the popular support of Sierra Leoneans.

As soon as Johnny Paul Koroma issued his public invitation to the RUF to join his government, the CDF knew that they would be excluded. As well as long-standing difficulties with the army, there was even greater animosity against the RUF. The period following the coup was one of great difficulty for the CDF: they were evicted from major towns and their district and chiefdom structure was disrupted. The junta's military strength was relatively much greater and kamajors were forced into the bush. Strategically, the CDF was on the defensive.<sup>108</sup>

The CDF needed time to reorganise, re-equip and build its strength. It established two bases in its heartlands deep in the jungle: one at Talia, a village in the south of Bonthe District, called 'Base Zero'; the other, called 'Base One', at Bo Waterside on the Liberian border.<sup>109</sup> Base Zero was

distant from any towns held by the junta and was not connected to the main road network. It would remain the CDF's main base for command, training and logistics throughout the junta period.

Over time, and supported with Nigerian supplies flown by helicopter from Liberia, the kamajors at Base Zero built their strength. They recruited massively among the Mende tribe, conducting magical initiation ceremonies that conferred magical powers upon those inducted. In December 1997 they were able to start military operations against the junta, isolating many junta garrisons and stretching junta forces to such an extent that they were unable to resist the Nigerian-led ECOMOG attack on Freetown in February 1998. Even more importantly, the CDF was the only indigenous force fighting on behalf of President Kabbah's government, which may otherwise have lacked legitimacy within Sierra Leone.<sup>110</sup>

### **The Nigerians and ECOMOG intervene**

The immediate condemnation of the May 1997 coup by the international community put pressure on Nigeria, as the main regional power, to take action. The Organisation of African Unity (OAU), and the Commonwealth, fully advocated the use of force by Sierra Leone's neighbours 'to take all necessary measures to make life impossible for the new regime.' This show of collective opposition to a military coup was uncharacteristic in a sub-region notorious for the use of the military in internal politics.<sup>111</sup> Subsequent decisions by ECOWAS to apply military pressure on the Koroma regime, including the imposition of the economic blockade, inevitably required Nigerian forces to implement them.<sup>112</sup> This led to the situation where a military dictator in Nigeria took the lead in restoring democracy in Sierra Leone against another military dictator. This irony was not lost on the international media, involving some finely nuanced diplomatic positions from, for example, the British government which wanted to support Nigerian actions in Sierra Leone without appearing to condone the Nigerian military regime.<sup>113</sup>

ECOMOG's military intervention to restore the legitimate government of President Kabbah started on 4 February 1998. Over nine days, supported by close air support and naval gunfire, Nigerian forces overran the AFRC and RUF junta forces defending Freetown. Those remaining fled in disarray

down the western coast road, being forced to hire boats to cross the estuary at Tombo, finally collecting themselves in Masiaka.

Once Freetown was secure, the Nigerian Army started to expand its control across the rural area of Sierra Leone. The by now reorganised junta forces withdrew before them, moving east to seize from the CDF the diamond mining town on Koidu in Kono District from where, in mid-April, they were driven into the jungle by advancing ECOMOG forces. The Nigerian attack was supported by kamajors through most of southern and central Sierra Leone. Major towns, like Bo and Pujehun, that lay outside the main ECOMOG axis of advance were attacked and liberated by the CDF.<sup>114</sup>

The weak marriage between AFRC and RUF, effectively sundered under ECOMOG's military pressure. Johnny-Paul Koroma was held under effective house arrest at the RUF headquarters at Buedu near the Liberian border, while the majority of AFRC fighters set out on their own from the RUF concentrating around Koidu, to establish an independent force in the jungle in the north under the command of Solomon ('SAJ') Musa.

## **President Kabbah Returns**

Meanwhile, back in Freetown, there were ugly scenes as the population sought revenge for the previous junta's mismanagement and excesses. Within hours of the junta's evacuation of Freetown on 12 February, there were signs of mob violence against those thought to have collaborated with them.

Kabbah's return on 10 March was an opportunity for public rejoicing in the restoration of democracy and thanks for the leading part played by the Nigerians. In the ceremony held that day in Freetown, attended not just by Kabbah but also by President Abacha of Nigeria and President Conde of Guinea, 'there were loud cheers every time anyone mentioned ECOMOG, Nigeria or Abacha ... but the largest cheers were reserved for [Brigadier Maxwell] Khobe ...', the Nigerian commander of the forces that had freed Freetown.<sup>115</sup>

President Kabbah declared a state of emergency, permitting the arrest and prosecution of collaborators, and reducing their legal rights.<sup>116</sup> Many military

personnel and civilians who had served under the regime were arrested as a result; over 3 000 people were detained at Pademba Road prison.<sup>117</sup> Fifty-nine civilians and thirty-eight soldiers were charged with treason, and sentenced to death.<sup>118</sup> The soldiers were tried by military court-martial, with no right of appeal: twenty-four were found guilty, and were executed by firing squad on 19 October 1998.<sup>119</sup> The civilians were more fortunate: they had right of appeal and there was no immediate execution. They were still in Pademba Road prison on 6 January 1999, when they were released by invading AFRC Faction forces.<sup>120</sup>

The executions and detentions of large numbers of AFRC members in Pademba Road prison were to become a factor behind the 6 January 1999 attack on Freetown. SAJ Musa was known to have said that 'they are killing our brothers' to motivate his troops.<sup>121</sup> Several of the rebels' relatives, including SAJ Musa's wife, were among those detained by the government in Pademba Road.<sup>122</sup> The first act of the invaders on 6 January, after capturing State House, was to open the gates of the prison.

Another rationale for the 6 January 1999 attack was to 'restore the SLA (Sierra Leone Army)'.<sup>123</sup> Given the fact that the Sierra Leone Army had joined the AFRC almost wholesale and that its discipline was notoriously bad, President Kabbah disbanded the Sierra Leone Army and appointed the Nigerian Brigadier Maxwell Khobe as Sierra Leone's Chief of Defence Staff.<sup>124</sup>

So, unwittingly, the government had taken two actions (the executions and the disbandment of the Army) that were to provoke the single most violent and barbaric act of the war – the AFRC's 6 January 1999 assault on Freetown. This is not to say that the government's actions were, in any way, a justification for what was to follow; but it is an example of unintended consequences.

## **The Rebels Fight Back**

### **ECOMOG's Strategic Position Weakens**

Sani Abacha, the military dictator of Nigeria, died on 8 June 1998. He had been an ardent supporter of ECOMOG intervention in Sierra Leone and the

recapture of Freetown in February was a triumph for him as the Chairman of ECOWAS. With his death, Nigerian military support for involvement for the Kabbah government became more problematic. One of the first steps of the new Nigerian leadership under General Abubaker was to release Foday Sankoh to the custody of the Sierra Leone government. The other decision impacting Sierra Leone was a commitment to civil rule in Nigeria: it was clear that a democratic Nigerian Government would have to regain control over its powerful, independent-minded and coup-prone army.<sup>125</sup>

Reduction in political support for the Nigerian Army and its war in Sierra Leone is likely to have been largely responsible for the weakening of ECOMOG's strategic position in Sierra Leone by late autumn 1998. There have also been suggestions of disunity in the high command, troop reductions after the initial offensive and difficulties in its relationship with the CDF. Whatever the reasons, the force that had swept all before it during February to April 1998 was now on the defensive. In the terminology of military doctrine, ECOMOG had reached its culminating point.<sup>126</sup>

The CDF was still weak in the north and was affected by continuing personal conflict between its coordinator, and Deputy Defence Minister Hinga Norman, and the President.<sup>127</sup> As a result, its role in the north, where the war was now being fought, was limited to that of the provision of guides and other support to ECOMOG forces rather than being able to capture and hold ground against the RUF in its own right. Although the Sierra Leone government was trying to recreate a national army under the leadership of Nigerian Brigadier Maxwell Khobe, it was a long way from being an effective force.

Without an army of its own, the Sierra Leonean government's fortune was linked inextricably to ECOMOG. Unfortunately, ECOMOG was becoming fatally weaker.

### **The RUF in the Jungle, Again**

After the RUF took to the jungle again, in April 1998 following the ECOMOG capture of Koidu, the rest of the year was marked by rebuilding its strength while ECOMOG's waned. The RUF established a series of jungle

bases around the Nigerian positions in Koidu and gradually created an encirclement, including a series of ambushes on the only road from Koidu heading west back to Makeni and Freetown, preventing any reinforcement or supplies from reaching Koidu by road. Although Nigerian Alpha Jets flew sorties to discover the guerrilla bases, the RUF positions were sufficiently well camouflaged under the jungle canopy to escape detection. By the time the RUF finally attacked Koidu in December, the ECOMOG garrison was totally isolated and beleaguered.

The final RUF attack was conducted using munitions supplied by Charles Taylor who, by this time, was President of Liberia. They were brought across the border to the RUF Headquarters at Buedu by Liberian Army trucks, disguised as NGO vehicles, and then carried by abducted civilian slaves along jungle paths the 100 kilometres or so to the RUF's positions around Koidu.<sup>128</sup> The munitions were paid for by diamonds: although ECOMOG occupied Koidu town and the centre of diamond-mining production, the RUF still controlled several peripheral diamond fields. Diamond mining was one of the main activities conducted by the RUF in their positions around Koidu.

On 16 December 1998, a lightly armed guerrilla army, manned largely by abductees including many child soldiers, defeated a regular army brigade equipped with artillery and armoured vehicles. It was the largest battle of the Sierra Leone war. Up to a thousand Nigerian soldiers may have been killed. Although the Nigerian defence can be faulted tactically (it was too static; arrayed along the east-west road with no north-south depth; no reserves; artillery positions too exposed), Nigerian soldiers fought courageously. But the RUF fought a tactically astute battle, well controlled by experienced commanders.<sup>129</sup> But the greatest reason for the disaster was inaction by ECOMOG commanders back in Freetown: it had been clear for some months that the Koidu garrison was increasingly exposed and vulnerable, yet nothing effective was done. As it was, ECOMOG lost nearly half its combat strength in Sierra Leone in one battle.

### **The AFRC's move to Freetown**

While the RUF was gathering strength through the second half of 1998 around Koidu, in the northern jungle the AFRC was similarly recuperating

and reorganising. Its commander, SAJ Musa, was an inspiring leader. One ex-member of the AFRC recalled:

*SAJ was strong and very brave. He was a good soldier – he was trying to reinstate the Army. Other soldiers with strong hearts were loyal to him. He was once the Vice President in this country; everybody knew him and we all loved him more than we loved our own commanders. It was like after ECOMOG attacked us, we felt so bad; morale was down too low at that time. SAJ was the only one who brought us up again to believe in ourselves.*<sup>130</sup>

SAJ Musa planned an operation that was breathtaking in its audacity. Over a period of four weeks he would march the AFRC, with maybe 700 troops, 250 kilometres through the jungle to the outskirts of Freetown. In doing so he had to avoid detection and attack by the Nigerian Air Force and ensure that he avoided any strong ECOMOG garrisons or mobile forces. But he also needed to attack weaker garrisons in order to capture sufficient ammunition to sustain an attack on Freetown. As noted earlier, Musa's stated purpose was to 'reinstate the Sierra Leone Army' and to rescue their families and friends from the junta who were being held in Pademba Road prison. He probably also wanted to capture Freetown before the RUF so that the AFRC could once again take the upper hand in the junta.

Moving only at night, the force assaulted ECOMOG positions at Lunsar, Masiaka and, finally as they arrived on the Freetown Peninsula, the training camp at Benguema. In each location they captured significant quantities of weapons and stocks of ammunition, before resuming their night march towards Freetown. However, after Benguema's capture, SAJ Musa was killed in an ammunition accident. This had a significant impact: not only was Musa the strategic brain behind the AFRC, he was the only one who had the charisma and personal power to control what would become an orgy of killing once they reached Freetown. The new leader of the AFRC, Alex Brima (alias 'Gullit') was an effective low level tactical commander but nothing more.

At the same time as the AFRC reached the peninsula, the RUF forces were also advancing towards Freetown after their success at Koidu. They attacked and captured Makeni between 23 and 27 December and then headed towards Freetown.

ECOMOG now faced two threats that were distinctly different in nature. On the one hand, the RUF advanced on Freetown from the east, following the fall of Koidu; its forces captured town after town, expelled ECOMOG, established RUF rule and secured a line of communication back to Buedu in Kailahun District and then Liberia. On the other hand, the AFRC advanced from the north as a self-contained unit; it did not aim to occupy territory, or to defeat the ECOMOG defenders it found en route. Its only interests were to find a route to Freetown and to capture enough ammunition for the final assault.

It is perhaps not surprising that ECOMOG's intelligence analyses at the time seem to have been incapable of differentiating between the two distinct threats. They certainly regarded the RUF advance as the more substantial and worrisome. It was also easier to spot and plot on the map, as it conducted a conventional military advance, with a clearly identifiable front line. The AFRC, however, was a 'will o' the wisp': it attacked ECOMOG bases by night, seized military stores, and moved on. In each case ECOMOG forces reported the attack, and then emphasised that they had regained control of the town, driving the attackers off. For example, on 16 December 1998, following the Masiaka attack, ECOMOG's spokesman reported that ECOMOG forces 'were on top of the situation... we have succeeded in blocking them from regrouping.'<sup>131</sup> In this way, ECOMOG intelligence appears to have concentrated on the RUF advance rolling in from the east, and underestimated the AFRC threat which was moving faster and was already significantly closer to Freetown. ECOMOG seems to have regarded the AFRC attacks as some form of advance party for the main RUF advance, rather than as a distinct threat in its own right.

## The 6 January Rape of Freetown

The AFRC attack on Freetown started at 2am on 6 January 1999. By 8am the seat of government, State House, had been seized and the majority of the capital was in the hands of the AFRC. The only substantial defence was at the Upgun roundabout, at the eastern edge of the city, where a single Nigerian infantry company was finally overwhelmed by six battalions of attackers.<sup>132</sup>

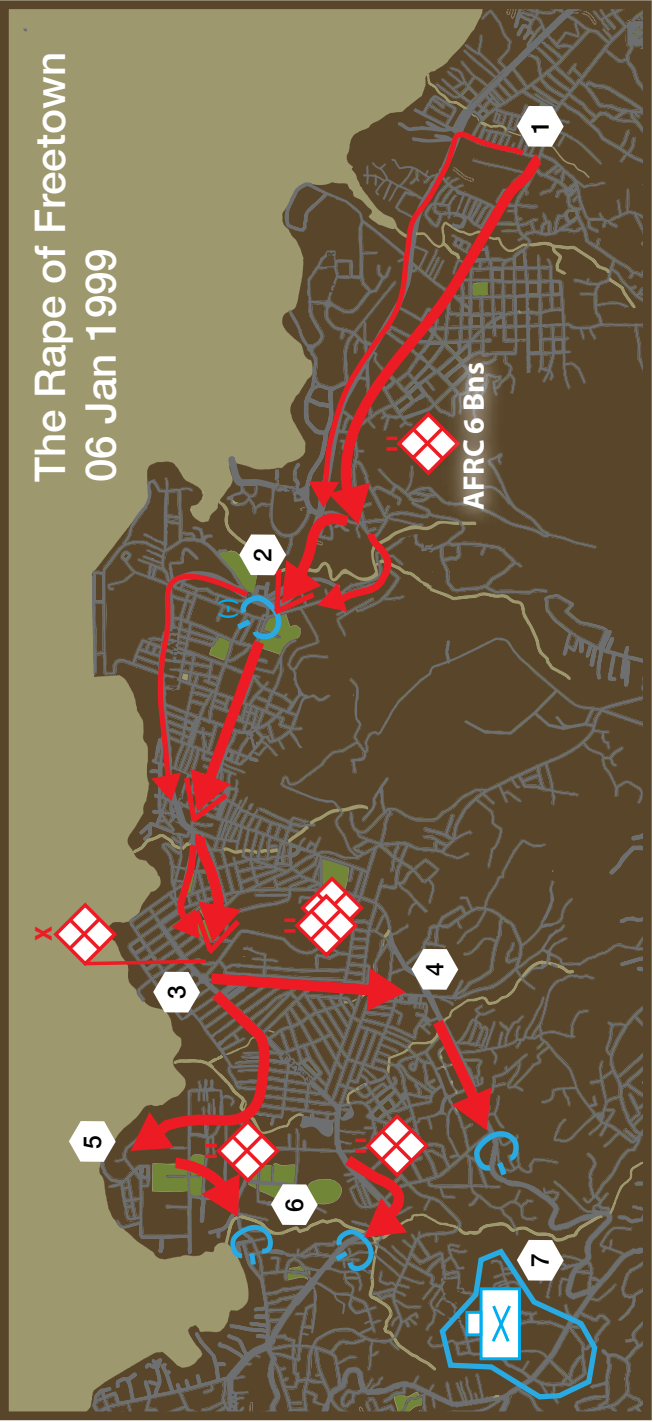


Figure 8. The Rape of Freetown. 1. At 0400 an AFRC column of about six battalions attacks the Kissy Police station and the battle for Freetown commences. 2. 0600 - the battle for the ECOMOG stronghold at the Ugun Roundabout. The ECOMOG forces were at about company (-) strength. Four AFRC soldiers are killed before ECOMOG forces withdraw. 3. State House, the seat of government, is captured at 0800, its ECOMOG defenders having fled before the AFRC columns arrived. A HQ is established in the building. 4. Two battalions move south and free the prisoners at the Padema Road prison. 5. Troops march into Kingtom where the power station is located. 6. Two battalions are ordered to seize the bridges that cross the Congo River which are held by ECOMOG forces supported by some armoured vehicles. Both attacks fail. 7. Wilberforce Barracks - the primary barracks of the Sierra Leone Army. (Image by Major Conway Bown derived from sources supplied by the author).

On arrival at State House, the senior commanders congratulated themselves and immediately started to occupy offices. Alex Brima (alias 'Gullit') chose the President's office for himself. The brigade headquarters was established in the compound. Generally, the AFRC troops were jubilant; State House was regarded as the most important target within Freetown, and many thought that they had already achieved their mission.

Already the discipline which had sustained the group in the jungle and long march to Freetown was beginning to erode. The battalion structure broke down and the lure of raping and looting in a relatively rich city was too much for many who had lived in the jungle for the previous eight months.

Meanwhile, two AFRC battalions attacked Pademba Road prison. There was a short fight, but the AFRC fighters subdued the prison guards by about 10am. All prisoners were released and told to make their own way to State House, which many did. Others took advantage of the chaos to slip away. There was no plan to receive the prisoners at State House, nor to process them or administer them in any way. The start of the general breakdown of order can in part be attributed to this mass release of prisoners.

Freetown is split by the Congo River which flows from the mountains in the south to the sea. The larger part of Freetown was to the east of the Congo River, and occupied by the invading AFRC fighters. To the west of the river lay Wilberforce Barracks and the remnants of the ECOMOG force and CDF fighters. There are two bridges across the river, and the AFRC attempted several times to force the ECOMOG positions guarding the west bank of the bridges. These attacks took place in the afternoon and evening of 6 January and on 7 January but failed against strong Nigerian defence, including the use of armoured vehicles to dominate the bridges.

The style of fighting in Freetown was typical of that in the Sierra Leone war generally. Attackers massed fire against defenders from a range of 100 to 300 metres; the intention being to frighten the opposition so that they would abandon their positions. The defenders, similarly, would mass their fire against the attackers and try to make them call off their attack. Usually, one of the sides would disengage when they started to take casualties. Casualties tended to be light since not many of the combatants were well trained shots, weapons were invariably not zeroed, and forces tended to disengage rather than fight to the death. When both sides were in defensive

positions, such as during the Congo bridges battles, they would continue to fire at each other until one side ran out of ammunition, when it would withdraw.

This style of fighting and the calculus that emerges from it, explains many of the results of the battles fought in Freetown. In particular, the static nature of the Freetown battles meant that the AFRC could not overrun ECOMOG positions and capture ammunition supplies. Capturing ammunition had been successful during the war of movement in the jungle where the AFRC could raid lightly defended outposts. However, once the battle had stabilised on the line of the Congo River, no more ammunition could be captured and the AFRC's profligacy with ammunition over the first two days of battle now cost it dearly. It was inevitable that the AFRC would eventually run out of ammunition and be forced to abandon its positions.

It took several days for ECOMOG to mount a counterattack across the Congo River. Reinforcements reached Freetown from Lungi airport, where they had been flown in from Nigeria. They advanced steadily through Freetown, supported by CDF fighters who frequently led the attacks, backed by ECOMOG firepower. The AFRC established a series of delaying positions but lack of ammunition drove them to abandon them one by one. Finally, some two weeks after the initial attack, they surrendered their last position and escaped across the mountains to the east.

Most of the damage to Freetown was caused during this retreat: seemingly vengeance for their defeat. Killings and amputations were frequent and indiscriminate; large numbers of people were abducted; thousands of houses were looted and burnt. There was no military justification for what happened; it was a policy driven by spite. The abductions seem particularly self-defeating. At a time when there was benefit in reducing the size of the force to allow it to move faster during the escape, the abductees swelled the size of the column, slowed it down, and made it a much bigger target. One reason given for the abductions was to make the fighting strength seem larger than it was, but the truth is more likely to be that abductions were now common practice for the AFRC.

Meanwhile, the RUF had attempted, and failed, to capture Port Loko which would have opened the route to Lungi airport. Instead they moved to Waterloo, on the edge of the Freetown Peninsula but did nothing to

help the AFRC in Freetown. They explained their inaction by saying the ECOMOG garrison at Hastings had blocked the road into Freetown, despite the fact that the AFRC had by-passed ECOMOG by marching through the mountains on their way to the city. But as the remnants of the AFRC emerged from the mountains to the east of Freetown, they arrived at RUF-held positions where they were relatively safe from attack.

It is impossible to know exactly how many people were killed by the AFRC in Freetown in that very bloody month, but it is estimated that more than 5 000 houses were destroyed and close to 10 000 people were killed.<sup>133</sup>

### **Towards the Lomé Peace Agreement**

Although Freetown had been saved and Lungi Airport remained firmly in the control of ECOMOG forces, the situation was still grim for President Kabbah. The RUF and the remnants of the AFRC remained at Waterloo, poised to threaten Freetown. Although the Nigerians, for a second time, had come to Sierra Leone's aid at a moment of great peril, their commitment could not be relied upon indefinitely. Sierra Leone's main international backers, the UK and US, were both unwilling to support the government militarily and pressurised President Kabbah to seek a negotiated end to the conflict.

Fortunately for President Kabbah, the RUF was at this time beset by its own civil war as Liberian Denis Mingo (alias 'Superman') unsuccessfully challenged Sam Bockerie's (alias 'Mosquito') leadership of the RUF. The remnants of the AFRC also carved out a role for themselves independent of the RUF in the Occra Hills where they renamed themselves 'the West Side Boys', previously the nickname of the AFRC 4th Battalion.

This relative stabilisation of the military situation permitted the beginnings of talks, which became the third of Sierra Leone's attempts to reach a negotiated end to the civil war, in Lomé, Togo, during July 1999.

## Key Insights

**Key Insight 2.1: Insurgent armies were not rag-tag drug-crazed mobs; they were experienced and battle-hardened, capable of significant military achievement.**

The nihilism of the Sierra Leone civil war, like many in Africa, has given the impression of forces such as the RUF as being out of control and under the continuous influence of narcotics. Although there were times when such descriptions are entirely appropriate, this should not obscure that, when well led, they were capable of carrying out complex and well-coordinated operations.

The RUF's 16 December 1998 attack on Koidu and defeat of a regular all-arms brigade, including its isolation of the garrison in the previous months, was a highly complex operation with four separate but coordinated axes of advance. Similarly, the AFRC's long march to Freetown showed high levels of competence that makes its subsequent descent into barbarism in Freetown even more marked.

**Key Insight 2.2: As Executive Outcomes showed, superior organisation and coordination of counter-insurgency assets can give a decisive edge against insurgent armies.**

Executive Outcomes mostly used equipment and capabilities that were already in Sierra Leone. The only capabilities that they brought with them were secure communications and night vision equipment: although these gave Executive Outcomes an intelligence advantage over the RUF, the real difference lay in the coordination of local knowledge provided by the CDF, air and artillery provided by Nigerians and Guineans, and regular heli-borne infantry provided by the Sierra Leone Army.

**Key Insight 2.3: Abducted civilians were critical for the RUF war effort; they were a resource to be exploited, not a population to be won over to their side.**

Although in the initial stages of the war Foday Sankoh was relatively successful in persuading local populations to join the RUF voluntarily,

the violence used by the RUF quickly lost the movement any popular support they may have had in their resistance to the generally disliked APC government. Instead, the civilian population became a resource for the RUF: they provided child conscripts for the armed force; slave labour to support the military logistically; and sexual services for their fighters. At no time during the war, before the arrival of the British, did either side attempt to win the population over to their own side, as per classic counter-insurgency doctrine.

**Key Insight 2.4: Peace agreements, without military levers to ensure their enforcement, are unlikely by themselves to bring an end to fighting.**

The 1996 Abidjan Peace Accord and the 1998 Conakry Peace Plan were both flawed. In the first, it became clear that the RUF was using the agreement to give it time to rebuild after the major defeats it had suffered at the hands of Executive Outcomes. The Conakry agreement was also used by the junta to buy time to strengthen its position, while pretending to agree to restore civilian rule. In each case there were insufficient sanctions to enforce the factions to keep to the agreement.

The Lomé Peace Agreement may have been different. Foday Sankoh genuinely wanted peace and was attracted by a senior position in government. But by then he had lost control of the military wing of the RUF and was unable to persuade those who had spent the previous decade fighting to give up their weapons, which were their only claim to power. Only overwhelming military pressure would have induced them to do that; and the UN force deployed to oversee the Agreement was far from overwhelming, as shown in the next chapter.



*Figure 9. A member of 1st Battalion, The Parachute Regiment, patrols Lungi Airport passing two RAF Chinooks of No 7 Squadron and a Royal Navy Commando helicopter.*  
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## Chapter 3

### The British Decision to Intervene

Despite the horrific character of the Sierra Leone war, it was not high on the UK agenda through the 1990s. The UK was, militarily, committed to stabilising the Balkans and was more focused on Russia, North Africa, the Near East and the Arabian Gulf than sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>134</sup> The Lomé Peace Agreement, with its major concessions to the RUF, was largely advocated and supported by the UK as a result of its unwillingness or inability to provide military support to secure the Kabbah government in Freetown.<sup>135</sup> As a British minister in the Foreign Office said at the time: 'we felt it necessary to support a very imperfect Lomé Agreement ... because there was literally no alternative.'<sup>136</sup>

Few, if any, Western states understood the situation in Sierra Leone. To quote Mary Wright, Deputy Chief of Mission at the US Embassy in Freetown between 1996 and 1998:

*One of the real problems that we had was the lack of intelligence assets to help us figure out what was going on with the RUF. We were continually told by the agency that collecting intelligence on the RUF was not one of their missions. So we were in the dark about what was really going on out in the countryside until we would hear after the fact of big villages being overrun. But there was nothing that we could provide to the government that would be helpful to*

*fight the RUF. Neither was the agency looking for the sources of the RUF's support on the international scene. That just wasn't one of their concerns.*<sup>137</sup>

It is therefore something of a surprise to find UK military forces taking a major role in Sierra Leone in 2000. This chapter assesses the factors that led to the decision to intervene.

### **British involvement in Sierra Leone prior to the May 1997 AFRC coup**

The reintroduction of democracy and the election of President Kabbah in February 1996 opened the door to British aid to Sierra Leone. The UK was the leading bilateral aid donor to Sierra Leone and had paid £3 million to help run the elections.<sup>138</sup> Furthermore:

*... the British Government embarked upon a number of aid projects designed to nurture the infant democracy - support for the Parliament, the Public Service, the judicial sector, the press and media and various civil society and human rights groups. It also paid attention to the security sector through projects to support the police and military. A two-man British military training team arrived, headed by a Scots Guards officer, Major Lincoln Jopp.*<sup>139</sup>

This latter focus on security sector reform was the result of a (then) relatively recent British approach to aid: previously many millions had been spent on healthcare, education and social programmes without parallel initiatives to promote stability. As a result, much aid to Africa had previously been wasted as it had become victim to coups, rebellions and insurgencies.<sup>140</sup>

The plan to develop the Sierra Leone Army was made in conjunction with the United States. Two battalions were to be trained: the other ranks were to be trained by a US Special Forces training team at the Sierra Leone Army's training centre at Benguema; the officers were to be trained by the British two-man team, under Major Jopp, assisted by Sierra Leonean instructors, at Cockerill Barracks in Freetown. Although the plan was developed jointly by the British and Americans, there was no contact between the two teams on the ground. Reportedly, the US mission was well funded and manned; the British training team was done on a shoe-string with a budget of only

£140,000, indicating the low priority of this mission compared to investment in the Balkans at the same time.<sup>141</sup>

The British team arrived in country two months before the AFRC coup in May 1997. Their first role was to identify and train suitable Sierra Leonean instructors in a 'train-the-trainer' cadre. After some difficulties, twelve Sierra Leonean officers and NCOs were identified but the AFRC coup took place before any training could take place.<sup>142</sup>

Major Jopp's short tour in Sierra Leone then took an unexpected turn: first, he provided a uniformed British military presence to High Commissioner Peter Penfold's week-long, but ultimately fruitless, negotiations with Major Johnny Paul Koroma to end the coup and permit the return of President Kabbah. Subsequently, he fought alongside Will Scully, a British security contractor, in the day-long battle to defend the Mammy Yoko Hotel against AFRC and RUF attack on 2 June 1997, receiving serious head wounds before being evacuated by the US Marines the following day on the USS *Kearsage*.<sup>143</sup>

### **Trying to bring down the junta: the Arms-to-Africa Scandal**

After the evacuation from Freetown, the British High Commissioner, Peter Penfold, established the British High Commission-in-exile in Conakry near to President Kabbah, 'as a clear demonstration that the British Government continued to recognise [Kabbah's] government as the legitimate government of Sierra Leone.'<sup>144</sup>

Internationally, the UK-led efforts to restore Kabbah's government. In the UN, Security Council Resolution 1132 was passed on 8 October, authorising ECOWAS to enforce sanctions on the import of petroleum and military equipment into Sierra Leone and restricting junta members' freedom to travel.<sup>145</sup> Furthermore, Kabbah was invited to a conference in London in November 2007 entitled 'Restoring Democracy to Sierra Leone.' Following this, he attended the Commonwealth heads of government meeting in Edinburgh as the personal guest of British Prime Minister Tony Blair, in an overt sign that the Commonwealth did not recognise the junta as legitimate.<sup>146</sup> In a significant achievement for British-led diplomacy, the junta failed in its efforts to receive recognition from a single country, including Libya.

While in Conakry, President Kabbah negotiated with a Canadian businessman, eager to protect his mineral concessions from violence, to fund a British private military company, Sandline, to provide training, equipment and organisational support to the Kamajors in their struggle to liberate Sierra Leone's rural hinterland from junta control. Sandline's contract included the provision of 15 tonnes of military equipment (including arms) which arrived at Lungi airport after the Nigerians began their intervention to drive the junta out of Freetown in February 1998. As it happens, the equipment was neither used nor needed by the Kamajors, although Sandline's helicopter was essential in bringing ECOMOG supplies to Kamajors at Base Zero and Base One throughout this period. Nonetheless, the incident sparked a major scandal within the British Government since, despite being supported by various elements of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, it appeared to break the terms of the arms embargo on Sierra Leone.<sup>147</sup>

The difficulty lay in the differences between UN Security Council Resolution 1132, which appeared to aim the arms embargo against the junta, not at the legitimate government-in-exile, and the British Government 'Order-in-Council' which is the mechanism by which UN resolutions are passed into British law. The Order-in-Council subtly changed the meaning of the UN resolution to encompass banning the import of all arms into Sierra Leone, not just to the junta. Unfortunately Orders-in-Council are not publicly published, unlike UNSCRs; neither the British High Commissioner nor Sandline were aware of the difference and that they were party to breaking UK law.

HM Customs & Excise conducted a criminal investigation into the affair, concluding that Sandline had operated with the full knowledge of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and that prosecution should not be pursued. Additionally, two public enquiries were conducted into what became known as 'the Arms-to-Africa Scandal', suggesting that some members of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office had demonstrated extraordinarily poor judgment; the Foreign Affairs Select Committee particularly censured the Foreign Office's Permanent Under Secretary who 'failed in his duty to Ministers'.<sup>148</sup> Although Foreign Secretary Robin Cook weathered the political storm, he was close to having to resign.<sup>149</sup>

As a result of the Arms-to-Africa scandal, Sierra Leone became politically sensitive for the UK. From February 1998 until February 1999, most British

Government officials responsible for Sierra Leone were tied up in the scandal and the subsequent inquiries. Even after the inquiries were published, mention of Sierra Leone was discouraged to prevent the British media from re-kindling memories of the scandal. At the time that Sierra Leone most needed support, during the rebel advance towards the end of 1998 and the 6 January 1999 attack on Freetown, the 'British Government's attention had been directed towards the various inquiries in the UK instead of helping to re-establish stability and democracy in Sierra Leone.'<sup>150</sup>

### **Tony Blair and the policy of intervention**

Tony Blair is often described as a 'War Prime Minister'. In his first six years in office he used armed force six times: Iraq in 1998 in Operation Desert Fox, Kosovo in 1999, Timor Leste in 1999, Sierra Leone in 2000, Afghanistan 2001, and Iraq again in 2003. This appears somewhat surprising given Blair's youthful left-wing credentials and his early membership of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. But it is entirely consistent with what his Labour Government dubbed an ethical foreign policy, as 'New Internationalists'.<sup>151</sup>

The 1999 Kosovo War transformed the world's view of Blair, given his leading role within the international coalition, and it played a decisive role in changing his attitude to conflict.<sup>152</sup> Subsequently, he argued the case for humanitarian intervention in his 1999 Chicago Speech, introducing what he called a Doctrine for the International Community.<sup>153</sup> He continued to argue the value of the use of force for moral, as opposed to utilitarian, purposes:

*[foreign policy] has been governed as much by values as interests; indeed ... it is by furthering our values that we further our interests in the modern era of globalisation and interdependence.*<sup>154</sup>

The establishment of the UK's Department for International Development by Blair's government was a logical development of his ethical foreign policy: the Department's mission statement was tied to the alleviation of poverty internationally, divorced from the UK's national interests.<sup>155</sup>

Blair believed that Britain had a moral duty to take the lead in the furthering of its values on other nations, by force if necessary, and that the British Armed Forces should have the capability for such intervention overseas:

*There are two types of nations similar to ours today. Those who do warfighting and peacekeeping and those who have, effectively, except in the most exceptional circumstances retreated to the peacekeeping alone. Britain does both. We should stay that way.*<sup>156</sup>

Blair's political team remained largely constant from Kosovo to Sierra Leone the following year, with all the same main ministers and senior officials except for George Robertson as Secretary of State for Defence, replaced by Geoff Hoon when Robertson became Secretary General of NATO.<sup>157</sup> In some ways, it was a natural development from the Kosovo experience:

Sierra Leone represented the next stage in the evolution of the 'New Internationalist' policy from one based on involvement in such operations as part of an alliance to unilateral action.<sup>158</sup>

So, despite the damage done by the Arms-to-Africa scandal, politically the British Government was not averse to the concept of armed intervention overseas. Equally important to this political will was the development of the UK's military capability to conduct such intervention.

### **Strategic Defence Review 1998 and the UK's Joint Rapid Reaction Forces**

The UK first formed its Permanent Joint Headquarters (PJHQ) in 1994. This was partly as a result of a realisation that the previous single-service operational command system was no longer appropriate after the end of the Cold War and partly to split operational command from policy, which remained the main focus of the Ministry of Defence (MOD).<sup>159</sup> PJHQ was thus well established and practised as a joint operational HQ by the time it was the superior headquarters responsible for deploying, commanding and recovering the forces on Operation Palliser in 2000.

The more important developments that framed success in Sierra Leone were more recent. The *Strategic Defence Review 1998* (SDR 98) created a pool of high-readiness forces for rapid deployment worldwide. Units allocated to these Joint Rapid Reaction Forces (JRRF) had the highest priority for training and equipment: they ranged from the Spearhead Battalion, at 24-hours' notice-to-move, to armoured brigades at up to 30-days notice.<sup>160</sup> SDR 98 also established, in PJHQ, a two-star position responsible for joint training and readiness (CJFORT). Although single

service commands remained responsible for the single-service training of forces they made available to PJHQ for operations, CJFORT oversaw joint level training and ensured that units in the JRRF pool were maintained at the required state of readiness.<sup>161</sup> It further established a standing deployable one-star joint headquarters – the Joint Force Headquarters (JFHQ) – at short notice-to-move. This HQ consisted of 55 staff: it was established just prior to the 1999 Timor Leste operation, but had conducted a number of work-up exercises beforehand, including ship-borne deployment.<sup>162</sup>

Although SDR 98 endorsed the concept of a UK amphibious capability, the Amphibious Task Force deployed to Sierra Leone in 2000, including HMS *Ocean*, was the result of a much longer gestation. The 1981 *Defence White Paper*, under Secretary of State for Defence John Nott, proposed the disbandment of the Royal Marines and sale of the Royal Navy's amphibious shipping in the belief that future British maritime operations would have an anti-submarine focus in support of NATO against the Warsaw Pact. This judgement was scrapped as a result of the 1982 Falkland Islands War.

Subsequently, Chiefs of Staff endorsed two important papers. The first, *CDS 10/85 An Operational Concept for UK Amphibious Warfare 1995-2010*,<sup>163</sup> provided the conceptual basis for the amphibious force and provides the background for which the next general of amphibious platforms was procured. The second paper was *CDS 11/85 Future Amphibious Capability - Costed Options*, which identified the equipment and structural solutions to meet the requirements identified in CDS 10/85. It was as a result of this work in the mid-1980s that the amphibious assault ship, HMS *Ocean*, was built and launched in 1999. Operation Palliser was *Ocean*'s first operational deployment.

SDR 98 was highly important for the UK's armed forces which had been deployed to the Balkans for much of the 1990s after 50 years of defending Western Europe against the Soviet threat. SDR 98 was the first real articulation of the need for forces capable of flexible and rapid response. It gave Prime Minister Blair the military tool he needed to fulfil his interventionist policy. The then Chief of Defence Staff, General Sir Charles Guthrie, is often credited with overseeing the development of policy and garnering the political support it needed:

*Bluff and charismatic, Guthrie felt similarly respectful of his Prime Minister. He also knew how to work with him. It was Guthrie who*

*persuaded him to override the Treasury and provide the first real increases in defence spending since 1985. It was Guthrie who persuaded Blair that the SDR should focus on more flexible and responsive armed forces, capable of moving quickly to overseas trouble-spots.*<sup>164</sup>

### **Collapse of the Lomé Peace Agreement and pressure on the UK to act**

The terms of the Lomé Peace Agreement, signed in July 1999, included the withdrawal of ECOMOG (mostly Nigerian) forces and their replacement by a new UN force, the United Nations Mission Sierra Leone, or UNAMSIL. Unfortunately, UNAMSIL matched neither the Nigerian Army's numbers nor its resolve. By January 2000, when UNAMSIL attempted to expand its deployment into regions dominated by the RUF, conflict immediately arose between guerrillas and peacekeepers:

*There were several serious incidents involving UNAMSIL and former rebel elements or combatants. On 10 January, RUF elements seized a large number of weapons, ammunition and vehicles from a convoy of Guinean troops moving to join UNAMSIL. In two other incidents, numbers of the UNAMSIL Kenyan battalion were ambushed and had to surrender their weapons to ex-Sierra Leone Army combatants in the Occra Hills area on 14 January, and to RUF elements near Makeni on 31 January.*<sup>165</sup>

In February, the UN boosted UNAMSIL's mandate and authorised doubling its strength to 11 100 personnel, with the addition of an additional six infantry battalions.<sup>166</sup> This was intended to allow the force commander, Major General Vijay Jetley, to offset ECOMOG's withdrawal and deploy UNAMSIL through the rest of the country – in particular into the remaining RUF controlled areas – and open Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) centres to enable the RUF to begin the DDR process. Unfortunately, the expansion of UNAMSIL's mission took place before the arrival of the troops intended to cover them. As a result, the first two DDR centres in RUF territory were opened on 20 April 2000, when the imbalance of forces between UNAMSIL and the RUF was at its most marked.

Although there were elements within the RUF that probably did want peace

and were prepared to go along with Lomé, the more powerful faction within the group, led by Sam Bockerie ('Mosquito') in the western jungle, had no intention of giving up its arms or control of its territory. Soon, the RUF responded. On 1 May, they attacked the DDR camp at Makeni and laid siege to the Kenyan Army infantry company and four UN Monitoring Officers (three British, one New Zealander) who were protecting it. A Zambian battalion sent to relieve them was itself ambushed and surrendered en masse to the RUF.

News also reached Freetown at about this time that the RUF had seized control of Kambia, a major town in the northern district near the Guinean border. The US Ambassador reported that, without external intervention, the RUF could be in Freetown within a week and the UN peacekeeping mission would collapse.<sup>167</sup>

As the situation in Sierra Leone deteriorated, the UN Security Council met in New York on the evening of 4 May 2000. Its members agreed to release a statement that expressed outrage at the killings of Kenyan peacekeepers and demanded that the RUF end hostilities and immediately comply with the terms of the Lomé Peace Agreement. Apart from commending the in-place UN force commander, the Security Council had run out of options to halt the escalating violence: it had no levers left with which to influence the situation on the ground, except for a plea within the statement for 'all States in a position to do so to assist the [UNAMSIL] Mission.'<sup>168</sup>

Immediately following the Security Council meeting, the US and French ambassadors to the Security Council, together with the UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan, met the British ambassador and impressed upon him Britain's responsibilities to Sierra Leone as the ex-colonial power. It was clear that the UN had done all it could: it would now be up to the UK to take the lead in rescuing the situation. Britain could no longer hide behind a narrative of relying on the international community to solve the Sierra Leone problem. This message was swiftly passed back to London.<sup>169</sup>

### **London is taken by surprise**

There was no indication in London that anything was about to happen. All seemed relatively stable in Sierra Leone and, where there was concern, the UK's strategy was to bolster and support the UN peacekeeping effort. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office had replaced the experienced

(but tainted by the Arms-to-Africa scandal) Peter Penfold, as High Commissioner, with Alan Jones, who was in his first week in post. In the House of Commons, on the day of the UN Security Council meeting, the Secretary of State for Defence Geoff Hoon spoke about the successes of the UN peacekeeping mission. In answer to a question about the deteriorating situation, he responded:

Until very recently the operation in Sierra Leone had been remarkably successful and was achieving results. Certainly there have been difficulties recently which the international community is seeking to address.

Mr Hoon then went on to discuss the purpose of the debate, which was the rationale for UK military deployments world-wide.<sup>170</sup>

This is not to say that the UK had not invested heavily in Sierra Leone since democratic elections in 1996. Sierra Leone had absorbed a greater proportion of the UK's aid budget per head than any other country.<sup>171</sup> Both the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Ministry of Defence had also invested heavily in effort and political capital as well as in the UN mission in Sierra Leone, and there was considerable pressure to see it succeed.

But it was Kosovo, in south-eastern Europe, that was the higher priority. The UK had deployed a corps headquarters and a large division, as well as considerable air assets, for the initial Kosovo operation in 1999 and in 2000 it maintained a significant presence there, as well as a continuing force in Bosnia. It is no surprise that happenings in Sierra Leone (which few Britons could place on a map) were regarded as a much lower military priority and best left to the UN.

Whereas the UK's political leadership of the Ministry of Defence seems to have been caught unawares by the rapidly worsening situation, PJHQ had been quietly preparing for the possibility of a deployment as one of a range of potential operations it may have to undertake. In particular the commander of the JFHQ, Brigadier David Richards, later the UK's Chief of Defence Staff, conducted a series of country visits and reconnaissances. Part of his responsibility was to ensure that JFHQ was prepared for any of the likely trouble spots to which it may need to deploy. He visited Sierra Leone three times in the 18 months before Operation Palliser, including during the counter-attack to recapture Freetown after the 6 January 1999 rebel occupation of the capital. His final visit was just two weeks before Operation Palliser.<sup>172</sup> He therefore had a far better understanding of the

situation in Sierra Leone than policy and strategy planners back in London, including the relative capabilities of Sierra Leone government forces and the rebels. He also knew many of the main decision-makers in Sierra Leone including, crucially, President Kabbah.<sup>173</sup>

## **The Decision to Intervene**

On the same day as the UN Security Council debate on Sierra Leone, the Foreign Secretary wrote to the Secretary of State for Defence, laying out his view of what was needed in Sierra Leone. He stated that evacuation of British and other entitled personnel was necessary but not enough: a broader response was urgently needed that included strengthening UNAMSIL.<sup>174</sup> This wider commitment, beyond an evacuation, was not initially agreed to by the Ministry of Defence and would remain a key issue of contention between the two ministries that would confuse the orders flowing from London for some time.<sup>175</sup>

On the night of 4 May, as well as the message from the UN Security Council in New York, more news arrived from the High Commission in Freetown: the Deputy High Commissioner had met Foday Sankoh in his villa in Freetown, who had given the impression of being in control of the situation.<sup>176</sup> Coupled with the RUF's capture of the Zambian battalion sent to relieve the Kenyans in Makeni, it appeared the RUF was being duplicitous and had no intention of keeping to the terms of the Lomé Peace Agreement. Instead, it seemed that the RUF was intent on an invasion of Freetown. Given recent memory of the horror of the 6 January 1999 attack, panic was beginning to affect the civilian population, the diplomatic community and the UN force in Sierra Leone.

Thus, as ministers and senior leadership came into work on Friday 5 May, it was clear that something would have to be done; and that the UK would have to do it. The question was what? The answer to this question is addressed in the next chapter on Operation Palliser.

## Key Insights

### **Key Insight 3.1: The British political doctrine of moral intervention underpinned military preparedness despite being taken by surprise by events in Sierra Leone.**

The British were undoubtedly caught by surprise by the unfolding events in Sierra Leone. The military focus was on the Balkans and the UK's policy was to 'internationalise' the problem by supporting the UN mission rather than doing anything nationally. Only very limited contingency planning had taken place and there had been no warning of a possible deployment. Nevertheless, the political doctrine of intervention, in support of a moral foreign policy, was given expression in SDR 98 which created the structures and forces which had the capability and readiness to intervene, despite the lack of specific warning. SDR 98, however, was based on much earlier work on amphibious capability emanating from the 1982 Falkland Islands War.

### **Key Insight 3.1: The commander's personal understanding of the situation was critical to success.**

Undoubtedly, if JFHQ had asked MOD for guidance on which missions to prepare for, it would have been told to ignore Sierra Leone, since British intervention there ran counter to what was then British policy. But Commander JFHQ quietly prepared for a range of operations, largely in Africa, understanding that national policy sometimes has to change, as it did after the UN meeting on 4 May 2000.

As a result, on the eve of Operation Palliser, Brigadier Richards probably had a greater understanding of the situation in Sierra Leone than anyone else in the British military. In particular, he understood some of the vulnerabilities of the guerrillas and that they had frailties that belied the faceless horrors of the decade-long war that seemed so intractable to those who did not understand it. He knew, while most in London did not, that small, highly professional forces, with effective command and control and prepared to use violence, could be a game-changer in Sierra Leone.



Figure 10. (Above) HMS Illustrious (on the right), an Invincible-class helicopter carrier that also carried Harrier fighter/attack/reconnaissance aircraft is replenished at sea. On the left is Royal Fleet Auxiliary Fort Austin. Both vessels formed the Royal Navy's task group in support of operations in Sierra Leone. (Image © Crown Copyright Image 45156126. Used under MOD Consent Licence)

Figure 11 (Below) An L118 Light Gun on an exercise in Kenya. Artillery was considered too provocative to be on open display during operations but were kept on standby and under cover. (Image © Crown Copyright Image 45152934. Used under MOD Consent Licence)





*Figure 12. Royal Marine Commandos fast rope from Westland Commando helicopters during a demonstration of force in Freetown. (Source unknown)*

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## Chapter Four

### Operation Palliser

*... this operation is constrained by task, time and exposure in Theatre.  
It is to be kept tight.*

Chief of Joint Operations Mission Directive for Operation Palliser <sup>177</sup>

At 10am on Friday 5 May a Cabinet Office Briefing Room (COBR)<sup>178</sup> meeting was held in the Cabinet Office with officials from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Ministry of Defence, Department for International Development, the Home Office, Treasury and the intelligence community. It was chaired by the Cabinet Office. The meeting assessed the increasingly worrying reports from Sierra Leone and the overnight telegram from New York.

At the COBR meeting, the MOD presented the preliminary work done overnight at PJHQ on three options for the evacuation of British and other entitled personnel from Sierra Leone. First was the use of a Special Forces squadron, at 24-hours' notice-to-move, to facilitate air evacuation from Lungi Airport. Second was the use of the Spearhead Battalion Group, based on 1st Battalion, the Parachute Regiment (1 Para), held at five days' notice-to-move, which could secure an evacuation point in Freetown as well as the airport. The third option was the use of the Amphibious Task Group, based on 42 Commando Royal Marines (42 Cdo), at the time on exercise in

Southern France, to conduct a sea evacuation.<sup>179</sup>

The meeting did not make a decision on which option was most suitable, but instructed the MOD to develop all three and, at the same time, deploy an Operational Liaison and Reconnaissance Team (OLRT) to assess the situation, in conjunction with the High Commissioner, and recommend to London what action should be taken.

Overnight, PJHQ had already tested the readiness of units involved in the three options to ensure that the plans offered to COBR were feasible. But, as soon as the meeting was over, the MOD's Defence Crisis Management Organisation (DCMO) started formally warning units of a potential operation in Sierra Leone. Director Special Forces alerted the Special Forces standby squadron, on exercise in Scotland, to return back to base that afternoon and transport aircraft were put on alert to deploy them. Both 1 Para and 42 Cdo were similarly warned and started preparation for a possible deployment.

At this stage there did not appear to be any discussion at COBR of British military forces doing anything unilaterally in Sierra Leone other than an evacuation operation. Instead, the meeting focused on ways that the UK could assist the UN mission, including responding to a list of requests such as provision of air transport to enable the early movement of further battalions from troop-contributing nations.

### **The OLRT deploys**

OLRTs are provided by the Joint Force Headquarters (JFHQ), the deployable joint HQ held at PJHQ. About a dozen strong, one is always held at 24-hours readiness. They have two main functions as its name suggests. The first is reconnaissance: in a crisis there is no substitute for the early deployment of experienced and trusted officers to evaluate the problem. The second is liaison: most operations are part of a coalition and within an inter-agency setting; establishing good relations early is important to gaining the trust necessary for the operation to succeed.<sup>180</sup>

Given the likely importance of the Sierra Leone mission, the Commander of the JFHQ, Brigadier David Richards, led the OLRT personally. He had been to Freetown on a reconnaissance two weeks previously and was well known by President Kabbah. The JFHQ had been due to deploy to

Ghana on exercise the following day, so the team was largely prepared for deployment. Receiving the order to move shortly before midday on Friday 5 May, the OLRT was in the air by C-130 eight hours later for an overnight flight to Lungi.<sup>181</sup>

Landing at Lungi shortly before midday on Saturday 6 May, Brigadier Richards established communications with PJHQ by satellite phone before taking a civilian helicopter to fly the team across the Sierra Leone River into Freetown. The OLRT set itself up in the British High Commission and started finding out what was happening with a series of meetings that afternoon, including President Kabbah, the UN Special Representative and Major General Jetley, the UNAMSIL Commander. He sought reassurance from Jetley that the UN would hold its ground; he simultaneously reassured Jetley that the UK would help defend Lungi Airport. This commitment was in advance of policy in London, but necessary to give confidence to a weak UN position.<sup>182</sup>

That Saturday afternoon, Richards was told that the only thing that stood between the rebels and Freetown was a fragile UNAMSIL position at Waterloo, 30 kilometres from the city. Further north, the RUF had started to attack on a second axis towards Port Loko, on the route to Lungi, and there were concerns about the ability of the UN battalion and Sierra Leone Government Forces (GF) to hold their position there. The team had also witnessed near panic in Freetown as the population feared a re-run of the horrors of the 6 January 1999 attack, with civilians fleeing from Waterloo and Masiaka to Freetown.<sup>183</sup>

As a result of the situation he found, late on Saturday afternoon, Brigadier Richards reported back to PJHQ that the situation was deteriorating rapidly and requested the immediate despatch of JRRF lead elements, including the Spearhead Battalion, the Amphibious Task Group and the Special Forces squadron. He wanted to keep all options open.<sup>184</sup> In particular, he persuaded PJHQ's Chief J3 (Brigadier Andrew Stewart) to order 1 Para to fly to Dakar that night so to reduce their response time.<sup>185</sup> He also called the Commanding Officer, 1<sup>st</sup> Parachute Battalion (CO 1 Para), who had already moved his battalion to the Air Mounting Centre at South Cerney, and briefed him on the situation.<sup>186</sup>

## 1 Para deploys

Lieutenant Colonel Paul Gibson, CO 1 Para, received the warning order early Friday afternoon in barracks in Aldershot. He immediately convened a planning conference in the battalion training wing to discuss the practicalities of a deployment.

1 Para was not just the Spearhead Battalion but also the stand-by Airborne Task Force; both commitments involved a lead element to be at R1 (Readiness State 1 = 48-hours' notice-to-move) with the rest of the battalion group at R2 (Readiness State 2 = 5-days' notice-to-move). It was unusual for the two roles to be combined but the British Army was at that period suffering considerable overstretch because of its Balkans commitments and risk had been taken in the force structure. Oddly, the attached arms for one role were different from the other: whereas supporting units for the Airborne Task Force were all from the newly formed 16th Air Assault Brigade, the Spearhead Battalion Group supporting elements were drawn from across the Field Army. Unsurprisingly, CO 1 Para immediately chose to take those with whom the battalion had trained and trusted, rather than those they barely knew. So, for example, artillery support was provided by G Battery 3rd Royal Horse Artillery (G Bty 3 RHA), 1 Para's normally affiliated artillery battery, rather than the field battery which was on the Spearhead roster. Furthermore, one of 1 Para's companies was on exercise in the West Indies at the time, so Lieutenant Colonel Gibson asked for a replacement company from 2 Para, rather than from the line infantry battalion nominated to backfill any shortages in the Spearhead Battalion. So, although 1 Para was activated as the Spearhead Battalion, it actually deployed as the Airborne Task Force.<sup>187</sup>

All 1 Para's normal supporting elements were present at the Friday afternoon planning conference. Despite the notice-to-move of 48 hours (for battalion tactical headquarters and one company group) and five days (for the rest of the battalion group), all were told that they were to be ready to deploy from 0800 hours the following day, Saturday 6 May. Lieutenant Colonel Gibson's enthusiasm was infectious and few doubted that they would deploy. One detachment commander, younger and more inexperienced than most, pointed out that he couldn't deploy without orders from his chain of command or a reduction in his notice to move. The CO's response was immediate: 'you're quite right, young man. Better hop off now

and check with your chain of command.' After the officer had left the room, the CO turned round to the remainder and asked 'is there anyone else who doesn't want to go on operations?' No one raised their hands. The young officer concerned never made it to Sierra Leone.<sup>188</sup>

As the conference broke up on Friday afternoon at about 1700 hours, orders were rapidly transmitted down the chain of command. Units on the readiness roster had a booking out system from their unit guardrooms so it was relatively easy to inform all personnel to report packed and ready for operations from 0800 the following morning, despite being before the era of universal mobile phones. Chalked notice boards were also erected outside unit guardrooms, warning troops to be ready to deploy from 0800 hours. The following morning's parade was nearly a 100 per cent turnout across the Task Force.<sup>189</sup>

On Saturday morning, the whole Task Force was bussed to the Air Mounting Centre (AMC) at RAF South Cerney. No formal orders had yet been issued for the deployment, apart from the initial warning order, but 1 Para wasn't taking any chances. The rest of Saturday was spent checking equipment and, when necessary, going back to Aldershot to collect items that had been left behind.<sup>190</sup> 1 Para's Quartermaster had also taken spare weapons and uniforms to South Cerney to equip any soldiers who had self-deployed to the AMC direct from home without their kit.<sup>191</sup>

G Bty took its 105mm Light Guns to South Cerney but CO 1 Para and the battery commander agreed to leave them behind because the airlift requirement for both guns and ammunition was considered to be too great in the initial stages of the operation. The intention was to bring them out later, but this intent was overturned on Monday or Tuesday by PJHQ who considered them 'too aggressive'. This order was given despite the fact that Light Guns can be containerised and therefore could have a very low profile until needed.<sup>192</sup>

Brigadier Richards' late Saturday request for the Spearhead Lead Element to deploy immediately led to a Sunday morning RAF Tristar flight to Dakar, Senegal, which was to become the forward Air Mounting Base for the operation. The group arrived in Dakar late that afternoon and was accommodated overnight in the French barracks near the airport. Since Lungi airport had not been secured and was regarded as 'at risk', the RAF

Tristars were not cleared for deployment forward from Dakar, so early on Monday morning a special forces C-130 flew C Company and 1 Para battalion tactical headquarters to Lungi. The C-130 had already conducted a reconnaissance of Lungi airport on Saturday afternoon.<sup>193</sup>

To maximise the combat power in theatre, 1 Para deliberately took risks with its own sustainment in order to get the largest number of people, weapons and ammunition into theatre. Most took only the clothes they were wearing. They crowded as many people, support weapons and ammunition as possible into the first C-130 to Lungi. On arrival, C Company's role was to secure the airfield to permit, first, any evacuation of civilians to take place and, second, the uninterrupted flow of reinforcements to UNAMSIL. They were met by an officer from JFHQ who briefed them on the situation. There was a Nigerian Army detachment at Lungi but no other UNAMSIL forces. On arrival, 1 Para negotiated to borrow a number of old Land Rovers from the Nigerians and quickly started the task of digging defensive positions around the airfield. The Battalion tactical headquarters set itself up in the terminal building.<sup>194</sup>

As the first wave of 1 Para arrived at Lungi, the rest of the battalion was already flying to Dakar from the UK, landing on Monday afternoon ready for operations.

### **Meanwhile, back in London...**

After Friday's COBR meeting, DCMO and PJHQ had continued planning for all options. Ministerial approval for the OLRT's deployment was gained on Friday afternoon and the operation was given the codename Operation Palliser. Authority was granted at the same time to incur costs against the operation and assets were formally warned for the operation, pending Brigadier Richards's advice.<sup>195</sup>

The MOD formed a Current Operations Group (COG)<sup>196</sup> under the chair of the Deputy Chief of Defence Staff (Commitments), Lieutenant General Tony Piggott. It met for the first time on Saturday, at 0800 and 1400 on Sunday and then daily through the rest of the week. At the Saturday meeting, Lt Gen Piggott confirmed that, at that stage, the UK's stance was not to engage in combat in Sierra Leone, but to support UNAMSIL. The COG also authorised the preparatory deployment of assets and, on Sunday, the transfer of their authority from the single-service commands to PJHQ. This meant that PJHQ now had the authority to deploy assets to theatre as required, including the

special forces squadron. By the time this happened, the lead elements of 1 Para were already in the air en route to West Africa and the special forces squadron had arrived in Dakar.<sup>197</sup>

At 1000 hours on Sunday, the OLRT was formally re-designated as the Joint Task Force Headquarters Forward (JTFHQ Fwd) and orders were given for the rest of the HQ to deploy to Sierra Leone. This included the re-deployment of its signals squadron which had already deployed to Ghana in advance of the planned JFHQ exercise and where it had been conducting preparatory training.<sup>198</sup>

### **The Maritime Force assembles**

The Amphibious Task Group (ATG) was on exercise in the Mediterranean with HMS *Ocean*, the Type 22 frigate HMS *Chatham* and the RFAs *Sir Bedivere* and *Sir Tristram*. The ATG had already gone through certification between Portugal and Gibraltar in early April, conducting its 'wader' exercises including the transfer of command from ship to shore, finishing with a short landing. Although the ATG had much more training planned on this deployment, it was already qualified and ready for operations at R2 (= at five-days' notice-to-move).<sup>199, 200</sup>

On Friday 5 May, the landing force (which was most of 42 Cdo under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Andy Salmon) had disembarked in southern France and was preparing to train at Camp de Conjurers, 100 kilometres north of Marseilles, while the landing craft were exercising on the coast. After receiving the warning order for operations in Sierra Leone, the landing force rushed back to Marseilles while the ships readied for sea, deploying from Marseilles on Sunday 7 May.

Coincidentally, the HMS *Illustrious* Carrier Task Group (CTG) was also on exercise in the Mediterranean. The CTG was coming to the end of its deployment, having been there since January. On Sunday 7 May, *Illustrious* (under the command of Captain Mark Stanhope) and its supporting RFA *Fort George* were detached from the exercise and diverted to Sierra Leone.<sup>201</sup> *Illustrious* carried thirteen Harrier jets, Anti-Submarine Warfare Sea King helicopters and Electronic Warfare Sea King helicopters which could provide air traffic control if no Nimrod aircraft were available.<sup>202</sup> HMS *Argyll*, a Type 23 frigate, was also despatched to Sierra Leone from the UK, setting sail on Monday 8 May.

The ATG arrived off Gibraltar on 8 May, where it remained for nearly two days conducting logistic preparations. Stores were cross-loaded from *Fort George* to *Ocean* and a logistic team deployed ashore to strip Gibraltar of anything that may prove useful. In particular, they took all the defence stores from the military garrison, thinking that there may be a requirement for Fighting in Built Up Areas (FIBUA) if the RUF managed to penetrate Freetown. Using credit cards, they also purchased considerable quantities of building materials, for FIBUA, from B&Q (the British equivalent of Bunnings in Australia).<sup>203</sup>

While at Gibraltar, the Commander ATG (Commodore Niall Kilgour RN) and his staff flew in from UK and joined HMS *Ocean*. He had been appointed as the Maritime Component Commander so also assumed overall command of the *Illustrious* CTG. HMS *Chatham* was detached from the ATG's preparations at Gibraltar and sailed directly to Freetown with a troop of Royal Marines, arriving two days before the remainder of the group.<sup>204, 205</sup>

HMS *Illustrious* and RFA *Fort George* arrived in the holding area off Freetown on Thursday 11 May; HMS *Chatham* and HMS *Argyll* arrived on Friday and the remainder of the ATG arrived on Sunday 14 May.<sup>206</sup>

The ATG had much work to do during its passage south. Nobody knew anything about Sierra Leone and little background information was being received from PJHQ, so *Ocean*'s limited internet connection was busy supporting open source research including, for example, the International Maritime Organisation's port guide to Freetown (which was surprisingly accurate). They conducted rehearsals, including SACEX (supporting arms coordination exercise, or fire coordination) and NEO training. They realised that some of their weapons had not yet received Ordnance Board clearance to arm on board, such as TOW missiles and hand grenades; so they worked out sensible SOPs and assumed responsibility on board, which is a courageous act outside general war. Realising that operations up the Sierra Leone river were likely, they also updated and rehearsed Royal Marine riverine doctrine, which had been a largely neglected capability in recent years. They also had to develop rapidly a set of SOPs to cover TRAP, the tactical recovery of downed aircraft and personnel, which at a late stage they discovered had not already been done.<sup>207</sup>

Once the ATG arrived in the Joint Operational Area, it had to keep a low profile offshore on orders from PJHQ, to limit the media exposure of the force until it was required. So although ships were permitted close to the

shore at night, for preparation and rehearsal of drills, they had to sail out to sea before first light on each day,

### **The RAF also Deploys**

In the morning of Monday 8 April, the first two of four H2 Chinook helicopters from No. 7 Squadron RAF arrived at Freetown. Since, at that time, the UK did not have the airlift capability to carry them (the RAF has subsequently acquired C-17s that can fulfil this role) the Chinooks had to self-ferry from RAF Odiham, their base in the UK, to Sierra Leone: a distance of 6 115 kilometres. This remains the longest Chinook flight in history; it was undertaken at six hours' notice and took three days.<sup>208</sup>

In addition to the Chinooks, and air assets sailing south onboard HMS *Illustrious* and with the ATG, considerable transport air assets were being made available to the operation. The RAF established an Air Transport Detachment at Dakar with, at the height of the operation, five C-130s based at Dakar and two at Lungi.<sup>209</sup> Over the weekend, airframes were also readied for a possible air evacuation from Lungi; eventually four RAF Tristars and five chartered Antonovs would be used.<sup>210</sup>

At 1620 hours on Tuesday 9 May, ministerial clearance was given for deployment of a Nimrod R to support the operation.<sup>211</sup> Based at Ascension Island, and supported by its own VC-10 tanker aircraft, the Nimrod gave the JTF Commander a sophisticated EW capability that permitted intercept of the RUF's communications. The aircraft was supported by a GCHQ team based in the High Commission at Freetown to provide tactical analysis and assessments of the intercepts.<sup>212</sup>

### **The Evacuation of Entitled Civilians**

Overnight on Sunday 7 May and on Monday 8 May there was considerable unrest and violence in Freetown. Spurred on by JP Koroma, members of the West Side Boys attacked and arrested a significant number of RUF members in Freetown, largely members loyal to Sankoh, and probably committed to the Lomé Peace Accord.<sup>213</sup> Extraordinarily, the evidence now suggests that much of the violence that shook Freetown in this period, resulting in the order for evacuation of British and other entitled personnel, was caused by forces ostensibly loyal to the Government, not the RUF.

Indeed, an RUF delegation called on Vice President Albert Joe Demby in the evening of 7 May to halt a planned demonstration outside Sankoh's lodge in Freetown, in order to calm the rapidly rising tension in the city.<sup>214</sup>

The following day's demonstration was not cancelled. Instead, up to 100 000 largely peaceful people gathered to protest against the RUF's breaking the terms of Lomé. But feelings ran high and the demonstration quickly turned into a lynch mob: initially throwing stones at the Nigerian UNAMSIL detachment protecting the house until their barrier was breached; then a firefight ensued between the large numbers of armed West Side Boys and Kamajors in the crowd on one side, and the RUF security detail at Sankoh's house on the other. In a major gun battle, the West Side Boys and Kamajors stormed the compound and killed many RUF defenders and a number of Sankoh's family; many civilians were also killed. Sankoh and most of his senior officers, however, escaped through a back entrance and into surrounding bush. During this gun battle, about 40 people were killed, spread broadly evenly among civilian bystanders, armed attackers and RUF defenders.<sup>215</sup>

Little of the facts of Monday's violence were available to the British High Commission at the time, about one kilometre up the hill from Sankoh's house. But the gun battle was clearly audible and it was obvious that the situation was deteriorating. At 1440 hours,<sup>216</sup> at the height of the fighting, the High Commissioner asked Brigadier Richards to implement a Non-Combatant Evacuation Operation.<sup>217</sup> The plan was to establish an Evacuation Centre at the Mammy Yoko Hotel, on the Aberdeen Peninsula where, three years earlier, ex-SAS soldier Will Scully and Major Lincoln Jopp had held junta forces at bay for most of the day in an earlier evacuation. It was the most secure and defensible part of Freetown. The Evacuation Centre was to be run by High Commission staff assisted by troops from 1 Para. After being processed at the Evacuation Centre, evacuees were to be flown to Lungi by Chinook helicopter and put on C-130s to Dakar.<sup>218</sup>

Accordingly, messages were conveyed via the BBC World Service, that all entitled personnel (EPs)<sup>219</sup> were advised to move the following day to Mammy Yoko Hotel. Late on Monday, the rest of 1 Para arrived at Lungi and D Company (the attached company from 2 Para) was flown by Chinooks directly to the Aberdeen Peninsula to protect and help run the Evacuation Centre. The Chinooks and the Paras had arrived just in time.

The Mammy Yoko Hotel was also being used as the temporary UNAMSIL headquarters. Most of the UN civilian staff had already been evacuated to Banjul, The Gambia, on Sunday;<sup>220</sup> the remaining UNAMSIL presence in country was therefore military and one of the roles of the Evacuation Centre was 'preventing some of the UN military officers' attempts to self-evacuate.'<sup>221</sup>

The evacuation went smoothly. The first aircraft took 105 to Dakar; by Wednesday, 299 had been evacuated; by Thursday 359; and by Friday a total of 428 EPs had landed in Dakar. The operation continued the following week but at reduced capacity with the Evacuation Centre open for two hours per day. The final total evacuated was 442; with a further 420 registered and an estimated 200 unregistered EPs choosing not to evacuate.<sup>222</sup> It appears that, after the first few panicky days, the situation had sufficiently calmed due, in Brigadier Richards' view, to the arrival of the Task Force, that the remainder had the confidence to remain.<sup>223</sup>

A number of evacuees were dismayed to discover that they were being evacuated only as far as Dakar and not London. If they wanted to go on to London they could do so, but at their own expense. Although this situation was managed by local consular staff in Senegal, there was sufficient press interest in the issue that, on Tuesday's COBR meeting in London, a No 10 Downing Street spokesman voiced concern that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) consular staff in Dakar needed to be 'more visibly helpful' to the evacuees.<sup>224</sup>

## **Developing the Mission**

By the weekend of 13-14 May, UK personnel in theatre totalled 4 482, with 1 365 ashore in Sierra Leone. Forces were deployed as follows:<sup>225</sup>

LOCATION	ASSET
Dakar (Fwd Mounting Base)	JTFHQ (Rear) Air Transport Det - 5 x C130
Ascension Island	Nimrod R, VC10 Air Tanker
Freetown	JTFHQ (Main) at British High Commission  D Coy, 1 Para securing the Aberdeen Peninsula  Liaison Officers assisting UN defensive positions  SF Squadron providing Indicators and Warnings
Lungi Airport	The balance of 1 Para with 6 x 105mm L118 Light Guns 4 x Chinooks 2 x C-130
At Sea	HMS <i>Argyll</i> and HMS <i>Chatham</i> close inshore and occasionally well up the Sierra Leone River ready to provide NGS (Naval Gunfire Support).  Amphibious Task Group with 42 Cdo and an Air Group embarked on HMS <i>Ocean</i> supported by LSLs <i>Sir Tristram</i> and <i>Sir Bevidere</i> and RFA <i>Fort George</i> .  Further offshore, HMS <i>Illustrious</i> with 13 Harrier FA-2 and GR-7 embarked within its Carrier Air Group and RFA <i>Fort Austin</i> in support.

Table 1. British Forces dispositions and capabilities in support of operations in Sierra Leone.

Although PJHQ had declined to deploy G Bty's 105mm Light Guns to Sierra Leone, the ATG brought with it its own Commando battery with their Light Guns. These were eventually unloaded and put under the command of the Paras' G Bty, which caused some concern with 42 Cdo. The JTFHQ

authorised the offload of the guns and did not seek PJHQ authority until sometime afterwards; PJHQ was keen to de-escalate the situation and thought the presence of British artillery might inflame the situation. The reality was completely opposite: emphasising British capability gave the JTF greater influence over the factions, on both sides of the conflict.<sup>226</sup>

With the evacuation under way, Brigadier Richards turned his attention to the pressing problem posed by the RUF. Unbeknownst to the British at the time, Foday Sankoh had called Issa Sesay, commanding the Northern wing of the RUF's combatant cadre, to instruct him to 'rescue' him after his escape from his Lodge on Monday. As a result, within hours about 1 000 fighters were on the move from Makeni and by Tuesday had arrived at Newton on the Freetown Peninsula and were engaging the UNAMSIL position at Waterloo.

The evidence presented to Sierra Leone's Truth and Reconciliation Commission on these events indicates that, contrary to what Brigadier Richards was told over the weekend, the RUF had at that time posed little direct threat to Freetown, but on Tuesday the threat had become real, provoked in large measure by the actions of the Sierra Leone Government over the weekend to decapitate the RUF's political wing in Freetown.<sup>227</sup>

Brigadier Richards received his first written orders on Wednesday 10 May, in the form of a Joint Commander's Mission Directive to the Joint Task Force Commander, issued by PJHQ.<sup>228</sup> CJO's intent <sup>229</sup> is here reproduced in full:

*The UK has yet to decide on its level of commitment to UNAMSIL, although it remains determined to shore up the current UN operation without getting drawn in, and for no longer than absolutely necessary. Your priority should be the safe evacuation of UK EPs and others for whom the UK has responsibility. Thereafter, I intend to support the UN operation principally by ensuring that the airport at LUNGI can be used safely. It is the vital ground and cannot be lost. While endeavouring to ensure that UNAMSIL leads in the defence of LUNGI airfield, be in no doubt that you have authority to engage in combat operations to ensure the airport is held for UNAMSIL reinforcement, in accordance with your current rules of engagement. Other support for the UN will be largely at the tactical level and by nature short term.*

*I do not anticipate UK providing more than a Battalion sized force to this operation, with the necessary CS [Combat Support] and CSS [Combat Service Support]. Our footprint ashore should be minimised consistent with the task. Provision of support to Theatre will be kept to the absolute minimum. Units and equipment no longer required should be returned to UK. Although details are not yet known, you are to assume that this operation is constrained by task, time and exposure in Theatre. It is to be kept tight.[sic]<sup>230</sup>*

It is clear that PJHQ viewed Palliser as an economy of effort operation and wished to minimise resources and risk. The orders specified the evacuation of EPs and instructed Brigadier Richards to support UNAMSIL, 'principally' by helping secure Lungi Airport. The orders made no mention of assistance to Government Forces (GF) of Sierra Leone. However, Richards was clear in his own mind that assistance to GF was an implied task: UNAMSIL could not succeed without GF doing much of the heavy fighting against the RUF; so by assisting GF he was, indirectly, supporting UNAMSIL.<sup>231</sup> He was convinced that the British Government's intent was 'to prevent the democratically elected government from falling and to help ensure the UN did not fail.' As a result, he had already decided upon and started to implement a campaign plan with two major lines of operation:

First was to encourage UNAMSIL to fight, by adopting a conventional defensive posture, rather than a peacekeeping posture that made UN forces highly vulnerable to RUF attack.

Second was to turn the GF into an effective fighting force, building their unity and determination to defeat the RUF.<sup>232</sup>

Brigadier Richards therefore turned a blind eye to what was not in his orders and did what he considered was in the British Government's best interests.<sup>233</sup>

### **Line of Operation 1 - Support to UNAMSIL**

The most important British decision relating to the UN was taken early, probably on Friday 4 May. It was that British forces were not to be subordinated to UNAMSIL but would instead work closely with the UN force. This was not popular in New York or with UNAMSIL, but it reflected British opinion of the paralysis within UNAMSIL's military command.<sup>234</sup> The only

circumstances where the UK would be prepared to join the UN force would be if it was granted its command, but the British Government was unable to invest the military resources in UNAMSIL which, within UN rules, would justify holding the command position.<sup>235</sup> As a result, on Tuesday 9 May, the British Foreign Secretary formally notified the UN Secretary-General that the UK deployment will not be part of UNAMSIL but British troops would co-operate closely with it.<sup>236</sup>

British support to UNAMSIL in-country went well beyond the security of Lungi. The JTF provided some key staff to boost the UNAMSIL HQ in the Mammy Yoko Hotel; they provided 'liaison officers' to a number of UN battalions, whose key role was to persuade the battalions to dig defensive positions so they could withstand RUF attack; and they wrote a short estimate and campaign plan for UNAMSIL to help guide their actions. As Brigadier Richards commented: 'The most decisive factors were persuading them, at least temporarily, to move from a peacekeeping to a conventional defensive posture and convincing them that the RUF were not supermen.'<sup>237</sup>

The British also provided assistance to Jordanian troops within UNAMSIL, as the result of a request from the Jordanian Foreign Minister to the British Government on Tuesday 9 May. Consequently, RAF Chinooks flew 300 newly arrived Jordanian reinforcements from Lungi to Hastings, along with combat supplies.<sup>238</sup>

The British view was that the UNAMSIL commander, Major General Jetley of the Indian Army, had been paralysed by the RUF taking hostage of a large number of Indian Army personnel in Kailahun and would do nothing that might jeopardise their safety. Undoubtedly, General Jetley had a different view, regarding it as important that UNAMSIL should remain neutral and not be a party to the conflict. Either way, in May 2000, UNAMSIL was not prepared, or able, to take offensive action against the RUF who could therefore continue to threaten both Freetown and Lungi Airport without fear of counter-attack. This would continue to be a cause of disagreement between Jetley and Richards throughout the rest of the operation, although the UN did subsequently agree to move forward, largely at the prompting of the UN Special Representative in-country, French diplomat Bernard Miyet, who in Brigadier Richards' view was 'an unsung hero.'<sup>239</sup>

## Line of Operation 2 - Assistance to Sierra Leonean GF

Brigadier Richards explained his philosophy thus:

*With UN forces unwilling to move out of their defensive positions, the key to pushing back the RUF was to turn the SLA [the Sierra Leone Army] into a basic manoeuvre force. This we set about doing. I persuaded them and the UN to coordinate their actions. Liaison Officers were exchanged and key meetings were organised on a daily basis. In SLA HQ, we provided a team to pull the factions together and sort out their appalling logistic and communications problems. We built them an operations room... We found ourselves de facto directing the SLA campaign and heavily influencing the UN's.<sup>240</sup>*

Scaled-down and disarmed under the Lomé Accord, the SLA numbered about 3 000. Brigadier Richards knew this would need to be substantially increased, with British help, but it would be a long-term project which would become a separate operation (Operation Basilica). In the meantime, additional forces would have to come from what came to be known among British circles as the 'Unholy Alliance'. This was the group of AFRC, ex-SLA and CDF militias that had been mobilised on Sunday by JP Koroma and had taken part in the attack on, and sacking of, Sankoh's house on Monday; Koroma called it 'the Peace Task Force.'<sup>241</sup>

Brigadier Richards encouraged the organisation of the total government force into three brigades each of three battalions. The total size of the force was about 6 000. Together, the SLA and the Peace Task Force were directed by a Government Forces Joint Military Committee of the faction leaders.<sup>242</sup> It is most unlikely that the 'Unholy Alliance' would have stayed together, given the often antagonistic relationship between the AFRC and CDF, without the calming influence and physical assistance provided by British leadership. Indeed, it is noticeable that after Operation Palliser ended, the West Side Boys withdrew from the alliance to the fiefdom they had established in the Occra hills.

Deploying forward from Freetown on the evening of Monday 8 May, GF started to reinforce the UNAMSIL position at Waterloo. Some CDF sources state they arrived just in time, since UNAMSIL forces were preparing to retreat. Over the next few days, supported by the Mi-24 attack helicopter, GF was able to push the RUF back about 10 kilometres back to Songo, on

the road to Masiaka and Makeni.<sup>243</sup>

This was an important week. It started with 1 Para's arrival and ended with the ARG in theatre. The non-combatant evacuation operation was conducted without serious hitches. UNAMSIL had been stabilised and further UN withdrawal had halted. Most importantly, local Government forces had been organised and were now taking the offensive against the RUF. Brigadier Richards said:

*By 15 May the situation had changed markedly. The SLA and its faction allies, under our direction, had forced the RUF back several miles. The latter had gone onto the defensive. They were in political disarray. Their leader, Sankoh, was out of contact with his forces, but no one had taken his place. Intelligence revealed a split between their Eastern and Northern Commands that we began to exploit.*<sup>244</sup>

The UK's Chief of Defence Staff, General Sir Charles Guthrie, visited Dakar and Freetown on Sunday 14 May to Tuesday 16 May.<sup>245</sup> This was an important visit. Guthrie was well trusted by the British Government and it was Brigadier Richards' opportunity to influence the MOD and British Government to accept his operational approach, which was still ahead of PJHQ's thinking in regard to his focus on developing and coordinating the operations of the GF against the RUF. Fortunately, Guthrie was in complete agreement with what Richards had done. As a result of the visit, the MOD endorsed the need for a longer term training mission to expand and professionalise the SLA and set a target date of mid-June for the end of Palliser and transition to a training mission, which was to become Operation Basilica.

### **The Battle of Lungi Lol - Wednesday 17 May**

The one major engagement of Operation Palliser that involved British forces took place east of Lungi Airport in the early morning of Wednesday 17 May.

Lungi Lol is a small hamlet, about 25 kilometres east of Lungi Airport, where two roads join leading to the airport. CO 1 Para had deployed two companies around the airport: one providing close protection and the other operating at a greater distance to provide early warning and depth to the defence. The forward position was at Lungi Lol and was manned

by the Parachute Regiment's Pathfinder Platoon. The Pathfinder Platoon was supported by a section of 81mm mortars while the rest of the mortar platoon remained at Lungi.<sup>246</sup>

This forward deployment well away from the airport raised some eyebrows. In particular, Department for International Development (DfID) representatives in London complained that the JTF was deployed too far out and therefore not adequately protecting the airport,<sup>247</sup> causing PJHQ to request justification for the deployment. It was, of course, easy for the JTFHQ to explain the military justification and it was rightly a tactical decision for the commander on the ground. But the Lungi Lol position was, in fact, a 'come-on': a deliberately attractive target set up for the RUF to attack. The position appeared isolated but was in fact stronger than it looked with many support weapons and personnel hidden.<sup>248</sup>

Although the 'come-on' was planned by Lieutenant Colonel Gibson, CO 1 Para, it had the full support of the JTF Commander. As Brigadier Richards later said:

*The RUF needed to understand that we would and could fight. We had no orders that would justify engaging with the enemy - just the NEO and stabilization - but we needed to intimidate the RUF.*<sup>249</sup>

This was a further area where Brigadier Richards stretched his orders. The Secretary of State's Directive to CJO stated 'commit no more than absolutely necessary to achieve our current mission, be wary of any unnecessary increase in the footprint/mission creep and *avoid combat*' [emphasis added].<sup>250</sup> The come-on position at Lungi Lol sought combat rather than avoided it.

At about 0445 hours on 17 May, the Pathfinder Platoon identified some 40 RUF moving along the road towards them. As the Paras quietly stood to, the rebels deployed into a base line along a low bank, from where they engaged the Pathfinder Platoon position. The following fire fight lasted about ten minutes and after four or five subsequent short contacts the enemy withdrew to the northeast. The 81mm mortars fired illumination rounds but PJHQ-imposed rules of engagement forbade the use of high explosive. In the immediate aftermath, the Paras confirmed four RUF killed and recovered various light weapons including an RPG-7. The RUF later reported 14

killed and a number wounded: but the British believed that psychological effect of this brief engagement was important in deterring the RUF and further enhancing the British JTF's status in the eyes of the UN and Sierra Leoneans.<sup>251</sup>

## 42 Cdo Relief in Place of 1 Para

By now most of the 1 Para battalion group had been in Sierra Leone for about 10 days on very light scales. Although the Royal Navy had organised an efficient system of showering, laundry and rest on board HMS *Ocean* on a rotational basis, which nearly all the Paras had taken advantage of, they were near the end of their logistic tether. Some soldiers were beginning to display symptoms of malaria, since they had deployed so quickly there was insufficient time for prophylaxis. As the situation on the ground began to stabilise, it was time to replace 1 Para with 42 Cdo.

Having ships offshore had made the operation much more robust. Even without the need to replace the 1 Para battalion group, the amphibious force provided powerful capability to Brigadier Richards in case the situation worsened. As the Secretary of State for Defence explained on 15 May:

*The 1st Battalion The Parachute Regiment is currently shouldering the main burden in Lungi. However, the maritime forces we have deployed — including our amphibious capability — provide vital flexibility for the joint force commander in what remains a volatile and potentially dangerous situation.*<sup>252</sup>

Early in the operation, the options for 42 Cdo were uncertain: a warning order from JTFHQ dated 14 May listed a number of possible tasks:

1. Be prepared to assume responsibility for the security of the Aberdeen Peninsula.
2. Be prepared to conduct relief in place of 1 Para.
3. Be prepared to reinforce 1 Para.
4. Be prepared to defend Waterloo/Hastings in order to prevent RUF from entering Freetown.
5. Be prepared to conduct mobile defence forward of Freetown in order

to buy time for efficient evacuation.

6. Be prepared to conduct humanitarian and confidence boosting tasks.<sup>253</sup>

But by the following week it was clear that 42 Cdo would replace 1 Para in place and the first planning conference was held on 20 May.<sup>254</sup>

The ATG also made the operation much more sustainable, with RFA *Fort George* becoming the primary logistics depot for the force ashore. As Brigadier Richards commented: 'with RFA *Fort George* providing what was arguably the best storage environment in West Africa, there was little reason to expose our stocks to the Sierra Leonean sun and monsoon rain.'<sup>255</sup>

Sea basing did have some disadvantages, however. Ships had to deploy out to sea every three days to make water. For HMS *Argyll* and HMS *Chatham* this was not a problem since they could take turns to provide stand-by naval gunfire support, but for HMS *Ocean*, the command ship, it meant that, on every third day, the only connection to the landed force ashore was by HF radio, which was challenging.<sup>256</sup> It would also have made it much more difficult to take the JTFHQ on board, even if Brigadier Richards had not preferred being close to the political and military leadership ashore in Freetown.

The Maritime Component deployed into several zones:

- Sea Echelon: 15-20 nautical miles out to sea.
- Outer Transport Area (OTA): parked ships not needed at the time; 8 nautical miles out. Protected but at lower threat.
- Inner Transport Area (ITA): HMS *Ocean*
- Fire Support Area 1 (FSA1): HMS *Chatham* or *Argyll*.
- FSA2: the 'Elbow' on the Sierra Leone River, as required, so ships' guns could reach further inland.

The maritime chart for the coast of Sierra Leone was dated 1896; there had been no recent survey of the seabed or the estuary of the Sierra Leone River. Before HMS *Chatham* was able to enter FSA 2, it required covert survey, by night, to ensure she would not run aground.<sup>257</sup>

The operation to replace 1 Para with 42 Cdo was jointly planned on HMS *Ocean*, with a 1 Para planning team being flown in for planning meetings.

Brigadier Richards had given instructions that the relief in place was to be low profile and not announced in advance: the JTF did not want the RUF knowing that the operation was taking place. As a result the operation was planned to take place over the course of a single night, with 42 Cdo deploying from *Ocean* by boat and 1 Para, when relieved, flying by Chinook to Lungi and thence by Tristars to UK.<sup>258</sup> By the time it took place, the presence of maritime assets offshore had become routine and fixed and rotary wing overflight no longer attracted attention.<sup>259</sup>

One of the problems is that 1 Para battalion group was larger than 42 Cdo: because the Paras had deployed on light scales they were able to maximise their deployed manpower at about 1 000. As a result, the Commandos found it difficult to replace 1 Para man-for-man. One of the solutions included provision of a Royal Navy platoon of volunteer sailors to deploy ashore and provide a defence platoon for the JTFHQ.<sup>260</sup>

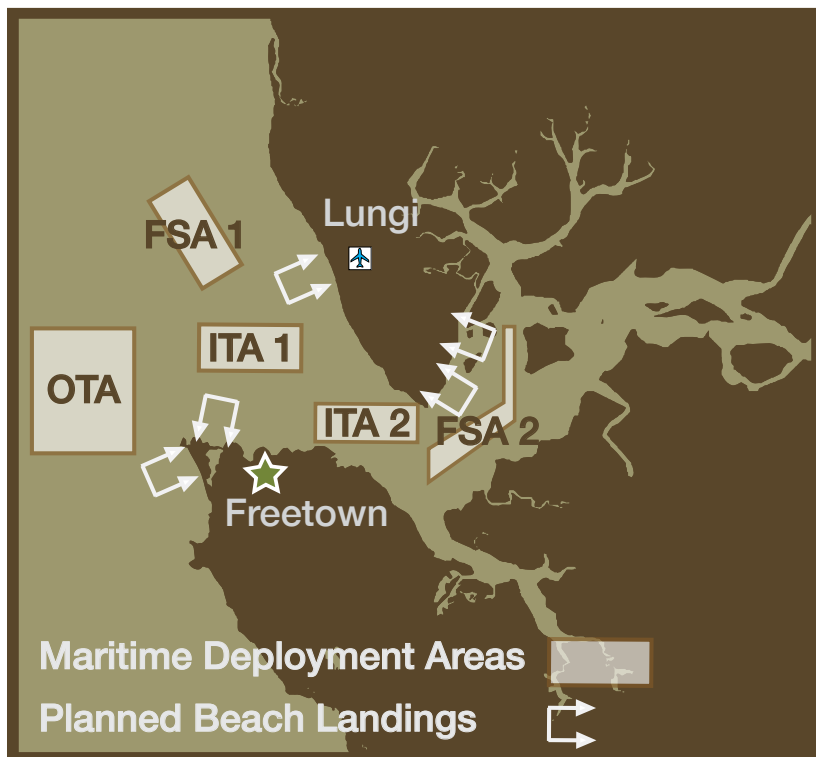


Figure 13. The maritime deployment areas and planned beach landing sites.  
(Image by Major Conway Bown)

Another problem for the planners was the great distances from *Ocean* to

some of the landing beaches. It was 19 nautical miles from the ITA to Bronze Beach, which was a day-long round trip for a Mexeflote raft which has a maximum speed of 3-4 knots.

The relief in place took place on 24-25 May. This was the first operational amphibious landing for the Royal Marines since the 1982 Falklands War. Unfortunately, the start of the operation was delayed by four hours due to problems with the VERTREP, the helicopter resupply of *Ocean* from the RFA. As a result, D Company 1 Para had to remain overnight in Aberdeen when the plan was for them to extract that evening back to Lungi in time for the following day's flights back to UK. Command was transferred from CO 1 Para to CO 42 Cdo at 1630 hours on the 25th. Despite a rush that day for the Paras to catch their flights home, the operation went well.<sup>261, 262</sup>

### **The Situation in Sierra Leone Continues to Stabilise**

Only a few hours after the Lungi Lol incident on 17 May, Foday Sankoh was found, hungry and bedraggled, on the edges of Freetown. He was taken by members of the AFRC to the guardroom at Cockerill Barracks. A hostile crowd soon gathered outside and, in response to a formal request from the Police Inspector General, the British lifted him and his police guard by Chinook to Lungi, then to HMS *Chatham* and eventually to a safe house on the Aberdeen Peninsula.<sup>263</sup> His location was not revealed to the public at the time.<sup>264</sup> Sankoh was never again released from detention: in March 2003 he was transferred to the custody of the Special Court for Sierra Leone, where he remained until his death on 29 July 2003.<sup>265</sup>

A few days later, on 21 May, an apparent plot to kidnap President Kabbah and free Sankoh from prison was foiled after a fierce gun battle in Freetown. Six dissident members of GF attacked the home of President Kabbah's chief security officer in an attempt to force him to open the gates to the Presidential Lodge. After an exchange of fire, they were beaten off; but went on to Wilberforce Barracks, where they were involved in second fire-fight that resulted in three rebels being killed and the other three captured.<sup>266</sup>

At about this time, as a result of heavy diplomatic pressure on Liberia, the UNAMSIL soldiers detained by the RUF in early May started to be released. The first 204 were released in Liberia, where they had been taken, on 22 May. A further group of 238 were released on 28 May, being flown from

Monrovia to Lungi. There was still a large detachment of INDBATT 1 with 11 UN Military Observers (MILOBs) under effective siege in Kailahun, but the returns considerably strengthened UNAMSIL's numbers and morale.<sup>267</sup>

But the RUF was certainly not yet defeated. On 24 May, three SLA soldiers and two international journalists were killed in an RUF ambush near Rogberi Junction. On 26-27 May the RUF mounted a major attack on the SLA at Rogberi Junction, using at least one armoured personal carrier captured from the UN Zambian Battalion and supported by heavy machine guns. Although 11 SLA soldiers were killed and 21 wounded, the defence held.<sup>268</sup>

The situation at the end of May, some three weeks after the start of Operation Palliser, looked much more hopeful than it did at the beginning and it was possible to envisage a withdrawal. As Brigadier Richards described:

*By late May the target of ending Op Palliser by mid-June looked progressively more achievable ... the next step was persuading UNAMSIL to deploy troops further east. The SLA could not hold ground and attack. UNAMSIL had to do the former. On 3 June INDBATT 2, an excellent Grenadier Battalion with combat experience in Kashmir and Sri Lanka, moved forward. Although coming under fire, they consolidated a strong position quickly. This first positive move by UNAMSIL had a major effect on the morale of both the UN and the SLA, and coincided with reports of deteriorating RUF morale - a response to attacks by the Sierra Leone Government's Hind helicopter and effective Information Operations. With UNAMSIL holding the Lungi/Freetown horseshoe and the SLA again advancing east, conditions were in place for the establishment of a UK-led training team (Op Basilica) and the start of Op Palliser's draw down.<sup>269</sup>*

The move forward by INDBATT 2, mentioned by Brigadier Richards, was conducted by the 18th Grenadiers as a response to the RUF's recapture of Lunsar on 30 May, which had been seized by GF the previous day but who had insufficient strength and ammunition to hold it against RUF counterattack.<sup>270</sup> Brigadier Richards was convinced that Lunsar's loss was due to lack of UNAMSIL support for GF and pressured UNAMSIL to move further forward from its defensive posture around Freetown to backfill GF advances. The move by the Grenadiers was a direct result of this policy and

was the start of a more confident and proactive approach by UNAMSIL.<sup>271</sup>

Towards the end of the operation, Brigadier Richards' main effort switched from supporting GF, to two strands of information operations. The first strand sought to maintain the Sierra Leone military and civil confidence that had been built during the operation and to limit any damage that could result from the UK's desire for a clear gap between Palliser and Basilica. It also sent a message to the RUF regarding the UK's continued long-term military commitment to Sierra Leone. The second strand provided direct assistance to the Government of Sierra Leone against the RUF, including JTF-produced leaflet drops by the Mi-24 helicopter, targeted at the RUF. Both strands were deemed to be successful, raising the morale of GF while undermining that of the RUF, thereby enhancing the conditions for the end of Palliser and the start of Basilica.<sup>272</sup>

### **Handover to Operation Basilica**

By mid-June UNAMSIL had still not fully deployed and was not yet as operationally capable as it was to become later in the year. Nevertheless, Major General Jetley seemed confident that UNAMSIL no longer needed much in the way of British support and so Operation Palliser terminated on 15 June, with the withdrawal of the JTF, and Operation Basilica started.<sup>273</sup>

The commander of Operation Basilica was Brigadier Gordon Hughes of the Royal Signals. He arrived in theatre on 9 June and would command all UK forces in Sierra Leone after Brigadier Richards' return to UK. Operation Basilica provided a Short Term Training Team (STTT) responsible for training a further 3 000 men of the Sierra Leone Army at the Benguema Training Centre. The STTT was based on 2nd Battalion The Royal Anglian Regiment (2 R Anglian), whose Main Body arrived in Sierra Leone on 10 June,<sup>274</sup> flown by multiple Chinook lifts to Benguema on the same day.<sup>275</sup>

Like the relief in place from 1 Para to 42 Cdo, the concept for the withdrawal of the JTF was to preserve tactical secrecy as much as possible, but at the same time prepare the population for the JTF's withdrawal and reassure it that Britain's support remained assured. Thus the JTF's information operations cell issued a leaflet on 31 May saying that that the force would soon leave Sierra Leone:

*The UK military force has achieved its mission of stabilising the security situation in Sierra Leone while UN reinforcements arrive ... As UNAMSIL reinforces and assumes the role of defending Lungi there will be a withdrawal of British troops ... A strong British military team will remain to assist the government defence forces and UNAMSIL. The essential technical and other advice given to both will remain firmly in place.*<sup>276</sup>

Regardless of the public messaging, the need to keep the tactical details of the withdrawal secret meant having to withdraw over a much longer period than might otherwise be the case, so that equipment and manpower moves looked routine rather than a withdrawal. For example, L Company of 42 Cdo (patrolling to the north of Lungi Airport) reduced from three troops to two on 6 June, nine days before the withdrawal was complete, and the reconnaissance troop screen was withdrawn on 10 June.<sup>277</sup> The Nigerian Battalion of UNAMSIL took over security of the airfield from 42 Cdo on 13 June,<sup>278</sup> although K Company did not recover back to HMS *Ocean* from Lungi until 15 June.<sup>279</sup>

The ATG sailed back via the Canary Islands for a brief decompression before returning to the UK and ten days' leave, after which they started planning for their autumn exercise in the Mediterranean, which, like their spring exercise, would be interrupted by an operation in Sierra Leone: except this time it would be Operation Silkman.<sup>280</sup> In his farewell visit to HMS *Ocean* on 15 June, the British High Commissioner Alan Jones' last words to the Royal Marines were 'see you in October when it stops raining.'<sup>281</sup> Nobody at the time realised just how prescient those words were to prove.

## **Operational aspects of Palliser**

### **Fire and Air Support**

Fire support for forces ashore remained problematic throughout the operation. We have seen how 1 Para Battalion Group deployed with its artillery forward observation officers but without its 105mm Light Guns, meaning that its 81mm mortar platoon was the only integral fire support available. Although mortars could support the company around Lungi airport, with a section supporting the company based in Freetown, their

range was too limited to support troops operating further forward. Once the ATG arrived, the JTFHQ planned to land 42 Cdo's 105mm battery ashore, but was initially prevented from doing so by PJHQ which wanted to 'de-escalate' the situation.<sup>282</sup>

The battery commander supporting 1 Para produced a fire support escalation matrix for the JTF, which escalated from 81mm mortars to naval gunfire support (NGS) to Harrier close air support: in his view a 'steep escalation curve'.<sup>283</sup> The GF Mi-24 attack helicopter was also available in case of emergency.<sup>284</sup>

To maximise the range of NGS, a fire support area for HMS *Chatham* was planned in the Sierra Leone River (FSA2), with *Chatham* making its way up river overnight. However, even here, troops forward at Lungi Lol were outside the fire support envelope.

The JTFHQ was surprised to discover that the Harrier pilots on board *Illustrious* were not certified either to fly at night or to use live ammunition.<sup>285</sup> There was also an initial reluctance by the JFACC to overfly land although this was overcome: the first air presence mission ashore was flown on Wednesday 17 May by two GR7 and two FA2 Harriers.<sup>286</sup> Subsequently they flew almost daily. But it meant that the Harriers could only be used for reassurance and demonstration operations rather than close air support. Fortunately, neither the RUF nor the Sierra Leonean population knew this.

As a result of the limitations of NGS and fixed-wing air support, land forces deployed forward of Lungi were exposed while being outside effective fire support range. So Brigadier Richards ordered 42 Cdo's 105mm Light Guns to be brought ashore anyway on 18 May,<sup>287</sup> regardless of PJHQ's orders, to a hangar in Lungi where they could be hidden from general view. Although PJHQ's agreement was granted retrospectively, the guns were never cleared to fire high explosive shells, although they did fire illumination.<sup>288</sup>

Although PJHQ produced daily Air Tasking Orders (ATOs) the means for controlling airspace were relatively simple: fixed wing aircraft remained above 1 000 feet and helicopters stayed below 500 feet. *Ocean* and *Illustrious* coordinated the airspace together. All the ATG's helicopters were based and maintained on board but frequently were forward-based at Lungi during the day.<sup>289</sup>

## Command and Control

Brigadier Richards' experience as National Contingent Commander in Timor Leste was an important part of his subsequent emphasis on Command and Control (C2). He frequently uses an adaptation of an old military adage: 'it used to be said that amateurs talked tactics; but professionals studied logistics. Now professionals study C2'. He thought Major General Peter Cosgrove's headquarters in Timor Leste, based on a two-star divisional HQ, was insufficiently joint and, more importantly, insufficiently focused at the theatre level. Whether or not this impression was accurate does not matter: he trained his own JFHQ hard and particularly concentrated on its application of operational level doctrine.<sup>290</sup>

The JFHQ was one of the major successes of the operation. Again, in Brigadier Richards' view:

*[The JFHQ] was a major reason why the Joint Task Force was able to create order out of Sierra Leone's chaos, put the UN back on its feet, reconstitute the Sierra Leone Army, give the rebels a bloody nose and depart, all within six weeks.*<sup>291</sup>

Yet the headquarters was not staffed by high profile staff officers who were destined for senior rank. The JFHQ was still experimental and had not yet become the place where careers were made and where fast-track ambitious officers aimed to be. As a result it was largely staffed by competent, rather than obviously talented, officers who worked well as a team. Few had been to staff college, but the overall result was a testament to the British staff system.<sup>292</sup>

The component structure involved four component commanders:

- Maritime Component Commander (MCC): Cdre Neil Kilgour (COMARG).
- Land Component Commander (LCC): Lieutenant Colonel Paul Gibson (CO 1 Para) followed by Lieutenant Colonel Andy Salmon (CO 42).
- Joint Force Air Component Commander: Gp Capt Paul Blackford (Director JFAC HQ, the UK's standing air component HQ) embarked on HMS *Illustrious*.
- Joint Force Special Forces Component Commander: CO 22 SAS.<sup>293</sup>

Although this component command structure looks sensible, there was some dispute over the selection of the MCC. The choice of the Amphibious Task Group commander as MCC may, in retrospect, have been unwise: in the view of some in the ATG it meant that some component-level aspects of the operation were missed at the expense of the component HQ becoming too involved in the tactical details of the amphibious operation.

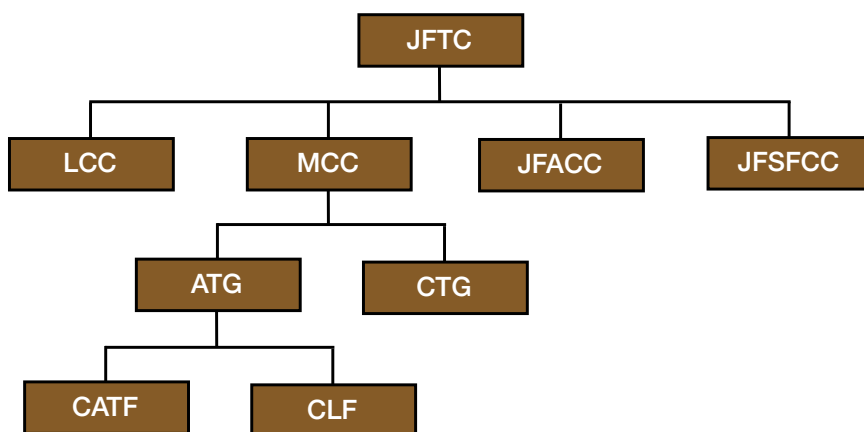


Figure 14. The JTF component structure.

An alternative would have been for the MCC to have been the commander of the carrier group and positioned on *Illustrious*; this would have allowed the amphibious commander to then focus purely on the amphibious operation. It would probably also have meant that the component would have been aware of and dealt earlier with issues such as the lack of SOPs for tactical recovery of downed aircraft and personnel (TRAP) and the lack of certification for Harrier pilots

Although secure voice and data transfer were available, it was the very limited facilities of the OLRT's communications pack that for some days provided the only secure link from JTFHQ Forward (in Freetown) to the Spearhead Lead Element in Lungi, Dakar and the UK. Fortunately, the JFHQ's duty Signals Squadron was already deployed on exercise in Ghana with its full SATCOM-based CIS suite ready to support a Main and a Forward HQ. Trained, partially acclimatised and well placed to support Palliser, the squadron was re-deployed to Dakar to bolster the then JTFHQ Main, and to Freetown to assist in transforming the OLRT into a fully functional Forward HQ. As the mission was extended, the squadron's life support package was flown in from the UK.<sup>294</sup>

## Logistics

The logistic concept of operations incorporated a Forward Mounting Base at Dakar and an Airport of Disembarkation (APOD) at Lungi. A Force Logistic Element was formed at the APOD to coordinate logistic activity; after the ATG's arrival in theatre it was based around 42 Cdo's 2nd Line resources but incorporating personnel from all three Services. Two C-130s shuttled daily between Dakar and Lungi, with additional aircraft added when needed. Stocks held afloat were used whenever possible and, in the later stages of the operation, an increasing proportion of combat supplies was kept at sea.<sup>295</sup> RFAs would, when necessary, top up at Dakar throughout the operation.<sup>296</sup>

Medical Role 2 facilities were provided at Lungi by 16 Air Assault Brigade's Combat Support Medical Squadron with two Field Surgical Teams. This package was reconfigured with most medical assets being moved to *Ocean* when 42 Cdo relieved 1 Para.<sup>297</sup> There were no serious battle casualties during the operation, although there were a considerable number of non-battle casualties that needed evacuation: most were cases of either malaria or gastroenteritis. Although 42 Cdo had time for effective malarial prophylaxis (Larium) 1 Para deployed unprepared and had 24 malaria casualties; a small number of them contracted serious cerebral malaria.<sup>298</sup> In the view of one senior medical officer, these casualties could have been reduced with greater anti-mosquito discipline such as enforcing a policy of shirt sleeves rolled down.<sup>299</sup>

The ATG deployed with substantial logistic stocks. Because the deployment concept was still new, on-board operational stockholdings had only just been calculated by the 3 Commando Brigade Deputy Chief of Staff and the HQRM J4 before the Mediterranean deployment. Doctrine mandated stocks sufficient for seven days high intensity conflict and 28 days sustainment, but expected consumption rates were not defined and the logistic staff had to translate daily requirements into numbers. Ammunition; spares; petrol, oil and lubricants (POL); and deployable infrastructure were all calculated and bid for. Because high readiness forces of the JRRF were the MOD's highest priority, all that was bid for was provided.<sup>300</sup>

## Intelligence

One of the JTF's main problems was access to reliable intelligence. At the

start of the operation, almost the only source of information was UNAMSIL, which soon proved to be unreliable. The SF squadron provided, among other tasks, a limited surveillance capability to provide early warning, but even they needed more information to be able to focus their limited assets most effectively. The SF commander constantly pressed the JTFHQ to expand the range of information gathering assets.

As a result, a Nimrod R (an Electronic Warfare aircraft) was allocated to the operation to provide interception of RUF communications, supported by a GCHQ analytical team based at the British High Commission in Freetown. The Nimrod's first operational flight was on Wednesday 10 May.<sup>301</sup>

However, the amount of information that can be gleaned electronically about an organisation such as the RUF is limited. The JTF's priority information requirements also included knowledge of what GF and UNAMSIL were doing and where combat was taking place: the reality was that even information on friendly forces was difficult to obtain and often could not be trusted.

CO 1 Para's solution was to utilise the GF Mi-24 attack helicopter, flown by contracted South African pilots. It was the GF's most potent asset and was involved in nearly all the fights between GF and the RUF, as well as support to UNAMSIL. Lieutenant Colonel Gibson decided to put one of his people on board the aircraft to monitor where the combats were taking place, and their outcomes, in order to provide an accurate picture of what was happening on the ground. As a result, one of the FOOs, Captain Adam Cherry, spent the rest of his tour flying combat missions with the Mi-24 and producing daily intelligence reports to his CO.<sup>302</sup>

Several days into the operation, the SF commander, still looking for more information, suggested at a JTFHQ evening meeting that he should put someone in the Mi-24. Brigadier Richards stated categorically 'under no circumstances is anyone to get into that helicopter'. CO 1 Para, the battery commander and Captain Cherry all agreed to ignore the order and continue to gain vital information. It seems that the SF commander also ignored the JTF Commander since two SF members shortly afterwards attached themselves to the flight. Sometime in the second week, the JTFHQ's Chief of Staff, Lieutenant Colonel Neil Salisbury, spotted Captain Cherry on the aircraft at the helipad. But he was drawn into the deceit, agreeing not to tell Brigadier Richards as long as he was included in the distribution of the

intelligence report.<sup>303</sup> It is not clear that Brigadier Richards ever knew that his orders were being disobeyed; but by the time 42 Cdo relieved 1 Para he seems to have relented and a more senior Royal Marine officer spent most of his tour in the Mi-24.<sup>304</sup>

### Information security

Although the initial deployments of the OLRT and 1 Para were not deliberately shielded from the British public, the move over the first weekend was not picked up by the British press until the following week, with an announcement by the MOD. This was at least partly because few soldiers owned mobile phones in 2000 and those soldiers who did, had them removed at the Air Mounting Centre.<sup>305</sup> The result was that the commander of the JTF had rather more leeway in his early decisions than if he had been in the media and political spotlight from the very beginning. He may have found it more difficult, for example, to stretch his orders in the way that he did.

The decision not to reveal the presence of the ATG until the relief-in-place on 24 May meant that none of the Royal Marines' boats could be seen in daylight and that *Ocean* had to come into shore each evening but be 25 nautical miles away by first light. Any Royal Marines conducting reconnaissance or liaison ashore had to remove Commando flashes from their uniforms. Orders were given that only RAF Chinook helicopters were to be used to bring personnel and equipment from the ships, rather than Royal Navy aircraft that might be associated with the ATG. This was after the Chief of the Defence Staff (CDS), General Sir Charles Guthrie, stonewalled all questions on the ATG when interviewed by the press in Freetown on 16 May; when asked about Royal Navy helicopters, he stated there were none in theatre, just as two Royal Navy Lynx landed behind him!<sup>306</sup>

PJHQ's sensitivity over the presence of artillery was probably more due to concern over the operation's profile in the UK media than in Sierra Leone. As CJO had instructed Brigadier Richards: 'this operation is constrained by task, time and exposure in Theatre. It is to be kept tight.'<sup>307</sup> Nevertheless, PJHQ's decision to refuse the deployment of artillery, made with little real understanding of the situation or risk in theatre, placed the JTF Commander in a very difficult position. As it was, fire support was not needed; but if the

situation had suddenly worsened then artillery guns may have been essential to save British soldiers' lives.

## Key Insights

**Key Insight 4.1: The Joint Force Headquarters (JFHQ), including its Operational Liaison and Reconnaissance Team (OLRT), was the most important element of the UK's Joint Rapid Reaction Forces (JRRF) structure.**

Operation Palliser was the third operational deployment of the JRRF but the first requiring rapid response. A Cabinet Office meeting authorised the deployment of the OLRT to Sierra Leone on Friday 5 May; by midday Saturday the OLRT had arrived at Lungi. Because of the commander's presence in the OLRT, it was able to transition seamlessly to be the in-theatre joint HQ as forces began to arrive on Sunday.

The JRRF concept as a whole was also validated. Forces at readiness were able to deploy within specified notice-to-move times: a joint task force of some 5 000 people was deployed over 5 000 kilometres from a standing start within seven days. Equally importantly, the priority afforded to the JRRF meant that they were well supported logistically so the on-board stocks of the Amphibious Task Group were able to support the JRF as a whole.

**Key Insight 4.2: Command at the operational level may need quick decisions in advance of government policy.**

One of Brigadier Richards' most important 'own lessons learnt' relates to the operational, or theatre, level of command.

Translating strategic intent is a key operational level role. On Palliser the in-theatre political and military situation changed rapidly; more rapidly than which Government machinery in London could cope. As a result, Brigadier Richards (in his words) got 'ahead of his strategic masters.' The imperative to maintain tempo and keep the initiative meant he had to take quick decisions that reflected government priorities rather than obey every

policy direction that may be out-of-date and formulated without a detailed understanding of the situation in theatre. In Sierra Leone, Brigadier Richards was accused of driving British Government policy; he admits that, to an extent, this was true. But he assumed the freedom to work within strategic intent and not be required to wait for Whitehall's guidance on matters of 'minor strategic significance'. It was clear to Brigadier Richards from the outset that the Government would want him to do all he could to prevent the UN from failing and to bolster the Sierra Leone government. This led to the twin track approach: assistance to UNAMSIL and assistance to the Sierra Leone Government; which only became formal British Government policy some days after it had been implemented in theatre.

**Key Insight 4.3: Readiness is an attitude of mind rather than a staff process. Nevertheless, low level administration, prior to deployment, is critical to enabling rapid deployment.**

The lead elements of 1 Para and its attached arms were nominally at 48-hours' notice-to-move as the Airborne Task Force and the Spearhead Battalion, both elements of the JRRF. The main body of the battalion group was at five days' notice-to-move. However, after notification on Friday evening, nearly 100% of the force turned up for parade at 0800 hours on Saturday for deployment to the airhead that morning; the battalion moved before the formal order had been issued. Everybody *wanted* to go on operations and were prepared to answer the call regardless of what they might have had planned domestically.

Deployment would not have been so rapid, however, if all necessary low level administration had not been completed beforehand (medical and dental checks, passport and documentation updates, routine equipment inspections, wills, etc).

**Key Insight 4.4: Highly mobile but lightly equipped forces have very limited sustainability and need early replacement or significant logistic enhancement.**

1 Para and its supporting elements deployed at the lightest of scales to maximise airlift capacity; the focus was to get as much combat capability (that is to say, armed infantrymen) as possible into theatre, rather than

logistics. As a result the force was able to create simultaneous footprints in Lungi and Freetown (to conduct the NEO), but at high logistic risk. Many battalion commanders would not be prepared to accept such a level of risk but CO 1 Para was exceptionally mission-focused.

Within several days the force began to suffer as a result of its lack of sustainability; but by this time the amphibious group had arrived and was able to provide basic logistic support to the Airborne Task Force until it was replaced by 42 Cdo as the land component, 16 days after it deployed.

**Key Insight 4.5: Prior to the arrival of maritime assets or the establishment of an in-theatre airhead, intervention is likely to be dependent on regional friends and allies to enable access into the operational theatre.**

Operation Palliser was critically dependent on Senegalese and French support to enable air access to the region until the arrival of amphibious forces and development of the airhead in-country. British forces used Dakar, Senegal, as their Forward Mounting Base throughout the operation. Until Lungi airport in Sierra Leone had been secured, only night time flights by tactical aircraft were permitted. Until the arrival of the Amphibious Task Group on 12 May, all logistics had to be flown forward from Dakar. The French military in Dakar facilitated the British presence.

Furthermore, the self-ferry of four Chinooks from UK to Sierra Leone was critically dependent on allies for refuelling en route. When two of the aircraft landed at Gibraltar, the Spanish Government refused to allow them to fly south via the Canary Islands so they had to fly via the Portuguese Azores instead.<sup>308</sup>

**Key Insight 4.6: Tactical engagements should be pre-planned and won quickly with the maximum violence and the latest and most capable technology available. Even relatively few engagements using controlled and directed acts of violence against an opponent can establish tactical and technical superiority, which can then be widely exploited by information operations.**

The British applied violence only twice during their engagement in Sierra Leone. The first was a pre-planned ambush of the RUF by the Pathfinder Platoon of 1 Para on 17 May 2000 during Operation Palliser; the second was a raid by SF to free British hostages on 10 September 2000 during Operation Barras which is discussed in the next chapter. Both were highly successful and established British superiority over rebel groups which gave the UK a significant advantage in subsequent information operations.

In this environment, PJHQ's judgement that the presence of artillery would inflame the situation was wrong. What gave Brigadier Richards real authority, to friend and foe alike, was the belief in British military power and excellence. Although the Harriers could not drop bombs they looked as though they could; the obvious presence of artillery would have been another lever to strengthen the British position. If, as suspected, PJHQ's sensitivity over artillery was more to do with how the operation was perceived in Britain than in Sierra Leone, then it could be explained as a prudent force protection measure.

**Key Insight 4.7: Gaining tactical intelligence or understanding ground truth is very difficult early in an intervention, unless tactical information gathering assets have been deployed for some time beforehand. One should be prepared to exploit or leverage all local sources despite potential risks.**

The only intelligence available to the British on arrival was from the untrustworthy source of UNAMSIL. Therefore, 1 Para placed a forward observation officer in Sierra Leone's only flying helicopter: an Mi-42 flown by a contracted South African pilots, engaged daily in combat missions against the RUF. As a result, the British were able to gain first-hand knowledge of where Sierra Leone forces, UNAMSIL and the RUF were operating. This information was critical to achieving tactical success (such as the Pathfinder Platoon's ambush at Lungi Lol on 17 May) and strategic reassurance of both the Sierra Leone Government and the UN. British presence on the helicopter, flying combat missions, was not reported back to the HQ or to London, where it is likely to have been vetoed as too politically risky.

**Key Insight 4.8: Well-trained and equipped amphibious forces, operating from specialist platforms, were critical to both projecting and sustaining forces ashore.**

The equipment, structures and doctrine employed by amphibious forces on Operation Palliser were the culmination of an amphibious concept endorsed in 1985 after the 1982 Falklands War. The concept was re-endorsed by the *1998 Strategic Defence Review* and was well practised by the Amphibious Task Group prior to Operation Palliser. Amphibious forces had trained together on multiple occasions and were a coherent team.

**Key Insight 4.9: Rapid deployment left the media behind and therefore limited political intervention. This allowed the commander on the ground to exploit to the maximum any flexibility in his orders, which may not have been possible if there had been greater press scrutiny**

Deployment to Sierra Leone, via Dakar, took place over a weekend. There was no MOD press statement until early the following week. By this time, the NEO operation had started and Commander JFHQ was already engaged in reassurance operations with the Sierra Leone government and UNAMSIL to help stabilise the operational situation. By the time UK media teams arrived in-theatre the operation was well underway. They reported that UK operations seemed to go far beyond the NEO originally stated and this was picked up by politicians - even the Leader of the Opposition complained of mission creep. But by then success on the ground was already apparent and political pressure to limit the commander's freedom of action dissipated.

In 2000 mobile phones were less ubiquitous than now and all were removed from deploying troops as they passed through the UK airhead prior to deployment. It was thus relatively easy to control communications from theatre to UK.

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## Chapter Five

### Operations Basilica and Barras

*We replaced an operational HQ with a bunch of trainers. We attempted transition too early ... We took a risk and failed.* <sup>309</sup>

Lord (previously Brigadier) Richards of Herstmonceaux

Operation Palliser stabilised the situation in Sierra Leone by halting the RUF's advance. This enabled UNAMSIL to bring in reinforcements and commence the process of rebuilding the Sierra Leone Army so it could force the RUF to abide by the terms of the Lomé Peace Accord. Yet there is a limit to what can be done in six weeks. When Palliser wound up on 15 June 2000, it was hoped that the training and advisory mission left under Operation Basilica commanded by Brigadier Hughes would be sufficient—together with a more robust and stronger UNAMSIL—to continue to exploit the momentum started by Palliser.

But it was not to be. Although Basilica achieved much in the reorganisation and training of Sierra Leone's armed forces, it did not provide the galvanising leadership and coordination needed to defeat the RUF, in the way that the JFHQ had started to do during Palliser. Recognising this, the UK initiated Operation Silkman, starting in October 2000, which is covered in Chapter 6.

This chapter therefore looks at Operation Basilica, how it was set up well

before Palliser, and the plans developed to re-build Sierra Leone's MOD and armed forces. It examines the structures created by the UK to oversee this re-building and why initial hopes that it would be sufficient to bring peace to Sierra Leone proved wrong. It also examines the circumstances in which a group of British soldiers were held hostage by the West Side Boys and the successful mission to rescue them during Operation Barras.

### **Operation Basilica Before Palliser**

In January and February 1999, in the immediate aftermath of the AFRC's 6 January attack on Freetown, a small team from JFHQ, led by Brigadier Richards, assessed how the UK could best assist President Kabbah to restore stability. This analysis was codenamed Operation Basilica, which was to become the operational name for military support to the Sierra Leone armed forces, under various guises, for the next two years. The assessment was followed by deployment, in June 1999, of a three-person team to establish the Sierra Leone Security Sector Reform Programme (SILSEP). The team was funded jointly by the UK's MOD, FCO and DfID; and became known as the MOD Advisory Team (MODAT). It was tasked to design and implement the plan to restructure and reorganise the Sierra Leone Ministry of Defence (MOD) and the office of the National Security Advisor (NSA).<sup>310</sup>

At the time, Sierra Leone's MOD was operating in a small run-down building near State House in Freetown. It had no water, electricity or other services. It was manned by three officials: a Director General assisted by two Assistant Secretaries.<sup>311</sup> The armed forces the MOD was supposed to administer were no better: personnel were poorly clothed, equipped and fed; they lacked basic levels of training, logistics and infrastructure support. The officer corps was riven with corruption and incompetence.<sup>312</sup>

As a result, MODAT recommended that its scope should be widened to include a root-and-branch review of the entire Sierra Leone defence establishment, not just the MOD and NSA. This was agreed by President Kabbah who gave MODAT freedom to undertake a mini-Strategic Defence Review (SDR) that would: develop a national security strategy; determine the defence missions and resultant military tasks; and recommend a structure for defence, including the Order of Battle (ORBAT) for the armed forces.<sup>313</sup> This work was completed in February 2000, with the publication of the framework document proposing new structures and organisation

for the MOD and armed forces. It was endorsed by President Kabbah on 24 March.<sup>314</sup>

President Kabbah also endorsed the outline Military Reintegration Plan (MRP) which was the mechanism to create new armed forces for Sierra Leone, selecting and training personnel from across the range of ex-combatants. The Sierra Leone Army, the AFRC and the RUF were all to go through the DDR process, after which they would become eligible for the MRP. This was a key requirement of the Lomé Peace Accord. UNAMSIL had been established to run the DDR process for ex-combatants but MODAT recommended that the task of creating new armed forces, out of those who had been through DDR, should fall to the British as part of planning and implementing the overall restructuring plan. As a result, MODAT recommended the creation of a Military Advisory and Training Team (MATT) to undertake this task.<sup>315</sup>

The UK agreed to take the lead of the MATT but, because of manpower commitments elsewhere, sought help from other trusted nations for what was to subsequently become the International MATT (IMATT). In January 2000, the MOD briefed a group of Commonwealth and Overseas defence attachés in London and invited them to participate in IMATT.<sup>316</sup> IMATT staff started to arrive in Sierra Leone at about the same time as Palliser was starting and were quickly embedded into key roles within the Sierra Leone Army to support Brigadier Richards' campaign plan.

At the same time, also under Operation Basilica, a six-man training team had deployed in May-June 1999 to assist military training for new recruits and young officers.<sup>317</sup> This team was too small, insufficiently resourced and under-empowered to make much difference in the time available, but it meant that when the JFHQ arrived in May 2000 under Operation Palliser, and later the IMATT, there was a small corps of British officers (including MODAT) that had been in Sierra Leone for some time. Its members understood the Sierra Leone Army and its shortcomings, and were guardians of the plan for the transformation and development of the Sierra Leone Armed Forces.

### **New Armed Forces Structures for Sierra Leone**

The Defence structure designed by the British officers in MODAT suggested the establishment of a Joint Forces Command (JFC) and a Joint Support

Command (JSC), both under a new MOD. Initially, they were commanded by British colonels. The JFC was to command the combat forces of Land, Air and Maritime Components and run operations. The JSC was to command the supporting arms, such as engineers, communications and medical, as well as the newly established Armed Forces Personnel Centre (AFPC) and the Training Centre.<sup>318</sup>

The new Sierra Leone Armed Forces (SLAF) were planned to be a single joint organisation. The Land Component was initially designed as a two-brigade structure, primarily to defend the territorial integrity of the state. Brigade commanders were Sierra Leonean with British advisors embedded in their headquarters. Air and Maritime Components were commanded by British officers: the Maritime Component had responsibility for policing territorial waters (in particular protecting Sierra Leone's fishing grounds) and the Air Wing was to have both rotary and fixed-wing assets.<sup>319</sup>

One of the problems for the Sierra Leonean Army was the issue of 'ghost soldiers', those who had either died or long retired but whose colleagues or commanders continued to draw their pay and ration allowance. So MODAT recommended the establishment of a Personnel Verification Team (PVT) to visit every SLA location and check the identity of every individual soldier against any existing documentation, create a new personnel database and issue ID cards to every soldier. The PVT was established in mid-2000 and, led by British officers, conducted the verification exercise in the autumn and winter of 2000. By the end of the process, the Army's payroll had been reduced by 2 000 people, establishing a total strength of 12 000. The database developed by the PVT formed the basis for the newly-formed AFPC in Freetown, under the JSC, to provide personnel administration for the new force.<sup>320</sup>

At the time of the SDR and planning of the ORBAT, post-Lomé, it was anticipated that the armed forces would be established in a secure and peaceful atmosphere with a low internal threat.<sup>321</sup> This proved a false assumption and would have to be revisited after the resumption of hostilities in May 2000. As a result the Land Component was expanded to three brigades with a separate Freetown Garrison force, but MODAT's overall design of Sierra Leone's armed forces remained remarkably resilient and is largely the structure in place today.

## **The DDR Process**

After the Lomé Peace Accord of July 1999, there was a genuine belief in Sierra Leone that the war was over and that there was no longer a need for a large counter-insurgency army. The Sierra Leone Government was also concerned that some of its Army harboured doubtful loyalties with many siding with the AFRC, rather than the democratically-elected government, during the 1997-98 junta. As a result, the Army was treated as one of the factions at Lomé, rather than as the constitutional and legitimate defender of the state, and was disbanded as an entity and made to go through the post-Lomé DDR process alongside the RUF, AFRC and CDF. Only when all ex-combatants had gone through DDR would the process of building the new Sierra Leone Armed Forces (SLAF) begin, through the MODAT-designed and run Military Reintegration Programme (MRP) to fill the new post-war ORBAT. With the Nigerian Government's agreement, President Kabbah had in June 1998 appointed Brigadier Maxwell Khobe, a highly respected Nigerian officer, to become his Chief of Defence Staff rather than select a Sierra Leonean who he may not necessarily trust.

When UNAMSIL was created to manage the DDR programme, it was naturally much easier to start the DDR process with forces that were relatively disciplined and under the control of the Government. As a result, UNAMSIL first established DDR camps in western Sierra Leone, near Freetown, specifically for the Sierra Leone Army, ex-members of the AFRC and the CDF. It was when they attempted to spread the DDR footprint into RUF-controlled territory in April 2000 that they encountered conflict, resulting in the May 2000 crisis and Operation Palliser.

## **The Situation on the Eve of Palliser**

The DDR programme was suspended on 8 May 2000 but by this time a total of 16 600 personnel, mostly ex-SLA/AFRC and CDF, had been disarmed, leaving very few armed and trained combatants available to the Government when warfare against the RUF restarted.<sup>322</sup> The majority had been disarmed and were living in the DDR camps, leaving a gross imbalance in military power between the fully armed RUF and the partially de-mobilised SLA and CDF.

On 18 April 2000, Brigadier Maxwell Khobe, the Nigerian officer who had been appointed Sierra Leone's Chief of Defence Staff, died of illness.<sup>323</sup>

He had commanded the ECOMOG intervention of February 1998 that had evicted the AFRC/RUF junta from Freetown and was rightly regarded as a heroic figure in both Freetown and Abuja. While CDS, he appointed a number of trusted Nigerian officers to fill the key Grade One staff appointments in the Sierra Leone Defence Headquarters but, with his death, they all departed, leaving a significant gap just at the time that the war was about to re-start.<sup>324</sup>

As hostilities recommenced in May-June 2000, there were many demonstrations of poor military skills and inadequate leadership, which contributed to a series of defeats at the hands of the RUF. These included a mutiny at Lunsar by members of 5th Battalion SLA on 15-16 June, while the battalion was advancing against the RUF, and the rout of a brigade headquarters and its defence company by a patrol of the RUF near Masiaka. The only battle-winning asset available to the SLA was the Mi-24 attack helicopter, but even this was constrained by scarcity of ammunition and absence of spares.<sup>325</sup>

## Developments initiated during Palliser

### Short Term Training Team

As a result of the UK CDS' visit during Operation Palliser, and a subsequent visit by the Foreign Secretary, the UK agreed to ramp up significantly its support to Sierra Leone's armed forces, earmarking £21.27 million. The first element of this was the deployment of a Short Term Training Team (STTT) to implement a retraining package for those who had undergone DDR but were now languishing in the DDR camps. The first STTT was based on 2nd Battalion, the Royal Anglian Regiment (2 R Anglian); the concept was to provide, initially, three training courses each of six weeks for up to 3 000 ex-combatants from the DDR camps who had volunteered to return to service with the SLA.<sup>326</sup>

The STTT was based at Benguema Training Centre, later designated the Armed Forces Training centre (AFTC), on the edge of the Freetown Peninsula, which had been partially rebuilt by Royal Engineers during Operation Palliser. A total of four British infantry battalions were involved in

the STTT process over 15 months, each running two or three courses. In each case, the battalion only deployed with its trainers, administrators and one rifle company for local security, taking just over 200 personnel to Sierra Leone.

By September 2001, when the STTT was wound up, a total of nine packages had been run at Benguema, training a total of 9 300 personnel. The process had created nine new infantry battalions, a number of specialist sub-units including combat engineers and signallers, and had run a series of specialist courses for clerks, military police, medics and logisticians, as well as support weapon training. They had also run officer training courses, including Short Service Combatant Commission (SSCC) courses, Administrative Commission courses (ACC) and courses for Quartermasters and Regimental Quartermaster Sergeants.<sup>327</sup>

## **IMATT**

Despite IMATT's name including both Advice and Training, at this stage IMATT personnel were fully embedded into the Sierra Leone command structure; from MOD to battalion level.

The original purpose of IMATT, as envisaged by MODAT in early 2000, was that it would be the principal mechanism for building Sierra Leone's new armed forces. As it was, it formed up in Sierra Leone in early May just at the time the war was re-starting. As a result, IMATT's principal purpose became to help the SLA confront the RUF while training was to be carried out by the STTT. As seen in Chapter 4, Brigadier Richards embedded a number of officers into key positions in the Sierra Leonean chain of command. As IMATT reached its full strength, every Sierra Leonean battalion would have two advisors: one officer and one SNCO. Not all posts were advisory; some senior command appointments, such as the Joint Force Commander and Joint Support Commander, were held by British loan service officers as part of IMATT.

But it wasn't just all about combat. The first requirement was ensuring that SLA soldiers were adequately fed and resupplied with ammunition. In the early stages these functions were largely planned and executed by British personnel to make sure they were done.<sup>328</sup>

Through most of 2000, IMATT was purely manned by about 75 British

personnel. The first international contingent of ten Canadians arrived in November 2000. Further contingents arrived from the USA, Australia and Bermuda in 2001. The British remained throughout the largest contributor to IMATT, until it was eventually wound up in 2013.<sup>329</sup>

## **Operation Khukri**

Despite the RUF's release, through Liberia, of 442 UNAMSIL hostages in late May, two companies of INDBATT 1, a total of 222 soldiers from 5th/8th Gurkha Rifles (5/8 GR), and 11 international MILOBs were still under effective siege deep in RUF territory in Kailahun.<sup>330</sup> It became clear that the RUF would not willingly permit either the Indian troops or the MILOBs to leave. In a ramping up of pressure, the RUF in early July refused to permit the resupply of the garrison by either air or road.

By early July there were sufficient UNAMSIL resources available to consider a rescue operation. In particular, INDBATT 2 (18th Battalion, the Grenadiers – 18 GREN), Indian attack helicopters and special forces had arrived in country. The operation was to be supported by two RAF Chinook helicopters and elements of British special forces, as well as Ghanaian and Nigerian infantry. Most of the assets to be used in the operation had been secretly assembled at Daru, the headquarters of 5/8 GR, from where the rescue was to be launched.

Operation Khukri was conducted on 15-16 July 2000. It was a complex operation that involved:<sup>331</sup>

- A dawn air extraction from Kailahun of 11 MILOBs and 33 injured Indian Army personnel by RAF Chinooks.
- A break-out from Kailahun by two companies of 5/8 GR involving a deliberate attack on RUF positions in Kailahun town, followed by a link-up with Indian SF outside Kailahun and, further south, a company of 18 GREN, both of whom who had been previously air-landed to secure key points on the extraction route towards Daru.
- Simultaneously, an armoured column consisting of the rest of 5/8 GR and 18 GREN advanced 30 kilometres to Pendembu, midway from Daru to Kailahun, defeating several RUF ambushes on the way.
- Pendembu was a major RUF headquarters and stronghold, but it had

to be secured to enable the extraction of the force from Kailahun. Thus the force from Daru mounted a deliberate attack, including artillery and air attack on pre-planned targets throughout the town, using armoured vehicles and dismounted infantry platoons to clear each house individually. The RUF suffered numerous casualties during this operation.

- Following the securing of Pendembu, elements of the column advanced further north to link-up with the two companies moving south from Kailahun.
- The whole force over-nighted in Pendembu. Early the following morning, 12 Mi-8 sorties were flown to extract much of the force that was not required to clear the road for the move back to Daru.
- The final phase was the road move back to Daru, including clearing several RUF ambushes and supported constantly by an Mi-35 attack helicopter. It was during one of these ambushes that the Indian force suffered its only fatality, from an RPG-7 attack on an artillery ammunition vehicle.

The operation was an extraordinary success and it reflects great credit on the Indian Army who largely planned, commanded and executed it. The British Chinooks were necessary since they were the only helicopters in Sierra Leone at the time with all-weather capability; Indian Mi-8s that were due to follow them to Kailahun to extract stores were unable to take off because of poor weather in the early morning of 15 July.

The operation demonstrated what UNAMSIL was capable of, if they had been used more decisively from the beginning. But, despite the intense combat of Operation Khukri, the force commander, Major General Jetley, still refused to take a more proactive stance against the RUF. Immediately after the operation, he told reporters that the UN remained neutral in the Sierra Leone conflict: 'we are here as a peacekeeping force and we will continue to be neutral, taking no sides.'<sup>332</sup>

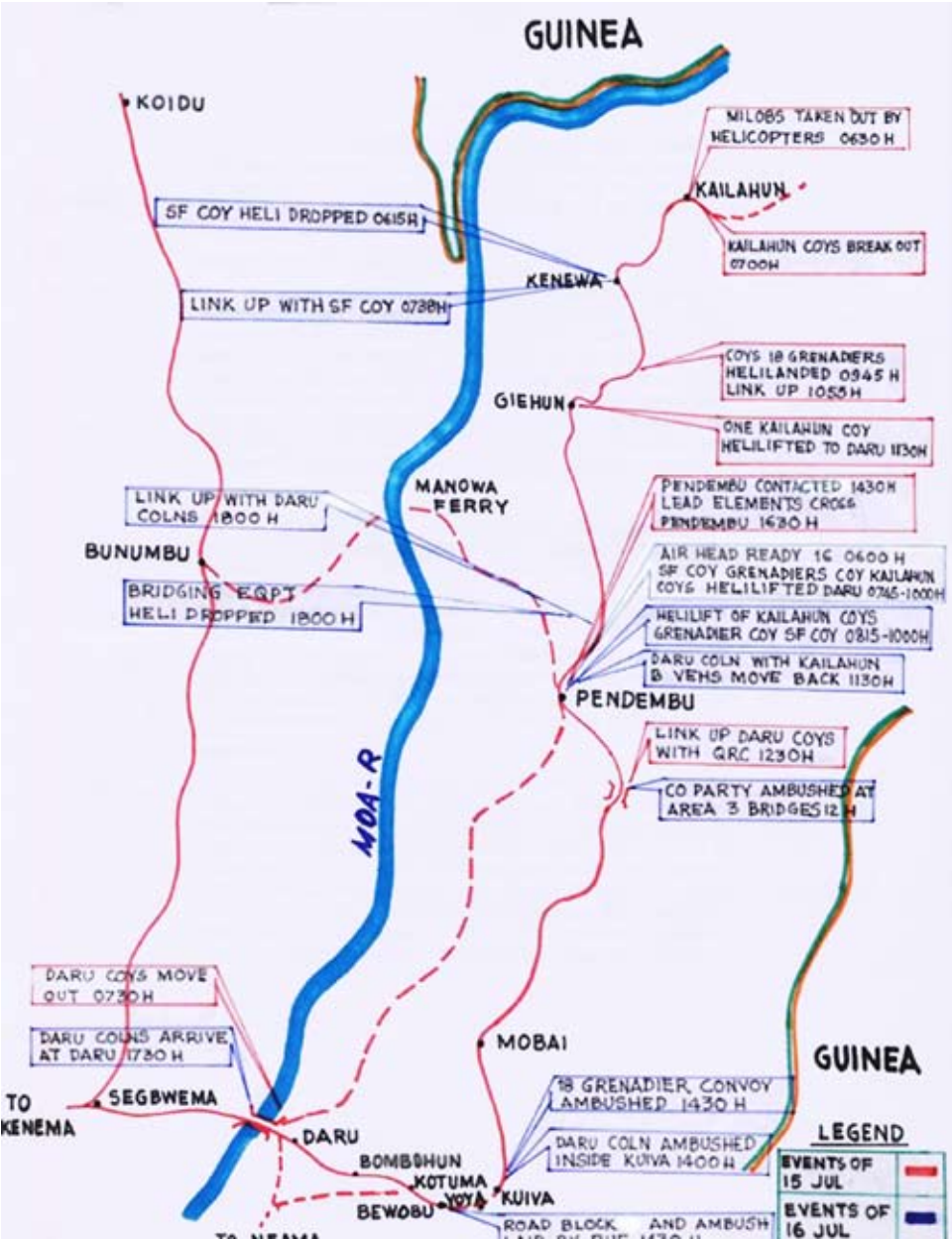


Figure 15. Operation Khukri operational map as drawn by Major Anil Raman, Adjutant of 5th/8th Gurkha Rifles<sup>333</sup>

## Operation Barras

On 22 July 2000, 2 R Anglian was replaced as the STTT by the 1st Battalion The Royal Irish Regiment (1 R Irish).<sup>334</sup> Like the Anglians before them, the main role of the team was the selection of recruits - interviews, medical checks and simple aptitude tests - followed by six weeks of basic military training modelled on that designed for recruits in the British Army. C Company 1 R Irish was the only formed sub-unit in the STTT, providing protection for the rest of the team conducting and supporting the training.

On 25 August, Major Alan Marshall, Officer Commanding (OC) of C Company, took an 11-man patrol in three land rovers on a routine patrol to visit the Jordanian UNAMSIL battalion in Masiaka. On the return journey, he decided at short notice to follow up information that the West Side Boys in the Occra Hills had started to surrender themselves to the DDR programme. When he arrived at Magbeni on the banks of the Rokel River, a town occupied by the West Side Boys, his patrol was overpowered by a group of militiamen who, although initially welcoming, turned aggressive and used a 4-tonne truck equipped with a twin-barrelled ZPU-2 14.5mm heavy machine gun to block the R Irish escape. The British soldiers were taken by boat across the river to the West Side Boys' headquarters at Gberi Bana where they were incarcerated.<sup>335</sup>

Over the next two weeks, the hostages were subject to high levels of violence, including mock executions, by the increasingly erratic West Side Boys. But the worst treatment was reserved for the Sierra Leonean Army liaison officer with the patrol, Lieutenant Musa Bangura, who was recognised by one of the ex-SLA members of the West Side Boys and regarded as a traitor. Bangura was close to death by the time the rescue operation took place on 10 September.<sup>336</sup>

The British quickly opened up negotiations with the leader of the West Side Boys, the self-styled Brigadier Foday Kallay. On the British side, negotiations were led by Lieutenant Colonel Simon Fordham, CO 1 R Irish, with the assistance of two professional hostage negotiators from the Metropolitan Police. Members of UK SF also joined the negotiating team in order to start preparations for a possible rescue mission.

In exchange for a satellite phone, medical supplies and food, five of the British soldiers were released on 31 August. But this brief moment of hope

evaporated when the West Side Boys upped their demands for the release of the remaining hostages, including re-negotiation of the Lomé Peace Accord; freedom for all AFRC members currently in custody; safe passage and places at British universities for their leaders and the remainder to be taken back into the Sierra Leone Army. These were unrealistic demands and impossible to grant for either the Sierra Leone or British Government.

On 30 August, 1 Para was warned to provide an infantry company to support a possible special forces operation to free the hostages. This time it was A Company, who had missed out on Palliser while on exercise in Jamaica. Under the cover story of a short notice exercise deployment, they flew to Dakar on Sunday 3 September. At the same time D Squadron of 22 SAS was re-deployed from exercise in Kenya to West Africa. Operation Barras – the recovery of the captured 1 R Irish patrol, was underway.

By 5 September, two SAS undercover observation posts had been established immediately outside Gberi Bana, with direct sight of the buildings where the remaining six hostages were held, inserted at night by boat from the Rokel River.

The decision to launch the rescue operation was made on Saturday, 9 September by COBR in London. The rebels had once again raised their conditions to release the hostages—this time that President Kabbah's government should stand down—and reports from the observation teams suggested an increase in the volatility of the group at Gberi Bana. It was judged that the lives of the remaining six hostages were in increasing danger. As a result, the men of A Company 1 Para and D Squadron received their final briefings that night in preparation for a 0500 hours lift off the following morning.

The plan involved a direct early dawn assault by D Squadron on Gberi Bana, using two Chinook helicopters which would hover immediately above the village while the SAS troopers fast-roped onto the ground, with machine gunners in the aircraft providing suppressive fire. At the same time, A Company would be heli-lifted to assault Magbeni, south of the Rokel River, which might otherwise provide heavy fire in support of the West Side Boys' positions in Gberi Bana. The Paras would be supported by the Sierra Leonean Mi-24 and British Army Lynx helicopters to suppress enemy defensive fire.

This was not to be a stealthy and clinical hostage rescue like many SF

operations. It was a more or less conventional military attack with an emphasis on surprise, overwhelming firepower and rapid action. The hostages were released, including Lieutenant Bangura, for the loss of one SAS fatality, shot early in the raid. Brigadier Foday Kallay was captured. On the other side of the river, A Company captured Magbeni despite the helicopter landing site being chest deep in water and the company command team all being wounded by a mortar bomb. Under the company second-in-command, A Company continued its assault through the village clearing each house with grenades and small arms against stiff defence. The Paras suffered 13 injuries during the assault. West Side Boys casualties were officially stated as 25 fatalities but were likely to have been much higher.

Following the attack, on 13 September, Jordanian UNAMSIL peacekeepers visited the Occra Hills and found no evidence of any of the West Side Boys. Forty-eight had voluntarily disarmed to the Jordanians the previous day. For the rest of the week there was a steady stream of surrenders; by 15 September the DDR camp at Lungi housed 294 surrendered West Side Boys.<sup>337</sup>

After the operation was over, an analysis was conducted to assess the circumstances in which the R Irish patrol was taken hostage. Conducted by Brigadier Peter Pearson of LAND Command, the analysis concluded:

*Major Alan Marshall made an error of professional judgment in diverting from a planned and authorised journey so as to make an unauthorised visit to the village of Magbeni. There his patrol was overwhelmed. Maj Marshall made a grave mistake.*<sup>338</sup>

Another senior officer had a different view, saying

*It is easy for officers safe back in LAND Command and MOD to second guess what Marshall should or should not have done and to talk of him making a 'grave mistake' in exercising his initiative. They were not the men on the ground – he was. Even if the route and visit had been planned and registered it would not have prevented his capture. Indeed any number of patrols could conceivably have ended up in a similar set of circumstances. All these operations rely on the use of initiative.*

*We rely on men such as these [Marshall] to stick their necks out on operations across the world.*

*We must therefore be prepared sometimes for things not always to go according to plan. That is why we have contingencies, and they must have the confidence that we will back them up – come what may. The British Army punches above its weight in many areas. If we lose the courage and ‘brass neck’ of our soldiers we will all join the ranks of mediocrity and there are plenty of armies already in that vein.*<sup>339</sup>

Despite the report’s apparent censure of his decision on 25 August 2000, Alan Marshall continues to serve a successful career in the British Army.

Brigadier Pearson’s report went further than examining Marshall’s decision. It also admonished Brigadier Gordon Hughes, the British commander, reminding him that Sierra Leone remains ‘an unstable and volatile environment and that the deployment of his forces was to be strictly controlled.’ He was ordered to ensure that UK forces ‘never again find themselves inadvertently in a position that may lead to their capture.’<sup>340</sup>

Despite the internal blame game within the British Army, the military success of Operation Barras was quickly exploited. At a press conference, Secretary of State Geoff Hoon stated:

*The operation sends a number of powerful messages. Firstly, it is a yet further demonstration of the refusal of successive British governments to do deals with terrorists and hostage takers. Secondly, we hope the West Side Group and other rebel units in Sierra Leone will now realise the futility of continuing unlawful operations and instead accept the rule of law and the authority of the democratically elected Government of Sierra Leone. Thirdly, we hope all those who may in future consider taking similar action against UK Armed Forces will think carefully about the possible consequences and realise that there is nothing to be gained by taking such action.*<sup>341</sup>

Ever since Operation Barras, British commentators and analysts have tended to describe it as a turning point in the Sierra Leone war as a whole, due to the ‘powerful messages’ to the RUF about the UK’s resolve and capability.<sup>342</sup> Actually, there is little evidence for this. There was no noticeable

change in the RUF's behaviour, nor any suggestion that they were any more persuaded to implement the terms of the Lomé Peace Accord after Barras than they were before. In the Sierra Leone media there was great rejoicing over the destruction of the West Side Boys but little reference to wider implications for the RUF.<sup>343</sup> Where it did make a difference, however, was during Operation Silkman: first, the elimination of the West Side Boys had removed a potential spoiler to the peace process; second, the British information operation could cite Barras as a demonstration of British power within a larger information campaign against the RUF, as explained in Chapter 6.

### **The Situation Deteriorates, Again**

On 4 August 2000, the United Nations Security Council had adopted Resolution 1313, putting the blame for violence since May and the breakdown of Lomé on the RUF. It stated that:

*Until security conditions have been established allowing progress towards the peaceful resolution of the conflict in Sierra Leone there will continue to be a threat to UNAMSIL and the security of the state of Sierra Leone, and that in order to counter that threat, the structure, resources and mandate of UNAMSIL require strengthening ...*<sup>344</sup>

UNSCR 1313 authorised increasing the size of UNAMSIL and, for the first time, placed UNAMSIL in support of the Government of Sierra Leone's mission to defeat the RUF:

*To deter and where necessary decisively counter the threat of RUF attack by responding robustly to any hostile actions...*

*To assist ... the efforts of the Government of Sierra Leone to extend state authority, restore law and order and further stabilize the situation progressively throughout the entire country.*<sup>345</sup>

However, in September 2000, India announced that it would withdraw from UNAMSIL by the end of the year. It was one of the largest troop contributors and provided Major General Jetley, the force commander. The

announcement was a surprise, but among the reasons is likely to have been that India was concerned about UNSCR 1313 strengthening the mission's mandate from impartial peacekeeping to defeat of the RUF in support of the Sierra Leonean Government.<sup>346</sup> The following month, Jordan (another major troop contributor) also announced its withdrawal, citing the need for First World states to do more as the mandate was strengthened.<sup>347</sup> Both withdrawals sparked a crisis within the UN to find replacements and how to prevent a window of vulnerability during the troop changeovers.

Contributing Nation	Troop numbers
Bangladesh	792
Ghana	785
Guinea	789
India	3 151
Jordan	1 817
Kenya	889
Nigeria	3 205
Russia	125
Zambia	788
Others	169
<b>Total</b>	<b>12 510</b>

*Table 2. Composition of UNAMSIL - 30 October 2000 348*

At the same time as this crisis within UNAMSIL, the RUF remained in control of over half the country and appeared to be strengthening its control over Makeni and the diamond producing areas of Kono. Despite protestations to the contrary, Charles Taylor continued to provide weaponry and logistic support in exchange for diamonds. The RUF showed no sign of wanting to return to negotiations; indeed, it had started to expand its operations into Guinea.

The UK's efforts with the SLA were slowly bearing fruit: MODAT, IMATT and the STTT were all having a positive impact but it was all too slow and there was a lack of a single coordinating headquarters that could simultaneously plan and execute the defeat of the RUF while building the RSLAF over the

long-term. In the view of the UK Chief of Defence Staff, General Sir Charles Guthrie, what was needed was a powerful headquarters in Sierra Leone that could fulfil both functions while, at the same time, provide breathing space for UNAMSIL to reorganise.<sup>349</sup>

This was the birth of Operation Silkman.



*Figure 16. Members of 2nd Royal Anglian Regiment speak with UN soldiers of UNMASIL*  
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## Key Insights

**Key Insight 5.1: The transition from Palliser to Basilica was a mistake: the British switched focus from defeating the RUF to developing the SLAF too early. Both lines of operation continued to be necessary.**

In the words of now Lord Richards:

We replaced an operational HQ with a bunch of trainers. We attempted transition too early. After we departed, the RUF regained confidence. By September 2000 the situation was again deteriorating. Brigadier Gordon Hughes R Signals was an inappropriate choice [as British theatre commander]: he just didn't have the operational experience and insight to oversee a complex campaign. We took a risk and failed.<sup>350</sup>

Although Brigadier Hughes took some of the blame for allowing the situation where the R Irish were taken by the West Side Boys, his headquarters was not established to conduct or oversee operations. He did not have, for example, the intelligence support of the JFHQ or a brigade headquarters that could have provided greater insight to patrols as to the real situation on the ground, such as with the West Side Boys.

More important than the West Side Boys incident, however, was the IMATT Commander's lack of emphasis on defeating the RUF. Despite UNSCR 1313 strengthening UNAMSIL's mandate, the UNAMSIL commander continued to believe himself impartial in the conflict between the Government and the RUF and was unwilling to take further offensive action against the RUF after Operation Khukri. This left the onus of defeating the RUF on the fragile alliance between the still weak Sierra Leone Armed Forces, the CDF and other pro-Government militias. Without the British to act as arbiter this alliance quickly stopped functioning effectively; the momentum gained against the RUF during Palliser started to drift.

If, at the end of Palliser, the JFHQ had been replaced by another operational headquarters (as was to happen during Operation Silkman), then it is likely that the situation in Sierra Leone would not have deteriorated as it did in July to October 2000.

**Key Insight 5.2: Building Sierra Leone's armed forces was a long-term project but it was essential to long-term strategic success.**

British personnel designed and built Sierra Leone's armed forces and its MOD from scratch. They largely selected, trained and mentored the personnel, from lowest to highest ranks, that were to fill the structure. They provided much of the equipment and supplies for the new units. And, for the next ten years, they continued to provide advice and oversight to the armed forces, ensuring accountability to the democratic government.

Whereas we have seen in Key Point 5.1 that the British should not have lost focus on defeat of the RUF, it was only through building effective indigenous capability that long-term strategic success could be gained. Both lines of operation were necessary: defeat of the RUF was essential in the short term to enable peace in Sierra Leone; effective and accountable armed forces were essential in the longer term to enable that peace to be sustained.

**Key Insight 5.3: Risk taking is essential in this kind of operation which relies on leveraging the effect of relatively small forces to gain a theatre-level impact. But if you take risks then you need to be prepared for things to go wrong.**

Brigadier David Richards and Lieutenant Colonel Paul Gibson, CO 1 Para, both took significant risks on Operation Palliser and got away with it. Major Alan Marshall took a smaller risk on Operation Basilica but didn't get away with it. Richards and Gibson were rewarded; Marshall was not.

Risk taking is essential in nearly all military endeavours. Military personnel are trained how to assess risk and, when appropriate, how to mitigate it. Risk can never be entirely eliminated and things will occasionally go wrong. In Sierra Leone, the militias had created an industry in taking foreign military personnel hostage; it should not have been too difficult to predict that a British patrol might also be at risk.

**Key Insight 5.4: Beware over-emphasising the impact of your actions in someone else's war.**

It is easy, when on operations, to assume your perspective is shared by others. But when involved in someone else's war, as the British were

in Sierra Leone, it can be difficult to appreciate that the protagonists' perspectives are shaped by culture and shared experience in a war that had lasted for 11 years before the British intervention.

In this case, the British assumed that Operation Barras had sent shock-waves through Sierra Leone and would persuade the RUF of the futility of confronting the British. Although the British were later, during Silkman, to exploit the success of Barras, at the time it had no such effect on the RUF, who rather enjoyed the *schadenfreude* of seeing their erstwhile competitors from the AFRC being beaten.



Figure 17. British troops in a Land Rover near Waterloo, Freetown. © Crown copyright. IWM (UKLC-2000-084-006-026)

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## Chapter Six

### Operation Silkman

*We can do this the easy way or the hard way – but it will end only one way. You can go into the UN's programme (the easy way) or you can get killed by me (the hard way). I do not mind in the least which you choose.*

Brigadier Jonathon Riley's message to the RUF  
during Operation Silkman <sup>351</sup>

Operation Silkman was the decisive operation of the British engagement in Sierra Leone. It was the operation that finally forced the RUF to engage with the peace process and surrender themselves to DDR. It was also the operation where British thinking and strategy on Sierra Leone matured and was successfully implemented to such an extent that Sierra Leone has remained at peace ever since. Yet Silkman is overshadowed by the publicity and weight given to, in particular, Palliser and Barras. A Google exercise conducted in 2015 revealed that Palliser generated 4 760 hits, Barras 56 400, Basilica 1 010, yet Silkman yielded only 489.<sup>352</sup>

#### The Decision to Mount Silkman

Baroness Symons, a Defence minister in the House of Lords, announced the Silkman decision in a statement on Sierra Leone in the House on 10

October 2000:

*The key to a long-term solution in Sierra Leone remains the establishment of effective and accountable government armed forces*

*Building on our work so far, we shall be continuing our programme of training, equipping and advising the Sierra Leone army in several areas: a series of three further training teams will be deployed to train fresh troops ... we shall provide continuation and specialist training covering topics such as leadership and logistics; a package of equipment support for the SLA to include personal equipment for the trainees; and we shall adjust our command and control arrangements, through the provision of an operational (one star) level HQ to command the overall UK effort and to provide high level operational advice to the SLA.*

*The overall number of UK troops on the ground will increase from the current figure of around 300 to somewhat over 400, depending on the training under way at any one time.*

*A key element of our strategy is to help the Sierra Leone Army develop its ability to undertake effective operations in order to maintain pressure on the RUF.<sup>353</sup>*

Hidden within this statement was the most important element: provision of an operational one-star headquarters. There was also no indication that Basilica was to be wound up and, although many of the same training activities would continue, they would take place under a new operation codenamed Silkman. The COS at PJHQ had described the situation in Sierra Leone prior to Silkman as one of 'strategic muddle and operational impasse'.<sup>354</sup> The UK was now relying on deployment of a capable commander and staff to sort out the muddle and break the impasse.

Very shortly after Barras, a JFHQ team had deployed to Sierra Leone to conduct an estimate and recommend how to improve the mission. Their first recommendation was to deploy a 'joined-up' operational level headquarters into theatre as soon as possible. Yet, it appears that the decision to deploy a brigade HQ had already been made: General Sir Mike Jackson, then Commander in Chief, Land Command (CINCLAND), on the day after Barras,

warned Brigadier Jonathon Riley, Commander 1st Mechanised Infantry Brigade (1 Mech Bde) that he and his headquarters were to deploy to Sierra Leone for a six-month tour.<sup>355</sup>

HQ 1 Mech Bde was at readiness state R5, 30-days' notice-to-move. Undoubtedly, like the JFHQ and 1 Para during Palliser, it could have moved earlier. But there is a difference between a six-week deployment and a six-month one; and the decision was made to honour the notice-to-move time and deploy HQ 1 Mech Bde in mid-November. In the meantime the JFHQ under Brigadier David Richards was sent back to Freetown to fill the gap until the brigade HQ arrived.

When the JFHQ arrived back in Freetown on 12 October, Brigadier Richards' first task was to tell Brigadier Hughes that his services were no longer required in Sierra Leone and that Operation Basilica was to be wound up; Silkman started the following day. This time, the headquarters established itself in Cockerill Barracks, adjacent to the Sierra Leone military HQ, rather than in the British High Commission. The acting Sierra Leonean Chief of Defence Staff was Brigadier Tom Carew: President Kabbah had now appointed a Sierra Leonean to replace the deceased Nigerian Brigadier Maxwell Khobe.<sup>356</sup>

The British viewpoint is that the arrival of the JFHQ in Sierra Leone had an immediate impact. As Lord Richards commented afterwards: 'Silkman was all psychological'. He stated his intent was to convince the RUF 'of the inevitability of their defeat.'<sup>357</sup> The JFHQ designed an information operation that exploited:

- UK commitment to Sierra Leone as evidenced by the return of the JFHQ to Freetown.
- the growing strength of the SLA.
- the display of the Amphibious Task Group as an 'Over-the-Horizon-Reserve' (OTHR).
- effective FCO-orchestrated pressure on Liberia.
- an announcement of a further expansion of UNAMSIL.
- speedy implementation of an earlier recommendation to increase the number of British officers in HQ UNAMSIL, including the Chief of Staff.<sup>358</sup>

According to the British narrative, it was largely as a result of the success of this information operation that the RUF indicated a willingness to engage in ceasefire discussions to be held in Abuja, Nigeria.

### **The Royal Marines Return to Sierra Leone**

The withdrawal of Indian and Jordanian peacekeepers from UNAMSIL started in November 2000. The gap was filled by two additional Bangladeshi battalions, a Ukrainian Maintenance and Training battalion and a Kenyan Guard and Training Company. Command passed in November to Kenyan Lieutenant General Opande with a Nigerian deputy. The entire change around was completed by early February 2001, with the majority of new troops in position by the end of December 2000.<sup>359</sup>

Nevertheless, the potential hiatus in UNAMSIL during the troop changeover sufficiently worried the Sierra Leonean and British Governments that they agreed to deploy the UK Amphibious Task Group (ATG) back to Sierra Leone to conduct a week-long amphibious demonstration in November.<sup>360</sup> 42 Cdo and the rest of the ATG were once again on exercise in the Mediterranean: this time re-deployment was rather less rushed and HMS *Ocean* arrived off Sierra Leone on Sunday 12 November.

Brigadier Richards told local radio that Britain's intent in deploying the maritime force was to 'remind the rebels that Britain meant business here. I think the imminent arrival of [the task group] ...probably was a factor in them coming to the peace table a little earlier than we'd anticipated.' He added: 'The record of the RUF in these ceasefire negotiations in the past has not been that good, and I think it won't do them any harm ...to realise that should it go wrong Britain isn't going away.'<sup>361</sup>

On Monday 13 November the ATG started the amphibious demonstration in Freetown. According to a Joint Task Force statement:

*An amphibious force based on 42 Commando Group Royal Marines from the helicopter carrier HMS Ocean staged a beach landing exercise on the Aberdeen Peninsula. The landing itself was supported by Sea King helicopters, while Chinook battlefield support helicopters delivered 105-mm light artillery guns and all-terrain vehicles. Lynx attack helicopters provided air cover.*<sup>362</sup>

In Freetown, local media reported that 'convoys of British military vehicles rumbled through the streets.' JFHQ spokesman Lieutenant Colonel Richard Eaton explained that the exercise was designed to show Britain's ability to support United Nations missions throughout the world, including Sierra Leone. He told local radio:

*What we have said is that if any of the UN missions were to be in trouble anywhere in the world, then the capability of the Joint Rapid Reaction Force is such that they can deploy in a hurry to be of assistance, and that's what's happening now.*<sup>363</sup>

For the rest of the week, 42 Cdo conducted jungle training in the Benguema area, including an impressive live firepower display for which there was a large invited audience. Spokesmen declared it a show of support for UNAMSIL in the wake of the Indian and Jordanian withdrawal from the UN peacekeeping force.<sup>364</sup>

The arrival of 42 Cdo in Sierra Leone did not please everyone. RUF spokesman Gibril Massaquoi described the Royal Marines as 'mercenaries under any guise' whose presence in Sierra Leone was 'very, very provocative and not in the interests of peace.' He claimed the British were only in Sierra Leone to steal its diamonds and not to assist its people.<sup>365</sup> On 21 November, Liberian President Charles Taylor demanded that British troops either withdraw or be put under the command of UNAMSIL, saying they were in Sierra Leone 'for mischief and to de-stabilise the West African sub-region.' This is unsurprising given Taylor's long association with the RUF.

Rather more surprising was criticism on 16 November by the acting commander of UNAMSIL, Brigadier Mohammed Garba, who believed that the UK's amphibious demonstration had de-stabilised the peace process. Garba went on to suggest that Britain had more aggressive plans in Sierra Leone than did the UN and that 'if the UK really wanted to help ...it should contribute at least a battalion of troops to UNAMSIL.' To counter this criticism, the following day Sierra Leone's parliament adopted a resolution welcoming the British military presence and, on 24 November, large public demonstrations were held in Freetown, Bo and Kenema in support of the British military presence in Sierra Leone.<sup>366</sup>

## The Abuja Ceasefire Agreement 10 November 2000 - 'Abuja 1'

On 10 November representatives of the RUF and the Government of Sierra Leone signed a ceasefire agreement in Abuja, Nigeria. The meeting had been convened by a committee established by ECOWAS to facilitate the end of the war. The agreement provided for:

- an immediate ceasefire
- a monitoring role for UNAMSIL
- full liberty for the UN to deploy throughout the country
- unimpeded movement of humanitarian workers
- the return of UNAMSIL weapons and other equipment seized by the RUF
- the immediate resumption of the DDR programme
- a review of implementation of the agreement after 30 days.<sup>367</sup>

Views differ as to why the RUF signed the agreement. One British officer stated:

*Privately the RUF conceded that the British commitment to Sierra Leone was the key factor in their decision to seek a peaceful outcome at this time.*<sup>368</sup>

Others thought that the RUF was genuinely interested in returning to the Lomé accord, while the Sierra Leonean Government and UNAMSIL wanted the ceasefire to reduce the risk of conflict during the UNAMSIL troop rotation at the end of 2000.<sup>369</sup> A more sceptical view, more in line with what subsequently happened, was that the RUF agreed to the ceasefire in order to relieve military pressure on its units as they mounted a major offensive campaign in neighbouring Guinea. Without fear of attack from Sierra Leonean, British or UNAMSIL forces, the RUF could use its territory in northern and eastern Sierra Leone as a safe base from which to mount its attacks into Guinea.<sup>370</sup>

The now Lord Richards, in an interview for this paper about his time as the commander in Sierra Leone, is of the opinion that not only had the JFHQ's

arrival in October forced the RUF to sign the November ceasefire, but the Abuja agreement signalled the effective end of the war. He was particularly keen to have the agreement in place while he was still in command and before the arrival of Brigadier Riley.<sup>371</sup>

Alas, it was not to be that easy. Like every previous attempt at peace in Sierra Leone, unless the agreement was backed by a credible threat of force, the RUF simply ignored it while using the time gained to re-arm, re-organise and focus its military effort elsewhere. After Abuja, the RUF's interim leader, Issa Sesay,<sup>372</sup> refused to turn up to or delayed meetings with UNAMSIL to discuss implementation of the agreement. UNAMSIL was not granted freedom of movement in RUF-controlled areas. The only weapons returned during the ceasefire were 11 derelict UN armoured vehicles that had been stripped of all weapons and equipment. No weapons or ammunition were surrendered and no RUF fighters underwent DDR.<sup>373</sup> Nevertheless, the ceasefire held and Sierra Leone enjoyed a largely peaceful Christmas for the first time since 1990.

### **The RUF Takes the War to Guinea**

According to witnesses appearing for the Prosecution at the Special Court of Sierra Leone, in July 2000 Charles Taylor ordered the RUF to attack Guinea to oust its then president, Lansana Conte, whom Taylor accused of supporting the rebel group 'Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy' (LURD) that was fighting against his regime in Liberia. The witnesses claimed that Taylor gave the RUF commander, Issa Sesay, arms and 50 boxes of ammunition to support the attack.<sup>374</sup>

In late 2000 and early 2001, the RUF conducted a series of major raids in the border area of Guinea, often abducting or recruiting Guineans so to create the illusion that the attacks were conducted by Guinean dissidents. The attacks are estimated to have caused over 1 000 deaths and displaced more than 100 000 Guineans.<sup>375</sup> For example, the BBC reported on 7 December 2000 that hundreds had been killed in a single major attack on Gueckedou, a Guinean market town near where the borders of Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone meet.<sup>376</sup>

The Guinean Government was ruthless in its response: in January 2001 it started a campaign of cross-border raids into Sierra Leone to destroy RUF bases. According to Amnesty International, the Guinean Army made no

attempt to limit civilian casualties, using multiple launch rocket systems and attack helicopters to attack RUF-occupied towns, causing heavy casualties not just among the RUF but also among civilians. Guinean cross-border attacks stopped on 17 May 2001 after Guineans mistakenly shelled an RUF detachment at a disarmament site.<sup>377</sup>

The RUF suffered heavily during their Guinea campaign. Lieutenant General (Retired) Jonathon Riley described the Guineans as:

*...hard-core, without restraint or mercy, and as a result the RUF took a great many casualties, as well as overstretching themselves. This was a fatal error on their part and on Charles Taylor's.*<sup>378</sup>

It is a sign of the naivety of UNAMSIL at the time that they allowed themselves to believe that the fighting in Guinea was not due to the RUF and nothing to do with UNAMSIL. The acting UNAMSIL commander suggested on 15 November that if RUF fighters were involved it was only because of their being 'idled' by the RUF's commitment to the Sierra Leone ceasefire, leading to them being recruited by Guinean dissidents. He went on to say that he had spoken to Dennis Mingo (alias 'Superman'), one of the RUF's most effective field commanders, and believed his assurance that the RUF was not involved in the Guinea fighting.<sup>379</sup> Although the circumstances of Mingo's subsequent death on the Guinean/Liberian border in June 2001 remain unclear, he was one of a significant number of experienced RUF commanders to be killed during the RUF's ill-fated Guinea campaign.<sup>380</sup>

### **Brigadier Riley Takes Command**

When Brigadier Riley assumed command of Operation Silkman on 25 November and HQ 1 Mech Bde became the JTFHQ, there was a general belief in PJHQ and MOD that the war had been won and that the new JTFHQ's role was limited to 'taking forward the peace process and implementing longer term training and restructuring plans.'<sup>381</sup>

As has been shown, that belief was wrong: the RUF had no intention of disarming and, although distracted by their operations in Guinea, they were determined to hold on to their weapons and control their territory, including the diamond-mining areas of the Kono District. They would need to be forced to surrender to DDR and it was up to the new JTFHQ to force them

to do it. But this false belief was to bedevil relationships between PJHQ and operational HQ in-theatre over the coming months. For a long time, PJHQ believed that the JTFHQ was involved in post-conflict activities, while the reality was that the war had not ended and the JTFHQ had to take the lead in coercing the RUF into the peace process.

### **The Silkman Mission**

The Directive issued by CJO for Silkman, quoted the UK Government's strategic end state as:

*The establishment of sustainable peace and security, a stable democratic government, the reduction of poverty, respect for human rights, the establishment of accountable armed and police forces, and the enhancement of the UN's reputation in Africa and more widely.*<sup>382</sup>

This end state was wide-ranging and went well beyond the military instrument of power alone. For example, in parallel with UK assistance to the Army there was an equivalent effort to reform the Sierra Leone Police. Military activities would therefore have to be nested within other efforts managed principally by the FCO and DfID.

The mission statement given to Brigadier Riley was:

- to establish an operational HQ with the ability to command and control UK joint operations within the Joint Operational Area
- to provide advice to the government of Sierra Leone on a national security strategy and, at the operational level, direction for its campaign to bring the RUF back into the process of disarmament, demobilization and re-integration
- to conduct and supervise through the IMATT the development, training and provision of equipment for the Sierra Leone armed forces in accordance with the whole armed forces concept, in order to create the conditions necessary for the achievement of the British Government's strategic intent<sup>383</sup>
- Riley challenged his original mission statement, which included reference to not permitting the UN to fail in Sierra Leone: his view

was that this was very different from ensuring that the Government of Sierra Leone succeeded, and that the two statements were irreconcilable. In the end, PJHQ agreed and the mission was changed.

Brigadier Riley found that he had four separate roles in Sierra Leone:

1. **As Commander British Forces** he had command of all UK personnel routinely in the country.
2. **As Commander UK Joint Task Force** he had command of the on-call over-the-horizon reserve, with its supporting ships and aircraft.
3. **As Commander IMATT** he had command of the 100 advisers embedded in the Sierra Leone Army.
4. **As Military Adviser to the Government of Sierra Leone** he met with the President regularly, attended the National Security Council and occasionally briefed the Cabinet.

Note that these four roles were embodied in the Commander; they were not mirrored in the JTFHQ which had been given explicit orders to separate British from Sierra Leonean operations. So, ostensibly, IMATT (embedded in the Sierra Leone structure) was not under the JTFHQ but it was under Brigadier Riley who was Commander JTFHQ. In reality, common sense prevailed and people in theatre just got on with it.<sup>384</sup>

### **The Campaign Plan**<sup>385</sup>

Brigadier Riley identified that the key to achieving the UK's strategic end state was to win the war—what he described as 'The Big Idea'. This could be through the physical destruction of the RUF or through coercing them to accept the DDR process offered by the UN; a carrot and stick approach. Both options were at least partly dependent on the two enabling objectives of, first, producing a credible, but interim, Sierra Leonean force while, second, conducting longer-term development and restructuring of the whole machinery of Defence.

In his estimate, Brigadier Riley conducted a centre of gravity (COG) analysis. He assessed the enemy and friendly COGs as:

- Enemy strategic COG: the support of Charles Taylor's Liberian regime.

- Enemy operational-level COG: RUF control of the Kono diamond mines to fund its operations.
- Friendly strategic COGs: the legitimacy and legality of President Kabbah's Government and its support by the international community.
- Friendly operational-level COG: possession of Freetown and Lungi Airport from which operations could be mounted.

In each case he sought critical vulnerabilities which, in the case of enemy COGs, could be exploited and, for friendly COGs, needed to be protected. It was clear that success would be largely dependent on politically and physically isolating the RUF from the Taylor regime in Liberia and limiting the RUF's ability to profit from the illegal trade of diamonds. Much of the success of the campaign, therefore, lay outside Sierra Leone and within the remit of the FCO. So, for example, the UK pushed hard in the UN to break the link between illicit rough diamonds and armed conflict, including support for a Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 1 December 2000 that led to the establishment of the Kimberley Process in 2003.<sup>386</sup>

The subsequent campaign plan had five phases:

- **Phase 1 - Building Confidence and Regaining the Initiative.**  
This phase included preventing further RUF offensive operations by strengthening the SLA's defensive positions; establishing communications with Guinea; re-forming the CDF and gaining control over its operations; and an information operation as much aimed at the local population as the RUF.
- **Phase 2 - Offensive Command and Control Warfare and Cutting RUF Supply Lines.** This was to be achieved largely by electronic jamming and physical attack of command nodes, coupled with physical interdiction of cross-border routes to Liberia.
- **Phase 3 - Expulsion of the RUF from the north and north-west.**  
This could be done either by Sierra Leonean forces or by UNAMSIL occupying RUF-controlled territory. But in either event it was critical that the area should come under Government authority, rather than in some way still being controlled by the RUF.
- **Phase 4 - Capture of the enemy COG in Kono District.** This

was the decisive operation of the campaign to neutralise the RUF’s operational-level COG and, at the same time, undermine its strategic COG: without a steady flow of diamonds, Charles Taylor’s support for the RUF would quickly wither. Once again, it did not matter whether Kono was taken from the RUF by the SLA by force or UNAMSIL by agreement. What was important was that the Government was able to regain control of the country’s sources of wealth.

- **Phase 5 - Post-conflict activities.** This phase was to include the Military Reintegration Plan (MRP) and the development of the long-term Defence structures.

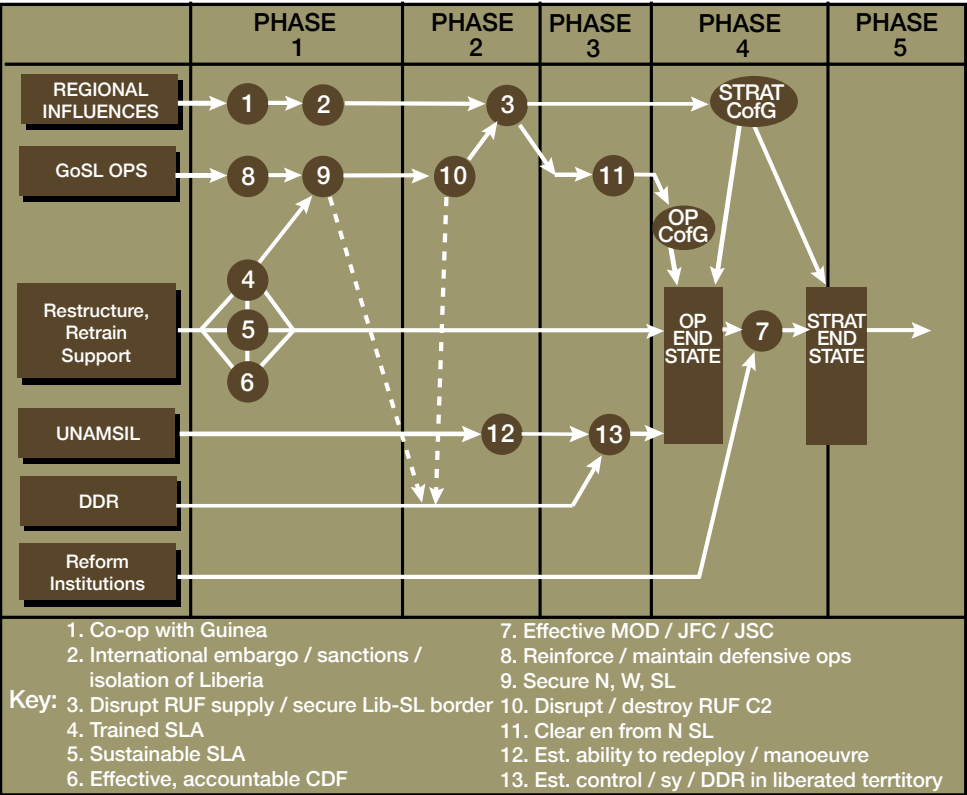


Figure 18. The campaign's operation plan and its phases (Image derived from Op Plan by Major Conway Bown)

## Forcing the RUF to Surrender to the DDR Process

The operational element of Phase 1 of the plan was initiated by the SLA's 5th Infantry Brigade, (5 Bde) based in Port Loko. It conducted an operation to clear the Occra Hills of the remaining West Side Boys and other rebels. That done, the newly formed 4th Infantry Brigade (4 Bde) deployed into, and occupied the area around Masiaka. With both Masiaka and Port Loko secure, the SLA (and UNAMSIL) now had a firm base in the Horseshoe from which they could expand to the north in Phase 3. The Horseshoe was the name given to the horseshoe-shaped arc traced by the road that led from Lungi airport to Freetown that crossed the Sierra Leone river.

Over the Christmas period the 3rd Infantry Brigade (3 Bde) occupied Kenema, Sierra Leone's third largest city, which, although in an area partly dominated by the CDF, had not seen effective government for several years. This was to secure the western flank and to allow 3 Bde to be in a position to interdict the RUF's supply routes. The gap between 3 Bde and 4 Bde was covered for a period by the CDF until 4 Bde was reinforced in March 2001.

Kenema is over 300 kilometres from Freetown and 3 Bde's move and occupation of it was considered to be ambitious. Brigadier Riley was criticised for this deployment in both London and New York, fearing it to be provocative to the RUF and potentially undermining the Abuja ceasefire. But it had an electrifying effect on both the SLA and the civil population: it showed that the Army could lift an entire brigade in a single move and then sustain it (both of which would have been impossible six months earlier) and that the Government was serious about re-imposing its writ over all of Sierra Leone, however far from Freetown. Both also appear to have had a significant psychological impact on the RUF.<sup>387</sup>

On 21 January 2001, President Kabbah opened the new MOD HQ and announced that the Sierra Leone Armed Forces would be designated the Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces (RSLAF), further separating the new military structure from what had gone before, emphasising the new culture of democratic accountability and transparency. On the same day, Joint Force Command (JFC) and Joint Support Command (JSC) were created, both commanded initially by British officers.<sup>388</sup>

One of the more frustrating restrictions imposed from the UK was the

requirement to separate British from Sierra Leonean operations. This ignored the fact that advisors had to be embedded in RSLAF units which meant having to deploy with them. At the time, British personnel were not permitted to deploy beyond the Horseshoe. This restriction had been imposed following the R Irish hostage-taking, but now it limited greatly the effectiveness of RSLAF operations against the RUF. The British Army has considerable experience in mentoring and developing indigenous forces, and one of the most important lessons is that you should both train and fight together. Doing one without the other doesn't work, as the British Army later found to its cost in southern Iraq. It took a visit by the UK's Secretary of State for Defence to Freetown to lift this limitation on British advisors' movements.<sup>389</sup>

During Phase 2, the RSLAF, with British technical support, attacked the RUF's command network. But it was done in a way that did not interrupt the flow of intelligence. One of the most important sources was interception of their satellite phones but one day all the phones went dead. A visit to Sierra-Tel established that the RUF had not paid its bills, so the British Force Commander paid them in cash and the flow of intelligence resumed. The British continued to pay the RUF's telephone bills for some time afterwards.<sup>390</sup>

Brigadier Riley also moved to gain control of and exploit the CDF. The kamajors and other secret societies of the CDF were mostly loyal to tribal chiefs rather than the central state but, if they were to be militarily effective, they needed to be brought under central command and their operations coordinated with the RSLAF. The mechanism for doing this was through supplying them with food. In a country where food was always scarce and where much of the agriculture had been destroyed by the war, whoever provided food gained control. The CDF was thus largely re-mobilised into companies and placed under the command of the RSLAF brigade commanders. They were tasked to hold ground in rear areas to release regular troops; to harass RUF supply lines; to gather intelligence and liaise with local villagers; and scouting and flank protection during RSLAF operations.<sup>391</sup>

For the previous two years, two Army garrisons in the north, Kabala and Bumbuna, had remained loyal to the Government, despite being cut off by rebels and under frequent attack. The British firstly organised resupply and re-equipping of the garrisons using RAF C-130s landing on bush airstrips

and then, later, organised their relief-in-place with fresh Sierra Leonean troops. This was an important symbol of strengthening Government control and growing capability of the RSLAF. Whereas previously the two garrisons had been under siege, they were now bulwarks from which offensive operations could be launched against the RUF. The RSLAF had changed from a defensive posture to an offensive one and, as a result, increased the military pressure on the RUF.<sup>392</sup>

By March 2001, it was time to start Phase 3 of the operation: clearing the north and north-west. This had become particularly problematic since it was from these areas that many of the attacks on Guinea were being mounted. UNAMSIL, now gaining in strength, undertook to occupy the main towns of Lunsar and Makeni, but it 'did not take proper control, did not disarm the rebels and, worst of all, totally disregarded [its] mandate in obstructing the return of Government authority.'<sup>393</sup>

By this time, the country was in danger of being divided. The east-west line that broadly differentiated between Government-held and RUF-held territory was now becoming institutionalised. And, unfortunately for the Government, all the main diamond-producing areas lay on the RUF's side.

### **Re-building UNAMSIL**

There continued to be considerable pressure from New York for a British contribution to UNAMSIL. The UN position was understandable: if the British were not prepared to provide at least a battalion, why should any other western nation? But the British continued to be concerned about UNAMSIL's leadership: only by deploying a full brigade would the UK be able to guarantee command of UNAMSIL and that was just not possible given other commitments in the Balkans at the time.<sup>394</sup>

The UK did provide additional staff officers to the UN, both in New York and in Freetown. In particular, the UK provided the Chief of Staff to UNAMSIL who developed a UNAMSIL campaign plan that tied into the plan developed by Brigadier Riley: it was the UN's carrot to Riley's stick. Although this plan was never properly enacted, it is credited with forcing the UN to take a more proactive attitude, such as the March move into the north.<sup>395</sup>

UNAMSIL continued to grow. By December 2001 its troop strength had increased to its authorised strength of 17 500 with the addition of infantry

battalions from Pakistan and Nepal.<sup>396</sup> This was at the time the largest ever UN peacekeeping deployment.

### **Review of the Ceasefire Agreement - 'Abuja 2'**

On 2 May, delegations from the RUF and the Government of Sierra Leone met a second time in Abuja to review the implementation of the November 2000 ceasefire agreement. This meeting became known as 'Abuja 2'. It was the first such meeting where the RUF genuinely sought an end to the fighting. The rebels' position had become significantly weaker since the previous November and they realised that, first, their military campaign had been defeated and, second, the political deal on offer was as good as it ever would be.

Ever since Lomé, divisions had existed in the RUF between those who pressed for a political settlement and those who sought continuation of the war. The Sierra Leone Government's decapitation of the RUF's political wing in Freetown in May 2000 had decisively moved the balance of RUF decision-making in favour of the militarists; but many of these were now dead, killed by the Guinean Army during the RUF's foray in Guinea. An opportunity now existed, therefore, for the remnants of the RUF 'peace party' to regain control of the movement.

President Kabbah had been deeply frustrated since Abuja 1 that he was unable to restore government control over RUF-occupied areas, even when UNAMSIL had deployed there. He was also concerned that he was unable to stop the RUF from using Sierra Leonean territory to attack his neighbour and ally. He felt the Abuja Agreement was being used against him. His solution, with Nigerian and British backing, was to call for a review of the agreement, seeking to force the RUF to vacate the north and north-west and permit the RSLAF to assume responsibility for security there. This time, the Government's negotiating position was backed up by the threat of force: if the RUF did not pull out and engage with the DDR process, the RSLAF would feel free to resume hostilities.<sup>397</sup>

At Abuja 2, the RUF capitulated. It agreed to withdraw from Kambia district, on the Guinean border, and that the RSLAF would deploy there. The withdrawn RUF forces would then undergo DDR.<sup>398</sup> The RUF also abandoned demands that the newly formed RSLAF should be also disbanded, once again, and made to go through the DDR process: they

recognised that the RSLAF were the established armed forces of the state. Instead, their disarmament would take place in concert with that of the re-mobilised CDF.<sup>399</sup>

The RUF also dropped demands to end the British involvement in Sierra Leone and, unlike Abuja 1, there was no mention of any conditionality to the British remaining. However, Charles Taylor's campaign against the British continued. In April 2001 he criticised President Kabbah for allowing the British to 'practically re-colonise Sierra Leone.' Kabbah bluntly told him to mind his own business.<sup>400</sup>

### **The DDR Process Succeeds, at Last**

Abuja 2 immediately revitalised the DDR programme, which was re-launched on in May 2001.

As per the agreement, disarmament in Kambia District started first on 18 May, followed by the deployment of the RSLAF into former RUF held areas in the north, starting on 29 May. DDR in the Port Loko District started on 12 June, in Kono on 1 July and in Moyamba and Koinadugu on 15 and 20 August respectively. By 14 September the RSLAF had deployed additional troops to Kabala, established forward bases at Moyamba, Mongeri, Zimmi and Joru and opened up the supply route by road to Bumbuna and Kabala. DDR in Bombali and Bo Districts started in September and October. RSLAF deployments to previously RUF-held border areas continued throughout December 2001 to February 2002 as the official disarmament of districts was declared.<sup>401</sup>

Disarmament formally ended on 17 January 2002. In the period since it restarted on 18 May 2001, 47 076 combatants were disarmed: 19 183 RUF; 27 695 CDF; and 198 AFRC/ex-SLA. 15 840 weapons and 2 million rounds of ammunition were surrendered.<sup>402</sup>

The most symbolic moment in the war's end came on 3 September 2001, when President Kabbah, accompanied by the presidents of Nigeria and Mali, visited the diamond centre of Koidu for the first time since the war's start. Koidu had recently been occupied by newly arrived UNAMSIL troops from Pakistan who re-established Government control of the region and its diamond mines. In an emotional meeting in Koidu's Catholic church, Kabbah shook hands with the RUF's interim leader, Issa Sesay, saying 'as

from today, you are no more a rebel leader, but Mr Issa Sesay.<sup>403</sup>

By the end of February 2002, the RSLAF were fully deployed around the territorial borders and the bulk of the country was, for the first time in 11 years, under Government control.<sup>404</sup> The war was over.

### **Silkman Ends, IMATT Continued**

Whereas disarmament was fully the responsibility of UNAMSIL, the reintegration of ex-combatants was undertaken through the previously planned Military Reintegration Plan written by MODAT, but held in abeyance since April 2000. The MRP was initiated on 4 June 2001 and the first of the successful ex-combatants arrived at the Holding and Basic Training Centre which had been built by RSLAF Engineers, near Lungi, on 14 June. MRP was conducted by a British infantry battalion in a similar way to the STTTs the previous year. Three battalions were used in this way, the last being 1st Battalion, the Royal Gurkha Regiment who completed the final MRP package on 17 May 2002. 2 349 ex-combatants were absorbed into the RSLAF through the MRP, of whom 56 were commissioned and 290 were appointed NCOs; 65 per cent were ex-RUF and 35 per cent were ex-CDF.<sup>405</sup>

The RSLAF was almost totally re-equipped during this period. Every soldier had at least one new uniform with helmet and boots. There was enough working transport to move a brigade and to resupply all deployed forces. Attack helicopters were operational and sustained. Rations had been increased to two meals per day: this was immensely important and greatly improved morale. Soldiers were paid on time and administered effectively. The MOD was operational as was the Joint Force Command and Joint Support Command.<sup>406</sup>

Much, but not all, of the equipment for the RSLAF was supplied by the British, funded by the UK Sub-Saharan Africa Conflict Prevention Fund,<sup>407</sup> although a great deal of high-powered political help had to be enlisted to overcome some systemic obstructions in UK. To short-circuit delays in delivery of British weapons and ammunition, Brigadier Riley enlisted the support of the Chinese ambassador who provided a shipload of Chinese armaments to the RSLAF to be distributed by IMATT. The ambassador explained this Chinese assistance by saying that China deplored chaos in an area in which they wanted to do business and would do everything in its

power to support British attempts to bring stability.<sup>408</sup>

Operation Silkman wound up on 31 July 2002 after the last MRP battalion departed. Brigadier Riley and HQ 1 Mech Bde had left over a year earlier, at the end of April 2001, but the success of Silkman was undoubtedly built during their tenure. HQ 1 Mech Bde was replaced by an *ad hoc* one-star headquarters which trickle-posted personnel throughout the rest of Silkman, limiting sudden loss of expertise or change of approach during change over periods but losing the benefits of cohesion which comes with a worked up formation headquarters.

When Silkman ended, it left the IMATT in place for a further 11 years until 2013, tasked to build the new RSLAF and demonstrate continuing British commitment to Sierra Leone. In 2001 and 2002, further contingents had arrived from Canada, USA, Australia, Bermuda and France. By the end of 2002, IMATT was reduced from 360 to 114 military personnel, reflecting the reduced requirement for the embedding of international officers in the operational structure as the combat role diminished. That figure stayed largely static until 2013, under the command of a British brigadier who remained double-hatted as military advisor to the President of Sierra Leone. The annual budget of the IMATT borne by the UK was about £16 million.<sup>409</sup>

The very presence of IMATT was in itself a stabilising factor within Sierra Leone, further to its professionalisation of the RSLAF. When discussing the possibility of military opposition to the 2007 Sierra Leone election, the then US Ambassador to Sierra Leone said:

*... it was never certain that the ruling party would respect the outcome of the election if they lost ... the British had and still have an International Military Assistance Training Team (IMATT) that is there for a period of about eight years or so ... 120 soldiers, 100 from the UK, 3 from the United States and the rest scattered among other British Commonwealth countries mainly. They were there to train the military, which meant they had insight into the mood of the military, and likewise there was always the fear the British might call for their over horizon SAS troops to come in if the military acted inappropriately. So... what was clear was the security forces were not going to intervene to influence the outcome of the election.*<sup>410</sup>

In effect, the long-term presence of international advisors and trainers kept the RSLAF honest.



*Figure 19. A member of 2nd Battalion, Royal Anglian Regiment conducts a fieldcraft lesson with a member of the Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces. © Crown copyright. IWM (UKLC-2000-085-003-009)*

## Key Insights:

### **Key Insight 6.1: Negotiate from a position of strength, with the ability to coerce compliance with any agreement reached.**

There were a number of internationally brokered peace agreements during the Sierra Leone War. In nearly every case they were used by the RUF for short term tactical purposes, normally to re-group and re-arm. Apart from Abuja 2, the only time the RUF was *forced*, militarily, to negotiate was at Abidjan in November 1996: the offensive planned and organised by Executive Outcomes had nearly destroyed the RUF as a movement. But RUF negotiators, supported by international opprobrium for private military companies, had persuaded Kabbah to expel Executive Outcomes as part of the Abidjan Agreement; as a result the Government had no ability to coerce implementation of the Agreement, despite being in a strong negotiating position at its start.

Abuja 2 was different. Once again, the RUF had suffered military defeat. But, this time, the RSLAF with British support and leadership had the capability and will to coerce RUF compliance with the agreement. As a result, the remaining militarists within the RUF were easily out-argued by the 'peace party' within the RUF; military resistance to DDR and the political process evaporated. There were no significant attempts by elements of the RUF to resist DDR or prevent the RSLAF taking over previously RUF-controlled territory.

What made the difference was an organised and effective RSLAF, well led, with a workable campaign plan to restore control over the whole country. It was the stick that persuaded the RUF to accept the UN's carrot.

### **Key Insight 6.2: A force under national command can act more purposefully than a UN force.**

The British never considered putting its forces under UNAMSIL command. The British Army, in particular, was still scarred by the experience of being part of UNPROFOR in Bosnia-Herzegovina; and the early experience of UNAMSIL in April-May 2000 indicated that it was even worse.

Frustratingly for British commanders, UNAMSIL's actions on the ground did

not reflect the mandate authorised by the UN Security Council. Although the UNAMSIL mandate was explicitly to support the Sierra Leonean Government to extend its writ across the country, somewhere between the UN Headquarters in New York and UNAMSIL Headquarters in Freetown this was reinterpreted to mean that UNAMSIL had to maintain a position of impartiality, treating the legitimate democratically-elected Government of Sierra Leone as a faction of equivalent status to the RUF.

Whatever the UN mandate might say, the force on the ground is limited by what troop-contributing nations are prepared to do and the risks they are prepared to take. In this case, British refusal to contribute to the force left other nations, with lower military capability, to take the lead: the British should not have been too surprised by UNAMSIL's reluctance to become involved in conflict.

Nevertheless, the British JTFHQ in theatre achieved a great deal more than UNAMSIL, despite the thousands of UN troops, massive logistics and money at UNAMSIL's disposal. It did so because the British openly supported President Kabbah's Government and was prepared to coerce the RUF into DDR in a way that UNAMSIL was not. Once the RUF had caved in, however, UNAMSIL's impartiality was important in helping them disarm through the DDR process.

**Key Insight 6.3: The UK's long term commitment was highly important in creating confidence within Sierra Leone; as well as ensuring that the long-term project of re-building democratically accountable and effective armed forces would be completed and not corrupted on the way.**

The British signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Government of Sierra Leone which, for ten years, provided a security guarantee and a commitment to rebuild the state almost from scratch after the war.<sup>411</sup> This guarantee was sufficient to persuade Sierra Leoneans to invest in the future of their own state rather than hedging their bets. In the security sphere, the vast majority trusted in the RSLAF project rather than, for example, retaining their own armed militias 'just in case'.

The guarantee was also important economically: international investors deciding whether or not to commit to Sierra Leone, as opposed to another

country in the region, were reassured that Sierra Leone would remain a stable place to do business.

**Key Insight 6.4: Understand the situation and the enemy sufficiently well to be able to analyse centres of gravity and expose their critical vulnerabilities.**

At the start of Operation Palliser, the British understood very little about the country they were operating in or the enemy they opposed. Six months later, it was very different. There was much greater understanding of Sierra Leone's people, the character of the conflict and the modus operandi of the RUF. Intelligence on the enemy was detailed and thorough. Most importantly, the British understood the relationship between the RUF and Charles Taylor's regime in Liberia and how it worked.

As a result, Brigadier Riley was able to base his estimate on a sound analysis of centres of gravity, both enemy and friendly, and accurately identified their critical vulnerabilities. Brigadier Richards, six months earlier, had to make decisions based on an intuitive feel for the situation: Richards was sufficiently intelligent and adept to get it right; another commander might have got it very wrong.

The campaign plan that resulted from Riley's analysis, coupled with the parallel development of the RSLAF, forced the RUF into submission and was largely responsible for ending the war.

**Key Insight 6.5: A brigade headquarters can be a joint task force HQ, but with difficulty.**

HQ 1 Mech Bde was augmented to help it transform from a land tactical level to a joint operational level headquarters. As Silkman was principally a land operation, with support from maritime and air components, it only required a limited number of augmentees from other services. But the process was nevertheless difficult. The requirement was for about 130 staff posts; HQ 1 Mech Bde normally had 30 all ranks. Although numbers were made up by augmentation, there was also a gap in knowledge and experience. Within a brigade headquarters there were only four 'psc' officers,<sup>412</sup> including the brigade commander and the OC of the signals

squadron. Most of the staff were captains, often on their first tour away from their regiments, who had never previously been exposed to the level which they were now expected to work.

For example, the brigade intelligence cell was used to dealing with enemy tactical dispositions on the ground. But in Sierra Leone that was the SLA's job. HQ 1 Mech Bde had to try to understand the higher level strategic and operational intentions of the RUF and Liberian Government. They were as dependent on their ability to procure and fuse national intelligence from UK as on their ability to gather intelligence in theatre. They were augmented by Human Intelligence (HUMINT) and Electronic Intelligence (ELINT) sections; they liaised daily with civilian intelligence agencies in the High Commission; and periodically accompanied deputations to Guinea. They also constantly managed a firewall between themselves and the SLA. Nothing in their experience or training had prepared them for this level of operations. It was only in the latter part of the tour that HQ 1 Mech Bde developed an appropriate intelligence architecture manned by suitably qualified staff.<sup>413</sup>

Furthermore, Lieutenant General Riley, many years after the event, considered that he personally would have done a better job if he had been rather older and more senior than he was at the time. As a relatively junior brigadier, despite a great deal of prior operational experience, he was not as prepared to operate at the theatre-strategic level as he would have been as, say, a divisional commander. In retrospect, the JTFHQ might have been better modelled on a divisional HQ (-) rather than a brigade HQ (+).<sup>414</sup>

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## Conclusion

There was no single, simple cause of the civil war in Sierra Leone, so it is no surprise that there was no single, simple reason for its end. As this work has shown, it was certainly not purely due to the British military intervention, let alone the rapid reaction operation of May 2000 codenamed Operation Palliser. Military defeats, international pressure and internal contradictions all played a part in the downfall of the RUF and the ending of war. Yet, among these wider reasons, British involvement was important and the British military presence did play a significant part in ending the war.

To learn from the British intervention, therefore, we need to untangle the web of circumstance that caused the war to end and determine the various contributions played by the British intervention. Only in this way can we decipher the value of the military intervention in Sierra Leone and draw deductions from it that may assist in the planning and conduct of future interventions elsewhere.

The Sierra Leone war ended primarily because the RUF was defeated. Political and economic developments, in particular the democratic election of President Kabbah's government, are sometimes ascribed as being the reasons the war ended, since they largely undermined the original causes of the war. However, the RUF remained remarkably immune to such changes and continued to fight long after most of their original demands had been met, such as the removal of the APC government and the holding of democratic elections.

This is not to say that such political and economic changes in Sierra Leone

were unimportant: they contributed significantly to the RUF's defeat. Nor is it true to say that the RUF was defeated purely militarily: it was defeated comprehensively in military, political and economic spheres. Thus, to understand how and why the war ended, we need to understand how the RUF was defeated. In order to do that, we need to understand the RUF itself and, in particular, its critical vulnerabilities that were exploited, wittingly or unwittingly, in its defeat.

## Why did the RUF fail?

The RUF had a number of particular characteristics as a guerrilla organisation. Some are unique to the RUF; others are common to many African groups. There are five characteristics that are particularly important and from which critical vulnerabilities emerge.

### 1. The RUF was not a populist movement.

Although Foday Sankoh attempted to woo public support for his invasion of Sierra Leone in 1991—indeed he attracted a significant number of volunteers in the first year of the war—the movement's depredations against the population soon lost it any measure of popularity among the urban and rural poor. Both are constituencies from which the RUF should have freely expected to draw supplies, recruits and intelligence. Sankoh's attempts to impose discipline on the organisation were doomed to fail: the powerful Liberian contingent within the RUF in the early years was beyond his control and the population did not distinguish between Liberian or Sierra Leonean members of the RUF when committing abuses.

On the other hand, democratic elections in 2006 and government sponsorship of trusted local defence forces went a long way to overcome the rural population's distrust of the Sierra Leone Army. This was coupled with significant international aid, channelled through the government, to improve the lot of both urban and rural populations. The national government thus largely retained the support of its population throughout the war, except for when the junta took over in 1997-98.

As a result, the RUF had to rely on fear to impose its will on the people it controlled or wanted to control, inflicting violence on the population, rather

than having a widely accepted legitimacy to rule. The unpopularity of the RUF was quantified in the 2002 presidential elections, after the Abuja ceasefire had been implemented and the country was at peace, when the RUF candidate attracted only 1.7 per cent of the popular vote and President Kabbah was re-elected with 70.1 per cent.

The continuum of relative interests, developed by analyst Jamison Jo Medby and now part of US Army doctrine, describes the range of loyalties of a standard civil population, varying from adversaries of the government to its allies.<sup>415</sup>

**Adversary - Obstacle - Neutral - Accomplice - Ally**

*Figure 20. The Continuum of relative interests.*

In most insurgencies, individuals and groups move across the continuum, depending largely upon their responses to the actions of the government and insurgent groups. The struggle for the support of the population between insurgent and counter-insurgent can largely be characterised as insurgent attempts to influence sections of the population to move towards the left of the above chart against government attempts to move them to the right.

No such struggle for the hearts and minds of the population occurred in Sierra Leone. The RUF largely saw civilians as a resource to be exploited by the abduction and recruitment of child soldiers, provision of forced labour and easy availability of sex slaves, rather than a prize to be won over to give the organisation a popular legitimacy. Thus, the continuum of relative interests was a lop-sided affair: few, if any, of the population were adversaries to the government in their battle against the RUF. Although some resisted the Sierra Leone Army, as suspicious of army depredations as of the RUF's, it did not make them support the RUF: instead most put their trust in the government-supported local militias that evolved into the Civil Defence Force.

The lack of the RUF's legitimacy meant that the organisation depended solely on military power to rule, rather than having any kind of moral authority. Defeat of its military wing meant defeat of the organisation as a whole. There were no popular demonstrations for the RUF or disruption

of labour in Freetown; there was no student agitation for the RUF against the government; and there was no RUF-inspired rural terrorism in areas recaptured by government forces from the RUF.

The British emphasis on militarily defeating the RUF during Operation Palliser and, in particular, Operation Silkman was therefore absolutely correct. Much else was required in addition, but in the end the RUF needed to have its military power wrested from it in order to bring peace. The British military intervention enabled the Sierra Leone Army through training, mentorship and leadership to allow it to defeat the RUF: at this stage in the war, no one else could do it.

## **2. The RUF had no effective ideology to see it through difficult times.**

Most insurgent, guerrilla or terrorist groups have some form of ideology which forms the basis of a political programme. Such ideologies provide motivation to the group's members who remain convinced of the rightness of their cause even when things are not going well, such as when suffering military reverses. Ideology, and the political programme that it underpins, can also appeal to wider sections of the population, not directly involved in the insurgency, to provide a core of support that could fill the adversary and obstacle brackets of the continuum of relative interests above.

The RUF's leadership was, seemingly, proud of its ideology. It produced, in about 1995, a document entitled *Footpaths to Democracy: Toward a New Sierra Leone* that purported to be the ideological basis of the movement.

But the document is oddly devoid of ideology: there is little or no reference to ideological antecedents with no mention at all of Marxist ideas of class conflict or, even more strangely, no quotation of Mao Zedong where one might have expected phrases such 'people's war' or 'protracted struggle' to appear. Indeed, the style and standard of writing in *Footpaths* indicate that it was written primarily for an international, rather than internal, audience and is likely to have been authored by people who were not resident in Sierra Leone at the time. The ideological programme, such as it existed, was limited to complaints about the venality of the Freetown government and the need to redistribute Sierra Leone's mineral wealth.<sup>416</sup>

According to Gibril Massaquoi, at one stage Sankoh's spokesman, the RUF's fighters had no interest in *Footpaths* or the ideology it claimed

to outline. He was tasked with visiting all RUF field units to explain the ideology but claimed it was a dispiriting experience with the commanders, in particular, being only interested in the conduct of the military campaign.<sup>417</sup>

Without any form of underpinning ideology, the RUF had to find the motivation to keep fighting from within itself. Such self-motivation is common in all military organisations and is grounded in good leadership and small unit cohesion. The principal consequence of this was that a RUF fighter's loyalty was mainly to his own small fighting group rather than to the organisation as a whole, especially after Sankoh's arrest in Nigeria in early 1997. This made the RUF prone to in-fighting and factionalisation which resulted in near-civil war within the organisation for much of 1999.

One other important aspect of the RUF's self-motivation came from the sense of empowerment that RUF membership brought. After the war, most child soldiers when interviewed claimed that having an AK-47 gave them power: it made them feel important. Similarly, commanders in the RUF had far greater power and responsibility than most could ever hope for in peacetime. Being an arbiter of life and death, on a whim, and free availability of sex from almost any woman they desired, made many young men and boys in the RUF feel important and empowered. It was this empowerment that was in large part responsible for the RUF's reluctance to give up its weapons and control of its people as the war drew to a close: a return to civilian life would have resulted in a significant loss of personal power and status.

Thus one of the most important terms of the Abuja Agreement was the inclusion of RUF fighters in the DDR process and their subsequent absorption into Sierra Leone's new armed forces. Individual RUF fighters wanted to retain status and authority as a soldier. The British designed and managed Military Reintegration Plan, following after the UN-sponsored DDR process, was important in giving the RUF the confidence that they would be treated fairly. In the end only about 10 per cent of the RUF was admitted into the new armed forces (many were too young), with very few officers, but the mechanism was an important part of bringing the RUF to peace.

### **3. The RUF was highly dependent on external support.**

Given that the RUF could not rely upon the support of the population, for much of the war it was largely dependent on external sources for munitions,

cash and even food.

Throughout the war, the RUF was highly reliant on Charles Taylor and his Liberian guerrilla group the NPFL and, later, his Liberian government.

This reliance started with the loan of NPFL fighters, continued with Liberia acting as a conduit for Libyan-supplied weapons, and developed as the RUF became increasingly reliant on Liberian-supplied ammunition for its major operations. Charles Taylor's principal interest in Sierra Leone was its diamonds and the RUF invested considerable effort in diamond mining to pay for Liberian support.

This had three major implications for the RUF's conduct of the war. The first was that the RUF needed to establish effective occupation of at least some of Sierra Leone's diamond fields: this created a critical vulnerability that was exploited, first by Executive Outcomes in 1995 and secondly by the Sierra Leone Army, under British guidance, as part of Operation Silkman in 2001.

The second implication was that the RUF was reliant on a tenuous logistic umbilical cord through the Sierra Leone jungle, using enslaved labour on foot, to carry large amounts of ammunition from its base on the Liberian border to its forward troops: as the RUF advanced closer to Freetown and further away from its headquarters, it found it more difficult to sustain sufficient ammunition flow to meet demand, so it became decreasingly effective the closer it got to Freetown.

The third implication is that the RUF supply route was vulnerable to interdiction from anti-Charles Taylor rebels operating within Liberia. At some stages of the war, including much of the period 2000-2001, the Liberian counties bordering Sierra Leone were effectively closed to both to the RUF and the Liberian government by the anti-Taylor group Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD). Although there is compelling evidence that Taylor used Ukrainian pilots to fly munitions directly to the RUF in Sierra Leone in this period, this in itself was a risky operation when British and Nigerian jets dominated Sierra Leone's airspace.

The RUF's reliance on Liberian support in exchange for diamonds also made it vulnerable to international efforts to impose controls on the supply and dealing of uncut diamonds. Although the 2003 Kimberley Process came after the RUF's defeat in 2001, the subsequent controls established on the trade of uncut diamonds made it more difficult for the war to restart.

Brigadier Riley identified the RUF's operational-level centre of gravity as its control of the diamond producing areas around Kono: the occupation of this area by government forces was the decisive element in his plan. Although, in the end, the RUF did not fight to retain its control of the area, losing it was the final element in its defeat. The British also conducted an information operation against the Ukrainian pilots flying for Taylor by suggesting that they were going to be shot down on their next mission; although it is not known whether this was responsible for reducing air-delivered logistic resupply.

#### **4. The RUF was reliant on a small number of experienced and charismatic field commanders.**

By early 1999 the RUF was as tactically effective as it had ever been. Its operation to destroy a Nigerian all-arms regular brigade in Koidu on 16 December 1998 was complex and well executed. All its commanders and many of its fighters had been continuously engaged in combat for over seven years. The movement had mutated through conventional war and jungle-based insurgency: it was now an adaptable organisation which had developed many of the systems and techniques more usually associated with a regular army. For example, it had its own provost staff, medical services, chaplains, radio communications specialists and logistic systems.

Nevertheless, the RUF tactical force was still largely made up of children who, when in combat, were often under the influence of hallucinogens. Their discipline, both in the jungle and in combat, was enforced by experienced RUF field commanders who had, largely, been promoted by proven competence in battle. Where the RUF differed from many regular armies, however, was in its lack of a professional non-commissioned officer cadre to maintain the discipline and cohesion of fighting units when not under the direct supervision of their field commanders. As a result, RUF command was fragile: it relied unduly on a relatively small number of charismatic and experienced commanders... if they were absent or killed then RUF units could disintegrate quickly.

The 1999 struggle for power within the RUF, which resulted in considerable intra-factional fighting, took its toll of its leadership where a number were killed or executed. However, many more of the RUF's field commanders were killed during their ill-fated campaign in Guinea in late 2000 and early

2001. The Guinean Army's response, including cross-border hot pursuit of RUF groups retreating into Sierra Leone, inflicted high levels of attrition on the RUF including its leadership cadre. A number of its best and most well-known field commanders were killed. This caused a serious weakening of the RUF's military capability as well as reducing the influence of the fighting cadre (who generally supported a continuation of the war) against the political cadre (who sought a political solution) within the RUF.

Although the RUF, when at full strength, was a well-led and competent guerrilla force, we should not over-estimate its capabilities. For intelligence, it largely relied on radio intercept of un-encoded Army communications and camouflaged its jungle camps in the visible spectrum only: as a result, it was particularly vulnerable to relatively minor technological enhancements such as secure communications and infra-red surveillance. Once RUF positions were located, they were then vulnerable to indirect fire and air attack. As demonstrated initially by Executive Outcomes in 1995, the RUF could be defeated by superior organisation: coordinating intelligence, indirect fire, the kamajors, air and ground manoeuvre into a single operation. The British were again, in 2000 and 2001, able to provide such coordination of assets that were already, in the main, in theatre but had worked separately, not together.

## **5. The RUF was vulnerable to internal pressure.**

Within an insurgent or guerrilla group there is always a tendency towards factionalisation. It is a natural phenomenon. Fighting group commanders tend to be alpha males who tend to resent orders from above and seek the maximum flexibility for their own action. Without the strict rank and discipline structures of a regular army, it is easy for separate elements of a guerrilla organisation to go their own way. This tendency is even more marked in a guerrilla group dispersed across a wide jungle area where the senior command finds it difficult to control subordinate commanders who may be operating hundreds of kilometres from the headquarters. It is easy to forget, as a counter-insurgent, that the insurgent has just as many seemingly intractable problems as you do: group cohesion is always an insurgent vulnerability.

The RUF was particularly vulnerable to factionalisation without any kind of unifying ideology and it became particularly acute after Sankoh's arrest in

Nigeria in 1997.

The RUF adopted a number of mechanisms to maintain the loyalty of its dispersed commanders. One of the most effective was to establish a monopoly over ammunition supply. All ammunition came via the RUF's field commander who could reward commanders with extra ammunition and starve those who he considered were not operating in accordance with his wishes. This system generally worked but, when in 1999 the RUF was operating on the outskirts of the Freetown Peninsula, the ammunition supply was at its most tenuous and the system broke down as the RUF split into a six-month contest for the leadership in Foday Sankoh's absence.

The other area of factionalisation within the RUF was between the military and political wings. Prior to Sankoh's arrest both wings were united under his leadership, but afterwards he lost control of the military arm of the RUF to his nominal second-in-command, Sam Bockerie (alias 'Mosquito'). Sankoh was unable to regain control even after he was rehabilitated by the Lomé Peace Agreement and became a government minister. Only military defeat in Guinea with, concurrently, relentless pressure by the Sierra Leone Army was able to rein in the military wing of the RUF to such an extent that the political wing was able to negotiate peace meaningfully at the review of the Abuja ceasefire agreement in May 2001.

### **What was the British contribution to ending the war?**

There is little doubt that the British contributed significantly to the ending of Sierra Leone's war, although they were just one of a number of important factors. Operation Palliser stabilised a dangerous situation in May 2000 and prevented the collapse of the government and evacuation of UNAMSIL.

This was important but it did not end the war. The Nigerians had played the same role twice before in more difficult circumstances and at much greater cost: first in overthrowing the junta in 1997, and second in liberating Freetown after the AFRC's January 1999 attack. Operation Basilica was, in retrospect, a mistake. By focusing solely on the long term project of rebuilding Sierra Leone's armed forces, this permitted the RUF to regain the military initiative and facilitated its refusal to comply with the terms of the Abuja ceasefire agreement.

The hostage rescue Operation Barras is unlikely to have had much impact

on the RUF, but its destruction of the West Side Boys removed the AFRC as a potential spoiler to the peace process. It is difficult to quantify how significant that spoiler may have been, but the behaviour of the West Side Boys during the hostage crisis betrayed their extreme volatility so their forced removal is likely to have simplified the peace process considerably.

At the same time, the success of Barras strengthened the Sierra Leone government's, and its army's, confidence in the British Army, to the extent that British commanders during Operation Silkman had a freer hand with how they employed Sierra Leonean forces.

It was only during Operation Silkman that a workable and enduring campaign plan to win the war was developed and implemented. It exploited the grievous losses suffered by the RUF during its disastrous invasion of Guinea and, also, the interdiction of RUF supply lines in Liberia by the anti-Taylor LURD guerrilla group. In the end it was, of course, the Sierra Leoneans who won the war, not the British, but British support, training, mentoring and technical assistance was essential in giving the Sierra Leone Army such a tactical advantage over the RUF that, in the end, the RUF capitulated.

Despite diplomatic words spoken in New York, the UN and the British in Freetown were both frustrated with each other throughout much of the intervention. The UN could not understand why the UK, as the ex-colonial power, would not contribute its forces to boost UNAMSIL both in numbers and in capability. The British, for their part, were exasperated that UNAMSIL would not take a more aggressive posture towards the RUF, despite a mandate change during the operation that authorised such a position in support of the Sierra Leone government. Both sides misunderstood the different roles that were required: there was a role for the impartiality of UNAMSIL to manage the DDR process once the RUF had been defeated.

But the RUF was not going to enter the DDR process until it had been defeated: this was the job of the Sierra Leone Army with British support. The Sierra Leoneans could not do it by themselves and, at this stage in the war, there were no others than the British who could—or would—help them. Both roles were required, although neither side understood that at the time, hence the mutual but unnecessary frustration between the British and the UN.

## The Key Lessons from the British Intervention

- A rapid intervention operation can stabilise a situation before it deteriorates further but, by itself, is unlikely to be decisive. Only long term commitment is likely to have any strategic impact.
- A balance needs to be struck between the long-term rebuilding of indigenous forces and the shorter term requirement to defeat the adversary.
- There are two distinct roles for international military forces: one is support for the government to win its war; the second is for an impartial military force to implement any DDR agreement.



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## About the Author

Richard Iron was originally commissioned in 1975, with early service in Germany, Kenya and the Falkland Islands. He served three years in the Sultan of Oman's Armed Forces and several tours in Northern Ireland. He attended both the British and US Army staff colleges.

He subsequently commanded 1st Battalion of the King's Own Royal Border Regiment, a mechanised infantry battalion, serving in Bosnia and Macedonia/Kosovo. During two years as an instructor at the UK's joint staff college he was responsible for development of campaigning concepts. He was subsequently responsible for development of British Army doctrine, including its capstone Army Doctrine Publication Land Operations. In this latter post he also deployed to the Coalition Land Component HQ in Kuwait in 2002-03, where he led a UK/US planning team for the invasion of Iraq. He was also responsible for the British Army's subsequent analysis of the preparation for and execution of that invasion.

He has since served as the UK's National Liaison Representative to NATO's Allied Command Transformation in Norfolk, Virginia. For six years he led the development of land doctrine in NATO, including counter-insurgency doctrine. In addition, he was an expert military witness for the prosecution in the Sierra Leone War Crimes trials, where he worked with members of various guerrilla groups and gained valuable insight to the internal dynamic of such groups.

From December 2007 to November 2008 he served as the Chief Mentor to the Basra Operations Commander in Iraq, and commander of the British Advisor Team to the Basra Operations Command. In this appointment he was largely responsible for development and implementation of the Iraqi

counter-insurgency plan for Basra, including Operation Charge of the Knights. He also developed the security plan for the Iraq/Iran border through engagement with the Marsh Arabs.

After leaving the Army in 2012, he led the operation to provide security to the remaining US presence in Iraq. Until moving to Australia in early 2016 he was Chief Operating Officer of Equilibrium-Global, a London-based strategic consultancy. He has written and lectured widely on doctrine, military history and counter-insurgency. He was lead editor of the book *British Generals in Blair's Wars* and is currently writing a history of the Sierra Leone war from an African perspective.

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