

United Nations Missions in Sierra Leone (UNOMSIL and UNAMSIL)

Sierra Leone (1998-2005)

Although the conflict in Sierra Leone began in earnest after the invasion of some 300 Revolutionary United Front (RUF) rebels from Liberia in March 1991, the UN largely ignored the war until February 1995 when the UN Secretary-General appointed Berhanu Dinka from Ethiopia as his special envoy. Dinka's role was to work in collaboration with ECOWAS and the OAU to negotiate a settlement to the conflict and return Sierra Leone to civilian rule. In the UN's absence, it was ECOWAS which had deployed a peace operation to Sierra Leone (known as ECOMOG), comprised mainly of troops from Nigeria, Ghana and Guinea.

On 25 May 1997, however, a coup d'état led by disaffected members of the military had deposed the elected president, Ahmed Tejan Kabbah. In response, the Security Council imposed an arms and oil embargo on Sierra Leone (Resolution 1131, 8 October 1997). With the help of the ECOMOG forces, Kabbah was returned to office in March 1998. The Security Council responded by terminating the embargoes and strengthening the position of the Special Envoy, adding military liaison officers and security advisory personnel to his staff.

In July 1998, the Security Council established UNOMSIL (under Resolution 1181). This was a small observer force intended to support the Abidjan peace process and associated efforts to disarm, demobilize and reintegrate the rebel fighters. Although the UN had planned to send approximately 720 troops and 60 military observers, the rebel leader, Foday Sankoh, would not accept this and only some 40 observers were deployed (Adebajo and Keen 2007: 251). Like UNAMIR, UNOMSIL was initially given a six-month mandate after which the Security Council was to

assess its progress. As well as monitoring the ceasefire, UNOMSIL was given wider tasks of supervising local disarmament efforts and restructuring the government's security forces. In addition, unarmed UNOMSIL teams protected by ECOMOG forces were supposed to catalogue atrocities and human rights abuses against civilians. Again like UNAMIR, UNOMSIL was tasked with implementing and monitoring a peace agreement but its mandate and capabilities were based on the assumption that local actors would adhere to the agreement. Once the agreement began to fall apart, UNOMSIL lacked the appropriate means to halt the slide into war even though it was supposed to be international society's guarantor of the peace. In spite of UNOMSIL's efforts, rebel forces overran most of Sierra Leone's capital, Freetown, in January 1999. UN personnel were evacuated from the area. Later that month, ECOMOG troops recaptured Freetown and Special Representative Oleko initiated a series of diplomatic efforts to bring an end to the fighting. These negotiations produced the Lomé Accord on 7 July 1999. As well as agreeing a ceasefire and a power-sharing arrangement not dissimilar to that envisaged in the Arusha Accords on Rwanda, the parties also agreed to request an expanded role for UNOMSIL (which the Security Council had increased to 210 military observers).

Two months later, on 22 October, the Security Council further strengthened the UN's position in Sierra Leone by replacing UNOMSIL with a much larger peacekeeping force, UNAMSIL. UNAMSIL is a good example of an operation that was initially caught in the perilous position of wider peacekeeping but eventually overcame the difficulties facing it (albeit with significant external support) and helped oversee the end of Sierra Leone's civil war.

The Security Council's decision to create the new force was prompted in large part by the announcement made by Nigeria's new president, Olusegun Obasanjo, that

he would be withdrawing most of his country's soldiers from the ECOMOG force in Sierra Leone. Obasanjo was elected to power in May 1999 following the death of Nigeria's former leader, the military dictator General Sani Abacha. Claiming that ECOMOG was costing his country around \$1 million a day and concerned about the fatalities suffered by Nigerian troops, Obasanjo wrote to Kofi Annan in August 1999, telling him that Nigeria would withdraw 2,000 of its peacekeepers from Sierra Leone every month (Adebajo and Keen 2007: 259). As it turned out, Obasanjo did permit some 3,500 of his 12,000 soldiers to be re-hatted to become part of the new UN mission but UNAMSIL was essentially an attempt to fill the security vacuum left by the departure of Nigerian troops. This operation had a much wider mandate than its smaller predecessor and was given the task of assisting the various parties in implementing the Lomé Accord. UNAMSIL represented a significant escalation of the UN's activities in Sierra Leone, increasing its presence to 6,000 military personnel including 260 military observers. Like both UNPROFOR and UNAMIR, UNAMSIL's initial mandate was to cooperate with the parties to the conflict in implementing the agreement. This included assisting the government with disarming and demobilising the militias and reintegrating them into civilian society.

As in other wider peacekeeping missions, therefore, the consent of the belligerents was central to the conceptualisation of UNAMSIL. Under the revised mandate, UNAMSIL personnel were required to actively provide security at all DDR sites, facilitate the free flow of people, goods and humanitarian assistance along specific thoroughfares, assist and coordinate the Sierra Leone law enforcement agencies in discharging their responsibilities and guard weapons, ammunition and other military equipment collected from combatants and assist in its subsequent disposal or destruction. These duties gave UNAMSIL a limited and territorially

circumscribed peace enforcement role. In short, UNAMSIL's mandate changed from assisting and monitoring the implementation of the Lomé Accord to the more ambitious objective of establishing law and order throughout Sierra Leone. To help UNAMSIL carry out this new mission, its military component was gradually expanded. In February 2000 the Security Council increased its size to 11,100 troops, and by March 2001 it was increased still further to 17,500 military personnel making it, at the time, the UN's largest operation.

The major problem, however, was that the Lomé Accord was 'basically an appeasement of the RUF by West African leaders and an international community that had wearied of a protracted eight-year conflict' (Adebajo and Keen 2007: 257). Not surprisingly, therefore, UNAMSIL's presence did not produce a lasting ceasefire and violence remained prevalent in many parts of the country. Like earlier missions in Bosnia and Rwanda, its problems can be traced to a severe discrepancy between the expanded mandate that the peacekeepers were expected to fulfil and the means they were given to do it: insufficient numbers of poorly armed and badly coordinated troops. As we discussed in chapter 5, this discrepancy was most starkly highlighted in early May 2000 when RUF rebels attacked DDR centres in central and eastern Sierra Leone, killing four Kenyan peacekeepers and detaining approximately 500 others (mainly from India, Kenya and Zambia). Furthermore, the failure of most parties to adhere to the Lomé Accord meant that UNAMSIL personnel were deployed into an ongoing conflict where they were seen by rebel forces as a hostile presence because of their support for Kabbah's government and because their efforts to end the war jeopardised the rebels' livelihood (primarily pillage and illicit diamond mining). At this stage, the only good news was that Sankoh was arrested in Freetown later the same month.

Between May and October 2000, UNAMSIL experienced a number of serious challenges that threatened to fatally undermine the entire operation. In addition to the hostage crisis, UNAMSIL's Indian force commander, General Vijay Jetley produced a confidential report in which he accused senior Nigerian military and political officials of attempting to sabotage the UN mission by colluding with the RUF rebels, primarily to benefit from the country's illicit diamond trade. When Jetley's report was leaked to the media in September 2000 it provoked outrage from Nigeria, which subsequently refused to place its peacekeepers under Jetley's command. In response, India announced it was withdrawing its entire 3,000 strong contingent from Sierra Leone. They were quickly followed by the Jordanians, who cited Britain's refusal to deploy its troops as part of the UN mission as the reason for their departure. Fortunately, West African leaders agreed to bolster UNAMSIL by deploying a 3,000 strong rapid reaction force consisting largely of soldiers from Nigeria, Ghana and Senegal (see Adebajo and Keen 2007: 264; Olonisakin 2008: 81-90).

Despite these serious setbacks, UNAMSIL's fortunes were turned around by a series of developments during late 2000 and 2001 which effectively brought the war to an end. Adebajo and Keen (2007: 265-7) have neatly summarized the six main developments as (1) the increasingly significant role of Guinean armed forces, sometimes in tandem with the *Kamajors*, in fighting the RUF; (2) international efforts to regulate Sierra Leone's diamond trade, most notably the imposition of UN sanctions; (3) international efforts to obstruct Liberian President Charles Taylor's attempts to support the RUF, notably diamond, arms and travel sanctions imposed by the UN; (4) the greater levels of funding and troops (up to nearly 20,000) given to UNAMSIL after its various crises, as well as the adoption of a clearer enforcement mandate; (5) the role of British forces in destroying the rogue faction known as the

West Side Boys; (6) and the changes that took place within the RUF leadership after Sankoh was replaced by the more moderate Isa Sesay.

By early 2002, the war was officially at an end. By this stage, UNAMSIL had achieved some notable successes (see Olonisakin 2008: ch.7). These included disarming and demobilizing over 75,000 ex-fighters, assisting in the voluntary return of over 500,000 refugees and displaced persons, assisting in the holding of national elections, helping to rebuild the country's police force, and contributing towards rehabilitating the infrastructure and bringing government services to local communities. It was also instrumental in setting up the Special Court to try those most responsible for war crimes and in helping the government to stop illicit trading in diamonds and regulate the industry. As progress was made, UNAMSIL gradually withdrew its forces. By December 2004, the UN had about 4,000 peacekeepers left in Sierra Leone.

UNAMSIL's positive impact was confirmed in a public opinion survey that was conducted by a US academic just before the operation withdrew from Sierra Leone at the end of 2005. This received responses from more than 900 locals (Krasno 2005). Nearly 100 percent of the respondents said the security situation had improved since UNAMSIL had been in the country, and 71 percent indicated they wanted the peacekeepers to remain longer. Asked to evaluate the UN-organized disarmament process, 84 percent rated it good or very good. On the work done to retrain former fighters, 76 percent said that UNAMSIL had done a good or very good job. The most ambivalence came with a question on whether UN peacekeepers treated people in Sierra Leone with respect: 50 percent answered "always," and 45 percent said "sometimes," with only 5 percent saying UN peacekeepers had failed to respect the population. About 98 percent said that the professional conduct of UN peacekeepers

was either good or very good. Asked to name the worst thing UNAMSIL has done, 41 percent said that it had done nothing wrong and 9 percent had no response. The remaining 50 percent cited a number of problems, with the most frequent criticism on the issue of sexual exploitation. In light of its traumatic early experience of wider peacekeeping, these are (generally) very positive endorsements.

References

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