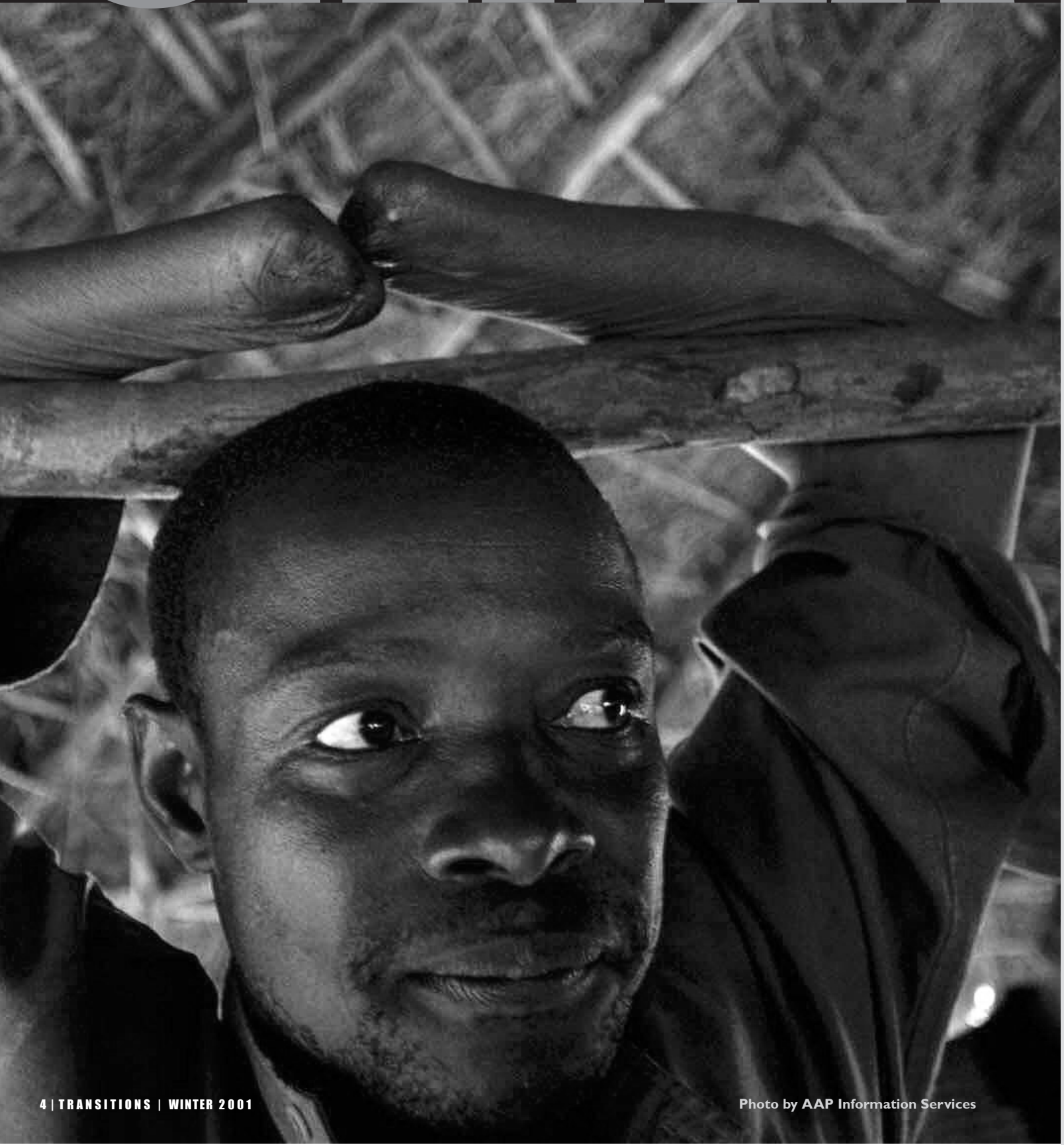


SIERRA



LEONE

A Decade of Darkness and Barbarism

The brutal violence that the Revolutionary United Front inflicted on defenseless civilians during the war sent a chilling reminder that the battle to defeat evil is never over. Sierra Leone's recent history is a story of greed, corruption, brutality and political failure. It presents the West with the most profound ethical and moral issues of our time. Olga Yoldi writes.



"We have virtually wasted a quarter of our life as an independent nation in a senseless and brutal armed conflict" President Tejan Kabbah said last April, in his address to the nation on the eve of Sierra Leone's 40th independence anniversary. He urged Sierra Leoneans to reflect on the strife-torn last decade and called on members of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) to lay down their arms and end all hostilities. Kabbah appealed to Sierra Leoneans to now work to create what he called a new Sierra Leone, based on the principles of self-reliance and

political tolerance.

The RUF, however, have been reluctant to surrender their weapons and put a final end to the country's decade-long conflict. Last month 1,000 of the RUF's estimated 10,000 combatants were demobilised in the Kambia district, a rebel stronghold. They also released 600 of the estimated 5,000 child combatants and agreed in principle to resume the stalled Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration Program, one of the most crucial elements in the peace process.

But for combatants to return to

civil life they will need to find a place in society, if they are not to return to the bush, and at the moment Sierra Leone is in a very precarious situation. The legacy of war, the spread of disease (particularly malaria and AIDS), environmental degradation, uncontrolled crime, scarcity of resources and poverty will pose major challenges to the government in seeking to move from war to peace. Although there has been a deployment of up to 20,000 United Nations peacekeepers, financial resources for long term recovery are poor and as a result the ▶

future is uncertain.

Sierra Leone was described as the epicenter of anarchy in West Africa. In 1994 Robert Kaplan wrote in his Atlantic Monthly article, 'The Coming Anarchy', that "Sierra Leone is a microcosm of what is occurring in West Africa and much of the underdeveloped world: the withering away of central governments, the rise of tribal and regional domains, the unchecked spread of disease, the empowerment of private armies and the growing pervasiveness of war." West Africa, he predicted "provides

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an appropriate introduction to the issues, often extremely unpleasant to discuss, that will soon confront our civilization."

The country increasingly became a virtual zone of terror in the nineties when different areas fell under the power of RUF. The government, unable to control its national territory or protect its civil population, became what political scientist Oswaldo de Rivero would have called a Chaotic and Ungovernable Entity.

Only recently has the situation started to improve. Peacekeepers and other observers described the release of child soldiers as a sign of peace. In a war characterised by such atrocities as the hacking off of civilians' limbs and the widespread use of rape to terrorise people, the abduction of thousands of children by all sides was one of the most tragic aspects of the conflict. Humanitarian groups estimate there are 5,000 to 8,000 child combatants aged 6 to 16 in Sierra Leone.

Nobody really knows how many people actually died during the war. According to the World Health Organisation more people have died of malaria in Sierra Leone during the last eight years of ongoing conflict

than from trauma injuries.

The war has also left more than 2 million people (over one third of the population) displaced and refugees in areas under rebel control will soon be evacuated, but security remains fragile particularly in the borders between Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia where most refugee camps are located.

"There are signs of optimism" says UN Deputy Emergency Relief Coordinator, Caroline McAskie. "I have a profound belief in the human spirit. I see it in action here in

Sierra Leone. You've gone through things that would crush any ordinary mortal, and yet I see people going back, rebuilding their houses, their villages and reorganising themselves," she said.

THE LAST IN THE WORLD

Before independence Sierra Leone was a peaceful and reasonably prosperous country. Rich in mineral resources (diamonds, titanium ore, bauxite and gold) it now ranks last in the world in quality of life, according to a UN Human Development Report released last year. Even Rwanda and Afghanistan offer their citizens a happier, safer, more prosperous and dignified life.

The men of Sierra Leone have a life expectancy of thirty-eight and the women forty. Only three out of ten adults are literate and out of every thousand children born there, 164 die in infancy.

Before the British arrived a flourishing multi-ethnic culture and society had evolved. Today there are 20 native African tribes living in Sierra Leone. The dominant groups are the Temne, Mende, Limba and Creole. Islam is practised by sixty per cent of the population.

Sierra Leone had a long tradi-

tion of trade with Europe, which began in the fifteenth century with the Portuguese. The British arrived in the eighteenth century as slavers. They initially ran a slavery operation off Bunce Island and later established the present capital, Freetown, as a settlement for slaves who either had been freed in Britain and North America, or were seized from ships intercepted in the Atlantic after the passing of the Anti Slavery Act in 1787. Their colonial administration was confined to Freetown, but when the slave trade ended the British set their eyes on the mineral deposits and wasted no time in building a railway linking Freetown to the diamond mining areas of the interior. Trade flourished between the coast and the interior.

British rule in Sierra Leone has been described as moderately benign but neglectful. The system left by the British remained unchanged after independence. Sir Milton Margai (1961-64) the first Prime Minister and Head of the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) was chosen to lead the country. Margai's intention was to build a unified country but he died before he fulfilled his mission. Upon his death his brother Albert Margai (1964-67) replaced him and started a pattern of corrupt politics.

In 1967 All People's Congress (APC) leader Siaka Stevens won the elections. Stevens (1967-85), the dominant political figure in the country's post-independence history, was described as a master of manipulation. During his term he executed many of his rivals and adopted a single party constitution.

"Stevens destroyed and corrupted every institution of the state. Parliament was gutted of significance; judges were intimidated or bribed; the university was starved of funds, education was deprecated in favour of the quick acquisition of wealth; and the professionalism of the army was undermined," former US Ambassador in Sierra Leone, John L Hirsch wrote in his book

Sierra Leone, Diamonds and the Struggle for Democracy.

Stevens stepped down in 1985 and power was transferred to his friend Major General Joseph Momoh. However he continued to be influential behind the scenes.

Momoh (1985-92) was notoriously inept, with few political skills or leadership qualities. During his tenure corruption, nepotism and fiscal mismanagement contributed to the total collapse of the economy and the education system; as a result many children ended up on the streets. To make matters worse, Sierra Leone became increasingly involved in the Liberian war, a war that would soon drag Sierra Leone into an abyss.

“The pattern of corruption and misrule set by Stevens and Momoh had an impact that went far beyond those who immediately stood to gain by manipulation of government funds, smuggling of diamonds, or poaching of the lucrative fishing grounds. As infrastructure and public ethics deteriorated in tandem, much of the professional class left Sierra Leone, leaving behind a country sliding inexorably to the bottom,” writes Hirsch.

Sierra Leone’s civil war started in March 1991 when a group of one hundred fighters under the leadership of Foday Sankoh, a dissident army officer, launched a rebellion to overthrow the Momoh government. The RUF was unknown to most Sierra Leoneans at the time. The mysterious rebels turned out to be a group of young people, who joined forces with some Liberian fighters loyal to Charles Taylor, leader of the National Patriotic Front of Liberia. The rebellion quickly developed into a campaign of violence, making the diamond rich Kono region their battlefield.

The rebels had an ideology of resentment against the government and foreign companies who had plundered the country’s resources. However, it waged war not against the government but against defenseless civilians. They said they were

fighting for the provision of good health care and education for all, but ended up destroying all the hospitals, ransacking the schools and abducting the children.

It was the start of a vicious civil war which would destroy Sierra Leone’s development prospects and would lead to an almost complete dependence on the international community.

FROM LIBERIA TO SIERRA LEONE

Foday Sankoh would not have got very far in his revolutionary efforts without the support of Libya and Liberia. Charles Taylor had been fighting against Samuel Doe in his quest for power. Taylor resented the Sierra Leonean government for providing logistic support to the newly formed Economic Communities of West African States Cease-Fire Monitoring Group (ECOMOG), based in Liberia to support Samuel Doe’s government. Taylor retaliated by providing arms to Sankoh’s RUF fighters to bring down the Momoh regime.

Momoh found himself in a vulnerable position. The army was small, unprepared and poorly equipped so he asked Britain for help, but his request was turned down.

After 12 months of Sankoh’s butchery, a military junta staged an

tially he attempted to negotiate with Sankoh but talks failed. He then launched a major military offensive against the RUF. But the NPRC had inherited a demoralised and corrupt army. Many soldiers found that they were better off by joining the rebels in looting civilians in the countryside than by fighting against them. By mid 1993 civilians found it impossible to distinguish between rebels and soldiers, adding to their confusion and terror.

The NPRC continued fighting the rebels without success. By 1995 Sankoh had grabbed control of all the big mines and started taking expatriate hostages. The death toll was now being measured in tens of thousands. The economy plummeted as rebels controlled the mining areas, hitting the government’s revenue base.

As the RUF forces were advancing towards Freetown, Strasser, who had been supported by Nigerian and Ghanaian troops, decided to invite Executive Outcomes, a South African mercenary firm expert in fighting bush wars, to come to his rescue.

An intense controversy erupted when mercenaries landed in Sierra Leone in March 1995. The question was raised as to what a government should do when it comes under siege and cannot rely on its own army or on the UN troops.

“We have virtually wasted a quarter of our life as an independent nation in a senseless and brutal armed conflict” - President Tejan Kabbah

accidental coup. All they wanted was wages and supplies for fighting Sankoh and staged a protest outside parliament. Momoh thought he was facing a coup d’état and escaped to neighbouring Guinea.

Twenty seven-year-old army captain, Valentine Strasser declared himself head of the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC). He presented himself as a saviour, promising to win the war against the RUF and put an end to corruption. Ini-

Are mercenaries the answer to Africa’s conflicts?

Executive Outcomes’ own origins were obscure. In the 1990s Eben Barlow, a former officer of the 32 Battalion of the South African Special Forces recruited 2,000 men who had served the apartheid regime’s military and intelligence services against the African National Congress (ANC) and other apartheid opponents. These included members of the notorious Koevoet ►

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(crowbar) Battalion, which had fought against the South West African People's Organisation during the independence struggle in Namibia, and the Civil Coordination Bureau, which had murdered members of the ANC and other anti-apartheid activists. Barlow had also served in covert operations in Angola and Mozambique.

Conspiracy theories persist as to who really introduced Executive Outcomes to Sierra Leone. Accord-

ing to Paul McGeough and Tony Wright from the Sydney Morning Herald, one theory is that the push to get mercenaries came from Gencor, a South African mining house. Diamond concessions were apparently part of the deal between Executive Outcomes and the NPRC from the start, although there is no documentary evidence.

Executive Outcomes was linked to Western mining companies such as Branch Energy, which had invested

millions of dollars in mining exploration. According to Hirsch, Branch Energy played a major role in negotiating the deal between Executive Outcomes and the government. Executive Outcomes would be paid \$1.8 million a month by the government, (for less than 100 personnel) in spite of treasury being bankrupt. The government would grant Branch Energy the diamond mining concessions of the Kono region (once they were taken over from the rebels). Branch Energy would in turn give five percent of the value of all diamonds extracted and 37.5 per cent of net profits to the government.

The mercenaries managed to push the RUF out of Freetown very fast. Later that year they gained access to the Sierra Rutile and other important mining areas.

Executive Outcomes executed its contract, brutally and effectively. But it was a bloody contest. The rebels went around killing civilians who in their eyes supported the government. And when Executive Outcomes' fighter pilots complained to their Sierra Leonean military commanders that they could not distinguish between rebel fighters and civilians, Harpers magazine reported, they were told: "Kill everyone."

BROKEN PLEDGES

Multi party elections were announced in the midst of war in 1996. The RUF fiercely opposed the elections and reacted with great brutality and contempt for human life. "We will cut off your hands if you use them to write on the ballot papers," they said to discourage civilians from voting, and indiscriminately went about cutting not only the hands but sometimes the arms and legs of hundreds of defenseless civilians including children, babies and the elderly. Many people arrived at the hospitals with massive injuries, but it is impossible to know the number of victims who died before being able to receive medical attention.

Writer William Shawcross, who



Photo by AAP Information Services

visited a hospital in Sierra Leone at the time, was struck by the horror and the complete silence in the wards. "The victims were in shock. The thought of their lives ahead was terrible. With one savage blow, or with many awful sawing cuts, they had been deprived of any livelihood, if not of their lives," he wrote in his book *Deliver us from Evil: Peacekeepers, Warlords, and World of Endless Conflicts*.

The elections were held and Ahmad Tejan Kabbah, Head of the SLPP won with 59.9% of the vote. Kabbah, a self-effacing former UN diplomat who had been out of the country for many years, promised to restore peace. But peace would prove very difficult to achieve because the rebels developed a habit of making pledges that they would fail to respect.

Sankoh and Kabbah signed the Abidjan and Lomé Peace Agreements in 1997 and 1999. But neither agreement was implemented because the rebels refused to relinquish power. The Abidjan agreement included one condition: that Executive Outcomes should leave the country. The government was well aware that their departure would leave Sierra Leone in a vulnerable situation. However, Freetown politicians had complained that the mercenaries were exacerbating the war. There were also growing allegations that the individuals linked to Executive Outcomes were engaged in illegal diamond extraction and export.

Executive Outcomes left and Kabbah established a power sharing multi-party cabinet, but he was unable to rebuild the nation as the peace process soon broke down. Sankoh kept on delaying the appointment of RUF delegates for demobilisation, reconciliation and peace commissions. In fact he had no intention of honoring any agreement. He admitted that he intended to purchase more arms to continue the war. Shortly after that he was arrested by the Nigerian police at Lagos airport and placed under house arrest.

Kabbah started to lose credibility. Sierra Leoneans had placed much hope in him, but soon became disappointed. Worst of all was his handling of the military. When the country was most vulnerable he suddenly announced his intention of downsizing the army due to pressure from the IMF to reduce costs.

But army officers knew too well that the previous government had looted the country's assets and they would not receive pensions, making it very difficult or impossible for them to return to civilian life. This

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caused turmoil within the ranks which culminated in another coup d'état, this time staged by Major Johny Paul Koroma, who appointed himself the head of the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC).

Another wave of chaos and violence seized Sierra Leone. Gangs roamed the city, looting houses and killing civilians arbitrarily, using RUF's brutal tactics of intimidation and violence. Expatriates were trapped in different parts of the city and had to wait to be evacuated. Kabbah and 200,000 Sierra Leoneans left the country.

Koroma, who was a poorly educated young soldier, said he had staged the coup because Kabbah had been incapable of implementing the peace agreement. He suspended the constitution, banned political parties, and announced rule by military decree. He also started a period of political repression, characterised by arrests and detention. To make matters worse Koroma invited the RUF to join his junta in Freetown, giving them the opportunity they had sought for six years.

Initially ECOMOG troops attempted to defeat them but didn't succeed. Unrecognised by other gov-

ernments and politically isolated, the junta was going to find it difficult to survive.

Kabbah gained the support of the Economic Communities of West African States (ECOWAS), which was requested to mediate with the junta and take all necessary measures to persuade Koroma to step down. ECOWAS decided to resolve the conflict by imposing an embargo on military supplies and petroleum products to the junta.

The UN Security Council met three months later and endorsed

ECOWAS sanctions, however sanctions would not make much difference since Koroma continued to receive arms from Liberia.

Feeling increasingly isolated and pressured, the junta finally decided to send a delegation to Konacry for discussions and negotiations. The Konacry Accords that followed provided for a cease-fire and most importantly for Kabbah's government to return to Freetown by April 1998. The Konacry Accords remained just a written undertaking. The junta would abandon Freetown only after being defeated by ECOMOG troops.

BEYOND SALVAGE

It is difficult to describe the suffering inflicted on the civilian population during the last decade of war. In Sierra Leone no distinction was ever made between civilians and military targets. Civilians were constantly attacked by the RUF for their perceived support to the existing government and also by the military junta.

According to Human Rights Watch civilians were gunned down within their houses, rounded up and massacred on the streets, thrown from the upper floors of buildings, ►

used as human shields and burned alive in cars and houses. They had their limbs hacked off with machetes, eyes gouged out with knives, hands smashed with hammers and their bodies scalded with boiling water. Women and girls were systematically sexually abused and children and young people were abducted by the hundreds to fill the ranks of the RUF.

Victims were sometimes given a choice as to how they wanted to be killed - gunshot, machete or burned alive. Human Rights Watch reported that the atrocities were often planned and premeditated. Upon gaining control of a suburb the rebels went on looting raids, in which families were hit by wave after wave of rebels demanding money and valuables. Those who didn't have what the rebels demanded were often murdered. Victims and witnesses describe the rebels terrorising the civilian population by forcing them to watch atrocities being committed.

Children as young as eight have been implicated in killings and rapes and hacking limbs from other children and adults. According to Chris McGreat from the Guardian, many of these children had been abducted, forcibly fed powerful drug concoctions of cocaine or heroin and pushed into the battle. Many of these children were forced to commit atrocities under threat of death.

Not a single rebel has been tried for human rights violations in Sierra Leone because of the blanket amnesty, which Sankoh imposed as a condition for his signing the Lomé Peace Agreement. The amnesty freed the RUF from any legal responsibilities under Sierra Leone's penal code for the death and atrocities that it inflicted on the civilian population.

Last year the Security Council decided to establish a war crimes tribunal to prosecute those responsible for crimes against humanity and violations of international humanitarian law. This also included the prosecu-

tion of child soldiers. Its establishment will not be possible until the war ends.

But the war will never end if the RUF and Taylor continue having access to the diamond resources. It was in fact the government's inability to regulate the diamond trade that enabled foreign mining companies to reap huge benefits without paying taxes, and it was the smuggling of diamonds that enabled Taylor and Sankoh to finance their wars.

According to James Rupert from the Washington Post, Sierra Leone in the mid 1990s produced \$300 million to \$450 million worth of diamonds annually, almost all smuggled through Liberia and Ivory Coast.

According to Hirsch there is a long history of illicit mining in Sierra Leone. "After independence, successive mining ministers agreed to provide large mining concessions to foreign companies for large bribes or joined in the mining and smuggling themselves ... Diamonds became the keystone in the widespread pattern of corruption and private benefit that has remained beyond the institutional capacity of successive governments to control," he wrote.

Last year the UN Security Council proposed a resolution to impose a global ban on diamond exports from Sierra Leone and called on member countries "to take the necessary measures to prohibit the direct or indirect import of all rough diamonds from Sierra Leone to their territory." However, no global certification system has been established as yet. At present some 80 per cent of the world's rough diamonds and about half of the cut stones pass through the Belgian city of Antwerp. A Belgian foreign ministry official recently said: "Without an international system of certification we can never tackle the problem properly."

In May 2000 the UN imposed sanctions on Liberia after the Liberian government of Charles Taylor failed to convince the UN Security

Council that it had ceased its support for the RUF rebels. Liberia will be banned from exporting rough diamonds as well as arms.

After a decade of war and three flawed agreements Sierra Leone remains in a precarious situation. The country is now divided between areas under UN mission UNAMSIL and RUF control. Upon Kabbah's return to Freetown in 1998 the RUF reorganised itself and has continued the war unabated until now.

Foday Sankoh remains in prison at an undisclosed location. But now the rebels' new leader Issa Sessay says their desire for peace is genuine. Kabbah, who recently cancelled the elections due to security problems, is determined to end the war. "We should not tolerate attempts by any individual or group to sabotage the peace process," he said last April.

The international community, which was initially slow to respond to the Sierra Leone's crisis, has finally provided adequate resources for peacekeeping and disarmament through UNAMSIL. Unfortunately, assistance came a little too late. Sierra Leone, a small and strategically insignificant country, received little attention in the international media, while the wars in Bosnia, Somalia and Rwanda occupied the headlines and little was done to prevent the war.

Assisting Sierra Leone to recover from the trauma and devastation will pose major challenges to the international community. If peace is achieved the RUF will become a political party. The question is will RUF combatants find a meaningful place in society or will they remain a renegade force? Peace and reconciliation may be the only options for Sierra Leone. As a Burundian leader said at a civil society conference last year "even the worst person in society must ultimately return to his community." ■