

INTRODUCTION

RICH SUB-REGION, POOR SUB-REGION

Someone from the Anti-Corruption Commission in Freetown referred to Sierra Leone as “a rich little poor country.” He stressed that for a country with so much mineral wealth, it was unconscionable that 70 percent or more of the government’s budget came from donors. There were many possible reasons for this, he said: but he favoured the theory that organised crime of one sort or another has a controlling stake in Sierra Leone’s economy, and that because the illiteracy rate hovered around 40 percent, “people don’t even know how to speak anymore. It has been a deliberate campaign to keep people quiet.” Meanwhile, with civil society in a nascent stage and unable to provide oversight, the “shadow state” continues with business as usual and corruption, in his opinion and that of a 2004 UNAMSIL survey, poses the greatest threat to peace and stability.

West Africa is home to the world’s sixth largest oil producer (Nigeria), one of the world’s largest cocoa and coffee producers (Côte d’Ivoire), and some of the most notorious diamond deposits (Sierra Leone) and timber exporters (Liberia, Côte d’Ivoire, and Guinea). With Sierra Leone and Liberia recovering from more than a decade of devastating civil war, Côte d’Ivoire in the wake of recent peace talks to end fighting between President Laurent Gbagbo and the rebels who control the north of the country, and Guinea facing a possible future succession crisis, the region’s natural wealth is not easily monitored or controlled.

As in other areas rich in resources but poor in political stability, conflict in the Mano River Basin has consequences that reach not only the many impoverished and displaced people in the region, but around the globe. Warlords and terror networks as well as black-market businesses benefit from freedom of trade in liquid commodities that warring factions are eager to exchange for small arms and light weapons. Al Qaeda has been linked to the “conflict diamonds” mined by the RUF (Revolutionary United Front) in Sierra Leone during the civil war and sold in Charles Taylor’s Liberia to representatives of the terror network. Alluvial mining in the Kono district, a rebel stronghold, increased noticeably in 2001 before the 11 September World Trade Center attack in

New York City.¹ The events of this deceptively remote sub-region should be covered as frequently and in-depth as the so-called “War on Terror.”

The media’s coverage has, in fact, been quite sporadic in frequency although consistent in tone. The civil wars in Sierra Leone and Liberia are portrayed as unhinged, insane, and barbaric. One report in a South African newspaper quoted a young Liberian commander describing a regular ritual from that country’s civil war:

Before leading my troops into battle, we would get drunk and drugged up, sacrifice a local teenager, drink their blood, then strip down to our shoes and go into battle wearing colourful wigs and carrying dainty purses we’d looted from civilians. We’d slaughter anyone we saw, chop their heads off and use them as soccer balls. We were nude, fearless, drunk and homicidal...²

While this story is credible, it represents the extent of the (non-existent) political analysis offered by most reporters. In 1994, journalist Robert Kaplan published an essay in *Atlantic Monthly* magazine called “The Coming Anarchy,”³ arguing that war and violence in Africa was occurring outside any political boundaries and citing the case of Sierra Leone as a primary example. Kaplan’s cry of impending doom implied a crisis beyond the reach or scope of peacekeeping. In his view, the perpetration of conflict seemed not only irrational by Western standards, but also external to logic on the part of the participants themselves. The essay was extremely influential, and a copy was faxed from the State Department to every US embassy in the world. In 1996 Paul Richards rejected Kaplan’s thesis in a book-length argument that presented war as “performance” rather than anarchy.⁴ However, in attributing highly academic motives to the brutality of the RUF in their campaigns of rape and amputation this view fell at the opposite extreme end of the debate on rationality.⁵

The debate has moved on in the past ten years, particularly in policy circles and at the United Nations, but the public discourse never fully recovered from what Richards calls the “New Barbarism” idea. In ascribing either barbaric or overly academic motives to rebel warfare in Sierra Leone and Liberia, political motives and global consequences have been largely obscured from the public examination of conflict in West Africa. There are a number of complexly interwoven threats to the fragile peace in Sierra Leone and Liberia, as well as potential conflict in Guinea and a difficult stalemate in Côte d’Ivoire (perhaps coming to an end with elections in October). Broadly, these threats are driven by three overarching and interlinked themes: the movement of displaced

people and the resulting failure or lack of employment and education initiatives; the lack of funds for demobilisation and reintegration; and the influence of illicit trade.

The UN Missions in Sierra Leone and Liberia (UNAMSIL and UNMIL, respectively) have successfully debunked the myth that the conflicts in the two countries were “beyond peacekeeping.” Both DDR processes have concluded, with largely successful outcomes. UNAMSIL is scheduled to draw down and pull out by 31 December 2005 (one year later than originally planned), while UNMIL still has a lot of work to do in the lead-up to elections in Liberia scheduled for 11 October 2005. Côte d’Ivoire disarmament is scheduled to begin on 14 May, with elections to follow on 30 October 2005, and the UN has committed to monitoring the regional situation carefully before removing the 3,400 troops remaining in Sierra Leone. At its peak, UNAMSIL had 17,000 troops in the country and was one of the biggest peacekeeping operations in the world.

One of the biggest challenges the UN has had to deal with in its peacekeeping operations is the movement and resettlement of displaced people, both IDPs and refugees. The movement of large numbers of people whose lives have been disrupted by war has resulted in the establishment of numerous camps on the borders between Sierra Leone, Liberia, Guinea, and Côte d’Ivoire, as well as IDP camps within Liberia. Some of this migration reflects the emergency of conflict, while a secondary wave of displacement has roots in what UN representatives have described as a developing dependence on free assistance. Nina McGill of Liberia’s Refugees, Repatriation and Resettlement Commission put it this way:

If they say they cannot go back home because there are not enough schools and health centres, they know very well that even before the civil war not all villages and towns in Liberia had those facilities. Some IDPs just want to remain in those camps forever and depend on handouts. But IDPs should return home because there will be a time where there will be no assistance to them in the camps, but rather in their towns and villages.⁶

Informally, many youth are choosing to remain in urban areas rather than return to rural villages and systems of patrimony that are politically exclusive and the site of long-standing inter-generational conflict involving marriage and land. Marginalised youth see only a choice between rural dependency and exploitation of their labour, and the promise of a more materially comfortable

and socially free life in the city. The growth of large unemployed youth populations in the cities has already led to a seemingly increased crime rate in Freetown and the involvement of this demographic group in riots that killed 16 people in Monrovia in October 2004. The sum total of these different types of displacement includes a continued failure to increase employment in the overpopulated urban areas and to improve education and literacy rates for the next generation.

A second major issue threatening peace and stability is the lack of funds for reintegrating ex-combatants in Liberia. During the DDR process that concluded in November 2004, over 100,000 ex-combatants were disarmed and “demobilised.” The demobilisation phase consisted of five days of training and discussion, only four of which were actually spent on the content of the course. Modules on Personal Development and Career Counselling, Trauma Healing, Civic Education, and Conflict Resolution and Peace Building were meant to provide the basis of transition to civilian life. Women were also supposed to be provided with reproductive health and sexually based gender violence (SBGV) counselling. With such a minimal timeframe, UN officials argued that reintegration was the phase in which the bulk of transitional issues would be addressed. However, budget predictions are grim. As of April 2005, there is still a USD39.5 million shortfall that leaves 42,000 ex-combatants out in the cold.⁷ That is only a minor improvement on the shortfall of USD44.2 million and 47,000 excluded ex-combatants predicted in December 2004. For 42,000 ex-combatants at large in Liberia, demobilisation may have been their only exposure to assistance before the elections scheduled for October 2005.

Finally, widespread illicit trade in the sub-region continues to allow the flow of goods and people virtually unimpeded across borders. Diamonds, palm oil, cigarettes, guns, combatants, mercenaries, and child labourers move from one country to the next in a conflict economy that provides no barriers between one country’s instability and the next. Even as the conflagration of Liberia’s civil war was dying down to a low flame, plenty of tinder (offers of payment greater than the UNMIL’s DDR programme) in Côte d’Ivoire lured combatants to the next explosive site. Ordinary trade in produce and palm oil across borders has a negative effect on building national economies and identities. People living in the Kambia district of Sierra Leone have easier access to Conakry markets than to those in Freetown; the loss of border trade to Guinea means fewer transactions among Sierra Leoneans in Leones and other clashes over taxes and border control.

With up to 70 percent of people in the Mano River sub-region living on less than one US dollar a day,⁸ the natural resource base needs eventually to be harnessed for the good of citizens rather than faction commanders, arms dealers, and terror networks. A February New York Times editorial drew the link most likely to get donor countries' attention: "Training camps for Islamic extremists are now thought to be sprouting like anthills on the savanna."⁹ The verb "sprout" may be inappropriate for anthills that are built grain by grain, but the connection between political instability, poverty, and global security is an important one. The United States is set to spend USD420.7 billion on the military in Fiscal Year 2005 (not including an additional USD100 billion on the conflicts in Iraq in Afghanistan).¹⁰ USD19.4 billion in foreign aid was approved for Fiscal Year 2005, an 11 percent increase over 2004 spending but clearly a tiny fraction of the Pentagon's budget.¹¹

Poverty in Sierra Leone is so dire that that the United Nations' Millennium Goals cannot even function as goalposts. There were rice riots in Guinea early this year. Liberian IDPs do not have food rations to take on their return home. People living under such conditions should not have to build terrorist training camps before getting the attention of donors. However, the global nature of the trade in valuable resources and small arms does put a spotlight on conflict in West Africa. A focus on the next generation of warfare (where there are few big, visible adversaries and a lot of small, independent ones) requires a thorough understanding of what defines and threatens peace. Previously the domain of humanitarian work, policy and conflict analysts as well as donors now need to give careful attention to the movement of displaced people, the requirements of post-conflict reintegration, and the effects of international trade to build sustainable peace.

Methodology

The Institute for Security Studies sponsored research in Sierra Leone and Liberia in 2004 to investigate the sustainability of peace and the factors threatening to destabilise it. The research was carried out in October and November in Sierra Leone and Monrovia. Two separate monographs have resulted, one for the ISS Arms Management Programme focused on factors driving the demand for small arms, and this one for the African Security Analysis Programme on the broader regional developments and implications of threats to peace.

In Sierra Leone, I visited the following cities and their surrounding areas: Freetown, Kambia, Koidu, Kenema, Daru, and Bo. A field trip to Liberia was

limited to one week in Monrovia; the security situation at the time did not allow for travel to the provinces. Because of the sensitivities in the post-conflict context of both Sierra Leone and Liberia, interviews and focus groups were loosely structured to allow for different ways of approaching questions about peace and conflict. Questions also varied for different interview subjects: a discussion with a police officer was not framed the same way as a youth focus group in the Freetown slums. The following are questions that remained common to most interview subjects:

- Now that the war is over, what is the biggest challenge to sustaining peace?
- Can peace be sustained once the UN Mission has pulled out?
- Was DDR successful? Why or why not?
- Are there guns still present in your community even after DDR and/or CACD?
- (If yes), who in the community is keeping weapons?
- (If yes), why do they feel the need to keep weapons now that the war is over?

Interviews were conducted one-on-one with government and UN officials, corporate representatives, police officers, soldiers, and NGO staff. Focus groups were conducted with youth in both urban and rural environments and in small communities where practicality prevented individual private discussions. Youth focus groups were convened with the assistance of local NGOs conducting social work and research on an ongoing basis with the youth and community. Rather than attempting to randomise the selection of participants or organisations, local partnerships were formed on an ad hoc, ongoing basis to facilitate maximum exposure and time spent in each location. The National Movement for Justice and Development, through their head office in Freetown, staff in Koidu, and Director in Kenema, were extremely helpful in locating community-based organisations, youth groups, and peace building programs.

In Kambia, I travelled as an observer with the UNDP Arms for Development Program. I was driven in a UN vehicle by a UN Civilian Police Officer and several representatives from the Sierra Leone Police Firearms Division in

Freetown. The police conducted cordon-and-search operations in numerous villages, specifically with the purpose of certifying the area in question arms free so that development money could be released to the community. I observed and spoke with police teams as they went door-to-door, and entered many village homes to see how the search operations were conducted.

Sierra Leone, although it is far more peaceful than it was several years ago, still presents huge hurdles to travel and fieldwork, including both roads and bureaucracy that were at times impassable. Government and NGOs in Freetown have different goals and interpretations of problems than those in the provinces, a point which provincial interviewees never hesitated to make clear (“This isn’t Freetown!”). It was precisely for that reason that every effort was made to visit a representative number of people, groups, and organisations in various parts of the country.

Because many of the topics discussed were considered to be of a sensitive nature, the names of many interviewees have been withheld. All recorded interviews, transcripts, and notes will be kept for verification if required.