

# The shambles in Sierra Leone

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It is an indication of international incompetence that the final resort in war-torn Sierra Leone appears to be despatch of the Reverend Jesse Jackson to sort it out. Jackson is a joke figure, sometimes referred to, without the slightest justification, as a 'world statesman,' who is trotted out as a symbol by the US when it doesn't have a clue what else to do. When events turn to America's advantage, Jackson is hailed as having worked a miracle. When everything falls apart, he is not condemned. We can expect this again in Sierra Leone.

In 1997 a White House spokesman was asked why Mr Jackson was deemed a more appropriate person than a professional diplomat to be the president's 'Special African Envoy.' His halting answer, redolent of embarrassment (for the poor fellow had a conscience), included the resounding revelations that "Well, he brings enormous enthusiasm. He brings a great deal of experience because he has travelled frequently...He was co-leader of the presidential mission to the African-American summit in Zimbabwe...and he also led a team of observers to the 1994 elections in South Africa." And if this is an indication of America's approach to Africa's dreadful problems, there is little wonder these problems continue. The man is a charlatan, but the real answer to the question is that he is black, popular with blacks and with the liberal establishment (which has forgiven him for calling New York 'Hymie-Town' in an insulting reference to rich Jews), and a potential political pain in the butt if he is not found something important-sounding to do to keep him out of Washington as much as possible.

It is largely America's fault that the civil war in Sierra Leone has been revived with such intensity by the rebels. The US and Britain cobbled together a weird peace agreement last July in the ingenuous hope that the main rebel leader, Foday Sankoh, would abide by it. Of course he did not, and anyone with an intelligence quotient above that of a brain-dead rabbit would have understood why. The man is a born-again psychopath with the moral precepts of a poisonous snake. The CIA maintains fascinating psychological profiles of such people (well, of all prominent people, really; I saw part of one, once: it was detailed and devastating), but in the case of Mr (formerly corporal) Sankoh, this document ob-

viously went missing. There can be no other explanation for America's support for him in the power-sharing agreement thrown together at Lome in July 1999. (*The Economist* calls it "a half-baked deal", which is being kind.) Sankoh and his thugs of the so-called Revolutionary United Front (RUF) are guilty of mass murder and of conducting savage mutilation of thousands of people. By any standards they are war criminals of the vilest sort, but there is much resistance to the call by Amnesty International for prosecution or even indictment of Sankoh on such grounds.

## Confusion and murder reign in Sierra Leone, not only because the rebels are creating chaos but because the UN military commander has been placed in an impossible position, having been allocated ill-trained and unprepared contingents

The Reverend Jackson said on May 12 that, "The voice of the RUF in Sierra Leone is Foday Sankoh's voice, and his voice would be a very positive one...One of the things I would want to do early on [during his visit to Sierra Leone] is to seek not only the whereabouts of Foday Sankoh but to assure him of some port of safety if he can hear our voice." According to Reuters, Jackson "likened the RUF to the African National Congress during the transition to peaceful politics in South Africa and suggested that foreign aid might help the RUF follow the ANC's example."

OK, so the Reverend Jackson might shortly be recalled to the mothership to be whisked back to planet Zog in order to receive an overdue pre-frontal lobotomy, but meantime he is the voice of US foreign policy so far as Sierra Leone is concerned. He is the personal representative of the president of the United States, by golly; and that still counts for something, in spite of Clinton being Clinton. Jackson is head of the US 'National Rainbow Coalition' whose handout describes him as having "played a major role in virtually every movement for empowerment, peace, civil rights, gender equality, and economic and social justice," following a spell at the University of Illinois on a football scholarship and attendance at the Chicago Theological Seminary "until he joined the civil rights movement full time in 1965." In fact, this self-important busybody has made a lucrative career out of jumping on every bandwagon

that rolled into his field of view. But now he is guiding US foreign policy in Africa and, especially, at the moment, US policy in the tortured country of Sierra Leone in which the United Nations peacekeeping force has been embarrassed, emasculated and almost destroyed.

This is no fault of the UN secretary-general, Kofi Annan. Once again he faces a crisis whose solution lies only in the hands of nations that could but won't contribute appropriate numbers of properly trained troops to the mission. It is fatuous for the UN to be given dribs and drabs

from 30 countries, as is the situation in Sierra Leone. The commander of the force, India's competent Major General Jetley, must be tearing his hair out, for he has been given an almost impossible task. In addition to the permanent members of the Security Council breathing down his neck, full of ignorant advice and ready to condemn him at the drop of a hat, there is the saintly Reverend Jackson saying that "The support that Foday Sankoh needs to turn the RUF into a political organisation is deserved." Mr Sankoh is now in custody, and one wonders what the Rev Jackson will say next.

General Jetley has other problems. The main one is that none of the African contingents in his force of 8,700 (minus hostages) is worth very much. They are unprepared for the task, being ill-equipped and poorly-disciplined. It is ludicrous to expect such a bunch to perform adequately, or even in a manner approaching efficiency. Reflect: it comprises personnel from Bangladesh, Bolivia, Canada, China, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Egypt, France, Gambia, Ghana, India, Jordan, Kenya, Kyrgyzstan, Malaysia, Mali, Nepal, New Zealand, Nigeria, Norway, Pakistan, Russia, Slovakia, Sweden, Tanzania, Thailand, UK, Uruguay and Zambia. How on earth could any commander bind that lot into a cohesive team in a few weeks? And note that there is one significant non-contributor: The United States of America. They send Jesse Jackson.

The US Congress has ferociously resisted creation of a UN ready-reaction force that could be called upon to cope with such situations. Other members of the Security Council are more than happy to follow its lead (if 'lead' is an appropriate word in such shameful circumstances). But they then leap up and down about "UN inefficiency" when it is their own lack of resolve that contributes to and even causes crises of a dreadful nature around the world.

Let it be made quite clear: the only thing that the Foday Sankohs of this world understand is maximum force. The moment that a single British battalion was committed to the area and showed that it was prepared to use such force, the rebel advance slowed down. The unit wasn't under UN command, so it could be as aggressive as it liked. Those UN elements that could be effective (the fighting battalions from non-African countries) have their hands tied by their terms of reference. The principles of war and the precepts of such as General Colin Powell are apposite; define the aim of the mission; get together the force necessary to achieve the aim; train it and make sure it understands its orders; assemble the logistic elements and administrative expertise necessary to support it; go in and defeat the ungodly; install a civil administration to run the country; get out. If you can't do that—forget the whole thing. So far as the UN's operation in Sierra Leone is concerned, there is no aim; the force cobbled together is not capable of looking after itself, never mind keeping the peace; and the enemy is rampant and will continue to be so until an aim is established and a peacemaking force given teeth to defeat an evil enemy.

Confusion and murder reign in Sierra Leone, not only because the rebels are creating chaos but because the UN military commander has been placed in an impossible position, having been allocated ill-trained and unprepared contingents. His own two national battalions and a couple of others can be trusted, but the rag-tag and bobtail are worse than useless. It is criminal that the UN secretary-general is forced to commit such ineffective elements to an important humanitarian operation. The solution lies in creation of a standing UN force of about 10,000 soldiers, trained in peacekeeping and ready to be despatched around the world. America won't have that, of course, but it won't commit US soldiers, either. It bombs from 20,000 feet or sends Jesse Jackson. Same thing, really.