

BACKGROUND TO THE WAR IN SIERRA LEONE

In 1990 Charles Taylor established the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPLF) and launched a rebellion. In March 1991 NPLF soldiers crossed the border into Sierra Leone and gradually gathered support from Sierra Leoneans in the east disaffected with the government. Within six weeks they took over much of the south and east, the country's most important areas in terms of cash crop production and valuable diamond reserves. This is not the only time disturbances had taken place in this area. In 1982 the army had to put down disturbances among the Mende tribe who had become dissatisfied with their representation in the All Peoples Congress (APC) government, in power since 1967. In 1991 a new Sierra Leone rebel force, the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) was formed under the leadership of Foday Sankoh and joined NPLF infiltrators. In May 1991 a new government army is formed and bolstered by troops drawn from Liberian refugees (the United Liberation Movement (ULIMO)).

During the next 11 months fighting continued spasmodically and was generally confined to the north and east of the country. In April 1992 opportunist young officers, complaining about lack of pay for their soldiers, took over the country during the absence of APC President Momoh. The National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC) was formed under the leadership of the youthful Valentine Strasser (Strasser was later to become involved in atrocities and corrupt dealings).

On 25th May 1997 the military under the leadership of Johnny Paul Koroma overthrew the new government and released 650 prisoners. They then invited the RUF rebels to help form a new junta. This was named the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC). This was not recognised by the international community, including the United Nations, and sanctions were imposed. This caused even greater hardship for poor people in the city and the rural areas.

It was reported that 20,000 people had been killed since 1990 (nearly all civilians) and one third of the 4.5 million population were in internal displaced camps or refugee camps in neighbouring countries.

Boy soldiers, often injected with marijuana, had been used by both sides to carry out atrocities. Adult soldiers, afraid of revenge by the family or the spirit of the executed person, encouraged children to carry out the killing for them. Child soldiers have cut off the hands, legs and heads of men, women and children.

On 13th Feb 1998 Nigerian forces and village militias (Kamajors), with the help of mercenaries (the South African 'Executive Outcomes' and the British based 'Sandline') defeated the junta and restored President Kabbah to power.

In Aug 1998 a Catholic nun, Sr Kieran Flynn, reported from Makeni that 'rebels cut off ears, hands and legs and left their victims to die in the bush'.

On the 6th Jan 1999 rebels attacked Freetown and drove civilians before them as a human shield. Thousands were abducted and buildings and vehicles throughout the city were set on fire, often with people inside them. Nigerian troops made a tactical withdrawal.

On the 7th July 1999 the Lome Peace Accord was signed under pressure from Britain, the USA and the UN. The combined SLPP/AFRC/RUF government and the involvement of a UN peacekeeping force permitted some degree of normality but the RUF continued to control a large part of the country and their leader Foday Sankoh was made the Minister of Resources and Mines.

About 50,000 people were estimated to have been mutilated and 100,000 killed. In Makeni 20,000 people were considered to be in danger of starvation.

On 13 Jan 2000 Partnership Africa Canada reported that the records of the High Diamond Council (Belgium) show that between 1990 and 1998 the Antwerp diamond industry imported an annual average of nearly 5 mil carats of diamonds from Liberia and 600,000 from Guinea. In 1998, while the Sierra Leone government Gold and Diamond Office reported exports of only 8,500 carats, the High Diamond Council's own figures showed it imported 770,000 carats of diamonds from Sierra Leone during the same period'. [The RUF had bought guns with money from the sale of diamonds].

In April 2000, 500 UN peacekeeping troops were taken hostage by the rebels.