

Greedy Elites, Dwindling Resources, Alienated Youths The Anatomy of Protracted Violence in Sierra Leone

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The war in Sierra Leone was ignited in March 1991 when a small band of rebels, supported by Liberian rebel Charles Taylor, attacked from Liberia. But it was underlying resentments *inside* Sierra Leone that turned this relatively small incursion into a conflict that displaced close to half the population.

All About Diamonds?

Sierra Leone's Permanent Representative to the UN, Ibrahim Kamara, told the UN Security Council in July 2000: »The root of the conflict is and remains diamonds, diamonds and diamonds«.

Problems in the diamond sector did indeed feed into the war – in at least four important ways. First, diamonds were an *incentive* for violence. This applied both to the RUF and to many government soldiers. Both groups quickly showed an interest in illegal diamond-mining. Whilst pitched battles in the war were relatively rare, those that did occur were often over diamond areas. Thousands of civilians were expelled from, and kept away from, diamond-rich areas.

Second, diamonds helped to *fund* the violence. The rebels of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) used diamonds to pay for arms, purchasing arms from government soldiers as well as outside the country. A number of traders benefited from rebel violence and seem also to have helped to fund it. The rebels' trading system – covering an area broadly in line with Taylor's vision of a »Greater Liberia« and including Sierra Leone's main diamond fields – provided an alternative to the tightly-controlled networks of patronage and trade that were based on Freetown, but also to the estimated seventeen unofficial diamond dealers who dominated pre-war diamond smuggling, much of it to Liberia.

Third, the diamond sector helped to fuel the war as a result of *frustrations* arising from the very unequal benefits accruing from diamond ex-

traction. Historically, most of the profits have accrued abroad. The Alluvial Diamond Mining Scheme set up in 1955 created the possibility of legal mining by local people, but in practice those who could afford the licenses and the necessary rudimentary equipment were primarily civil servants, chiefs, politicians and, most importantly, traders. These license-holders then engaged and equipped ordinary people to dig on a profit-sharing basis (Mukonoweshuro 1993, 187). Sierra Leone's Lebanese community was able to use its superior access to capital to dominate the new »native« mining sector. Siaka Stevens – who became Prime Minister briefly in 1967, again in 1968, and was President from 1971 to 1985 – was able to offer immunity for illegal digging to loyal supporters. Meanwhile, chiefs in the diamondiferous areas grew rich on the gems, benefiting from their ability to grant licenses and often reserving the best areas for themselves. Ruling house families tended to have ownership in land which they would then lease to others. These leases were often passed down on a hereditary basis, and ultimate ownership tended to remain with the ruling families, reinforcing their power (Fithen, 12).

Diamonds in some ways offered a temporary safety-valve for the frustrations of male youths in particular, who were frequently unable to find jobs, land, status or a wife within their own communities. Arguably, it was the diminution of readily-accessible diamond stocks – the absence more than the presence of diamonds – that eroded this safety-valve and intensified the frustrations of this marginalized group.

A fourth connection between the diamond sector and the conflict was the *low tax revenue* which the government was able to secure from diamond mining. Diamonds, being small and valuable, have always been a tempting proposition for smugglers. While the Government Diamond Office (GDO) had brought smuggling down in the 1960s by increasing the prices it paid, by contrast the management of Stevens' close associate Jamil Mohammed saw the GDO (part-owned by Jamil) being run for more short-term gain. It now bought diamonds cheaply and sold them dearly, whilst also undervaluing them when it came to assessing export taxes. Naturally, the low purchase price encouraged smuggling.

Before the conflict is presumed to be »all about diamonds«, however, four points are worth stressing. First, the very unequal benefits arising from diamond extraction and the inability of the state adequately to tax

this sector were part of a much wider set of problems affecting all commodities exported from Sierra Leone – notably a prevalence of highly unequal trading relationships and of underpaid, corruptible officials prepared to collude with smuggling and undervaluing of exports.

Second, the concentration of violence in the south and east – particularly early in the war – was linked not only to the presence of diamonds but also to the proximity of Liberia, from where the rebels entered. Many areas lacking diamonds became embroiled in violence as well.

Third, the frustrations of peacetime were much more complex than those arising only from the diamond sector. One recent NGO study concluded: »Contrary to popularly held views that ›the diamond issue‹ was the root cause of the war, more evidence points toward issues like corruption, poverty and bad governance, and the corresponding need for food security, justice, and the creation of democratic mechanisms capable of protecting the rights of ordinary citizens.« (Care International, 2002, 3). The NGO ActionAid has investigated local perceptions of the causes of the conflict across much of Sierra Leone. The verdict of people at Njagbuma Community, Bo, gives a good idea of the complexity of these causes, describing the roots of the rebel war as: »greed and jealousy, poor conditions of service for civil servants, poverty, corruption, centralization of opportunities, drug addiction, NGO involvement, unemployment (gun serves as a means of employment), political neglect.«.¹

In the fashionable emphasis on *greed* as a key cause of civil wars, it is easy to forget – or even dismiss as self-serving propaganda – underlying *grievances*. It is not unlikely that greed (and the willingness to use violence to acquire resources) is itself the result of grievances. These grievances reflect the mode of development in Sierra Leone, which under British rule was based on the extraction of unprocessed raw materials such as iron, diamonds, and a variety of agricultural products. Urban areas were largely centers for trade and administration, channeling raw materials out and manufactured goods in. Industry was scarce, as was any government stimulation for the rural economy. This pattern was not substantially altered after independence in 1961, when mining companies and fledgling industries continued to have poor linkages with the rest of the economy.

1. Njagbuma Community, Report on Youth in Crisis, Consultative Process, Bo, Southern Province, ActionAid – Sierra Leone/UNICEF/Conciliation Resources/Ministry of Youths, Education and Sports, June 1999 (consultations were 9–15 Dec 1998), p. 53.

A fourth reason to be skeptical about blaming all the conflict on diamonds (and related to this last point), is that diamonds in some ways offered a temporary safety-valve for the frustrations of male youths in particular, who were frequently unable to find jobs, land, status or a wife within their own communities. Arguably, it was the diminution of readily-accessible diamond stocks – the absence more than the presence of diamonds – that eroded this safety-valve and intensified the frustrations of this marginalized group.

Tensions Under One-Party Rule

At a political level, the undemocratic colonial system was followed (after a brief democratic hiatus) by almost two decades of what was effectively a one-party state under the All People's Congress (APC) from 1973 to the military coup of April 1992. Sierra Leone's extractive economy and the corrupt and autocratic political system were mutually reinforcing. The weakness of agriculture and industry sharpened the desire for the fruits of office, whilst the undemocratic and corrupt political system largely stymied any attempt at developing the country's potential for genuine economic development.

The state presiding over Sierra Leone's underdeveloped economy lacked – and continues to lack – the ability to suppress illegal economic activity or to harness the country's abundant resources for a sustained project of development. In effect, the central government has been caught in a classic dilemma: it has lacked the resources to fund a disciplined bureaucracy; and lacking a disciplined bureaucracy, it has been unable to acquire these resources. Such a state has inevitably lacked a good deal of legitimacy in the eyes of its citizens. An impoverished state was to prove as ineffective in suppressing rebellion as it had been in suppressing smuggling.

Whilst President Stevens built up his personal fortune and power-base through the clever use of patronage and intimidation in the 1970s and 80s, his mineral-rich and fertile country remained one of the poorest in the world.

The Chieftaincy System

Colonial rule did not see the establishment of a strong state with rigid bureaucratic lines of command. In line with the British colonial tradition of

indirect rule, the powers of the most important chiefs, known as Paramount Chiefs, were increased. The British made the chieftaincy a lifetime and inheritable position, whilst assisting in the suppression of local rivals, and reducing the option of secession from a chiefdom or of withholding payments or compulsory labor from a chief. Paramount Chiefs could make significant private gains from their office: for example, they were able to divert some of the colonial government's house tax into their own pockets.

The very significant economic rewards attached to the Paramount Chieftaincy – and the shortage of alternative routes to wealth – encouraged intense competition for the office, notably among rival »ruling families«. Chiefs made considerable efforts to capture agricultural development programs that might bring the threat of alternative sources of loans and patronage (Cartwright, 1978, 150).

Discontent at chiefs' abuses became common, often centering on excessive cash levies, unpopular land allocations, and the punishment of dissenters. Forced labor was another source of resentment. Particularly among the Mende of the south, acts of »rebellion« were often linked to ruling family rivalries, divisions that tended to cut across those of »class« or age. These rivalries proved an important factor in the 1990s rebellion. In the north, discontent was generally more »populist« and revolts could be directed against the ruling elites as a whole, as happened in 1955–56. Still, as Cartwright (1978, 129) observes, »...while small farmers might grumble about the chiefdom government's impositions, they would find it hard to conceive of a universe in which a different system of rule existed.«

The chieftaincy system carried powerful potential for discontent. Unwritten rights seem to have been perceived as particularly insecure when the chiefly guarantor was a »stranger« appointed by central government. For central government, the chieftaincy system has been a powerful instrument of control. Fanthorpe, Jay and Kamara (2002, 15–16) note: »Once you are assured of the loyalty of the chiefs, responsibility towards the rural populace can be abrogated except for carefully targeted patrimonial distributions at election time. It is an equally rational strategy for an unscrupulous individual once assured of central government patronage (or indifference) to exploit legitimately-won chiefdom office for personal gain. Even a government with good intentions might balk at the hugely expensive and politically fraught task of introducing a more modern and democratic system of local government – especially in the aftermath of a

destructive civil war that places a premium on the rapid re-establishment of political control over the countryside.«

Stevens made efforts to centralize decisions on licenses for diamond digging, increasing chiefs' dependence on the support of his ruling APC (All People's Congress) party. This tended to promote a situation where many chiefs lacked strong support within their chiefdoms.

With the country's population rising rapidly and perhaps fifty percent of the population under twenty years by the turn of the twenty-first century, significant numbers of younger people and women of all ages were unable to gain access to the trappings that followed from and implied full membership of a local community – notably land and the right to vote in chieftaincy councilor elections.

Ethnic and Regional Tensions

Sierra Leone's war has not been a war between ethnic groups; even so, ethnic tensions have contributed significantly to shaping the violence.

Historically, an important ethnic distinction in Sierra Leone has been between the Creoles of Freetown (usually literate, and dominant in the colonial civil service) and the other groups upcountry. The Creoles are descendants of freed slaves or of people captured by the British when they were being transported for use as slaves. These people had been resettled in 1787 on land bought for them in Freetown. Though the importance of the so-called »Creole/native« distinction has waned somewhat, it continues to matter and to weaken the sense of shared »nationhood« in the country. Freetown has been widely seen as indifferent to suffering upcountry, both before and during the war, with corruption at elections seen as feeding into this indifference.

Perhaps of greater importance are Mende-Temne tensions. With the advent of elections in independent Sierra Leone, appeals to ethnicity became one of the easiest ways to recruit supporters. The Mende were the dominant force in the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP), and the APC party drew major support from the Temne. While the SLPP had tended to politicize and ethnicize the army in favor of the Mende, under the APC northerners (notably the small Limba ethnic group) were granted a disproportionate number of senior positions in the army. By the time that Stevens' appointed successor Joseph Momoh was eventually overthrown in 1992, the officer corps of the army consisted almost entirely of northerners (Kandeh, 1999, 362).

During the war, the formation of their civil defense groups reflected Mende perceptions of abandonment by Freetown and indeed of abuses meted out by an army that was seen as northern-dominated. But as the civil defense forces became stronger and acquired government support under Kabbah's elected government in 1996–97, rebels were increasingly trying – in Fithen's words (235–6) – »to legitimate themselves as an ethnicized opposition to what is perceived as a Mende dominated resource-hegemony«. The elections of May 2002 emphasized that the North-South divide remains a serious one. The APC drew majority of its support from the North, while the SLPP swept the south and east.

The Security Sector

Factionalism within the military encouraged a series of coups between 1966 and 1971. Stevens, having himself been temporarily toppled in a coup in 1967, tried to prevent a recurrence by keeping the army weak with a largely ceremonial role. Arms supplies were kept in a depot, away from an often restless rank-and-file. In 1973 the so-called Special Security Division (SSD) was created, essentially a private security force that was built up as a means of intimidating opponents and as a counter to the regular army. Together with more informally-recruited APC »thugs« the SSD intimidated voters as well as dissident politicians. The SSD also terrorized those who protested against the APC government, such as Fourah Bay College students in 1977. Unlike the regular army, the SSD were usually armed. This use of violence by politicians set a dangerous example that was to be followed by youths with a vengeance, most notably in the civil war.

While educational and health services were allowed to decline and long-term development was neglected, the state continued to give priority to maintaining the loyalty of its security services.

Once the SLPP had decided to withdraw from the 1973 elections due to widespread violence instigated by the APC, Sierra Leone became, in practice, a one-party state. Labor strikes and independent trades unions were outlawed. Student protests were suppressed and the press was heavily coerced. Stevens was adept at co-opting potential sources of opposition, for example by bringing labor leaders into parliament and by bringing army and police chiefs into the cabinet. He was also careful to provide lavishly

for senior officers in particular, and key officers were awarded lucrative contracts (Fyle, 1993, 5; Cox, 1976, 207–8).

In 1968 and 1969 troops were sent to Kono to support the police in their moves against illicit mining. This offered the advantage of keeping the army busy, and thereby perhaps distracting it from the ever-present danger of a coup. Van der Laan's assessment of these campaigns gives a foretaste of dynamics that proved important during and immediately before Sierra Leone's civil war: the campaigns, he wrote, »had a disastrous effect on the morale and discipline of the Police and Army personnel«. This was largely due to bribery by miners without permits (Van der Laan, 1975, 169). There was no notable reduction in illicit mining. The police force went into serious decline in the early seventies due to under-funding, growing nepotism, and politicization, with the inspector general of police becoming a politically active cabinet minister.

By the late 1980s, Stevens' tried-and-trusted policy of buying off the army with lavish allowances, good accommodation and other perks was becoming increasingly unaffordable. Whilst senior commanders continued to benefit from major perks, soldiers' salaries were often left unpaid.

Assuming the Presidency in 1987, Momoh tried to rein in smuggling. As part of his emergency measures, the army – traditionally confined to barracks – was given the power to raid private residences. However, the army again became drawn into profitable complicity with this illegal activity. Policing the borders under Momoh's emergency measures became a significant new source of revenue for the army and other state employees (Zack-Williams and Riley 1993, 97; Olukoshi 1994, 107). Indeed, smugglers even paid army officers to ride in their vehicles to ensure safe passage for smuggled goods.

The Judicial Sector

Problems with the legal system also appear to have fed into the conflict. Criminal libel laws included the expressed purpose of stifling dissent. The judiciary was weak, corrupt and highly politicized, and the poor in particular had no credible redress when wrongly accused. Prison conditions led to very high death rates. Significantly, rebel leader Foday Sankoh seems to have been deeply embittered by his period of confinement in Pademba Road prison. In 2002, a Joint DFID/World Bank Visit (6) reported that at present, the justice system »operates effectively for only a small urban elite. In the countryside where the majority of the population

resides, the formal justice sector in particular plays a marginal role; people have increasingly resorted to traditional and informal mechanisms for settling their disputes.«

Neo-Liberalism: Privatization, Devaluation and Reduced Subsidies

In the course of the 1970s and 1980s, the fashion of nationalization gave way to privatization. This was strongly encouraged by the World Bank and the IMF, who were able to exert a great deal of influence as a result of Sierra Leone's high international debts. The formal privatization of diamond mining from 1973 was followed by privatization of the import-export trade, of fisheries, agricultural marketing and banking in the 1980s.

World Bank and IMF criticisms of state interference in the economy had some justification. Paying low prices, government marketing boards had in effect been taking income from small farmers and using it for the benefit of urban groups, government employees and some large farmers. The licensed buying agents for the marketing boards were mostly Lebanese, and many did extremely well out of the system. Low prices for cash crops had the effect of encouraging the smuggling of cash crops, further depriving the treasury of revenue.

While neoliberalism is often presented as an alternative to state-based corruption, in Sierra Leone during the 1970s and especially 1980s the two tended to interact to the benefit of a small clique around the President and to the detriment of the broad mass of people.

However, privatization did not bring about an efficient and competitive market; nor did it create a market that could be effectively taxed by the state. Instead, Stevens augmented his own fortune and those of his key political allies, notably a small group of Lebanese, by engineering for himself and for them a key role in monopolistic private concerns, using government control over import/export licenses and over the allocation of foreign exchange to favor his own clients. In the 1980s, the privatization of agricultural marketing seems if anything to have pushed the sector further outside the formal, taxable economy. As with mineral production, privileged private companies with powerful political allies were able to avoid taxation while smuggling escalated (Bradbury, 1995, 22; Koroma, 1996, 73).

Prices for most of Sierra Leone's exports were falling, and export volumes were falling too. In these circumstances, Momoh approved harsher austerity measures to attract further IMF support. They included a drastic reduction in petrol and food subsidies. Those left out of the APC's cosy patronage system were now facing cuts in government spending on health and education as well as raging inflation. At the outset of the war in 1991, social spending was just fifteen per cent of the level a decade previously.

Devaluation was also boosting inflation, compounding the effects of falling food production and of monopolistic profits for those holding import licenses and hoarding goods. All this redoubled the importance of becoming – or remaining – a political »insider«, whilst deepening the resentment of those excluded from this circle.

In the face of a growing, and increasingly urban, population, food production per capita fell by more than ten per cent in the 1980s. To a large extent, this was due to the rise of diamond mining, which absorbed land and (more especially) labor.

Corruption

The practice of government officials colluding with businessmen to undervalue exports embraced the activities of multinational mining companies. For example, companies exporting very valuable rutile and bauxite deposits tended to evade taxes through alliances with political leaders and through manipulating figures on the quantity and value of exported minerals (Sesay, 1993, 300, 309; Cleeve, 1993).

Government officials, whose salaries were falling further and further behind inflation, were increasingly turning a blind eye to – and often participating in – smuggling. The head of the civil service operated a system of bribes for appointments and promotions. Kandeh describes this as a »neofeudalist formula« (Kandeh, 1999, 351). It mirrored a similar system in the army. Lucrative chieftaincies could also sometimes be bought.

Increased smuggling in the 1980s – and the widespread undervaluing of exports – seriously reduced state revenues from diamonds and other primary products. By the late 1980s, 95 per cent of Sierra Leone's diamond production were estimated to be smuggled out of country (Sesay, 1993, 293–4).

Of particular importance to Stevens' regime was the distribution of heavily-subsidized rice to the civil service, the army, the police, other se-

curity services, and also (via favored rice traders) to diamond-diggers working for Stevens' supporters. This was a major drain on the treasury, not least because the treasury had often bought the rice from commercial importers at prices favorable to the latter. As a consequence, there was even less money available for salaries, and this in turn increased reliance on Stevens' hand-outs. In effect, patronage provided selective exemption from IMF-sponsored austerity programs. While educational and health services were allowed to decline and long-term development was neglected, the state continued to give priority to maintaining the loyalty of its security services. Momoh continued Stevens' policy of supplying subsidized rice and accommodation plus regular salaries to the military – even at a time when other public servants were often not receiving their pay. How much of these benefits was actually received by junior ranks is not clear.

The Problems of Youth

The rebels used extreme coercion to secure recruits. They abducted children and forced many new recruits – adults and children – into atrocities against their own communities, apparently to remove the possibility that they could leave the ranks of the rebels and return home. Forcibly administering drugs was another key element in the rebels' regime of coercion (Amnesty International, 1995, 25). As the rebels' brutality and largely self-serving agendas alienated civilians, this increased their dependence on coercion to secure recruits and co-operation, in turn reinforcing popular opposition.

The rapid population growth in Sierra Leone had helped to create a relatively young population. At the same time, the increasingly parlous state of the economy meant that many of these young people faced a very bleak future. In a context of extreme poverty, rebels' distributions of stolen goods could be a powerful attraction, as could the promise (however illusory) of a better future. A range of informants spoke of the widespread anger among Sierra Leonean youth, particularly males, at their perceived low status in a society offering them few opportunities to advance or to perform a meaningful role.² Many young men were getting stuck in the position where they were not able to marry and as a result were unable for many years to shake off the status of »youth«.

2. Author's interviews.

Richards stresses that the RUF's violence – so far from being »mindless« or »random« – was an attempt to articulate and dramatize the grievances of those floundering at the margins of an exploitative world economy and a »patrimonial« state that was no longer able to extend even minimal services to much of the population. Much of the violence is seen by Richards as a plea for attention from those who felt they had been forgotten or marginalized.

Abdullah et al. suggest that the RUF drew its key support from marginal, or »lumpen«, youths, and that these can usefully be divided into three groups, each of which contributed to the rebellion. The first were the *urban marginals*. The origins of the RUF have been traced to the Freetown drop-outs, largely illiterate, who could be found as early as the 1940s. Many of these urban marginal youths worked as hired thugs for politicians in the late 1960s and 70s (and were unceremoniously abandoned by their patrons after election-time). With the economy in free fall, unemployment escalating, and health and education spending plummeting, some radical students – notably from Fourah Bay College – began to forge links with these groups, particularly after the APC's brutal clamp-down on student protest. Revolutionary students and other dissidents like the rebel leader Foday Sankoh himself received guerrilla training in Libya, where they seem to have struck an alliance with fellow trainee Charles Taylor of Liberia.

Increasingly, the Sierra Leonean military was an army of marginalized and often embittered youths.

A second group contributing to the RUF were the *socially-disconnected village youth*. Many had had some kind of dispute with local chiefs. Many had dropped out of school and some had rifts with their own families. Muana (comments in Abdullah et al, 1997, 206) says their lack of social obligations and responsibilities like children and wives helped give this group the energy and desire for »adventure«.

A third group of marginal youths were the *illicit miners* eking out a precarious existence in diamond-mining areas, vulnerable to official harassment, and often working for Mandingo or Lebanese traders. Closely linked with these young miners were youths from border areas who were involved in illegal logging, in smuggling to and from Liberia or in gold mining.

Land shortages were often a significant source of conflict, and joining the rebels sometimes provided the opportunity to seize land by force (Amnesty International 1992, 2–3). There was significant competition over land in some areas, and this competition had often been increased by diamond mining (partly because it reduced the availability of farming land), by soil erosion, by population growth, or some combination of the three. Land tenure disputes had become endemic in Mendeland, and were usually arbitrated by chiefs. Younger sons typically received the most distant land, or sometimes none at all. There was anger when those returning from education in Europe were allocated prime land, apparently in the hope that this would bring benefits to the chiefdom (Hardin, 1993, 51–53). The aid agency Care reported: »Youths in every Peace and Rights day event levied charges against the chiefs ranging from a long-standing history of the misappropriation of NGO inputs, to complaints of unjustifiable ›taxes‹ and heavy fines for negligible infractions, a severe lack of justice, marginalization, and dishonesty, deprivation of rights, favoritism and unfair representation in communities.« (Care International, 2002, 2). Fanthorpe suggests that therefore alarming numbers of people had apparently become »neither ›citizen‹ nor ›subject‹«, and that many may have sought an alternative »moral community« in the combat group (Fanthorpe, 2001, 385).

It does appear that violence could also bring the satisfaction of bonding with a set of comrades (e.g. Bangura's comments in Abdullah et al., 1997, 185). Just as it was frequently more lucrative, the life of a rebel was sometimes more interesting and exciting than the frustrations of a peacetime where many were, in Joanna Skelt's (1997, 21) words, »deceived by diamonds, bored by agriculture, and powerless against corrupt politicians and lack of opportunities«. Dropping out was not confined to a troublesome few: Wright (in Skelt, 1997, 22) reports that most children dropped out before completing primary school. By further disrupting education, the war produced increased numbers of drop-outs susceptible to joining the rebels.

Accounts of rebel atrocities suggest that some young men were interested in inflicting not only violence but also some kind of humiliation. This could include attempts to compel applause at atrocities against their own relatives – as if the rebels were forcing recognition their new role as »big men«. ³ Violence could reverse a loss of face, including that associ-

3. Author's interviews; Bradbury, 1995; Atkinson et al.

ated with dropping out of school. Particularly where violence was related to a desire for recognition, the condemnation and rejection following rebel cruelty only deepened the rebels' sense of alienation – a vicious circle that appears to have significantly deepened the violence in Sierra Leone. Conversely, the key to survival in the midst of rebels was often some kind of acceptance and recognition of the rebels, or at least the convincing appearance of it.⁴

Education

It seems clear that education was not only disrupted by the conflict; it also fed into the conflict. Significantly, educational establishments, including schools and colleges, were specifically targeted in the war. At the same time, in a manifestation of what Wright calls the rebels' »love-hate relationship« with education, rebel fighters undergoing rehabilitation made persistent demands for education and training (Wright, 1997, 26).

It is hard to be sure, but strongly-ingrained habits of deference and silence in Sierra Leone may only have added vehemence to an undisciplined explosion of violence as long-suppressed resentments burst to the surface. After fieldwork among the Kono people in the late-1980s, Kris Hardin observed (1993, 109): »... when emotions do break out they are often uncontrollable, testimony to the fact that people spend a great deal of energy trying to contain them ... when one of these outbursts begins, it is not unusual for someone to fall into a state of uncontrolled rage, striking out at anything or anyone within reach.«

Shrinking resources for education (including sports activities) appear to have encouraged many middle-class students into association with poorer alienated youths in the urban »potes« (meeting-places). Student protests often grew into more general urban protest as students formed alliances with disenfranchised youth beyond the campus. The students' hostility to the APC was reinforced by events in 1977 when APC thugs had broken up a formidable student protest that had threatened to bring down the government.

By 1987, less than thirty per cent of children of secondary school age were still in school. Education was a principal victim of a more general decline in social spending. Many schools and colleges were closed because of non-payment of salaries to teachers (Davies, 1996, 13). Naturally,

4. Author's interviews.

teachers' morale and status fell. When war broke out, large numbers of children had either dropped out of school altogether or were extremely disgruntled with the educational (as well as the employment) opportunities available to them.

In a detailed study of combatants and ex-combatants, Richards et al. stated: »It is worth noting that the largest single unemployed group in the 1989 study was made up of young males with incomplete secondary education. It is this group that feels most strongly the shortage of jobs in the urban formal sector, and has been drawn towards the war. The data reviewed above show that boys with Form 1–3 secondary education are the single largest group of irregular combatants. Finding viable employment opportunities for this modernized but frustrated group of young men is a key longer-term contribution to the peace process.« (Richards et al., 1996, section 4.2.1).

The »Sobels« Factor

Even early in the war, some observers harbored the suspicion that fomenting and prolonging the war was a higher priority than winning it. The two major political parties did not escape these suspicions. The APC, faced with growing pressure for a multi-party democracy, seems to have used the war as a pretext to avoid calling a general election, something that infuriated opposition leaders (Zack-Williams and Riley, 1997, 94). The war saw increased levels of repression of the political opposition. For its part, the SLPP is widely reported to have contained elements that gave support to the RUF in the early part of the war, notably by mobilizing young combatants in the Mende heartlands. Certainly, SLPP politicians had every reason to want to overturn the one-party rule of the APC. However, once the APC was overthrown, many SLPP politicians seem to have »cosied up« to the military regime, seeking a share of power and an advantageous position in any hand-over to civilian rule.

The 1992 coup which ushered in the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC) military regime was, in large part, a revolt against the neglect and abuse of front-line soldiers. Nepotism and corruption in the army hindered logistical support to those few units that did confront the rebels (Reno, 1996; Bradbury, 1995, 27). Pay was poor or non-existent. In effect, peacetime corruption was spilling over into wartime corruption as state funds were once again diverted from their designated end-use – this time apparently by the upper echelons of the military (Fyle, 1993, 11).

Frustrated at the lack of support and usually unable to pin down an illusive enemy, many soldiers turned to looting, to illegal mining, and to attacks on civilians. Further, many rank-and-file soldiers were being stirred up by discontented officers linked with the old regime. The National Provisional Ruling Council subverted an established system of army promotion based on patronage and age (Bradbury, 1995, 6). Many senior officers lost their privileges, and were now angry at their diminished status and rewards. Inciting more junior soldiers was facilitated by ties of loyalty many soldiers owed to those who had originally recruited them. Some ousted APC politicians also had powerful friends in the army.

While disciplining soldiers was never easy, the April 1992 coup removed any civilian checks on the military. Soldiers now had virtual immunity from legal prosecution and from dismissal or demotion. This climate of impunity interacted with the grievances of soldiers to encourage abuses against civilians.

Rogue soldiers became known as »sobels« – often glossed as »soldiers by day, rebels by night«. Accusing civilians of harboring rebels or of having »rebel sympathies« increasingly served as a convenient excuse for abuse and exploitation. Conveniently, most attacks could still be blamed on »the rebels«, and this was critical in providing soldiers with impunity for their actions. Further, while disciplining soldiers was never easy, the April 1992 coup removed any civilian checks on the military. Soldiers now had virtual immunity from legal prosecution and from dismissal or demotion. This climate of impunity interacted with the grievances of soldiers to encourage abuses against civilians. Extrajudicial killing of rebel suspects was common (Amnesty International, 1992, 3–II; 1995, 2). Since young men and teenagers were the object of particular suspicion, the incentive for them to join the rebels was particularly great. Those escaping the RUF also risked summary execution by government troops.

The army was expanded rapidly – under the APC and continuing under the NPRC. The expanded army proved highly volatile. Many of the boys and youths who were recruited had previously been living on the streets, notably in Freetown, and unemployed youths were heavily represented. Increasingly, the Sierra Leonean military was an army of marginalized and often embittered youths. Significantly, the army's social base was edging closer to that of the RUF, and this had important consequences for

the behavior of government soldiers. Upcountry many children were recruited as »irregular soldiers« – brought into the security outfits of rogue officers and given army uniforms and weapons but no state pay. They tended to loot and mine diamonds on behalf of these officers (Kandeh, 1999, 364). Sending this kind of rag-tag army into resource-rich areas to do battle with elusive rebels was a recipe for disaster.

For civilians, the geography of recruitment was another major problem. Soldiers' ties with local populations in the war zones were usually minimal, reflecting the focus on recruiting in Freetown, a degree of northern bias in army recruitment and promotion (Fyle, 1994, 130), and, finally, the use of ULIMO fighters (a militia group consisting mostly of Krahn and Mandingo refugees from Liberia).

The NPRC's apparent drive against corruption chimed nicely with the priorities of international financial institutions. For the most part, the international community kept quiet about government troops' abuses in 1991–95. Significant aid and debt relief was offered to a government that actually looked good according to International Financial Institutions' criteria. Inflation was brought under control by the NPRC – not least because soldiers funded by their own looting and mining were no more than a moderate drain on the treasury.

The failings of government troops meant civilians increasingly looked to their own devices for protection – and specifically to civil defense units that were usually formed around a core group of traditional hunters, or »kamajors«. With soldiers' abuses boosting support for civil defense initiatives, this support in turn seems to have intensified many soldiers' hostility towards civilians. Civil defense organizations aimed to check soldiers' as well as rebels' abuses, and constituted a growing threat to the military's economic control.

Among the problems identified by military representatives at civil-military relations conferences in June 1996 were that »civilians are ungrateful and unappreciative of their [soldiers'] sacrifice to defend them against the rebels«. A related complaint centered on the »generalised accusations of indiscipline, atrocities and collaboration with rebels that humiliated and demoralised them« (Pemagbi, 2000, 27). With both the rebels and the soldiers, a perception that civilians were »turning away« from them seems to have fed into anger towards civilians, and fear of civilian recriminations.⁵ Both the anger and the fear tended to deepen

5. Author's interviews.

anti-civilian sentiment and violence. Like Sankoh in the RUF, the NPRC leadership seem to have considered the educated as a threat. This seems to have been linked to a widespread sense of betrayal by the educated but corrupt APC elite.

Government soldiers collaborating with rebels had a mix of commercial and ideological motives for doing so. A common pattern was for government forces to leave arms and ammunition in a particular town for rebel groups (groups that could include restive or deserting soldiers); the »rebels« would then pick up the arms, extract loot from the townspeople (mostly in the form of cash), and then themselves retreat, perhaps also capturing some young people; at this point, the government forces would reoccupy the town and engage in their own looting, usually of property (which, as noted, the rebels found hard to dispose of, but soldiers could take away in trucks) as well as engaging in illegal mining.⁶ Because of the reduction in arms flows from Liberia, the RUF was in particular need of arms and ammunition from government forces just at the point when government forces were increasingly ill-disciplined and apparently ready to provide them.

With both the rebels and the soldiers, a perception that civilians were »turning away« from them seems to have fed into anger towards civilians, and fear of civilian recriminations.

Peace talks between the military and the rebels in 1996 were distastefully cordial, in the view of some observers. It seems that, in the face of democratic elections and a military onslaught from the kamajors and the South African private security company »Executive Outcomes«, the two factions no longer found it convenient to portray themselves as »enemies«, preferring now to make a public show of common interests, mutual goodwill, and the shared view (at least on the surface) that peace was imminent if only elections could be forestalled.

A peace agreement was made in Abidjan in November 1996, but it did not hold. Rebel leader Sankoh objected to the deployment of UN peacekeepers, and his objections were allowed to block the deployment. While demobilization and reconstruction were being poorly funded, the International Monetary Fund in particular pressured for a reduction in secu-

6. Author's interviews.

rity spending, both on the national army and on Executive Outcomes. This proved to be a dangerous combination of policies.

For their part, RUF fighters had been attacked by kamajors, even after the Abidjan agreement. Many observers felt that the agreement had been reached in bad faith by both sides. More generally, the kamajors were a threat to rebels' – and rogue soldiers' – systems of economic exploitation. Kamajor-army tensions were rising in early 1997 and were strongest in mineral-rich areas. Many soldiers complained that the Kabbah government did nothing if a soldier was attacked by a kamajor, but acted swiftly if the situation was reversed. Many combatants from the RUF, Civil Defense Forces and army rebels felt their leaders were giving them false information, and blamed them for keeping them in the dark about the Abidjan agreement and the Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) scheme.

May 1997 saw what was effectively a joint military coup between the RUF and large parts of the military. The army contingent of the coup-makers drew heavily on the »sobel« element. What had previously been a largely covert collaboration between the RUF and elements of the military was now coming out into the open. The coup saw a reversal of the military hierarchy, and significantly there was widespread humiliation of senior officers by lower ranks both during the coup and afterwards (Khobe, 1998, 61–62). Part of the aim of the May 1997 coup seems to have been to ensure immunity from prosecution for those responsible for years of abuse. Significantly, the coup ushered in a general attack on those institutions and individuals that might pose a threat of accountability (Gberie, 1997, 153), for example, the National Treasury and the Supreme Court building.

The international community imposed a variety of sanctions on the Koroma regime, and Kabbah was restored to power after the ECOMOG forces ejected the coupists from Freetown in 1998. But the rebels and sobels did not disappear. In October 1998, a military push towards Freetown began, apparently triggered by the executions of 24 soldiers linked to the coup and by the sentencing to death of RUF leader Foday Sankoh. The horrific attack on Freetown killed in excess of 6,000 people. Victims and witnesses said most of the atrocities in January 1999 were committed by people under the influence of alcohol and other drugs (Human Rights Watch, 1999, 20). It would be a mistake, however, to see this simply as a random, drug-fuelled anarchy. Drugs were often manipulated in a calculating way, as individuals tried to control the violence of others or to unleash (and perhaps subsequently tolerate) their own violence.

Although ECOMOG was eventually able to expel the attackers, it had proven unable to prevent the violence, and morale within the ECOMOG forces had suffered a major blow. In these circumstances, the international community pushed strongly for a peace agreement, and many – both inside and outside the country – were prepared to contemplate an amnesty and a role for the RUF in the government if it would mean peace. These were key features of the June 1999 controversial Lome peace agreement.

Once the kamajors began to acquire the backing of government, the behavior of many of them began to deteriorate. From around 1996, the kamajors were evolving into a more partisan force, sometimes carrying out violence against civilians, and increasingly shoring up the economic interests of a Mende elite through mining activities and support for the Mende-dominated Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP). A fundamental problem was that the social base of the kamajors had some similarities with that of the RUF and the Sierra Leonean army. More and more youths were being recruited and there was growing resentment at the uneven distribution of benefits that had been allocated to the kamajors by the government. The way this fed into abuse of civilians was reminiscent of processes in the army.

A continuing danger in Sierra Leone is that the RUF is blamed for all the problems in the country, including abuses by government forces. This was what allowed massive human rights abuses by the forces of the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC) under the guise of »rebels« in 1992–1996. It has continued to provide a climate of impunity for a number of other actors. One analyst said, revealingly, »The RUF is not so much a movement as an environment« – in other words, an environment in which a variety of groups could get away with various kinds of bad behavior. The idea that the RUF has only ever been a bunch of criminals, that everything can be blamed on Sankoh and the RUF, actually militates against the kind of introspection and constructive self-criticism which might produce a solution to the war and a degree of inoculation against future »RUFs«.

The Problems of »Reconstruction«

In the wake of a conflict, it is natural to focus on reconstruction. But two dangers stand out. The first is the danger of reconstructing the political

economy that led to the conflict in the first place. The second is that the war has produced changes in attitudes, notably in people's awareness of their rights. Thus, even those elements of the old system that were considered acceptable might not be today. Currently being reinvented and revived are several phenomena that fed into the conflict. These include: neoliberalism, continuing debt repayments, a neglect of industry, endemic corruption, the chieftaincy system, a dysfunctional legal system, and a focus of civil society activity and international assistance on Freetown. Whilst some of these phenomena – notably the chieftaincy system – may still have role, caution about reinventing them is appropriate.

Neoliberalism

While neoliberalism is often presented as an alternative to state-based corruption, in Sierra Leone during the 1970s and especially 1980s the two tended to interact to the benefit of a small clique around the President and to the detriment of the broad mass of people. The structural adjustment programs of the 1980s were designed to promote growth, but did not have the desired results. Some of these prescriptions are currently being reinvented by the World Bank and the IMF. Insufficient thinking is being done about how to revive the economy and promote growth, and in particular what alternative models of growth-production (other than the traditional structural adjustment package) are available. Education, moreover, cannot work without jobs: many observers stressed that raising expectations of a good job without providing one could be actively damaging. The concern with promoting good governance promises to tackle some of the root causes of violence, but only tangentially addresses the question of promoting economic growth. The World Bank also has plans to focus on institutional reform and capacity building, including district councils, legal and judicial reform, and strengthening property rights. The World Bank does state that its priorities include building capacity for agricultural development (World Bank, 2002, 18), but it is not clear how new remedies differ from old ones.

The above analysis of the effects of devaluation and of privatization suggests that these proved to be part of the *cause* of conflict in Sierra Leone. The struggle to keep up with debt payments in the 1980s was a key reason for the austerity programs that fed into the war. This system is still in place. The Sierra Leonean government says: »Debt service payments (excluding debt relief) are estimated at 47.8 percent of export of goods and

non-factor services ... The debt burden militates against a sustainable economic recovery since it crowds out investments, particularly in education and health« (Republic of Sierra Leone, 2001, 13).

Development: More of the Same?

Whilst reviving agriculture is clearly a reasonable priority, a common and dangerous assumption in African post-war conflicts in particular, is that people want nothing more than to return to the traditional farming. However, there are dangers in a rehabilitation effort that attempts to turn the clock back to a rural idyll that never actually existed. As Paul Richards notes (1996, 51): »Young people, modernized by education and life in the diamond districts, are reluctant to revert to this semi-subsistence way of life; many treat it only as a last stand-by.«

Even the reinvention of the »developmental project«, whilst clearly essential in some sense, carries dangers if it is not handled with sensitivity. One perceptive analyst, Amy Smythe, a former minister in the first Kabbah regime, suggested that in a system where people were seen and labeled as poor and even as somehow less than human, they may end up behaving in a less than human way: »People in the communities have a sense of justice and respect for life, but people have been so disempowered and being told they are useless, they are poor, they are illiterate, and they have lost their humanity and are behaving like animals. People are not poor – they are rich in potential ... Before, their self-perception was different. They carried on in their communities, getting young women and men together in so-called »secret societies« for six months and that was a kind of education.« This is part of the problem with labels like »lumpen« which analysts like Abdullah have used to provide a sociological explanation of the war. The term could be taken as much as an insult as an analytical category.

The traditional focus of governmental and civil society activity on Freetown is also something that is in danger of being reinvented.

Corruption

In terms of corruption, it is worth noting that many young people perceive a continuity of practices and even many personnel between the old APC, the National Provisional Ruling Council and the current SLPP government.

Tackling corruption and tackling illegal diamond exports are intimately linked. The UN's diamond export certification scheme has had positive impact, with recorded diamond exports rising to 27.9 million dollars in 2001, compared to 10.1 million in 2000 and 1.2 million in 1999 (IMF, 2002, 43). However, the World Bank (2002, 3) has noted that more than half of all diamond exports remained outside official channels covered by the diamond certification scheme. Traders have continued to bribe government officials and to smuggle diamonds illegally out of the country. In the long-term, such practices are unlikely to be reined in without substantial improvements in civil servants' salaries.

Chieftaincy

The institution of chieftaincy is still widely accepted. A recent report by the UK Department for International Development (DFID 2002) noted: »The recent consultations at chiefdom level in Blama, Mano and Rotifunk re-confirmed public acceptance of the institution of chiefs despite open criticism of the corrupt and arbitrary way in which some office holders behaved in recent years.«

However displacement has brought exposure to new ideas and systems, and a new unwillingness to submit to abuses by chiefs. The link between migration and awareness is a long-standing one. Historically, out-migration from the less well resourced north meant young people with a wider experience of the world outside the chiefdom tended to be less willing to accept the authority of chiefs, especially chiefs with no education.

Given the dangers of reinventing things that fed the conflict and given many people's increased awareness of their rights, an overly conservative interpretation of chieftaincy restoration carries clear dangers. At root, ordinary people's vulnerability to the abuses of chiefs is linked to the chiefs' ability to guarantee (or not) their rights, and this vulnerability could only be tackled by increasing the bureaucratic capacity of the state to a point where it can take over from the chiefs as principle guarantor.

The Security Sector

The army remains a potential threat to security. The history of soldiers' abuses during the war should be salutary. British training and improved conditions have helped boost morale, and the International Crisis Group (ICG) – for example – credits the training with helping to keep the mili-

tary from intervening in the political process. (ICG, 2002, 9) British officers stressed that they were trying to instill a fundamentally different ethos in the army, and a sense of pride in its history.⁷

In the short-term at least, the strategy seemed to be working. Among the current danger-signals, however, is the fact that the May 2002 elections saw the security forces overwhelmingly voting for Kabbah's opponents, principally the People's Liberation Party and All People's Congress. (ICG, 2002, 2) The International Crisis Group expresses a concern that Koroma's weak position in parliament and likely indictment by the Special Court might lead him to destabilize the government (ICG, 2002, 10). The training and upward mobility of new recruits has apparently created discontent among some of the older soldiers with fewer promotion prospects. Moreover, »the expected downsizing and pensioning of older officers will also likely exacerbate tensions«. (ICG, 2002, 10)

An important cause of the conflict in Sierra Leone has also been the corruption and other abuses of the police force. The wake of the conflict brings new problems, for example a rise in sexual violence and a need for the police to deal with disputes over buildings and land, sometimes taken by ex-combatants. The British government has been supporting police reform and training, and the police have also been supported by the UN Civilian Police Project. However, ICG (2002, 12) notes that »other donors like the World Bank and IMF remain reluctant to contribute because they associate the police with the military, and wish to avoid any perception that they are funding national security services.«

Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration

Disarmament in Sierra Leone has been largely successful, though the turning in of weapons does not mean that others have not been hidden or that more weapons could not be quickly imported should the ex-combatants consider it desirable. According to the International Crisis Group »almost 72,500 combatants completed the disarmament program, including more than 24,000 RUF and 37,000 Civil Defence Forces (CDF). ... although these former fighters have turned in their weapons, they have not yet dispersed and returned home. This is true of both the RUF and the CDF, and the decision to go home for most will continue to hinge on the internal security situation. ... Reintegration programs are de-

7. Author's interviews.

signed to provide six months of training and a small monthly stipend (60,000 Leones, or US dollars 28) to former combatants who are actively involved in training. But rising concerns over the viability of the reintegration fund have already led to clashes. Unless the program receives a rapid infusion of donor money soon, it will likely be bankrupt by August 2002. This would leave roughly two-thirds of those who disarmed without the possibility of completing the demobilization and reintegration phases of the program and could lead many to conclude that they have no alternative but to join one of the groups fighting in Liberia.« (ICG 2002, 13).

A strong international presence would probably be needed for ten to fifty years.

Government promises of material support for ex-combatants have yet to be wholly fulfilled. Meanwhile rural communities have expressed concern at the apparent targeting of aid to ex-combatants. Rewarding ex-combatants at the expense of a peer-group who did not take up arms sends out a dangerous signal. In general, donors have tended to fund community development programs rather than those specifically targeted at former fighters. Of some ninety million dollars used by the National Commission for Social Action, only about seven million has gone to programs for former fighters (ICG, 2002, 14). Despite this, many communities still believe that ex-fighters are benefiting from donors at expense of victims of violence. A significant drawback of focusing assistance on communities is that ex-fighters often lack functioning communal ties or means to reintegrate, and react by forming their own groups.

Kamajors are reported to be the last remaining Civil Defence Forces, remaining »relatively well organised, militarily capable, and unwilling to disband«. (ICG, 2002, 11) In discussions with British government officials, the kamajors were also seen as a possible source of instability, with officials stressing that they had been promised a great deal and that many were dissatisfied with what they had received. Part of the trick in dealing with the kamajors was seen as providing recognition and a continuing sense of community, for example through veterans' associations.

In a discussion on the current threats to peace in Sierra Leone, British government officials stressed that a strong international presence would probably be needed for ten to fifty years. Current threats to peace in-

cluded: lack of control of the diamond fields; Liberia; renegade former RUF fighters; any failure to deliver a peace dividend, reintegrate ex-combatants or reconstruct institutions. Deterioration of security in Guinea was also seen as a threat. A particular danger was seen to lie in attempts to reduce the military, something that had proved incendiary in Côte d'Ivoire (one might add also in Sierra Leone before the May 1997 coup). The political ramifications of the Special Court were seen as potentially destabilizing. HIV/AIDS was seen as another threat to security: officials said elsewhere in Africa it had encouraged violent warfare to pay for treatment and also appeared to have changed soldiers' attitude to risk in a way that encouraged violence.

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