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## heritage



### Sierra Leone's Civil War

Photo: Soldiers guard the national army headquarters after rebel leader Foday Sankoh is arrested in May 2000. Courtesy: AP Photo/Brennan Linsley.

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Ansumana Gebeh, a Sierra Leonean who is now a physician at New York's Mount Sinai Hospital, left his native land in 1988 to attend school in the US, just in time to escape the carnage that would soon engulf his homeland.

Sierra Leone's ongoing civil war has come to symbolize Africa's turmoil and has recently sent the international community scrambling to contain the conflict, which could destabilize much of West Africa. The struggle has become synonymous with brutality; according to Agence France Presse, "In nearly every Sierra Leonean town and village, at least some civilians have had their arms, legs, ears, or lips hacked off."

"The international community is of great help, but several years too late," says Gebeh. "The war has been going on for eight or nine years inland – it only reached Freetown three years ago. I grew up inland, in the diamond areas, Kono and Tongo. My father's an engineer, and my family had to move from the diamond mines – where my father remained – to Bo, the second largest city, and then when things got bad there, they moved to Freetown. So this [war] is relatively new to people from Freetown, but not to many of us."

Gebeh, like other Sierra Leoneans abroad, watched in horror from afar as rebels committed heinous atrocities in their quest for political power and control of the diamond trade.

On July 5, the United Nations Security Council passed Resolution 1306, imposing a ban on diamonds from Sierra Leone in an effort to cut off the rebel movement's main source of revenues (the Revolutionary United Front reportedly reaps \$60 million a year from diamond smuggling). The embargo, which will be in place for at least 18 months, makes it illegal to buy diamonds from Sierra Leone except those that have a certificate of origin from the government. The Security Council could decide to extend the ban if the Sierra Leonean government has not gained control over the country's diamond areas, 90 percent of which remain in rebel hands. Trafficking in "blood diamonds" has allowed the RUF to finance a brutal war that has left an estimated 20,000 dead and scores maimed. The rebels have also reportedly chased half of the country's population of 4.5 million from their homes, and half a million Sierra Leoneans have fled the country.

"In 1992, when I went home I saw army trucks decorated with human skulls," Gebeh recalls. "And now, despite the efforts of the West African community – the Nigerians tried – and the presence of international forces, Freetown is still not entirely safe. Rebels recruit kids, most of whom are orphaned and have nothing to lose. A generation of kids have watched their parents bludgeoned to death. In fact, a team of psychologists were sent earlier to evaluate some of these kids."

The eight-year-old civil war, which had subsided with the signing of the Lome peace accord of July 1999, reignited in May. RUF soldiers captured 500 UN peacekeepers and advanced to within 25 miles of the capital, Freetown, and the increased violence led to British intervention. On May 17, pro-government forces arrested RUF leader Foday Sankoh, after gunmen protecting him opened fire on a crowd of demonstrators, killing 19 people.

Since Sankoh's capture, pro-government forces, aided by British and UN troops, have regained control over some rebel-held towns and managed to secure the release of some 500 UN troops, mostly Zambians.

Now in government custody, Sankoh had only months earlier been released from jail to sign the peace accord, which subsequently granted the rebel leader and many of his henchmen amnesty. The deal was partly brokered by the Rev. Jesse Jackson, the US Presidential Special Envoy for the Promotion of Democracy in Africa, who was criticized for making too many concessions to the RUF. More recently, as a mediator in the more recent resumption of hostilities, Jackson earned widespread condemnation in Sierra Leone for likening the notoriously bloodthirsty RUF to South Africa's African National Congress and suggesting that Sankoh should be regarded as an equal partner in negotiations with the government and afforded financial assistance.

"We are not sure he understands the issue in Sierra Leone," said John Leigh, the Sierra Leonean ambassador to the US in a speech shortly after Jackson's controversial remarks. "He thinks Sankoh is a legitimate political dissenter, and we think he is not."

Jackson hastily backed down from his statement. "I'd like to make it clear that Foday Sankoh and the RUF alone are responsible for the current crisis in Sierra Leone," he said three days after his initial comment. "As for the RUF and the ANC, there is no equivalent." But for many Sierra Leoneans, Jackson's gaffe highlighted American ignorance about the civil war. "Americans who want to get involved should educate themselves first on the conflict," says Bidemi Carrol, a Sierra Leonean graduate student at Stanford University. "There are a number of Sierra Leonean groups [in the

US] looking for people to petition the US government through letter-writing campaigns and demonstrations. I'm a member of a group called Friends of Sierra Leone, which does humanitarian work – sending shipments of clothes and so on to Africa – and also campaigns the INS to grant temporary protective status to Sierra Leoneans in the United States. I'm also part of FAWE (Forum of Women Educationalists), an Africa-wide organization with a chapter in Sierra Leone, which works with women who were victims of the war, giving medical and psychological counseling, though our main mandate is education."

Carrol, like many Sierra Leoneans, is ambivalent about the efficacy of foreign troops. "The British have been involved in one way or another for a long time, it is their official intervention that is new," she says. "I believe there is a need for the involvement of the international community. But UNAMSIL, the peacekeeping mission, is ineffective. First, there was no peace to be kept, and the UN people had no support or authority. So they were constantly ambushed by rebels."

On July 7, the one-year anniversary of the Lome deal, 100 Sierra Leonean leaders –parliamentarians, religious figures, and non-government organization officials – issued a statement calling on the UN to help revive the peace accord, and to use "robust measures" to disarm the RUF. The statement said the amnesty guaranteed by the 1999 Lome agreement should be lifted until the rebels give up their arms and territory. President Tejan Kabbah also declared that his government was not to blame for the recent outbreaks of violence, saying the rebels were "full of obstruction, deceit, lies, violence and all negative things which are a clear absence of goodwill."

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan told Reuters on July 7 that Sankoh should face trial for war crimes. "We reserved our right at a future date to deal with those who had committed such crimes," Annan said referring to the Lome accord's amnesty clause. "We should not get the impression out – not in this part of the world, not in any part of the world – that impunity is allowed to stand and people can get away with these sorts of atrocities."

As Sierra Leone's civil war threatens to draw in neighboring states, the UN and Britain have become more aggressive in their quest for a long-term solution to the regional quagmire. The conflict has already unleashed a flood of refugees on neighboring countries, and the diamond trade that has financed the rebels' activities has allegedly been facilitated by bordering states, especially Liberia.

"Most interests in Africa are larger than just the internal conflict," Gebeh says. "There's a huge foreign element in this war. Weapons have been traced to as far as Eastern Europe. Foreign diamond dealers are involved...the Lebanese in Kono, [and] De Beers [the South African conglomerate that controls two-thirds of the world's rough diamonds]."

According to the *Financial Times*, Liberia exports 60 times as many carats as its own diamond mines are capable of producing. Despite his denials, Liberian President Charles Taylor is widely suspected by the international community of supporting the RUF and being involved in the diamonds-for-arms trafficking. In fact, Sankoh and Taylor are long-time friends; both trained in Libya and started their rebellions in the late 1980s, and their armies have helped each other repeatedly.

The UN Security Council has called on Liberia and the diamond industry to comply with Resolution 1306. Partnership Africa-Canada, a coalition of

groups working to promote sustainable development, has asked for an embargo on diamonds originating in Liberia "pending a full audit."

Recently, Britain, which has been training and advising the Sierra Leonean army, announced that further support would be provided for President Tejan Kabbah's forces in the form of extra personnel and ammunition. The international organization Human Rights Watch, however, has appealed to Britain to use its influence to help the Sierra Leonean armed forces respect international law and not target civilians. Meanwhile, the United States is reportedly set to introduce a draft resolution calling for a war crimes tribunal for Sierra Leone, similar to the international panels now assessing rights violations during conflicts in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia.

For information on how to help Sierra Leone's civilian population, visit <http://www.cryfreetown.org>

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