

# What's behind Africa's 'diamond war'?

By Ashfak Bokhari

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WHEN Robin Cook, British foreign secretary, last month suddenly burst into anger over free trade in diamonds in the Belgian city of Antwerp, where the world's largest trading exchange is located, and sought urgent curbs on its sale, he was only referring to what are now called 'blood' diamonds because their sale proceeds are used to finance at least three civil wars in Africa.

In Sierra Leone, a former colony of Britain, diamond-producing areas are controlled by Foday Sankoh, a notorious warlord and leader of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), who doesn't mind chopping off limbs of innocent civilians to terrorize the population and thus strengthen his control over the mining areas. These diamonds, in rough shape, are then smuggled out of the country through Liberia where his ally, Charles Taylor, is in power for sale in Antwerp where they currently fetch about 200 million dollars annually.

On Wednesday, the UN Security Council endorsed Britain's demand and imposed an eighteen-month embargo on all diamond exports from Sierra Leone in a move to cut off funding for rebels in the west African country. The annual sales of diamonds in the world is worth twenty billion dollars and eighty per cent of the trade is in rough diamonds. But a major problem that this trade faces is that it has been barely regulated. Most smuggled diamonds, stolen or illegally mined, have turned up in Antwerp where both the Belgian government and the EU have turned a blind eye.

Why Britain is particularly keen to stem the diamonds trade from Sierra Leone where at present it controls not a single diamond is difficult to understand. Cook told the House of Commons, after a visit to Freetown, capital of Sierra Leone, in June, that

are now part of the Kabbah regime. They are Paul Koroma and Samuel Hinga Norman. It is the coalition of these forces on whose behalf British troops are there to regain control of the diamond areas. Sierra Leone, officially the least developed country in the world, has for long been torn by a civil war being fought over control of mineral deposits. In fact, all the present conflicts in Africa stem from a scramble to capture mineral resources.

Ahmed Tejan Kabbah's People's Party was elected in February 1996. He promised to stabilize the country and make it safe for international investors. But in May 1997, Maj-Gen. Johnny Paul Koroma, an ally of the RUF, carried out a military coup. The Kabbah-RUF peace agreement broke down this year when the RUF took UN peacekeepers hostage. On the one side is the neighbouring regime of Charles Taylor who has effectively turned Liberia into his own business empire. Taylor is closely linked with the RUF and diamonds, extracted from Sierra Leone's mining areas, are channelled through Liberia. The illicit business is linked with "a mar-

revenue, economic organisation, finance, customs, and even the ministry of defence. The commander of the Sierra Leone Police is Inspector-General Keith Biddle, formerly of the Greater Manchester and Kent forces. A British official was quoted as saying, "I wouldn't say we are running the country but it is fair to say that it is better run because we are here."

Britain's defence secretary Geoff Hoon justifies the decision to arm the Sierra Leone army saying: "We have strong interests there and we want to help in whatever way we can". The preferred help includes stationing troops there for "many, many months."

So, Britain has virtually been drawn into Sierra Leone's civil war. Daily *Telegraph* recently noted: "It represents perhaps the most ambitious attempt by Britain to involve itself in an African nation's affairs since the colonial era." It quoted Brigadier Richards, the commander of Britain's forces in Sierra Leone, as saying, "I am constantly surprised by the number of people who come to me and ask that Britain [should] recolonise Sierra Leone."

For all practical purposes, Britain has assumed de facto control of its former colony. It has already effectively taken over the UN mission, Sierra Leone Army and pro-government militias by the simple expedient of sending a small number of British "advisers" and commandos to take charge and following this up with a substantial armed force.

Sierra Leone is the largest independent military operation carried out by Britain since Margaret Thatcher dispatched a British task force to Falkland Islands in 1982. The Labour government of Prime Minister Tony Blair has repeatedly described it as a mission limited to "non-combatant evacuation" of British nationals. It is now being termed an exercise in "military diplomacy." The issue of who controls Sierra Leone's mineral wealth and, by extension, far greater resources throughout Africa seems to be the Blair government's key concern.

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Sierra Leone, in June, that his government's "main objective" in that country was to take the diamond-producing areas out of the hands of the rebel Revolutionary United Front (RUF). Then in whose control these mining areas should go? The irony of the circumstances is that Cook was not defending the interests of the poor people of that country by seeking a ban on sale of 'blood' diamonds. He was only defending the 'vital interests' of four mining multinationals which had made deals with Sierra Leone's president Kabbah last year, after the US-brokered peace deal was struck between the RUF and the government.

"One square meter after another, the whole of 'usable' Sierra Leone has been mortgaged off in the form of concessions for extracting diamonds, rutile (titanium dioxide), bauxite and gold", says an article in *Le Monde Diplomatique* about the terms of that deal. "What is at stake is over a billion dollars worth of stones sold in the jewellers' shops each year, the world's second biggest field of rutile, and bauxite deposits that could have an effect on world prices..."

The companies involved are DiamondWorks (Canada), Rex Mining (Belgian), Global Exploration Corporation (Thailand) and Sierra Rutile (allied with a US company). It is the interest of these companies that Cook is defending in Sierra Leone. (Currently, De Beers, the South Africa corporation, has a virtual monopoly over the diamond trade and 80% of the world's diamonds are traded through Antwerp.)

The mining deals were struck with the heads of militias who

ket in arms, drugs and money-laundering in Africa." On the other side are the militia leaders Norman and Koroma now working with Kabbah and backed by the British.

In May, when 1,000 British paratroopers and marines sent into Sierra Leone were withdrawn, London's intentions, as spelled out in an official statement, were "strictly limited to establishing peace." The withdrawn troops were later replaced with 200 "military trainers" (as the US did in Vietnam). Their job is to train 1,000 raw recruits for the Sierra Leone army at a special camp.

Cook says only a third of the "trainers" would actually be deployed in training. The rest will be put on "other duties." John Prescott, the deputy prime minister, was frank enough to admit, "we aren't leaving". He told Sierra Leone's President Kabbah as he met him: "We have brought an element of stability and now we are moving to the second stage of restoring and helping in the democracy."

London *Guardian*, sensing the real intentions of Britain in Sierra Leone, on May 19 described the British military intervention as "second colonization" and said in a report that "months before this crisis, a quieter British invasion was under way. There is barely a government ministry in that country that does not have some Whitehall bureaucrat checking the books or offering what is euphemistically called 'advice'."

The newspaper revealed that the accountant-general in Sierra Leone's finance ministry is a British, alongside other 'advisers' in departments dealing with

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This is the first such unilateral military action in a decade by a European power independent of the US. So far the US had forced or dictated to the NATO or the UN to back its initiatives in case of Iraq, Bosnia, Kosovo, Somalia and Sudan. Britain has now followed in America's footsteps.

Unhappy with restrictions on its ability to intervene directly in Sierra Leone, the Foreign Office in London came to an arrangement with a mercenary outfit, Sandline International, for the purpose of breaching the UN embargo and aiding pro-government forces. Sandline's specific mandate was to help regain control of diamond-producing areas.

A week later a spokesman of the Conservative party argued in the parliament: "The government has made clear their great distaste for the private-sector military companies, but if such companies had been used in Sierra Leone, they would have realized the objective, which we share, of ensuring victory for the democratically elected government of Sierra Leone and they would have secured the country's wealth-creation area — the diamond mines which could have been handed to a major mining corporation."

Kabbah and Britain now want the UN to set up an international tribunal to try Foday Sankoh for his crimes against humanity which include chopping off arms and legs of innocent civilians and abduction of children for use as sex slaves and soldiers. But a major obstacle is that Sankoh enjoys amnesty granted to him last year.