# War and Peace in Sierra Leone

PAUL RICHARDS

The war fought by the Revolutionary United Front in Sierra Leone started in 1991, and has dragged on for a decade, causing untold suffering. It should have been settled long ago. Carelessness, folly, and greed caused its prolongation. Now there is better news. On April 3, 2001, it was announced that the rebel group, the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), was asking the United Nations force in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) to deploy in territory it holds. The conflict might be coming to an end. It is timely to ask about the background to the war and the prospects for lasting peace.

The RUF began as a small protest movement of angry exiles. Corruption and political mismanagement drove many Sierra Leoneans out of their country. Some dreamed of revenge, and found a backer in Colonel Gaddafi of Libya. Their movement was intended to end decades of political corruption. This corruption has long been at the root of the country's poverty. Low participation in primary education and high infant mortality are major reasons for a very low rating on the U.N. Human Development Index. Rich in diamonds, Sierra Leone is the world's poorest country in social terms.

The rebels entered the country from Liberia on March 23, 1991. They failed to provoke a mass uprising against the one-party state regime of Joseph Saidu Momoh. The RUF depended on the support of Liberian warlord Charles Taylor. Many people thought the war no more than an overspill from Liberia. The RUF was further undermined by atrocities committed by Liberians and Burkinabes fighting for it as "special forces." Even so, the movement attracted some voluntary adherents—more than most accounts admit. The isolated Liberian border region had long been hostile to the Freetown government. Some young people who rallied were from communities damaged by violent struggles to control cross-border trade. Others were radically minded rural teachers, including alumni from a rural Teachers College at Bunumbu, in forested, hilly country close to the Liberian border.

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Bunumbu had an unusual and imaginative approach to the curriculum. It trained elementary school teachers to cope with life in isolated village schools. Many of its young products were idealistic and committed to serving remote rural communities. But their idealism was deeply dented by a government that paid rural teachers' salaries (pittances at the best of times) months late or not at all. The army, the police, and perhaps city teachers, were a much higher priority for limited public resources when the international community tried to bring a corrupt government into line. Some of the more hotheaded among these disregarded rural pedagogues welcomed the RUF. Their hand is detectable in the way the RUF re-modeled itself, around 1993, from a Liberian-style militia force into a bush movement capable of surviving without local social support or normal external supply lines.

The RUF failed in its initial objective, to take the main provincial towns of Kenema and Bo, in 1991. It then came under pressure from a Sierra Leonean army reinforced by local irregulars, especially after young army officers pushed the moribund Momoh regime aside in 1992, establishing a military government, the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC). A change of fortunes for its ally Charles Taylor blocked the line of retreat into Liberia. Pinned down in Nomo Chiefdom, a remote, under-populated, but diamond rich finger of Sierra Leone surrounded by the Gola forest reserves, with only the large numbers of children it had abducted from run-down border-zone elementary schools for company, the RUF leadership faced hard choices. To surrender risked elimination: Amnesty International reported in 1992 that summary execution of rebel suspects by government forces was routine. The other choice was to tough it out. Green Book ideologues[1] and hardened teachers pooled their talents. They set about molding their child abductees into a forest survivalist movement to fulfill a millennial dream.

Bunumbu graduates had been trained to improvise with local resources. Rather than teach reading and arithmetic without books, the challenge now became how to conjure up food, guns, and radios from the enemy by guile. The children were quick learners, and good at scouting, laying ambushes, and raiding lonely outposts, sometimes spooking well-armed professionals with little more than carved wooden replica guns. Back "home" in the depths of the forest RUF camps, with their neat lines of stick-built quarters, their praying grounds, and elaborate inner fortifications, were virtuoso demonstrations in how to make do with whatever mother nature provided. Each day at dawn, the cadres prayed first as Christians, then as Muslims, and then sang the movement's anthem, after which the battlefront parties were selected. Any who stumbled during the anthem were flogged. The movement was fast evolving into a kind of sect. As is often the case with sects, those who threatened to leave were seen as a threat to the survival of all. A harsh culture of brutal egalitarianism took hold. Classroom

punishments and playground beatings were replaced by lethal force. The RUF so-called "Supreme Court" regularly handed down death sentences to those caught outside camp without a valid pass. Their peers eliminated those who cut "lessons" in this "school."

Although recruited by force, many young people turned into loyalists. RUF pedagogy was more powerful than outsiders realized. A movement that analyzed Sierra Leonean politics in terms of a neglect of rural education, and demonstrated its own practical values through camps run along Green Book egalitarian lines, proved to have considerable appeal to young rural abductees accustomed to being looked down upon by a distant urban elite. Protected by its draconian discipline, the forest-enclaved RUF began to accumulate diamonds, abundant in local streams, which it traded with corrupt government army officers, building up war *materiel* to a point where the leadership could think about larger revolutionary plans once again. Phase Two of the RUF struggle to conquer the nation was launched in November-December 1994 with a series of hit-and-run raids across the country. These raids were intended to advertise that the RUF was back in business. They also netted many more children for training.

Some aid workers, mining engineers, and doctors in rural hospitals were also abducted. Attempts to rescue these professionals—a group including 17 foreign hostages—first focused international attention on the RUF. Some of the Sierra Leonean hostages, harboring their own political grievances, sided with the RUF, eventually joining the leadership group, the War Council. Aid volunteers released after several months captivity in the bush camps expressed guarded admiration for their captors.

In the capital, the political response to these developments was to deny or downplay the rebel revival. Hostage taking was supposedly the work of army splinters. The NPRC needed to hide its embarrassment at not making good on a promise to end the war quickly. Apart from stabilizing the currency, the military regime had achieved little in nearly three years than to provide openings in the army for unemployed youth. A second reason for the regime to be coy about the RUF was that to admit its existence would draw attention to murkier aspects of the real economy under the NPRC—how the army swapped weapons for gems.

No one in government, or the international community (apart from the International Red Cross and a conflict resolution agency, International Alert—both widely condemned by Sierra Leoneans for their pains) went to talk to the RUF, to find out what it had become under forest-incarceration. No one figured out how it might be defeated, or its burning anger assuaged. No one took steps to halt ill-disciplined soldiers killing rebel stragglers. Summary execution continued to stoke RUF's sectarian paranoia—a time bomb waiting to explode.

Towards the end of 1995, the NPRC came under intense civilian and international pressure for elections. Having tried to hush up the war, the regime

and national army bore the brunt of civilian blame for the continuing violence. People in the capital and towns, removed from the fighting, were adamant that the answer was to get rid of the soldiers. "Elections before peace" became a rallying cry. Diplomats downplayed the continuing threat posed by the shadowy RUF. A British group offering support for democratic transition, the International Crisis Group, concluded the problem in Sierra Leone was "not rebel war but bad governance."

Matters came to a head in January 1996, when the chairman of the NPRC, Valentine Strasser, was swept away in a palace coup, opening the way for elections. Loss of earlier civilian enthusiasm for the NPRC was in part the fault of the soldiers. Protected by the regime, troops spent their time operating pointless roadblocks (the RUF had long since given up vehicles), harassing civilians, and squabbling over supplies, rather than fighting. But the RUF also had its own tactics to undermine and discredit the military. RUF cadres knew better than the army how to operate along remote bush paths. They mounted hit-and-run attacks throughout a small country, almost at will. For these raids, they bought or stole army uniforms (or stitched fakes). Civilians in burnt-out villages thought they had been attacked by their own troops. They interpreted RUF pinprick raids as soldiers seeking to prolong the war for private benefit. People coined a new word, *sobel*, meaning "soldier by day, rebel by night."

Elections in early 1996 produced a civilian president, Ahmad Tejan-Kabba, a retired United Nations bureaucrat. Great international acclaim silenced doubts about the electoral process, and the new regime moved quickly to consolidate its rule by standing down government troops. This was ostensibly a gesture of peace to the RUF, but in reality was more an attempt to neutralize the power of officers still loyal to earlier presidents. Mr. Kabba, long a resident overseas, feared an army originally shaped by an old foe, the more-or-less defunct All Peoples Congress political party, more than he feared the youthful, rebellious RUF.

The burden of military defense was switched to ethnic civil defense force units loyal to the new regime. Hunter-militias had already proven effective against the RUF in some areas. The new government vastly expanded these neo-traditional units as its major weapon to win the war. International private security operatives (first hired by the NPRC) were retained to supply weapons, training, radio triangulation, and helicopter support. This enabled these hunter-militias to hit the RUF hard. The security companies, linked to diamond mining interests, were apparently paid off in a mixture of hard cash and mining concessions.

Unlike the government troops, the civil defense forces were not afraid to follow the RUF deep into the bush. Security company personnel—mainly South African and Namibian, but later including some former British army commandoes—undertook specialist operations. The forest was no longer a shield. The RUF was harried to the point of exhaustion. Peace negotiations were attempted,

but with hindsight neither party appears to have been sincere. Despite a general cease-fire, civil defense forces and mercenaries destroyed several key RUF bush camps before the deal was signed on November 30, 1996 in Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire. The RUF concentrated more on how to regroup in parts of the country that were less well defended by civil defense than establishing itself as a regular political party, as the agreement required.

The Abidjan deal quickly fell apart. First, the RUF leader, Foday Sankoh, was detained under house arrest in February 1997, after venturing to Nigeria, apparently looking for new sources of weapons supply. Second, in May, the sidelined but not yet fully disbanded government army staged a mutiny. The maximum-security jail was opened, army detainees released, and the civilian president fled the country. The mutinous army officers had watched the new democratic government's growing commitment to civil defense with alarm. The last straw was when the IMF pressured the president into halting army food subsidies. If senior officers had lost political power and influence in the election, other ranks now risked being unable to feed their families. The mutineers promptly invited the RUF to come out of the bush to join a government of national unity. The resulting, inherently unstable, junta called itself the Armed Forces Ruling Council (AFRC). Ostracized by the international community, the AFRC found some ready collaborators within sections of the country feeling cheated by the 1996 agreement.[2]

Fitful and inconclusive negotiations for the AFRC to step down in favor of the elected government were incomplete when a West African intervention force (ECOMOG), largely manned by Nigerian troops, launched a surprise attack on Freetown in February 1998. The junta leadership was quickly driven out of the capital. Within a few weeks, ECOMOG controlled the main provincial towns. The elected president returned to Sierra Leone in March. The RUF quickly reverted to life in the bush. This time its bases were stocked better than ever, after several months access to the national armory.

Nigerian officers had their own economic agenda for intervening in Sierra Leone. They, too, were keen to exploit minerals. But the ECOMOG venture, carried out with international blessing, also allowed a military regime in Nigeria to draw unaccountably on national revenues under the cloak of military secrecy. This may have been part of some plan by Nigerian dictator, Sanni Abacha, under pressure to pass some kind of democratic test, to impress the electorate, and hang on to political power.

Once the rebels had been cleared from the towns and main roads, ECOMOG peacekeepers gave up further pursuit and settled down to mine diamonds, as former UNAMSIL commander General Jetley alleged in a confidential report.[3] But the scramble for diamonds was a two-horse race. Discovery of major new kimberlite reserves had been announced in the mid-1990s. The security and

mineral interests supporting the democratic government held key concessions. A rival consortium of Israeli, Eastern European, and South African "rogue" business elements saw a way these concessions might be revoked. To do this, they needed to revive the fortunes of the junta.

Unregistered helicopters started to ship in supplies, and Ukrainian and South African mercenaries began to re-equip and retrain hardcore AFRC and RUF fighters in the bush. These forces massed to take the vital Kono diamond fields in October 1998. Then, in December of that year, as the government assured people the RUF was a beaten rabble and that "the war would end by Christmas," an AFRC/RUF hit squad swept down on the capital in a terrifying raid, driving out the Nigerians. This strike, in January 1999, with its appalling burden of atrocity upon civilians, finally brought home the cruel reality of the war to many in Sierra Leone and overseas.

Much of the actual fighting was done by AFRC fighters (i.e. disgruntled government soldiers dismissed by the Kabba regime). The RUF formations hung back, concerned more with raiding the maximum-security jail, hoping to free their leader, Foday Sankoh. RUF commanders cheekily phoned the BBC World Service in London claiming to control events from State House, but—always quick to cut and run—had already withdrawn a safe distance. They had failed to rescue Sankoh, who was spirited away by a government hanging on by its fingernails at the international airport, but they knew the Freetown attack had secured the international visibility their movement needed to parley his release.

A second, and very controversial, peace agreement was signed in Lome in July 1999. This time, it provided for the incorporation of elements of the RUF leadership, including Sankoh (freed from death row), within a new power-sharing executive. The deal largely excluded the AFRC. Again, it seems the parties were not sincere. The RUF was used to playing the long waiting game, always believing (like the other "weak" backwoods revolutionary movement it most resembles—the Shining Path in Peru) that it is not the revolutionaries who succeed but society or the state that fails. Only then will the revolutionaries walk into their inheritance. The political vision is millenarian, not practical.

The Lome agreement was less than a year old when, like the Abidjan peace, it broke down in renewed fighting. The largest U.N. peacekeeping operation in the world, UNAMSIL (with a current agreed strength of 17,500), formed to implement the Lome accords, was humiliated by a spate of RUF hostage-taking incidents in April-May 2000. The RUF, seemingly, was testing the willingness of UNAMSIL to fight. The Kabba government responded to this threat with surprising decisiveness. On Monday May 8, 2000, a hostile crowd marched to the house of Foday Sankoh and his bodyguards opened fire. Sankoh fled, and was later captured by the authorities. But other key RUF leaders had, in fact, been rounded up the day before, and whisked into detention, suggesting that maybe a

trap had been sprung. RUF field commanders, no longer in bush camps but more comfortably ensconced in the main towns of the diamond fields, and growing fat on alluvial diamond wealth, rushed to arm their barricades. The British government sent forces to help stabilize the situation, and to allow UNAMSIL to begin negotiating the release of its hostage troops.

A tense standoff prevailed for several months in the second half of 2000, with the RUF remaining in control of the northern half of the country. Travelers from southern Sierra Leone to Freetown increasingly fell prey to a dissident "AFRC" group known as the West Side Boys (mainly ex-convicts the RUF had released during the raid on Pademba Road jail in January 1999). British specialist troops moved against the West Side Boys in September 2000. The larger situation with the RUF was eased by a series of cease-fire agreements signed in Abuja, the Nigerian capital, late in 2000.

Progress since then has been slow but surprisingly steady. One factor was the change of mood in the last days of the Clinton administration from tolerance of Charles Taylor, the Liberian president, and former Libyan-backed rebel ally of the RUF, to outright hostility. Taylor was not without political sympathizers in the Democratic Party, but the evidence of arms supply to the RUF became an embarrassment. This change of perspective in the Clinton camp helped unite the international community against Taylor, leading to restriction or closure of the main supply line through which the RUF imported weapons and exported diamonds.

A second factor has been a tendency to re-think the war and its causes, from the days when the RUF was assumed to be a rabble without politics, or political reason to exist. Of course, this is not to say that the RUF should be taken seriously on its own political terms. A regular liberation movement it is not. Lome was a mistake, born of desperation, based on the assumption that bargaining might appease the RUF. As already shown, its history and mentality are different, and strongly sectarian. Like so many sectarian movements, it wants either the moon, or martyrdom. But that it will not "play politics" is not the same thing as to say the movement has no political context. Acceptance of the RUF as a symptom of a problem—inequality of educational opportunity—that can only be solved by political means will be a concrete step towards durable peace. But first an end to the fighting has to be devised.

Part of the difficulty in framing any sort of coherent approach to ending the war has been that the international community, and many Sierra Leoneans, have had great difficulty in dealing with, on the one hand, the political and pedagogical aspirations of youthful dreamers and idealists at the core of the RUF, and on the other, the wild, drugged, abducted children who fight for it like automata in the bush. These "rebels without cause" are at times apparently hardly aware of the appalling atrocities they commit. Much of what they do is (perhaps rather unsatisfactorily) put down to drug-addiction, despite evidence that the RUF has

a draconian anti-drugs policy. The trouble with dubbing the leaders of the RUF "criminals and bandits" is that jeering at Libyan-inspired revolutionary aspirations fails to address the threat posed by the military machine the RUF has created. Lacking surrender options, die-hard child fighters continue to kill without compunction, knowing little or nothing of life beyond the strange bush camp worlds of terror and violence they have helped evolve. Draconian measures simply feed the fighting machine.

But a more sensible strategy for dealing with the RUF began to emerge from the low-point of the U.N. humiliation. There is evidence that the three groups—two leadership elements and the rank-and-file—are being usefully differentiated, and appropriate strategies put in place by the Sierra Leone government, the British, and the U.N., to deal with each.

Rounding up the RUF hard-core leadership in Freetown in May 2000 may have been a key move, by serving (odd though it may seem) usefully to re-politicize the movement. The leaders have long kept quiet about their larger ambitions, awaiting the implosion of a society they presume to be rotten to the core. But now they have little option but to state, in their own defense, why they were driven to fight. The platform that beckons is the forthcoming war crimes tribunal before a mixed court of Sierra Leonean and international judges being organized by the U.N. RUF grievances need to be heard. Anyone seeking a foretaste should attend closely to RUF ideologue Mike Lamin, interviewed extensively in a recent French-made documentary film about the Sierra Leone crisis, *Nouvel Ordre Mondial.* This film has been accused of being partial and of voyeuristically dwelling upon violence and atrocity, but what it also does is to make clear the depth of very tangible political bitterness that drives the RUF. Far from being, as critics alleged, a good-time boy spouting revolutionary nonsense to hide a diamond habit, Lamin comes over as deadly serious in his mad-eyed political demands.

As for the young automata in the bush, they should be treated like the products of a prolonged domestic siege—a siege in which the captives have begun to side with their captors. At the end of January 2001, UNAMSIL ventured to the RUF stronghold of Makeni, for the first time since blue helmet troops were seized there in May of the previous year. This time the approach was low-key, and based on very careful confidence building measures. The armory of the U.N. forces now includes a much better understanding of how the young fighters were formed in the first place. Many of these youthful combatants, it is now recognized, are the human rights abusing victims of human rights abuse. To be pacified, they will need to be met with therapy, not force.

This leaves the problem of dealing with the field leadership of the RUF. These are mainly fighters who climbed the RUF meritocracy on the march, rather than through training in Libya. These people remain loyal to the vision of the jailed leadership group, but are of two minds about solutions to their

current predicament, that they are increasingly cut off from Liberian supply routes. Some think their best bet is to back an RUF-like exile group attacking Guinea. This new rebel movement apparently numbers a son of the former Pan-Africanist radical icon, Sekou Toure, among its leadership.[4] It is possible that some RUF supporters of the Guinean venture still cherish a vision of the United States of Africa.

However, others appear to retain shreds of the earlier elementary school radical dream. So, they have begun, in a gesture of some symbolic significance, to use diamond revenues to pay teachers in "Togo," the name they give to the areas of central-northern Sierra Leone currently under RUF control. Through UNAMSIL, this faction has recently asked international NGOs to help them with an under-fives vaccination program. Now they have requested that UNAMSIL fully deploy in areas they control.

Beyond current cease-fire agreements, durable solutions to the Sierra Leone crisis will have to pay attention to the basic weaknesses that made the country vulnerable to war. Rebuilding basic rural education is a clear priority. But equal attention is needed to creating rural employment opportunities outside the diamond economy. Basic education is no good unless it leads to work and respect. Rural economic revival is the key to finding jobs and social incorporation for under-educated militia fighters. A vigorous program of road building, reaching into the more remote diamond-rich corners of the country, with ex-combatants providing the labor, could be the place to start. This would provide initial employment for the fighters and serve to link food producers with sources of diamond wealth (currently, the elite are keen to keep its remote sources of wealth under wraps and prefers to import food to feed diamond-digging labor gangs than source it locally). It was lack of roads that made the RUF camps possible. The improvisatory inventiveness that went into making these camps needs to be harnessed for a more broad-based and peaceful rural transformation.

The conflict in Sierra Leone has boiled unattended for far too long. This is because it fits no existing model of what a war should be. Too many opportunists have tried to shape it to their own needs: to show that private security works, to consolidate democracy in Africa, to prove the U.N. is capable of running successful peace-keeping operations. The World Bank has tried to persuade itself that educational collapse, and armies of angry young men fighting as irregulars for want of better work, demonstrates a new economics of African war driven by "greed" not "grievance." This certainly demands faith in the neo-liberal dogma that "unemployment" and educational failure are always economic, even voluntary, but never political. A panacea favored by international NGOs is to end the war by banning trade in "conflict" diamonds. This is to ignore an abuse of human rights that lies at the heart of the problem in Sierra Leone—the right to a basic education. Young people may or may not be the natural barbarians William

Golding portrayed in his novel, *Lord of the Flies,* but the war in Sierra Leone is graphic and terrible proof that any society failing to provide elementary education and basic job opportunities, risks perishing at the hands of its deluded, autodidactic youth. ■

## NOTES

1 The Green Book of Colonel Gaddafi (c.1977) was widely studied by student radicals in Sierra Leone in the 1970s and 1980s, including those who helped found the RUF. It rejects both Western ballot-box democracy and Soviet-style one-party rule in favor of direct participation by citizens in government.

2 Election results from war-torn districts were inflated, and the chief electoral commissioner, James Jonah, a retired U.N. official formerly in charge of peacekeeping operations in Somalia, later joined the government he had brought to power.

3 Chris McGreal, "Conspiracy to Sabotage Peace Effort: U.N. Commander Accuses Nigerians," *The Sydney Morning Herald,* September 12, 2000.

4 Sekou Toure was the one francophone West African leader to reject General de Gaulle's terms for decolonization. Thereafter Guinea ploughed a lone furrow, with some support from the Soviet block. Sekou Toure cooperated with African radicals leaders, including Kwame Nkrumah, in early ventures to lay the foundations for a United States of Africa, incurring the admiration of African and African-American radicals of a younger generation, despite the collapse of his regime into brutal dictatorship.