

A brutal war for diamonds

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It could be the nineteenth century. A flotilla gunboats assemble off the coast of Sierra Leone, Africa. British troops go ashore and take over the streets. Local people are interviewed by the British press. All of them say how wonderful it is to have their "former colonial masters" back again.

Liberal journalists praise Foreign Secretary Robin Cook for this entirely selfless and humanitarian intervention. The word "diamonds?" is hardly mentioned. The Tories, on the other hand, sourly warn of "operation creep" and the danger of casualties for "our boys". Something strange is going on.

The pretext for the British intervention was the recent offensive of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) led by Foday Sankoh. Under last year's Lomé peace agreement, the RUF promised to give up its nine-year war in return for four cabinet seats with its leader becoming vice-president and head of diamond exports.

However, in early May, up to 500 UN officials were taken hostage by the RUF at the sites earmarked for weapons. UN forces were also attacked as they were about to occupy the diamond centre of Koidu.

The RUF launched an offensive against the capital, Freetown, twice attacking Masiaka, 60 kilometres from the capital, and threatening the international airport at Lungi. Both attacks were beaten back with difficulty. The second time this was only due to the use of Nigerian and British troops.

The SAS, then 600 paras and now 1,000 Royal Marine commandos were sent into Freetown to prop up the tottering regime. This is an example of the new "humanitarian" colonialism advocated by Bill Clinton and Tony Blair.

These apostles of the "Third Way" are totally committed to the economic depredations of the IMF. Its repeated savage austerity packages, imposed on African states over the last two decades, have led to the economic collapse and the descent into brutal civil wars of many of the weakest states. Presented in the racist Western media as all part of the "heart of darkness" in fact this horror is imposed from the "civilised" boardrooms of Wall Street, Paris and the City of London.

Faced with the collapse of states like Sierra Leone, Blair and Clinton's answer is to mount "temporary" military interventions: first by local gendarme-regimes like Nigeria, under the cover of regional peace keeping forces like ECOMOG or the UN.

But since even states like Nigeria are staggering under the destabilising effects of the IMF their forces prove militarily inefficient and easily corrupted. Thus the imperialist powers are increasingly obliged to do their own dirty work, or at least stiffen their local agent's forces, first with private enterprise mercenary outfits and, when these too proved insufficient, to send in regular troops, ships, helicopter gunships and the rest.

Since their initial victories over the RUF, the motley array of government troops and irregular militias have taken the offensive, reaching the strategically important town of Lunsar. But they were expelled again in

early June. Sankoh was captured by British in mid-May and is rumoured to be incarcerated outside of the country.

The RUF however is no anti-imperialist national liberation force. It has earned itself a reputation for mass cruelty and terror. Though originating in student struggles in the early 1980s it was rapidly corrupted by the economic and political conflicts waged by the military-bonapartist regimes of the highly balkanised region. What is at stake is the control of the economic wealth of the region and who is to be middleman for the multinational corporations which exploit it.

The RUF's leading cadres, including Sankoh, were trained in Libya and backed by the governments of Burkina Faso and Liberia. Liberian guerrilla leader Charles Taylor (now President) originally sent them into Sierra Leone, in 1991, hoping that they would destabilise the country and prevent it from being used as a base by forces hostile to him. He was all too successful.

The RUF now controls about half of the country with up to 4,000 troops under arms. It reportedly killed 6,000 civilians when it captured Freetown in 1998. Most importantly it controls the bulk of the diamond producing areas. It has been able to sustain its war by diamond smuggling, using Liberia as the transit point.

In 1998 the Sierra Leone government exported 8,500 carats of diamonds but the Belgium High Diamond Council - the world's largest market for rough diamonds - registered 777,000 carats from Sierra Leone.

However, in some parts of Sierra Leone, such as Kalihun in the east of the country, the RUF was seen as a defence force against government forces which committed a series of atrocities against people from the Nimba ethnic group in the early 1990s. Charles Taylor remains its main backer. No peace deal is likely to be brokered without his support.

The forces ranged against the RUF hardly have any better record. The old army, the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council, have a bad record of carrying out atrocities when they were in power from 1992 to 1997. Its then leader, Captain Valentine Strasser, has received asylum in Britain, despite being wanted for human rights violations.

Under its new leader Johnny Koroma, the army, sided with the RUF in 1998 and deposed the recently elected President Kabbah. Eventually, he was restored as President with the backing Britain (via the mercenaries of Sandline International) and the West African peace-keeping force ECOMOG, led by Nigeria.

This time around, Koroma and his troops backed the restored Kabbah. There are also a number of ill-disciplined militias. The new Sierra Leone Army was created last year and has between 3,000 and 5,000 troops, trained and organised by the British army.

The United Nations forces, brought in to police the Lomé peace accords, were badly armed and blatantly ignored by the USA and the UK. Some troops have been killed, including a number of Zambians, and their weapons used by the RUF. It was the use of armoured personnel carriers taken from the UN that initially gave the RUF the edge in recent battles.

At a recent meeting of the West African heads of states, which discussed the crisis, a far-tougher mandate was demanded from the UN. This call was backed by Kofi Annan who urged a policy of "peace-enforcement" by the UN. He also promised extra troops aiming to take the UN strength up to 11,000. In response Nigeria has committed itself to doubling its forces to 6,000.

Around the fringes of the war are the various mercenary outfits and their mining companies. The biggest

British-based mercenary groupings Sandline International and Executive Outcomes have Branch Heritage group, a diamond mining firm, as their employer. It also has a number of mining concessions and is developing a regional business empire. These forces were in the past, and maybe in the future will be, vital to the survival of the Kabbah government..

This brutal war over diamonds has led to a death toll of somewhere between 20,000 to 50,000. Many more have been maimed and wounded. Yet the way out of this nightmare for the people of Sierra Leone is not to rely upon the UN, the British or the mercenaries. British occupation ?with the TV cameras running?may seem to provide a respite from terror but it will do so only at the cost of subjecting Sierra Leone to a new colonialism.

In fact it will sow the seeds of more conflict. Nor is relying upon the militias and the Sierra Leone army a way out. Immediately, the workers in the towns, the mines and the countryside need to create their own militias, based on and accountable to workers' and poor peasants councils. These alone can organise effective defence against the competing military outfits.

But to end the cycle of destructive war the workers need a political party that can fight for a workers' and peasants' government. Only such a regime, based on councils of elected and recallable delegates, will put an end to domestic corruption and the plunder of the country by the imperialist corporations.

Only such a governments can nationalise the mines and all imperialist holdings under workers' control. It must dissolve the army and the militias and replace them with a popular defence militia, with democratically elected officers and commanders. Socialists in Britain must demand the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all British troops and mercenaries.

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