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# War in West Africa

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West Africa, affected by war since the outbreak of hostilities in Liberia at Christmas 1989, is now peering into an abyss of violence. Immediately at risk is Guinea—unwilling host to hundreds of thousands of refugees who have been brought into the violence of neighboring Sierra Leone and Liberia. Guinea has been the scene of heavy fighting since September 2000. Its government has responded with reprisals against refugees and indiscriminate violence against groups of people suspected of harboring guerrillas. One of the difficulties of countering the new-style insurrections throughout West Africa is that armed bands often consist of men, women, and even children who wear civilian clothes and are indistinguishable from the general population.

Right now, there are at least three distinct places in West Africa where combat regularly takes place: Guinea, Senegal, and Liberia. Sierra Leone, generally the most violence-afflicted of all, has seen a lull in fighting but could face more battles. Two more countries in the region that are wracked by internal conflicts are Cote d'Ivoire, which risks breaking out into real civil war, and Guinea-Bissau, which risks restarting a war that ended only recently. All of these areas of struggle are linked by politics as well as by flows of people and weapons. One could perhaps add to this list Nigeria which, although not close to war, is prone to internal violence and whose composition, strategic location, and political tradition make it vulnerable.

The stakes are high indeed. If the violence in and around Sierra Leone is not contained, it will spread and may ultimately affect Nigeria. It would then become too important for the world to ignore: for while Liberia and Sierra Leone are countries with small populations and few significant exports, Nigeria has 120 million people and is a major exporter of oil, notably to the U.S. If serious armed conflict were to spread to Nigeria, the flows of refugees would be immense.

A further spread of war would also have serious implications for the international control of narcotics and weapons, and for international regulation of airspace,

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presently used for smuggling with impunity by Russian and Ukrainian mafias. At the moment, the arms primarily being used are hand-held weapons, but some East European mafias involved in the region are known to have surface-to-surface missiles for sale at bargain prices. Evidence of this was recently revealed when police in Italy arrested a leading Ukrainian trafficker, Leonid Minin, after he was found in possession of a small quantity of cocaine. Minin, a close friend of Liberian President Charles Taylor, who has business interests throughout West Africa, had with him paperwork indicating that he and his associates had access to SS-18 missiles.

### CONNECTED CONFLICTS

These various theatres of war in West Africa are connected in ways characteristic of a new generation of wars, like those in central Africa and central Asia. Governments in various West African countries support armed groups in neighboring states as a regular instrument of foreign policy, but generally do not call for any change in internationally recognized borders. None of the groups currently deployed in Liberia, Sierra Leone, or Guinea is calling for secession. No one is contesting the right of even the most ramshackle states to exist as sovereign entities. The elites supply their allies with guns and diplomatic support and in return expect their proxies to wrest control of local resources, including diamonds and other minerals, as well as such mundane commodities as food crops and looted goods. These are often sold openly and provide partial payment for arms. It is through the resulting trades that the war in southern Senegal, for example, has become linked to Liberia (via the weapons and marijuana trades) and West Africa as a whole has become linked to places as far away as Angola and Russia via the diamond trade. Libya, meanwhile, takes a strategic view of the region and its rich mineral resources, working with a swathe of insurgent movements and established governments with the aim of establishing an anti-Western bloc.

Although it is often said in the West that these wars are all about greed, economics is only part of the explanation. These wars are also about ideas, some of them originating among the African diaspora in America and Europe. They convey a streak of pan-Africanist ideology, the idea that all Africans should unite to free their continent from the vestiges of colonial rule, which for radicals includes corrupt, postcolonial governments that they judge to be too friendly to the West. It is this streak of radicalism in West African politics which two decades ago attracted the attention of Libya's Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, a supporter of bloody rebellions in several countries of the region. No doubt the founding fathers of pan-Africanism would turn in their graves if they saw what is being done in the name of their philosophy by Charles Taylor, Liberia's warlord-turned-president, or by the fighters of the Revolutionary United Front in Sierra Leone, who hack off the hands of villagers, even of babies, for no reason other than that it has become their trademark.

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During colonial times, many black intellectuals in America and Europe, as well as Africans studying abroad, dreamed of liberating Africa through a political revolution. They reasoned that an Africa free of exploitation by outsiders would also be prosperous. Independence would be negotiated where possible, fought for where necessary. By the 1970s, a generation after the end of colonial rule in most countries, there were organized groups of vaguely Marxist, pan-Africanist radicals among students both in West Africa and the U.S. Many of them looked to Libya and even North Korea for inspiration. Among them was Charles Taylor. In 1985, after sitting in an American jail for one-and-a-half years, he escaped and found his way to Libya, where he met up with pan-Africanist revolutionaries and failed putschists from all over the continent, guests of Colonel Gaddafi. Among them was Foday Sankoh, who later emerged as the leader of the rebellion in Sierra Leone. Graduates of these Libyan camps went on to fight in the wars that are plaguing swathes of Africa today.

Few observers today believe that Taylor and Sankoh have any genuine desire to improve the lot of ordinary people, although it is still possible to find African intellectuals who will speak in their favor, if only out of opportunism. They are at best self-serving (like Taylor) or at worst they strike some observers as being largely unpredictable (Sankoh). But no matter how incoherent their ideas, these leaders have an effective military strategy of destabilization and can attract recruits from the many millions of young West Africans who are poor and see no future for themselves. They have the money to pay for expert advice and training from mercenaries from Israel, Ukraine, South Africa, and other places. It is easy to persuade bored youngsters to call themselves freedom fighters and pick up a gun. Teenage recruits, often high on drugs, can then rape, steal, and murder at will. In both Liberia and Sierra Leone, they have carried out the worst human rights abuses imaginable. The fact that Charles Taylor has been an elected head of state since 1997 has also enabled him to use Liberia as a center for adventurers of all sorts. They can use the country as a base for launching coup attempts elsewhere or, in the case of international mafias, simply as an operations center for whatever it is they are involved in. The veneer of respectability, which the presidency gives him, has enabled him to forge a friendship with, for example, Reverend Jesse Jackson, former President Bill Clinton's special envoy on Africa. Until recently Taylor's public relations were handled in the U.S. by senior officials-turned-lobbyists from the U.S. State Department and the Pentagon.

Unofficial militias and recognized governments throughout West Africa resemble each other in many ways, making it easy for a Charles Taylor to straddle both types of activity. Their formal and informal aspects are mixed up. Many of the leading players in West Africa take formal positions in their capacities as heads of state or government ministers, but simultaneously make full use of informal or even criminal techniques, sometimes on a massive scale. For example, President

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Taylor officially plays no part in the wars in Sierra Leone and Guinea has in fact given massive support to rebel armies in both countries. For its part, the Guinean government is now defending its sovereign territory but has for ten years supported a Liberian warlord army known as ULIMO, which has often launched incursions into Liberia from Guinean territory.

The same tendency can be detected in most countries of the main regional grouping, the Economic Community of Western African States (ECOWAS). Officially, ECOWAS has for a decade tried to play the role of regional peacemaker and honest broker. But at the same time, leading ECOWAS member-states have been giving clandestine aid to all sorts of warlord armies. At the height of the war in Liberia in the mid-1990s, each of seven or eight Liberian private militias was receiving aid from one or another ECOWAS member-state, while ECOWAS as a community was the sponsor of a regional peacekeeping force! It is this interweaving of interests and techniques which has made ECOWAS and its armed intervention wing so ineffective as a regional peacekeeper. On occasion, its armed force (known as ECOMOG) has been worse than ineffective: it has actually spread and prolonged wars needlessly by using peacekeeping missions as a cover for massive smuggling and financial fraud. Nigerian troops in Liberia and Sierra Leone have been particularly notorious for this, to the extent that an Indian peacekeeping contingent pulled out from the United Nations' peacekeeping force in Sierra Leone late last year to protest Nigerian officers who were trading diamonds with rebel groups.

This mixture of formal and informal activities also extends to the economy in general. In theory, every government in the region is committed to stamping out corruption and smuggling, and striving for good governance and democracy. In fact, leading members of governments in every single West African country profit from smuggling or fraud, including the diamond trade. Governments can publicly support international efforts to eliminate so-called blood diamonds, sold by rebel armies to fund their effort, while in fact senior army officers and others make private gem-marketing deals with rebels. Regional peacekeepers have even been known to sell weapons to their enemies.

Because warlords can get control of diamond and hardwood trades, and even have a finger in the drug trade, they are players in global markets. Ever since the 1980s, this part of the world has been a significant staging post for the Russian and Ukrainian mafias, which use West African countries to market smuggled diamonds and have also found a niche market for mercenary services and weapons. In addition, some of these international operators play a similar role in conflicts elsewhere in the world. Before the Russians and Ukrainians came, Lebanese militias used Sierra Leonean business to help finance their own country's civil war. Liberia is especially useful for money laundering because of its historic links with the U.S. dollar zone.

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## SIERRA LEONE: THE HEART OF THE MATTER

Although the conflict in West Africa started in Liberia, today its epicenter is Sierra Leone. The war in Sierra Leone is associated with a degree of social collapse more alarming than anywhere else in the region. The main rebel force, the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), is more like an extremist sect than it is like other warlord armies. Many of the RUF's fighters were originally kidnapped, often when they were children, and soon came to regard the movement as their family and Foday Sankoh as their father. Now, with Sankoh currently in jail and awaiting trial by an international tribunal, his main lieutenants are squabbling over diamonds. But the RUF should not be underestimated. It is an effective guerrilla force, its fighters often believe in their movement, no matter how appalling it seems to everyone else, and they have nowhere else to go.

Furthermore, Sierra Leone is the site of the main international peacekeeping interventions in the region, currently including a U.N. force some 9,500 strong, which the U.N. wants to increase to 17,500. It is militarily ineffective, while a British force some 800 strong is highly effective. The British are attempting to retrain the 8,000-man Sierra Leonean army and also form an alliance with a network of private militias of up to 40,000 fighters, officially called the Civil Defense Force but better known as *kamajors*. The *kamajors* began as village self-defense groups, armed only with hunting rifles, based on traditional hunters' guilds, but have now become thoroughly linked to national politics. Sierra Leone has been host to various foreign armies for a decade, including Liberian militias and Nigerian expeditionary forces operating both on their own account or, more often, under the guise of international peacekeepers. It has a long tradition, going back to colonial times, of various people recruiting their own private armies and mercenary forces. These have often been used by self-serving cliques or corrupt governments.

This combination is what makes the situation in Sierra Leone more than just an average international crisis. At the moment the U.N. force (UNAMSIL) and the British force with its Sierra Leonean allies are pursuing different strategies. The U.N. wants to negotiate with the RUF rebels, while the British and the Sierra Leonean government want to destroy them. There are good reasons for this bellicose stance: time after time, the RUF has signed agreements that it has not respected. It is not an ordinary guerrilla force. It has no political base in Sierra Leonean society. It has committed crimes too ghastly to pardon. Its true patron these days is an outsider, Liberia's President Taylor, who sees peace treaties only as tactical opportunities to regroup and re-arm. These are all good reasons why the world should not attempt to negotiate another power-sharing agreement with the RUF and why the U.N. should give its force in Sierra Leone a more aggressive mandate, enabling it to support the British and Sierra Leonean government line.

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But the prospect of a full, internationally backed offensive against the RUF causes deep misgivings in West Africa, and not only among governments in Liberia and Burkina Faso, who support the RUF. It is a humiliation for Nigeria, which aspires to be the regional hegemon but which was never able to defeat rebel forces in any of its interventions. More seriously, a defeat of the RUF followed by a triumphant withdrawal of British troops would destabilize the region more than ever. Diplomats and analysts need to realize just how sick the Sierra Leonean state is. If a British-led force were to defeat the RUF and then hand power back to the government elected in 1996, the consequences would be disastrous. Desperate RUF fighters would flood into Guinea, further destabilizing it. British withdrawal would leave a power vacuum most likely to be filled by Charles Taylor. The reasons underlying Sierra Leone's social collapse would become more pressing than ever. Sierra Leone's current government may have been democratically elected, but it has also shown itself to be weak, corrupt, and partisan. The last thing the country needs is for that government to be left in power. Sierra Leone needs a proper army, a judicial system that functions countrywide, and a restored national education system. Its government cannot provide any of these things on its own.

The inescapable implication is that Sierra Leone, like Kosovo and East Timor, needs to be run as some sort of international partnership for the medium term, five years or more. This is a conclusion which many Sierra Leoneans have already drawn for themselves but which is met with reluctance everywhere else. None of the world's foremost military powers wants to get involved in governing Sierra Leone. It is a vote-loser in Britain and elsewhere in the West. These days, none of the world's leading powers even wants to contribute troops to a U.N. peacekeeping mission. African countries, especially a humiliated Nigeria, do not want to legitimate any sort of formal role for foreigners on African soil, least of all from a former colonial power. South Africa, committed to an African Renaissance, will hardly be pleased either.

Anyone who cares about peace in West Africa, and is nervous about the consequence of more wars, needs to think hard about this. The U.S., which is bankrolling the U.N. effort in Sierra Leone and training West African troop contingents, should work with Britain to strengthen the U.N. mandate on Sierra Leone. They should work particularly to get Nigerian support for such a change. The British, if they really want to help, should be negotiating with the Sierra Leonean political elite and civil society about the prospect of British participation in government for the medium term. At a rough estimate, five years is the minimum needed to resettle displaced people, restore the system of education, create a reasonably efficient army and police force, and hold new elections.

Another former colonial power, France, has a role to play too. For years after its former West African colonies gained independence in 1960, the French

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government kept tight control on most of them via a series of financial and defense agreements, including technical cooperation measures. This left France and its African friends open to accusations of neo-colonialism, but provided stability and even modest prosperity in some cases. Now, times have changed. The current French government shies away from anything that smacks of the old Gaullist system of intervention and wants to see Africans take responsibility for their own peacekeeping. But the French foreign ministry is also interested in developing a bipartisan approach to Africa with its British counterpart. Moreover, France's leading regional ally, Côte d'Ivoire, contains 25,000 French nationals and is itself in dire political trouble. A further militarization of the region could drag it into civil war. The new president of Côte d'Ivoire, Laurent Gbagbo, has refused to allow his territory to be used for arms transfers to Liberia or Sierra Leone. He could support a regional approach, with Nigeria, which aims to reconcile historic differences between English and French-speaking countries and sees a role for regional peacekeeping in partnership with foreign forces, including British and French. West African leaders in search of stability need to develop some real vision and not satisfy themselves with old slogans that are out of touch with reality and can only comfort their enemies. ■

