

Sierra Leone

UN is battling for itself

By Jonathan Power

WHEN Kofi Annan, the UN's Ghanaian Secretary-General, visited Rwanda in May, 1998 he ended up being pilloried in an aggressive press conference for presiding over the UN's "hands off" policy during the genocide of the Tutsis by the Hutus four years previously.

Journalists were quoting from Philip Gourevitch's shocking then just-published, book, "We wish to inform you that tomorrow we will be killed with our families". In it he charged that the UN had ignored a cable from its local commander warning of the impending genocide.

As William Shawcross tells it in his important new book on the UN, "Deliver Us From Evil", "His voice almost cracking, Annan ended by saying that 'too much was made of one cable and that if information was indeed the only problem then peacekeeping would be much easier. We would not be having problems in Kosovo because everybody knows. We would not have had a problem in the Congo because everyone knew we had to separate the troops and the refugees. Why didn't it happen despite the information? Later everybody knew that there were refugees left behind when one million went back to Rwanda. Why didn't the information make us go and save them?'"

Ever since the Rwanda genocide the corridors of the UN have been pervaded by a heavy sense of guilt. For his part, President Bill Clinton tried to make amends for America's obstructive role by actually going to Rwanda and making a contrite apology. Yet as we all know from day to day life, guilt on its own doesn't always engender better behaviour. Neither, come to that, does having more information. We either have the will because we have the conviction, or we don't.

age" and his physical health steadily declined, recalls a biographer.

Walter Lippmann described the odds in one of his telling columns in the New York Herald Tribune: "The cause of the opposition to the UN from East and West is a determination not to have the UN succeed in what it is attempting to do. For if the UN succeeds, there will not be a communist government in the Congo. That is what Khrushchev hated about Hammarskjöld. And if the UN succeeds, there will not be a restoration of white supremacy in the Congo and that is why money, propaganda and clandestine intervention are being employed [by the French, the Belgians and the British] to frustrate the UN."

Moreover the political and managerial complications over Sierra Leone are nothing as compared with the Congo. Brian Urquhart, a former head of UN peacekeeping, described the effort to persuade the rebellious, secessionist leader Moise Tshombe to agree to the National Reconciliation Plan as "like trying to get an eel into a bottle". The UN, moreover, was not only under strength it had an Ethiopian contingent that was totally undisciplined and elements from the Swedish airforce that tried to take off and bomb the rebels on their own say so.

By this measure the UN operation in Sierra Leone is a haven of good sense. The Security Council is reasonably united. The diamond traffickers and some of the companies may have their own agenda but they do not have the ear of Western governments, as did the copper miners of Katanga forty years ago.

Yet there is one major difference that stands out. In the Congo, the U.S. was prepared to pull its weight on peacekeeping support, providing low cost transport for the troops of other countries and other logistical help. Now, besides not paying

Thus, until a week ago, we had to watch the unfolding carnage in Sierra Leone, as did Kofi Annan, with hands clasped, baited breath, wondering how far the situation had to spiral downwards in the direction of genocide or mass killings before the resolve of the Security Council made itself apparent.

Meanwhile, we were swamped with information on children being conscripted into the rebel army and children at large having their limbs amputated by machete.

"How much information do they want?" Kofi Annan doubtless asked his wife.

The Secretary-General is supposed to bake bread without flour much less yeast.

A man with an ego would have quit long ago. One of Annan's predecessors, the Burmese U Thant, suffered similar attacks, when in 1967 he ordered a UN peacekeeping force to honour an Egyptian government request to withdraw from its soil, triggering an Israeli attack on Egypt and the Six Day War. "He suffered irreparable psychological dam-

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its dues on time, the U.S. offers transport at four times the commercial rate. There may be no cold war, but this attitude undermines the UN as effectively as an ideological fist fight.

Very much for their own reasons, the British have got involved in Sierra Leone and perhaps even saved the situation. Prime Minister Tony Blair sent in a naval task force to evacuate British and other foreigners. Once they got their feet on the ground, finding their superior training gave them a cutting edge and backed by a favourable press at home they've stayed on, secured the capital and helped with the capture of the murderous rebel leader Foday Sankoh.

But such ad hocing is not good for the UN in the long run. Insisting on operating outside the UN chain of command, the British follow in the footsteps of the bad example that the U.S. set in Somalia. And now the Nigerian military is talking about operating in Sierra Leone outside the UN as well. This is no way to revitalize the UN, nor to build up the reputation of its peacekeeping department for future conflicts.

UN peacekeeping can work very well. This has been demonstrated in places as diverse as Cyprus and Namibia. Most recently, UN intervention in East Timor has been a remarkable success. But it only will happen if a will to make it work returns to the corridors of the UN. In different ways Clinton and Blair have undermined the UN. One can only hope that peace is brought to Sierra Leone despite their deficiencies.—

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