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# Sierra Leone: Belated International Engagement Ends A War, Helps Consolidate A Fragile Democracy

## INTRODUCTION

The history of the diplomatic community's role in democracy promotion and consolidation in Sierra Leone is extremely complex. Sierra Leone was essentially not on the international community radar (with the arguable exception of international financial institutions such as the World Bank) from independence in 1961 until the civil war that occurred in the 1990s. International community involvement in Sierra Leone can therefore broadly be seen as one of neglect until the late 1990s, at which time the UK and UN led a robust international response to a crisis that had finally become too dire to continue to ignore. Since this critical shift, the international community can in many ways be commended for its role – however late in the day – in helping to: put an end to the decade-long brutal civil war; consolidate the peace; and assist the transition to democracy and democratization. Apart from the UK and UN, a number of national, regional, and international players, most especially Sierra Leonean civil society groups, ECOWAS, the US and EU, have contributed to this progress. At the same time, the international community must take responsibility for efforts that did not serve to advance democracy and development. For example, the diplomatic community and the Sierra Leonean government have been heavily criticized for not addressing the root causes of the war, including issues of corruption and patronage-based politics. The fact that many of the underlying causes of the conflict still remain indicates the enormity of the task ahead.

Despite myriad shortcomings, it is clear that Sierra Leone has made significant strides forward since the civil war ended officially in January 2002, and a substantial amount of this progress can be attributed to the international community. This case study provides a brief historical overview of Sierra Leone since independence, before moving to a more in-depth analysis of the role of the diplomatic community in Sierra Leone from the start of the civil war in 1991 to the peaceful handover of power after the recent 2007 elections. It is important to note that the information provided in the section on diplomatic resources and applications includes only contributions from bilateral actors, which is consistent with the other case studies in the Handbook, and comes from a review of existing written materials as well as interviews with numerous practitioners involved in Sierra Leone since the early 1990s. The assets and applications described are therefore by no means a complete account, but do serve to provide useful, concrete examples of many of the actions taken by diplomats to support the transition to peace and the development of democracy in Sierra Leone.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

When Sierra Leone gained independence in 1961, the British left behind a country that it had ruled officially as a Crown Colony since 1808. British colonial rule was characterized by direct and dominant administrative rule over Freetown and its environs, and indirect rule via local “paramount chiefs” over the countryside.

Negative aspects of the colonial period lingered on, especially as to ethnic rivalries. The British had favored the Krio ethnic group, which amount to about 10% of the population, by offering Krios access to the best schools and business opportunities. Krios became dominant among civil servants in the colonial administration but given their small numbers, became less influential in the civil and professional services after independence. Other ethnic groups, including the Mende in the South and the Temne and Limba in the North, had coexisted fairly peacefully before independence. However, post-independence politicians incited ethnic differences which then became a major contributor to subsequent state collapse. As political parties have for the most part remained along ethnic and geographic lines, such differences retain the potential to be sources of future friction. Corruption also developed during colonial rule, stemming from attempts to gain private benefit from the diamond-mining industry. Finally, the British left behind a state with barely functional political institutions and administration. Both corruption and the low capacity of the state have haunted Sierra Leone from the colonial period to this day.

From its start as an independent nation, there were dysfunctional signs. The first Prime Minister, Sir Milton Margai, was Mende and democratically elected with support of his ethnic group and Krio elites. Margai was part of the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP), which was formed in 1949 (during colonial rule) and was composed mainly of Mende from the South (the SLPP is still predominately Mende today). Upon his death in 1964 Milton's brother, Albert, assumed the reins, and proceeded to lead a corrupt regime and attempted to amend

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the constitution to create a one-party SLPP-run state. Albert Margai also heavily stocked his government with Mende officials, leading Krio supporters of the SLPP to defect to the All People's Congress (APC), a party whose supporters consisted mainly of northerners, especially the Limba and Temne (and still does to this day). Albert Margai ultimately lost the 1967 presidential election to Siaka Stevens, who was leader of the APC.

Siaka Stevens ruled for 17 years despite being initially overthrown by a coup in 1967 only to be reinstated through a countercoup in 1968. He subsequently proceeded to oversee the utter destruction and corrupting of the country as well as a move to one-party rule for the APC in 1978. Stevens ensured dominance by the Limba and Tembe through ethnic favoritism in the security forces. Additionally, by the early 1980s nearly all of Sierra Leone's major exports were controlled by one businessman, who happened to be one of Stevens' cronies. Former American Ambassador John Hirsch has noted that "Resident diplomats did not raise a hue and cry about these developments, which were regarded as internal problems of little consequence to the economic interests of the British, Americans, or others."

Stevens handed power in 1985 to his hand-selected, northern-born successor, Major General Joseph Momoh, who led an already nearly stateless country even further into economic and financial ruin. Civil servants, educators, and paramount chiefs often went unpaid. Politically Momoh was very weak, and Siaka Stevens remained head of the APC and in control of much of Sierra Leonean commerce, including the richly lucrative diamond industry. Indeed, Stevens had chosen Momoh knowing he was loyal but not highly effective as a politician, a combination that enabled Stevens' significant political and economic influence to continue. Stevens had built an extensive patronage network during his years as president, which therefore continued throughout the Momoh years. Diamond profits, for instance, had brought in about \$200 million prior to Stevens' reign. Yet, by 1987 profits through the formal diamond industry dwindled to \$100,000, with sales conducted almost exclusively on the black market. Stevens and his allies took much of the rest.

Momoh even fought off a coup attempt by Stevens' associates in 1987. In the late 1980s Momoh's government, after receiving significant loan assistance from the IMF, came under pressure to introduce major economic reforms. Though the reforms achieved liberalization of trade and exchange rates and slight improvements in tax collection, real progress remained elusive and consequently Sierra Leone continued to suffer severe fiscal difficulties. It is worth noting that the pressure for reform took place at the end of the Cold War, when for the first time western policies began to have some sort of focus on good governance in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Upon the recommendation of a constitutional review commission established by Momoh, in October 1991 a new constitution was adopted, restoring a multi-party system. The time for major political reform, however, had past: a group of rebels from the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), which included Sierra Leoneans, Liberians loyal to Charles Taylor, as well as mercenaries from neighboring Burkina Faso, had invaded eastern Sierra Leone from Liberia in March of the same year, marking the beginning of the horrific civil war.

The root causes of the conflict in Sierra Leone are often reduced to a war over diamonds, but this is overly simplistic. While Liberian rebel leader Charles Taylor and Libyan head of state Muammar Gaddafi certainly had a strong interest in Sierra Leone's diamonds and played important roles in the conflict, history of personal relationships between Taylor, RUF leader Foday Sankoh, and Gaddafi was of even greater initial significance. Taylor and Sankoh met and became friends in 1980s in Libya at a revolutionary training camp run by Gaddafi. Gaddafi also provided enormous support to both the RUF and to Taylor's rebel group, the National Patriotic Front for Liberia (NPFL), via training, arms, and financial resources

In 1989, Taylor had wanted to launch his NPFL invasion of Liberia from Sierra Leone, and the Momoh government had refused. Momoh then allowed ECOMOG troops to use the main airport in Sierra Leone as a base of operations from which they launched attacks on the NPFL in Liberia and also sent Sierra Leonean troops into Liberia to join the ECOMOG forces. Taylor therefore had a keen interest in taking revenge on the Momoh government and supporting his friend Sankoh's rebel movement. Over time, diamonds did come to play an increasingly more important role as a means to finance the RUF and enrich Taylor, Gaddafi, and their cronies. But they should not be seen as the root cause of the war.

Foday Sankoh's RUF was able to recruit a multitude of young Sierra Leonean men who felt severely alienated because of government corruption (at both the national and paramount chief levels) and lack of economic opportunity. Sankoh was also supported by a number of government officials in Freetown frustrated with the

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Momoh government and initially saw the RUF as a legitimate political alternative.

The role of the military in Sierra Leone since independence is another causal factor of the war. Each of Sierra Leone's rulers from independence until the civil war politicized the military and asserted increasing political and personal control over the armed forces. Soldier loyalty was thus to political parties rather than to the country. Military professionalism was sacrificed at the expense of using the military for the ruler's political survival. In such an atmosphere, military corruption was rampant and private armed groups were created to protect political factions. When the military was finally put to the test, it was incapable of responding. Throughout the civil war, the Sierra Leonean Army (SLA) did not have adequate supplies or weaponry, lacked technical capacity, and was not loyal to the state. As evidence of disloyalty among the rank and file, many SLA soldiers became known as "sobels," meaning soldier by day, rebel by night. The myriad problems with the SLA also led Kabbah and his deputy defense minister, Hinga Norman, to create Civil Defense Forces (known as Kamajors), which were armed local units, mainly comprised of youth, that fought on the government side and were known for committing abuses against civilians similar to the RUF (though not to the same extent; for RUF abuses, see below).

Additional underlying causes of the conflict include a history of extremely poor governance and manipulation of ethnicity for political ends.

Between 1991 and 2002 Sierra Leone was thus engulfed in chaos that led to the deaths of tens of thousands of Sierra Leoneans, with at least a quarter of the population being displaced from their homes during the conflict. The widespread practices of amputating limbs of civilians, brutal killings, and the conscription of child soldiers into armed forces undertaken by the RUF, the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (which was closely aligned to the RUF), the Sierra Leonean Army, and the Kamajors gained international attention. The civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone were closely interrelated from the beginning, and throughout the conflict in Sierra Leone the RUF, Charles Taylor and Muammar Gaddafi benefited from controlling much of the diamond trade.

In 1992, a year after the RUF had begun the war, a group of junior officers in the SLA orchestrated a bloodless coup and deposed President Momoh. Captain Valentine Strasser was chosen as head of the newly formed National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC), which ruled the country until 1996. During the period under NPRC rule, the RUF continued fighting and advanced across the country (the RUF was within 40 km of Freetown by early 1995), while the NPRC sought unsuccessfully to bring the RUF to the negotiating table, even by offering amnesty to the RUF in 1995. The government relied on private security forces (first from Gurkha Security Group, made up of Nepalese Gurkhas who formerly served in the British Army, and then from Executive Outcomes, a South African security firm) to repel the RUF, as well as an ECOMOG contingent composed of 2,000 Nigerian troops based in Freetown.

Civil society spoke up in 1995 to push for elections. A number of civil society groups met at the Bintumani Conference to decide how and when elections would be held. Women's groups and key women leaders such as Amy Smythe and Zainab Bangura led this massive civil society movement. It has been given credit for the subsequent elections that were successfully held in 1996, in which Ahmed Tejan Kabbah of the SLPP was elected as president amid high voter turnout. The elections took place against a backdrop of ongoing fighting. Brutal attacks by the RUF targeting civilians were intensified between the first round and the runoff. The international community, with the UK and US in the lead, also supported these elections by devoting significant political and financial resources that both allowed the elections to take place and provided legitimacy to the process and outcome. British High Commissioner Peter Penfold and American Ambassador John Hirsch were both instrumental in the organization of this election. Although there were a number of irregularities, observers still pronounced the election free and fair.

After the 1996 election the government and the RUF negotiated on and off for six months before a peace agreement was finally signed in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire. The agreement provided amnesty for RUF fighters and dictated that a mercenary outfit, Executive Outcomes, which had been brought in by the government to protect the diamond fields and fight the RUF, had to leave Sierra Leone.

But the Abidjan Accord, for which the OAU, Côte d'Ivoire, and ECOWAS served as guarantors, suffered from a lack of close follow-up and implementation. Two months after the accord was signed fighting broke out once again.

A year later, in May 1997, President Kabbah was forced to flee to Guinea following a coup by junior military

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officers, led by Johnny Paul Koroma who was installed as head of the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) and immediately invited the RUF to join the AFRC in ruling the country. The AFRC/RUF coalition controlled Freetown and the rest of the country for nearly 10 months before Kabbah was reinstated in March 1998 following Nigerian/ECOMOG troop advances in Freetown. The conflict continued.

The government and RUF returned to the negotiating table in Lomé in mid-1999, and the two sides signed the Lomé Peace Accord in July. Many civil society actors were present as observers at the negotiations and also played an informal mediating role between the RUF and the government. (Civil society actors involved in these negotiations include the Inter-Religious Council of Sierra Leone, the Human Rights Forum, the Women's Forum, and the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists, the Civil Society Movement of Sierra Leone (a consortium of labor unions), among others.)

The Lomé agreement provided amnesty for the RUF (as the Abidjan Agreement had also done), gave a number of ministerial positions to the RUF, created a position for Sankoh as chairman of the to-be-created Commission for the Management of Strategic Resources, National Reconstruction and Development, and established the principle of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). Although the Lomé Accord contained a greater number of oversight mechanisms than Abidjan (periodic reviews were built in, some of which took place), the Lomé Accord still suffered from insufficient oversight and implementation, as well as a sentiment that the RUF acted in bad faith and gained more from the accord than the government.

After Lomé, the RUF indeed proceeded to violate a number of provisions of the accord, as they resisted disarmament efforts, and took several hundred UN peacekeepers hostage in May 2000. This action was protested vehemently by civil society, as tens of thousands of people marched to Foday Sankoh's house to demand the release of the seized UN peacekeepers. When Sankoh's men opened fire on the protestors, killing about 20 of them, the crowd stormed his house and had him arrested. This strong show of support in favor of the UN Peacekeeping force and against the RUF and their leader Foday Sankoh revealed the extent of popular disapproval for the RUF at this stage in the war. The arrest of Sankoh also led to Isa Sesay taking over as head of the RUF. Sesay later proved to be cooperative in the peace process.

The bold move by the RUF to take hundreds of UN peacekeepers hostage finally prompted far more robust involvement by the international community, led by Britain. International attention on Sierra Leone had been mounting since the mid-90s. The UN had sent a Special Representative to Sierra Leone in 1995 and approved an international peacekeeping force in 1999. Yet prior to May 2000 the Security Council had not provided sufficient resources or a strong enough mandate to the peacekeeping force.

Following the UK and UN response to the RUF aggression, two peace agreements were eventually signed in Abuja in November 2000 and May 2001 that finally put an end to the conflict. The next section will take a closer look at the role of the international community during the decade-long conflict and its aftermath.

## **THE EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENT**

Sierra Leone was dysfunctional from independence, but it remained below the radar of the international community from the 1960s through much of the '90s. Even in the context of the Cold War, Sierra Leone was not a major factor, unlike neighboring Liberia, which served as a Cold War base for the Americans in West Africa. The UK also generally neglected its former colony, as illustrated for example by the British refusal of President Momoh's request for military advisers, communications, and intelligence capacity in 1991 just after the start of the civil war.

### **The Role of Regional Actors**

Though under-equipped and under-funded, ECOWAS can be credited for preventing Sierra Leone from descending deeper into chaos and protracted conflict. During the early years of the civil war when the international community was reluctant to get involved, ECOWAS, under Nigerian leader General Sani Abacha, played the main role in the attempt to end the conflict. Analysts have noted the irony in a dictator working to restore a democratically-elected government, yet Abacha was concerned about maintaining Nigeria's role as the most

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influential state, within ECOWAS as well as with the potential ramifications of the pan-African revolutionary goals of influential government and rebel leaders such as Gaddafi, Taylor, Sankoh, and Burkinabé president Blaise Compaoré. Abacha feared that successful revolutions in Liberia and Sierra Leone could feed revolutionary fervor in Nigeria. Abacha took further interest in Sierra Leone as Nigerian forces were already fighting the NPFL in Liberia as part of the ECOMOG contingent, and using Sierra Leone as a base of operation. Therefore the regional and internal political dynamics within ECOWAS specifically and more broadly in West Africa had a significant impact on Nigerian and subsequently ECOWAS policy towards Sierra Leone.

ECOWAS pushed for an end to the civil war through the active promotion of peace negotiations as well as providing regional ECOMOG military forces in efforts to maintain control of Freetown. ECOWAS also played a critical role in peace talks – in 1997 in Côte d'Ivoire under Ivorian leadership, in 1999 in Lomé under Togolese leadership, and in 2000 and 2001 in Abuja under Nigerian leadership. As noted above, ECOMOG's military offensive against the RUF in March 1998 enabled President Kabbah's return to Freetown. Shortly after the March offensive, Nigerian Brigadier General Maxwell Khobe, who had been in charge of ECOMOG's ground operations in Sierra Leone, was assigned Chief of the Defense Staff of the SLA. This inclusion of ECOMOG staff within the Sierra Leonean government is important as it set a precedent that later allowed British troops to serve at the highest levels of the SLA, the Sierra Leonean Police, and the Ministry of Defense.

Guinea was another important regional military player involved in Sierra Leone, as it backed and supplied the Kabbah government, contributed troops (along with Ghana and Nigeria) to the ECOMOG contingent, and even launched cross-border attacks on the RUF as it also became ensnared in the conflict that engulfed the region. While the Nigerians and their neighbors can be credited for engaging in Sierra Leone when the international community continued to ignore the conflict, it should also be noted that Nigerian ECOMOG troops in Sierra Leone were accused of committing heinous atrocities against the civilian population, and some generals were accused of partaking in the illicit diamond trade.

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In addition to the military role, ECOWAS adopted sanctions in August 1997 on petroleum products, arms imports, and international travel for AFRC/RUF leaders. The UN Security Council adopted similar sanctions only six weeks later, as Nigerian Ambassador to the UN Ibrahim Gambari was instrumental in getting issues of conflict in West Africa on the UN Security Council agenda.

Following Sani Abacha's sudden death in June 1998, General Abdusalam Abubakar took control of Nigeria. Abubakar promised elections to restore a civilian government in Nigeria, indicating that a possibility of a reduction and withdrawal of Nigerian forces from Sierra Leone might be on the horizon, which increased the pressure on the Sierra Leonean government to reach a peace agreement with the RUF. The election of Olusegun Obasanjo in early 1999 signified a critical shift in Nigerian policy, as Obasanjo found himself under significant pressure to end the conflict and bring the Nigerian troops home. It was only a year later, in May 2000, when the international community finally arose from its slumber and developed a united approach.

### The Role of International Actors

The tepid global response to the 1997 coup encapsulates the general ambivalence of the international community with respect to the situation in Sierra Leone. This lack of response was due to a number of different factors: the recently ended war in Bosnia; the US and UN failures in Somalia and Rwanda, which severely decreased confidence (and first world participation) in UN peacekeeping operations; and the conflict in neighboring Liberia. Most Western nations saw Sierra Leone as an issue with which the British needed to deal. Although the British provided some assistance to maintain Kabbah's government while in exile, tense relations between the UK and Nigeria (the UK refused to provide financial or material support to ECOMOG as long as General Abacha was serving as chair of ECOWAS) meant that Sierra Leone received little tangible support from the international community.

The events in May 2000 were a turning point in the international community's role in Sierra Leone. Prior to this time, the UN had played a limited yet lead role: through establishing a Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) in 1995; financing and supporting elections in 1996; adopting aforementioned sanctions during the AFRC/RUF rule (following ECOWAS' lead) and further sanctions in 2000 on illegal diamond exports; authorizing deployment of 10 UN personnel in 1998 to report on the situation in Sierra Leone and develop a plan of further UN involvement if needed; authorizing a military observer force (UNAMSIL) in July

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1999; participation by the SRSG in peace negotiations in Abidjan and Lomé; and finally through establishment of a full UN peacekeeping force, UNAMSIL, in October 1999, three months after the Lomé peace agreement. ECOMOG forces, bowing mounting popular pressure in Nigeria, began drawing down in early 2000. This withdrawal of ECOMOG forces occurred without a proper handover to UNAMSIL troops. The initial months of 2000 saw a rapid worsening of the conflict, culminating in a decision by the RUF to seize 500 peacekeepers as hostages, creating another potential major UN peacekeeping debacle.

### **UK Involvement**

The UK responded immediately by intervening militarily and got the crisis under control. The British then pushed for a stronger and larger UNAMSIL force in the Security Council and took the lead bilateral role in Sierra Leone. Since 2000 the UK has provided prodigious support: for elections, the development of civil society, independent media, as well as security sector and judiciary sector reform. British assistance to the security sector has been critical in securing peace in Sierra Leone, especially given the historically pernicious role of the Sierra Leone military. British military support has consisted of numerous programs, including: the British Ministry of Defense Advisory Team (MODAT) and the British-led International Military Advisory and Training Team (IMATT), which both aim to train, equip, and advise Sierra Leonean military forces. In addition, UK military advisers have been integrated into government forces. The British also assisted the government in restructuring the Ministry of Defense to improve civil-military relations. Further key British contributions to democracy and development are included in the assets and application sections below.

British support in Sierra Leone, however, has not been without misgivings from critics. Prior to 2000 the UK had been criticized for its role in the Sandline affair, in which the UK government seems to have been aware of Sandline International's (a private security firm) intention to sell arms to the Kabbah government while international sanctions were in place prohibiting arms transfers. Peter Penfold, British High Commissioner in Sierra Leone at the time, and others in the British government claimed that the embargo applied only to the AFRC/RUF, not to the Kabbah government. The entire episode proved an embarrassment to the British government, though there are conflicting views as to whether or not tacit British support for arms transfers to the government was acceptable given the complexity of the situation (including the army's dubious loyalty) and possible ambiguous meaning and interpretation of the sanctions.

The UK also has been heavily criticized for the multi-million dollar Paramount Chiefs Restoration Program, which was introduced in 2000 and funded through DFID. This program was aimed at restoring paramount chiefs, a majority of whom had been displaced by the war, in an attempt to stabilize the vast rural areas of the country. As it turned out, money was often used in a corrupt manner, and the program reinforced traditional modes of local domination and governance that were in fact among the root causes of the war, helping to maintain the system of elite patronage politics pervasive at both the national and local level in Sierra Leone.

### **UN Involvement**

The overall importance of the UN in Sierra Leone since 2000 should not be underestimated. The UN responded to the May 2000 crisis by revising UNAMSIL's strategy to include ongoing promotion of dialogue with the RUF as well as increased military enforcement, which led to UNAMSIL taking a much more pro-active approach in Sierra Leone. In addition, the UN began to be more aware of the regional dynamic to the conflict in Sierra Leone. A Security Council mission to Sierra Leone and Liberia in October 2000 documented Liberian President Charles Taylor's ongoing support to the RUF and facilitating illegal transport of diamonds from Sierra Leone through Liberia. In March 2001 the Security Council adopted travel sanctions against Taylor and an arms embargo. In brief the UN – through the SRSG, UNAMSIL, and the humanitarian agencies on the ground (UNDP, UNHCR, UNICEF, etc.) – has been critical to the progress made in Sierra Leone during this decade. It is also worth noting that the US and Japan, being the largest financial contributors to the UN's assessed and voluntary contributions, have contributed hundreds of millions of dollars to UN activities in Sierra Leone.

May 2000 is thus now seen as a real turning point in finally getting to peace in Sierra Leone. Following the UK and UN leads, international attention rapidly increased, along with a large injection of international assistance and the critical recognition by much of the international community of the regional nature of the conflict.

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## **US Involvement**

The United States has by and large played a supporting role to the British in Sierra Leone. The US too began to take the conflict in Sierra Leone seriously after fighting in late 1998 forced the evacuation of staff from the American Embassy as well as from other Missions. Although the US was concerned with Liberia at the time, it took a long while for the most senior-level officials in Washington to understand the regional context of both wars. US Ambassador to the UN Richard Holbrooke (1999-2001) was advocating during this period for much stronger American participation in peacekeeping in Africa, and he pressed the US to exert greater pressure on the RUF.

The US did play a significant role in the Lomé peace negotiations in 1999 where American Ambassador Joseph Melrose's was active as observer. Notably, the US had sent special envoy Jesse Jackson to press President Kabbah to go to the Lomé negotiating table with the RUF. According to former American Ambassador John Hirsch, "Many in Sierra Leone argued that Jackson's pressure forced Kabbah to enter negotiations from a weak position and that allowing several more weeks for ECOMOG forces to continue fighting would have changed the diplomatic equation significantly. Jackson earned the opprobrium of many Sierra Leoneans."

In the aftermath of Lomé critics have argued in hindsight that the US specifically, and the international community in general, may have pushed too hard for a negotiated solution to the conflict, essentially forcing the Kabbah government to the table and to accept an agreement that provided too much for the RUF, and one that would be extremely difficult if not impossible for each side to uphold. Although the provisions of the accord were heavily criticized by some, the agreement was seen by others as reflecting the realities on the ground – including the impending withdrawal of Nigerian troops – and the need for the government to reach a peace deal. Post Lomé and the British repulsion of the RUF from Freetown, the US played a key role in the establishment of the Special Court for Sierra Leone, in supporting the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and in providing support to elections and independent media.

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Once the international community was sufficiently engaged, the major priorities consisted of consolidating peace (including overseeing the DDR process as well as the reintegration of returnees back to their host communities) and addressing humanitarian needs. As peace began to hold, focus shifted to the 2002 elections and subsequently over the past several years to the general democratization process, which has included institution building, the fight against corruption, as well as support to civil society, independent media, and rule of law. Daunting challenges still remain – including many of the root causes of the civil war – that Sierra Leone must overcome if it is to continue along the path towards full democratization and development. The international community today can be criticized for not making significant enough demands of the post-war government, for putting in place weak accountability measures to fight corruption, for insufficient oversight mechanisms placed on the Kabbah government, and for certain initiatives introduced, such as the one to strengthen the local paramount chiefs. There is also a fear today of Sierra Leone stagnating. Inclusion as a priority country by the UN Peace Building Commission and ongoing attention from the UK, US, EU and others, however, should ensure that Sierra Leone continues upon an upward trajectory.

## **DIPLOMATIC RESOURCES IN SIERRA LEONE AND THEIR APPLICATIONS IN SUPPORT OF DEMOCRACY**

### Assets

The diplomatic community resident in Sierra Leone has been very limited. Through the early years of this decade, the major diplomatic presence in Freetown was provided by the UK, the US, and the EU, including some EU member states. But until the late 1990s, the UK and the US diplomatic Missions did not enjoy sufficient *support from their home governments*. Once London and Washington realized the importance of acting in Sierra Leone, the leverage of support from each of these global powers made a significant difference. The British sponsored UN Security Council Resolution 1132, which was adopted in October 1997 and established an embargo on weapons and other military equipment, petroleum, and petroleum products on Sierra Leone. This UN embargo followed directly upon the heels of a similar ECOWAS embargo adopted in August of the same year, once again illustrating the critical role ECOWAS played during the 1990s when the international community was not paying close enough attention to Sierra Leone. Support from a home authority was finally

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illustrated by the 1999 visit of then US Secretary of State Madeline Albright to refugee camps outside Freetown, as well as the sending by US President Bill Clinton of Special Envoy Jesse Jackson to help negotiate the Lomé Peace Agreement in 1999. These events raised the profile of the crisis in Sierra Leone in the US – both in the media as well as in the government in Washington. The British also took very decisive and prompt action by intervening militarily in May 2000 following the seizure and hostage holding of nearly 500 UNAMSIL peacekeepers by the RUF, and the impending fall of Freetown to the rebels. The British deployed 600 troops in the defense of Freetown and the airport. This decision by the Blair Administration signified the recognition by the British that something had to be done in Sierra Leone to demonstrate that the international community had the will and capacity to act effectively in these types of situations. Finally, the British government made an “over-the-horizon” security guarantee to intervene militarily in Sierra Leone within 48 to 72 hours if a security crisis in Sierra Leone emerged. This guarantee, along with the presence of 17,500 UN peacekeepers serving under a Chapter VII mandate, helped serve as deterrents to the resumption of conflict.

The US played the lead role in both the preparation and implementation of the Special Court for Sierra Leone (SCSL), which is a hybrid court (an international court staffed by expatriates and Sierra Leonean nationals, operating outside the Sierra Leonean judiciary but with the ability to prosecute under Sierra Leonean law), established by UN Security Council Resolution in 2000 to try those who bore the greatest responsibility for crimes committed after the 1996 Abidjan Peace Accord. The US has been the largest donor to the SCSL, and the first prosecutor for the Court was an American (marking the first time an American was prosecutor of an international court since Nuremburg).

Although viewed by many in the international community as a success, some Sierra Leoneans have not supported the SCSL, as complaining that the significant amount of money spent on the SCSL (the Court’s budget in its first year of operation was \$25 million) would have been better spent in other ways. Compared to recent international tribunals in Yugoslavia and Rwanda, however, the SCSL has operated in a much more timely and cost-effective manner. The US was also instrumental in supporting the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), established through the 1999 Lomé Peace Agreement and approved by Sierra Leone’s Parliament in 2000. The TRC was mandated to create an impartial historical record of human rights violations during the conflict, address impunity of offenders not tried by the Special Court, respond to the needs of victims, and promote healing and reconciliation. The US supported the TRC through sponsoring various seminars and conferences throughout the country to promote discussion of human rights and reconciliation type issues. Diplomatic support by the Americans of these two transitional justice mechanisms helped provide *legitimacy* to the processes and the government efforts to address major human rights violations that occurred during the war.

US Embassy staff would often participate directly in the seminars and meetings that were promoting the TRC and dialogue around human rights issues. This was also an example of the *solidarity* provided by the diplomatic community to those who were acting in support of peace and democracy promotion. There were frequent visits by American Ambassadors to civil society groups, as well as through diplomats speaking out publicly in support of the 1996 and 2002 elections. *Funds* from the UK and US governments have been channeled mainly through the aid agencies DFID (the Department for International Development) and USAID (the US Agency for International Development). Annual DFID bilateral funding to Sierra Leone is currently £40m. USAID funding for development assistance in 2008 was \$4 million, with an additional \$400,000 for International Military Education and Training (IMET), \$150,000 for narcotics control. USAID’s strategy for Sierra Leone focuses on “agriculture and local economic development” and “strengthening democracy and reducing corruption.” Both of these countries also footed a significant portion of the UNAMSIL bill, which totaled an estimated \$3 billion over six years (1999-2005). Direct diplomatic mission funds, while not that significant in amount, were used strategically to support independent media, civil society (including an emphasis on youth), and elections-based work.

## APPLICATIONS

### The Golden Rules

The small but influential diplomatic community in Sierra Leone was on the whole highly collaborative, in very regular contact regarding democracy-related activities. This *sharing* of information and coordination of

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strategies allowed democracy-promoting missions to come to dialogue and come to consensus on key issues, as well as to coordinate which mission would take the lead on different issues. The British High Commission has played the largest role within the diplomatic community in Sierra Leone since 1992.

Diplomats in Sierra Leone also sought to *understand* the overall situation in Sierra Leone through interactions with a wide range of stakeholders, including civil society, local and international NGOs, the government, as well as the international community. Even though there were initially numerous failures to understand, including a general lack of comprehending the conflict and historical situation and the inability by many observers to grasp the regional nature of the conflict, diplomats were finally able to recognize that, although government and civil society capacity were relatively low, Sierra Leonean understanding of the conflict and its own history was critical to the international response. As former British High Commissioner Alan Jones has noted, “Credit for what has happened in Sierra Leone does not just lie with the international community. Primarily it lies with the people of Sierra Leone. They were the ones who suffered the horrors of eleven years of civil war. They are the ones who fought against injustice.” International NGOs such as Human Rights Watch, which was influential in identifying key human rights issues upon which to focus attention, and International Crisis Group, whose analysis helped the international community understand the on-the-ground realities of the conflict, were also instrumental in increasing greater awareness and understanding.

### Truth in Communications

Diplomats *reported* back to their host governments in as candid a way as possible on the situation in Sierra Leone. From the American side, reports back to Washington were regular (except when communication was cut off because of personnel insecurity) and these reports were known for being candid and credible. Reports did not shy away from highlighting criticisms of the government and the true extent of atrocities being committed mainly by the RUF.

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While reports from the American Embassy in Freetown in the mid-1990s also highlighted the regional nature of the war in Sierra Leone, including direct Liberian involvement, it took a long time for Washington to finally understand the Sierra Leonean conflict. Washington, even with the candid reporting from Freetown, did not make responding to the conflict a policy priority until after the British mobilized to act against the RUF in 1999. This led to subsequent visits in 1999, first by the American Ambassador-at-Large for War Crimes Issues and then by the American Secretary of State. These visits helped raise the priority level of Sierra Leone in Washington. The British government began prioritizing Sierra Leone in 1999 as a result of a series of BBC news spots that were aired following the invasion of Freetown. These spots revealed the atrocities being committed against innocent civilians, and were influential in moving the UK to respond. American print and television media, particularly the *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, and CNN (including Sierra Leonean journalist Sorious Somura’s *Cry Freetown*) also increased American awareness of and interest surrounding the conflict. Finally, the UN Panel of Experts reports on Liberia and Sierra Leone helped raise international community awareness and improve the understanding of the regional aspects of the conflict in Sierra Leone.

The diplomatic community has been deeply involved since 2001 in *informing* the Sierra Leonean population through support to independent media. Missions have frequently provided media with information from their governments’ perspectives, as well as supported local and international NGOs working in radio and print media, through financing, support to community radio, and promotion of independent media activities.

### Working with the Government

The diplomatic community in Freetown has played a major role both in *advising* as well as *capacity / institution building*. When President Kabbah was in control of the government in the 1990s (which was on an on-again, off-again basis between 1996 and 2002), diplomats provided timely and critical advice to Kabbah and the Sierra Leonean government in general. American Ambassador Joseph Melrose was also involved in close discussions with President Kabbah regarding how to deal judicially with the seizure of the UN peacekeepers, especially given that this was a clear violation by the RUF of the terms of the Lomé Agreement. Discussions between Kabbah and Melrose revolved around concerns that the judicial system in Sierra Leone could not deal adequately with the RUF. Melrose also provided advice to the drafting of the TRC legislation that was passed by Parliament. In the early part of this decade, British High Commissioner Alan Jones and American Ambassador Peter Chaveas met frequently with President Kabbah on a wide variety of pressing issues and acted as interlocutors with senior level government officials.

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The diplomatic community, particularly Britain, has played an instrumental role in efforts to strengthen the capacity of Sierra Leone's woefully inadequate state institutions. The British are currently in the process of providing major funding and support to a ten year security sector reform (SSR) program, which includes equipping, training, and restructuring both the military and police forces and is being led by IMATT. Much of the funding for SSR has come from the UK's Africa Conflict Prevention Pool. In addition, the UK is supporting a major decentralization process, as well as a five-year, £25 million project (funded via DFID) to develop an effective and accountable justice sector capable of meeting the interests and needs of Sierra Leoneans, especially the poor and marginalized. Finally, the British are funding the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), and through DFID have provided general support for reforming other government ministries and institutions since the late 1990s. The US, meanwhile, has complemented British efforts to SSR and justice sector reform. The US has targeted military personnel and civilians by organizing programs to improve civil-military relations, as well as initiated a significant program in the military to address HIV/AIDS. The US has also sent a small number of Sierra Leonean military personnel to the US for training. With respect to the justice sector, the US has brought in American legal experts for short capacity building programs, as well as assisted in repopulating the Supreme Court's legal library in Freetown. Finally, various international NGOs (INGOs), through financial support from various Community of Democracy members, have provided training to national parliamentarians. Support to Sierra Leone's weak institutions has not been without its share of controversy, however. For example, the British have been criticized for prioritizing police reform at the expense of military reform, leading to resentment within the armed forces. In addition, the penal system has been neglected as prison conditions remain deplorable, and many inmates have spent years in prison without being charged. The ACC has also never really been functional and has not pursued serious corruption cases at the senior level. Millions of dollars have thus been poured into a body that was supposed to be fighting corruption and was ironically proven to be quite corrupt itself. The British and others failed to use their leverage as donors to pressure the government into improving the ACC. Newly elected President Ernest Bai Koroma has, though, vowed to tackle corruption and has appointed Abdul Tejan-Cole, a well-respected civil society leader, as the new head of the ACC, illustrating this commitment to fight corruption.

### Reaching out

Civil society groups have made important contributions to the peace and democratization processes in Sierra Leone. Diplomatic missions played an active role in *connecting* civil society groups to international NGOs, outside assistance, and other types of support. Since the early 2000s, the US and UK have supported the local NGO 50-50, which is an organization that has worked to bring more women into the political process. Other groups focusing on women and youth have also received diplomatic support. In the preparations for elections in 2002, the country director for an international NGO (INGO) working on democracy and governance issues, stated: "The international community saw civil society as the only hope... Civil society had more credibility and ability to function than (political) parties." The diplomatic community has also supported civil society through working with local elections observers. Prior to the 2002 elections, the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and the Forum for Democratic Initiative (FORDI), a local NGO, convened a workshop to discuss election monitoring. This workshop gave birth to the National Election Watch (NEW), which has grown into a coalition of over 375 local and international civil society organizations and a national network of civilian election observers, headed by Search for Common Ground (SFCG), another INGO. During the 2007 presidential elections, NEW placed trained civil society observers in 97% of polling stations around the country. NEW received funding from DFID, NDI, and the Canada Fund for Local Initiatives in 2007. NEW has thus helped ensure transparent elections over the past five years. Prior to the 2007 election, NDI also trained local NGOs to help with registration and voter education. It should be noted that NDI and Search for Common Ground both received a majority of their support in Sierra Leone from the US and UK since 2001, and are very highly respected by the diplomatic community.

In addition to providing support to civil society, diplomats have also played important *convening* roles in Sierra Leone. Diplomatic missions have supported the National Electoral Commission (NEC), the governmental body established to organize and conduct elections. In the early days of the NEC (preceding the 2002 elections), the UN, UK, US, and EU provided massive support to the NEC to enable it to function, including technical, material, and financial assistance. Following the 2004 parliamentary elections the NEC's performance was so poor that the NEC had to be nearly completely dismantled and restructured. The reconstituted NEC, under the leadership of well-reputed civil society and government veteran Christina Thorpe, is now seen as much more capable, neutral, and independent. Most recently, the NEC was lauded by the international community

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for its oversight of free and fair presidential elections in 2007. Furthermore, prior to the 2002 elections, the diplomatic community provided funding to FORDI to set up the Political Party Resource Center (PPRC), a training and resource center in Freetown for political parties to use that included computers and a photocopier that all legitimate parties had access to, as well as meeting space. The meeting space was used for political party trainings, cross-party dialogues, as well as for meetings between parties and the NEC. The diplomatic community also used this space to come together with party leaders and presidential candidates.

Diplomats have *facilitated* peace processes and negotiations, as well as in trying to foster political dialogue and reconciliation. For example, American Ambassador Melrose met privately on multiple occasions with the RUF leadership, including Foday Sankoh, trying to push for a cease-fire. The diplomatic community has also been active in promoting dialogue, accomplished most notably through diplomatic support to the Special Court and the TRC. Diplomats have also shown support to political dialogue through public support of the Political Parties Registration Commission, a body established to ensure peaceful political representation of the population through independent registration and balanced monitoring of parties. This support was evidenced by a public communiqué issued in 2006 and signed by the US Embassy, the British High Commission, the European Commission, and the German Embassy. A section of the press release read, “We hope that Sierra Leone’s political parties... will take advantage of this opportunity to educate and inform the electorate by generating a genuine and vigorous issues-based national debate as they approach the 2007 presidential and parliamentary elections. Such a debate is a critical component of Sierra Leone’s successful emergence from its turbulent past.” Most recently, after the tense 2007 elections, the American Ambassador June Carter Perry and British High Commissioner Sarah MacIntosh worked with a number of international and local civil society groups to organize an event aimed at general reconciliation and dialogue among women and that also encouraged and supported women’s participation in the local elections that followed. First Lady Sia Koroma hosted the two day event, and NEC Commissioner Christiana Thorpe was the keynote speaker.

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Diplomats have used *financing* – channeled both directly through the missions as well as through aid agencies – to support democracy promotion work in Sierra Leone. Significant amounts of financing since 2002 have been devoted to preparing and running elections, UNAMSIL, DDR programming, capacity building of government institutions, fighting corruption, reforms in the diamond industry, and civil society and independent media support. In addition to the US, UK, and UN, major donors active in Sierra Leone include the European Commission, Canada, and Germany.

The US, for example, has provided funding to local democracy and human rights groups through the Democracy and Human Rights Fund, which is provided by USAID, as well as small grants to community groups through the Ambassador’s Special Self-Help project, which supports various activities such as small-scale economic initiatives and community theatre. USAID’s Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) also provided funding for the Lomé peace talks, as well as other quick-impact projects (including independent media support). US financing to support parliamentary and presidential elections has been channeled through INGOs such as SFCG, NDI, IFES, the International Republican Institute (IRI), and the National Endowment for Democracy (NED).

In addition, financial support to diamond industry reform has included assistance in setting up the Kimberly Process for certifying non-conflict diamonds, as well as community initiatives to support miners and mining communities.

It should be noted that much of the money provided multilaterally to the government has not been spent in the way in which it was intended, due to ongoing government corruption and a lack of international community oversight and accountability mechanisms for financial expenditures of donor money. Government financial systems have not been sufficiently analyzed and improved, and the government has often accepted funding for projects it is not prepared to implement. There was a major scandal, for example, surrounding the parliamentary elections in 2004, as a damning report on the NEC’s performance by IFES detailed widespread irregularities and embezzlement of funds (this report was not made public, and led to the overhaul of the NEC).

### Defending democrats

The diplomatic community in Sierra Leone has also been instrumental in *verifying* elections. Election monitoring has been an important part of diplomacy for democracy-promoting missions since the 1996 elections. The diplomatic community has also provided general elections support and contributed vast amounts of resources

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to ensure the success of presidential, parliamentary, and local elections. During the 1996 presidential elections, the British took the lead within the international community in preparing the elections. The US and EU also played supporting roles. The 2002 presidential elections, the first since the official end of the civil war, were closely monitored by diplomats and were considered a major diplomatic priority. Once again, the UK, US, EU, and UN provided major funds for these elections. In addition, American Ambassador Chaveas secured the use of two contract helicopters that were dispatched around the country to fill gaps in preparation for election day. The UK, EU, and US all sent out election monitors in teams of two throughout the country to observe the elections. International observers have also been involved in monitoring in subsequent elections, including the 2007 presidential elections, whose results were monumental in that they brought about peaceful democratic transfer of power through the ballot box as Ernest Boi Koroma, leader of the APC opposition, won in a run-off. Koroma's election was seen by many as more a rejection of the SLPP and its years of inept and corrupt rule than a wholehearted or informed endorsement of the APC. In spite of this, the peaceful transition to opposition rule is an extremely significant result for Sierra Leone.

## **CONCLUSION**

Although peace in Sierra Leone remains somewhat tenuous, diplomatic involvement in Sierra Leone has allowed the country to move out of civil war and begin the long and arduous path towards democratization and rebuilding. Once the UK and UN decided, beginning in the late 1990s and culminating in May 2000, to engage more sincerely and vigorously over the long-term, others followed their lead. Sierra Leone remains one of the poorest countries on earth today (ranked 176 out of 177 countries in the UN Human Development Index as of 2006), however, and still urgently needs to address many of the root causes of the civil war, including issues of corruption, abuse of power by politicians and local chiefs, and lack of economic opportunity for the majority of Sierra Leoneans, especially the growing youth population.

Sierra Leone does now have in place a functioning government – including a president and legislature elected freely and fairly by the populace; a justice system that, while seriously flawed, has shown signs of improvement; a security sector undergoing thorough reform; and a civil society that is becoming increasingly more active. Although elections are by no means a panacea, the 2007 presidential elections seem to have been a major step forward for the country. The election put in place a government that was seen as at least nominally credible by the international community and the population. The election, in combination with the security guarantee from the British and the major presence of the UNAMSIL force until 2005, helped consolidate the peace and allow Sierra Leone to move forward to focus upon other critical aspects of the democratization process, such as institution building, combating corruption, providing openings for civil society development, and ensuring freedom of the press and rule of law. Progress on each of these issues has been extremely slow. Yet continued international engagement in Sierra Leone since the late 1990s has illustrated the generally positive role that the international community can play once it decides to commit itself. The recent declaration of Sierra Leone as a priority country for the UN Peace Building Commission signifies the recognition of the need for the international community to maintain sufficient attention on post-conflict developments within Sierra Leone. In conclusion, Sierra Leone is a country where, if one judges in comparison with its past, and especially considering the conflict in the 1990s, the international community has gotten it somewhat right, while struggling in the attempt to address underlying causes of the war, foster institutions, or consolidate democracy.