

SIERRA LEONE (1994-96) - NARRATIVE

On November 30 1996, Sierra Leone's President Alhaji Ahmad Tejan Kabbah and Corporal Foday Sankoh, leader of the Revolutionary United Front of Sierra Leone (RUF/SL), signed a Peace Agreement in Abidjan, the Ivory Coast. It was, however, short-lived.

Communications between the conflict parties and the guarantors of the peace accord soon broke down as effective compliance with the comprehensive provisions of the agreement was not forthcoming. For example, the Neutral Monitoring Group that was to verify the end of hostilities and the disposition of armed forces could not be set up. Internal dissension within the respective camps eventually led to a break-up of the Committee for the Consolidation of Peace whose task was to oversee the accord's implementation. More seriously, this rupture led to the resumption of hostilities thereafter followed by the military coup of May 1997 which was supported by some factions within the RUF/SL. Subsequent efforts by relevant regional organisations and, in particular, the ECOMOG forces led by Nigeria helped restore the civilian government in February 1998.

This brief section limits itself to the period of the peace process in Sierra Leone prior to and leading to the Peace Agreement from 1994 to 1996. During this initial phase, International Alert (IA)ⁱ, a non-governmental organisation working for the peaceful resolution of conflicts, was involved in supporting official efforts to reach a negotiated political settlement. The principal mediator and host to the talks was the Foreign Minister of the Ivory Coast Government. The talks were facilitated by the UN, the OAU, the Commonwealth Secretariat and IA.

BACKGROUND

West Africa represents a turbulent region in the continent, with its share of civil wars and coup d'états which have caused the loss of lives, the devastation of national economies, and the destruction of homes resulting in refugee flows and the internal displacement of people. At the heart of this sub-region lies Sierra Leone.

British colonial rule ended in 1961. Independence initially brought the Sierra Leone People's Party to power. The All People's Party of Siaka Stevens assumed office in 1967, but not before a military coup and counter-coup ushered in their wake violence and factionalism, political patronage and repression, economic mismanagement and chronic corruption. After nearly a quarter of century of one party-rule, the politics of exclusion was entrenched. Aptly described as a period of political failure and corruption, this period once again triggered a coup d'état in April 1992 led by Captain Valentine Strasser and the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC). The NPRC was composed of young military officers who initially adopted certain objectives: end the war, end administrative corruption, reform the economy and restore multi-party democracy.

However, their initial objectives were soon overshadowed by their ineptitude in government and their own propensity for corruption.

CONFLICT PHASES

Phase One 1991: Crisis and Violence

It was in this context that in March 1991 an armed rebellion broke out, and the Revolutionary United Front of Sierra Leone (RUF/SL), led by Foday Sankoh a former army corporal launched attacks from the eastern and southern parts of the country. The group recruited disaffected rural people and former dissident students, and its objective was to secure a democratic civilian government in the country. But in the military struggle between government and rebel forces terror tactics were employed and civilians attacked. Violence spread throughout the country.ⁱⁱ

The Sierra Leone military forces sought support from the Nigerians, Guineans and the United Liberation Movement for Democracy in Liberia, and countered the RUF/SL's advances successfully. Government troops had recaptured much of the rebel-held territory by 1993.

Phase Two 1993-95: Escalation

In 1994, however, the RUF/SL resumed its attacks. The conflict escalated further, spreading more widely into northern parts of the country. UN estimates indicated that approximately 47% of the country's total population were either internally displaced or refugees in neighbouring countries. Figures also indicated that 70% of educational facilities were destroyed and only 16% of the country's health centres functioned.ⁱⁱⁱ Countless children were trained as soldiers. As result of the war, the country's armed forces increased from 3,000 members to an estimated 16,000 soldiers. However, resources were limited. Thus, many of the soldiers were ill-trained, ill-equipped, ill-disciplined, badly-clad, and hardly paid. Many were forced to eke out an existence by raiding villages, plundering and pilfering. Civilian populations throughout the country grew terrified of these 'sobels' - soldier-rebels. The RUF/SL gained ground and continued to bolster its numbers. Both sides in the conflict were accused of gross human rights abuses.^{iv} The government sought further military assistance by hiring "Executive Outcomes", a private security firm mainly composed of former South African soldiers, in exchange for mineral concessions.^v

PREPARATION & PRE-NEGOTIATION: CREATING A FRAMEWORK FOR PEACE

International Alert (IA) had embarked on a discreet programme aimed at responding to the sub-regional challenges for peace in West Africa as early as December 1993. Although it believed that the internal armed conflicts in Liberia and Sierra Leone had their unique causes, it recognised the importance of taking the sub-regional context into account when attempting to address each conflict. At the time, a former west African journalist was amongst IA's staff and was able to make contact with the parties. Following discreet consultation with international and regional parties, IA held a series

of meetings with OAU and UN officials. A visit was also arranged to meet with one of the sub-region's most seasoned diplomats, Amara Essy, foreign minister of the Ivory Coast, and then president of the UN General Assembly, to explore possible efforts to help mediate talks between the parties to the conflict in Sierra Leone. In Freetown, IA held discussions with NPRC representatives and made radio contact with the RUF/SL which led to preliminary talks. Together with the Nairobi Peace Initiative, IA organised a conflict resolution workshop in Dakar, Senegal, at which RUF/SL representatives met with other Sierra Leoneans in an informal problem-solving setting.

During this period despite mounting international pressure for an end to the violence the conflict continued to intensify. However in April 1995 the RUF/SL took a number of Sierra Leoneans and foreign workers hostage. The international community refused to enter into talks with them so long as the hostages were still captive. Under such circumstances, there seemed little chance of peace talks getting underway.^{vi}

Overcoming Obstacles to a Process

IA fully supported the international diplomatic community's position that no dialogue was possible unless the hostages were released, however it sought to explore a means of releasing them. In consultations with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) a decision was reached to attempt to secure their release. The Sierra Leonian government was consulted and its approval sought. A plan was made, and following three weeks of trekking into the bush and face-to-face negotiations with the RUF/SL leadership, the hostages were released into IA's care and escorted to the Guinean border into the care of the ICRC. This event proved to be a significant step towards creating a more conducive climate for talks.

There were however other significant obstacles. To sustain a process of peace in Sierra Leone meant dealing with both political and logistical problems. Establishing reliable and secure communication links with the parties to the conflict under the most difficult circumstances was an initial hurdle. Nigerian, Ghanaian and Guinean troops were involved in the war efforts through the invitation of the NPRC Government. Helping to bring out a delegation from the bush to engage in talks posed many difficulties in this preparatory phase of the process at a time when the other state-related facilitators were not yet fully engaged.

Furthermore, the RUF/SL hardly had any experience in formal diplomacy and little in their representatives' backgrounds prepared them for formal negotiations. They had expressed their desire to receive technical assistance since they felt afraid of becoming "casualties of peace". At the same time, the NPRC was a military regime that generally acted in cautious fashion, discussing possibilities of talks while continuing to pursue the military option.

In the ensuing months, IA's role in the Sierra Leone peace process was one of catalyst and subsequently co-facilitator. During the pre-negotiations phase, IA helped prepare the ground by putting together relevant peace-related material, sharing copies of peace accords formulated in other conflict areas for comparative purposes, making available

compilation of resource material on rebuilding war-torn societies, documents of human rights and humanitarian law, as well as reports by Amnesty International on Sierra Leone.^{vii}

NEGOTIATIONS & TRANSFORMATION

Phase Three: Abatement

The situation took a distinctive turn as a change of guards - a palace coup - took place at the beginning of 1996 when Brigadier General Julius Maada Bio displaced Captain Strasser. In his first public broadcast, General Bio stated his support for a return to civilian rule and a commitment to ending the war, and participating in the talks process. In the space of a few months, with support from the international community (the UN, Commonwealth Secretariat, and the OAU), the country entered into national elections. Simultaneously a round of formal peace talks went underway in the Ivory Coast between the RUF/SL, the NPRC government (under General Bio's leadership), and representatives of the incoming civilian government of President-elect Ahmad Tejan Kabbah.

In this phase of the peace process, assurances were sought from all quarters that the talks would be sustained even as the delicate period of transition to civilian rule was then taking place simultaneously. As talks were about to take place in Yamoussoukro in March 1997, IA led a peace mission to Sierra Leone to consult with and brief leaders of the incoming civilian government including the president-in-waiting's special representative who was set to join the talks. He participated in the discussions that produced a joint communiqué which adopted three critical measures: the maintenance of the cease-fire, the adoption of humanitarian measures to ensure that relief aid reach people on both sides of the conflict-affected areas, and general provisions for the future of peace talks.^{viii}

These steps in turn enabled a consensus to emerge on the establishment of three joint working parties (on the peace accord, encampment and disarmament, demobilisation and resettlement of combatants), which formed the core of the Joint Communiqué signed in Yamoussoukro on 23 April 1996 by both President Kabbah and Cpl. Sankoh leader of the RUF/SL, in the presence of the President of the Ivory Coast.^{ix}

Comprehensive discussions in working group and plenary sessions from 6-28 May 1996 resulted in a common single text, a draft Peace Agreement with twenty eight articles and an annex, which reflected significant consensus. The parties failed to reach agreement on two critical issues - principally, the timing or the synchronisation of the withdrawal of the private military outfit "Executive Outcomes" and the disarmament of the RUF/SL. It was therefore agreed to suspend the sessions to give time to the parties to consult with their respective constituencies and explore ways forward. Nevertheless, the cease-fire remained in force for as long the parties remained committed to negotiations.^x

CONSOLIDATION & REVERSAL - A RARE WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY MISSED

Sustaining momentum and rebuilding confidence in the precarious in-between period of the talks from June-November 1996 was a critical task which determined whether the talks advanced or were scuttled. The draft text existed on paper, but already it was evident that the tenuous cease-fire was difficult to sustain on the ground for lack of both vigorous political will and a way to properly monitor how forces behaved on the ground. Without proper verification, the situation could easily deteriorate.

To overcome deep suspicions that had re-surfaced, intense shuttle diplomacy of diverse kinds and exchange of communications thus continued. It was not until after the consultations with combatants and the RUF war council in November 1996 that the process resumed in earnest. The ICRC and a representative of the Ivorian Government accompanied the RUF leader to the Kailahun District and the Kangari Hills to discuss the content of the peace agreement and the alternatives provided by the possible transformation of guerrilla to political force.

In the last days of November 1996, the remaining issues seemed finally resolved with the adoption of a compromise formulation on the contentious issues, including the repatriation of all foreign troops still in Sierra Leone. Monitoring groups were likewise identified (an internationally-constituted group and joint group composed of both government and guerrillas). Dubbed as the Abidjan Accord^{xi}, the peace agreement was signed on 30 November 1996 at official ceremonies held at the presidential palace. The UN, the OAU and the Commonwealth were named as moral guarantors and the Commission on the Consolidation of Peace designated to ensure compliance.

But it proved to be a rare window of opportunity for a peace that existed for an all-too-brief period. In early-1997, as the parties to the conflict faltered in fully implementing the terms of the Agreement, serious disputes arose. This resulted in the breakdown of communications and the inability to set up joint verification for the cease-fire and demobilisation process. In May 1997, a military coup launched by breakaway factions of the army - the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council - and the RUF toppled the civilian government. Sierra Leone was once again cast into conflict with foreign troops entering the arena again. Finally, in early 1998 a counter-offensive by a sub-regional force of the ECOMOG led by Nigeria resulted in the ouster of the combined AFRC-RUF forces and the restoration of the civilian government.

ⁱ International Alert (IA) is an independent non-governmental organisation (NGO) founded in 1985 with the specific mandate to work towards the prevention and resolution of intra-state violent conflicts. By 1995 IA had approximately fifty permanent staff at its London headquarters and had established close working relations with a wide network of national, regional and international organisations involved in conflict resolution practice, skills training and mediation.

ⁱⁱ A recent historical account is Fighting for the Rain Forest: War, Youth and Resources in Sierra Leone, Paul Richards, 1997. (unpublished manuscript).

ⁱⁱⁱ UNDP Report on Sierra Leone, (New York: United Nations, 1995).

^{iv} Amnesty International, “Sierra Leone: Human Rights Abuses in a War Against Civilians,” (London: AIP, 13 September 1995).

^v A description of “Executive Outcomes” is found in Civil Wars, Civil Peace, Introduction to Conflict Resolution, Kumar Rupesinghe with Sanam Naraghi Anderlini, (London: Pluto Press, 1998) pp. 55-56.

^{vi} For a comprehensive account of the Sierra Leone peace process, A Time of Hope and Transformation: Sierra Leone Peace Process, Reports and Reflections, (London: International Alert, 1997).

^{vii} For a selection of documents put together by IA for these purposes, confer Appendices 3-4, A Time of Hope and Transformation, pp. 87-97. Cf. above-mentioned 1995 AI Report and various urgent action appeals made by Amnesty International.

^{viii} A Time for Hope and Transformation, Appendix 2, Op. Cit.

^{ix} Ibid.

^x Ibid, “A Report on the Peace Talks from February to May 1996: Searching for Common Ground,” in Op. Cit.

^{xi} Ibid, Appendix 1, Op. Cit.

SIERRA LEONE - CHRONOLOGY

INDEPENDENCE

April 1961 - British colonial rule ends and Independence is declared. Sir Milton Margai, Secretary General of the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP), becomes the first prime minister of an independent Sierra Leone. Upon his death in 1964, he is succeeded by his brother, Albert Margai.

1967 - The All People's Party (APC) of Siaka Stevens triumphs in elections. He is prevented from assuming position of Prime Minister, and is forced into exile into Guinea. Coup and counter-coup result in the formation of the National Reformation Committee under Brigadier Andrew Juxon-Smith.

April 1968 - The "Sergeants' Revolt" subsequently leads to the re-establishment of civilian rule under Siaka Stevens in 1969. However, the country continues under a state of emergency, and political instability, factionalism and violence characterise this period.

1971 - Sierra Leone is declared a Republic with Siaka Stevens as Executive President. The APC wins elections but political violence continues.

February 1978 - Student unrest leads to the declaration of a state of emergency, and a referendum is held on the issue of a one-party state. A New constitution is promulgated providing for one-party rule and Siaka Stevens is sworn in as first president of the one-party state for a seven-year term.

July 1980 - Sierra Leone hosts an OAU Summit which gives the country considerable international publicity but the costs negatively affect the economy. A general strike is called by the Sierra Leone Labour Congress, provoking repression.

1981 - "Vouchergate" and other scandals result in arrest of several ministers and fifty other suspects.

MILITARY COUPS, TURMOIL & CORRUPTION

May 1982 - Violent elections take place after several postponements and an alleged coup attempt.

August 1985 - Siaka Stevens hands over power to a member of his Cabinet, Maj. Gen. Joseph Momoh, commander of the armed forces since 1971.

January 1987 - Three universities are closed down. Vice President Francis Minah and fifteen others are arrested and sentenced to death. Ministers, including the Minister of Finance, are accused of misappropriation of funds.

1987 - A state of economic emergency is declared. The IMF and World Bank close all lines of credit owing to delays in payment

REBELLION, VIOLENCE & CONFLICT

March 1991 - A rebellion erupts in south and east, led by the Revolutionary United Front of Sierra Leone. A UN mission reports that 145,000 people have been driven from their homes and are in need of aid. Troops from Guinea and Nigeria are deployed in the country.

August 1991 - A new multi-party constitution is approved.

April 1992 - A coup d'état led by Captain Valentine Strasser sets up a new 22-man National Provisional Ruling Council. Momoh is exiled to Guinea. The war intensifies, especially in the eastern and southern areas.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR PEACE

1994/1995 - Exploratory peace efforts are facilitated by International Alert and other inter-governmental organisations. A Joint Action Peace Forum on Sierra Leone is held in March at the offices of International Alert. Hostages held by the Revolutionary United Front are released through collaborative efforts and handed over to the ICRC.

January 1996 - Brig. Gen. Julius Maada Bio takes over from Captain Strasser in a palace coup. Peace talks begin on 28 February in Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire. By this time, nearly half of the population has been displaced, and thousands have become casualties of the civil war.

March/May 1996 - President Alhaji Ahmad Tejan Kabbah (SLPP) is elected as civilian president. Peace talks are resumed after a summit meeting of leaders in Yamoussoukro, Cote d'Ivoire. This summit results in a Communiqué declaring an indefinite cease-fire; it also creates three working groups that meet from 6-28 May in Cote d'Ivoire. A Draft Peace Agreement is formulated.

June/November 1996 After consultations with their respective constituencies, and through the mediation of the Ivory Coast government - in particular Foreign Minister Amara Essy - and the facilitation of the UN, the OAU, the Commonwealth and International Alert, the President of Sierra Leone and the leader of the Revolutionary United Front of Sierra Leone sign the Peace Agreement in Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire on 30 November 1996.