

**NGOs IN COMPLEX EMERGENCIES  
THE CASE OF SIERRA LEONE**

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## NGOs IN COMPLEX EMERGENCIES

### AN INQUIRY INTO THE ROLE OF HUMANITARIAN NGOS IN FORESTALLING COMPLEX EMERGENCIES AND ALLEVIATING THEIR EFFECTS

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*NGOs in Complex Emergencies* focuses its inquiry on international crises involving the combination of mass population movements, severe food insecurity, macro-economic collapse, and acute human rights violations. These so-called "complex emergencies" present new and unique challenges to the international community and to organizations at all levels engaged in human rights, relief and development work.

The set of organizations of special concern in this project are the operational humanitarian relief NGOs and the non-governmental human rights/refugee monitoring groups. The project's overriding goal is to shed light on the moments and places of interaction between these NGOs and the other key players in complex emergencies, and draw lessons for use in future similar situations. What did NGOs do and not do; what NGOs could and could not do; what NGOs should and should not do to forestall, to report on, to draw attention to, and respond to complex emergencies.

The study will proceed by examining and comparing information on three national crises of ongoing international concern: Sierra Leone, Rwanda/Zaire, and Somalia. It is a basic assumption of the study that comparing data about key events, decisions and actions from the varying perspectives of the UN system, relevant NGOs and the people most affected by the emergencies will yield valuable insights into the workings of the international system during complex emergencies.

#### A Multi-disciplinary Team

Collaborating on *NGOs in Complex Emergencies* is a unique interdisciplinary research and policy analysis team:

**Jane Boulden** -- *UN system and international law*, Queen's University, member of Canadian Council for International Peace and Security.

**Michael Bryans** -- *military and political affairs*, independent writer and consultant.

**David Cox** -- *peacekeeping operations and the UN system*, Queen's University. (deceased, August 1996)

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## **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

### **PART I: BACKGROUND**

- 1 POLITICAL
- 2 ECONOMIC
- 3 THE REVOLUTIONARY UNITED FRONT
- 4 THE ARMED FORCES
- 5 OTHER ARMED FORCES
- 6 THE NATURE OF THE WAR
- 7 THE AID SCENE
  - 7.1 Multilateral and Bilateral Agencies
  - 7.2 NGOs
    - 7.2.1 International NGOs
    - 7.2.2 Sierra Leonean NGOs

### **PART II: THE ROLE OF NGOS**

- 8 FORESTALLING
  - 8.1 Forestalling the Deterioration of Good Government
  - 8.2 The Role of NGOs in Building and in Forestalling the Collapse of Civil Society
  - 8.3 Forestalling Escalation: Negotiation
- 9 DRAWING ATTENTION
- 10 MAPPING AND INTELLIGENCE
  - 10.1 Within Sierra Leone
  - 10.2 Outside Sierra Leone
- 11 OPERATIONAL RESPONSE
  - 11.1 General
  - 11.2 Coordination
  - 11.3 Reconciliation and Peace Building
  - 11.4 Reconstruction: A Late Warning
- 12 CONCLUSIONS

## ACRONYMS

ARD	Association for Rural Development
CAW	Children Associated with the War
CDF	Civilian Defence Force
CCSL	Council of Churches in Sierra Leone
CRS	Catholic Relief Services
DHA	(UN) Department of Humanitarian Affairs
EO	Executive Outcomes
HACU (UN)	Humanitarian Assistance Coordination Unit
IA	International Alert
ICG	International Crisis Group
INEC	Interim National Election Commission
NARECOM	National Rehabilitation Committee
NPFL	National Patriotic Front of Liberia
NPRC	National Provisional Ruling Council
OAU	Organization of African Unity
ODA	Official Development Assistance
ODA	Overseas Development Administration (UK)
RUF	Revolutionary United Front
SLANGO	Sierra Leone Association of NGOs
ULIMO	United Liberation Movement for Democracy in Liberia
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
UNHCR	United Nations High Commission for Refugees
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
VSO	Voluntary Service Overseas
WFP	World Food Program
WHO	World Health Organization

## **PART I: BACKGROUND**

This report is part of a larger 'inquiry into the role of NGOs in forestalling complex emergencies and alleviating their effects'. The studies have focussed their inquiry on international crises involving a combination of mass population movements, severe food insecurity, macro-economic collapse, and acute human rights violations. The project's overriding goal is to shed light on the moments and places of interaction between humanitarian, relief and human rights NGOs and other key players in complex emergencies, and to draw lessons for use in future similar situations: what NGOs did and did not do; what NGOs could and could not do; what NGOs should and should not do to forestall, to report on, to draw attention to, and respond to complex emergencies.

The report is the result of a year-long exercise in monitoring the crisis in Sierra Leone (from May, 1995, when the crisis was perhaps at its peak), to the completion of a field trip to Sierra Leone in May, 1996. The field visit was undertaken a month after multi-party elections, and the end of military rule, and at a time when the new civilian government was in the midst of negotiations with Revolutionary United Front (RUF) leaders. The paper includes events leading up to the Roundtable Conference of Donors held in Geneva in September 1996, and concludes at a moment of both optimism and uncertainty about the future.

Because this version of the paper is a preliminary document, circulated to stimulate discussion and critical comment, and because it was completed during a period of negotiations and optimism, the past tense has been used when referring to events, attitudes and institutions which may prove to have an unwanted resilience.

The author is extremely grateful for the assistance provided by many individuals in Sierra Leone, Britain, Canada and the US. NGOs, United Nations agencies, bilateral aid agencies, academics and many others concerned with the crisis in Sierra Leone, went out of their way to help with information, advice and logistical support. Michael Gaouette, David Jones, David Lord, Elizabeth Lwanga, Thomas Mark Turay and Essa Saccoh provided valuable comments on an early draft of the report. The views expressed, however, as well as any errors or omissions are those of the author alone. A list of public sources will be found at the end of the report.

### **1 POLITICAL**

Following its independence from Britain in 1961, Sierra Leone drifted inexorably away from Westminster-style democracy toward a system of patronage and mismanagement. A brief military government (1967-68) was followed by the presidency of Siaka Stevens (1968-1985), one-party rule (from 1978), corruption, mismanagement and economic decline. A peaceful

transition occurred in 1985 when Stevens retired, handing power to retired army commander, Joseph Momoh.

Momoh gradually dismantled the one-party system of government and re-established a multi-party constitution, which came into effect in 1991. Corruption and mismanagement, however, continued apace. In March 1991, an armed group crossed from Liberia into Sierra Leone, attacking towns in Pujehun and Kailahun Districts and starting what has come to be known as 'The Rebel War'. The group, under the command of a former army photographer, 'Corporal' Foday Sankoh, is known as the Revolutionary United Front (RUF). Its hit-and-run tactics, aimed primarily at civilians, were especially brutal, causing widespread fear and panic, and leading to the virtual disappearance of government from the rural areas. Thousands of civilians were murdered, and over time, almost half the population was displaced.

In April 1992, Momoh was overthrown in a coup. The new government, known as the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC), was headed by 27-year-old Captain Valentine Strasser, who promised to end corruption and bring a halt to the rebel war. Although the 1992 coup aimed at reform and growth, and was expected to end the rebel war, it did not. In a series of increasingly violent attacks on towns and cities throughout the country in 1995, the RUF continued to destabilize the government, contributing to the displacement of 1.6 million people. Another 370,000 Sierra Leoneans became refugees in Liberia and Guinea, meaning that almost half of the country's entire population was seriously affected by the war. Estimates of the number of people killed between 1991 and 1996 range from a low of 10,000 to as many as 50,000.

Strasser was himself overthrown in a bloodless palace coup in January 1996, and was succeeded by his second-in-command, Brigadier Julius Maada Bio. Although the NPRC made efforts to postpone elections that had been planned for the same month, these went forward. None of the 13 parties gained a clear majority, and a runoff election in March was won by Ahmad Tejan Kabbah, leader of the Sierra Leone People's Party, a lawyer and a former UNDP official.

The new government continued the face-to-face peace talks that had been initiated in the Ivory Coast by the military government. In April 1996, the Government and the RUF agreed to establish three joint working parties to deal with the details of a peace accord, the encampment and disarmament of combatants, and the demobilization and resettlement of combatants. Negotiations recessed in June, with major outstanding issues around the presence of foreign troops in Sierra Leone, and questions relating to debt and the national budget. At the time of writing, (September, 1996) there was great hope within Sierra Leone that the cease-fire and negotiations would lead to a permanent conclusion of hostilities.

## 2 ECONOMIC

The Republic of Sierra Leone covers an area of 72,000 square kilometres, about the size of New Brunswick or the Republic of Ireland. It has a population of 4.4 million people, with a growth rate of 2.4% (up from 2.1% a decade ago). By 2025 there will be 10 million Sierra Leoneans. Population density is about 627 per 1000 hectares (compared with 3157 in Rwanda and 458 in Kenya). The urban population increased from 15.4% of the total in 1965 to 36.2% in 1995. While the percentage is similar to other countries (Ghana, Nigeria), the rate of urbanization has been much more rapid.

About 70 per cent of the population is involved in agriculture, which accounted for 26% of GDP in 1993-4. At independence, Sierra Leone was an exporter of rice, palm kernels, palm oil, ginger and groundnuts. Diamonds and iron have been the mainstays of the export economy since the 1930s, however, and diamonds have formed the basis for a large and continuing underground economy, with extensive smuggling through Liberia and Guinea.<sup>1</sup> Minerals - diamonds, bauxite, rutile and gold - represented 7% of GDP in 1993-4 and 90% of the country's exports. Rutile accounted for 53% of the mineral sector, and 48% of export earnings. RUF attacks on rutile operations in 1995 closed the operation entirely, however, and corruption - later aided by RUF attacks on diamond mining areas - reduced diamond exports from 2 million carats in 1970 to only 7,000 carats in 1991.

Despite the crisis, foreign involvement in the diamond areas has continued. A British firm, Branch Energies Ltd., claims to have invested \$11 million in several projects during 1995-6 alone. De Beers, which controls most of the world's diamond trade, is now in the second year of offshore diamond explorations.

The country's total external debt was 177% of GNP in 1993, a level exceeded by only seven other countries in the world.

Fourah Bay College was the first University in Sub Saharan Africa (1827) and in the 1960s, Sierra Leone had a reasonably good and expanding education system. In recent years, however, education has fallen behind, and today the adult literacy rate is only 23.7%, one third of what it is in Ghana. For women it is only 12%.

By the early 1990s, the economy was in a state of virtual collapse. Between 1965 and 1973, there was an average real growth rate of 4% per annum. This fell to 1.8% between 1974 and 1984, and between 1991 and 1995 the average has been negative: -6.24%. GNP per capita was \$150 in 1993, lower than every member of the UN at that time except Tanzania, Ethiopia and Mozambique. The average annual rate of inflation between 1980 and 1992 was more than

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<sup>1</sup> For a colourful early description, see Graham Greene's *The Heart of the Matter* (1948)

60%, higher than in any other LDC except Nicaragua.<sup>2</sup> As manufactures and exports declined, agriculture assumed a growing importance in the economy, but the value-added in agriculture has declined and cereal imports have grown. The export price of Sierra Leonean commodities has fallen significantly over time.<sup>3</sup>

Since 1991, a Structural Adjustment Programme has governed the economy, arresting inflation and attracting support for the rehabilitation of some of the country's basic infrastructure. According to the Central Statistics Office, the economy grew by 3% in 1993-4, compared with a contraction of 20% in 1991-2. Since the dramatic escalation of the war in 1995, however, the expression 'formal economy' relates very largely to the Freetown area. A 30% reduction in the civil service between 1991 and 1994 trimmed government spending, and added significantly to an already severe unemployment problem.

For several years, schools and colleges have operated on a sporadic basis, or not at all. As of March, 1996, it was estimated that 75% of school-aged children were out of school, and that 70% of the country's educational facilities - in a state of decline for several years - had been destroyed. Only 16% of Sierra Leone's 500 government health centres were said to be functioning in March 1996, most of these in the Western/Freetown area.

Sierra Leone ranked 173 out of 174 countries on the 1996 UNDP Human Development Index, an improvement over 1991, when it was last. Life expectancy in Sierra Leone is 39 years (Nigeria, 51), and an estimated 70% of the population live in absolute poverty, two thirds of these in extreme poverty.

### **3 THE REVOLUTIONARY UNITED FRONT**

The RUF is said to have had its origins - along with Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) - in Libyan and Burkinabe training camps for disaffected youth. Of its original 150 commandos, a high proportion are said to have been Liberian and Burkinabe mercenaries. The Burkina Faso connection is related to marriages and enmity between the leading families of the Ivory Coast and Burkina Faso. But the primary NPFL interest was to destabilize (and repay) the Sierra Leone government for allowing the ECOMOG peacekeepers to use its international airport at Lungi as a base to launch air raids on NPFL bases in Liberia, an exercise that basically foiled Charles Taylor's drive for power. There may also have been an NPFL interest in Sierra Leonean diamonds (i.e. guns and encouragement to the RUF in return for diamonds).

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<sup>2</sup> Various structural adjustment programmes negotiated with the IMF and the World Bank between 1991 and 1995 have helped to stabilize some aspects of the economy, and inflation declined from 110% in 1991 to 22% in 1994. During 1995, the figure was 34.5%

<sup>3</sup> Between 1975 and 1992, palm kernels declined in real value by 53%. Palm oil fell 62%, iron ore 23% and groundnut oil 70%.

Early RUF successes probably owe a debt to the inept response of the Sierra Leone military, and to the legacy of public antipathy towards government, following years of APC political manipulation and abuse in the Eastern and Southern provinces.

Although there are no reliable statistics on RUF numbers, a National Demobilization Task Force used a planning figure in April 1996 of 3-4000 armed fighters and up to 6,000 'support staff', including family members.

The original RUF strategy was an attempt to copy the successful NPFL strategy in Liberia, which turned an armed incursion into a war of ethnic rivalry, leading to the downfall and death of President Doe in 1990. In its early days, the RUF seems to have tried first to alienate the Mende people - the country's most populous ethnic group - from government, and then to single out wealthier 'tribes' - particularly the Mandingo, Fullah, Creole and Lebanese - as a particular focus of attention and violence. Although the Lebanese population of the country declined from 35,000 to an estimated 10,000 by 1996, none of these strategies appears to have had any real success apart from the generalized and deep-seated fear they engendered in the population at large. By 1996, few regarded the war as having any serious ethnic overtones.

The success of the RUF has had less to do with military prowess than with the viciousness of its attacks on civilian populations, on rumour, on superstitious belief that its fighters possessed supernatural powers, and on its high mobility and the randomness of its attacks throughout the country (including one or more in 1995 only 27 miles from the capital, Freetown, and at Port Loko, not far from the international airport). The RUF gained strength from kidnapping and the forced recruitment of alienated young men from the diamond fields, apparently requiring them to participate in atrocities in order to ensure their long-term loyalty. Drug usage is said to be widespread among the rebels, adding to the superstition that fighters are 'invincible' and that 'the more you kill the rebels, the more they multiply like ants'.

Attacks on civilians have been marked by the most ruthless kinds of savagery. Parents have been forced to kill their children; people have been mutilated, disembowelled, raped. Women are said to participate actively in the atrocities. Witnesses have always been left to tell the tale, adding to widespread fear and to the force of rumour.

The RUF has a War Council which is said to include educated Sierra Leoneans apparently dedicated to ending poverty and corruption, and to restoring democracy. There appears to be no satisfactory explanation of the contradiction between this stated philosophy and the brutal behaviour of RUF forces, except, of course, that many of the atrocities were not committed by rebels. Initially, it was thought that the RUF had no political agenda apart from a desire for the government to resign, and for all foreign forces (mainly Nigerian and Guinean) to be

withdrawn from the country. Negotiations at the end of 1995 and early in 1996 were made difficult by the lack of specificity in the RUF demands.<sup>4</sup>

The RUF may, in fact, be made up of different factions or groups, without any real central authority over what looks from the outside like a coordinated operation.<sup>5</sup> Until early 1995, it was not even clear whether Foday Sankoh was anything more than a legend, as nobody outside RUF areas had seen or talked to him. Until 1996, the RUF refused several formal offers of a negotiated settlement, issuing the occasional incoherent set of demands via a radio link it had established with the BBC in London. The first formal talks between the NPRC Government and the RUF, held in February 1996 in the Ivory Coast, were inconclusive, but were followed by talks between Foday Sankoh and the new civilian President, Tejan Kabba, in April. These talks resulted in an extension of the February cease-fire, and the creation of three negotiating committees to hammer out further details on a permanent end to hostilities. At the time of writing, these talks were continuing.

#### 4 THE ARMED FORCES

The Sierra Leone armed forces, expanded from 3,000 to 16,000 in the space of three or four years, are poorly trained, poorly equipped, and poorly paid. They are easily panicked, and are said to have taken advantage of the confusion created by the RUF, going on looting binges themselves, and blaming it on the rebels. They are said to have been involved in diamond selling, and are reported to have sold weapons to the RUF. Army 'protection' for food convoys has often resulted in attacks in which no soldiers have been killed (only lorry drivers). Army-inspired evacuations of towns and villages have led to rampages of looting which few blame on the RUF. So blurred are the lines between soldier and rebel that many refer to the enemy as '*sobel*s'. The army has been far from united, with newly-empowered younger officers destabilizing the old balance of power (and economics) within the armed forces. Twenty-nine soldiers were executed in December 1992 (reportedly after having their ears cut off) for allegedly plotting a coup.

With the return to civilian rule in March 1996, fellowships were arranged by UNDP and other donors for some of the leading military figures, and 29 left the country for indeterminate periods of time.

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<sup>4</sup> In its December 1995 meeting with OAU representatives, the RUF made the following main demands: relief supplies should be made available in RUF-held territory; the UN and the OAU should provide the RUF with security and travel documents; there should be a universal arms embargo on Sierra Leone; the army should shield and protect civilians from external aggression; the January elections should be postponed until people could be conscientized as to their rights.

<sup>5</sup> Letters circulating in Freetown from RUF Foreign Relations Officer, Alimamy Sankoh, dated January and March 1996, indicated that he had angrily left the RUF to (re)establish something called the Sierra Leone People's Democratic League.

## 5 OTHER ARMED FORCES

When the RUF incursion began in 1991, President Momoh requested assistance from Nigeria and Guinea, and both countries have maintained troops in the country since then. The Guinean troops are said to have been instrumental in stemming early RUF advances in 1991, and Nigerian jets and helicopters have often been used in bombing raids. There is evidence, however, that Nigerian troops - estimated to number 2,000 in mid 1995 - have also been involved in self-enrichment exercises and extortion.

The United Liberation Movement for Democracy in Liberia (ULIMO) is a group of armed Liberian refugees operating on the southern border. Although they have fought against the RUF, they too have been accused of looting, extortion and civilian deaths.

Because superstition played such a large role in creating the idea that rebels were 'invincible', in the early days of the conflict the government used fire to fight fire. In some parts of Sierra Leone, traditional hunters are both highly respected, and are believed to possess supernatural powers - the ability to change into a tree, a snake, an elephant. The government recruited these traditional hunters - *Tambaboro* in the Northern Province, and *Kamajor* in the Eastern and Southern Provinces, and they are said to have played an important role in repelling rebels from Kono before the arrival of foreign troops, and in liberating Kailahun District in the east.

The government engaged Gurkha military advisors in 1994, and in May 1995, at the height of the war, a South African company, Executive Outcomes, was engaged by government to assist in the war effort. Essentially a mercenary operation, Executive Outcomes has imported former special force soldiers with Angolan experience. Executive Outcomes is widely believed to have saved Freetown, and has been instrumental in clearing the Kono diamond areas of rebel troops. The company's efforts are not condoned by the Government of South Africa, although Executive Outcomes ingenuously claims to be involved only in training. Two members of Executive Outcomes were killed and six wounded in a rebel ambush early in February 1996.

It is said that EO has arranged a results-based contract with government, and are paid on the basis of their accomplishments. The fact that they cleared the diamond areas of RUF activity within weeks of their arrival suggests that they are being paid in diamonds (or by foreign companies with an interest in diamonds).<sup>6</sup>

Several towns outside the capital have established their own civil defence forces (CDF), initially with the encouragement of government. In Bo, the CDF is said to have organized 40,000 people to take a stand against a rebel attack in January 1995. In some cases they have also confronted the army, and CDF leaders have subsequently been singled out for attack.

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<sup>6</sup> Among the rumours: Executive Outcomes received \$31 million as well as diamond mining concessions in Kono District. Mark Huband of the *Observer* reported (March 24, 1996) that the government had diverted \$19 million from an IMF facility to EO in December 1995, in order to prevent their imminent withdrawal.

During the February 1996 elections in Bo, ten soldiers were killed by civilians in retaliation for past military transgressions. The CDF in Bo actually forced soldiers to obey a curfew during the elections, rather than the other way around. Some fear that the CDFs themselves could become predators, however, just like most other armed forces in the country.

## 6 THE NATURE OF THE WAR

Although known as the 'Rebel War', what has transpired in Sierra Leone is something that is at once more complicated, and more basic. The most obvious social and economic fact of life in Sierra Leone is deep and widespread poverty, and a relentless withering of governmental will and capacity to deal with it over a period of three decades. The appearance today of chaos and mindless barbarity are deceptive. British analyst David Keen suggests that the western concept of war as an occasion for risking death in the name of the nation state is inappropriate to Sierra Leone. This is rather 'a war where one avoids battles but picks on unarmed civilians and perhaps eventually acquires a Mercedes'. It is a war about two things: revenge and resources.

On the revenge side, the war has been used as a cover for the settling of family feuds and old unresolved land disputes, and more particularly for settling scores that had festered since the violent electoral abuses of the old APC government.

On the resources side, for some, the stakes are represented by diamonds; for others, a car; for many, simply enough food or money to carry them to some not very distant economic horizon. The barbarity maximises fear and displacement, and the few survivors that are always left to tell tales of horror add to the effect. 'For the majority of those taking part in the violence,' Keen says, 'the purpose of war may not be to win it so much as to make money while it lasts and, moreover, to ensure that it lasts long enough to make serious money'.

Clauswitz said that war is 'the pursuit of politics by other means'. Keen turns this around and says that war in Sierra Leone is the pursuit of economics by other means. The result is that few of the groups with power or weapons have any stake in the successful outcome of standard approaches to a 'government versus rebels' situation: peacemaking, negotiation, reconciliation, a return to law and order.

Martin van Creveld, describing the almost unnoticed but fundamental change that has taken place in warfare since 1945, says that low intensity conflict 'is tearing to pieces many developing countries... Much of this is the work of ragtag gangs of ruffians out for their own advantage, hardly distinguishable from the *écorceurs* ("skinners") who devastated the French

countryside during the Hundred Years' War. Now as then, they have turned entire societies into bloody chaos'.<sup>7</sup>

Whether Sierra Leone's newly elected civilian government can reverse these trends was, at the time of writing, a matter of speculation and hope.

## **7 THE AID SCENE**

### **7.1 Multilateral and Bilateral Agencies**

In 1990, Sierra Leone received \$64.3 million in bilateral official development assistance, \$14.5 per capita - less in total and on a per capita basis than almost any other African country (e.g. Zimbabwe \$69 per capita; Cameroon, \$59; Ghana, \$39).

With the conclusion of agreements on structural adjustment in 1991, however, the aid picture began to change. Aid flows more than doubled, reaching \$154.8 million in 1994. Paris Club members rescheduled \$42 million in debt and a further \$13.7 million in debt was cancelled by eight bilateral donors. Of all ODA in 1994, however, almost 30% was in the form of emergency and relief assistance. Although figures for 1995 were not available at the time of writing, the proportion undoubtedly increased as development programmes halted, or retreated into Freetown.

Until 1993, most aid funds were derived from bilateral sources, however by 1994, UN agencies had surpassed the bilaterals, providing 35% of the total. Twenty five percent was provided by bilateral agencies (most prominently USAID, Britain, Italy and Germany) and 23% came from non-UN multilateral agencies (mainly the World Bank and the EC). NGOs contributed 19% of the total in 1994, up from 10% the year before.

UN involvement in Sierra Leone has been complicated by a number of factors. Some in the Department of Humanitarian Affairs (DHA) wanted to declare Sierra Leone a 'complex emergency', while UNDP fiercely resisted. At the height of the fighting, there was concern in some quarters that free and representative elections could not possibly be held. Many observers, including the small number of external journalists with an interest in Sierra Leone, believed that UNDP and other donors were supporting the idea of elections in the naive, and even dangerous hope that they would somehow bring about peace. There was some concern as well, that donors were simply unwilling to become involved in a full-fledged 'emergency' because of resource constraints.

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<sup>7</sup> Van Creveld, p.60

The alternative side of the debate is typified in the report of one bilateral aid agency official:

DHA Headquarters have argued for a declaration of a state of 'complex emergency' in Sierra Leone. This would unleash a whole set of responses, including the appointment of a UNSRSG, a Humanitarian Coordinator, and new arrangements for UN working in Sierra Leone. However the UN Secretary General's Special Envoy, the UN Resident Coordinator, and the GoSL are all united in the opposition to this. They argue that such a declaration would be politically inept as it would undermine the authority of the Government and signal to the RUF that the international community has lost faith in the present administration. It would create the impression that Sierra Leone is a 'failed country' ... and undermine confidence building efforts. Aid agencies also fear from experience elsewhere that the declaration of a 'complex emergency' in Sierra Leone would give license to all sorts of ill conceived aid inputs and appointments of coordinators with conflicting mandates...<sup>8</sup>

The collection of fears and concerns contained in this paragraph is telling. Despite the assertion about confidence in government, few donors had any real confidence in mid 1995, and the military government undermined its own stability by engaging in a palace coup not long after this report was written.

Nonetheless, the decision to avoid the declaration of a complex emergency seems to have paid off, in the sense that maintaining a form of *status quo* did allow elections to be held (or at least did not prevent them), and these in turn contributed to a dialogue with the RUF. This might not have been possible had the government fallen under the thrall of a relief juggernaut. Some viewed the issue as a 'turf battle' between competing UN agencies - UNDP and DHA. To the extent that this view has validity, the battle was settled by a compromise which saw the establishment of a DHA Humanitarian Assistance Coordination Unit (HACU) at the beginning of 1996, but which placed it under the overall supervision of the UN Resident Coordinator, who is the UNDP Resident Representative. This has been applauded by aid officials with experience elsewhere. The presence of two directors in Liberia, for example was widely regarded as counter-productive and dysfunctional.

There is an aura of unreality, however, about aid to Sierra Leone and about aid statistics. Reading donor reports and the latest economic figures - most of which pre-date the upsurge in fighting in 1995 - one cannot help but be struck by the fact that almost every positive economic trend and virtually every donor prediction has been nullified by the war, and by the retreat into Freetown of civil servants, aid agencies and the tens, if not hundreds of thousands of displaced people. In April and May 1996, the streets of central Freetown were being dug up

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<sup>8</sup> This quotation implies that a bureaucratic declaration of a complex emergency is needed to ensure an appropriate UN response. This, of course, is not the case. Under-Secretary General Peter Hanson, speaking about Sierra Leone, made the point that a declaration would not change reality one way or the other for the average Sierra Leonean. A complex emergency *is*, it is not designated. UN agencies can (or at least they should be able to) reconfigure themselves to deal with an emergency, regardless of what has been 'declared'.

so that new drains could be installed, courtesy of an aid programme. Traffic jams, exacerbated by the influx of vehicles from the provinces, gave those in cars plenty of time to ponder the dozens of people begging on every street corner.

David Keen observes that 'the concentration of aid resources on Freetown - itself largely the result of insecurity - constitutes an important additional benefit from violence for those elements of the government able to "cream off" a substantial share. It can also be a distraction. One aid worker with many years experience in the country said [before the 1996 election], "The EC is providing the electricity, roads. They're making the government look good. It's a sham. And then the government forces are just beating up on everyone. UNICEF are talking about iodized salt when the whole place is burning".'

## 7.2 NGOs

### 7.2.1 International NGOs

By early 1996, some thirty international NGOs were operating in Sierra Leone. In 1994, their financial contribution was \$27 million, up from \$14.7 million in the previous year. A significant percentage of the increase was a result of increased relief efforts, and of a doubling of the food programmes of one organization, Catholic Relief Services (CRS).

Among the larger international NGOs:

Catholic Relief Services (CRS)	\$15.0 million
Foster Parents Plan	\$ 4.2 million
ActionAid	1.7 million
The End Hunger Network	1.7 million
Adventist Dev.& Relief Agency	1.0 million
Swedish Org. for Individual Relief	.8 million
Canadian Lutheran World Relief	.6 million
CARE	.5 million

These are 1994 figures; figures for 1995 are no doubt different and considerably higher. In addition, since the 1994 figures were compiled, a number of new organizations have initiated high profile relief activities in Sierra Leone, among them World Vision, Action Contre La Faim, Concern Worldwide, the International Islamic Relief Organization, Medical Emergency Relief International (MERLIN), MSF Belgium and MSF Holland.

Other international organizations include Cause Canada, Africare, Concern Universal, the Christian Children's Fund, and the Swedish Red Cross. Several international church organizations work through their local counterparts, such as the National Catholic Development Office-Caritas. Some NGOs have left. After more than 30 years in Sierra Leone,

CUSO closed its office in March 1996. Others (e.g. WaterAid) have also withdrawn, as did VSO following the kidnapping and subsequent release of two British volunteers by the RUF.<sup>9</sup>

Amnesty International has taken an interest in Sierra Leone, mainly from the aspect of human rights abuse. The ICRC started relief activities in Sierra Leone in 1993, but suspended its work in 1994 when two ICRC nurses were killed by the RUF. It has since worked with Sierra Leonean refugees in Guinea and has been actively involved in attempts to broker negotiations between the RUF and government.

### **7.2.2 Sierra Leonean NGOs**

Estimates of the number of Sierra Leonean NGOs range from a few dozen to several hundred. The variance results from differing definitions of what constitutes an NGO. Many would more properly be classified as community-based organizations (CBOs). There are probably fewer than 30 organizations with paid staff and offices.

Many Sierra Leonean NGOs are new and very small. Many are church-related. The largest are the Sierra Leone Red Cross and the Council of Churches in Sierra Leone (CCSL). Others include the Evangelical Fellowship of Sierra Leone (EFSL), Children Associated with the War (CAW), the National Organization of Women (NOW), the Association for Rural Development (ARD), and Women Organized for a Morally Enlightened Nation (WOMEN). The Sierra Leone Association of NGOs (SLANGO; founded 1994) has 58 members, although only eight international NGOs have joined (including CARE and Plan International).

Because of the war, many NGOs became stuck in Freetown, and all but a handful were obliged by circumstances to transform their development activities into relief efforts of some kind. Sierra Leonean church organizations - the Catholic Church most prominent among them - have been actively involved in relief and reconciliation efforts, often with external support.

As will become clear in subsequent sections of this report, there is a degree of tension, and even of bitterness between Sierra Leonean NGOs and the internationals. With the exception of the Sierra Leone Red Cross and church-related organizations, very few Sierra Leonean NGOs have been able to attract funding or other forms of institutional support and strengthening from their Northern counterparts. Some early emergency efforts by Sierra Leonean NGOs were marked by problems of malfeasance. For those international NGOs with an interest, the reason given for so little interaction is 'lack of capacity' and probity among Sierra Leonean organizations. Sierra Leonean NGOs (and many other observers in Sierra Leone) believe that honesty is a matter of monitoring, contracts and the creation of adequate checks and balances.

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<sup>9</sup> Embassies too have closed, some as a result of a decline in Sierra Leone's strategic value, others for economic and security reasons. Among them: Russia, Italy, South Korea, Israel.

They are particularly unhappy that this 'excuse' has been given by the internationals for what can only be seen as an avoidance of any serious capacity-building efforts.

The Government has a two-person NGO desk in the Ministry of Development and Economic Planning, and is favourably disposed toward NGOs. The previous government also established a National Rehabilitation Committee (NARECOM) to help coordinate relief efforts, although this was replaced by a new Ministry of Reconstruction, Rehabilitation and Resettlement in 1996. Discussions with senior officials in both ministries reveal considerable concern about the unwillingness of international NGOs to work with Sierra Leonean organizations. This is an issue that is likely to grow in future.<sup>10</sup>

Part II of the report will demonstrate that problems notwithstanding, the role of NGOs, both national and international, has been important, even pivotal at key moments in the crisis that has unfolded in Sierra Leone since 1991.

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<sup>10</sup> The new Deputy Minister of Reconstruction was Executive Director of one of the stronger Sierra Leonean NGOs (ARD), and was Chair of the SLANGO Board. He is particularly outspoken on this issue.

## **PART II: THE ROLE OF NGOs**

### **8 FORESTALLING**

#### **8.1 Forestalling the Deterioration of Good Government**

The process of collapse in modern-day Sierra Leone perhaps began with the first military coup in 1967, and continued with the creation of a one-party state in 1978, and with the growth thereafter of systematic looting of government coffers by politicians and officials. The sharp economic downturn created by the oil crisis of 1973, followed by a decline in world prices for Sierra Leone's major exports, exacerbated matters. Total diamond exports declined from 2 million carats in 1970 to 7,000 carats in 1991, with an estimated 90% of the actual output leaving the country illegally.<sup>11</sup> Smuggling of export crops increased as well, so that by the early 1990s, the informal economy accounted for more than 80% of all economic activity.

Declining government revenue was offset by increased loans from bilateral and multilateral agencies (external debt increased from \$299m in 1978 to \$1,291 in 1991), although when government began to default on loans in the late 1980s, further lending was suspended, and government services continued to decline.

It is uncertain what role - if any - NGOs had in attempting to forestall or mitigate any of these phenomena, from the declaration of a one-party state onward. There were attempts on the part of 'civil society' to fight back (e.g. student demonstrations in 1977), but these were ruthlessly suppressed, as were opposition political parties and an independent press. There were incidents when church organizations attempted to intervene. In the absence of a strong indigenous NGO community, however, a relatively small external NGO community, and the complicity of the donor community in supporting government, it is perhaps wishful thinking to assume that any serious NGO 'forestalling' could have taken place during the 1970s and 1980s.

More recently, Sierra Leonean NGOs have become actively involved in the democratization process. In 1993, the NPRC appointed a National Advisory Council to prepare a new democratic constitution. After widespread public discussion, a new constitution was adopted in 1995. Two additional democratic bodies were formed, the Interim National Electoral Commission (INEC) in 1993, and a National Commission for Democracy, aimed at educating people and making them aware of their rights and responsibilities as citizens. Several NGOs, including SLANGO, were actively involved in this process, putting out brochures and pamphlets and organizing related workshops and events.

Following the January 1996 palace coup, the new Head of State made direct radio contact with the head of the RUF, and agreed to peace talks in Abidjan. Both sides began to argue for

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<sup>11</sup> Output rose to 213,000 carats in 1995, perhaps as a result of the interventions of Executive Outcomes.

'Peace before Polls', but vocal and widespread public support soon developed for a contrary idea - 'Polls Before Peace'. An extremely important role was played by Sierra Leonean NGOs, particularly a coalition of women's organizations known as the Women's Forum, in forcing the military to go ahead with elections. Some of the impetus for this originated at regional preparatory meetings for the Beijing Women's Conference, held in Dakar early in 1995. There, representatives of women's groups, the YWCA and others, met women from other African countries, notably Somalia and Angola, who had also been through war and civil strife. They began to realize that the war was not an aberration for which they had no responsibility. On their return, they created the Women's Forum which now includes 50 different groups in six cities and towns.

The women's push for elections mounted after Beijing, and the Forum held meetings, marches and press conferences, lobbying donors, the press and traditional leaders. The government felt, however, that the case for 'peace before elections' had been made, and that a free vote at a reconvened National Consultative Conference would verify their position. It did not. Again, the women's groups demonstrated their strength of will and their ability to lobby other groups, especially traditional leaders, at the conference. Despite intimidation and threats of violence, the vote was 56 to 14 for immediate elections. A large amount of credit for this can be taken by the Sierra Leonean NGO community, especially the women's movement.

### *The Elections*

The election process was managed by the Interim National Election Commission (INEC), headed by James Jonah, recently retired Sierra Leonean Undersecretary General of the United Nations. It was the charisma of Jonah and the support of UNDP and other donors which helped to make INEC the success it turned out to be, although in the run-up to the voting, there were widespread concerns as to whether a free and fair election would be possible under the circumstances.

Several groups of election observers operated under the umbrella of a Joint International Observer Group. This included representatives of UN agencies, the OAU, and a team of 18 organized by the Commonwealth Secretariat. The largest group of observers, however, was provided by the Sierra Leone NGO community. The African American Institute of the United States provided some of the funding and training, working closely with the Sierra Leone YWCA, and workers were provided through the offices of SLANGO and a wide variety of NGOs and civic groups. An estimated 300 observers were deployed by the Council of Churches of Sierra Leone.

Voter registration and voter education were part of the process, and although the only serious election issues were the return to civilian rule and peace, these were enough to ensure good voter turnout. The elections went ahead as planned on Feb. 26. Despite some violence and intimidation, voter turnout was high. An estimated 1.6 million voters were registered, and

although polls could not be held in rural areas, the major towns - crowded with displaced people from the countryside - allowed for a reasonably representative showing.

No party gained a majority in the first election, and a runoff was held on March 15, 1996, ultimately returning the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) to office.

The Commonwealth Observer Team said that

Transparency was the watchword and the count concluded a process that was by and large a model of integrity... No elections could have been held under more trying circumstances... These elections... were nothing short of an act of faith on the part of the people of Sierra Leone. They were the first truly democratic elections in nearly 30 years. For the citizen voters in the queues, these elections were more than an opportunity to replace a military regime with a democratically elected and accountable government. They saw them as an historic watershed, the one opportunity to make a new beginning.<sup>12</sup>

The Commonwealth Secretary General called the election 'a ringing affirmation of the faith of the people in the democratic process'. *The Economist*, however, was less sanguine. In a March 4 editorial before the runoff, it said that the people, who had queued in huge numbers, 'believe in democracy. And they have been fooled.' Referring to the preliminary military-RUF meetings in the Ivory Coast, it said that the two delegations had 'got on well, finding they had much in common, especially in their hatred for the corrupt old politicians. Meanwhile, the corrupt old politicians were making their way back into office, thanks to the election.'<sup>13</sup>

As will be seen from some of what follows, this gloomy verdict may have been both premature and unfair.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Report of the Commonwealth Observer Group, pp24-26.

<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, especially for a study of NGOs, many of those elected were decidedly *not* old politicians. The President of the National Unity Party, which placed a weak third in the election, is a former CUSO project officer. The Secretary of the NUP ran the CUSO programme in Sierra Leone for several years up to 1996. The new cabinet includes a Minister for Gender and Children's Affairs who was a longtime YWCA worker and also an ex-CUSO staffer. The Deputy Minister of the Ministry of RR&R was head of the Association for Rural Development and Chairman of the Board of SLANGO. The new Attorney General was a Board Member of Children Associated with the War (CAW). One of them told the author of this report, 'The times have made us politicians'.

<sup>14</sup> The role of the international media is addressed elsewhere. It may be worth noting, however, that *The Economist's* gloomy but influential editorial position was essentially the work of a single writer, Richard Dowden. Dowden was not wrong in pointing out that a high proportion of the newly elected Members of Parliament had been heavily involved in previous (corrupt) civilian governments.

## 8.2 The Role of NGOs in Building and in Forestalling the Collapse of Civil Society

As government services and infrastructure declined over the years, so did government's influence over law and order. It is apparent in many countries that the cannon fodder, and sometimes the impetus for violence, is young men. This is no less true in Sierra Leone. Stories of disgruntled and displaced youth being drawn into RUF ranks are common. Some have been forcibly conscripted. But others, drawn by the attraction of booty and power, have soon found themselves involved in horrific atrocities - murder, mutilation, rape, cannibalism, beheadings. Willing participants or unwilling, for many of them there is no retreat, as they are regarded with suspicion and fear in their home villages, and the only alternative is a return to a life of indigence and anonymity in the bigger towns. As *The Economist* put it, 'looting is far more profitable than waiting for a job that will never come, or being a shoeshine boy in the capital'.

As the crisis deepened, more and more displaced people flocked to camps in the capital and the larger towns. For the young men (and boys) who took this route, the only source of expanding employment (apart from shining shoes and the like) was the army, and there are reports of children as young as eight in uniform. On both sides of the 'line', therefore, most of the combatants are young, untrained and usually undisciplined males, most of whom have joined the fray for economic advancement which, as it turns out, is available (to both sides) mainly through violence and looting. (It is said, however, that women are also active participants in RUF attacks.)

As in many other countries, development efforts in Sierra Leone have perhaps failed male youth more than others in society, creating awareness and expectations through education and access to information and films, but providing little in the way of direct assistance with jobs or income-related opportunity. Violent films are not made exclusively for the Sierra Leone market, but they have always found a ready market there - especially 'spaghetti westerns' and martial arts films. A recent study found that most young people in Sierra Leone - urban and rural - have been thoroughly exposed to television and video, and that war films are by far the most popular. One of the best known films is the first in the Rambo trilogy, *First Blood*. Paul Richards, Professor of Anthropology at the University of London, believes that it is a mistake to dismiss *First Blood* as mindless violence. For young Sierra Leoneans, there is a genuine shock of recognition in the story of a man who fought for his country in Vietnam, suffers social rejection on his return, is abused and beaten by the police, and who eventually ambushes his pursuers in the forest, turning their own weapons against them. 'As with *Shining Path* (and Rambo),' Richards argues, 'apparently "meaningless violence" is, seemingly, intentionally expressive of the false turn taken by the educational process in the country. It is not hard to see in the Rambo epic, a ready-made inspiration for the RUF's understanding of the world'.

While it would be wrong to criticize NGOs for failing to forestall such a phenomenon, many - such as religious orders, CUSO and VSO - were actively involved for years in an education system that raised expectations without addressing opportunities or values. And others - such as CARE, Plan International and ActionAid - ran standard community development projects.

Like virtually all aid agencies, NGO or otherwise, they had little time for the hordes of unemployed male youth that had drifted to urban centres, or to the diamond fields where the RUF found its first recruits.

### **8.3 Forestalling Escalation: Negotiation**

The indigenous secular Sierra Leone NGO community dates basically from the mid 1980s. It is still small and fragile, but since the war began, individual organizations and groups of organizations have made various attempts to bring an end to hostilities. One attempt was what became known as 'The Mano Bridge Talks'. In December 1994, a number of Sierra Leonean NGOs, prominent individuals, private sector representatives and chiefs travelled to a main Liberian border crossing with the idea of conducting talks with the RUF. One exchange did take place but it resulted in a hostage-taking incident, and subsequent civilian efforts at the border were prevented by the military. Following a BBC report that they were begging, the RUF itself rebuffed the idea of further cross-border talks.

The conflict did lead to the creation of several new organizations, and to new activities within existing organizations, aimed at helping to achieve a peaceful settlement. Two of the more visible new organizations have been the Women's Movement for Peace and the National Coordinating Committee for Peace. In addition, through 1994 and 1995, there were parallel effort by Sierra Leoneans inside and outside the country to make contact with the RUF and to identify reliable spokesmen for the rebels.

The ICRC made several efforts to broker talks during this period, but there were divisions within the Sierra Leone peace movement, and the NPRC itself appeared divided on whether to encourage civilian initiatives or to sabotage them. The brutal nature of the war also had a chilling effect on the ability and willingness of civilians and organizations to express themselves openly.

A number of peace demonstrations were, nevertheless, organized over the years in Freetown, Kenema and Bo by prominent individuals, church leaders and NGOs, notably women's groups. One, organized by the Sierra Leonean Women's Movement for Peace in February 1995, attracted more than 20,000 people. Since then there have been other demonstrations and groupings such as the Youth Federation for World Peace and the Citizens' United for Peace Alliance.

It is perhaps telling, however, that a December 1994 SLANGO proposal for an NGO Peace Seminar was foiled from almost every angle imaginable: International NGOs such as VSO (which was then attempting to negotiate the release of two hostages), said it was too political. Several national NGOs agreed with VSO, and the government said that any press release would have to be officially 'edited'. It was only later when women returned from the pre-Beijing meeting in Dakar that an overt peace movement gained momentum.

One observer of the Sierra Leone peace movement has said that 'small, fragile and under-resources as it was, members of Sierra Leonean civil society were actively engaged in publicly and privately promoting a negotiated settlement, and no doubt influenced the decisions of the NPRC to step aside, the Kabbah government to negotiate a settlement rather than resume military operations, and the RUF to enter and remain in those negotiations'.<sup>15</sup>

### *International Alert*

The UK-based NGO, International Alert<sup>16</sup>, is a special case, and deserves special attention. International Alert had more apparent success in bridging communication gaps between the warring parties than either the ICRC or the United Nations Special Envoy, who had been sent to Sierra Leone expressly for that purpose in 1994. Informal contacts with the RUF in 1993 and 1994 led IA to make peace talks in Sierra Leone a primary organizational objective. An IA 'Special Envoy' first visited Freetown in January 1995 to discuss the organization's aims and objectives with government. On a subsequent visit the following month, the envoy made direct contact with some of the RUF leadership. IA began talking with British NGOs in London at about this time, and a Working Group was formed to keep members and other interested parties (including the Sierra Leone Embassy and ODA) abreast of developments. In March, the IA Special Envoy again visited Sierra Leone, travelled three weeks on foot to the RUF headquarters and negotiated the release of 10 expatriate and six Sierra Leonean hostages.

IA hosted a Joint Action Forum in London in March 1995, which included about 10 NGOs, the SL High Commission, and an assortment of individuals from organizations as diverse as De Beers and Scotland Yard. The meeting concluded, *inter alia*, that direct contact between the RUF and the NPRC was essential, that the RUF had to put forward a clear political agenda, that a human rights code of conduct had to be established and agreed by both government and the RUF, and that a 'truth commission' should be established. Subsequently, with the moral and financial support of a number of British NGOs, IA continued its attempts to broker dialogue between the RUF and the GoSL.

The OAU began efforts to make contact with the RUF in March, 1995, with a view to initiating peace talks, and was only able to make its first formal links through the efforts of the ICRC and International Alert.<sup>17</sup> It was not until November, 1995 that a meeting could be

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<sup>15</sup> David Lord, private communication

<sup>16</sup> IA was formed in London in 1985 by human rights campaigner Martin Ennals and others to help combat the widespread violations of human rights inherent in violent internal conflicts. With support mainly from European government agencies, it has grown very rapidly in recent years, from a budget of £861,000 in 1993 to an estimated budget of £5 million in 1995.

<sup>17</sup> 'Report of the Secretary General on Sierra Leone', OAU, 18/12/95

arranged between OAU officials and the RUF, 'following consultations facilitated by International Alert'.<sup>18</sup>

IA helped to arrange and was present at the January 1996 talks between the NPRC and the RUF, and was subsequently instrumental in helping to arrange talks between the RUF and the civilian government. The organization was again present in the Ivory Coast at the plenary negotiating sessions through May 1996.

Like *Rashamon*, however, the International Alert story changes dramatically, depending on who is telling it. Many of IA's detractors start with a critique of the organization's very active campaign of self-promotion. But there are more serious issues. The British Foreign Office (with the involvement of Scotland Yard) was actively involved in hostage release negotiations, as was the ICRC, long before the arrival of International Alert. They maintain that the release of hostages had already been agreed, when IA became involved and delayed the process considerably, at the same time creating a publicity coup for itself.

In order to be successful, a negotiator must be impartial. IA believes that it has observed such impartiality, but others do not. While some NGOs and donor agencies are very supportive of the IA initiatives, others are highly sceptical. Viewing negotiation as a governmental prerogative, some feel that the current NGO rush into peace brokering may result in what one observer calls 'an anarchy of good intentions'.<sup>19</sup>

Effective or not, IA is widely known and widely distrusted in Sierra Leone, a *cause célèbre* as infamous as Executive Outcomes. Its brokering role has been important primarily in the sense that it is trusted by the RUF, and it has been present at the Ivory Coast meetings only because the RUF wanted it there. Many, including government leaders, believe that IA crossed the boundaries of objective detachment, actually becoming an advisor to the RUF.<sup>20</sup>

Ironically, but perhaps not inconsistent with this view, IA has also been controversial within the RUF itself. In December 1995, the RUF's Foreign Relations Officer wrote to the Secretary-General of IA, accusing the organization of 'treacherous meddling in the Sierra Leone conflict', of deliberately misrepresenting the RUF, and of using the conflict as a 'money generating source not for the good of deprived Sierra Leoneans caught in the conflict...but for its own coffers. This smacks of nothing short of fraud and criminal

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<sup>18</sup> *ibid*

<sup>19</sup> At the time of writing, for example, there were 17 NGO peace-brokering initiatives in Burundi, IA among them.

<sup>20</sup> 'Who do they represent?' is an accusatory question often addressed to organizations like IA. The average Sierra Leonean might well have asked the same question of the military government and the RUF, neither of which had any popular mandate.

dishonesty on the part of IA'.<sup>21</sup> This attack did not represent the views of the entire RUF leadership, however, as IA continued to have direct contact. Two months later, the Foreign Relations Officer resigned from the RUF, citing basic disagreement over aims and objectives, and saying that the RUF had fallen prey to the manipulation of 'unscrupulous international adventurers of the likes of... International Alert'.

IA believes that it is a victim of its own achievements, having succeeded where the UN failed. As a result, it began to suffer from unfair vilification as soon as the UN and other multilateral organizations could take advantage of the contacts made for them by IA.

Whatever its contribution, International Alert was an important player in the lead-up to the peace talks, facilitating or possibly even forcing communication where little had previously existed between combatants and between the RUF and international bodies. IA can undoubtedly take some of the credit for the negotiations that eventually transpired. It may also have carved out a peace-brokering role that - with the exception of the ICRC - has traditionally fallen within the sole purview of governments and governmental agencies. There is a possibility, however, that International Alert may have overstepped the boundaries of neutrality or, that in seeking to remain part of a negotiating process in which it had no mandated role, overstayed its limited welcome and damaged its own reputation in the process.

## 9 DRAWING ATTENTION

Because of the way the Sierra Leone crisis developed, there was no obvious opportunity for the sort of standard 'warning' role that many now ascribe to NGOs. There was, nevertheless, an accumulation of reliable data over time about human rights abuse, social disintegration, economic disparity, corruption and mismanagement - all indicators of state collapse. If there is a lesson in the Sierra Leone experience, it is perhaps Mandelstam's warning that 'silence is the real crime against humanity'.

Amnesty International has played an important role in detailing and drawing attention to the human rights abuses of both government and rebels, but of the many human rights organizations extant today, they are alone in their concern about Sierra Leone.

Various scenarios developed since the beginning of the 'Rebel War' by government, UN agencies and NGOs have proven remarkably unreliable. And predictions that things were going to end soon (with the army takeover in 1992; with the arrival of Executive Outcomes in 1995) have also proven totally unreliable. In addition to the lack of good information about the extent of the crisis, there have been few indicators - from any source - of what might

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<sup>21</sup> Letter from Alimamy Bakarr Sankoh to Kumar Rupesinghe, Dec. 12, 1995. Alimamy Sankoh took up residence in Ghana in mid 1995 and formally resigned from the RUF in January, 1996.

constitute escalation (or *de*-escalation) of the trouble. In the absence of information and such indicators, serious forward planning of any type has been difficult, if not impossible.

With the exception of Amnesty International, NGOs have been singularly unsuccessful in drawing international attention of any volume or value to the Sierra Leone crisis. Part of this may be due to the fact of the Sierra Leone crisis having been overshadowed first by Somalia, then Rwanda, and closer to home by ongoing events in Liberia. It may also have to do with the fact that while there is widespread malnutrition in Sierra Leone, there has been little of the starvation that excites both media and donors. It may also be that under the difficult and dangerous logistical circumstances, there is a reluctance among NGOs to raise their profile internationally or within Sierra Leone. Rebel leader Foday Sankoh repeatedly warned NGOs off, accusing them of partiality toward government. Several convoys, some sponsored by the Red Cross and other NGOs were attacked, as were mission stations - with the resulting deaths of nuns, priests and lay international personnel.

Often, as in the cases of Biafra and Ethiopia, a single journalist (or an editor willing to place a story under a large headline) can start a media avalanche. Sierra Leone has been the subject of several prominent stories in the British Press and on the BBC World Service since 1994. Sierra Leone also featured prominently in a controversial and widely-read 1994 *Atlantic Monthly* article by Robert Kaplan, 'The Coming Anarchy'.<sup>22</sup> None of these, however, has sparked widespread public attention or concern. It may simply be that the popular media, after ten years of bad news from Liberia and Nigeria, have become inured to stories from West Africa.

## 10 MAPPING AND INTELLIGENCE

### 10.1 Within Sierra Leone

One of the biggest problems in the Sierra Leone crisis has been the disproportionate use and manipulation of rumour. Rumour of an impending attack will scatter the civilian population, and was responsible in mid 1994, for the evacuation of all international NGO staff from Bo, the second largest town in the country and site of the largest displaced persons camp. Such was the level of atrocities (rebel and otherwise) that - understandably - few were willing to take chances.

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<sup>22</sup> The article was controversial because of its apocalyptic nature, and in the South some saw it as an unfair blanket critique of developing countries as a whole. The article was also controversial in Sierra Leone. Kaplan had identified one of his cabinet informants as having jaundiced, yellowish eyes. A cabinet meeting was subsequently held to determine which of them had the most yellow eyes. Kaplan went to considerable lengths thereafter to further conceal the identity of his informant. A good critique of Kaplan, by Joseph Opala, appeared in the July 1996 issue of *Crosslines*. Sierra Leone's collapse into anarchy is easily explained, says Opala: 'Corrupt politicians and a shattered economy destroyed respect for government. There is nothing new in that; it is as old as politics itself.'

According to a September 1995 UN Interagency Report, there was no centralized management of information relating to humanitarian assistance in Sierra Leone. NGOs had localized information of varying quality on their areas of operation, but this was only shared in an *ad hoc* manner. Until its cancellation, NARECOM convened bimonthly meetings of NGOs, UN agencies and government ministries to discuss issues of common concern, but NARECOM had few staff, limited facilities, and virtually no budget.

Of perhaps longer-term importance is the kind of mapping and intelligence that might herald a genuine return to peace and the initiation of reconstruction and development programmes. There was, however, little evidence as late as May 1996, that NGOs were preparing in any serious way for an outbreak of prolonged peace.

This stands in rather odd contrast to the widespread 'feeling' in Freetown that negotiations and a cease fire would somehow lead to a prolonged peace, and to the eagerness with which donors were embracing ideas and plans for military demobilization.

## **10.2 Outside Sierra Leone**

In 1995, at the instigation of CARE Britain and International Alert, a handful of British NGOs formed an *ad hoc* Working Group, to which representatives of ODA, the Sierra Leone High Commission and others were invited. The meetings appear to have been relatively informal and exploratory in nature, with little follow-up beyond the informal mandate given to IA to continue with its efforts to arrange negotiations between the RUF and the GoSL. There do not appear to have been NGO meetings on the Sierra Leone crisis elsewhere in Europe or North America.

Amnesty International has published detailed human rights reports on Sierra Leone. Perhaps the most comprehensive and thoughtful paper on the crisis as a whole, however, was commissioned by CARE Britain. Written by Mark Bradbury in April 1995, *Rebels Without a Cause?* provides a detailed and extensive account of the crisis, its antecedents, and the various players, and is essential reading for anyone interested in understanding the situation up to that point.

## **11 OPERATIONAL RESPONSE**

### **11.1 General**

Precise details and numbers are difficult to come by in Sierra Leone. UN estimates in March 1996 placed the number of Sierra Leonean refugees in other countries at 330,000. In Freetown there were thought to be as many as 750,000 displaced people, although many of these were living with family and friends. A further one million or more displaced people had moved into

towns up-country, and 900,000 had registered for food aid. In all, 2.1 million people, half the population of the country, have been forced to abandon their homes and livelihoods. An ODA report suggests that about half the displaced people have been able to manage reasonably well without assistance, living with friends and family. A further 210,000 live in camps, where they are dependent on others for some aspects of their survival. But they have also adopted other 'coping strategies', such as travelling by day to farming plots within a five or ten-mile radius of the towns where they shelter at night. A third category of about half a million people are entirely destitute, camping where they can in towns and cities, or surviving in camps only with the help of relief supplies.

In September 1995, a UN report said that there was adequate relief food available for the 'accessible' populations, although such a statement concealed a number of problems. The most prominent was the inability of relief agencies to get food convoys through to the affected areas. In December 1995, WFP was reporting that malnutrition was reaching 'frightening levels', however the overall UN response remains dramatically limited in comparison with other countries. In Liberia, for example, a country with only 60% of the population of Sierra Leone, the 1995 consolidated UN appeal was for \$65 million, and more than 80% of the requirements were met. In Sierra Leone, however, a UN appeal for less than \$20 million was only half subscribed.<sup>23</sup>

At the height of the food crisis, MSF Holland mounted an airlift, and for a time WFP also flew in food and medical supplies.

With the advent of peace talks and a cease fire, the food situation eased somewhat, as convoys were able to get through to major towns. WFP and CRS projected a total food requirement for 1996 of 79,000 metric tons, and an estimated caseload of about 750,000 people. This is not to say that the situation had become acceptable. Displaced people living in camps receive a ration of 6kgs. of bulgar wheat and 2 pints of oil *per month*. Six kilograms of wheat will fit easily in a small pail.<sup>24</sup> Because there are no other supplements - vegetables, fish, meat - people are forced to sell some of the wheat at extremely low prices in order to purchase other necessities. Low rations have also contributed to cheating, said to be quite widespread until a series of verification exercises were undertaken by UN agencies and NGOs early in 1996.

WFP has been at the forefront of the targeting, registration and feeding effort, but has worked almost exclusively through NGOs. In other words, almost 100% of all general distribution and institutional feeding has been carried out by NGOs. WHO supplies emergency kits and supplies to the Department of Health and to NGOs, and deals with special issues such as outbreaks of cholera and meningitis. As much as 80% of health related interventions outside

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<sup>23</sup> A March 1996 UN consolidated appeal for Sierra Leone had reached only 12% of its target by August.

<sup>24</sup> A senior UN official said that the rations being provided to people in Sierra Leone were much lower than what was normally provided elsewhere - in Asia or Bosnia, for example. 'This is a disgrace,' he said.

the Freetown area are probably being carried out by NGOs. UNHCR, working through an NGO, Cause Canada, supports 7,000 Liberian refugees near Freetown, and provides assistance to refugees upcountry through the Sierra Leone Red Cross, CRS and the Council of Churches in Sierra Leone (CCSL). UNICEF has emergency programmes in immunization, hygiene education, schooling for displaced children, much of it executed through or by NGOs.

Among the unsung heroes of the Sierra Leone crisis are the truck drivers who have attempted, sometimes at the cost of their lives, to take food from Freetown to the interior. Another under-recognized group is the Lebanese community. Robert Kaplan observed that although 'nobody said it, aid workers and diplomats knew that if all the ten thousand Lebanese ever left Sierra Leone, so might they. The Lebanese were a life-support system for the foreigners, whether it was by arranging truck transport for refugee relief or offering lunch in a Western-style place.'<sup>25</sup>

## 11.2 Coordination

As noted elsewhere, coordination has been problematic. Until it was replaced by the Ministry of Reconstruction, Resettlement and Rehabilitation in April 1996, NARECOM held bimonthly coordinating meetings, and there were also meetings held by the international NGOs and by SLANGO. Until the establishment of DHA's Humanitarian Assistance Coordinating Unit (HACU), there was, however, no centralized management of information, and there was, according to a UN report, 'widespread dissatisfaction within the relief community regarding present arrangements for coordination'. A June 1995 UNICEF report stated that 'there has not been an effective coordination of relief at the national level and [there is] thus...weak collaboration on the ground'.

NGOs were named as 'lead agencies' for camps or areas without regard for their capacity or their resources, and NARECOM was often singled out for special criticism, having advised NGOs, for example, that roads were safe when they were not. NARECOM was hampered by the fact that it had few staff, limited transportation facilities, and virtually no budget. The average international NGO was infinitely better equipped with staff, experience, hardware and financial support. As a result, the most effective coordination took place informally and behind the scenes, often through an informal group known as the International NGO Forum. Even so, there was (and may still be) much duplication and overlap, even among the larger agencies. A 1995 CARE report spoke of territoriality, incompetence and jealousy:

The current "lead agency" system of coordination and managing emergency work up-country is not effectively promoting collaborative efforts, primarily because some agencies have become territorial in their perspective and are not coordinating the work of others... Roles of agencies could be better defined and partnerships forged around these strengths,

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<sup>25</sup> Kaplan (1996), p.68

rather than ad hoc assignments of lead agency roles... If the agencies cannot come to an agreement, then the key donor representatives should force a reasonable decision.

By early 1996, Bo, the second largest town in Sierra Leone, was clearly over-serviced by NGOs. The Sierra Leone Red Cross closed one of its clinics because of the influx of international medical NGOs. There seems, in fact, to have been a tendency for new international NGOs to go where there are others already present. As a result, many areas of the country - Koinadugu, Port Loko, Kambia, Tonkolili - have been under-serviced or even ignored.

As noted above, some of this was eased by the establishment of HACU. But HACU's mandate and time frame are limited, and they have related primarily to the international NGOs as the main service providers. The new Ministry of RR&R has stated clearly that better coordination and improved capacity among Sierra Leonean NGOs are priorities for the new government. It remains to be seen how or if these two solitudes can be reconciled.

## **Reconciliation and Peace Building**

*'Peace is a process, not an event'* - Victor Reider

Reconciliation and peace-building could well be seen as a means of forestalling escalation, rather than something which only follows conflict in a logical and linear manner. For purposes of continuity, however (and not because the conflict in Sierra Leone has ended), this section has been placed at the end of the report.

A few introductory remarks are perhaps in order. First, peace-building and reconciliation have achieved greater prominence in the wider NGO community in recent years because the need is growing, and because the need has become so obvious with the increase in war and violence. It has led to the creation of new types of NGOs specifically devoted to peace and reconciliation, and to changing mandates within older organizations. One of the new organizations, the Nairobi Peace Initiative (NPI), believes that 'as wars, conflicts and violence rage within many African countries and among communities and ethnic groups...peace is the most urgent concern and priority on the continent. The major challenge, however, is how to turn this into a reality... This is going to be a long, complex, and painful process that requires patience, sensitivity, knowledge, skills and informed reflection.'<sup>26</sup>

Several NGOs have become involved in efforts at reconciliation. SLANGO has conducted peace-related workshops and seminars and has put out a small brochure aimed particularly at women and what they can do to foster peace and reconciliation. The National Catholic Development Office-Caritas (NCDO) has initiated a number of workshops on reconciliation

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<sup>26</sup> Assefa, p.v

throughout the country, and in the summer of 1995, invited members of a newly-formed British NGO, Conciliation Resources, to work with some of its priests on developing training programmes around issues of reconciliation, healing and justice. Even like-minded people, they say, need support, space and empowerment, especially in a setting where fear and rumour have muzzled opinion and damaged confidence.

A newly-formed NGO - generously funded by the Carnegie Endowment and supported by a Board of pre-eminent internationalists - the International Crisis Group (ICG), undertook its first initiative in Sierra Leone, holding a seminar for newly-elected parliamentarians in April, 1996. Focussing on the roles and responsibilities of parliamentarians in a democratic society, the seminar was reportedly well-received by MPs, for whom there was no other form of 'orientation'.<sup>27</sup>

There are, however, discouraging words. Perhaps referring to the attempted negotiations by International Alert, an April 1995 ODA report says that 'the scope for ...conflict resolution by well-meaning NGOs is limited and may even be counterproductive because of the risk of undermining the main international effort... We should be wary about encouraging such developments in Sierra Leone. The experience with one such agency in Sierra Leone has given cause for concern.' Given the failure of 'the main international effort', it is perhaps not surprising that NGOs might also have problems.

Church efforts at peace and reconciliation have been patchy and sometimes personality driven, and there is little consensus on what peace actually means, or where it might come from. For some it is simply an absence of violence, while for others it means that the roots of conflict must be identified and dealt with in a fair and just manner. While the RUF would appear to have little credibility with the average Sierra Leonean, its rhetoric about an end to corruption and the creation of equal access for all to education, food, shelter, wealth and power are not so easily dismissed.

The temptation for the ordinary citizen, as well as the donor and NGO community, to assume that the free and fair election of a democratic government will solve these problems is naive. It could, in fact, reopen old wounds and resentments, and return Sierra Leone to the political uncertainties of the early 1970s, with few of the assets that were then available to make a difference.

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<sup>27</sup> The ICG implies that it has had considerably more success in Sierra Leone than the facts warrant. For example a public affairs brochure states that 'Governments were approached and asked to contribute funding to enable the country's first free elections in 25 years to proceed.' ICG, barely extant at the time of the elections, had virtually no impact in this area - despite its prestigious Board. The Sierra Leone crisis, for some reason, seems to encourage inflated NGO claims.

### 11.3 Reconstruction: A Late Warning

By May 1996, there was a real window of opportunity for peace and, therefore, for reconstruction and rehabilitation. Some of this was constrained by the advent of the 1996 planting season, a season which hundreds of thousands of farming families missed. As far as could be ascertained at the time, however, the only serious planning for reconstruction was being undertaken by UNDP, in consultation with the Ministry of RR&R.

The plans that were being drawn up foresaw a major role for NGOs, particularly Sierra Leonean NGOs. This was not because Sierra Leonean NGOs had spare capacity, but because the human and social skills that would be needed in helping to demobilize combatants required an intimate and long-term Sierra Leonean involvement. Given that the social structure in Sierra Leone has been part of the problem, this too suggests the need for competent, even sophisticated Sierra Leonean participation. Bridging the gap between the traditional and the modern, between the reality of the countryside and urban, donor-influenced ideas about civil society, will be no easy task.

The irony of this is that if the peace holds, and if donor funds are made available, the capacity of local organizations - stunted after five years of self-absorbed international NGO activity - to provide meaningful demobilization and reconstruction assistance, is extremely limited. As in so many previous cases, the international NGOs have done virtually nothing to build the capacity of local organizations.<sup>28</sup> A few high profile cases of mismanagement and corruption have been used as a wholesale excuse for INGOs to take control - in their loosely coordinated way - of most of the relief effort. Newcomers arrive in Freetown on a monthly basis, paying only cursory attention to the local NGO scene and taking a largely dismissive attitude towards government.<sup>29</sup>

This means that five years after the war began, most Sierra Leonean NGOs were no better equipped to do relief work than they were when the crisis began. More importantly, few had developed any of the capacity that would be required to work on reconstruction. Once again, donors would be obliged to turn to those who do have the capacity - the international NGOs.

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<sup>28</sup> One reader of an early draft of this report suggested that the expression 'self-absorbed' was unfair. Under the circumstances, few of the international NGOs there at the outset of hostilities were pure relief organizations, and none could have guessed that the war would continue and escalate. The war did continue, however, and it did escalate, and several years passed without an appreciable change in the relationship between the international and the Sierra Leonean NGOs. This may justify retention of the expression 'self-absorbed' in describing the internationals.

<sup>29</sup> Many applications for NGO approval in the Central Aid Coordinating Unit are regarded by officials there as demeaning, costly and irrelevant to Sierra Leonean needs, but are approved because the overall needs are so great.

## 12 CONCLUSIONS

The Revolutionary United Front was a spark that ignited a sea of highly flammable Sierra Leonean anger and discontent. The real cause of the crisis in Sierra Leone is poverty, exacerbated by years of corruption and government neglect. Much of the fighting has been reduced to the settlement of old grudges and disputes. Time and again, since the days of the Spartacist revolt against Rome, it has proven relatively easy for a charismatic leader to entice disaffected young men into a fight against a corrupt and repressive *status quo*. Had Foday Sankoh been better organized, or had he cared more about the people whose cause he purports to champion, he might have gained popular support and turned a rebel war into a revolution. Instead, like so many others, he provided only organization and weapons, transforming young men into terrorists and murderers. Sankoh has been quoted as saying, 'You can start a revolution, but you can't give it a heart'. In his case, this seems especially true.

The development community vastly underestimated the size of the problem, and until early 1995 continued to encourage the government to fight the war with bullets and structural adjustment. It was only when the war reached the outskirts of Freetown that the scent of coffee wafted into aid agency sleeping chambers. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that many outsiders believed the donor interest in elections to be a panacea, or a desperate clutching at straws. In any case, a crisis of major human proportions and extremely complex political dimensions has developed in Sierra Leone, with far too little attention or assistance from the outside world.

The aid community as a whole was unable, and to a certain extent unwilling to cope with the situation. Donors have been nervous about the encroachment of NGOs into traditional governmental territory, especially the area of negotiations, but they have been willing and, no doubt, happy that NGOs have been available to deliver relief supplies, to coordinate camps, and to provide the appearance of action in the face of the negligible resources that are actually being provided. By 1995, therefore, NGOs - mainly international NGOs - had become a significant factor in the provision and delivery of emergency services in Sierra Leone.

It is equally clear that NGOs were ill-equipped, or lacked sufficient appreciation of their combined responsibility, to take on the task they did in any coherent fashion. British NGOs speak of 'post Rwanda guilt' and of the need for better coordination and information sharing in Sierra Leone. This talk notwithstanding, the overall NGO input was erratic and rather poorly coordinated until the establishment of the UN's Humanitarian Assistance Coordinating Unit in 1996.

This criticism notwithstanding, the international NGO community, along with a small number of Sierra Leonean NGOs, has been responsible for the programming and delivery of a major proportion of the emergency assistance within Sierra Leone. The quantum of independent support provided by international NGOs was by no means insignificant either, rising to almost 20% of all ODA in 1994.

If there is a problem of sharing between international NGOs, the problem is much worse between international and local NGOs. Much of the foreign NGO effort is channelled through local church organizations, but many Sierra Leonean NGOs are ignored or sidelined. Some of this has to do with capacity and experience, but local NGOs argue that they will never have capacity and experience - especially for the longer term - if something is not done to build this now. One angry Sierra Leonean asks rhetorically why it is necessary for international NGOs to come all the way to Sierra Leone to dig pit latrines. Sierra Leonean NGOs raise the issue of accountability and legitimacy in discussing the international NGOs, but the INGOs toss the same question back at them, adding that the government, the RUF and the UN agencies too have serious problems of legitimacy and accountability.

Such debates may be important, but they are secondary to the main issue, which is that Sierra Leoneans must ultimately be able to develop their own organizations and to build their own civil society. If outsiders are unprepared or unable to help, they should at least not get in the way.

Capacity for service delivery aside, the Sierra Leonean NGO community demonstrated the meaning and importance of the expression 'civil society' in the weeks before the 1996 elections. Although weak, even by African standards, NGOs - especially the women's movement - distinguished themselves in taking the lead on the issue of democracy, becoming almost the only public voice demanding elections and a return to civilian rule. Supported behind the scenes in helpful ways by some donors (notably UN agencies), they braved threats and real danger, defying a nervous and unpredictable military, openly demanding and then obtaining its resignation. This had the effect of breaking a four year stalemate, and led to a situation where the first real peace negotiations could take place.

Here too, however, there is likely to be a problem of longer-term coordination, and of coordination between those providing services and those concerned with peace and good governance.

Several other issues arise from the Sierra Leone case:

- *resource mobilization* has clearly been a problem for NGOs, the UN system and the donor community as a whole; Sierra Leone has been Africa's 'forgotten war';
- *proportionality*: Sierra Leone is clearly getting far less attention than is the case in other disaster situations. And within the country, those suffering the most have often been inaccessible to relief efforts because of transportation and security problems;
- Although there is much talk of reconciliation and peace-building among international NGOs, it is unclear whether this is yet another aid agency fad, or whether adequate human and financial resources will actually be devoted to it. In any case, while

reconciliation and peace building can be *assisted* from outside, the real work must be done by those who have suffered most directly in the conflict;

- *the role of youth:* young people (led by adults) have done most of the fighting and killing in Sierra Leone. This represents a serious problem for the present, and for the future. As one report puts it: 'The greatest tragedy to befall Sierra Leone will be if the gun is taken away from these children and replaced with empty promises of politicians. These young people will remain hopeful for the future if they are not made outcasts in post-war reconciliation, rehabilitation and reconstruction.'<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Abitbol and Louise, p.28

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## **Meetings and Discussions**

### ***In Sierra Leone***

UNDP, WFP, UNHCR, DHA, Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary General of the UN, USAID, British High Commission, Dept. of Economic Planning, Ministry of Reconstruction, Rehabilitation and Resettlement, Christian Council of Sierra Leone, Plan International, Cause Canada, CARE, the Women's Forum, Amnesty International, Africare, Sierra Leone Association of NGOs, National Coordinating Committee for Peace, Children Affected with the War, Carinas-National Catholic Relief Office, Sierra Leone Red Cross.

I met individually with cabinet secretaries of the former NPRC government, and ministers of the new civilian government. Incidental meetings were held with a wide range of individuals, including former CUSO and VSO staff, members of parliament, and with consultants engaged in planning for demobilization and other reconstruction activities. Visits were made to two camps, one for displaced people and another for Liberian refugees.

### ***Outside Sierra Leone***

UK: International Alert, Oxfam, ODA, Action Aid, Conciliation Resources, African Rights; CARE (Britain, Canada, US), Cause Canada, CUSO (Canada, Sierra Leone); UNDHA (NY)