

## Sierra Leone

<b>Response to Information Request Number:</b>	SLE01001.SND
<b>Date:</b>	05 January 2000
<b>Subject:</b>	Sierra Leone: Information on the 1997 coup d'etat, ECOMOG harassment of civilians, and the current situation in Sierra Leone.
<b>From:</b>	INS Resource Information Center, Washington, DC
<b>Keywords:</b>	Sierra Leone / Armed conflicts / Armed forces / Civil wars / Collective punishment / Cruel punishment / Internal strife / Military government / Military alliances / Military intervention / Military occupation / Military repression / National defence / National security / Paramilitary forces / Repression methods / Rule of Law / Uprising

### Query:

Please provide information on the 1997 coup d'etat, the actions of ECOMOG forces in the aftermath of that coup, and the current situation in Sierra Leone.

### Response:

#### 1997 COUP D'ETAT

On 25 May 1997, the government of President Ahmed Tejan Kabbah, who had been elected president in March 1996 in the first multi-party elections for nearly three decades in Sierra Leone, was overthrown by a group of soldiers from the Sierra Leone Army (SLA) who had formed the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC). The leader of the coup and head of the newly formed AFRC, Johnny Paul Koroma, had been among nine soldiers charged with attempting to overthrow the government in September 1996. The armed forces were joined by the rebel Revolutionary United Front (RUF) and formed what became known as the People's Army. In effect, AFRC soldiers (formerly SLA soldiers) and rebel RUF soldiers jointly ruled Sierra Leone until February 1998 when ECOMOG (Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group) troops stormed Freetown and returned President Kabbah to power. The RUF and AFRC, including members of the SLA, retreated to the country side (UK, Apr. 2000, 5; HRW, July 1998, 4; UN OCHA-IRIN, 29 Dec. 2000).

#### MAY 1997 - DECEMBER 1999

The nine months of AFRC/RUF rule of Sierra Leone, from 25 May 1997 to 13 February 1998, was characterized by serious human rights violations and a complete breakdown of the rule of law. Immediately after the 1997 coup, Nigerian ECOMOG forces already present in Sierra Leone were significantly reinforced by additional troops from Nigeria, Guinea and Ghana. On 13 February 1998, ECOMOG forces ousted the AFRC/RUF junta. There were reports of acts of violence and intimidation by ECOMOG troops against civilians in Freetown and other parts of the country (UN OCHA-IRIN, 29 Dec. 2000; UK, Apr. 2000, 5 & 9; HRW, July 1998, 4).

On 19 October 1998, twenty-four (24) army officers were executed by firing squad after having been convicted of participation in the 1997 coup d'etat. Ten (10) officers convicted of the same charges had their sentences commuted to life in prison. The executions were

condemned by Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the British government, the European Union (EU) and UN Secretary-General Koffi Annan (AFP, 23 Oct. 1998; AFP, 20 Oct. 1998; AI, 20 Oct. 1998; Roy-Macauley, 19 Oct. 1998; HRW, 19 Oct. 1998).

In January 1999 RUF rebels and some former troops of the SLA launched an assault on Freetown and seized parts of the city from ECOMOG. Before ECOMOG regained control of the capital, at least 5,000 people were killed and many neighborhoods were thousands of others were abducted by the rebel forces. Some were used for forced labor, others as sex slaves, and many terrorized into joining the rebel army. ECOMOG forces summarily executed suspected rebels and collaborators in their efforts to drive the rebel forces from the city (UN OCHA-IRIN, 29 Dec. 2000; UK, Apr. 2000, 8).

All parties to the conflict were responsible for human rights abuses and violations of international humanitarian law. Civilian Defense Forces (CDFs) and civilian militias, commonly referred to as *Kamajors*, who support the Kabbah government, committed various human rights abuses including indiscriminate killings and torture. The *Kamajors* were responsible for the majority of abuses committed by those fighting on behalf of the Kabbah government since February 1998. However, abuses by forces aligned with the Kabbah government were carried out on a smaller scale than those abuses committed by the AFRC/RUF (HRW, July 1998, 4-5).

The AFRC/RUF waged war by attacking the civilian population. They used a brutal terror campaign to exert political and military control over the population. Testimony taken from survivors and witnesses of rebel attacks reported physical mutilation, rape, abduction, torture and murder among the atrocities committed by the AFRC/RUF (HRW, July 1998, 11).

In an attempt to restore peace and stability to the country, the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) was deployed in November 1999 to assist in the implementation of the Lome Peace Accord signed by the Kabbah government and RUF rebels in July 1999. The accord provided for the establishment of a unity government that includes the RUF and former AFRC junta. UNAMSIL has been criticized as being ineffective in its ability to protect civilians from harm in rebel-controlled territory (HRW, 30 Nov. 2000; Adeyemi, 15 Nov. 2000).

In February 2000 UNAMSIL was expanded in size from 6,000 to 11,000. During the following month rebels attacked UN forces in eastern Sierra Leone and seized weapons and equipment. In May more than 500 UN peacekeepers were abducted by the RUF. The previous peace deal reached between the Sierra Leonean government and the RUF collapsed and British troops arrived to evacuate British nationals. British advisors provided support for the UN forces (Reuters, 3 Jan. 2001; UN OCHA-IRIN, 29 Dec. 2000).

Complicating matters further, the Indian commander of UNAMSIL accused Nigerian peacekeepers of sabotaging the peace process by colluding with rebels in illegal diamond mining. In August 2000 former SLA soldiers held several UN officials, ECOMOG troops, journalists, and others hostage. Most were released within a week and RUF commanders being held were also freed a month later. In September British paratroopers attacked the camp of a rebel group known as the West Side boys who had taken 11 British troops hostage. During the same month India and Jordan withdrew their troop support from UNAMSIL. British troops deployed a taskforce of 500 British Royal Marines in Freetown to reinforce their troops who were training the SLA (Reuters, 3 Jan. 01; UN OCHA-IRIN, 29 Dec. 2000; Adeyemi, 15 Nov. 2000).

## **CURRENT SITUATION**

On 10 November 2000, the RUF and the government of President Kabbah signed a nine-point peace agreement in Abuja, Nigeria. The agreement called for an immediate 30-day cease-fire, full deployment of UNAMSIL, and the return of equipment, weapons and ammunitions seized by the RUF. The agreement also called for the immediate resumption

of the disarmament, demobilization and integration program of the Lome Peace Accord signed in July 1999. In December Britain announced that 300 Gurkha soldiers will help train the SLA (UNOCHA-IRIN, 29 Dec. 2000; Adeyemi, 15 Nov. 2000).

Presently, UNAMSIL reports that general security in the country remains calm, except for areas near the southeastern Guinea border. Agence France Presse reported the Sierra Leone government's mounting concern over RUF rebel activity in Guinea that has claimed at least 900 lives and caused the displacement of hundreds of thousands of local Guineans and Sierra Leoneans and Liberians who resided in Guinea as refugees. Sierra Leonean refugees continue arriving in the Guinean capital of Conakry after fleeing the conflict zones of southwestern Guinea. Many of those in Conakry are awaiting sea passage to Freetown. UNHCR stated that as of December 30<sup>th</sup> 1,559 refugees had voluntarily repatriated to Sierra Leone in an effort to flee the rebel violence that has now spread to southern Guinea. Meanwhile in Freetown, returnees have refused to move out of refugee transit centers after the maximum 5-day stay. UNHCR is trying to arrange alternate accommodations in Sierra Leone for those from unsafe areas of the country (UNHCR, 2 Jan. 2001; AFP, 27 Dec. 2000; UN-OCHA, 22 Dec. 2000).

UNAMSIL peacekeepers, whose mandate has been extended until 31 March 2001, appear to now be poised to enter RUF controlled territory. However, at the moment RUF intentions remain unclear. Although the RUF appears to have attempted to put a stop to atrocities being committed by its forces and has allowed further freedom of movement within Sierra Leone, the RUF has sent mixed signals regarding UNAMSIL deployment in accord with the peace agreement. The RUF has indicated that the UN forces could only deploy if RUF leader, Foday Sankoh, is freed; and at other times the RUF has stated that Sankoh's release was not a requisite for UNAMSIL deployment in territory under its control. The U.S. government has extended Temporary Protected Status (TPS) to certain Sierra Leonean nationals until 2 November 2001 (Reuters, 3 Jan. 2001; UNSC, 22 Dec. 2000; FR, 9 Nov. 2000).

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