

REPORT OF VISIT TO SIERRA LEONE 18TH SEPTEMBER TO 17TH OCTOBER 1991

This report is from personal notes I took while talking to people, and my impressions during my short visit to Sierra Leone. I have to qualify that because my visit was restricted mainly to Bo and short day trips to Blama and Kenema.

I want to start by expressing thanks, first to Christian Aid for generously giving two weeks compassionate leave added to two weeks of my annual leave to bring my visit to four weeks. I also wish to thank Bob Dixon, my previous boss and personal friend for hospitality and help with transportation, my mother-in-law Mrs. Cecilia Saidu, and my hosts Beatrice and Joseph Kangbai - especially for looking after my displaced relations from Golahun Vaana, a village south-east of Blama in the Kenema District.

I would also like to make mention of friends who gave me money to spend as I saw necessary - John Holliday, Eve Howes, Professor Gwynne-Jones, and Jean Conteh. Lastly, my thanks and appreciation go to my wife Margaret for all the help and support she gave me leading up to and during our visit.

I had planned to visit Sierra Leone in December - the early part of the dry season and harvest time (and also to escape the winter!). I had to bring my trip forward because of the waves of unsettling news from my relations about the effects of armed incursions on them. My village was not overrun but had had forays from a roving band of rebels whose base was Potoru. It was also the scene of a heavy gun battle between the Sierra Leone Government soldiers supported by former Liberian soldiers, about mid May. The soldiers won the battle but they ran out of ammunition so they advised people to move to Bandawoh about eight miles away, going towards Blama. Bandawoh had soldiers stationed there. The nature of the armed invasion from Liberia was one of bush warfare - the Liberian rebels overrunning and occupying key villages and towns, and the Sierra Leone army facing the task of dislodging them and taking back those villages and towns.

The victims have been thousands of rural people fleeing for their lives to bigger towns and the two provincial towns of Kenema and Bo for safety. The populations of Kenema and Bo have swelled as waves of rural refugees started coming from about March. The most immediate problems the refugees face are accommodation, food and health. Refugees have streamed into the big towns relying on and using their long distant relations network. It was commonplace for family houses to have an average of 15 people living in them. Apart from the refugee camps outside Waterloo (used mainly by Liberian refugees who flooded Sierra Leone at the height of the exodus), I did not see any refugee camps in Bo.

How did this Invasion come about?

Tracking facts down in Sierra Leone is an impossible task. Most of the time what happens is that you cast a long wide net and collect information and you process it by passing it through a sieve. A lot of it will fall through. The next step is to look

for similarities in the stories and compare them and then start piecing it together like a jigsaw puzzle. Stories come from a wide variety of sources, most of which are not authentic and on very few occasions do people write things down, but if you are interested and patient you can develop a picture close to the fact.

Story 1

Only superficial characteristics and identities distinguish a Sierra Leonean and Liberian along the long land border from Solima in the South to Koindu in the East. The common languages on the border are Vai, Gola and Kissi and this, together with other social and economic factors, has tied people together for centuries.

Another similarity which may not have direct bearing on the possible reasons for the invasion is the foundings of Freetown and Monrovia - both started as homes for freed slaves from Britain and the United States respectively. In fact, some of the settlers in Monrovia did camp in Bonthe before finally arriving in Monrovia. For long, Sierra Leoneans did secure employment in Liberia, some in fairly key positions.

Charles Taylor, the main rebel leader, launched his invasion from Ivory Coast and managed to control most of the hinterland. Food production must have been disrupted, and naturally his rag tag army traded along the border into Sierra Leone for food and may have resorted to quick border raids to secure food and money, terrorising the local population. They probably became more adventurous when they found little or no resistance. This theory holds water because towns in Sierra Leone close to the border like Koindu, Buedu, Kailahun, Pendembu and Daru are quite wealthy through agriculture and commerce, especially Koindu, which for long has served as a prosperous commercial and trading centre.

Daru has an army barracks, originally established by the British Colonial Government to halt French advance from the North East. The strategic importance of Daru declined with independence, also Daru is very remote from Freetown, especially with the closure of the railway. The military strength, and its equipment, was very weak. So the rebels faced no real confrontation until the arrival of troops from Guinea.

Story 2

Charles Taylor's invasion was launched into Liberia about December 1989 and his forces swept through the country. Late President Samuel Doe, whose power had waned as his popularity eroded because of the repressive nature of his government, gave up confronting Charles Taylor's army in the countryside. He consolidated his position in the capital, Monrovia, and heavily fortified the executive mansion where he lived. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) - Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Nigeria and Sierra Leone - after individual efforts and group efforts to influence the end of the civil 1 war, put together

a peace-keeping force, ECOMOG, which entered the country in August 1990.

However, there were two weaknesses in this initiative - the present Head of State of Nigeria, Ibrahim Babangida, was a close friend of late President Samuel Doe, and Nigeria had given support to the Liberian Government; francophone West Africa (except Guinea) did not contribute to the ECOMOG force. Old Anglophone/Francophone rivalry revived? In fact, Ivory Coast and Burkina Fasso gave support to Charles Taylor - settling of old scores?

A daughter of the Ivorian Head of State, Felix Houphouet-Boigny, was married to A.B.Tolbert, son of the late President of Liberia William Tolbert, whom Samuel Doe ousted in a bloody coup about 1979/80. Tolbert was killed and disgracefully buried. His son A.B.Tolbert too was killed when Doe established himself as Head of State. A.B.Tolbert's widow is now wife of Blaise Campoari, Head of State of Burkina Fasso, formerly Upper Volta.

For long Houphouet-Boigny had been waiting for an opportunity to settle scores with Samuel Doe and he saw that opportunity in Charles Taylor's invasion. The core of Charles Taylor's fighting men were trained and equipped in Burkina Fasso with Libyan connections. Houphouet-Boigny provided the passage from Burkina Fasso through Ivory Coast to launch the Civil War in December 1989. The Liberian army responded with extreme brutality against even suspected sympathisers of the invasion, particularly the Mano and Gio speaking people. Refugees started fleeing in Guinea and Ivory Coast in their thousands. Charles Taylor's force retaliated by killing Krahn speaking people (the language group of late Samuel Doe).

But for the ECOMOG intervention, Charles Taylor would have captured Monrovia and installed himself as President.

The ECOMOG forces had to use Sierra Leone as the assembly point for entering Liberia. Charles Taylor saw the ECOMOG intervention as a deliberate strategy to stop him taking over the whole country, something he feels very bitter about. His decision to invade Sierra Leone, in the hope that would cause her withdrawal from ECOMOG, was logical. It is thought he had a plan like that for Guinea as well, but he could not undertake the two ventures at the same time. Besides, Guinea has a stronger and more experienced army.

So the invasion took place about end of March. It was a twopronged attack - one in the east, the other in the south. The first towns to fall into rebel hands were Koindu, Buedu, Kailahun, and Pendembu, in the east; and Zimi, Solima, Pujehun, and Potoru in the south. After consolidating their position, the rebels led raids into the surrounding villages for food and loot.

Story 3

Charles Taylor had about 100 hard core soldiers/rebels trained

and equipped in Burkina Fasso. They were Liberians and Burkinabes and they were given a contract to take Bo and Kenema, probably to control resources - diamonds, cocoa, coffee - to pay for the war. Each man was on a contract of \$5000. These mercenaries recruited about 3000 Sierra Leoneans but never armed them, partly on suspicion of loyalty and/or shortage of arms. They needed the Sierra Leone conscripts for the local geography of the area and logistics - like communication with local people, and gathering intelligence.

A well-placed friend told me the invasion army was expecting an arms shipment by August. There is evidence that the rebels had radio contact with a ship about 100 miles out at sea. Somehow the arms did not arrive; probably that is why Bo and Kenema were not attacked. These mercenaries have now gone back to Liberia without achieving their objective.

Government Dilemma and Attitude

The invasion did not take the Sierra Leone government by surprise because Charles Taylor, on at least two occasions, said he was going to invade Sierra Leone. The invasion started about March, and in April towns like Zimi, Pujehun, Bandajuma and Potoru (south) were firmly in rebel hands.

The Sierra Leone government responded only in July. The Sierra Leone army was badly trained, had no arms to match those of the rebels, had no fighting experience, and really had no stomach to fight. The old, experienced soldiers were kept in Freetown to protect the city, and I was told troop reinforcements were sent to the Northern Province to stop the invasion spilling over there.

A lot of people feel some of the rebels were among the refugees who flooded Sierra Leone in January/February 1991 to gather information. The government enlisted the remnant of Doe's army that fled into Sierra Leone. They were very effective in flushing the rebels out of Pujehun, for example, but they were a law unto themselves - killing civilians, and looting.

Many people cannot put the government's negative attitude past party politics. The Eastern and Southern Provinces are very strong Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) strongholds. The All People's Congress (APC), one Party that has been in power since 1968, has always regarded those two Provinces as hostile areas and treated politicians from there with suspicion, even those who converted to being APC.

With the multi-party wind blowing over Africa, destruction of the Eastern and Southern Provinces would suit the Northern led and dominated APC government. I also think that the 'Colony' and 'Protectorate' divide still haunts that country. Freetown shows little or no interest in the plight of people in the war zones. Reaction has been - 'as long as it (the fighting) does not reach us'. People have referred to the rebels as 'Mende rebels'.

Most of the Nigerian troops are based in Freetown. The Nigerian Air Force planes fly reconnaissance missions round the peninsular. I was told Nigerian troops were only deployed to Bo after lots of delegations to the President. They are stationed seven miles outside Bo at the Gondama Bridge. There has been a tendency for Freetown to attract funding and relief supplies for the displaced people. Some funding agencies and those who have experience of the country have steered clear of 'hi-jack' of development resources and relief supplies.

Tragic Episodes

I have never until now believed man's inhumanity and cruelty unto man. The trauma of what people have seen done to family members and relations will haunt them for a long time. Personal experiences of those who were lucky enough to escape death still frighten them when recalled.

General

When the rebels overran a town, their first targets were ex-servicemen, retired police (these would be executed straightaway), local traders and businessmen - for money. They would select village beauties and make wives of them on threat of death for anyone who opposed it. This brutal use of force made people cower into submission.

The rebels picked people to do intelligence work for them. You may, for example, be sent to spy on the position of government troops, their number etc. Meanwhile, your wife, children, mother etc. were held captive against your return, against a deadline. Part of the money they loot was spent this way. You would be given money for transport and food. You were told someone else would be sent after you. (You never knew who would be sent.) If you did not return against the deadline, one captive would be killed per day after the deadline. Also, if the information you gave on your return was thought to be inaccurate, you would be killed. If you fell into the hands of the government forces and they suspected you of being a spy, you would be killed.

Recruitment

This was done mainly under duress. If you refused you were shot. Once recruited the rebels would put some sort of tattoo on you. The most common one was the scorpion. After that you were very likely to be initiated by committing atrocities at the point of a gun. After that you became a fugitive. If you fell into the hands of the government troops you were summarily executed.

Semantics

The term 'rebel' has acquired a twisted meaning. Its most common use is - "someone without identity". The capture of a town by invaders from Liberia made some people flee. If there is a pending Sierra Leone government assault to recapture a town, the invaders become jittery and vicious. Many more people flee

to escape it and/or to avoid being caught in crossfire. After the liberation of a town, people are commanded to come out of hiding against a deadline; if not, they are likely to be branded a rebel. Some villages changed hands twice, sometimes with heavy civilian casualties.

Personal

Apart from a cousin who died while in hiding, I lost no other relation. Twenty houses were burned in my village but no-one was killed, unlike lots and lots of other villages. My cousin fell ill and there was no hospital to go to, and it was impossible to take her to a health centre about five miles away for fear of being captured by rebels. She died after a long illness. She left behind two daughters, one of whom is epileptic.

There is one heart-rending tragedy I wish to share with you. It involves a classmate friend of mine, Paul Braima Sesay. After primary school we all went our different ways. Paul, after completing school, went to Liberia about 1970 and came back to Sierra Leone. The rebels attacked his village, Gandohun (see map), on 25th April at night. They issued commands which the local people could not understand and Paul was asked to be the interpreter, and he reluctantly agreed. The rebels withdrew after looting and killing a 15 year old girl, but they promised to come back. The Paramount Chief escaped and went to Kenema to report to government authorities. He sent a letter to the townspeople telling them to vacate the town because the government was going to send soldiers to recapture it. Unfortunately the rebels heard about this, so on their next visit to Gandohun they instructed Paul to order the townspeople to fell trees across the road as a road block. However, the road block was not set up for fear of reprisals from government forces. On Thursday 2nd May the rebels came back and assembled the people and asked them to produce the letter the Chief had sent. They denied knowledge of such a letter. Paul was called out to explain why they had not set up the road block as instructed. Before he could answer he was ordered to get out of the midst of the people. Immediately outside the barrie (meeting hall) he was shot four times by four rebels. People were ordered to go and bury him, guarded by one of the rebels. Paul was about 41 years old.

What Is Being Done

Sierra Leone has never experienced and coped with such a situation before, so there is no previous experience to draw from.

Displaced people streaming into towns like Bo and Kenema have often traced relations and friends to stay with, so large scale, efficient relief work has been very difficult. For some of these displaced people this is the first time they have come to these towns.

I saw two relief distribution centres in Bo where food - rice,

some cooking oil and tinned fish was distributed fortnightly, three days of the week. Very time-consuming and frustrating, and humiliating. The Red Cross, Catholic Relief Services have been active in Bo. The Methodist Church has concentrated efforts on refugee camps in Guinea where most of the Methodist flock have fled. Relief also goes as far as Segbwema - the edge of the liberated zone.

People's generosity has been stretched to unbearable limits as they have taken more people in to look after. Anyone you know in those areas would welcome cash gifts at this time.

People are encouraged to return to liberated and safe areas. But what are they returning to? The incursion started at the beginning of the farming year, so no crops were planted in 1991. There will therefore be no seed rice for 1992. Hunger is stalking Sierra Leone.

There are a few small local organisations who want to help in the resettlement of people in the war-torn areas; some are very genuine and commendable. This situation would naturally increase demand on NGOs who are involved in Sierra Leone. Christian Aid is one.

If you feel moved by what has befallen Sierra Leone and would like to help in some way, please contact me for names and addresses of local relief and development projects. I would urge you not to divert your commitment and giving from any charity you support, but take this on as what the Methodist Church Overseas Division (MCOB) calls a "Second Mile Project" - going an extra mile with these people who are struggling to rebuild their lives.

Moussa M. Conteh

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P.S. Events in Sierra Leone have not received enough publicity for two reasons - Sierra Leone is in the world's backwaters, and the invasion took place when there were 'more important' emergencies - the Gulf Crisis, the Kurds, and more recently Yugoslavia. As a friend told me, 'we have suffered in silence and the world does not seem to care!'