

National Intelligence Council Project

CASE STUDY: INTERVENTION IN SIERRA LEONE

Kwaku Nuamah and I William Zartman

Sierra Leone is a case of state collapse, in which the conflicts of the 1990s were not an independent event but merely the work of the maggots on a dead body. Thus no intervention could have done anything more, at best, than removing the momentary parasites taking advantage of the situation. It would require a longer, deeper, and more sustained effort of the Sierra Leoneans, necessarily with help from the international community, to restore a functioning political, economic and social structure necessary to prevent a recurrence of conflict. At the same time, it is noteworthy that this internal conflict was not an ethnic conflict, despite some secondary ethnic ramifications.

The collapse of the Sierra Leonean state, already a weak creation of colonization and decolonization, took place under the long reign of Siaka Stevens (1968-85) and his All Peoples Congress (APC) drawing primarily on the interior Temne and Limba people from the northern part of the country, reacting against the previous predominance of the coastal Mende people from the south and east. Collapse was consummated under Stevens' handpicked, inept successor, Gen. Joseph Momoh, overthrown by dissatisfied junior officers led by Capt Valentine Strasser in April 1992. The main rebel groups operated under the name of the Revolutionary United Force (RUF), led by ex-cpl Foday Sankoh and Samuel Bokarie and operating with the active support of the rebel movement and then the government of Liberia under Charles Taylor. The rebellion expanded into neighboring countries and then wore down under the falling away of external and internal support.

The subsequent decade after the first coup saw a seesaw of controls over the capital, Freetown, and the rest of the country by various loyal and dissident military and rebel groups, interrupted in 1996 by the free and fair election of Ahmed Tajan Kabbah. Strasser's colleague Capt. Maada Bio took power in January 1996 to prevent Strasser from delaying a planned transition to elected. Bio re-launched negotiations with the rural rebellion and handed over power to Kabbah in March 1996. Kabbah continued negotiations begun by Bio and made substantial concessions to the rebels that paved the way for the Abidjan Agreement of November

1996. In the third attempt since the elections, junior officers led by Maj. Johnny Paul Koromah overthrew Kabbah in May 1997 and promptly made common cause with the rebels. Kabbah was restored to power ten months later, and again chased out of the capital for several months in early 1999, before being restored once again. During this period, a legitimate civilian government was in place (scarcely in power) only from the March 1996 elections until the May 1997 coup, from March 1998 until the end of the year, and again after the spring of 1999—four years.

External intervention to contain the conflict was practiced by three agents: the essentially Nigerian force of the Military Observer Group (ECOMOG) of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the United Nations Observer/Armed Mission in Sierra Leone (UNOMSIL/UNAMSIL), and the British Army. Three peace agreements were signed as a result: the Abidjan Accord of November 1996, the Conakry Peace Plan of October 1997, and the Lome Peace Agreement of July 1999. All failed. Rebellion, intervention, and state collapse all continue to cohabit in Sierra Leone.

I: Conflict

The tinder for the conflict began to gather under the Momoh regime when the government stopped paying salaries, notably to its school teachers and military (Hayward 1989; Luke & Reilly, 1989). Structures of authority disintegrated; unemployed youth wandered the streets of Freetown and the interior, and took to drugs and petty crime; and soldiers turned to brigandage. Disaffected soldiers were the political entrepreneurs who took the match to the tinder. The actual outbreak of the Sierra Leone conflict began as an offshoot of the Liberian civil war and evolved into a full-fledged internal conflict over power and resources with heavy regional undertones. The rebellion begun in March 1991 when ex-corporal Sankoh, formerly jailed for his participation in a coup against Stevens in 1971, led his rag-tag band of Sierra Leonean dissidents backed by Liberian fighters and mercenaries from Burkina Faso, to invade Sierra Leone from Liberia (Abdullah 1998; Koroma 1996). Sankoh had met Taylor of Liberia in the 1980s during guerrilla training in Libya; Taylor supported the RUF in order to force the Freetown government to change its Liberia policy, which included a contribution of 500 troops to ECOMOG, the use of Lungi airport as a base for ECOMOG operations, and provision of sanctuary for the United Liberation Movement of Liberia for Democracy (ULIMO), a group of

former Liberian President Samuel Doe's followers, as they opened a front against Taylor's rebellion from Sierra Leone.

Sankoh's stated aim was to fight the corruption of the Momoh regime. However, when Momoh was overthrown by his junior officers a year after the RUF rebellion broke out, the rebellion continued against the new government. 27-year-old Capt. Valentine Strasser (who promised to end war and restore economy within a short time) overthrew Momoh on April 29, 1992. This latest coup d'état prompted the use of force by ECOMOG and following talks in Conakry, Kabbah was restored to power several months later. Many different types of factors combined to aid the spread of the conflict and rendered it intractable. These can be grouped as contextual aspects related to state collapse, the dynamics of the conflict, and the nature of the conflict resolution efforts.

1. The context of state collapse

While state collapse is recognized as providing the basic opportunity that leaders and their followers seized to carry out the conflict, it also subdivided into a number of specific areas where the state no longer performed its core functions, leaving them up for grabs by diverse agencies. Not all these agencies were hostile to the state, but the fact that they performed state functions further weakened the state as much as did the rebellion itself. These functions include general order, territorial control, population control, control over armed forces, and provision of security.

A weak state system and economic decline hampered the government's ability to respond effectively to the rebellion. By the early 1990s, Sierra Leone's economy was in decline and plagued by official corruption that was generating mass discontent and political instability. Political uncertainty and economic decline undermined effective policy-making and diminished public confidence in the state's ability to secure its interests and lives. Coup plots were rife as Momoh's sole legal party struggled to negotiate a long delayed transition to a multiparty system. The state's security apparatus was also in complete shambles as wages failed to keep up with inflation or remained unpaid for weeks. Army morale continued to sink to new lows; soldiers began moonlighting as rebels and joined in looting and harassing the peasantry. The net effect was a government that had to turn to foreign actors for security assistance.

Involvement in the Liberian Civil War increased since 1991 until Sierra Leone became simply a theatre in that conflict, with little control over its own territory. Military units from

Nigeria and Guinea joined the Sierra Leone army in mid-1991 and helped to recapture several towns from the RUF. This infuriated Taylor who threatened attacks on Lungi airport and launched cross border raids in support of the rebels. Sierra Leonean troops responded with their own attacks on rebel bases inside Liberia. Sierra Leone by default had become a new front of the Liberian conflict and so by May 1992, the Nigerian and Guinean presence was transformed into a regular ECOMOG mission.

On the other side were ULIMO and other Doe-loyalists who had fled to Sierra Leone and joined in counter-offensive measures against Taylor's forces. The government's failure to exercise control over such elements provided an excuse for Taylor's retaliations that fuelled escalation and occasionally tipped the scales in the RUF's favor. ULIMO's attacks were sporadic and disrupted attempts to bring the conflict under control. Early efforts by ECOWAS to broker a peace agreement in 1991, for instance, were interrupted by ULIMO's forays into Liberia. The RUF then also used the foreign presence as an excuse for reneging on agreements reached with the government.

Refugees have had a complex effect on the conflict. As thousands of Liberian refugees fled to the eastern part of Sierra Leone, equal numbers of Sierra Leoneans fled into Guinea and Liberia. Refugee populations served as recruitment pools for the rebellion as well as adding to the economic hardships of the host communities. In Sierra Leone, the criss-crossing of refugees added to the fluidity of the crisis. Guinea became a new front in the conflict, as did several other states in the West Africa subregion that played host to Liberian and Sierra Leonean refugees, notably the Casamance dissidence in Senegal and neighboring Guinea-Bissau drew rebels of fortune from the Sierra Leonean conflict. Refugees attracted internal humanitarian aid workers whose presence invited hostage-taking by the RUF; the RUF also took peacekeepers hostage for use as leverage in negotiations. This strategy sometimes backfired when it occasioned the entry of other parties on the side of the government. The RUF also launched repeated attacks on the peasantry and took ordinary people (as well as non-military foreigners) hostage as a way of forcing the government to make concessions. Government compliance with such demands weakened it substantially, but non-compliance led to deadlocks and escalation in the conflict.

Privatization and alienation of security functions have been a specific result of state collapse. With the collapse of the army, the government increasingly relied on private and foreign security agencies for protection, many of which were also affiliated with mining firms.

These actors “privatized” the conflict and introduced the ethos of commercial profit seeking as a major current underlying the conflict. The government’s need to elicit the help of private security was exacerbated by two additional factors: the inadequacy of assistance received from ECOMOG and UNAMSIL, and the imposition of UN arms embargo on all parties to the conflict. The effectiveness of ECOMOG and UNAMSIL was hampered by the absence of a UN Security Council authorization to use force. The foreign forces also lacked adequate knowledge of the terrain as well as the capacity to deal with the guerrilla tactics employed so efficiently by the RUF. Fluctuations in numbers caused by periodic troop withdrawals by some contributors also meant that the peacekeepers were not a reliable security force for the Sierra Leonean government. Private security firms therefore had to be employed to supplement the peacekeepers and provide strategic training for the Sierra Leone army. The UN arms embargo, on the other hand, meant the Sierra Leonean government could not obtain the ammunition and weapons it needed to pursue the war and had to rely on private groups such as Executive Outcomes and Sandline International for arms shipments.

Private specialty groups have also taken over other state functions. The government needed to continue extracting whatever resources still available from the diamond-mining sector to finance its war operations. The RUF’s presence in some of the diamond regions posed a security problem which was resolved through cooperation with another category of private specialty entities willing to provide security for mining operations and to pay the government in cash or in kind for a role in the diamond fields. Groups such as Diamond Works and its subsidiary, Branch Energy, had to find their own security for mining operations in the Koindu area. Other commercial mining operations secured assistance from a wide array of private specialty groups (examples include British companies such as Lifeguard, Defense Systems Ltd, Sky Air, Occidental, and American companies such as Military Professional Resources Inc. [MPRI] and International Charters Inc.). Most of these commercial and security firms also had important connections with major players in the conflict and this further complicated the roles of those players in the search for a solution.

2. Conflict dynamics and escalation

The very dynamics of the conflict provide another element that contributed to its intractability and hampered the search for a negotiated settlement. As the conflict evolved, the

proliferation of parties on both sides and the RUF's resort to unconventional warfare thwarted efforts at resolution.

Proliferation of parties, particularly on the side of the government, characterizes the Sierra Leone conflict. Political instability fed uncertainty and often benefited the rebels who took the opportunity to form alliances with supporters of removed regimes. Sierra Leone had five different governments in the decade since the outbreak of violence. Each of the post-Momoh regimes came to power promising a swift end to the war and proceeded to reach out to the rebels with upgrades in offers that yield no corresponding dividends. The RUF also suffered its share of political uncertainties, so that it became difficult to know with whom to negotiate and on whom to rely for implementation of an agreement. A rift between Sankoh loyalists and followers of Sam Bockarie unsettled peace agreements in 1996, although it did little to weaken the RUF. Attempts in March 1997 to remove Sankoh (who had been detained in Nigeria) from the RUF leadership weakened negotiations but not the RUF. Such political uncertainties disrupt peace efforts, delay the implementation of agreements, and provide opportunities for escalation.

Use of unconventional tactics in the conflict frustrated the government army and its supporters, many of who lacked training and experience with guerrilla warfare. The RUF knew the terrain and on two occasions, late 1994 and late 1998, executed the same swing westward and then southward from their bases to the outskirts of Freetown. Well-planned guerrilla attacks also helped the RUF seize hundreds of pro-government peacekeepers and relief workers at will. In May 2000, they took about 500 UN peacekeepers hostage, and two months later, they seized another 233 peacekeepers (mainly from India) at Kailahun. As a precondition to negotiations with the Sierra Leonean government and British officials, the RUF demanded diplomatic recognition, armament and medical supplies from London as well as an end to British military assistance to the Strasser government. The RUF also seized eight foreign nationals and several local employees during attacks on mining installations owned by the Sierra Leone Ore and Metal CO and Sierra Rutile Ltd as well as seven catholic nuns (Italians & Brazilians) in the Kambia area. These and other hostages were used as leverage during talks brokered by the International Committee of the Red Cross. The RUF also often demanded in exchange for releasing its hostages, the withdrawal of all foreign troops from Sierra Leone.

3. Conflict Resolution Efforts

Resolution efforts were also misguided in important aspects. Inadequate diagnosis, inappropriate agreements, and the premature exit of peacekeepers undermined crucial dimensions of the peace efforts and contributed to prolonging the conflict.

Diagnosed as merely an extension of the Liberian conflict, the Sierra Leone conflict was not understood in terms of its own causes and dynamics. While the conflict may have begun, in part, as an auxiliary of the Liberian war, it took hold because of the ready context within Sierra Leone and it soon became a full-fledge civil war with its own dynamics and issues. The international community, however, continued to perceive it as a subset of Liberia until the mid-1990s. As a result Sierra Leone did not receive any substantial international attention until much later when the conflict had grown in scope and become complicated and intractable. International interventions were therefore late in coming and often inadequate.

Unbalanced agreements have been the result of all mediation attempts. The conflict has witnessed three major attempts at finding a negotiated settlement. Each was based on the principles of power sharing, amnesty for the RUF, and removal of foreign forces in the conflict. The first, the Abidjan Peace Agreement of November 1996, was brokered by President Henri Konan Bedie of Cote d'Ivoire with the governments of Bio and Kabbah. It required the Sierra Leonean government to remove all foreign troops assisting it in the war. Government compliance weakened it so much that the RUF could afford to renege on its promised demobilization. The Abidjan “bad deal” cost Kabbah the presidency six months later when Johnny Paul Kromah exploited its weak position to launch a successful coup d’etat that eventually drew escalation from ECOMOG.

The second Agreement, the Conakry Peace Plan of October 1997, was negotiated by ECOWAS to restore the Kabbah presidency, but it ended up granting legitimacy to the Koromah junta that had gone into partnership with the RUF. After Conakry, the junta began asserting itself as a legitimate government with a mandate to rule till the 22 April 1998 handover date when president Kabbah was to return to Freetown. It accumulated weapons and exhibited signs of non-compliance with the terms of the agreement. Eventually ECOMOG had to employ force to expel them from Freetown.

The third accord, the Lome Peace Agreement of July 1999, made considerable power-sharing concessions to the RUF which made the government very unpopular among ordinary

Sierra Leoneans who expected the Foday Sankoh to be put on trial for crimes against humanity. Lome also created the false impression that the conflict's end was near and therefore hastened the withdrawal of some ECOMOG contingents that, once again, strengthened the rebels and encouraged non-compliance. The agreement's endorsement by US Secretary of State Madelaine Albright was an additional blow to government legitimacy and prospects.

Premature troop withdrawals and announcements of withdrawals also prolonged the conflict by signaling to the RUF that depreciation in government capacity was near. This discouraged the rebels from making concessions and instead fuelled sporadic attacks aimed at recovering lost ground. Nigerian president Abdulsalami Abubakar's January 1999 announcement of an imminent withdrawal of his country's troops, for instance, strengthened the RUF's bargaining position at the Lome talks in May of the same year. Though the Nigerian pullout was delayed indefinitely, the announcement restored the RUF's hope of a unilateral victory and therefore reduced the incentive for them to comply with the terms of Lome. The withdrawal of the Indian contingent from UNAMSIL in August 2000 was yet another blow to the effort to end the conflict.

II: Interventions

Each of the three major intervention missions had its strengths and weaknesses. None could have been expected to end the conflict, which is deeply embedded in Sierra Leonean society. Any of them could have been expected to bring the military situation under control, although stopping there and confusing military control for conflict end would guarantee the reoccurrence of the conflict. As it is, none of them even brought the military conflict fully under control. The reasons are as political as they are military, but on the military side, appropriate numbers, tactics, rules of engagement, and simple command and control over one's own troops were lacking at crucial times, and sometimes throughout the entire operation. On the political side, appropriate mission, financing, commitment, and strategy were required, plus a willingness to engage in a longterm, well conceived plan to revive the Sierra Leonean economy, society and state.

1. The ECOMOG Intervention

The ECOMOG intervention in Sierra Leone evolved out of ECOWAS' role in neighboring Liberia and also out of previous commitments of two key member states--Nigeria and Guinea--to assist the government of Sierra Leone in its fight against the RUF rebels. Sierra Leone's active role in ECOMOG brought retaliation from the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) with cross border raids and support for the rebels. ECOMOG's initial deployment along the Sierra Leone-Liberia border in May 1992 was therefore prompted by the dual need to assist the Sierra Leone government hold off RUF attacks and to combat NPFL gun-running and offensives in the border region. Deployment came at the beginning of violent conflict. The ECOMOG intervention involved troops from ECOWAS members, but almost all of them were Nigerian. By March 1998, its strength stood at 10,000 with Nigeria contributing the largest contingent. The troops were backed occasionally by air force and naval units of member states. .

The intervention has undergone several metamorphoses as peacekeepers, combatants, and peace enforcers. Unlike the UN intervention, ECOMOG was unambiguous in its support for the government of Sierra Leone and willfully used force to compel the rebels to comply with agreements. Throughout the several phases, ECOMOG's principal goal remained the restoration of peace and stability to Sierra Leone, a key supporter of Nigeria's leadership role in ECOWAS and key contributor to the peace enforcement mission in Liberia. That goal has remained largely elusive even though major aspects have been realized. The intervention did succeed in restoring president Kabbah to power, as the first step is restoring the state, through the application of force when negotiations and sanctions proved ineffective. ECOMOG's other goal was to help the state of Sierra Leone develop its own security apparatus sufficiently to manage the peace and provide a stable environment for national reconstruction efforts. This long-term goal has also not been realized. The intervention has also not reduced the possibility of future conflicts in Sierra Leone.

The ECOMOG intervention could have been improved in many ways. The early mistakes were associated with ECOMOG performance in Liberia, where ECOMOG came in in order to save Doe and beat Taylor, rather than to restore the state that Doe had destroyed. Thus, an early operation in 1990-91 to bring Taylor to power under controlled conditions, before his rebellion had broken down into internecine warfare and his forces had disintegrated into child soldiering and moneymaking, would have precluded the creation of a rebellion in neighboring Sierra Leone. Thereafter, an early use of force against the rebels could have averted some of the

escalations that followed the Strasser coup. ECOMOG could also have benefited from proper coordination and better management. Many of its offensive missions were carried out by the Nigerians, whose determination to use force whenever possible was not evenly matched by other contingents. In some instances, poor strategy cost the mission dearly. The 2 June 1997 standoff with the RUF-backed Koromah Junta at the Mammy Yoko Hotel, for instance, resulted in the capture of ECOMOG troops and led to civilian casualties in neighboring Murray township.

The central role played by Nigeria, a country whose terrible human rights record was attracting international condemnation and sanctions, also hurt ECOMOG'S ability to attract much needed international financial support. It also prevented Britain, a key actor in the Sierra Leone situation, from working together with ECOMOG in the search for a negotiated settlement. Had the US, for instance, provided financial support for the essentially Nigerian force of ECOMOG at the end of 1998, the return of the AFRC/RUF and the pressure for a Lome Agreement would have been avoided. On the other hand, ECOMOG depended on Nigeria, the only country willing to finance and man the operation. The intervention could have benefited from a joint-leadership arrangement involving a neutral state such as Senegal or Mali. Such an arrangement could have enhanced ECOMOG's credibility while allowing Nigeria to play its dominant military role, although it would have posed major problems of coordination and command since the two armies were based on different colonial military systems and different languages.

The ECOMOG mission was essentially military. ECOWAS members assumed state sovereignty and reckoned that when the rebellion was suppressed, a full and effective state would remain; to question this assumption would have been to question their own existence. This assumption underlay the one effective accomplishment of the ECOMOG intervention, the 1996 presidential election. ECOMOG offered the rebels several opportunities to concede peacefully and even held back to give peace agreements --such as Conakry and Lome that "rewarded" the rebels--a chance to succeed. The rebels continually reneged on the agreements, forcing ECOMOG to continue the use of force as the primary mode of transforming the conflict. That strategy did not always work well but when it did work, it forced the rebels to comply and contributed toward the search for peace.

The ECOMOG intervention had no credible exit plans. It was initially conceived as a mission--creep from Liberia that would cease when that conflict was resolved. However the

Sierra Leone problem grew in scope and transcended the Liberian war. ECOMOG's exit therefore became linked to successful resolution of the war. This was an untenable situation for several contributing states that faced financial crisis and security problems of their own. The largest and wealthiest contributor, Nigeria, announced its intent to withdraw from the intervention on the eve of Lome, before negotiations were completed or the conflict was over. That announcement was prompted by rising costs and a transition to democratic governance in Nigeria following the sudden death of Sani Abacha, the dictator who had kept Nigeria in Sierra Leone and Liberia for several years. In the end the Nigerians delayed their exit, however the cost of the intervention forced them to seek a partnership with the United Nations intervention that had had an appalling record in Sierra Leone.

2. The UN Intervention

The United Nations Observer Mission in Sierra Leone (UNOMSIL/ UNAMSIL) was first established by UNSC resolution 1181 of 13 July 1998 as a disarmament monitoring force of 70 military observers for an initial period of six months. Its deployment was prompted by optimism that followed the successful expulsion of the Johnny Paul Koromah/RUF junta from Freetown by ECOMOG and the restoration of the Kabbah regime. The intervention was to monitor ECOMOG's efforts to disarm the RUF combatants and to help restructure the government's security forces. It also hoped to document reports of on-going atrocities and human rights abuses committed against civilians by both ECOMOG and the rebels. The mission failed to accomplish any of its goals and was hurriedly evacuated when the RUF re-launched its offensive to retake Freetown. Only the Special Representative and the Chief Military Observer remained in the country. However on the eve of the Lome Talks, the UN agreed to station some 210¹ military observers in the country upon the request of the government.

The second wave of UN presence (UNAMSIL) was authorized by UNSC resolution 1270 of 22 October 1999 under Chapter VII following the "success" of Lome, when both parties had agreed to a ceasefire in order for the rebels to disarm. It was prompted by Nigerian announcements of an impending withdrawal from Sierra Leone, as Sierra Leone and ECOWAS

¹ As of 30 July 1999, there were only 49 military observers and 2 troops, supported by a 2-person medical team. The civilian component of UNOMSIL as of 4 June 1999 was 29 international civilian personnel and 24 locally recruited staff (UNOMSIL website).

requested an increased role by the UN to ensure that all parties fulfill the terms agreed upon at Lome. It was therefore perceived as a post-conflict monitoring mission. The RUF favored a UN presence because it did not trust Nigeria and ECOMOG to be impartial in the execution of the intervention mandate. However, sporadic violence continued and led to a quick abandonment of several of the terms agreed at Lome. The consequences for the UN were dire as the Mission's troops became prime targets for abduction by the rebel alliance. Key contributing parties withdrew their troops causing the mission great embarrassment and limiting its effectiveness. This second UN intervention involved a much larger force of 6,000 troops consisting of six infantry battalions and a helicopter-borne rapid reaction force, half of the troops coming from ECOWAS (again, mainly Nigeria) and the rest from India, Kenya and Zambia.

The principal goal of UNAMSIL was to ensure that all parties adhered to the terms of the Lome Agreement. Towards this, it planned to monitor the disarmament process, facilitate the resettlement of Sierra Leonean refugees in Guinea and Liberia, and assist the government to develop its security apparatus. The intervention also investigated human rights abuses committed by both government loyalists and the rebel alliance. On a less formal basis, the intervention hoped to facilitate further talks on the power sharing deal agreed upon in Lome. In the end it spent most of its resources negotiating the release of its own troops taken hostage by the RUF.

The greatest improvements would have required a different set of rules of engagement appropriate to the situation. The UN did not authorize the intervention to use force in its operation, even though it was established under Chapter VII. It was also concerned about cooperating too closely with ECOMOG troops who were considered as being biased towards the government (Alao 1998). These were issues that limited the effectiveness of UNAMSIL. It is likely that a proper identification of the rebels as the villains in the conflict could have helped to authorize an intervention whose sole purpose was to help the legitimate and democratically elected government of Sierra Leone regain control of its territory and population, restore its state, and end the rebel insurgency. After the UNOMSIL debacle at the end of 1998 and the authorization of UNAMSIL in 1999, the UN should also have authorized a change in mandate to peace enforcement. Such a move could have averted the embarrassing episodes of hostage-taking that continue to plague the mission.

The UN intervention in Sierra Leone was instrumental in legitimizing the Lome Agreement that endorsed the RUF as a partner in government. That agreement was largely unpopular among civil society as it banned on-going efforts to put the RUF leadership on trial for human rights violations. The presence of UNAMSIL, however, facilitated the repatriation of some refugees and helped the government's effort to raise funds for reconstruction. Despite its ineffectiveness as a military force, the intervention helped bring much needed credibility to the peace process. Unfortunately that process was not used to end the crisis in Sierra Leone. The first UN intervention had a clear exit plan. It was mandated for a period of six months subject to review as necessary. When the conflict intensified to a point where the intervention considered its mandate untenable, it quickly withdrew. The second installment, on the other hand, entered with an open-ended commitment to monitor the implementation of the Lome Agreement. The UN Security Council did not modify its rules of engagement even as its forces came under persistent RUF attack. Contributing states such as India therefore withdrew their troops when they perceived the intervention as unhelpful to their interests. Such unilateral withdrawals hurt the overall purposes of the mission, although it was the only way contributing states could exit the process in the absence a general UN policy on collective exit.

The mission's principal goal of facilitating the implementation of the Lome Agreement was largely unattained. This is due to its ineffectiveness and the government's continued weakness in the face of RUF atrocities. The disarmament process agreed upon in Lome is yet to be completed and there are indications that the RUF will continue to violate the terms of the accord as long as the UN intervention abjures the use of force in response to attacks on its personnel.

3. The British Intervention

The British intervention—"Operation Palliser"--was triggered by the "disappearance" of 500 United Nations Peacekeepers in Sierra Leone. The withdrawal of ECOMOG troops in late April 2000 created a huge security vacuum that United Nations peacekeepers under force commander Vijay Jetley of India were unable to fill. The RUF exploited the situation to escalate its attacks on the UNAMSIL. 500 UN troops were taken prisoner by the RUF in May, prompting the UK to dispatch a "rescue" force to the country. The British deployment came in the aftermath of the major clashes of the war and as Liberia, a major backer of the RUF, was

seeking international legitimacy and therefore had become less visible as a threat. The presence of the United Nations force (UNAMSIL) also eased the British entry by helping to legitimize the intervention. The intervention comprised 800 paratroopers, with strong air force and naval support.

The British intervention sought to realize several immediate and long-term goals. In the short term, the mission sought to reverse RUF gains and change the conflict structure in favor of pro-government forces. To accomplish this, it launched an operation to rescue the 500 "missing" United Nations peacekeepers and also to repel the imminent RUF capture of Waterloo and possibly Freetown. To save Freetown, troops were dispatched to secure the local airport and then deployed throughout the capital and its environs as a buffer to the RUF offensive. The long-term goals were geared toward capacity building assistance to help pro-government forces consolidate the gains of peace and security. To this end, the British troops provided technical training and assistance to the Sierra Leone army that had been in complete disarray following the sudden death of its Nigerian Chief of Staff, Gen Maxwell Kobo, in April 2000. British experts also assisted the UN in tactical planning and strategic deployments as well as with logistics such as helicopters to transport Jordanian peacekeepers to defensive positions.

Earlier deployments to help ECOMOG and UNAMSIL could have averted some of the more dangerous dynamics that necessitated the British entry in May 2000. There were several occasions where British intervention could have deterred the RUF from employing abductions as a concession-seeking tool. In January 1995, the RUF seized several employees (including 8 foreign nationals) during its capture of the mining installations of the Sierra Leone Ore and Metal CO and Sierra Rutile Ltd. The rebels also captured seven Italian and Brazilian nuns and several Sierra Leoneans in a later raid on Kambia. British intervention as in May 2000 could have achieved similar goals at that stage of the conflict. Another point where a British presence could have positively impacted conflict dynamics is February 1997 when the Kabbah government was most vulnerable after sending home all mercenaries in fulfillment of RUF conditions for disarmament. Under the terms of the agreement, the RUF was ready to accept foreign observers to monitor its disarmament exercise. The British mission could have constituted the core of such an international presence and help raise the cost of defection for the RUF. As it turned out, the RUF failed to disarm and continued to violate the peace agreement leading to newer levels of escalation on both sides. When UN troops were first deployed, on 22

October 1992, a British intervention could have altered the negative trends of the conflict. Since the first battalions of Kenyan and Indian troops were largely unprepared for the task bequeathed them by the withdrawing ECOWAS troops, a British presence could have fortified their strategic operations and helped the UN better handle escalations by the RUF, which demanded that the UN pay for surrendered arms. This was also a period when Foday Sankoh's grip on the RUF began to weaken and so a better equipped unit such as a British intervention could have hastened a break up of the RUF and hastened the demise of the rebellion.

The British mission was short-lived and geared toward the accomplishment of relatively limited goals that gave a much-needed boost to government forces but nevertheless produced little lasting effect. Its capacity development program was crucial to the emergence of UNAMSIL as a credible force in Sierra Leone; however longstanding operational difficulties as well as the UN's reluctance to authorize the use of force, robbed the UN mission of opportunities to reverse RUF gains in the conflict. The military and non-military balance remained constant over the period of intervention even though the intervention evolved into a technical support group later and its size was drastically reduced to 251 members

It is certain that the British originally intended the intervention to be a “rescue mission”. It was supposed to be a short, precise trouble-shooting mission that would avoid mission creep, deliver quickly, and exit as soon as possible. However events on the ground convinced the British to tackle capacity building as a way of ensuring that their exit would not create an imbalance similar the one created by the ECOWAS disengagement.

The immediate goals were better defined and hence easier to achieve than the long-term goals. As a direct result of the intervention, the RUF was forced to release the 500 UN hostages. The British impact was felt again, in late August 2000 when the West Side Boys (a pro-AFRC faction originally supportive of the government) abducted eleven British soldiers and a Sierra Leonean as leverage for the release of their leader. The British troops intervened to secure their release just as the United Nations was dealt a heavy blow by India’s announcement of a pullout. British assistance was also directly responsible for the successful deployment of the Jordanian contingent in Sierra Leone. Without their helicopters and operational cover, the Jordanian troops could have become stranded or restricted to non-contested terrain while the RUF continue to devastate the diamond-rich northwest.

In terms of long-term goals, the impact of the British intervention was quite muted, above all because of the advanced stage of disrepair into which the government army had fallen before the intervention. Poor training and lack of adequate equipment was exacerbated by petty quarrels among the ranks and with allies such as the Kamajor militias. British capacity-building effort yielded better results for UNAMSIL, which became more professional and superbly handled the rescue of 233 peacekeepers (mainly from India) held hostage by RUF in Kailahun soon after the British intervention.

III: Conclusions

The conflict in Sierra Leone has dropped in intensity in 2001, for a number of different reasons mainly unrelated to the interventions themselves. RUF members have accepted to join programs of Disarmament, Demobilization, Resettlement and Rehabilitation (DDRR), at least in the first phase, although there is still little economy into which to integrate. The RUF has lost much of its appeal as its various experiences in Freetown and in the countryside alike have shown it to have no goal, no program, and no governing ability. Under international pressure, Taylor has pulled back Liberian support; the evolution toward collapse in neighboring Ivory Coast also reduced support for Liberia and introduced distracting complications as the forces of Gen. Guei, reputedly close to Taylor, predominated in the western part of the country bordering on Liberia.

There are many lessons from the Sierra Leone case of multiple interventions. The first double lesson is that military intervention is not enough to end conflict whose basic cause is state collapse, but that military intervention is a necessary ingredient in engaging the road to conflict's end. The conflict began in the failure of governance, the dissolution of the economy, and the breakdown of the social tissue in Sierra Leone, and will only end when these elements are restored. That is a statement of shocking realism, and while it may sound like a counsel of perfection in an imperfect world, it does stand as a guideline for the sustained, broadbased, committed efforts needed to restore Sierra Leone. Violent conflict, even in the outrageous form practiced by the RUF, is a symptom of a deeper malaise.

If such conditions are not dealt with, the cancer in the region, only in remission, will again emerge to eat away at the countries around it. One cannot isolate Sierra Leone and tow it out to sea; it is part of a regional rot and, to broaden the challenge even further, needs to be handled in its context. As seen, early and late the interventions needed to be conducted in relation to the Liberian conflict and its aftermath, and as the conflict continued, it had its own spillover into Guinea and its secondary effects on Guinea-Bissau and Senegal. The latter is not an object of control measures, but the Guinean extension poses its own Sierra Leonean-type problems: Reinforcement of the Guinean military reinforces the autocratic tendencies of Guinean president Lansana Conte and creates conditions for a similar type of rebellion in Guinea, a state on the way to its own form of collapse.

On the other hand, the military intervention is an important element in the process of bringing the conflict under control. When the RUF arose, it was necessary to take adequate measures to stop it in its tracks. These measures would have been best taken by the regional organization or a single country acting in its name, and secondarily by a UN operation (squarely under Chapter VII, not shakily so or under Chapter VI), but in fact it took a British intervention to show the necessary military commitment and centralized strategy and command. Appropriate measures should necessarily have begun in Liberia, in the context of the Liberian war, in early 1991 (Zartman 2001). The need for decisive military action continued in 1992 with a focussed strike against the RUF by ECOMOG early on; realistically, it need be noted that ECOMOG in 1992 was in deep trouble in Liberia and there was no Sierra Leonean army to rely on. Thereafter, there were moments, particularly after 1996 when the Liberian civil war was officially ended, in late 1998 and early 1999, and in early 2000, when ECOMOG or UNAMSIL needed to act as a unified military force with an enforcement mission and active rules of engagement. The longer one waits, the larger the force commitment required.

The Sierra Leone experience raises enormous questions about the non-military side of the conflict management operation. Conflict management “doctrine” indicates that one can only end a conflict by negotiating with one’s enemy and that any party to the problem must be a party to the solution. Yet there are limits, if not on the participants, at least on the conditions under which their participation can be envisaged. Some enemies are beyond the pale, incapable of making and holding an acceptable agreement (Stedman 2000). Which enemies is a judgment call, not easy to make: The deliberate atrocities of the RUF, whose hallmark was amputation,

made them appropriate objects of punishment, not power-sharing, but what about Renamo in Mozambique or UNITA in Angola Taylor's NPFL or for that matter either the Palestinians or the Israelis in the Middle East? It is too easy to qualify one's enemy as beyond the pale and not worthy of negotiation.

Suggestions for an answer to the conundrum come out of the Mozambican experience. Despite its vicious past, Renamo was not only a necessary participant in negotiations if the conflict was to be ended, but also an organization which had already made a good deal of progress from a guerrilla movement toward a political party when the negotiations started. As such, it was not only organizationally coherent but also began to see a stake in electoral participation and in transformation of the conflict to political means. No such indications were available from the RUF.

The other side of the answers return the analysis to the military situation. In cases where the enemy does not seem capable of transforming its struggle into a political contest by the rules, military control is necessary. As noted, this is not to be confused with elimination of the broader and deeper causes of the conflict, which if not treated will give rise to a new insurgent expression, but it does indicate that in some cases if any negotiation is to take place it will be between victors and vanquished, not equals.