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Sierra Leone (1991 - 2001)

The decade-long war in Sierra Leone began in 1991 as a revolt against a longstanding dictatorship. The war was fueled by wealth from diamonds located in the east of the country, where the Rebel United Front (RUF) was strongest. With the help of Liberian rebel-turned-President Charles Taylor, the RUF sold diamonds to purchase weapons.

Sierra Leone is home to many ethnic groups, including the descendents of former American and British slaves. In 1978, after a series of failed governments, Sierra Leone became a one-party state with its wealth flowing disproportionately to corrupt politicians and their business cronies.

Foday Sankoh, a Libyan-trained Sierra Leone politician, formed the RUF in 1991. Although the RUF was ostensibly created to challenge the political elite, Sankoh's subsequent strategy and tactics suggested that his foremost objective was control of Sierra Leone's resources. The RUF used abducted children as its core fighting force. After kidnapping the children, the RUF compelled them to take drugs and commit atrocities in their own villages, so that they would feel unable to turn to anyone but the RUF for support and protection.

The poorly trained Sierra Leone Army (SLA) was unable to suppress the RUF. Largely made up of conscripts, the SLA had its own discipline problems. Their soldiers, too, kidnapped women and looted towns they were supposed to protect. Some soldiers moved fluidly to join the RUF and then back again, depending on which force appeared to have the upper hand. A third fighting group in Sierra Leone was the Civil Defense Force (CDF) or Kamajors, which began as independent community-based protection groups but morphed into yet another roving militia that threatened civilians.

Though fighting began in the east in 1991, the conflict did not spread to the north and south until 1995, and only reached the capital, Freetown, in 1998. During the war, military coups and elections changed government leadership five times. In early 1998 and again in January 1999 a Nigerian-led West African intervention force (ECOMOG) battled the RUF for control of Freetown. Following a peace agreement in July 1999, in which rebel leaders were promised positions in the government, United Nations peacekeepers arrived, but the RUF took several hundred of them hostage and forced their withdrawal from rebel-held territory. Fighting continued, and in May 2000 British forces intervened to secure the Freetown airport, capture Sankoh, and support government forces. British troops remained in Sierra Leone until 2002, when the war was declared over. The British helped to disarm more than 45,000 rebels and retrain the SLA. In 2002, the country held peaceful elections, and the United Nations agreed to set up a war crimes tribunal for Sierra Leone. Sankoh died in prison of natural causes in 2003, while awaiting trial. Disarmament and rehabilitation of ex-combatants was officially completed in 2004, and UN peacekeepers withdrew in December 2005.

Print Resources

Keen, David (2005) *Conflict and Collusion in Sierra Leone.* Oxford: James Currey.

Richards, Paul (1996) *Fighting for the Rain Forest: War, Youth, and Resources in Sierra Leone.* Oxford: The International African Institute.

Lord, David (2000) *Paying the Price: The Sierra Leone Peace Process.* London: Conciliation Resources.

Sillinger, Brett (ed.) (2003) *Sierra Leone: Current Issues and Background.* New York: Nova Science Publishers.

Online Resources

BBC News. *Timeline: Sierra Leone.*

Brown, Derek (2000) "Who is Foday Sankoh?" *The Guardian,* 17 May.

Human Rights Watch. *Sierra Leone Documents.*

Timeline

1961 – Sierra Leone becomes independent

1991 – Sankoh leads Revolutionary United Forces (RUF) against president Momoh

1992 – Momoh overthrown by Strasser; fighting continues

1996 – Strasser overthrown by Bio; Kabbah elected president, signs accords with Sankoh

1997 – accords unravel; Kabbah deposed by Koroma and RUF; UN imposes sanctions

1998 – ECOMOG enters Freetown and fights RUF; Kabbah returns to power

1999 – RUF fights ECOMOG in Freetown; peace agreement signed; UN troops deployed

2000 – UN troops taken hostage; British soldiers deployed

2001 – British train Sierra Leone army; UN troops deployed in RUF territory

2002 – war declared over; UN completes disarmament; UN sets up war crimes tribunal; Kabbah wins elections; British troops withdraw

2003 – Sankoh dies in prison of natural causes

2004 – disarmament completed; war crimes trials begin

2005 – UN peacekeepers withdraw