

CHAPTER 6

POLICING SIERRA LEONE

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Introduction

The story of policing in Sierra Leone is not the most pleasant of tales. Distrusted and chased out of conflict zones during the war, the Sierra Leone Police (SLP) are challenged on multiple levels. They are simultaneously reasserting control for internal security in the country; building up a credible and effective police force, and re-engaging with local communities throughout Sierra Leone to build the trust of the local citizenry in the ability of the police to provide internal security.

The need for developing a policing methodology that would meet these challenges was recognised at an early stage by both the Sierra Leone government and the members of the United Nations and the Commonwealth assistance team. Some of the key challenges facing the SLP included early questions about the size and structure of the revitalised police force, the type of policing it should engage in, and how policing could be exerted in the country in the face of the widespread collapse of the criminal justice system.

Even prior to the outbreak of war in Sierra Leone in the early 1990s the police presence in Sierra Leone was weakening through corruption and systematic neglect by successive Freetown-focused governments. During the war years it became almost non-existent across the country, and its numbers dwindled as officers left, or were killed and not replaced. It has been estimated that 900 officers were killed during the conflict and that the overall reduction in the size of the Sierra Leone police was almost 30 per cent (from a high of 9,317 to a low of 6,600).¹ In January 1999 alone, more than 300 police officers were killed during fighting in Freetown.²

With evidence that the conflict was subsiding – although by no means over – the United Kingdom in 1999 seconded a seasoned police officer to Sierra Leone to become the Acting Inspector General of Police. By 2000, the Commonwealth Community Safety and Security Project (CCSSP) was established to provide training, support and advice to the police. Funded largely by

the United Kingdom, primarily through the Department for International Development (DFID), the CCSSP provided the bulk of training, management support and moral courage to the SLP from 2000–2002. The mission of the CCSSP is to ‘re-establish the Sierra Leone Police as an effective and accountable civilian police service’.³ The CCSSP has allocated £1.5m to provide training for over 9,000 officers, including providing some senior level training at the UK Bramshill Police Staff College. In addition, the UK DFID has provided £1.25m for a police communications network and £3.5m for vehicles for the SLP, including 155 Land Rovers, 158 motor cycles, 47 medium carriers, 24 large carriers, 10 ambulances and 10 cars.⁴

Through its civilian police (CivPol), UNAMSIL also provides support to the SLP and indeed helped it re-establish its presence in critical areas of the country, especially to the east in former RUF stronghold areas where the police were persecuted and killed by RUF members during the war.

All parties realise that however much support has been provided to the SLP to date, it remains insufficient, given the need that exists. The challenges facing the SLP are enormous, and, as one UNAMSIL official observed, just about the only positive aspect of the SLP was that at least it existed after the war, even if in name only – so at least there was a base to build on.⁵

Building a police force for the new Sierra Leone

The history of the SLP from the late 1960s to the 1990s is a litany of oppressive policing, nepotism and corruption that undermined public confidence in the police and made them a ready target for the RUF during the 1991–1999 war. With corruption and the appointment of friends and colleagues came the decline of the service – skills were not sought after and officers were illiterate.⁶ The police were not given uniforms, training or equipment. In November 1999 a constable was paid the equivalent of \$15 per month. The police were also given a heavily armed Internal Security Unit (now the Operational Service Division) under President Siaka Stevens. By 1999 Sierra Leone had the illusion of a police force but one that lacked the confidence of the public and the equipment, skills and training to provide security in the country.

In discussions on reform of the police, the government of Sierra Leone and its international partners all recognised that building a new police force in Sierra Leone would require a dramatic departure from old-style policing in the country. The SLP needed to become a transparent and accountable service

that was trusted by local citizens as much as by the national government. Thus the SLP was launched on a course of development with the “aim of creating a community police service, which is accountable to the people and is not an organ of the government”.⁷ This approach requires decentralising the police force to local level and bringing in the support of communities, including the paramount chiefs, youth organisations and local organisations, as well as members of the public. These aspirations are reflected in the Policing Charter launched by President Kabbah in 1998.

The key challenge in the intervening years has been matching rhetoric to reality. While the SLP officers are generally committed and enthusiastic about their work, they face unbelievable obstacles in transforming the Policing Charter into the face of the police in Sierra Leone.

The SLP is responsible for the internal security of Sierra Leone, while the RSLAF defends Sierra Leone’s borders. The police are unarmed (with the exception of the operational support division) and rely on building relations with local communities for intelligence gathering. By the end of 2001, the SLP were deployed around the country, even into former RUF stronghold areas where they had come under the greatest attack during the war.⁸ However, coverage remains sparse in some regions.⁹ There seems to be evidence that the police are increasingly relied upon by the local population, an important indication of growing support for the SLP in the country.

The three core functions of the police are currently

- public security;
- crime prevention; and
- joint patrols with UNAMSIL.¹⁰

Early on, however, it was recognised that the SLP on their own could not maintain law and order in the country at current capacity. Therefore one of the tasks of UNAMSIL has been to support the SLP in sustaining internal security, essentially buying time for the police to build capacity and resources.¹¹

The SLP has a current force size of 6,500 including 700 new officers that joined the force in 2001–2002. According to the 2002–2003 National Recovery Strategy, the intention is to bring the force up to pre-war strength – to 9,500. The intention is to take on 1,000 recruits in 2003 and to have reached full force size

by 2006. Importantly, the government has budgeted to absorb the cost of the new 1,000 recruits in 2003. Rather than relying on donor funds to pay for these posts, this sends an important signal that government is committed to building up the force itself. Of course additional funds are being sought to increase salaries and to pay for structural improvements, but out of the \$1,870,600 required for the SLP in 2003, \$1,095,00 has already been committed, leaving (in relative terms) a rather small shortfall of \$775,600.¹²

The police training school at Benguema, which was sacked twice by the RUF and suffered the destruction of some of its building by aerial bombing, can presently only accommodate a maximum of 200 trainees per intake. This is after substantial assistance from DFID in restoring destroyed buildings and facilities.

Before the war there were also three regional police training centres at the provincial capitals of Bo, Kenema and Makeni, and it is hoped that these will be revived if donor funding becomes available.

In order to meet its intake targets with reduced facilities, modifications have been made to the training curriculum. The current basic course has been reduced from six months to twelve weeks, followed by three months of field training. As part of the new CivPol concept the focus will be on training (including field training) and mentoring of the SLP, followed by closely observing progress on the ground wherever the SLP is deployed. Training support will ideally be at all levels of the police hierarchy, and include the strategic planning cycle.

Some of the top executive structure and some of the middle-ranking police managers are well trained, but this is largely 'book knowledge', rather than the type of proficiency that comes with experience in professional policing. Nevertheless it is estimated that 80 per cent of the SLP police officers should be able grasp the strategic plan and to work towards its implementation.

The 2002 strategic plan for the SLP was approved by the National Police Council in August 2002. The focus is on 'back-to-basics' training and specifically on the management of manpower and resources. The strategic plan also recognises the need to build up the practical experience of executive and middle managers.¹³

With these plans come challenges. In terms of structure, the SLP is top heavy, with more supervisors than operational members of the force. Many officers have been reassigned from traffic duty to criminal investigations – two func-

tions that arguably need different sets of skills. Importantly, as the police are better able to perform their function and start to arrest more people, there needs to be a place for arrested people to be detained, and a functioning criminal justice system to ensure that cases are processed. Currently the majority of prisons are derelict. The National Recovery Strategy states that “the lack of prison facilities, coupled with the slow pace of the extension of judicial coverage is seen as negatively impacting on the restoration of civil authority and on the maintenance of law and order in particular”.¹⁴ Notably, the financial requirements for the courts and prisons face funding shortfalls of 93 per cent and 66 per cent respectively.

For the moment however Sierra Leone seems to be benefiting from low crime rates, with very low rates of firearm-related crime. There is some violent crime associated with drug use, but the crimes on the increase are primarily assault-related. Domestic violence is a special concern and a special family support unit has been established within the SLP.

The police are also increasingly seeing evidence of rising drug use, which poses special threats to a large youth population and large numbers of unemployed ex-combatants. Prostitution is also a concern. The police are monitoring both situations.

In its current policing approach, the SLP is focused on working with communities and not engaging in aggressive behaviour or policing tactics. Among some observers, however, there is a concern that a more assertive approach is required, given Sierra Leone’s brutal war and its experience of extreme violence. Others say that Sierra Leone is by and large a peaceful society, and one that is so sick of war that any resurgence of violence will be limited. It is too early to gauge which assumption will be the correct one. The reality, as often happens, will probably lie somewhere in the middle.

Most people, including the police, believe that there are still illegal weapons in the country, either in arms caches or held by criminals. As part of the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration process, as well as the Community Arms Control and Destruction (CACD) programme, many weapons in Sierra Leone have been collected and destroyed. In order to respond to the needs of legal firearm owners, who also surrendered their weapons during the CACD programme, the SLP is establishing a new licensing bureau. This is in response to the fact that no licensing procedures have existed since 1996. The current proposal is that between 100 and 200 civilians will be issued firearms, but only for so-called ‘legitimate needs’.¹⁵ The SLP

is undertaking this task with the technical advice of the UN Development Programme (UNDP), and plans are currently being implemented to establish a database of legally held weapons. However, the police recognise that significant arms caches must remain in the country, and are engaging in an ongoing process of community development programmes in exchange for arms, also with the support of the UNDP.

UN civilian policing and the Commonwealth team

The re-emergence of a policing presence in Sierra Leone has benefited greatly from the high-level support of the United Nations, including UNAMSIL and UNDP, and the CCSSP, funded largely by the British government. External assistance, primarily through the Commonwealth, has enabled the police to acquire basic transportation and communication equipment, as well as uniforms and other key equipment. The British government has also sponsored the training of SLP officers at Bramshill Police Training College in England. Funding for the courses comes from the CCSSP programme. UNAMSIL, in the form of its peacekeepers, has been the principal partner at the deployment level, supporting the police on their arrival in areas that were very hostile to the SLP during the war, such as Kono district.

In addition, UN CivPol has been working with the CCSSP and the SLP to support the training of the SLP and the introduction of better management procedures, such as fleet management, duty rosters, investigation and case procedures. Additional functions include supporting the re-equipment of the police force and supporting the restructuring of the service – in particular its devolution to district level.

UN CivPol has 60 observers working in Sierra Leone. In the months leading up to the elections, this increased to 90, and the number has recently been boosted with the most recent UN Security Council resolution (S/RES/1436 (2002)) which will be discussed below. The function of UN CivPol is closely linked to the plans for the draw-down of peacekeeping troops in Sierra Leone. These troops have been working with the SLP to ensure that internal security and stability, especially in flash points such as Koidu, Tongo Fields, and the capital of Freetown, are maintained. Any plans for a draw-down will be commensurate with capacity of government and the SLP to maintain law and order.

The Commonwealth Community Safety and Security Project has also played a significant role in supporting the transition of the SLP. With the Acting

Inspector-General at the head of the organisation, the UK provides the most visible support to the police in Sierra Leone. However, the CCSSP has also assisted in the rebuilding of police stations, supplying of equipment and the installation of a communication network for the police.

Some observers feel that the CCSSP approach is not what is needed at present in Sierra Leone. They believe that it may have served a purpose earlier in the mission, but what is now needed is training that is drawn from countries that have a similar experience of policing and a greater understanding of the challenges faced in Sierra Leone. In their opinion, what Sierra Leone needs is greater participation of African civilian police, possibly drawn from Commonwealth countries such as Ghana, Kenya or South Africa. But there is no denying the experience and expertise of UN CivPol members, most of whom have at least ten years' experience and have often worked with the UN on other missions, in, for example, Haiti, East Timor and the Balkans.

The relationship between the CCSSP and the CivPol component of UNAMSIL has been somewhat unclear. The CivPol 'advise and assist' mandate was vague, and CivPol has only recently come to grips with the dynamics of policing in Sierra Leone. This is reflected in its new beefed-up role as training partner to the SLP, according to the September 2002 UN Security Council resolution.

The fifteenth report of UNAMSIL (S/2002/987) to the UN Security Council reported that the

... civilian police component of the mission, together with the Commonwealth team, could play an enhanced role in assisting in the recruitment of new Sierra Leone police cadets; devising and delivering a basic and field training programme for the new recruits; providing additional training to serving personnel; training Sierra Leonean trainers; providing advice on strategic and operational planning; and devising and supporting a deployment plan aimed at enhancing security in the areas to be vacated by UNAMSIL troops.¹⁶

These expanded responsibilities are designed to assist the SLP to accomplish the 'critical security benchmark for the drawdown of UNAMSIL', that includes an increase in training and recruitment of new officers, equipping the SLP, and building police stations across the country.¹⁷

Practically, the revised CivPol mandate means that with the UN's commitment to ensure a stable draw-down, the responsibility for ensuring the building of

the SLP has shifted from the CCSSP to UN CivPol. Although the partners will continue to co-ordinate activities, it appears that CCSSP will maintain the role of providing logistical assistance to the SLP. It will also provide specialised training, especially to the operations support division and other specialised branches of the SLP, while CivPol takes a greater responsibility for training and management.

United Nations CivPol will be increasing to 185 personnel. This will comprise 57 trainers assigned to the Hastings police training facility and the provinces, 85 trainers assigned to the 17 police divisions across the country, 15 trainers assigned to SLP headquarters, and 16 'mentors' at SLP headquarters to assist with strategic and operational planning. Ten officers, a commissioner and deputy commissioner will be assigned to UNAMSIL headquarters. The concept of operations for the expanded CivPol role is currently being developed.¹⁸

In many ways, the shift in mandate of UN CivPol is the clearest reflection of the shift of UNAMSIL away from peacekeeping to peace-building activities. By assuming greater ownership in developing the SLP, and linking its strengthening to the draw-down of UNAMSIL, the UN has announced its commitment to work on building Sierra Leone's future police force. Co-ordination between the SLP, UN CivPol and CCSSP will be critical, which is why the new structure will include a steering committee chaired by the Inspector General of Police.

Ongoing challenges and the way forward

With the successful elections of May 2002, Sierra Leone seems to have entered a period of relative calm and stability – at least for a country that only declared the war over in January 2002. With the visible presence and active support of UNAMSIL and the CSSP, the SLP have been able to focus on relearning the core principles of policing, and re-engaging with the communities they are to serve.

It would be wrong to suggest that there are not enormous problems facing the SLP. The danger is that by listing the challenges, the positive developments to date may be overlooked. However, it should not be suggested that these challenges be ignored.

First and foremost, and clearly stated by the UN Security Council in resolution 1436, is the need for further strengthening of the SLP to enable them to maintain security and stability independently. Hopefully strong international support

for Sierra Leone will be sustained until this is achieved. Much of Sierra Leone's resource wealth stretches across the middle of the country. The need to protect these areas and to keep them relatively safe and stable is paramount. With the best will in the world, the SLP is not yet at a stage where it can provide this service, and is the first to recognise this. In its draw-down plans, UNAMSIL identifies the central region and Freetown as the last areas from which it will withdraw, with good reason. If Sierra Leone loses its tenuous control over its mineral resources all the achievements of the past three years may be lost.

This is not a new challenge for the government or the police. Indeed, most of the challenges of policing in Sierra Leone are common to almost every country in the world. Briefly, these include:

- A clearer definition of responsibilities at border areas between SLP and RSLAF.
- Creating conditions that thwart corruption.
- Xenophobia towards foreigners, especially in the mining areas of the country.
- Reintegration of ex-combatants, and the possibility that they could become the drivers of economic and political crime and violence.
- Lack of a functioning criminal justice system to underpin the work of the police.
- A dearth of intelligence-gathering capacity so as to be proactive rather than reactive to threats.
- The establishment of the Special Court and the role of the SLP in supporting its work as a police force, for example detaining and arresting suspects.
- Smuggling of diamonds from areas where police presence is very weak.
- The explosion of street traders in Freetown and the need to regulate their activities.
- Traffic in Freetown and balancing the need for police to perform crime prevention and traffic duties – which wins out?

- Building the capacity of the police to enforce the law, and encouraging a culture of respect for the rule of law among the population.
- Vigilantism, especially in the resource-rich areas of the country.
- The growth of organised crime, especially smuggling and money laundering.
- The situation in Liberia also affects the SLP, especially the influx of refugees, some of whom move into the mining areas and either become involved in criminal activities, or victims of crime.

According to the Acting Inspector General, Keith Biddle, the largest challenge facing the SLP is personnel management – after years of neglect and the infiltration of corrupt practices, a culture of management needs to be rebuilt. This includes increasing funding for the police, as well as decentralising the force away from Freetown.¹⁹ In the current situation, given the critical shortage of prisons in the provinces, prisoners are often transported 14 to 16 hours by road to Freetown to be held and their cases heard.

To counteract the list of woes, however, Sierra Leone is also gaining an advantage in some areas. The expected violence has not emerged, and people have been surprised at how low crime levels are. In addition, while tensions may be simmering under the surface, discontent among non-integrated ex-combatants has not boiled over, nor have there been many serious incidents of attacks against ex-combatants. In fact, tolerance for ex-combatants is unexpectedly high among the general population. This has provided the police with a breathing space in which to focus on management and service delivery issues.

There is also no evidence that disaffected ex-combatants are re-arming. While many people believe that small arms have remained in the country, they have not appeared, except in rare cases of armed burglary, usually attributed to renegade RSALF members.

By engaging with communities, traditional rulers, and the district councils, the SLP should also start to meet its service delivery objectives and implement crime prevention measures. Commanders have started to work with communities to identify issues of concern and possible remedies, while local rulers have been consulted to work out systems of co-operation between traditional methods and 21st century policing.

Ideally the SLP should be able to focus on reducing the capacity of citizens to engage in violent crime, and to build the number and quality of its personnel.

There are still key questions about what type of policing Sierra Leone needs. With the shifting of responsibilities between the CCSSP and UN CivPol there will be an evaluation of the SLP's needs, and the training that is best needed to achieve these. The issue of maintaining an unarmed police force, in a country with such a violent past, remains. Although financial implications play some part, there is also a concern about the image that an armed police would have in a country that has seen so much violence. Also, until police officers have demonstrable capacity to retain control over their personal weapons, there seems little sense in increasing the pool of weapons in the country.

Building a police force cannot be achieved in a few months, or arguably even in a few years. In the words of UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, "the international community must stay the course, provide the resources needed to complete the re-integration of ex-combatants, enhance the capacity of the Sierra Leone police ... and support the transition to peace-building, and thereby grasp the success that is within reach."²⁰

Notes

- 1 M Malan, P Rakate, A McIntyre, (eds), *Peacekeeping in Sierra Leone: UNAMSIL hits the home straight*, Institute for Security Studies (ISS) Monograph no 68, January 2002, p 65.
- 2 K Biddle, *Conflict, Security and Development Group Bulletin*, Issue 5, March – April 2000, pp 1–4.
- 3 Clare Short, response to question from John Barrett, UK Parliament, 26 November 2002, <www.parliament.the-stationeryoffice.co.uk/pa/cm200203/cmhansrd/cm021126/text/21126w14.htm>
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Interview with Superintendent F Muhoro, Deputy Civilian Police Commissioner, Freetown, 22 August 2002.
- 6 K Biddle, op cit, p 1.
- 7 Ibid, p 2.
- 8 C Ero, Sierra Leone: addressing regional dynamics, *Conflict, Security and Development Group Bulletin*, Issue 13, October – November 2001, p 4.

- 9 *National Recovery Strategy* (NRS), Sierra Leone 2002–2003, p 21.
- 10 Interview with Brima Kamara, Acting Inspector-General of Police, Freetown, 26 August 2002.
- 11 Interview with Muhoro, Freetown, 22 August 2002.
- 12 *National Recovery Strategy* (NRS), op cit, p 22.
- 13 Interview with Muhoro, op cit.
- 14 *NRS*, op cit, p 23.
- 15 Kamara, op cit.
- 16 United Nations Security Council, *Fifteenth Report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone, S/2002/987*, 5 September 2002, para. 33.
- 17 Ibid, para. 16–17.
- 18 Ibid., para. 34.
- 19 P Anderson, Interview with Police Inspector-General Keith Biddle, *Sierra Leone Web*, 17 June 2001, <www.sierra-leone.org/feature061701.html>
- 20 S/2002/987, op cit, para. 56.