

Towards Rebuilding a Failed State: The United Nations Intervention in the Post-Civil War Sierra Leone

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At the time of creation, it is said, God created a tiny country rich in mineral wealth, with diamonds, gold, bauxite, rutile, iron-ore, chromite, and platinum; an abundance of offshore fish; relatively fertile land; and plenty of rainfall. People from the neighbouring territories became furious and demanded equal treatment. God, however, cautioned them with the caveat that they should first wait and see what kind of government would rule over Sierra Leone (Zack-Williams, 1990: 22).

1. Point of Clarification: Setting Up the Problem

The end of the communist ideology, the disintegration of the Soviet behemoth, the dynamism of *glasnost* and *perestroika* introduced by the Gorbachev's administration in the defunct USSR, and the fall of communist backed governments in Eastern Europe signalled the birth of a new international geostrategic, economic, and political order. A New World Order where the ideological bipolarity and East-West contestations between the United States (US) and the former USSR had given way to a unipolar world on which the US is riding as a colossus. The thawing of the East-West Cold War and the relaxation of tensions between the superpowers made the world to believe, albeit erroneously, that the era of total peace had arrived, and by extension, the same for the Third World countries (TWCs) of which Africa is not an exception. Paradoxically however, while interstate conflicts at the global level are on the decrease, the end of the Cold War has ignited numerous intrastate conflicts in

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Africa, championed by sub-state actors (insurgents, irregular forces, local warlords, ethnic nationalists, etc) challenging the *status quo*. It is a common knowledge that the post-Cold War African conflicts (the so 'new wars')¹ are virtually not only intrastate and unregulated, but equally violent and intractable in nature. The intractability of these wars is embedded in the sheer barbarity, political adventurism, greed, self-centredness, and an absence of clearly defined objectives of the warlords, characterised by unleashing terror on the civilian population and the "use of war as business leading to the rise of warlordism on the continent." (Fawole, 2001: 7). The intractability and barbarity of intrastate wars often make them a daunting task for third party mediation. The attendant result of these internecine wars is that those conflict-ridden states are labelled as, "collapsing state", "collapsed state" or "failed state". It is in this context that Sierra Leone, a West African state, could be aptly described as one of the Africa's failed state as a result of the civil war that engulfed the country between 1991 and 2002. A decade of tension, political quagmire, societal dislocations, and military contests that not only psychologically destabilised, but equally put terror on the faces of the war victims. The sum total of these disorders are economic decay, militarism and militarization of society, erosion of state cohesion and power, etc that accelerated the pauperization of the society.

Against the above backdrop, the tasks of this article are tripartite. First, it discusses the origin and dynamics of the civil war in Sierra Leone. With the benefit of hindsight, an historical excursion is imperative for proper understanding of the background to the civil war in order to put us on a better platform to assess the whys and hows of third party intervention. Second, the article also analyses the actual third party, the United Nations (UN) intervention in the war and how did the world body fare in this rather

¹ The new intra-state conflicts in Africa have been variously referred to as 'new wars' (Kaldor and Vashee, 1997; Kaldor, 1999); 'network wars', 'post-modern wars' (UNRISD, 1995; Sesay, 2008), 'wars of the third kind' (van Creveld, 1991; Brown (ed.), 1996).

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expensive and tortuous adventure. Finally, we seek to comprehend the post war reconstruction/peacebuilding efforts of the UN in the country. Has the UN lived up to expectation in its odyssey in Sierra Leone in the face of criticisms of Africa's marginalization in the post-Cold War era and more importantly, the argument of the UN's partial response to African problems? Does the UN adventure in Sierra Leone a slap on the face of the West African sub-regional grouping, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), or at best, the erosion of the 'African Solution to African Problems' clause in the Charter of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), the forerunner of the African Union (AU) or better still a tripartite collaborative efforts among the UN, AU, and ECOWAS. These are some of the questions addressed in this article.

2. Defining the Basic Terms: 'Failed State', Intervention, and Civil War

The section analyses the terms that are central to this study. In this sense, 'failed state', 'intervention', and 'civil war' constitute the concepts that are basic to our endeavour. Let it be clearly understood that the three concepts are interrelated because conflict, more often than not, results leads to state failure and intervention seeks to normalize the situation. The concept of *civil war* is fraught with definitional ambiguities and to escape from this trap, this study follows Peter Wallensten and Margareta Sollenberg's (1997) characterisation of civil war. First, these scholars contend that, to be qualified as was, a "conflict must produce a minimum of 1,000 battle-related deaths in a given year. Minor conflicts result in less than 1,000 battle-related deaths during the course of conflict, while intermediate conflicts produce more than 1,000 such casualties during the conflict, but less than 1,000 in a particular year." In contemporary international relations, the most common type of military engagement is civil war. Civil wars are armed conflicts that have both historical and domestic roots

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(Rhoda, 1999). Wars are said to be civil when the theatre of the armed contestation is restricted to the boundary of a given state, between the state and sub-state actors and mostly rooted in ethnicity and the struggle for the control of mineral resources (Bangura, 1997; Abdullah, 1998: 203). Relying on this definition is not unproblematic. Why? This is because, though, civil wars are intrastate in nature, but the fact still remains that the roles of the external powers in such conflicts cannot be relegated to the background as the Nigerian led ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) interventions in the Liberian and Sierra Leonean civil wars aptly illustrate¹. While we agree that there is a clear cut dichotomy between intrastate and interstate wars, the former are not immune from the involvement of the third party.

As already adumbrated, the post-1989 international system is characterised by the emergence of multiple actors competing with states over the monopoly of the instruments of coercion, thereby making nonsense of the Westphalian postulation² of the state-centric view of international relations. This contestation has led to the erosion of the hegemony of the state, legitimacy of its government and of course, its primacy. As a result, this has exposed the structural weaknesses of African states and more importantly, most governments fail to guarantee the provision of common goods to their citizens, thereby coming under severe attacks. A state is said to be 'collapsed' or 'failed' when there is a failure or collapse of state institutions, legitimacy, legality and the government authority is not binding on the governed or on some parts of the country. This was the situation in Somalia after the fall of President Siad Barre³ while Sierra Leone joined the league

¹ Beyond the shores of Africa, India is not a neutral party to the conflict between the Tamil Tiger rebel movement and the government in Colombo, Sri Lanka, while Israel and Syria were actively involved in the Lebanese civil war.

² The Treaty of Westphalia of 1648 puts an end to the 30 years war in Europe and recognised state as the sole actor in international relations.

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of collapsed states as a result of the forced exile of President Ahmed Tejan-Kabbah and his cabinet in 1997.

Furthermore, civil war and state failure often brought forth intervention by state or non state actors. Intervention itself a contested concept because there is variation in its conceptualization, especially in pre- and post-Cold War era. We are following Vincent (1974: 3) in defining intervention as an “activity undertaken by a state, a group within a state, a group of states, or an international organisation which interferes coercively in the domestic affairs of another state. It is a discrete event having a beginning and an end, and it is aimed at the authority structure of the target state. It is not necessarily lawful or unlawful, but it does break a conventional pattern of international relations.” Furthermore, Wheeler (1997: 397) conceptualizes failed states as those “states that have collapsed into civil war and disorder, and where the government of the state has ceased to exist inside the territorial borders of the state. Citizens find themselves in a quasi-state of nature.”

3. Background to the United Nations Intervention in Sierra Leone: A Peep into History

A major step towards analysing the UN intervention in the Sierra Leone civil war is to study the background to the intervention. Although, copious literatures have explored the origin, dynamics, and other dimensions of the civil war in Sierra Leone, a review of the historical antecedents to the UN intervention is not a frivolous exercise. This historical account is not intended to review the performance of

³ Between 1990 and 1991, the government of Somalia collapsed and was forced into exile, while “diverse warlords filled the vacuum. None could provide the essential services of a state when mass starvation developed, largely as a result of the multifaceted civil war, no authority could provide minimum food but soon became involved in the local warlord’s feuds...The Somali case is not just a civil war...It is a case of absolute collapse of statehood, leading to social catastrophe.” See Holsti, 1995, p. 60. In the case of Sierra Leone, the vacuum was filled by the military that allied with the RUF.

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ECOWAS; rather, it is to give us insights into the situation in this West African 'failed' state before the UN odyssey.

Led by Foday Sankoh, the Revolutionary United Front's (RUF) attacks on 23 March 1991¹ marked the beginning of escalating difficulties and a new life in the political history of Sierra Leone; a history that was later characterised by political turmoil, tribulations, protracted and outright rebellion. The RUF was formed as a revolutionary movement to take up arms against the All Peoples Party (APC) government of President Saidu Momoh and later intensified its efforts against the succeeding government of Captain Valentine Strasser, who came to power as a result of the successful coup of 19 April 1992. This state of affairs, coupled with lingering economic crisis, opposition and pressure from civil society groups and the international community to honour his pledges to handover power to a civilian government, Captain Strasser was swept out of office in what can be described as a palace coup by Brigadier Julius Maada Bio². Maada Bio went ahead to conduct the general elections in 1996 to usher in democratic governance in Sierra Leone. The elections saw the ascendancy of the Sierra Leone Peoples Party (SLPP) and its candidate Ahmed Tejan-Kabbah as President and Commander-in Chief of the Sierra Leonean Armed Forces.

Dissatisfied with the ways and the environment in which the elections were organised and conducted, coupled with its own predatory motives, the RUF rejected the presidential election outcomes, refused to recognize the new civilian administration, and hence, the intensification of the armed contest that halted the proper functioning of Tejan-Kabbah government. In May 1997, disgruntled young army officers under the leadership of Major Johnny Paul Koromah struck and unseated President Tejan-Kabbah. The president fled to neighbouring Guinea. The return of the military to the political theatre in Sierra Leone provides a veritable platform

¹ The RUF launched its first attack in Bomaru and Sienga, both small towns in the Kailahun district in the Eastern part of Sierra Leone

² Brigadier Julius Maada Bio was a key figure in the government of Valentine Strasser.

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for the formation of an alliance between the newly constituted Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) and the RUF, while opposition to military rule in Sierra Leone championed by Nigeria, and the international community at large skyrocketed. With mammoth opposition to the authoritarian regime in Freetown, the Nigerian led ECOMOG reinforced its presence in Sierra Leone and began military offensive against what is widely believed to be the 'illegal' government of Major Paul Johnny Koromah and its RUF ally. The ECOMOG intervention, with the help of local militias, the *Kamajors* led by Chief Norman, was timely and succeeded in reinstalling President Kabbah in 1998 following the fall of the junta. However, the problem did not end there as the RUF rebels only technically withdrew from the battlefield and never abandoned their mission to seize the gemstones mines and control the central government.

Truly, the rebels did not abandon their missions as hostilities climaxed by the RUF in January 1999. This was not unconnected with the public execution of 20 military officers in connections with their roles in the AFRC's coup and the death sentence passed on the RUF leader, Corporal Foday Sankoh, for treason on 25 October 1998. The January 1999 offensive by the rebels was rightly described as the most brutal and vicious operation ever undertaken by the rebels with untold human and material losses to the government and the Nigerian peacekeepers. Commenting on this rather unfortunate incident, Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja contends that:

Although the Kabbah regime survived, it continued to depend on external support to stay in power. The national army had disappeared, and a Nigerian military officer was named Chief of Staff of a new Sierra Leone army, which Britain agreed to train. From all practical purposes, the government's writ did not run beyond Freetown and areas controlled by the ECOMOG forces. Given its experience in Liberia, ECOWAS was well placed to play major role in conflict management in Sierra Leone: Had it not been for ECOMOG, the rebel would have taken power in

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January 1999. Its role went well beyond the peacekeeping to peace enforcement. The role of Nigeria as the dominant power in the sub-region must be underlined. Had it not been for Nigeria's willingness to sacrifice lives and a lot of money to maintain stability in the sub-region, ECOMOG would not have been able to play a conflict management role in Sierra Leone.

Against the backdrop of criticisms over Nigeria's involvement in peacekeeping missions in the sub-region coupled with the overbearing costs of such operations on the country's economy,¹ Nigeria embarked on disengagement with the threat to withdraw its troops from Sierra Leone. This exercise actually called for the UN to take over from the sub-regional outfit and supervise the programme of Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Rehabilitation (DDR).

4. The United Nations Intervention in the Post-Civil War Sierra Leone: Towards Rebuilding a Failed State

As we emphasized above, the multiple effects of the civil war on the economy of Sierra Leone as well as the destruction of the decaying and already 'inadequate' infrastructural facilities, coupled with the complex humanitarian emergencies conditioned by the influx of Sierra Leone refugees into the neighbouring countries, and the entire West African sub-region, and the threats by the Nigerian government to pull out of Sierra Leone called for the UN intervention to guarantee peace and security. The war had ruined the economy to the extent that virtually nothing was functioning in this unfortunately West African country. The plights of Sierra Leoneans and the ways to ameliorate the appalling conditions prompted the international community into action. It is recorded that the number of people killed totaled over 75,000, while over 350,000 and one million people were internally displaced and became refugees respectively (Davies, 2000: 350). Since the rebels

¹ Nigeria spent over \$1 million daily in its operation in Sierra Leone.

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were in perfect control of the areas rich in diamonds and other precious gems, the sources of government revenues were greatly affected. This messy financial situation crippled Tejan-Kabbah's administration to effectively run the country. At the height of the war, it became clear that virtually all the sectors of the economy were paralysed. For example, hospitals were mere consulting clinics without drugs, while schools were shadows of themselves as they lacked adequate resources.

Deriving from the foregoing analysis, the international community, especially the UN, intensified its efforts to bail Sierra Leone out of the prolonged crisis. It should be noted that apart from the UN, OAU/AU, and ECOWAS, friendly governments such as Britain, the US were actively involved in the resolution of the civil war. But the focus of this article is on the UN and some of its specialized agencies. The UN intervention in the Sierra Leonean protracted civil war predates the end of the war in 2002. The organisation had been taking active roles since the beginning of the war in March 1991. For instance, the UN was effectively involved in the signing of the Abidjan Peace Accord between the government of Sierra Leone and the RUF in November 1996, while its involvement in the post-conflict peacebuilding in the country is highly remarkable. Consequently, for clarity of thought, sound intellectual analysis, and better understanding of its roles, we shall now discuss the UN intervention during and after the war.

1995 was very significant in the history of Sierra Leone civil war because it marked the beginning of the UN direct involvement in the war with the appointment of, by the UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, Mr. Berhanu Dinka, as his special envoy to Sierra Leone. Mr. Berhanu was charged with the responsibilities, amongst others, to work in close collaboration with the OAU and ECOWAS to settle for peace resolution of the civil war and return the country to a full blown democratic rule. It should be recalled that the recognition of both ECOWAS and the OAU was based on the fact that both organisations, most especially ECOWAS, had committed a lot of resources and made some headways in

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resolving the conflicts. Prior to 1995 the UN only *supported* all the activities of ECOWAS without physical and direct involvements. This attitude had won the resentments of Africa and friends of the black continent.

The return of the country to civil rule became a *sine qua non* for a peaceful Sierra Leone. To achieve this goal, Mr. Berhanu assisted by pressuring the junta to implement the timetable to return to civil rule and the UN performed remarkably by providing financial and material supports. These bold initiatives and supports encouraged the military to phase themselves out of power by holding both the parliamentary and presidential elections of 1996 that the SLPP won. The return to democratic rule reinforced the importance of the UN in African affairs, going by its participation and support.

Turning to peace agreements, the UN's special envoy, Mr. Berhanu was very instrumental in peace negotiation. Here, both the Abidjan Peace Agreement of November 1996 and the famous Lome Peace Accord come to mind. Despite its failure, the November 1996 Accord was very fundamental in putting Sierra Leone on the path of reconciliation and peace. Why is this so? This is because the Abidjan Peace Accord aimed at, amongst others, ending the protracted war; building a durable peace by ensuring national reconciliation, and promoting the participation of everybody in governance through democratic changes. To achieve these laudable goals, all parties claimed to be determined to foster mutual confidence and trust. In spite of its failure and eventual collapse, the Abidjan Peace Accord which called for the immediate end of the war promoted national unity to heal the wounds of the conflict and post-conflict peacebuilding, especially DDR¹. Also, central to the Abidjan Peace Accord is the setting up of a Commission for the Consideration of

¹ The Abidjan Peace Accord collapsed because of the internal and external factors that worked against its implementation. Not only this, there was the uncompromising attitudes of the RUF. Worse still was the January 1997 house arrest imposed on the leader of the RUF, Foday Sankoh, while the final blow came from the overthrow of President Tejan-Kabbah on 25 May 1997. For a comprehensive account of the Abidjan Peace Accord, see Diallo, 2000.

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Peace (CCP) to verify, supervise, and monitor the accord. Forging national unity ahead, membership of the Commission was drawn from both the government and the RUF. The failure of the accord reminded the international community of their unfinished business in Sierra Leone and warned the mediators to wake up from their slumber by intensifying efforts to achieve lasting peace in this West African country.

Though the quest for peace In Sierra Leone preoccupied the international community but how to achieve it was the problem. The UN, ECOWAS, OAU, and friendly governments took up the challenges and got involved in another round off efforts to achieve this goal. Then came the much publicized Lome Peace Accord. The Accord that was signed in the Togolese capital, Lome, is very fundamental since it served as the foundation for the road to peace in Sierra Leone. As with the November 1996 accord, the Lome Peace Agreement also called for the immediate cessation of hostilities, and made provision for the observance of same. Equally central to the Lome Peace Agreement was the process of disarmaments, demobilisation, and re-integration of ex-soldiers and most importantly the establishment of Government of National Unity (GNU) (Adeniji, 2001).

The UN Resolution 1270 was a watershed in peacekeeping operations in the civil war. In actual, at its 4054th meeting in October 1999, the UN Security Council adopted the Resolution for the establishment of the UN Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) with 2700 white berets. UNAMSIL cardinal mission was to see that the parties to the conflict adhere religiously to the terms of the Lome Peace Agreement. UNAMSIL peacekeepers were also mandated to collaborate with ECOMOG. Ironically, the latter provision became the Achilles heel of the implementation of the Lome Peace Agreement as UNAMSIL and ECOMOG officers were at loggerheads and excelled in buck-passing over alleged involvement in illegal possession of diamond gems. But it must be understood that while mutual suspicious marred the UNAMSIL and ECOMOG collaboration, the sincerity of purpose prevailed as both organisations cooperated with

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each other. They were able to forge a common front in the implementation of the Lome Peace Accord. This resulted in a division of labour between the two organisations. While the sub-regional body was saddled with the political aspect of conflict resolution, UNAMSIL was keeping the peace.

Despite the fact the UN peacekeeping in Sierra Leone suffered some setbacks; its peacekeeping roles in Sierra Leone are highly commendable. The UN via UNAMSIL was able to maintain the fragile peace especially between 2000 and 2001. Mention must also be made of the March 2000 peace conference in Bamako, Mali hoisted by ECOWAS. Apart from the fact that the said conference reinforced the commitments of the international community to bring peace to the country, it paved the way for a more elaborate discussion among Sierra Leone's political actors: the government, the RUF, and civil society groups. This meeting enabled UNAMSIL to have access to most of the RUF controlled areas with the rebels agreeing to remove all the obstacles. This singular act encouraged the international community to be more committed to Sierra Leone and, by extension, increased the confidence building between the government of Sierra Leone and the RUF. The post-conflict peacebuilding mechanism was central to the Bamako meeting. The conference called for the disarmament and demobilisation of combatants in order to rehabilitate them into civil life. Quite a number of combatants were disarmed and demobilised by UNAMSIL while the UN was very instrumental in rehabilitating them into civil society.

The other side of the coin is that, in a manner that is symptomatic of the features of the UN peacekeeping operations, UNAMSIL was bedeviled with avoidable constraints in its operations. These lacunas really constituted impediments in Sierra Leone. Chiefs among these stumbling blocks were financial and logistical constraints, coupled with abysmal lack of expertise in human resources management, and poor knowledge of the terrain by the peacekeepers. The bitter rivalries between the ECOMOG and UNAMSIL headships resulted in a verbal war between the two peacekeeping groups. Worse still, UNAMSIL

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was amateurish in its approach as about 500 peacekeepers were easily overran, out matched, and humiliated by the RUF guerrilla fighters in a manner that was reminiscent of the first attempt by ECOMOG at dislodging Major Johnny Paul Koromah and his cohorts in 1997.

The World Bank (the Bank) participation in the post conflict management cannot be underestimated. In fact, the Bank collaborated efficiently with other specialized agencies of the UN like the UNDP, UNICEF, etc. The Bank has been playing fundamental roles in post-conflict peace building in Sierra Leone. Of most significant is the concentration of its efforts to bring succor to the war affected people of that country. The Bank focuses its attention on the plight of Internally Displaced Peoples (IDPs), how to facilitate their return and to provide them with basic infrastructural facilities and social amenities that were already shattered and devastated by the civil war. The issue of demobilisation and reintegration of ex-combatants also takes priority in the activities of the Bank. It is on record that the Bank provided substantial fund to the tune of US\$41.3 million to the Community Reintegration and Rehabilitation Project (CRRP). The CRRP is a peacebuilding project with the primary task of addressing the needs of, and bring life back to the former combatants, IDPs, as well as refugees. Another component of the post-conflict peace-building in Sierra Leone is the twin programme of the Economy Recovery Support Fund (ERSF) whose aim is to empower local communities in the economic and social realms, and the Training and Employment Programme (TEP) that zeros in on the reinsertion and rehabilitation of former combatants. It is an integrative process of counseling and training whose copestone is a window of opportunities in skills acquisition. These programmes have significant impacts on the life of Sierra Leoneans.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Following from the above discussions, it is apparent that the UN and its specialized agencies should be commended for carrying out these post-conflict peacebuilding activities in Sierra Leone. It is able to achieve some of the goals because of its function and status as a neutral third party in the civil conflict. Although the UN intervention was belated, its involvement doused tensions and reduced mutual suspicion among the warring parties. Moreover, the UN's involvement paved the way for the signing of a comprehensive peace agreement that ended the war. Based on the wonderful result of the UN initiated programmes discussed above, we suggest that more programmes that aim at rehabilitating and empowering the people should be launched and pursued vigorously. The government in Freetown should also initiate policies that will aim genuinely at rehabilitating and empowering the people because peace is often difficult to win, manage, and sustain than the war prosecution. It must be acknowledged that the policies that focus on alleviating the sufferings of the people are daunting tasks because of the economic devastations and societal dislocations caused by the civil war. The international community can only provide assistance. The real tasks rest on the shoulders of Sierra Leoneans to revitalize the economy and rebuild the country.

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