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The U.K. in Sierra Leone: A Post-Conflict Operation Success?

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I was appointed to command in Sierra Leone in the late summer of 2000. The civil war had been going on for 10 years, and Sierra Leone was officially the world's poorest country. The Revolutionary United Front (RUF) rebellion had devastated a once-rich country, completing the work that corrupt, single-party, post-colonial government had started. The RUF rebellion in fact began in response to the abuses of this system, but was rapidly hijacked by criminals, backed from Liberia, with no political, social, religious or other moral motivation whatever—just a culture of greed based on controlling the easy money to be had from diamonds, and subduing the population through terror.

There had been three military coups, and the Sierra Leone Army was widely feared by its own people. It had become unaccountable and corrupt. There had been considerable activity by foreign mercenaries. Throughout the country a local militia, the Civil Defense Force (CDF), had emerged based on traditional tribal hunting fraternities. Although its methods were brutal, this group was at least consistently loyal to the government. The police were also loyal, but also corrupt—the result of one-party government and low pay, or no pay. The U.N. Mission had been attacked by the RUF and, with the honorable exception of the Indian Army contingent, had been all but driven from the country.

Turning Point

The former colonial power was at this point engaged in the situation, and this was to prove a turn-

Talking Points

- When Britain sent military advisers to Sierra Leone in 2000, the former colony had been devastated by a decade-long civil war. The U.N. mission had failed to get the rebels to disarm.
- Advisers undertook the structural, institutional reform of the Sierra Leone Armed Forces: its training organization, command structure, administration, supply, maintenance, and personnel management systems.
- In addition to security, there are two more necessary elements to allow post-conflict reconstruction to take place. One is governance, including the electoral process, the minimizing of corruption, law and order, and a working financial system. The other is essential services: electricity, clean water, basic health and sanitation, communications.
- If these three things are put in place, then business can function, and it is business that does reconstruction best. Governments, armies, institutions like the U.N. are too slow and bureaucratic and always under-resourced.

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ing point. Operation Basilica was set up. This put in place a British one-star officer with a small staff as Military Adviser to the Government of Sierra Leone, a team of advisers and trainers, plus an infantry battalion, tasked with restructuring Sierra Leone's Army from top to bottom. The U.N. force, badly damaged, had lost its mandate and many of its contributors began to pull out. The force remained in the country, but for the time being, without a role. Moreover, the "unholy alliance" of the old Army, former coup plotters, and others rapidly began to fall apart, and in particular, many former dispossessed Armed Forces Revolutionary Council men, calling themselves the West Side Boys, set up a fiefdom in the Occra Hills around Masiarka, from where they preyed on local people and traffic, adopting banditry as a means of support. It was these bandits who kidnapped and held 11 British officers and men and their Sierra Leonian liaison officer. The rescue of these men, Operation Barras, was daring, successful, and widely publicized.

It was now recognized in the analysis of the operation that Britain, if it was to stay engaged in Sierra Leone, had to develop a far more coherent policy. There was a democratically elected government, internationally recognized, but whose writ hardly ran outside the capital. The economy was in ruins.

The British government's expressed aim was "the establishment of sustainable peace and security, a stable democratic government, the reduction of poverty, respect for human rights, the establishment of accountable armed and police forces, and the enhancement of the U.N.'s reputation in Africa and more widely." There are some laudable pieces in that, but some notable omissions, as I will mention later.

The U.N. force was in process of re-establishing itself, and Great Britain decided not to contribute troops. I believe this to be in the light of experience of UNPROFOR (United Nations Protection Force) in the Balkans. The United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone without the Indians, and until the arrival of a large contingent of Pakistani troops in late 2001, was largely impotent. Its mandate was supposed to be to support the government, and force the rebels to enter a process of DDR (disarmament,

demobilization, and reintegration). In fact, it did what U.N. missions often do, by deciding to try to appear "neutral" in defiance of its mandate. I was ordered to make sure that, in the words of one of my stated tasks, "the U.N. does not fail," i.e., to get them out of trouble if necessary. But making sure the U.N. did not fail is a different thing from making it succeed. In fact, I decided on an approach of good cop/bad cop with the rebels: They could either fight me and get killed, or go to the U.N. and enter the DDR process. I did not really mind which.

Rebuilding the Army

In terms of our relationship with the host nation, there were six elements of the campaign, and I had a part in most of them. I was, simultaneously, Commander British Forces West Africa with about 1,000 British troops ashore on any given day; Commander Military Advisory and Training Team; Military Adviser to the Government of Sierra Leone, with a seat on the national security council, responsible for coordinating the military effort to support government objectives; and Commander Joint Task Force, the over-the horizon reaction force of an embarked brigade, with supporting aviation, naval, and air firepower. I was also the de facto commander of the 14,000 strong Sierra Leone Army and its small air force and coastal navy. Quite a brief for a brigadier.

The elements of our campaign were:

- The manning, training and equipping of the Sierra Leone Army, air force and navy. This was done by a combination of specialist trainers (the Military Advisory and Training Team, or MATT) and partnering with assigned British units for collective training.
- The structural, institutional reform of the Sierra Leone Armed Forces: its training organization, command structure, administration, supply, maintenance, and personnel management systems. Unless we did this, we could never walk away—a lesson which has had to be relearned in Iraq.
- Fighting the RUF either directly, or using Sierra Leone Army units with embedded mentors, or by maneuver to force them to accept the U.N.'s DDR process.

These three were my direct responsibility. Rebuilding the army as an accountable instrument of democratic power was both an important part of nation-building, and one of the means by which the RUF would be defeated. Given the record of military coups, the army also had to be rehabilitated in the eyes of its own people. The difficult part was developing the leadership. There was no great shortage of equipment (although the Whitehall bureaucracy did everything it could to obstruct the fulfillment of its own stated intent), and plenty of good, hard-working, loyal, and brave soldiers. But the best leaders were either dead or in exile, so we had to grow this almost from scratch. Specialists, especially doctors, were also scarce.

Rebuilding Civil Society

Next there was:

- A similar effort with the Sierra Leone police conducted by a team of Commonwealth Police officers under a British Commissioner. In Sierra Leone, it was appropriate for Commonwealth policemen to undertake this task because Sierra Leone has a British legal system and a British Colonial policing model. Like was, therefore, dealing with like with a good chance of success. The same logic has not, I fear, been applied in dealing with policing in Bosnia, Kosovo, or Iraq, where British and/or U.S. policing models have been overlaid on a Napoleonic legal model and a paramilitary police force. There has, unsurprisingly, been limited progress. This business of choosing the right sponsor, and not just allowing nations to step up because they think it is a way of making a contribution, is vital. I hope it has been understood in Afghanistan.
 - Capacity building in civil ministries, notably the Ministry of Defense. This was achieved by embedding civil service advisers; running courses for Sierra Leone civil servants; sending Sierra Leone civil servants and senior officers on courses at British universities and defense institutions; and using Department for International Development funds for selected projects like infrastructure, communications, and information technology. There was also money
- for proper salaries for the army, police, and civil service. Proper funding of salaries is one of the best methods of tackling corruption at lower levels since it removes the impetus. If a man can feed his family properly, he has no need to look for bribes and backhanders; if he does, he has something to lose in being fired. At higher levels, corruption can only be tackled, of course, by a package of measures which includes the accountability of ministers through the democratic process, and a functioning legal system.
- Last, an information campaign directed towards the general population, and against the RUF, the message being that we were here to stay, we meant business, and that the rebels would be well advised to enter the DDR process rather than get killed by me. My part was speaking on every local radio station I could find throughout the government-controlled areas of the country, in the knowledge that their broadcasts would be heard both by the rebels and in neighboring countries like Guinea and Liberia. One of the most successful aspects of this campaign was purely accidental. The British Forces Broadcasting Service began broadcasting British radio and TV programs, which were avidly watched by the locals. That we were doing this did as much as anything to convince the rebels that we were there to stay. I did not realize this for some time, until rebel deserters and DDR candidates told me of it.
- So far so good, but what was missing? I contend that there are three essential elements which must be put in place to allow post-conflict reconstruction to take place. These are:
- *Governance.* Not just local and national government, but, for example, the electoral process, the minimizing of corruption, the legal system—not just public order, but law *and* order—and a working financial system with functioning banks and a code of conduct for financial business enshrined in the legal system.
 - *Security.*
 - *Essential services.* Electricity, clean water, basic health and sanitation, communications.

Business Does Reconstruction Best

If these three things are put in place, then business can function, and it is business that does reconstruction best. Governments, armies, institutions like the U.N. are too slow and bureaucratic and always under-resourced; nor do they have the expertise. We did security. We made a contribution to governance but did not address the whole system, and we did nothing about essential services. In particular, we allowed corruption to continue. There was no coordinated inter-ministerial effort. Once the war left the newspaper front pages, Whitehall rather lost interest and left me to get on with what I could. No one with the authority to make decisions, especially financial decisions, and then make those decisions stick, took ownership of the problem at government level. Partly this was, I think, because of a policy vacuum over how to address the shortcomings of the U.N. force. This does not give one great confidence for the future; we do at least now have the Post-Conflict Reconstruction Unit.

When looking at what was achieved with the Sierra Leone Army, it must be obvious that in these situations, there is little use in throwing money at a problem without also providing expertise. That will mean exposure, and if we are not prepared for the consequences of that, then better not to get involved at all than risk losing face—and credibility—badly. Also, there has to be a better way of doing this kind

of business than I had to suffer at the hands of bureaucracy at home. Be in no doubt that a few good men with the right backing can achieve a huge amount in a relatively short time frame.

Sierra Leone is potentially a very wealthy country, with enormous natural resources: rice, timber, gold, iron, rutile, diamonds, fish, offshore oil, and hydroelectric power. Not only should it be self-supporting in these things, it should, as was once the case, be exporting many of them and earning foreign currency. Sierra Leone also has a well-educated population; it has sub-Saharan Africa's oldest university, for example. But it is not building up its natural wealth, and we have a half-done job to thank for it. It is not too late—but things are still fragile. The real danger is that, having fixed security and not the other essentials, we have simply created the conditions for the next military coup.

—Major General Jonathon P. Riley is Senior British Military Adviser to U.S. Central Command. He spoke at “Interagency Operations: Cultural Conflicts Past and Present, Future Perspectives,” a conference co-sponsored by the Strategic Studies Institute of the United States Army War College, the Ministère de la Défense, the Royal United Services Institute, the Association of the United States Army, the Förderkreis Deutsches Heer, the Heritage Foundation, and the United States Embassy Paris. The conference was held at the Sciences Po Center of History, Paris, France.