

Chapter 9: Fighting for diamonds – Private military companies in Sierra Leone

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Introduction

The story of private military intervention in the affairs of Sierra Leone goes back a considerable time, and is intimately connected to attempts by either the state or other political and economic actors to exploit or control the country's mineral resources. As will become apparent, it is often difficult to draw a distinction between the public and private roles of key players, with the result that the line dividing private security interests from those of the state also becomes blurred, as do the motives informing certain actions. Equally so, the predatory interests of a regime such as that of former Nigerian President Sani Abacha suggests the requirement for at least as much scrutiny of the Nigerian intervention in Sierra Leone, eventually under the auspices of the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG), as that of mercenary companies such as Executive Outcomes and Sandline International.¹

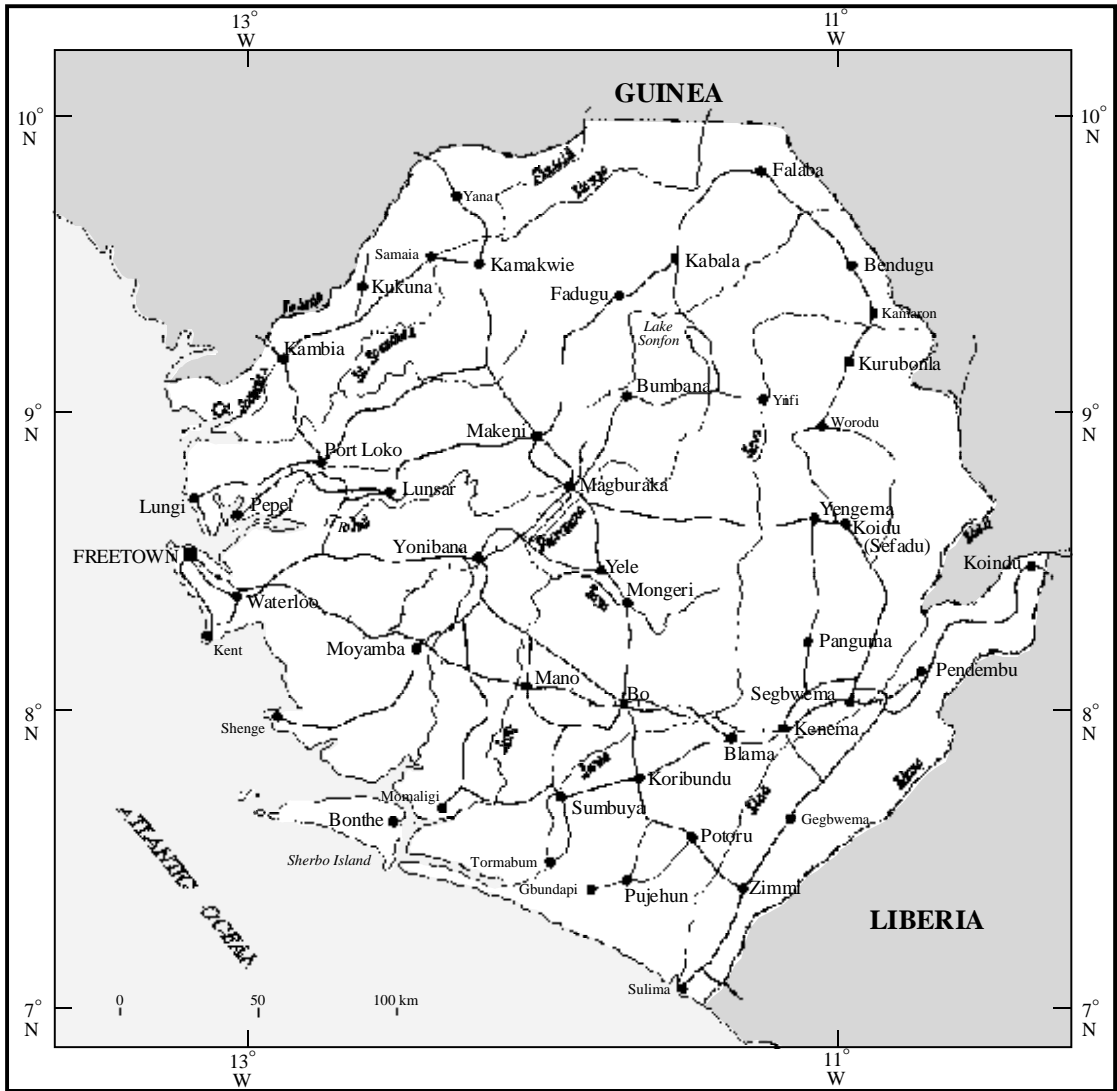
Much of the following account centres upon the richest of Sierra Leone's mineral prizes, the Kono diamond fields, and the commercial activity, licit and illicit, associated with this area. That Koindu, the centre of the region, is all of 500 kilometres from the capital Freetown, but only eight kilometres from the border with Liberia, and three from that with Guinea, adds an international complication to the quest for control and security – just as it enhances the opportunities and rewards for a trade in contraband. The six properties/concessions that the company DiamondWorks² admitted to owning in Sierra Leone in 1997, include diamond resources of almost 6,5 million carats in the proven, probable, or inferred category of resources. At an average price of US \$300 per carat, this translates into US \$2 billion to be gained from these concessions alone.

The origins of the war

In 1966 at independence, the British handed the country's administration to the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP), headed by Milton Margai. Sierra Leone's modern and troubled history, and its legacy of problems, started with Siaka Stevens breaking from the SLPP and forming the All Peoples Congress (APC), winning a contested and controversial election victory in 1967. Following a brief spell of military government, the army restored civilian power in 1968, with Siaka Stevens and the APC assuming control. Yet, neither Stevens nor his handpicked successor, General Joseph Saidu Momoh managed to stem the continued downward spiral of the economy.

The crisis in Sierra Leone started in March 1991³ when the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), led by Corporal Foday Sankoh,⁴ crossed the border from Liberia to launch its rebellion against the government of President Momoh. Since then, the war between the government and the RUF has claimed at least 20 000 lives and has forced more than half the country's population to flee their homes.

Sierra Leone



The manifesto of the RUF called, in typical fashion, for “... *national salvation and liberation ... the historic responsibility of each patriot ... for a national democratic revolution involving the total mobilisation of all progressive forces.*” It also stated that, “[t]he secret behind the survival of the existing system is our lack of organisation. What we need then is organised challenge and resistance. The strategy and tactics of this resistance will be determined by the reaction of the enemy forces – force will be met with force, reasoning with reason, and dialogue with dialogue.”⁵ As time would prove, the cannibalism and brutality of the RUF has few parallels, even in war-torn Africa.

Sankoh and other vanguard elements of the RUF had originally received guerrilla training in Benghazi, Libya, where he had met Charles Taylor (former warlord, now President) of Liberia. Taylor would subsequently use the remote areas of south-eastern Sierra Leone to train and stage attacks of his own against the then Liberian president Samuel Doe. After deposing and killing Doe in 1990, Taylor provided arms and fighters to the RUF, as part of its war against Sierra Leone’s President Momoh. Taylor hoped that his support of the RUF would impair Freetown’s ability to assist the military effort of ECOMOG in Liberia.

The RUF launched its military campaign with less than 100 men who crossed the Liberian/Sierra Leone border in the area of the Kailahun ‘finger’. The operations of the RUF, which envisaged it working in the supportive framework of peasant society, and indeed recruiting from it, quickly fell apart. The barbarity and cruelty seen in Liberia in operations of the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) were mirrored in RUF operations, and sometimes blamed on Liberians, but evidence and testimony indicated that there was more than enough blame to go around. The particularly brutal practice of hacking off limbs to terrorise and subjugate the population, has subsequently been documented in numerous books and horrific television news coverage. Given the choice of joining or dying, the decision for many new recruits was easy. Desertion was punishable by death. Yet, despite its barbarity, the RUF could feed off the hatred against the government and its cruel and vindictive oppression of the population

Even after Momoh’s government was overthrown in April 1992 by a group of rebellious officers under Captain Valentine Strasser who called themselves the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC), the RUF continued its campaign of random violence in the forests of the south and east. Hailed as saviours, the NPRC had no political leaders, knowledge or indeed an agenda, but simply carried on governing as they had witnessed and experienced it being done in the past. As a result, the change in leaders did little to aid the ailing economy or to end the civil war. For their part, the rebels remained a mysterious force with no coherent ideology and a constantly changing composition, and they persistently refused to enter into negotiations with Strasser’s regime, denying its legitimacy and demanding the withdrawal of Guinean and Nigerian troops assisting the Sierra Leone government.

It appears at about this time, however, that soldiers at the front realised the immense profits to be made from the war situation, both through the illegal mining of diamonds and the looting of civilians.

There is no great military tradition in the Republic of Sierra Leone Military Forces (RSLMF). While dissatisfied activists plotted and planned, the army lived in relative comfort largely as

a ceremonial force, receiving its patrimonial handouts, which included a rice subsidy on top of wages. Dissatisfaction only became a problem within the RSLMF when a plummeting economy halted the payment of wages and the receipt of other benefits.

RUF operations continued to grow until the NPRC, in panic, initiated conscription. This move saw youths being taken off the street, equipped with some rudimentaries and, with only a few days training, sent to the front – wherever that might have been. Army successes in the field dropped even further.⁶ Indeed, as the war progressed, the RSLMF acted less and less like a military force and more like groups of bandits. Rumours of military collusion with the rebels abounded. There certainly seemed to be a commonality of purpose between the RUF and the RSLMF early in the war when the NPRC overthrew the APC, against which the RUF had initiated the campaign in the first place. It also seems as if the NPRC, in the early days, had agreed to create a government of national unity that would include the RUF. Subsequent power struggles within the NPRC, and the progress of the war, caused this plan to be abandoned. However, stories of collaboration between the RSLMF and the RUF in the field are numerous.⁷

The plummeting economy, a lack of foreign aid and a severe cash flow problem forced the army outside of Freetown to exist, as did the RUF, in a foraging mode and thus to spend less time pursuing the war. The legend of the ‘sobel’ – soldier by day, rebel by night – came from this period. Both the RSLMF and the RUF existed by foraging and looting, each trying to blame the excesses thus committed on the other.

By 1994/95, the RSLMF had become a bloated, ill-trained organisation, which had become very much a part of Sierra Leone’s problem.⁸ For its part, the RUF was allowed to reconsolidate its position and, by the end of 1994, began a series of raids from its forest camps into virtually all parts of the country, reaching areas close to Freetown by the beginning of 1995. Not only were the alluvial diamond fields of the south, east and north-east overrun by the RUF, but the areas of bauxite and rutile mining were also captured, production had stopped, and thus most of the foreign exchange revenue essential to government operations was not available. The depredations of the rebels were aided and abetted by the army, and the continuation of the war provided an excuse to prolong the military’s profitable tenure of power.

Operationally, the RUF was roughly organised into six battalions, each of which operated from jungle camps, using classic guerrilla tactics. Units sought to acquire the uniforms of the armed forces of Sierra Leone and identity documents to fake ‘sobel’ attacks, and thus to divide civilians and RSLMF troops. While research on the RUF is limited, and evidence is in some cases anecdotal, it seems as if the RUF had an overall strength of three to four thousand with a hard core of five to six hundred soldiers.⁹ Sankoh also established an efficient radio network consisting of about twenty radio stations throughout the country. An office in Abidjan, Côte d’Ivoire, which was part of the radio network, dealt with international relations, and was controlled by Sankoh’s brother.¹⁰

Strategically, the RUF depended upon outside support from Libya, Guinea and Liberia, while tactically, it depended upon guerrilla tactics, foraging, and the capture of arms and equipment from the RSLMF which was weak, poorly led and seemed prone to flee on contact.

With the RUF literally knocking on the doors of Freetown by 1995, Strasser first looked to the outside world for military and security aid. Seeking to ensure a continued flow of revenue, Britain introduced him to a private military company employing Gurkhas to assist in securing the country's principal diamond and titanium oxide mines against the raiders. The Gurkha Security Guards (GSG) contingent was commanded by Major Bob MacKenzie and was supposedly composed of former 'crack' troops from that most famous of British mercenary sources – the Gurkhas of Nepal. As discussed in greater detail in Chapter 7 by Alex Vines, a number of questions and uncertainties surround the role of GSG in Sierra Leone. The commonly accepted story is that they were hired to train the RSLMF and not to conduct combat operations. The battle that caused the eventual departure of GSG from Sierra Leone apparently happened by accident. MacKenzie and a reconnaissance team were evidently seeking a remote jungle area to be used for the conduct of field firing exercises. During the reconnaissance, the group stumbled upon an RUF camp, a firefight developed during which MacKenzie and others of his team were killed. The story has it that MacKenzie was dismembered and his arm, with tattoo intact, was held as proof of his demise.¹¹ In any case, GSG departed in May 1995. By this time, Strasser was negotiating with another organisation – Executive Outcomes.¹²

By early 1995, the NPRC was in a desperate situation, since its primary source of revenue – mining companies such as Branch Energy and Sierra Rutile – had ceased to operate, and its military, the RSLMF, had become part of the problem.

Strange bedfellows

Executive Outcomes was introduced to Strasser by Michael Grunberg and Anthony Buckingham of the mining company Branch Energy. When asked why he and Buckingham would represent EO in the negotiations with the government, Grunberg stated¹³ that Branch Energy and the government had a common security problem, and as EO was an organisation that could solve this, “... *ownership of the company, EO or Branch, is irrelevant ...*”

The EO contract with the government was financially complex, due in part to the government's lack of resources. Despite the obvious collaboration, it is difficult to prove that there was a formal business link between EO and Branch Energy. Clearly, the connection was used to finalise the contract, and there can be little doubt about the 'common security problem' and the co-operation that this might engender. Yet, the exact manner of payment, given the parlous state of government finances, remains unclear – in particular, the issue whether shares in Branch Energy, based on mining concessions that had been granted by the government, were used as collateral to pay EO. Whatever the contractual relationship, there was clearly a close personal and professional connection between the management of EO, Branch Energy and Sierra Rutile.

The Branch Energy agreement with the government called for different leases and agreements. The largest of the six leases – for Koindu with potential reserves valued at US \$1,2 billion – was finalised shortly after the EO contract with the government had been negotiated by senior management of Branch Energy in July 1995. On the assumption of a 2,7

million carat reserve, a 25-year lease was granted to Branch Energy. The general conditions of the contract call for an investment, in the short term, of US \$6 million, and a further \$80 million to be invested once a feasibility, or 'due diligence' study has been completed. Given these conditions,

"Branch Energy and government of Sierra Leone ... agreed in principle ... that a decision is made to go into production, they will establish a corporate entity to commercially exploit the Koindu property in which Branch Energy will hold 60%, government of Sierra Leone will be granted a free carried 30%, and the remaining 10% interest will be made available to local business interests in terms to be negotiated."

All development costs and the risk for failure rested with Branch Energy which carried the risk to re-establish the operations.

Branch Energy¹⁴ also negotiated the contract for the provision of security services between EO and the government of Sierra Leone. This contract required EO to provide 150 to 200 soldiers, fully equipped and with helicopter support, mandated to support the RSLMF with training and other forms of assistance, while aiding in prosecuting the war against the RUF. For this, EO would be paid US \$2 million per month. Since the government had no ready cash, the partners to the agreement agreed that fifty per cent of the tax revenue from Sierra Rutile, once it was able to operate, would be used to pay the EO bill. As it transpired, Sierra Rutile did not reopen and EO was not paid. It later became apparent that the Sierra Rutile tax revenue would only amount to US \$15m per year, and would therefore not have been sufficient to cover the costs of EO.

Military operations

During May 1995, with the RUF offensive having reached the outskirts of Freetown, fifty soldiers from EO arrived in Sierra Leone. This was the lead contingent, with a further 130 or so arriving six months later as the Angolan operations of EO drew to a close. The EO historical synopsis states that, over the period April 1995 to January 1997, the company was contracted to provide "... *military advisory and support services ... to the NPRC of Sierra Leone.*" This obviously includes the services provided to the Sierra Leone Peoples Party (SLPP) which replaced the NPRC in March 1996.

The first item of business was a restructuring exercise, directed by EO, which saw the reorganisation of basic and specialist training along the lines in the accompanying table. Given the urgency of the situation, a crash course for individual soldiers and rifle companies was conducted at the same time to deter the immediate threat to Freetown.

The requirement to lift the RUF siege on Freetown dictated the establishment of a Joint Headquarters between EO and the RSLMF, subsequently set up at Cockril Barracks in Freetown, the headquarters of the RSLMF. While the training of rifle companies for the impending operation was going on, EO supplied the RSLMF with the essential, though less visible functions of information and intelligence gathering, command, control and

Course schedule for training in Sierra Leone by Executive Outcomes, 1995-1996

Basic Training	60 students	Sep, Oct 1995
Basic Training	310 students	Nov, Dec 1995
Rapid Reaction Force	120 students	Dec 1995
VIP Protection Training	30 students	Dec 1995
Basic Training	300 students	Apr, May 1996
Mortar Training	30 students	May 1996
Section Leaders	60 students	Jun, Jul, Aug 1996
Retraining	150 students	Jul 1996
Basic Training	150 students	Aug 1996
Security Guards	60 students	Sep 1996
Section Leaders	60 students	Sep 1996
Junior Commanders	30 students	Aug, Sep 1996
Mortar Training	12 students	Oct 1996
Infantry	90 students	Oct 1996
Basic Base Protection	28 students	Oct 1996
Close Protection	16 students	Oct, Nov 1996
Battalion Mortars	30 students	Oct, Nov 1996
Infantry Protection	60 students	Oct, Nov 1996

communications, helicopter support, and finally a guarantee of both logistic and fire support for operations.

At this stage, the RUF had been seizing mining properties, the main government source of hard currency and an obvious first priority for EO, Branch Energy and the government to reclaim. The Joint Headquarters devised a three-phase operational strategy beginning with the immediate problem of the siege of Freetown. The rebel force besieging Freetown worked out of a base to the east of the city in a location known as Ma-Sherwe. The RSLMF battalion-level combined operation was supported by two BMPs (Soviet-built armoured personnel carriers), two Land Rovers with mounted machine guns, and two Soviet-built helicopters (one Mi-17 and one Mi-24). This was the first battle of the war in which the government troops had achieved positive results, with fifty rebels killed within two days, and the siege of the city lifted in ten days. By this time, about 200 rebels had been killed and there were more than 1 000 deserters, most of the latter having been enlisted as unwilling conscripts and employed, among others, as porters and general labourers. Within ten days, the RUF had withdrawn 100 kilometres into the interior. After this operation, the trained companies that had been formed by EO were subdivided and the synergy and effectiveness of bonded, cohesive subunits was lost.

The second phase of the joint government/EO operational strategy was to stabilise the alluvial diamond area around Koindu by removing rebel forces from the area. This operation started in June 1995, with the same support group of armoured vehicles, but with two additional rifle companies. Within a few days, and without much resistance, Koindu was recaptured and 'area' (clearing) operations were conducted in the Kono district. The government decided to retain a presence in the area to provide mining companies with the necessary security, and to allow mining operations to recommence. Once the diamond area of Koindu was cleared, the government requested EO to clear and occupy the area of Sierra Rutile – an operation essential to the payment for EO's services.

The third objective was to locate and destroy the RUF headquarters. Air reconnaissance indicated the presence of a large enemy base approximately eighty kilometres east of Freetown which was attacked on 5 December 1995. Follow-up intelligence indicated that this was formerly the main springboard for operations against Freetown.

By late 1995, the main objectives of the government/EO strategy had been achieved. The siege of Freetown had been lifted and the RUF had suffered a series of defeats. The Koindu diamond area had been liberated and was once more open for operations. The RUF headquarters east of Freetown had been destroyed. Finally, the Sierra Rutile area was secured and ready to resume production. Concomitant with this strategy, efforts were made to develop a psychological warfare and a strong public relations programme.

These operations were characterised by the effective use of helicopters and co-ordinated fire support. In classic air-mobile operations, EO sought to find, fix and destroy. They first found the RUF, using electronic warfare and good intelligence; then fixed them in place using direct fire from helicopters and indirect fire from mortars flown into position; and, finally destroyed the enemy by using helicopter-borne assault troops. Using these tactics, EO and

the RSLMF elements involved, suffered very few casualties while RUF losses were extremely high.

The retaking of the mining areas demonstrated that a cohesive, well-trained organisation, with appropriate intelligence and firepower, had the ability to defeat a force that outnumbered it significantly. The success of small unit operations by the RSLMF, up to company level, increased. This was particularly true when the organisation had been trained by, and bonded with similar EO elements. EO provided hard, combat-oriented training programmes, supplemented with knowledgeable leadership – and leaders who lead from the front, not the back. There was evidently nothing wrong with the soldiers and junior leaders of the RSLMF that some serious training, motivation and leadership could not solve. However, while the RSLMF was organised to assault and capture objectives, it could not be trusted to occupy them. After the RUF had been driven out of the mining areas and concessions, EO occupied these specific financial vital points which were eventually turned over to LifeGuard Security.

In the process, EO had begun to co-operate with local rural militias and self-defence units to curb the excesses of rebels and soldiers alike. The best known and most formidable of these militias were the Kamajors,¹⁶ a Mende group from the south-east of the country, based on traditional hunter guilds and skilled in bushcraft, which EO supplemented by providing additional training in counterinsurgency. The use of the Kamajors grew from the efforts of a retired army officer, Captain Hinja Norman, to mobilise a local militia force for the defence of Tetu Bogor, a chiefdom south of Bo of which he was the regent chief, during 1994.¹⁷ Chief Norman's activities saw the Kamajor militia grow to two to three thousand strong. By virtue of captured weapons, and co-operation with EO, the Kamajors became the bulwark of a regional defence force. Familiar with the jungle and sworn enemies of the RUF, the Kamajors became the eyes and ears of EO, reporting the movements and locations of rebel units. They became fiercely loyal to the South Africans, whom they and the majority of the population regarded as liberators. As time progressed, regional defence and the protection of civilian life and property became more and more the recognised role of the Kamajors, versus the self-serving efforts of the RSLMF and the RUF.¹⁸

The Kamajors provided information and intelligence to EO and, in some cases, acted as guides for assault operations. While the EO/RSLMF team achieved the three objectives of the 'operational strategy', regional protection operations in the remainder of the country were conducted by the Kamajor militia. The areas of Bo and Kenema, south and west of the diamond fields, are good examples of this, and, while the Kamajors could not eradicate the RUF presence in the area, they were able to keep the towns free of the RUF and secure.

As the war progressed and the NPRC, through the RSLMF, became less and less capable of pursuing the war effort against the RUF, the Kamajor militia grew in influence and capability. The Kamajor was subsequently structured and formalised as the Civil Defence Force of Sierra Leone. The schism between the RSLMF and the NPRC widened as responsibility and credit for success were increasingly heaped upon the Kamajor militia who expanded their numbers by instituting recruiting quotas for towns and areas.

While EO's military efforts did not destroy the RUF, they forced them out of the vital diamond and rutile-producing areas, compelling them to seek sanctuary in the deep forest. By April 1996, the combined efforts of EO and the Kamajors caused Sankoh and the RUF to seek a cease-fire. However, it was another seven months before a peace agreement was finally signed in November. The final major joint thrust against the RUF occurred during October 1996 when Sankoh, having failed to observe the agreed upon cease-fire which he had requested, saw his headquarters attacked. The fire support for this operation included medium and close support artillery. A number of senior RUF commanders were killed and the headquarters facilities effectively destroyed.

EO had temporarily defeated the RUF in the field, that staved off further loss by entering into negotiations. When overt hostilities ceased, EO, supported in the countryside by the Kamajors, controlled the mining centres.

As negotiations dragged on and peace talks became bogged down, the small EO force continued to provide security to financial vital points and became a 'security guard force' as opposed to a warfighting unit. An uneasy calm developed as the RUF hid in its deep bush camps, foraging for survival, while the RSLMF was doing exactly the same thing from its barracks and temporary camps along the road network. During this period, the lack of logistic support by the government soon neutralised the army's effectiveness and allowed the RUF to re-occupy areas it had previously controlled. There was no doubt that, if the newly elected government were to succeed, it desperately needed the profits from its mining industry which, in 1996, could only be guaranteed by EO and its subordinates.

In the meanwhile, the government's financial position continued to worsen. No bills were paid during the period May to November 1995. As a result, EO Sierra Leone was being carried on the financial shoulders of EO Angola – and the bill was growing.¹⁹ In December 1995 with the promised elections approaching, and another military *coup* threatening, EO stated that, without a firm payment plan, it was going to leave.

The subsequent agreement between EO and the government, that was reached at the end of December 1995, called for the 1995 debt to be consolidated at US \$15,9 million, with \$2,4 million being written off and a debt of \$13,5 million to the government of Sierra Leone remaining. Of this amount, \$3 million would be paid during January 1996, with the remainder paid off during the year in monthly instalments of \$1,6 million. A further protocol (secret – as it involved an additional 200 soldiers) was also agreed upon at a cost of \$2 million per month. The soldiers would provide an increased security presence during the elections for two and a half months, thus incurring a further potential bill for \$5 million.

Under severe domestic and foreign pressure to proceed with the promised transition to civilian rule, Strasser eventually announced that the elections would be held on 26 February 1996. On 16 January, he was overthrown by his deputy, Brigadier Julius Maada Bio, and exiled to Guinea. This was undoubtedly an attempt by the military to deflect the threat posed by the forthcoming elections, although Bio was at pains to refute this and even called on Sankoh to hold talks with the government. Less than a week later, the RUF announced a unilateral cease-fire and offered to talk to Bio's government unconditionally, save for a demand that the

elections should be postponed. If there had been any doubt about the concurrence of interests between the rebels and the soldiers, this act in itself should have dispelled it. At about this time, it also came to light that Bio's elder sister, Maada, was part of the RUF high command. The electoral commission and other elements of civil society pressed on with their demand for elections, and had the support of the donor community.

In the countdown to the elections, EO received warnings that the RUF was planning a major attack in the vicinity of Bo. When the Kamajors reported and confirmed a rebel presence in the Mokanji Hills, the RUF suffered yet another massive defeat. The air-mobile tactics used by EO were so devastating that Sankoh offered a \$25 000 reward for the destruction of an EO helicopter. An additional bounty, paid in diamonds, was also offered for any captured EO employee.

Talks between the military government and the RUF began in Côte d'Ivoire on 22 February 1996. Central to the discussions was the rebels' sudden insistence that they would only deal with Maada Bio, and would refuse to acknowledge the outcome of the elections, which they aimed to disrupt. What transpired in secret between the two delegations is open to conjecture, but in the event, it was the army rather than the rebels who appeared to do the most to intimidate the electorate on 26 and 27 February.

After two rounds of voting in which the regional nature of party support became apparent, Ahmad Tejan Kabbah of the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) emerged as president in mid-March. There were few commentators who believed that he would have an easy task in restoring a ruined economy and asserting his control over a disaffected army. Kabbah was a lawyer, with some twenty years of working in the United Nations, but no political experience or claims to personal charisma. Nor were the results of the parliamentary and presidential elections uncontested, and even the electoral commission admitted that irregularities had occurred. Nevertheless, there was a general sense of relief when the military regime handed over power to the elected president.

The transformation, indeed metamorphosis, of the Kamajor militia into the recognised military arm of the country, was formalised when Chief Norman was appointed Deputy Minister of Defence (Kabbah held the defence portfolio in addition to the presidency). Norman's public disrespect for the RSLMF and his support for the Kamajors during 1996 and early in 1997, would serve to further weaken and antagonise the RSLMF.

Large areas of the national territory remained essentially under the control of the RSLMF, operating virtually as a force unto itself. In mid-March, the rebels initialled a two-month cease-fire and, in late April 1996, held talks with the new Sierra Leone government in Yamoussoukro, Côte d'Ivoire. A peace agreement seemed in prospect. The RUF insisted, however, that all foreign troops, including those of EO, should be withdrawn from the country before the process of encampment and disarmament of forces could begin. The talks stalled at this point, and the cease-fire began to look increasingly fragile.

In the meantime, the formal diamond sector had begun to stage a minor recovery, largely because of the protection afforded by EO to DiamondWorks properties. EO was also

reportedly providing logistics and security for at least one foreign aid agency, and had assisted the government with helicopter transport. Nevertheless, the international community expressed its disquiet about the activities of the mercenaries.

When President Kabbah was consulted on the contract with EO, allegedly only in April, he stated that the country did not have the resources to meet the contract agreed to by his predecessors. After some haggling, Kabbah agreed in May to monthly payments of US \$1,2 million beginning that month, with April being provided free of charge, and the contract terminating in December. These payments were reduced to \$900 000 in September, thus incurring a further \$300 000 per month in arrears. A subsequent unilateral decision by the finance department of the Sierra Leone government reduced the monthly payments to \$700 000. While EO initially balked at this last proposal, it eventually agreed, thus “... *helping the government of Sierra Leone through a difficult period.*”²⁰ In fact, Kabbah had a cash-strapped EO over a barrel.

In June 1996, Sankoh hired at least two Belgian mercenaries tasked either with training the RUF or shooting down EO helicopters. ‘Henri’ and ‘Michael’ left after three days, apparently disillusioned with the RUF’s lack of organisation and discipline.

In September 1996, a number of officers were arrested on suspicion of plotting to murder the president. This came only a few days after 26 senior officers and 155 non-commissioned officers had been retired in a major purge of the army. It was a clear indication of dangerous disaffection in the military, many of whom were becoming alarmed at the prominence of the Kamajor militia, and at the prospects of retrenchment, as the army’s strength was to be halved. Clashes between army and Kamajor elements were reported on a number of occasions.

The cease-fire agreement notwithstanding, Sankoh ordered the resumption of RUF attacks against both the civilian population and the RSLMF. Kabbah immediately put EO on the offensive – once again with devastating effect. The EO attack on Zagoda in the Kenema district destroyed the base, killing a number of Sankoh’s most trusted lieutenants and the majority of the RUF founding vanguard. Within days of the Zagoda attack, the remnants of the self-styled RUF 6th Battalion was discovered fifty kilometres east of Freetown and virtually annihilated. ‘Libya’, another important RUF camp near the border with Liberia was pinpointed and destroyed. Within a matter of weeks, Sankoh had lost more than 500 of his most experienced fighters. When Sankoh signed the peace accord in Abidjan on 30 November 1996, EO was preparing to destroy the remaining RUF base at ‘Burkino’ near the border with Guinea.²¹

The peace agreement provided for the cessation of hostilities to be monitored by a neutral monitoring group, the withdrawal of EO and other foreign forces five weeks after signature, and the establishment of the RUF as a political party. During negotiations, Sankoh specifically demanded the expulsion of EO and ECOMOG, in particular the Nigerians, whose Alpha jets had regularly provided tactical air support to EO operations against the RUF. Exactly how tenuous this agreement was, became evident when two more *coup* plots were uncovered in the following two months, apparently by disgruntled RSLMF

officers whose illicit diamond trading was threatened by the installation of the new government.

There has been much conjecture that the IMF forced President Kabbah to end the contract with EO and to expel its employees from the country. This has been convincingly rejected by sources close to the IMF who stated that the Fund had pressurised the government to reduce its deficit, but had not suggested how. It seems as if Kabbah had responded by suggesting an increase in the tax on rice, and a reduction of the rice subsidy to the RSLMF. While these measures would have raised revenues and indeed reduced the deficit, the proposal was unrealistic given the poverty levels in the country. It was perhaps at this time, in September 1996, that the unilateral decision to reduce payments to EO was made. EO was seen as an anomaly, 'the dog of war once more loose in Africa' and President Kabbah was clearly being pressured from all sides to break relations with the company.

Whatever substance there may have been to objections to EO's presence in the country, its subsequent withdrawal during January 1997 left Kabbah dangerously exposed, although LifeGuard Security Sierra Leone, an offshoot of EO, was still protecting DiamondWorks' assets with a much reduced presence. EO considered that it had only received US \$15,7 million out of a total contract value of \$35,3 million and identified the arrears as a 'sovereign debt' of \$19,5 million.²² As predicted by EO on its departure, Kabbah was soon to be overthrown in a *coup*.²³

By February 1997, a cease-fire was in place, the international community had returned, an internationally monitored election had been held, and the new civilian government was constituted. During March, Sierra Leone and Nigeria signed a defence pact and 900 Nigerian troops arrived in Freetown as partial replacement of EO. While UN agencies were formulating plans to meet their own specific mandates, World Bank teams were negotiating with the government of Sierra Leone on the longer term aspects of the peace and development process, while the new Ministry of Natural Reconstruction, Rehabilitation and Resettlement was organising and preparing to implement the disarming and demobilisation function essential to the process. The British government was on hand with seed money to initiate the process. A broad and long term approach seemed to be followed in dealing with the problems of the peace process by all concerned. The foreign perspective on Sierra Leone was positive, a country on the verge of peace.

The view from inside Sierra Leone was less optimistic, however. While some of the politicians were new, the bureaucrats were not. An old hand perhaps explained it best when he said that there would be no operational decisions or actions taken, regardless of the urgency, until the vital problem of cars, secretaries, office space, and hierarchy was settled. The opportunities offered by the cease-fire and the democratic elections, slipped away as time was wasted and the essential elements of the 'emergency stabilisation stage' of the peace process were ignored. Patrimonial-type bureaucracies were designed, and offered as models for the new ministries. Security, safety and stability declined in the countryside as both the RSLMF and RUF continued to forage, pillage and kill. The government of Sierra Leone had no trust in the RSLMF, believing that the Kamajors were protecting the people of the interior.

For their part, the Kamajors believed that they were strong enough to take on the army and executed several armed attacks against the RSLMF.

The 25 May 1997 coup

The *coup* of 25 May 1997 was led by Corporal John Gborie who, with a number of his colleagues, succeeded in overpowering the Nigerian-manned presidential guard, compelling President Kabbah to flee to Conakry, Republic of Guinea, from where he beseeched Nigeria to intervene militarily to restore his government to power. The *coup* was accompanied by twelve hours of shelling in Freetown and an orgy of looting, murder and rape in which as many as 200 people died. This was coupled with acts of extreme cruelty and atrocities especially against women, which generated fear and distrust in the minds of many. The Former Foreign Minister of Sierra Leone, Abass Bundu, summarised the situation as follows:

“Although the military junta must take the blame for what happened to the civilian population on the day of the coup, having started the rebellion, it was plain that they were heavily assisted in perpetrating the atrocities by the underclass of Sierra Leone society, consisting largely of unemployed youths. From their conduct, these youths appeared to be pointing an accusing finger ... at other sections of society as if they were to be held responsible for their deplorable condition and therefore believed that they could vent on them their deepening sense of frustration and despair.”²⁴

The plotters released hundreds of prisoners from the central jail, including Major Johnny Paul Koroma and several other officers due to stand trial the following day for the *coup* attempt in September 1996. Koroma subsequently emerged at the head of the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council, which justified its actions partly by referring to the marginalisation of the army by the Kamajors. Koroma, a relatively uneducated young officer with a reputation for rebellious behaviour, had been close to Strasser and his erstwhile deputy, Major S A J Musa, who shortly joined the new regime from exile in Britain.

Sankoh had managed to retain leadership of the RUF despite his arrest in Nigeria in March 1997, and announced that the RUF was allying itself with the new junta in a People's Revolutionary Army. Senior members of the RUF were subsequently appointed to senior positions in the administration.

Once more, governance of Sierra Leone descended into chaos as Koroma, with the RUF as partner, took over the reins of power, suspended the Constitution, dissolved parliament and banned political parties. In the ensuing chaos, a Nigerian force (nominally under the auspices of ECOWAS) was dispatched to reverse the *coup* and maintain law and order. While the international community condemned the junta, there was little if anything in the way of concrete support for the duly elected government. As the dust settled on the events of 25 May 1997, the junta controlled Freetown and its environs. The Nigerian forces maintained control of Lungi Airport with a beachhead on the Freetown side of the bay. The upcountry communities relied even more on the Kamajors, and private security companies attempted,

with financing from concession holders, to protect the infrastructure and equipment of the mining companies.

Despite the dangers involved, the public in several towns displayed their anger at these developments, and stay-aways were organised. Western governments voiced their disapproval, evacuated their citizens and imposed sanctions on the military junta in Freetown.

In the meanwhile, the Kabbah government-in-exile was busy with its own plans through the Kamajor-based Civil Defence Force, headed by former Deputy Minister of Defence, Hinja Norman. Norman headed the War Council and normally operated out of a field headquarters in Liberia where he was supported by ECOMOG. The Nigerian troops on the ground in Sierra Leone, and their control of Lungi Airport and a bridgehead near Hastings Airport, provided a staging point for future operations.

Before the end of May, an additional 700 Nigerian troops had arrived in Freetown to reinforce the 900-strong contingent already deployed in the country. The Nigerians soon gave notice of their intentions, shelling the junta's headquarters from warships on 2 June, killing hundreds of civilians in the process. The accompanying ground operations proved disastrous: 300 Nigerians were captured, while many civilians were killed in fighting around Freetown. In the aftermath, companies such as DiamondWorks and the Toronto-based Rex Diamond Mining Corporation halted work and withdrew their personnel to neighbouring Guinea.

The Nigerian warships withdrew on 21 June, but troops continued to hold the international airport at Lungi and a base at Jui, just outside Freetown, which they reinforced and re-equipped. Nigeria had, in fact, acted unilaterally during this period. The regional sanction for ECOMOG intervention was only forthcoming at the Abuja ECOWAS Summit of 29 August, and despite the Security Council commendation of ECOMOG in its July 1998 resolution establishing UNOMSIL, the UN military observer mission, explicit UN authorisation for ECOMOG's intervention, in terms of Article 53²⁵ of the UN Charter, never materialised. In the interior, clashes continued between junta/RUF forces and the Kamajors.

Enter Sandline International

Shortly after these events, Kabbah made contact with Sandline International, a company closely associated with EO and DiamondWorks. Sandline claimed close contact with the British government and had a less offensive international profile than EO, but there was little to choose between the two organisations. The purpose of the contact was to negotiate the provision of military expertise and planning for the eventual return of the Kabbah government-in-exile to Sierra Leone by force, if the international community did not provide a satisfactory solution. According to the account of events later released by Sandline's lawyers, the initial contact was made by Kabbah at the suggestion of Peter Penfold, the British High Commissioner to Sierra Leone, who was also sheltering in Conakry. Kabbah had arranged for funding for the Sandline operation through Rakesh Saxena, a banker and Indian national wanted for embezzlement in Thailand, then out on bail in Vancouver pending charges of travelling on a false passport. Saxena was evidently anxious either to protect or extend his

own diamond operations in Sierra Leone and was promised that, in return for his financial assistance, a restored government would grant him certain concessions.²⁶ In exchange, Saxena would finance the military operation in two tranches: an initial \$1,5 million for personnel and start-up costs, and a further \$3,5 million for military support equipment and its transfer to the area of operations.²⁷ By the middle of July, Tim Spicer, the head of Sandline, had flown to West Africa to see Kabbah (using an initial \$70 000 provided by Saxena) and ECOMOG. Spicer's subsequent proposal provided:

- contingency plans for possible military operations;
- co-ordination arrangements between the Civil Defence Force and ECOMOG; and
- liaison between the Kabbah government in Conakry, ECOMOG in Sierra Leone, and ECOMOG and the Civil Defence Force.

Details of the role that Sandline was to play, remain unclear, but the training of the Kamajors was mentioned, as was the supply of weapons to rearm the force. Sandline also appears to have been involved in co-ordinating the planning of the campaign to unseat Koroma, the provision of logistical support, control of ECOMOG air operations, including the services of two helicopters, and intelligence gathering.

By the end of July, Koroma was feeling confident enough to abort talks with other West African leaders in Abidjan and assert his intention of staying in power until 2001. On 6 August, the UN Security Council issued a statement indicating that, in the absence of a satisfactory response from the junta, it was “... *ready to take appropriate measures with the objective of restoring the democratically elected government.*”²⁸ It was another two months before it adopted a British-sponsored resolution imposing oil, arms and travel sanctions on Sierra Leone.

At the time of the Abuja ECOWAS Summit in August 1997, it was obvious that Kabbah and his government had lost hope that they would be restored to power through the force of arms of the international community. ECOWAS reflected the opinion of the international community when it opted, as the subregional body, to follow the course of trade and other sanctions to defeat the junta.²⁹

The Nigerian-led ECOMOG forces and the Kamajors, by this time, had exerted enough pressure on Koroma for him to consider negotiating a peaceful solution, though he was eager to have Sankoh, who was still in Nigerian detention, participate in the discussions. At the end of August, ECOMOG was authorised to enforce the economic embargo on Sierra Leone. It did this in a characteristically controversial way, by shelling ships at harbour in Freetown, and shelling and bombing the vicinity of the harbour and other centres – inflicting several civilian casualties over the next few months. These actions drew international criticism, however, without prompting a more determined attempt by other powers to oust the Koroma regime, which was later described in the *Guardian*³⁰ as “... *a truly appalling gang of brutal kleptocrats.*” Nor was the irony of the situation lost upon the Nigerian pro-democracy movement when it learned in October that the Abacha regime was committed to the

restoration of democracy in Sierra Leone. Writing in the Guardian, Ken Wiwa, son of the late Ken Saro-Wiwa, had earlier said:

“The Nigerian military is an old hand at meddling in the affairs of its neighbours in West Africa. The horny hand of its various despotic regimes has, among other things, sponsored or plotted coups in Gambia and exacerbated the terrible troubles in Liberia. On each occasion, this meddling has been called peace-making ... If the experience of Sierra Leone is anything to go by, then military intervention, coup plotting and ‘restoring democracy’ are lucrative businesses for those involved. That the British government might have found itself feeding this food chain, wittingly or not, has made a mockery of Robin Cook’s ethical foreign policy.”³¹

By late October, with Britain making unusually strong gestures of support to Kabbah’s government-in-exile, Koroma was induced to conclude a peace agreement in Guinea with ECOWAS. This provided for Kabbah to return to office before the end of April at the head of a broad-based government of national unity. The deal also gave immunity from prosecution to the leaders of the *coup*. All parties agreed to an immediate end to hostilities and the initiation of a programme of disarmament, demobilisation and reinsertion of combatants. Certain details still needed finalisation, however, and the position of the RUF in the bargain was unclear, as was the prospect of Sankoh’s return to Sierra Leone.

By the beginning of November, it appeared that the jubilation which accompanied the peace agreement might have been premature. Koroma insisted that Nigerian troops should be excluded from the ranks of the new ECOMOG monitoring force. He also voiced reservations about the nature of the unity government, and added a demand for Sankoh to be released. By 11 November, Koroma was insisting that, as the national army, his troops should be excluded from the disarmament process. From Liberia, President Charles Taylor added his objections to ECOMOG’s activities against the junta.

On 27 November, a report appeared in Toronto’s The Globe and Mail,³² detailing the relationship between EO, LifeGuard, Sandline International and a number of mining companies, including DiamondWorks. It alleged that members of these companies were engaged in planning a counter-*coup* in Sierra Leone to restore Kabbah. By the end of November, DiamondWorks shares had declined by 25 per cent to \$1.55 each since June. The article failed to generate much response, but by the middle of December, ECOMOG and the Kamajors stepped up their air and ground offensive along the Liberian border. Throughout January 1998, as Koroma continued to procrastinate, the Kamajors began to retake certain of the diamond towns from the junta/RUF forces. On 27 January, junta and ECOMOG troops clashed in Freetown for the first time since the peace agreement, and it was clear that both sides were preparing themselves for renewed war.

During this period, Sandline had acquired LifeGuard Security which nominally severed its formal association with EO, South Africa. LifeGuard was now guarding key income generating areas such as Sierra Rutile and Kono and was headed by the former commander of EO’s military contingent in the 1994/96 operation.³³ LifeGuard was therefore able to transfer individuals with appropriate technical qualifications to Sandline’s efforts and also employed former EO personnel. These circumstances would later help Sandline

operations significantly.³⁴ Sandline had also prepared a concept of operations but, more importantly, had developed the logistic and equipment requirements to support the operational plan.

The five-phase Sandline plan included the Civil Defence Force as the lead element of the operation, with support from ECOMOG, and co-ordination provided courtesy of Sandline's communications and aircraft. The plan included:

- Phase I: isolating cities such as Bo and Kenema through control of the inner road network, for example, by ambush;
- Phase II: encircling key cities;
- Phase III: conducting simultaneous attacks;
- Phase IV: exploiting the capture of vital points; and
- Phase V: returning the Kabbah government.

By Christmas/New Year 1997/98, the operation had begun. The first \$1,5 million had been received and Kabbah had co-ordinated action with Nigeria. Command, control and communications facilities were set up by Sandline with personnel transferred from LifeGuard. On 27 January 1998, the Civil Defence Force reported that phase I was complete, but that phase II was not quite ready to launch. The required arms had not yet arrived. It was at this stage that problems started to surface.

As he was about to hand over some \$3,5 million, the second contract instalment, Saxena was arrested on passport charges by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. This exacerbated Sandline's problems, which was trying to get an exemption to the UN arms embargo on Sierra Leone. Sandline eventually provided the money itself, believing that ECOMOG and Kabbah was exempt from the embargo, based on discussions with the US, the UK and ECOMOG authorities.

It would seem as if the subsequent ECOMOG offensive, which started on 26/27 January 1998 out of the Freetown side bridgehead, was premature and initiated without proper co-ordination and support. As a result, the Nigerian offensive only broke out of its positions outside Freetown on 6 February and a week later could claim to have control of the capital. Two days later, well-armed Kamajor forces took the major towns of Bo and Kenema. Though the war front remained flexible, it was clear that Koroma and the RUF were retreating towards their positions in the north-east of the country. As they fell back, they committed numerous atrocities against the civilian population who, in turn, exacted revenge on captured soldiers for earlier wrongs.

ECOMOG declared Freetown secured on 12 February 1998. An interesting sidebar to the main operations was the escape by helicopter of the junta, possibly including Kromah, apparently with a number of Ukrainian mercenaries. The helicopters, originally the property

of EO and then Sandline, were forced down in Liberia by ECOMOG on 13 February 1998 and, despite loud protestation by the Liberian government that wished to keep them, returned to Sandline crews on 14 and 16 February 1998. By January 1999, 'Bokkie' – as the one helicopter had become known – was the only remaining one in service with ECOMOG, piloted by a South African.

While the battle was raging up-country, and a scantily armed Civil Defence Force was making do with what it had, 28 tons of small arms arrived in Sierra Leone from Bulgaria on 23 February 1998 through the offices of Sandline.³⁵ The arms were never to be distributed, but were impounded by ECOMOG and held at Lungi. In any event, a 'country-wide' push was ordered for 27 February 1998 which resulted in a consolidation of effort and the establishment of an ECOMOG/Civil Defence Force line of Bo, Kenemo and Zummi, but did not include areas of Koindu/Kono and Kailahun. At this stage, operations became more static.

On 10 March 1998, President Kabbah returned to Freetown in triumph. By early April, he could claim to control about ninety per cent of the national territory, but sporadic junta/RUF outrages continue to be reported from the deep interior. By April, a stalemate seemed to have developed, with the RUF and its allies settling in the alluvial diamond areas, their rear secured by the Liberian border and supported by Charles Taylor's government in Liberia. During May, ECOMOG announced that it had captured close to 100 'mercenaries' from Liberia either behind the front-lines, in combat or in various towns and villages in the interior. According to one captured member of the NPFL, "*President Taylor could not integrate us into the Liberian army and I thought coming to Sierra Leone to fight, could have helped me out.*"³⁶

At least three more articles appeared in the international press in March about the role of Sandline in Kabbah's restoration, including one in [Africa Confidential](#), but it was not until May that questions in the British parliament revealed that a customs investigation was being mounted into the provision of arms to ECOMOG, in possible violation of the UN embargo. This, in turn, focused the attention on the question whether the British government had been aware of the role played by a private military company in the Sierra Leone conflict.

The initial official reaction to the claim that the British government had condoned or even connived at the involvement of 'mercenaries' in a counter-coup to oust the military junta of Koroma, and the sale of weapons to Kabbah, was one of outraged innocence. The Foreign Office minister responsible for handling African affairs denied angrily that his government would associate with 'hired killers' and dismissed the allegations as irresponsible rubbish. He was subsequently supported by the Foreign Secretary, though it was soon apparent that senior officials and diplomats had enjoyed prior knowledge of Sandline's involvement. Indeed, Sandline's defence of its position was rather more expert than the disingenuous one mounted by Whitehall. Its lawyers detailed meetings with senior British and US officials, in some of which actual plans had been shared by the company. Sandline claimed with some justification that it had every right to believe that its operations enjoyed the support and approval of London and Washington.

While much of the lively debate in the British press concentrated on the ministers' possible lack of control over their officials, or the failure of the Foreign Secretary to pay sufficient

attention to detail, the broader ironies implicit in Cook's defence also drew comment. On 8 May, The Times carried the following:

*"Had President Kabbah not turned to the private sector, he would still be in exile. He had universal verbal backing; but during and after last year's coup, the only force Western governments used was to evacuate their nationals; Nigerian troops had tried to overthrow the plotters and failed ... Since the wrath of the 'international community' had not the slightest impact on the regime, a rational observer might have expected the British Government to be quietly pleased that unorthodox methods had worked. It certainly professed itself delighted at the result. Instead, Sandline has been placed under criminal investigation and Robin Cook, the Foreign Secretary, has flatly condemned the operation ..."*³⁷

This was not to be the full extent of the Foreign Office's embarrassment about its handling of the affair. UN Security Resolution 1132 – that, among others, prohibited the supply of arms to Sierra Leone – was drafted in large part by Sir Franklin Berman, chief legal advisor to the ministry. The Order in Council giving effect in British law to the Resolution was also drafted by Berman's staff. Berman's interpretation was that the embargo applied equally to all parties in the conflict and that, on these grounds, Sandline may have been breaching the law. But by the end of May, the UN lawyers appeared to have changed their minds, arguing, as had Sandline, that since the Resolution had as its purpose the restoration of the elected government in Sierra Leone, ECOMOG, which was working towards that end with the encouragement of the UN, must enjoy an implied partial exemption from the ban. During October, it would eventually emerge, as was suspected, that MI6 had been deeply involved in the whole matter and, in fact, had encouraged Sandline to break the UN embargo. Eventually, the fuss over who-said-what-when-to-whom would simply underline Britain's extreme sensitivity to evidence of its collaboration with Sandline, whatever its degree of concern may have been for the desperate plight of Sierra Leone. In Freetown, in a spectacle not seen for many years, the people of Sierra Leone converged to the central cotton tree during May to chant their support for British High Commissioner Peter Penfold and Nigerian despot Sani Abacha – those that had brought some stability to Sierra Leone. The Legg report that investigated the linkage between Sandline and the British government and published during July, effectively downplayed the matter, accusing the British Foreign Office of incompetence, and ignoring the role of MI6.

Stability had not returned to Sierra Leone, however, as more and more forces and companies were drawn into the conflict. During July, Nigeria transferred more than 4 000 troops from Liberia to Sierra Leone, at a time when LifeGuard and Defence Systems Limited were providing security to UN relief operations. Earlier in April, *Tele Service Sociedade de Telecomunicações, Segurança e Serviços* (TeleServices) began to support LifeGuard at Branch Energy properties in Koindu. The US company ICI provided protection to businessmen, interests and aid workers in the south.³⁸

In October, Sankoh, in detention in Freetown, was sentenced to death for treason as a result of his role in the May 1997 *coup*, but appealed against his sentence.

By Christmas 1998, West African countries opened emergency talks on the civil war in Sierra Leone with the US and Nigeria accusing Liberia of supporting the junta/RUF in renewed

fighting as the rebels pushed the ECOMOG forces back. Apparently with the help of mercenaries from the Ukraine, rebel forces had already regained control of the diamond fields. A few days earlier, Nigeria had rushed an extra 600 troops to Sierra Leone to bolster ECOMOG as the rebels claim to have captured the key northern town of Makeni, 185 kilometres from Freetown, and were threatening Freetown itself. These reinforcements boosted ECOMOG to about 12 000 troops with more to follow – all to replace the hundred or so mercenaries that had previously brought a large degree of stability to Sierra Leone. The Committee of Six (composed of involved ECOWAS countries) held an extraordinary meeting in Abidjan on 28 December, appealing to the rebels to stop fighting, lay down their arms and recognise Kabbah as president. In the light of the deteriorating security situation, the Committee also pressed for additional troops, as well as a resumption of the Abidjan Agreements and the Conakry Peace Plan.

By January 1999, fighting had erupted in Freetown as the rebel forces under Sam Bockarie continued to advance. Kabbah had taken refuge at the Lungi airport town and offered to release Sankoh. Britain committed £1 million of financial and logistic support to ECOMOG. Anton la Guardia commented on the state of affairs in Sierra Leone:

“... the exclusive reliance on the 15 000 ECOMOG intervention force by Nigeria ... has turned out to be a political failure and a tragedy for the country's civilians. Within 12 months, the victorious Nigerian troops have been pushed back to their starting point ... the West's hopes that Nigeria could preserve stability in West Africa by acting as a regional policeman were clearly unrealistic, particularly when Nigeria is preoccupied by its own transformation to democracy.”³⁹

By 22 January 1999, Sam Kiley wrote in The Times: “Whether or not Sandline was implementing British policy then, it is quite clear that it should be now ... The redeployment of mercenaries in this blighted nation would be an act of genuinely ethical foreign policy.”⁴⁰

Conclusion

The per capita annual income of \$200 per person in Sierra Leone is half of that of poverty stricken sub-Saharan Africa. Life expectancy is less than forty years and the government is effectively run from Lagos. Had Executive Outcomes and Sandline International not been involved, the savage war in this country would not have raised much public interest in Britain, where it was basically a party-political issue, nor in South Africa, where the government has made an implicit connection between EO, the ‘third force’ and resistance to the new order.

The guilt of foreign countries is not that of short term complicity, but of long term complacency. Against the backdrop of the murder, mayhem and chaos in Sierra Leone, much domestic interest in a country such as Britain was focused on the political embarrassment for Robin Cook, the Foreign Secretary, who had loudly and repeatedly committed the Blair administration to the pursuit of an ethical foreign policy.⁴¹ As the story broke, it appeared that Sandline might have violated the UN arms embargo on Sierra Leone by supplying weapons to forces loyal to Kabbah, with the knowledge of officials or ministers in the British

government. There was also the question of how the government would attempt to reconcile its ethical position with the essential role played by Nigeria in the affair, which was suspended from the Commonwealth because of its abuses of human rights and doubts about its commitment to the restoration of civilian rule.

There is nothing unusual in this ambivalence. If Britain had grown weary of the white man's burden, it still did not find it easy to disengage. Under the eleven-year sway of Baroness Chalker, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office had consistently supported military actions to the incoherent but vicious rural rebellion gripping its former colony of Sierra Leone. In 1994, Britain helped to bring in 58 Gurkha troops from GSG to assist in the fighting. At the same time, Britain was instrumental in bringing about the 1996 elections and, subsequently, in introducing Sandline to Kabbah. Assistance was also forthcoming to the extent of repairing Sandline helicopters from the frigate HMS Cornwall in Freetown harbour. All these efforts were in vain, as Liberia's support for the hostilities in Sierra Leone continued unabated and the civil war in the country degenerated in a macabre orgy of bloodletting.

It is difficult and dangerous to apply Western assumptions about the nature of state security in many African countries where concerns for state survival are often subordinate to those for the personal security and well-being of the incumbent leadership. Countries such as Liberia, Nigeria and Sierra Leone have seen the creation of a parallel political authority, where personal ties and controls replace failing institutions. In this 'shadow state', alternative extrastate power networks underpin political and economic privilege. So potent and pervasive are these networks that, by manipulating the vestiges of state power, they are able to frustrate and bend interventions by the international financial and donor community designed to undermine the informal sector and strengthen the structures of the state for their own purposes. It is against this background and in this context that the military activities and interventions of state, regional and private security forces have to be analysed.

In a country such as Sierra Leone, the military is not a stable bulwark against chaos and instability. The RSLMF has never hesitated in the past to replace leaders or governments that did not please it. The use of private security forces such as EO can allow responsible decisions, such as military or civil service downsizing, to take place without fear of interference. Indeed, Reno states that "... *EO prevents chaos.*" In the context of military strongmen overruling political decisions in such countries as Liberia and Somalia, "[r]ulers in Sierra Leone and Angola avoid this fate by privatising violence and [guaranteeing the] accumulation of wealth to reliable foreigners, and contracting out the task of disciplining wayward politicians and social groups."⁴² The argument that real sovereignty comes from the unfettered ability to make unpopular but necessary decisions flies in the face of those who, in arguing against the use of private security, hide behind a false and self-centred definition of sovereignty. The other side of the coin is portrayed by Doyle⁴³ who presents the "... *arrival of powerful foreigners as a consequence of efforts of elite factions to recruit outside help to deal with local rivals who have their own foreign connection.*" Doyle calls this 'imperialism by invitation', and suggests that each case should be judged on its own merits. Foreign intervention is not necessarily bad or good, but judgements should pragmatically depend upon the reasons giving rise to such an intervention.

The situation in which the government of Sierra Leone found itself after the 25 May 1997 *coup* was completely different from the euphoric conditions that existed in February 1997 in the wake of the elections. Instead of being the internationally recognised government of a sovereign state-in-exile, enjoying the support of the international community, the Kabbah government found itself expelled, destitute, and dependent upon a neighbouring country for asylum. While the international community wrung its collective hands helplessly, the elected government could only sit on the sidelines and watch the country regress into a state of despotic anarchy under the thugs of the junta. To whom could Kabbah turn? Since Executive Outcomes was politically unacceptable, Kabbah would eventually turn to Nigeria and Sandline International.

EO's initial task was to reopen the alluvial diamond fields and other sources of revenue. In the process, it had brought short term stability to Sierra Leone, a cease-fire was agreed to, and a peace process started. It was this process, regardless of how sporadically and incompletely it was understood and applied, which allowed the elections and improved the prospects for peace.

The Kabbah government was brought down in 1997 by a combination of factors, including the destabilising role of the RSLMF, which was perhaps aided by strongmen elements in the bloated bureaucracy functioning in the vacuum that developed when EO left.

The Kabbah government was brought back into power in February 1998 by private deals made between what was essentially two private military organisations – Sandline International and Nigeria. Ironically, Sandline was more transparent in its affairs than the then government of Nigeria, with the latter being the source of extensive human rights abuses and criminal activity in a country such as Liberia.

Given that ECOWAS did not initially sanction military action to eject the junta and reinstate the government, but rather adopted a policy of trade and other sanctions, the use of Nigerian troops was a private deal between Sierra Leone and Nigeria. While the designation 'ECOMOG'⁴⁴ is used to characterise the Nigerian soldiers who originally represented ECOWAS, it would seem as if the Nigerian forces in the battle against the junta were just that – military forces hired by the government of Sierra Leone. In this context, an examination of President Kabbah's dalliance with Nigeria will show that the post-25 May 1997 activities were much more complicated, with possibly dangerous consequences to a free, sovereign and democratic Sierra Leone, than the use of EO in 1995/96. If history holds any lessons, it may be that Kabbah may have had a much harder time ridding himself of Nigerian troops than he would have had with either of the two private security companies previously engaged. Sierra Leone may only have been saved from Nigeria by the death of Abacha and the tenuous democratisation process in Nigeria.

Under military rule, Nigerian hegemony had spread across West Africa. The two Anglophone countries in the region, Liberia and Sierra Leone, that are the richest in natural resources besides Nigeria itself, were effectively influenced, if not controlled by a country run by a clique of self-serving despots who plundered their own country's oil resources as effectively as they did the natural riches of others. Writing about the role of ECOMOG some years later, Ofuately-Kodjoe would summarise it thus:

“The notion that a group of states headed by military dictatorships have the right to intervene in another state in order to establish a democratic regime is grotesque; and the notion that these states can in fact achieve that objective by the application of outside force may be only an exercise in wishful thinking.”⁴⁵

The Sierra Leone experience has demonstrated how a small, private security force can impact positively and strongly upon a chaotic, destabilised state, and potentially establish the conditions for economic rejuvenation at minimal cost. Impartial, private organisations can marginalise the traditional strongmen of previous government models. Given the resource shortages of the UN and ‘donor fatigue’, the controlled use of private security companies, as demonstrated in Sierra Leone, presents opportunities that justify further analysis.

According to this analysis, the use of private security forces should perhaps be considered as one possible solution to the problems of security in weak, emerging democracies.

Commenting on the release of the Legg report during July, the Financial Times made three sensible points.

“First, sanctions imposed by bodies like the UN need to be better drafted ...once decided, they at least need to be properly implemented ... Second, mercenaries are being increasingly used by governments. But they are a double-edged sword and need careful handling ... Last but not least is the realisation that Africa needs more diplomatic attention than it has been getting. It may account for an ever diminishing share of the world’s wealth, but it also, sadly, generates an increasing ration of the world’s conflicts.”⁴⁶

Endnotes

- 1 Prior to the Abuja ECOWAS Summit of 29 August 1997, ECOMOG had no legal mandate in Sierra Leone. See A Bundu, *ECOWAS: Conflict Management and Resolution in the Sierra Leone Crisis 1997*, in J N Garba (ed.), Militaries, Democracies, and Security in Sub-Saharan Africa, papers read at a conference in Abuja, Nigeria, 1-4 December 1997, p. 146.
- 2 DiamondWorks, Prospectus, Vancouver BC, Canada, October 1997.
- 3 On the twentieth anniversary of the execution of Brigadier Bangura, 23 March 1991.
- 4 Sankoh was a former corporal in the Republic of Sierra Leone Military Forces (RSLMF). He served under Brigadier John Bangura who was executed by Siaka Stevens in 1971.
- 5 Revolutionary United Front, Footpath to Democracy, undated.
- 6 A J Venter, *Sierra Leone’s Mercenary War, Battle for the Diamond Fields*, International Defence Review, 11/96, London, 1996, pp. 65-70.
- 7 I Douglas, Personal discussions in the field, Sierra Leone, July-August 1996.
- 8 RSLMF estimated strength in 1996 was about 15 000 soldiers in uniform.
- 9 The six battalions, of about 4-500 fighters each, were organised as follows: Vanguard (hard core trainers/leaders); Special Forces (Liberian migrants); Lumpen (most commanders came from this group); Salong Wosus (rank and file,

- pressed into service); Standbys (pressed into service, under training, unarmed); and Recruits (fresh intakes). At the height of the war in 1995, the RUF had deployed throughout the country with: Zogoda Base Camp – RUF HQ; Western Battalion – Malal Hills; Eastern Battalion – Giema; Peyeima Battalion – Peyeima; Sendumei Jui Group – Menima; Sulima Group – Camp Libya; Northern (Sixth) Battalion – Kangani Hills. Reintegration of War Effected Youth and Ex-combatants, Report to the Ministry of Resettlement, Rehabilitation and Reconstruction, 1966, Chapter 2, pp. 13-17.
- 10 Venter, op. cit., pp. 65-70.
 - 11 C Dietrich, *Altered Conflict Resolution: EO in Sierra Leone*, unpublished thesis, Princeton University, 1977, pp. 68-69.
 - 12 There is one account, which cannot be confirmed, that besides GSG and EO, a contingent of fifteen former British Special Air Service (SAS) soldiers were employed by Strasser following MacKenzie's death and GSG's departure. A possible reason for this brief appearance, if it happened, is that this group was reported to be a very expensive organisation, charging \$22 500 (US) per man per month. Venter, op. cit., p. 66. Also see Chapter 7 on GSG.
 - 13 M Grunberg, Telephone conversations with I Douglas, November/December 1997.
 - 14 Ibid.
 - 15 Various interviews with EO personnel conducted by I Douglas.
 - 16 Historically, Kamajors learned their skills through apprenticeships, and through acquisition of various powerful and expensive medicines (it is suggested that many of these medicines would prevent harm, even from firearms, to the Kamajors using them). Tradition has it that founders of pre-colonial Mende towns were often esteemed hunters, famed for having driven off the natural 'lords of the forest' (the elephants) so holding open a protected space for human occupancy. This tradition has served as the cornerstone for the development of a militia which, while no longer made up of the new 'lords of the forest', has used the mythology and, where possible, the skills of the hunter, to guard local or regional interests.
 - 17 Dietrich, op. cit., p. 31.
 - 18 Ibid., p. 32.
 - 19 It is not verifiable whether EO accepted shares in Branch Energy in lieu of cash.
 - 20 Dietrich, op. cit.
 - 21 J Hooper, *Peace in Sierra Leone – A Temporary Outcome?*, Jane's Intelligence Review, 2, London, 1997, p. 91.
 - 22 EO's figures reflect that the average fee per man per month, including all equipment and administration, was \$11 500.
 - 23 DiamondWorks, op. cit. EO had given Kabbah 90 days before he would be overthrown in a *coup*. The *coup* happened after 85 days.
 - 24 Bundu, op. cit., p. 145.
 - 25 Article 53 states that "... no enforcement action shall be taken under regional arrangements or by regional agencies without the authorisation of the Security Council." The only lawful embargo against Sierra Leone is that passed by the Security Council under Resolution 1132 (1997) on 8 October. It is limited only to arms and ammunition, petroleum and petroleum products, and travel restrictions against members of the junta and their families.
 - 26 The Toronto Globe and Mail, Toronto, Canada, 1 August, 1997. According to The Times, the Memorandum of Understanding between Kabbah, Spicer and Saxena stated: "... the Grantee (Saxena) agrees to give economic and other assistance, to the value of \$10,000,000 US to the Grantor (Kabbah) for ... restoration of the Constitution." See, UK Firm to Escape Action over S Leone Arms, The Times, London, 17 May 1998.

- 27 There was at least one other offer to support the military operation. An Israeli entrepreneur offered financial support, but the government stuck with Saxena's offer.
- 28 E Leopold, *UN Threatens Sanctions against Sierra Leone Junta*, Reuters News Service, United Nations, 6 August 1997.
- 29 ECOWAS Summit, Abuja, Nigeria, August 1997.
- 30 *The System Goes Wrong – But Sierra Leone Isn't Iraq*, Guardian, London, 8 May 1998, p. 26.
- 31 K Wiwa, *Opportunity Knocks*, Guardian, London, 13 May 1998, p. 20.
- 32 M Drohan & K Howlett, *DiamondWorks' African Site at Risk*, The Globe and Mail, Toronto, 27 November 1997.
- 33 Bert Sachse.
- 34 See, for example, P Sherwell, *International Dogs of War Stand Guard over Land of Diamonds*, Daily Telegraph, London, 21 May 1998.
- 35 The arms came from the company Arsenal and were flown to Sierra Leone by Sky Air Cargo Services.
- 36 *Liberian Mercenaries Support Ousted AFRC*, Inter Press Service, 1 May 1998.
- 37 *Cooked Up – The Foreign Secretary has Rushed to Judgement Prematurely*, The Times, London, 8 May 1998, p. 25.
- 38 *Militias and market forces*, Africa Confidential, London, 23 October 1998.
- 39 A la Guardia, *Sandline 'Should Have Been Left to Finish the Job'*, Daily Telegraph, London, 14 January 1999, p. 18.
- 40 S Kiley, *Send in the Mercenaries, Mr Cook*, The Times, London, 22 January 1999.
- 41 Cook's successful campaign to embarrass the previous government over the 'arms-to-Iraq' scandal marked him as a prime target for the opposition.
- 42 W Reno, *African Weak States and Commercial Alliances*, African Affairs, 1997, pp. 165-185.
- 43 M W Doyle, Empires, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 1986.
- 44 Liberians cynically state that ECOMOG stands for 'Every Car Or Moving Object Gone.'
- 45 W Ofautey-Kodjoe, *An Evaluation of the ECOWAS Intervention in Liberia*, in Garba (ed.), op. cit, p. 101.
- 46 *Legging it*, Financial Times, London, 28 July 1998, p. 19.