Chaos in Sierra Leone

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The present unsatisfactory situation—some would say shambles—in Sierra Leone is not solely the fault of the vicious thugs in the various rebel forces or even of its incompetent government. Much blame can be laid at the door of Britain for its swings of attitude to the problems that have exploded in the country over the past three years.

The roots of Sierra Leone's catastrophe are two centuries old. It was founded by a group of well-intentioned British settlers who bought land from local chiefs to create a homeland for Africans who had become destitute in Europe. Britain's fight against slavery gathered momentum in the early 1800s, and the settlement was extended to provide asylum for some 70,00 black prisoners rescued over decades by the Royal Navy from American, Spanish and Portuguese slave ships (a task most elegantly described in Patrick O'Brian's book, 'The Commodore').

Unfortunately for harmony in Sierra Leone, these former slaves, who became known as Creoles, gradually established ascendancy over Sierra Leone's 13 tribes. Many became doctors, churchmen, teachers, lawyers and administrators, and their advance and influence were resented by indigenous peoples. When the country became independent in 1961, the stage was set for revolution, and there have been countless coups and attempted coups ever since.

The most recent troubles began 10 years ago when former corporal Foday Sankoh formed the Revolutionary United Front to fight against the civilian government of Joseph Momoh who was then ousted in a coup by army captain Valentine Strasser in 1992. The RUF has no political platform, nor does it have a programme aimed at improving the lot of the population: it simply wants power.

Violence has been atrocious and has involved mindless, drug-hazed child 'soldiers' as young as eight, while the West wrung its hands and did nothing except pass resolutions at numerous well-attended, expensive conferences about the undesirability of governments and rebel groups throughout the world making use of boy soldiers.

The country continued in chaos throughout the 1990s. Sankoh was arrested during a visit to Nigeria in 1998 and taken back to Sierra Leone, where he was sentenced to death. Newly-elected President Kabbah was toppled but reinstated in 1998 with the help of Sandline, a British company specialising in provision of non-governmental military support to such regions, and Nigerian troops who restored a shaky peace to the capital, Freetown, and its immediate surrounds.

The British government did not approve of Sandline because it is frightened of the word 'mercenary', and it did not help that the company is run by a former commanding officer of the Scots Guards, to which distinguished regiment a cabinet minister of the British government referred on Irish television as 'chinless wonders.'

The government forced Kabbah to discontinue Sandline's services, but prime minister Tony Blair stated that keeping Kabbah in power was essential and that although it would have been improper for Britain to have broken UN embargoes against supplying weapons to Sierra Leone, the overthrow of the illegal military regime had to be put "into context", which most commentators considered to be tacit endorsement of sanctions-breaking.

Blair stated that Britain's high commissioner, Peter Penfold, had done "a superb job" in "working closely with the regime of President Kabbah," although his foreign minister, Robin Cook, had said allegations of support by Penfold for breaching the arms embargo and working with Sandline were regarded with "great gravity."

Similar mixed signals have continued to be given, but there is little doubt that if Sandline had been allowed to continue its work, the many murderous gangs would have been contained, the army would have received cost-effective training from Sandline's 'mercenaries', and the country would not be in its present awful state.

In mid-1999, Britain and the US pressured what passed for government in Sierra Leone to release the psychopathic ruffian Sankoh from custody, pardon him for his crimes, and involve him in running the country. He was appointed vice-president with responsibility for supervising the country's diamond mines (the only earner of hard currency), a move of sublime stupidity which had the endorsement of Britain's foreign secretary. Nigerian troops withdrew, and a rag-tag UN force from 30 nations began to arrive.

The commander of the UN force, Major General Jetley of India, is an outstanding officer but was presented with an impossible mission, given the poor standard of most troops at his disposal and their almost total lack of basic equipment such as radio sets and vehicles. In May, the country was saved from disaster—as was the UN force—by British troops of the 1st Battalion the Parachute Regiment and the 42nd Royal Marine Commando. Both units were prepared to tackle resistance robustly, and they did so, killing several rebels who were unwise enough to try them out. Word got around, and the rebels backed off, eventually releasing hundreds of UN hostages.

Mr Cook was precise in his statement on May 12, that "the rebels should understand that were they to attack the British forces then the British forces would fight back." He was referring to those troops in Sierra Leone at the time, the paratroops and commandos, and not the 370 soldiers subsequently committed in a non-operational role to train the Sierra Leone army.

This, however, is a distinction without a difference, for neither the rebels nor the rest of the world appreciated that Britain's foreign secretary could make it clear that if rebels attacked the first group of forces, then they would, in his words, "hit back," and if there were another contingent deployed, then it would not—or could not—hit back, because its mission statement was entirely different.

But this is exactly what has happened. Mr Cook said "We do not anticipate an immediate threat to our British troops (in June)" and in this he was wrong, because a threat rapidly presented itself and was dealt with swiftly and effectively. But British troops were not in a position to do the same when another threat appeared 10 weeks after withdrawal of the paratroops and Marines.

The eleven soldiers of the Royal Irish Regiment taken captive by rebels, the so-called 'West Side Boys,' are in country to train the Sierra Leone army and were not, apparently, tasked or able to provide their own protection against irregular or rebel factions. Britain had to engage in negotiations with thugs for their release on equal terms, army to army, as it were. The picture of a British senior officer holding discussions with the weird 'Colonel Cambodia' as one of these cretinous yobbos has deemed himself, is extraordinary, as is the release of five soldiers in exchange for a satellite telephone in order that a bunch of oafish barbarians can contact the BBC to present their 'demands.'

The whole affair is humiliating for the British government, which is, as always, terrified that electoral unpopularity might result from injury or death to members of the armed forces who have been placed haphazardly in harm's way by the new generation of video warriors inhabiting Westminster. It is bizarre that British soldiers can be committed in a training role by their government without means of self-defence, or orders to fight their way out of trouble.

Mr Blair and Mr Cook were warned of the consequences of committing the training mission while Sierra Leone was not yet under control of the UN peacekeeping mission, but were determined to 'maintain influence' in a country they had let slide to disaster. There are British advisers in senior posts, and the head of the police is British, but Blair and Cook refused to commit soldiers to the UN peacekeeping mission, which is where they would be of most value. Sandline could have looked after the training aspect—at a tiny fraction of the cost of regular troops.

No matter the outcome of the affair, there is only one way forward: either the trainers are withdrawn or they must be provided with security. There have been too many mixed signals, but other governments thinking of becoming involved in unstable, insecure areas might learn some lessons from Britain's abysmal political performance regarding Sierra Leone over the past three years.