

# London's mafia war against Sierra Leone

by Linda de Hoyos

Direct talks between the Sierra Leone government of President Ahmed Tejan Kabbah and the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) are scheduled to begin on May 18 in Lomé, Togo, under the mediation of Togo's President Gnassingbe Eyadema, chairman of the Economic Community of West African States. As suspected by Ambassador John Ernest Leight, Sierra Leone's ambassador to the United States (see interview), the RUF is using the talks to force the Sierra Leone government to permanently release RUF leader Foday San-koh from detention. "The man must be free, and our own position is that this is a prerequisite for the talks to succeed and the talks to continue," said Omrie Golley, a Sierra Leone exile living in England who works with International Alert.

As Ambassador Leight discusses in detail, the RUF is a gang of demoralized soldiers culled from a succession of corrupt military regimes extending from that of President Joseph Momoh, overthrown in 1992, to Valentine Strasser, overthrown in January 1996. In war against Sierra Leone since 1991, the RUF has waged a campaign of violent terror against the people. Ambassador Leight also documents that, at the center of the continuing war which has devastated a country whose citizens already had one of the lowest life expectancies in Africa, are the country's resources, its vast wealth in gold and diamonds.

The reaction of the Western powers to the RUF war against Sierra Leone has been ambiguous at best. Sierra Leone is a former British colony and a member of the British Commonwealth. In 1991, President Momoh asked the British Defense Ministry for help to defend his country against the RUF onslaught. *The British government turned down the request.* From there, over successive regimes and governments, the people of Sierra Leone have been crushed between a rock and a hard place. On the one side is the deranged RUF, ravaging the country, killing and maiming civilians, kidnapping children and turning them into drugged-up child-soldiers. On the other side, are all the British "private security forces," which seek to come to the aid of whatever non-RUF government is ruling in Freetown, to crush the RUF—at a price. And what is that price? The government should hand over to that private foreign interest the franchise for mining Sierra Leone's gold and diamonds.

In short, the RUF could be likened to the gang of street hoodlums hired by the mafioso fat cats at the top to terrorize people into seeking "protection" from the hoodlums the fat

cats had sent to steal, burn, and kill in the first place. This accounts for the fact that the British Broadcasting Corp. is considered a major booster of the RUF (and of its ally, Charles Taylor of Liberia), and accounts for the fact that the RUF was able to receive highly sophisticated equipment for its January assault on Freetown, in part delivered by such British companies as Occidental Airways and Sky Air Cargo. On the other side, in March 1995, the Strasser regime brought in Executive Outcomes to deal with the RUF, which the South African mercenary company managed to do, while its affiliate, Branch Energy, mined the gold and diamonds of Sierra Leone for itself.

EO, as *EIR* has documented, is close to the center of the British Commonwealth financial nexus around the British Crown. The Kabbah government terminated the agreement with EO in January 1997, but then Indian-born Thai banker Rakesh Saxena attempted to bring in Col. Tim Spicer's Sandline International, to aid Kabbah's restoration to power after an RUF-backed coup against him in May 1997. The terms were the same: Sandline will deal with the RUF, in exchange for Sierra Leone's mineral wealth. To keep the game going, the British government and its underlings at the U.S. State Department maintained that a UN Security Council embargo had been placed on both the RUF-backed government of Johnny Paul Koroma, and the Kabbah forces.

While praising the Nigeria-dominated Ecomog which intervened on behalf of the Kabbah government in Sierra Leone in 1998, the Western powers have failed to deliver substantial aid to Ecomog. Thus, the war continues—while thousands of Sierra Leone citizens die of starvation, disease, and murder caused by that war. Ambassador Leight avers that the current peace talks in Lomé will be used by the RUF as just another tactic in the war. Given the game imposed on the people of Sierra Leone by their former colonial masters and their helpmates in Washington, he is likely correct in that assessment.

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## Interview: John Ernest Leight

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# The grab for Sierra Leone's resources

*Mr. Leight is Sierra Leone's Ambassador to the United States. He was interviewed by Lawrence Freeman in Washington, D.C., on April 21.*

**EIR:** There is a bloody conflict going on in your country. Can you tell us what is at the center of this controversy?

**Leight:** At the center of the trouble in Sierra Leone is our

national resources, the wealth of the land. Unfortunately for my country, a lot of the world is searching for their fortune in gold and diamonds, and because of the ease of the access to these minerals, there are all kinds of shysters in my country. For the last 20 and 30 years, Sierra Leone lived and suffered the worst form of corrupt government probably anywhere in Africa because of the easy accessibility and sale of these commodities. People are looking to put in place a pliable government in Sierra Leone that will allow them unlimited access to exploit the wealth of the land, to the disadvantage of the people. The people of Sierra Leone are fed up with living in poverty. They want the resources of the land used to improve their living standards, and to bring in economic development, and to bring in social amenities like a good health system and a good education system. These factions and former corrupt politicians and military elements will not allow them. So, these people who have been responsible for the corruption and degradation of Sierra Leone over the last 30 years, are the very people fighting an elected government that was put in place by the people of Sierra Leone in 1996.

**EIR:** Could you tell us the battle between the current government and Revolutionary United Front? Who leads the current government? Who leads the RUF and what are their demands?

**Leight:** The government was elected in early 1996, and it is led by President Ahmed Tejan Kabbah. Because of political violence and corruption in the late 1960s in Sierra Leone, Mr. Kabbah resigned from the government service in Sierra Leone—he was then permanent secretary of the civil service, he went to law school in England, and later joined the United Nations. He worked at the United Nations Development Program, in southern Africa, central Africa, and eastern Africa, and after 23 years, he returned to Sierra Leone and began a reform movement to bring democracy and economic development to Sierra Leone.

The rebels are led by a fellow called Foday Sankoh. Sankoh was a general military soldier in Sierra Leone, and he was involved in the previous coup. He was not given any benefits, even though his group seized the government of Sierra Leone. In the late 1980s, students at the local university there, the oldest black African four-year matriculated college, were expelled because they were complaining about corruption in the country. These students formed the Revolutionary United Front, and hired Sankoh later on as their military adviser. Over time, Sankoh systematically executed each one of these founders.

He then joined Charles Taylor [current President of Liberia] to wage war against Liberia. Sankoh and Taylor were able to corrupt junior elements in the Sierra Leone military and they seized the diamond areas in Sierra Leone, and this was used by Charles Taylor to finance his rebellion in Liberia. After Taylor gained power in Liberia, he decided to

fulfill his pledge to Sankoh and give power to Sankoh in Sierra Leone.

The policy of corrupting the junior ranks of the military, this was extremely easy, because the senior ranks of the military were extremely corrupt, having been part and parcel of the corrupt system of government that had ruined Sierra Leone for over 30 years. In 1997, these junior officers overthrew the elected government and invited the RUF, which had been waging a brutal war in the bush, to join them in governing Sierra Leone.

The people, who had taken part in the democratic elections, and who had sent five political parties to Parliament, and who had elected President Kabbah, resisted the coup. For ten months, they went through amputations, executions, rape, assassinations, and general brutality, but still pursued a policy of civil disobedience and refused to yield. Representatives of elected governments around the world worked with the United Nations and other governments to bring in the restoration of President Kabbah. This occurred in March 1998.

The junta in Freetown then returned to the bush. The military reserves, who call themselves the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC), and the RUF went to the bush, and continued their policy of brutality against the peasants of Sierra Leone in the outlying towns, *again*. Children as young as seven years of age were captured; villages sacked; older people executed; the young men pressed into military service; and the females pressed into domestic and social slavery. General disruption took place. It was a campaign of brutality, amputations, executions, assassinations, rape, pillage, banditry, and general destruction. Meanwhile, as they captured these towns and villages, they captured the young people and pressed them into their military service. They took control of the diamond mines and used revenues from diamond mining to finance purchases of arms.

The campaign against Sierra Leone culminated in January of this year, when about 15,000 of them—AFRC soliders, RUF, Liberian ex-soldiers of Charles Taylor's movement, and troops from Burkina Faso—entered Freetown and determined to overthrow the government, and, failing that, to pursue a scorched-earth policy. They failed to overthrow the government. Ecomog was able to remove them. Ecomog is a military observer group of the countries in West Africa.

As the rebels retreated, they killed people, burned their homes, mutilated people, smashed churches and mosques to pieces, burned schools—everything that had the slightest semblance of economic development, of culture, of education, of health services, anything modern that would enable the country to develop, was smashed to pieces. All the factories and places of employment were destroyed, as they retreated into the countryside. Killing people as they retreat, is a very sad story, and some of the victims were babies.

**EIR:** What is Charles Taylor's interest in Sierra Leone? Why

does he want to get rid of the elected government of President Kabbah?

**Leight:** Charles Taylor runs a ruffian, undemocratic, and brutal regime in Liberia. Modern businesses will not deal with him. Few people will invest in Liberia. Taylor is aware of the immense wealth of Sierra Leone. He is particularly interested in the gold and diamonds. Later, he might be interested in something else, but right now what he wants is easy money.

See, most of the diamond deposits in Sierra Leone are what are called alluvial deposits. They may wash down over the rivers and streams over the centuries, and with a pick and a shovel and a pocket, you can access that wealth within six feet of the surface. So, if he has a large army digging for him, then he is in a position to earn a lot of money. That is the money he wants for his own needs, as well as to maintain a large supply of former military officers for whom there are no jobs in Liberia. Since no one will invest there, there is no employment. He wants to keep these people happy so they won't turn on him, so he is going to Sierra Leone to find money to get some programs for his ex-soldiers. Taylor fancies himself as the best guerrilla fighter in Africa. He was supported by Burkina Faso and by [Libyan President Muammar] Qaddafi in Tripoli.

Now, there is a very interesting connection between Burkina Faso and Liberia. In 1980, there was a coup in Liberia by a man named Sergeant Doe, and the first thing Doe did was to kill the Liberian elite. One of those whom Doe executed was Adolphus Tolbert, who was the son of the ex-President and a very prominent official in Liberia. An arranged marriage was made by Taylor for Tolbert's widow with the current President of Burkina Faso. In return, that woman is the link between Liberia and Burkina Faso. The link with Libya occurred when Taylor escaped from prison in Massachusetts and Qaddafi embraced him, trained his men, supported him in arms and military expertise.

Sankoh joined Taylor because Taylor was actually looking to help him. Sankoh volunteered for Taylor. Sankoh and Taylor have no good intentions for Sierra Leone, for West Africa, or for Africa. In our view, Taylor and Sankoh represent the slave traders of 500 years ago. These people care nothing about Africans, they are willing to sell their country's soul to Europeans so they can live the high life. They can get all the money they want, but they don't care about anything. Taylor is exploiting the natural resources of Sierra Leone and Liberia for his own private accounts, and taking care of his supporters. Sankoh is a fellow whom Taylor has promised to put in power, in exchange for giving Taylor the right to access the mineral wealth of Sierra Leone. They are both together, and they are trying to seize Sierra Leone.

When they have done that, they will use Sierra Leone and Liberia as a stepping stone to go to the next country, which is Guinea. I understand raids were made against Guinea a few

days ago, burning villages, exactly what had happened with Sierra Leone.

Taylor believes that the whole of West Africa is ripe for exploitation, and he wants to overthrow every possible system there, and, we believe, allow West Africa to become a sanctuary for international criminals. Right now, Taylor is supported by two people. One of them is called Nicolás Shaeffer. He is from Colombia, and he was at one time associated with the Cali, Colombia cocaine cartel. He is the former associate of Pablo Escobar in Colombia. The next man is a gentleman called Colonel Randall, formerly of Executive Outcomes in South Africa. He was assigned to Sierra Leone, and he is the one who introduced Taylor to European crooks, to Ukrainian crooks, and training the military to go to Sierra Leone to fight. Those people are beginning to import cocaine into western Africa and using Sierra Leone and Liberia as distribution points to export cocaine to other countries. We believe that if Taylor succeeds in disturbing West Africa, West Africa will become the mecca for corrupt economic policies around the world, a center for money-laundering, a center for the processing and exporting of cocaine. We believe that the future of West Africa is not understood by the Western countries; if they did understand, they would stop Taylor and Sankoh.

**EIR:** You mentioned some forces and countries involved. You mentioned Executive Outcomes. What is the role of outside agencies in the fight? We have reports of British air companies, Sky Air Cargo and Occidental Airlines, bringing guns to Sankoh.

**Leight:** The RUF has no support within Sierra Leone. But for external support, the RUF would be nothing, would be finished today. The RUF uses Sierra Leone wealth to buy arms from Ukraine. The arms are purchased either through mercenary groups, like the ones you mentioned, or through Burkina Faso.

Randall used to be associated with Executive Outcomes. He has left them; he is now on his own in Liberia. Executive Outcomes is part of the international private military groups that sell their services to governments or to insurgent groups. They were at one time hired by the military government of Sierra Leone, but the elected government terminated the agreement. We understand that some of the companies involved are based in England. We have heard that Occidental Airlines was flying the cargo into Liberia and from there distributing the weapons to rebels in Sierra Leone.

But again, some of these military groups are very dangerous; they have caused a whole lot of trouble for African countries since the days of Patrice Lumumba in the Congo.

**EIR:** There is fighting between the Ecomog forces for the defense of Freetown and the Kabbah government. Where does the situation stand now, and how can it be resolved?

**Leight:** The elected government is in a very difficult position in Sierra Leone. Although Ecomog and the civil defense forces have been able to clear the rebels out of the western area, which is where the military situation is now, a large portion of the country is in the hands of the rebels.

How did this come about? Very simple. When Ecomog removed the junta in March 1998, most of the junta soldiers surrendered. Ecomog persuaded the people of Sierra Leone to allow them to rehire these soldiers to defend the elected government. The people of Sierra Leone complained that these people had unleashed a reign of terror on them for ten months; they know them and they cannot be trusted. Even so, Ecomog rehired these junta troops. In December 1998, the junta troops rebelled against Ecomog, turned their backs on Ecomog, and in all the areas where the junta troops were in the majority, they switched to the rebels. The rebel troops were in Makono, so the rebels had the diamond mines. The other troops were in the northern area, in the northern capital. It is easy to connect Liberia to the diamond mines in Makeni, so arms are flowing across that area. Because of that strength, they were able within a month to come to Freetown, when Ecomog began to repel them.

The main location of the rebels, other than Makeni and Makono where the diamond mines are located, is Masiaka. Masiaka is an intersection town, where the roads lead to the northern province and to the southern province. I believe a war to remove them from that area is in the planning stages. However, each time the rebels are removed from a location, they engage in a campaign of pillage, carnage, and destruction, a scorched-earth policy. We believe that if we remove them from Masiaka, and they withdraw to Makeni, we are very concerned about the people in that area. Ecomog has to attack Masiaka in order to open the highways, so that the elected government can reach civilians behind enemy lines, to feed them and to take care of their health. Sickness and starvation are spreading behind enemy lines. It is the duty of the government, to reach those people, those victims, and to supply them with food and medical help. So, that is what is going on right now.

**EIR:** How do you see this being resolved and what role do you think the United States should play?

**Leight:** There is a peace conference going on right now in Lomé, Togo, but there has been a hitch. The government announced over two months ago that on April 18, it would allow Sankoh to travel to Lomé to consult with his field commanders and his supporters so that they can come up with a permanent position in a peace conference with the elected government. True to his word, President Kabbah allowed Foday Sankoh to travel on April 18. As we speak, the rest of his delegation are still in Monrovia [Liberia], arguing among themselves. They have not sent a delegation there. I believe that they are using this delay to get Sankoh to prolong his stay

in Togo. He is supposed to be there for seven days, to consult with them for seven days, and return back under detention in Freetown. I believe they are going to delay and prolong his freedom while they say they are talking peace.

When the rebels are able to get their act together, the government of Sierra Leone will meet with the rebel delegation, and the hope is that a peaceful settlement can be arrived at, the carnage in Sierra Leone can be ended, and the government can begin to minister to the people and begin to rebuild the country.

I believe it is a long shot. I believe that for a peace conference to have any meaning, both sides should have good intentions and be interested in peace. The government of Sierra Leone is interested in peace, but I don't believe the rebels, Charles Taylor's people, are civilized enough to understand, to want peace. I think they are out in the bush, raping, killing, maiming, and stealing, and they enjoy it. They are not going to give it up by just talking. I think that any peace agreement will be temporary. Taylor signed 13 peace agreements with the nations of West Africa before he was able to gain power in Liberia. Taylor sees the peace agreement as a stepping stone, not as an agreement to end hostilities. So, I am one of the skeptical people in Sierra Leone who do not bank on this peace conference, I think it will come to naught.

I think the United States is trying to contribute to the peace effort, but I do not think it is going about it correctly. The United States should understand that the rebels are completely uncivilized and they are engaged in atrocious conduct against unarmed civilians. My reading of the policy of the United States toward Sierra Leone is very simple: They want the rebels to share power with the government. The people of Sierra Leone are saying that that approach will sabotage the march toward democracy. The rebels were invited in 1995 to take part in internationally observed elections; they refused. Not only that, they tried to disrupt the election and tried to confiscate the ballot boxes. When the elections were over, they did sign a peace agreement, called the Abidjan peace accords, but they promptly reneged on agreement after agreement and arrested their own delegates who had been assigned to deal with the government.

I believe that the American policy of encouraging the rebels to think they can share power with an elected government is not a sound policy, because it will sabotage democracy and encourage other rebel groups to believe that the way to gain power in Africa is by engaging in gross human rights violations, and the more violent they are, the more they will be welcomed to take part in elected governments. The people of Sierra Leone said they are willing to allow the RUF to convert to a political party and to contest in elections, which are less than two years away. I think the American government should pursue a policy of getting the rebels to adhere to the Abidjan peace accords, explain to

the rebels the benefits of the peace accords, and make it known to them that there is no chance for them to gain power by force. They should become a political party and come explain to the people why they should govern, and contest the elections due in year 2001.

If the rebels are given a chance to participate in the government, other groups will try to get power in the same way. The rebels who attacked the Americans, Britons, New Zealanders, and Australians in Bwindi Impenetrable Forest in Uganda, are copying the exact tactics of the RUF. They have gone and attacked innocent people who have nothing to do with the government, to show that they can prevent the government from governing. We think that they should allow the people to vote and elect the government.

To be fair, the United States government has been assisting with refugees and humanitarian concerns. They gave \$75 million to the United Nations for programs to feed the refugees from Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Guinea, and to minister to their health. They also made a contribution for medical assistance for Ecomog troops who have been wounded. They have also made some financial assistance to Ecomog itself. But they have only given Ecomog a few million dollars. In this way, Ecomog is not strong enough to end the rebellion. The end result of this type of distribution of assets is that more and more refugees are created, requiring more and more money for them. Whereas, if the United States had given Ecomog logistics to the tune of \$50 million or so, the war would be ended.

The United States has also tried to encourage Charles Taylor to end his intervention in Sierra Leone. But, somebody like Charles Taylor does not listen to words. Unless the United States takes political action, Taylor will never listen to the United States. The United States can act when it wants to act. It took the United States less than two months from the time they found casualties in Kosovo, to intervene in Kosovo, and they are now asking for \$6 billion to fight that war. The RUF killed nearly 6,000 people in Freetown in one week, and the United States is talking about \$10-15 million for Ecomog. That will never do the job. Aid should go to the government of Sierra Leone, to Ecomog, and the United States should use its power over Liberia to get Taylor to end his violent intervention in Sierra Leone.

**EIR:** What are the Abidjan peace accords?

**Leight:** The Abidjan peace accords, which were negotiated in 1996 between the RUF and the elected government of Sierra Leone, provided for a peaceful end to the violence that has occurred in Sierra Leone since 1991. This agreement provides for certain organizations to implement the cease-fire, and for the disarming and demobilization of all combatants. The agreement also allowed the RUF to convert itself to a political party and be given money to finance its activities. There was general amnesty for everyone involved in

the carnage in Sierra Leone, and a plan was worked out with world organizations to begin the building in Sierra Leone. The RUF signed this agreement, but never implemented it. They arrested the delegates who were sent to the commission charged with administering the peace agreements, and those delegates have been held incommunicado since late 1996 or early 1997.

The RUF said that it was fighting against corruption in 1991. But now their sole allies in Sierra Leone are the very people they said they were fighting in 1991, the AFRC, the military set up by the government of Sierra Leone that had been in power from 1968 to 1992. These people are now the RUF's allies. President Kabbah was not with the Sierra Leone government then; he was out of the country. I, as ambassador, have been out of Sierra Leone for 30 years, because I would not work with such people.

**EIR:** Wars are creating millions of refugees, and now we see refugees in the Balkans. Lyndon LaRouche has proposed that instead of wars destroying the planet, that there be a New Bretton Woods system which would be based on nation-states coming together to decide the economic policies that are in the interests of their people. This would include the African countries as well. Do you support this proposal, and how do you see development in West Africa under a different set of economic policies?

**Leight:** I have not seen the details of the New Bretton Woods proposal, but I will look at it and study it. But I would agree with Mr. LaRouche that, as of now, it does not seem that there is a fair system in the world. There are killings in Kosovo and the United States government is sending 1,000 planes and \$6 billion to defend those people. More than 6,000 people are killed in one week in Freetown, Sierra Leone, in a war that has been going on since 1991, and piddlings, a few million dollars, are sent to Ecomog grudgingly and slowly to keep that organization going. So, I believe were a fairer, more objective look at this kind of problem is taken, I would support that kind of agreements—not to leave it to powerful nations to do as they please, and the weaker nations of Africa left out of the whole system.

I believe that African states should be strengthened; I believe that there are a lot of resources in Africa, and if money is exported to Africa correctly, I believe that the continent will develop and will benefit the whole world, and trade will prosper between the United States and Africa. But right now, I don't see that happening, despite all the conferences in Washington, D.C. It is mostly talk and no action. They acted in Kosovo; they failed to act in Sierra Leone sufficiently. They failed to act in Guinea-Bissau sufficiently; they failed to act in Rwanda, in Congo. So, it seems that as of right now, European nations are more important than African nations, even though the bulk of the resources for the rest of the world are today in Africa.