

'Donors' abandon Sierra Leone to the international drug cartel

by Linda de Hoyos

"The peace accord is the only thing the elected government can do," explained Sierra Leone's Ambassador to the United States John Ernest Leigh, in an interview shortly after the July 7 signing of the Lomé accords which ended the eight-year war between the government of Sierra Leone and the Revolutionary United Front. "The government has no ability to protect unarmed civilians," the Ambassador said. "It was thought better to end the human rights violations than to push for an ideal outcome, and put an end to this kind of savagery, in reliance on international pledges that the international community will see to it that the accord is enforced and implemented and supported."

Now, five months later, it has become clear that the international community is not living up to its obligations, abandoning Sierra Leone to carry out the disarmament of, and provision for, upwards of 30,000 armed fighters in the country. Even such obvious measures as debt relief have not been granted to the elected government of President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah. Disarmament has moved at a snail's pace, and the country's mines still remain in the hands of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), which gets a slice of the money fetched for the gold and diamonds smuggled out of the country.

The economy has been destroyed

The accord ended a war in which it is estimated that 100,000 people, out of Sierra Leone's 4 million, were killed or maimed; 2 million were displaced, either as refugees or within the country; half a million Sierra Leone refugees remain in Guinea. The infrastructure and productive economy of Sierra Leone were levelled. During its January 1999 offensive to seize the capital city of Freetown, the RUF abducted 6,000 children, destroyed the city, and cut off the limbs of 1,000 civilians. The RUF drive was brought to a halt by the Nigerian-backed forces of the Economic Community of West African States Peace Monitoring Group (Ecomog), composed mostly of Nigerian forces and paid for with Nigerian state funds.

The RUF of Foday Sankoh invaded Sierra Leone from Liberia in 1991, backed by current Liberian President Charles Taylor, who had invaded Liberia from Côte d'Ivoire in 1989 to overthrow the regime of Samuel Doe. The Taylor-Sankoh alliance seized Sierra Leone's gold and diamond mines and sought to bring down the regime of Gen. Joseph Saidu Momoh. In 1992, Momoh was overthrown by a military coup led

by Capt. Valentin Strasser, who brought in Israeli military advisers and the Anglo-South African mercenary outfit Executive Outcomes to combat the RUF, with the provision that Executive Outcomes would hold the franchise for the country's rich diamond and gold mines. In January 1996, Strasser was overthrown by Brig. Julius Maada Bio, who called elections which brought to power the elected government of President Kabbah. In 1997, President Kabbah terminated the contract with Executive Outcomes. Later that year, junior officers in the military overthrew the Kabbah government in a coup led by Maj. Johnny Paul Koroma, who became the government front for rule by the RUF. Through the action of the Nigerian-backed Ecomog, President Kabbah was restored to power in March 1998, but the war did not end. The RUF still retained control of the diamond and gold mines, with the loot being channeled through Liberia out of the continent. The monies accrued through this process paid for the arming of the RUF and Koroma's allied Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC).

After the RUF bid to capture Freetown was thwarted by Ecomog, the Front began pursuing options for peace, backed by the international community. The international community never considered providing the funding to Ecomog to enable the Nigerian and other West African forces to finish off definitively the RUF and its allied AFRC, despite its long and massive record of acts of barbarity against the Sierra Leone people.

As Ambassador Leigh explained, from where the Sierra Leone government sits, the international community, especially the United States, preferred to leave Sierra Leone at the mercy of the RUF, and, instead of acting to support the duly elected government, "put everything into Kosovo. In East Africa, the international community spends 11¢ a day on a refugee; for Kosovo it is \$14. NATO spent \$40 million a day to liberate the Albanians; while Ecomog was given \$15 million a year. The disparity could not be more stark. Because of the failure of the Western countries to support the government, it had to reach an accommodation with the rebels."

Pressure to settle with the RUF

Pressure came on the Kabbah government to settle. British High Commissioner Peter Penfold declared in April, "It is high time the people of Sierra Leone settle their differences."

Penfold threatened that the United Kingdom could not continue to “pump cash” into the country in the form of projects and other aid packages while there is insecurity in Sierra Leone. “If you people cannot put your house in order, Britain cannot continue to pour millions of pounds into the country,” he said.

Penfold was leaving out of the equation the fact that while London’s mercenary forces in Executive Outcomes, and then Sandline International, had been contracted to protect the Kabbah government in exchange for mining franchises, British intelligence has also supported the RUF, through such entities as Alert International, the British Broadcasting Corp., and various private airlines and mercenary subsidiaries that have supplied the RUF with sophisticated military equipment, making possible the RUF offensive on Freetown in December 1998-January 1999.

Pressure was also placed on the Nigerian government to bring about a settlement in Sierra Leone. Requests from the Nigerian military to Washington for increased funding in order to mop up the RUF forces were denied. Newly elected President Olusegun Obasanjo, concerned about Nigeria’s collapsed economy, made clear that Nigerian forces would begin a phased withdrawal from Sierra Leone. The Obasanjo government estimates that Nigeria spent \$8 billion over the decade of the 1990s on its participation in Ecomog in Sierra Leone and Liberia.

The message could not have been clearer: The Kabbah government must settle with the RUF, or the RUF and the allied Koroma forces will be permitted to reorganize, rearm, and launch a new offensive against Freetown—and there will be no one to stop them.

The Kabbah government accordingly accepted to negotiate with the RUF. Negotiations took place in Lomé, Togo, under the mediation of Togo President Gnassingbe Eyadema; Francis Okello, representing the United Nations; and U.S. special envoy Rev. Jesse Jackson.

The accord, as signed on July 7, called for a cease-fire; the establishment of a United Nations Observer Mission in Sierra Leone (UNOMSIL), to oversee the disarmament of the RUF and other belligerents; the transformation of the RUF into a political party; and full amnesty for the RUF. The accord gave broad and sweeping powers to the RUF in a government of national unity. Sankoh’s forces were to be given one senior cabinet post, along with three other cabinet positions, and four positions of deputy cabinet minister. Most importantly, the RUF was to be handed the key post of chairman of the newly formed Board of Commission for Management of Strategic Resources, National Reconciliation, and Development. In this new guise, Sankoh et al. would have a major and likely final say on the distribution of the country’s vast mineral resources. The post tended to make official the RUF control of Sierra Leone’s gold and diamond mines.

Ambassador Leigh called the accord a “great shame to the Western nations.” The United Nations and various human rights organizations criticized the accord because it granted

Taylor’s friends in the United States

The major advocate for the Taylor regime in the United States is Rep. Donald Payne (D-N.J.), a member of the House International Relations Subcommittee on Africa. Payne led the U.S. delegation that attended Taylor’s inauguration as President of Liberia in 1997. Payne was among those putting pressure on the Sierra Leone government to negotiate with the RUF. According to the *Washington Post* of Oct. 18, Payne calls the RUF “dissidents”—whereas human rights organizations call them criminals who have committed crimes against humanity. He believes that Taylor could be a “positive force,” reported the *Washington Post*.

Taylor, who was under arrest and imprisoned in Massachusetts, escaped from jail in 1989 and headed for the Ivory Coast whence he launched the invasion of Liberia, reportedly with arms supplied through Libya and Burkina Faso. The charges against Taylor were dropped earlier this year, through the efforts of chief lobbyist, former U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Herman Cohen.

amnesty to the RUF. Ambassador Leigh noted that “if the government had had the power, it could have insisted that any amnesty be through truth and reconciliation.” But under international pressure, the government was forced to settle; without amnesty, the war could not have been ended. Sankoh himself had been apprehended in 1998 and was in jail on charges of treason up to the point of the negotiations for the accords; without amnesty, the RUF and its allies would have stayed in the bush, using control of the mines to continue to wage a devastating guerrilla war against the government and the people.

Donor whiplash

If the international community acted to force the Kabbah government to negotiate, its actions since the accord show no commitment to peace. With the exception of Britain, which has sent some money to the Kabbah government, all promised aid from the donor countries has been channeled through aid agencies.

In the months since the accord, the government has upheld its part of the bargain—RUF appointees are now in charge of the ministries of trade and industry; energy and power; tourism and culture; and land, central planning, and housing. Sankoh is the chairman of the Resources Committee. But the disarmament process has been stymied. In part this is due to the fact that Koroma’s AFRC was not a party to the accord.

Koroma's forces have been continuing to maraud the Sierra Leone countryside, and also come into direct conflict with the RUF over such key towns as Makeni. The fight over this town through October wreaked havoc with the population, causing mass dislocation and starvation, as aid agencies there fled the scene. By mid-November, the town was under RUF control, and Sankoh went to the town to urge the disarmament of his people there and the AFRC.

But as of Nov. 19, only 915 former rebels had arrived at the disarmament centers to register and turn in their weapons, out of an estimated 9,000 RUF and AFRC fighters. Reportedly, 1,200 AFRC people surrendered their arms on Nov. 22.

Meanwhile, the RUF continues to control those pockets of territory which hold the country's mining operations, including Kenema and Kono districts and the mining area of Tongo.

But until the disarmament process is complete, Sierra Leone continues to be threatened with disintegration into a division of the country by warlords. In the RUF, there are two commanders who do not appear to be under political control: Samuel Bockarie Maskita, who has threatened to break away from the RUF and form his own insurgency, and Dennis Strongman Mingo. Further, Koroma has by no means fully accepted the peace accord, although it is hoped that now, as the new chairman of the Commission for the Consolidation of Peace, he has "bought into" the accords.

Furthermore, the condition of returning rebels is poor. Many of the RUF conscripts were children, who were heavily drugged and unleashed against the population. They are traumatized, demoralized, and in some cases on the verge of starvation. Many will be ineligible to join the newly reorganized armed forces because they are illiterate. Without programs in place to bring these youth into rehabilitation and training for full service in a reorganized armed forces or productive jobs, they remain easy targets for recruitment back into insurgencies, where killing, raping, and stealing are the easy order of the day.

Therefore, as Ambassador Leigh noted, the Sierra Leone government is in immediate need of hard cash for the rehabilitation and reconstruction program required for a permanent peace, in the order of \$50-100 million just for a start. But this money is not forthcoming.

Instead, the slow pace of disarmament and the continuing insecurity in the country are used as an *excuse* to withhold financial assistance from the Kabbah government. UN Undersecretary General for Humanitarian Affairs Carol McAskie visited Sierra Leone in mid-November and declared that her message to donors was that Sierra Leone is still "insecure," with aid agencies unable to gain access to sections of the country. That is, the red light still holds for funds into the country. The World Bank will supply no funding for any projects in Sierra Leone until the situation is secure.

During her visit to Sierra Leone at the end of October, U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright promised \$55 million in aid to Sierra Leone, of which \$4 million is for

logistics to ensure disarmament; \$4 million is for the education of ex-combatants; \$55 million is for aid; and \$1 million is to help Sierra Leone curtail the illegal flow of diamonds and other minerals out of the country. However, none of the money has been seen yet.

Albright further said that the United States would cancel \$65 million of its debt, but only if the government signed an agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Throughout the war and the period following the signing of the accord, the Sierra Leone government has paid its debt service on time. As one government official put it: "An IMF agreement means that the IMF will come in and run the government."

Mining of the country's mineral wealth is proceeding, but the profit does not accrue to either the government or the

Mafias profit from a 'children's war'

The wars in Sierra Leone and Liberia beginning in 1991 were fought by thousands of child-soldiers. In Liberia, the United Liberian Movement for Democracy in Liberia of Roosevelt Johnson and the National Patriotic Front of Liberia of Charles Taylor both used thousands of child-soldiers, and child-soldiers were the chief cadre of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) of Sierra Leone.

In Liberia, according to a 1994 Human Rights Watch report entitled "Easy Prey: Child Soldiers in Liberia," the warring parties did not abduct or actively recruit child-soldiers, but children came to them for food, protection, and to fight to revenge the killing of their families by the other side in the conflict. The warring parties did not turn such children away, but used them in the most brutal way possible.

In Sierra Leone, the RUF actively recruited and abducted children. In the December 1998-January 1999 offensive to take the capital city of Freetown, the RUF abducted 6,000 children in the space of several weeks. Today, more than 2,000 of those children are unaccounted for.

The treatment of these children by the commanders of the warring parties illustrates the way in which these 1990s West African wars were fought: Armed forces did not square off against each other, but retaliated for military attacks with atrocities against the civilian population in wanton destruction of life and property. "The troops move into a village; they take everything and kill and rape," a commanding officer of the Ecomog forces explained to Human Rights Watch. "They stay there a couple of weeks and then move on. The children are all part of this. It's

people. According to the Nov. 21 *Concord Times*, Liberians have taken control of the rebel-held mining town of Kono, and illegal cross-border trade is now rampant. The government is unable to take back control of the town unless the insurgents holding it are first disarmed.

It is estimated that Sierra Leone is annually losing \$300 to \$450 million from the illegal flow of minerals out of the country into the hands of the international mafia that has its grip on the government in neighboring Liberia.

World's poorest country

Even before the war, Sierra Leone was the world's poorest country, and today stands at the bottom of the so-called Human Development Index of the UN Development Program (UNDP). Because of the war, all productive activity in the

country has ground to a halt, including cultivation. Starvation is rampant in pockets of the country controlled by the rebels, such as Tonkolelie and Gbonkolenkeh districts. Per-capita income is a meaningless \$160 per year.

Sierra Leone's debt in 1997 was \$1.4 billion, having doubled since 1985. In 1997, it paid 21.2% of all its official export earnings to debt service.

In 1997, according to the UNDP, life expectancy in Sierra Leone was 37.2 years, having fallen from 42 years in 1990. Infant mortality was 182 infant deaths out of every 1,000 live births; mortality for children under five years of age was 316 out of every 1,000 live births. Maternal mortality was 1,800 out of every 100,000 women. More than 70% of the people are not expected to live to the age of 60 years. Adult literacy was 34.3%.

civilians who are attacked; it's not soldiers against soldiers. Relatively few soldiers have been killed. But thousands of people have been displaced and turned into refugees"—or killed.

Children were the most cruelly abused victims of the war. The Human Rights Watch report on Liberia notes that orphans often joined the warring factions. Quoting sources that work with child-soldiers, the report said: "Some children saw their parents killed and had no options. Some were forced to join. Some joined because of starvation—they could get food with a warring faction. Some joined because the rebels made promises to them, like 'We'll take you to a football game.' Food was very scarce; some joined to get food for themselves and their families."

A childcare worker in Liberia told Human Rights Watch that once recruited, "some children were the most vicious, brutal fighters of all. I once saw a nine-year-old kill someone at a checkpoint. Children learn by imitation; they saw killings and then when their commanding officers ordered them to kill, they did. Some of the kids killed out of fear; they were told they would be killed if they didn't carry out orders to kill."

A commanding officer of the Ecomog forces in Nigeria noted that "lots of children are used at checkpoints. Manning a checkpoint gives a kid power and influence, even if he's twelve years old. It's a children's war. Kids get promoted in rank for committing an atrocity; they can cut off someone's head without thinking."

Child-soldiers, reports Human Rights Watch, were treated extremely harshly. As one social worker describes it in the report:

"First of all, boys from both factions have told us that there were initiation procedures when they joined, in which they were forced to kill or rape someone or perform some other atrocity, like throwing someone down a well, or into a river. This was supposed to demonstrate that

they were brave enough to be soldiers. Anyway, they were told that they would be shot if they didn't do it."

A counselor working with former child-soldiers reported that "kids have told us that they were actually forced to witness the execution of members of their family or their friends. If they screamed or cried, they were killed. Boys have told us of being lined up to watch executions and being forced to applaud. If you didn't applaud, you could be next. Kids were flogged for minor offenses, or locked up."

Kids forced onto drugs

In Sierra Leone and in Liberia, the child-soldiers were deliberately put on drugs. According to a childcare worker: "The factions use both alcohol and drugs to control the kids. Children are given a mixture of cane juice (from sugar cane) and gunpowder which makes them high and is supposed to give them courage to go and fight at the front."

As another case worker explained: "Kids are often supplied with drugs; marijuana is the most common drug, but kids are given cocaine too, and cane juice and gunpowder, which can cause brain damage. Also the kids talk about being given 'bubbles,' a tablet that is apparently an amphetamine, an 'upper.' The theory apparently is that if a kid is intoxicated, he'll be braver—jump over his friend's body and keep shooting."

Thus, many of those who are to be disarmed in Sierra Leone are child-soldiers, who were often captured, forced to kill or be killed, torture or be tortured, and are now drug addicts. The disarming, treatment and rehabilitation, and re-training and schooling of these children is no mean mission, but an extraordinary task that Sierra Leone cannot do on its own, without massive help from the international community to make the peace permanent and to launch the reconstruction of this country.—*Linda de Hoyos*

It is hard to imagine what austerity conditions the IMF can place on Sierra Leone under the circumstances, but until such time as the government makes its pact with the IMF, there will be no debt relief for the country and no substantial funding from the industrialized countries.

Bonanza for the international drug mafia

On Nov. 10, *The Progress* newspaper reported that three Ukrainians had been arrested in Freetown after police had received a tip that the boat that they had landed at Quay 2 contained arms and ammunition for a possible invasion of the capital by the RUF. A week before, Spanish law enforcement officials had impounded a vessel containing arms bound for Sierra Leone on the coast of Las Palmers. "The impounded vessel was linked to a mafia ring in the Soviet Union," reported *The Progress*.

This little news item is but one piece in the mountain of evidence that at root, the war in Sierra Leone is not a civil war, but an invasion of Sierra Leone by international criminal forces—who have no loyalty to any country—with the RUF and the AFRC serving as an invading mercenary force.

The strongman for this mafia on the ground in West Africa is the current President of Liberia, Charles Taylor, whose 1989 invasion of Liberia from the Côte d'Ivoire launched the destabilization of the entire region. To the horror of most Liberians, the United States did not act to protect the Liberian government or its people, despite the long-standing historical ties between the two countries. But Taylor, who was backed also by Libya, was touted as one of the "new breed" of leaders during the 1994 Pan-African Congress that was held in Kampala, Uganda, under the aegis of London's premier warlord in East Africa, Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni.

Sankoh had helped Taylor take over Liberia, and in return Taylor has been backing the RUF operation in Sierra Leone since 1991.

According to multiple sources, the Taylor nexus is the channel for drugs from the cartels of Colombia into and through West Africa. As the CIA factbook on Liberia notes, Liberia is "increasingly a transshipment point for Southeast and Southwest Asian heroin and South American cocaine for the European and U.S. markets." All the cocaine in West Africa comes from *Colombia*, and the transshipment is run by the same *Russian mafias* that were linked to the vessel carrying arms to the RUF impounded by Spanish authorities.

According to an investigative article in the Oct. 16 *Washington Post*, the Sierra Leone war has also given mercenaries interlinked with the international drug trade a golden opportunity to boost their business. According to *Post* reporter James Rupert, a key person operating on behalf of the Charles Taylor-RUF operation against Sierra Leone is Fred Rindle, a former army intelligence officer of South Africa. Rindle had earlier helped supply Jonas Savimbi's Unita, and had trained RUF and Taylor forces in Liberia. Further, *Africa Confidential*, a London-based intelligence newsletter, reports that

Rindle is a former spokesman for the Afrikaner Weestandsbeweging. Rindle has gone in and out of Liberia since 1998, and, according to the *Post*, his hotel and travel accommodations are arranged by Charles Taylor, Jr. A Monrovia source told the *Post*, "On some trips, he has come with teams of South African soldiers and gone with them into the bush." Rindle evidently gets paid for his services in diamonds, exporting Sierra Leone diamonds gathered by the RUF through Liberia.

Because diamonds are impossible to trace, they are also a convenient currency for the international dope trade. *Africa Confidential* reports that Rindle's business partner is one Nico Sheffer, who was born in Ecuador and was once in business with the late Pablo Escobar, the Medellín, Colombia drug baron. According to the London intelligence newsletter, Sheffer played a key role in Taylor's 1997 election win.

The arms trade

Arms have been supplied to the Taylor-RUF nexus through a Ukrainian businessman, Leonid Minin, reports the *Post*, who operates a timber company in Liberia that is also dealing in arms and diamonds. An unnamed Ecomog source cited by Rupert reports that under the cover of his "Exotic Tropical Timber Enterprise," Minin runs trucks of arms to the RUF and its allies. "Their real business is diamonds and arms supply." Minin also operates a firm headquartered in Zug, Switzerland.

As can be expected, without loyalties to any nation or policy, the international mafia makes money from both sides of the war. A retired Israeli army officer, Yair Klein, was arrested by the Sierra Leone government in January on charges of fraud regarding the purchase of a helicopter from Belarus. Klein has been providing military training and matériel in Sierra Leone since 1996. In 1991, the Israeli government had convicted Klein of illegally selling arms and training to Colombian groups that the Colombian government described as fronts for the Medellín drug cartel.

The involvement of the British mercenary firm Sandline in arming the Sierra Leone government became a point of scandal in the British Parliament in 1998, as alleged British government involvement in the arrangement violated an arms embargo on Sierra Leone.

The *Washington Post* article also cited Zeev Morgenstern, of Rex Mining, who also agreed to arrange arms deliveries to the Sierra Leone government in exchange for franchises in the country's diamond mines.

In short, the people and government of Sierra Leone have been caught on the one side by drug-fueled gangs which use child-soldiers as their preferred cannon fodder, and on the other, by similar interests which seek to protect them from the RUF.

Meanwhile, Sierra Leone's diamonds flow out of the country through illicit channels to the major diamond center of Antwerp, Brussels, where their origin is untraceable.