

HIRED GUNS IN SIERRA LEONE: MERCENARIES' ENTHRALLING ROLE

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Abstract

This research focuses on the role of mercenaries in the Sierra Leone civil war. This gruesome event that lasted for more than a decade, represents a critical case study in understanding the multi-dimensional dynamics of privatized force participation in modern conflicts. The involvement of the Private Military Company (PMC) named Executive Outcomes had a significant impact on charting Sierra Leone's conflict trajectory. Providers of typical mercenary services, they were contracted to counteract the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) insurgency, often filling gaps left by weak state security forces and insufficient international intervention. It can be claimed that mercenaries played an effective role in securing key fronts and defending essential assets in this particular conflict, but their involvement accentuates issues of long-term consequences for governance, international norms, and peacebuilding. Thus, this paper provides insights into the complexities of

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privatized warfare in fragile states and their implications for future conflict resolution paradigms.

Keywords: Sierra Leone, civil war, armed conflict, mercenaries, rebel groups, PMCs, paramilitary group, reconstruction.

Sierra Leone Civil War

The Republic of Sierra Leone is located in western Africa, on the Atlantic coast, with its capital in Freetown. The official language of the state is English, but, as a rule, the *wolof* language predominates in most regions. In terms of religion, the approximately five and a half million inhabitants are, in a proportion of 62%, followers of animism, 37% have their faith in Islam, and the remaining 1% are Christians. The name of the state, *Sierra Leone*, comes from the Portuguese language and means "Lion Mountain". It was named after a Portuguese expedition to that part of Africa, when the ship's crew thought they heard the roar of lions coming from the mountains.¹

Today, the main occupation of the citizens is agriculture, which exploits a large part of the territory, but the most important means of obtaining income for the state is the export of diamonds and, to a lesser extent, gold.² Although it benefits from rich resources, which even allows it to export metals and precious stones, as a member state of the *Commonwealth*, Sierra Leone has the lowest per capita income in this community.³

Sierra Leone has gone through a series of invasions and external influences that have built the state we see today. Before the intervention of Europeans and other groups in this area, the people of these lands were organized in small communities. Even before the first European expeditions, those of Portuguese sailors in the mid-15th century, many of these communities were already established in various parts of the country.

¹ Silviu Neguț; Horia C. Matei; Ion Nicolae, *Enciclopedia statelor lumii*, XIII edition, Bucharest: Meronia, 2014, p. 587.

² Shekou M. Sesay; Christopher Fyfe, "Sierra Leone", in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 10 November 2024, [<https://www.britannica.com/place/Sierra-Leone>], accessed on 14 November 2024.

³ *** *Sierra Leone*, [<http://thecommonwealth.org/our-member-countries/sierra-leone>], accessed on 10 November 2024.

The *Loko* and *Temne* tribes had already found their place in the state's territory in the central and northwestern areas, and the *Kissi* and *Kono* tribes in the east, before the Portuguese arrived. These groups seem to have lived in isolation from each other, and internal migration was minimal. The first external influence came from European traders, followed soon after by the *Mande* tribe, who speak the language that bears the same name as the tribe.⁴

At the beginning, given that the Portuguese were the first traders to arrive in Sierra Leone, they were also the main connectors between Europe and West Africa. At first, goods and tools were exchanged, but soon this normality of exchange was replaced by the most inhumane type of trade in human history: the slave trade. The need for labor on plantations in the New World (*i.e.* the United States of America) triggered the buying and selling of people, and Sierra Leone became an important center of this market. It was the Europeans who sold slaves to work on plantations in the USA. Since it was noted that slaves from Sierra Leone were good rice planters, it became profitable for anyone to bring slaves from this country.⁵

In 1786, abolitionists, led by the leader of the British parliament, William Wilberforce, founded the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade. A year later, Britain helped 400 slaves freed by the United States and Nova Scotia return to Sierra Leone, where they formed the "Province of Freedom". This area soon took the name *Freetown*, the name that the state capital still bears today. It also became the capital of freed slaves. The consequences of this anti-slavery movement led to the official colonization of the state by the British crown in 1808, which declared a protectorate over this territory. Soon, thousands of slaves were freed and returned to their homeland, becoming known as *Creoles*.⁶

During the colonial period, between 1808 and 1961, the United Kingdom forced the Leonese state to build churches and schools, sending educators and teachers there to help the population learn and progress. The language they were taught in was English, and the structure of education

⁴ *** "Sierra Leone - History & Background", *State University*, 2011, [<http://education.stateuniversity.com/pages/1332/Sierra-Leone-HISTORY-BACKGROUND.html>], accessed on 10 November 2024.

⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁶ Sesay; Fyfe, *op. cit.*

was fundamentally British. The Leonese were "pushed from behind" by the English in terms of education, becoming an important center of learning for English speakers on the west coast. Nonetheless, thanks to British help, the region's first Western-style university, Fourah Bay College, was established in 1827. The streets of Freetown were given British names to highlight the close connection between the colony and the crown, and the dollar, the colony's original currency, was replaced by the pound sterling.⁷

The state's colonial history was not at all peaceful. The indigenous people had several failed attempts of riots against British rule. For the most part, the colonial history of the 20th century was quite placid, which meant that independence was achieved without violence. The 1951 constitution provided a legislative framework for decolonization and universal suffrage. Sierra Leone became an independent state, with a parliamentary system within the British Commonwealth in April 1961. After independence, they maintained the structure of British education, and English was declared the official language of the state.⁸

The initial period of democracy was functional, but it ended with the 1967 elections, won by Siaka Stevens. From that moment, Sierra Leone began to fall, entering an interminable era of repressive rule, military coups, and, by the end of the century, a terrifying and violent anarchy. With a brief interruption, Stevens remained at the helm of the state for 18 years, by abolishing the checks made on the abuse of power. This abuse was also manifested by the government's adoption of the idea of creating a one-party system. The regress did not stop in 1985, when Stevens retired, because he appointed Joseph Momoh as his successor. General disillusionment with the government and a growing number of unemployed young people created a perfect environment for violence. The violence only stopped in 1992, when Momoh's regime was overthrown and the young captain, Valentine Strasser, came to power.⁹

⁷ Neguț; Matei; Nicolae, *op. cit.*

⁸ *Ibidem.*

⁹ Carol Lancaster, "We Fall Down and Get Up", in *Center for Global Development*, August 2007, p. 3, <https://www.cgdev.org/publication/we-fall-down-and-get-carol-lancaster-reports-elections-sierra-leone>, accessed on 10 November 2024.

The former British colony of Sierra Leone has been internationally recognized as the most prominent example of a weak state since the 1990s. The United Kingdom's decision to achieve security and stability in the least expensive way led it to rely solely on local rulers for governance. Once set on this path of anarchy, the situation proved very difficult to reverse it, even for the British. Although the state became quite prominent, with a large, authoritarian bureaucracy and coercive strategies, social control remained with local rulers. At the same time, the state came to be seen as a prize that generated rewards, and therefore different local blocs fought each other for controlling it. This proved to be a fertile environment for the development of nepotism and the aforementioned corruption.¹⁰

Sierra Leone's rulers bought loyalty in various ways, and the state's diamond deposits played a key role. One of the benefits of President Siaka Stevens, who ruled the country from 1967 to 1985,¹¹ was his control over the diamond industry and its exemption from taxation. The mismanagement during this period brought the country to the brink of collapse. Stevens' successor, Joseph Momoh, had no support to challenge these "gifts", and had only limited power to provide either state services or patronage.¹²

Momoh faced a crisis in 1990 when the *Revolutionary United Front* (hereafter RUF) rebel group, led by Foday Sankoh, seized several tracts of territory along the Liberian border. He increased the strength of the military, but due to limited financial resources and pressure from international institutions to reduce the country's deficits, many soldiers fought without being paid. Based on the army's dissatisfaction, a group of officers, led by Valentin Strasser, took matters into their own hands, marched on the capital, and succeeded in overthrowing Momoh's regime in April 1992.¹³

Strasser was young and charismatic, but his very young age of only 29 diminished his credibility. People believed that he lacked the experience and strength to impose himself in an army, let alone as head of state. He proved to be no more capable than Momoh in providing even basic services.

¹⁰ Deborah D. Avant, *The Market for Force. The Consequences of Privatizing Security*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005, pp. 82–83.

¹¹ *** "Sierra Leone profile – Timeline", *BBC News*, 18 March 2015, Africa, [<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-14094419>], accessed on 10 November 2024.

¹² Avant, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

¹³ *Ibidem*.

In 1995, rebels attacked two diamond mines, which were the last major source of income of the state. The rebels then advanced on the country's capital, Freetown. For this reason, Strasser requested the help of private security companies in early 1995. The first such external help was a British firm called *Gurkha Security Guards* (hereafter GSG).¹⁴

A total of 58 Gurkha soldiers and three European managers arrived in January to train special forces in Sierra Leone. In February, a platoon of the state military forces came into contact with the RUF during a reconnaissance mission to find a suitable place for gunnery practice. During that encounter, about 21 soldiers and GSG personnel were killed. Following this incident, the Gurkha sent replacements, but they came under increasing pressure from the government, which demanded that they not only train the republic's military forces, but also engage in operations together with them. Despite this request, GSG continued to abide by the terms of the contract rather than adapt to the government's security needs, refusing to take a more active role.¹⁵

All the training provided by GSG proved ineffective, as it failed to improve the functional security of the state. Gurkha agreed to train the military force, not to do whatever was necessary to ensure the security of the army. The company saw that its expanded interests and reputation were no longer aligned with the objectives of the Sierra Leonean government, and when the government's direction came into conflict with these, GSG used the terms of their contract to oppose the direction of the state leadership. Strasser's dissatisfaction with the Gurkhas' attitude led him to dismiss them and turn his attention to a paramilitary group established in South Africa, called *Executive Outcomes* (hereafter EO), which provided the services the government needed at a much lower cost.¹⁶ Even if they are usually referred to and act as typical *mercenaries*, this group cannot be legally considered a mercenary one due to some gaps in the international legislation.¹⁷ For instance, EO publicly stated that they will offer their services only to for

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 83–84.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p.85.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 85–86.

¹⁷ Ramona Ioana Goga, "On Mercenaries in World Politics", *Studia UBB Europaea*, 2023, volume 2/2023, p. 313.

sovereign states, requiring to be incorporated into the armed forces of their hiring state.¹⁸

The defense minister's statement sought to reassure civilians who initially saw no point in calling in a mercenary force to restore order in the state. He stated:

“Our people have died, they have lost limbs, eyes and property. If we are employing a force to protect our hard-won democracy, why should that be viewed negatively?”¹⁹

In March 1996, the people of Sierra Leone elected Ahmed Tejan Kabbah, a former *United Nations* (hereafter UN) official, as president, further infuriating the RUF. They immediately launched a new war against the elected government, quickly gaining control of a small part of the capital and several other towns.²⁰ Despite this, Kabbah managed to sign a peace agreement with Sankoh's rebels in November of that year. However, the agreement between the two parties eventually fell apart, and President Kabbah was ousted by the military in May 1997. He was replaced quickly by Johnny Paul Koroma, who suspended the constitution, banned demonstrations, and dissolved political parties. During this period, the former president, Kabbah, took refuge in Guinea to try mobilize international support.²¹

In 1998, Kabbah managed to return to power, his return meaning the end of the civil war. The rebels returned to the capital as well, which they partially occupied. After fierce fighting, the RUF was driven out of Freetown, leaving behind 5,000 dead bodies and a completely devastated city.²²

¹⁸ *Idem*, “Privatization of Security in the 20th century. From Mercenaries to Private Military Corporations”, *Studia UBB Europaea*, 2018, volume 1/2018, pp. 255–256.

¹⁹ Elizabeth Rubin, “Saving Sierra Leone, At a Price”, *The New York Times*, 4 February 1999, [<http://www.nytimes.com/1999/02/04/opinion/saving-sierra-leone-at-a-price.html>], accessed on 13 November 2024.

²⁰ Laura M. Herța; Claudiu-Bogdan Aldea, “How can Regional and International Organizations Enhance Peace Processes? Lessons Learned from Sierra Leone”, in Delia Pop-Flanța, Laura M. Herța (eds.), *Conflict Resolution and Crisis Communication. Transforming Conflicts and Building Peace*, Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2022, p. 50.

²¹ *** *Sierra Leone profile...*

²² *Ibidem*.

In 1999, the UN implemented a peacekeeping mission in Sierra Leone (*United Nations Assistance Mission in Sierra Leone* or UNAMSIL). The RUF did not respect the agreement, and attacked United Nations forces instead, in the eastern part of the country, taking several hundred members of the mission hostage. Following these events, the United Kingdom reacted by sending 800 paratroopers to Freetown to evacuate British citizens and help secure the airport for UN peacekeepers. Thanks to this intervention, the rebel leader was captured. At this point, the disarmament of the rebel group began, and in 2002, after the UN announced that the disarmament process was complete, Kabbah, re-elected as president, officially announced the end of the civil war.²³

To understand the civil war²⁴ in Sierra Leone, we must first understand its causes. On the one hand, it is considered that the political history of the state was one of the reasons for the outbreak of the war. Since independence, politics in Sierra Leone has been marked by corruption, political assassinations and fraudulent electoral practices. On the other hand, as any war is based on economic reasons as well, in addition to obtaining political power, this conflict is not lacking these aspects either. Sierra Leone is a country blessed with resources such as rainforests, clean water (which is deficitary in many African countries), arable land, and precious metals and stones, most notably diamonds. The existence of diamond mines in the eastern and southern parts of the country, in the *Kono* and *Koido* regions, combined with a corrupt and unstable government, created a perfect opportunity to create anarchy so that they could exploit the mining fields for personal gain.²⁵

The paradox of Sierra Leone is that such a resource-rich country ranks among the last ones in the world in terms of development and well-being of its population. The most painful part is that this country was destroyed by its own wealth. Even if at the beginning it was not officially recognized, diamonds played the most important role in this war. The desire

²³ *Ibidem*.

²⁴ Laura M. Herța, "Hybrid Warfare – A Form of Asymmetric Conflict", in *International Conference Knowledge-Based Organization*, Vol. XXIII, No 1, Sibiu: "Nicolae Bălcescu" Land Forces Academy Publishing House, 2017, pp. 135-143.

²⁵ *** "Analyzing the causes", *Sierra Leone Civil War*, 8 February 2012, [<http://sierraleonecivilwar.com/the-sierra-leone-civil-war/>], accessed on 13 November 2024.

to take control of the diamond mines was the basis for the outbreak of the war. The financing of the war was also achieved through the sale of these diamonds, which would later be known as "blood diamonds".

The outbreak of the civil war was also influenced by external factors. Liberian President Charles Taylor, a preacher and former warlord, was found responsible for supporting and instigating some of the most atrocious crimes in human history. The civil war in Liberia, which installed Taylor at the helm of the state, can be correlated with that in Sierra Leone, because it was the Liberian president who supported the RUF in its actions, trying to get his hands on Sierra Leone's diamonds. In the illegal diamond business, Taylor provided arms and ammunition to the RUF, in exchange for the precious stones.²⁶

After the first years of war, the *Economic Community of West African States* (hereinafter ECOWAS) imposed a total and general embargo on the delivery of oil and weapons to Sierra Leone. In the meantime, the UN worked on a draft resolution aimed at helping to eliminate the rebel military group. The Security Council finally adopted Resolution 1132 on 8 October 1997²⁷. This provided further support for ECOWAS actions. For example, the third paragraph states:

"[The Security Council] expresses its strong support for the efforts of the ECOWAS Committee to resolve the crisis in Sierra Leone and encourages it to continue working towards the peaceful restoration of constitutional order, including through the resumption of negotiations."²⁸

On another note, the Sierra Leone civil war was one of the most grotesque in human history. The chronological order of events seems natural, typical of a civil war, with the oscillation of power between the RUF

²⁶ Alexandra Șerban, „Blestemul diamantelor: un deceniu de război civil în Sierra Leone”, *Historia.ro*, [f.a.], [<https://historia.ro/sectiune/general/blestemul-diamantelor-un-deceniu-de-razboi-civil-577911.html>], accessed on 13 November 2024.

²⁷ United Nations, *Security Council Unanimously Approves Sanctions Regime against Sierra Leone*, New York, 8 October 1997, [<https://press.un.org/en/1997/19971008.sc6425.html>], accessed on 10 November 2024.

²⁸ Christopher Kinsey, *Corporate Soldiers and International Security. The rise of private military companies*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2006, pp. 74–75.

and the state government, many changes of leadership, false promises and interventions from outside to maintain peace. However, if we look more closely at the events and the way in which the Revolutionary United Front acts, we can realize that this civil war differs from the others by several particularities, which highlight the inhuman nature of the fighting and those who initiate it. From 1991 to 2002, for more than a decade, Sierra Leone was under this seemingly endless inferno. Poor state administration, illegal diamond mining and the marginalization of the young population did nothing but fuel social discontent with the economy, politics, government and the ruling classes. Corruption and political violence were other factors that provoked negative reactions among the citizens, with civil society becoming weaker and the education system slowly collapsing. These were the conditions that created the favourable environment to the RUF to find its followers. The insurgents promised money and shelter to hopeless youth if they joined the campaigns in Sierra Leone.²⁹

Initially, people joined the RUF because of their disappointment with the leadership in Freetown. In the hope of a better life, citizens believed in the false slogan of the Revolutionary United Front: *"No More Slaves, No More Masters. Power and Wealth to the People"*.³⁰

Once followers of the rebels, there was no way to turn back. They were subjected to grueling training, indoctrinated or, more precisely, "brainwashed" by the RUF. After the training, they no longer recognized their families or friends. All that mattered to them was the goal of the group. The rebels created a negative reputation internationally because of the practices they adopted in the war. The cruelty demonstrated placed the RUF in a category similar to mercenaries, if not the same. They demonstrated a macabre pleasure in cutting off the limbs of innocent citizens, even very young children, spreading terror wherever they were. The fact that they used child soldiers on the battlefield was equally repugnant. They were kidnapped, assaulted and, later, indoctrinated. During training, the RUF taught them to shoot, kill, rape, torture, and even use the group's defining practice of amputation. To make it "easier" for them, the entire operation was carried out against the backdrop of jokes, such as the question they often

²⁹ Șerban, *op.cit.*

³⁰ *Ibidem.*

asked people before cutting off their hands: "With short sleeves or long sleeves?"³¹ Most of the time, during the fights, child soldiers were drugged, so that they would not be aware of what they were doing, consequently they would have no reservations or remorse.³² During the war, human rights were violated on a massive scale. Sexual violence and rape were considered by the RUF to be essential weapons of war, and were therefore commonplace.³³ Surprisingly, the mercenary activities undertaken by the RUF rebels in their desire to control the state were counterbalanced by the paramilitary group *Executive Outcomes*, which was much closer to the definition of a mercenary army.³⁴ Once in Sierra Leone, the South Africans recognized that their involvement in the fighting was just a business, and the business they had in the west of the continent was to save the state, by collaborating with the government, to defeat the rebel group that had started the massacre in Sierra Leone. Although they were initially feared because of their reputation as mercenaries, they came to be respected by the citizens for their actions in rescuing them from the hands of the rebels.³⁵

Thus, when the state's economy collapsed, the citizens were caught in a vise between the atrocities they were subjected to by the RUF troops, and hunger and poverty. Thirsty for power and with "blood diamonds" in their pockets, the RUF members killed, raped, mutilated and sexually abused thousands of innocent citizens during the civil war. Their power was mitigated by the intervention of the EO mercenaries, who proved to be much more humane than the rebel group. The war was officially declared over after the intervention of British troops who managed to demobilize and disarm the rebels.

³¹ Myriam Denov, *Child Soldiers. Sierra Leone's Revolutionary United Front*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 121–128.

³² *** *Analyzing the causes...*

³³ *** "The Armed Conflict in Sierra Leone", *Human Rights Watch*, 11 April 2012, [<https://www.hrw.org/news/2012/04/11/armed-conflict-sierra-leone>], accessed on 14 November 2024.

³⁴ United Nations, *International Convention against the Recruitment, Use, Financing and Training of Mercenaries*, New York, 4 December 1989, [<https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-convention-against-recruitment-use-financing-and>], accessed on 14 November 2024.

³⁵ Phillip van Niekerk, "African Soldiers-for-rent just Businessmen at Heart", *The Globe and Mail*, 21 September 1995, pp. 3–5.

Revolutionary United Front vs. Executive Outcomes

The main actors during the Sierra Leone Civil War were the Revolutionary United Front and the state government. However, in addition to them, there were also secondary actors who had a crucial impact during the fighting and who left their considerable mark on the outcome of events. The most important secondary actor, who intervened on the government's side and managed to save citizens from greater atrocities, was the mercenary group, *Executive Outcomes*.

The Revolutionary United Front is a guerrilla unit, formed in Sierra Leone in 1991, whose actions created instability in the state, which led to the overthrow of the government and, implicitly, to the outbreak of the civil war that lasted 11 years.³⁶ The foundations of the rebel group were laid by Foday Sankoh, along with Abu Kanu and Rashid Mansaray. They received logistical and financial support from the Liberian president, Charles Taylor, who had been installed as head of state after another civil war.³⁷

The RUF leader, Foday Sankoh, was a former student activist who had spent time in exile in Libya in the 1970s, where he came under the philosophical influence of Muammar al-Qaddafi, and then, in 1991, managed to reach Liberia. While in Liberia, Sankoh joined a Liberian anti-government guerrilla unit, the National Patriotic Front of Liberia, where he also met the leader of this group, who would become president of the state, Charles Taylor, who had previously made an armed incursion into Sierra Leone. He and Sankoh founded the RUF, which in March 1991 began carrying out attacks on towns along the eastern border between Sierra Leone and Liberia. Within a month, the RUF had taken control of a large area of the eastern part of the state.³⁸

Their main objective was to gain control of the diamond mines, especially those in the Kono region, which has been the main instrument of power. This could only be achieved by overthrowing the dictatorial regime

³⁶ Richard McHugh, "Revolutionary United Front (RUF)", *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*, [f.a.], [<http://www.britannica.com/topic/Revolutionary-United-Front>], accessed on 14 November 2024.

³⁷ Thomson Gale, "Revolutionary United Front (RUF)", *Encyclopedia.com*, 2006, [<http://www.encyclopedia.com/article-1G2-3447100132/revolutionary-united-front-ruf.html>], accessed on 14 November 2024.

³⁸ *Ibidem*.

of President Joseph Momoh. Although they initially promised to solve the problems of the state and bring fair and just leadership to Sierra Leone, they even won the sympathy of the people who were fed up with the corrupt elite. Later, they proved to be extremely cruel, even inhumane, both to those they considered enemies and to innocent civilians.³⁹

The rebels temporarily achieved both of their objectives. Sankoh's men gained control of the lucrative diamond-producing regions of Sierra Leone for their own use and to finance the RUF's wartime activities. During these 11 years, the RUF carried out violent attacks on civilians⁴⁰ that resulted in an estimated 50,000 deaths and the displacement of nearly two million people. The group gained a worldwide reputation for rape, mutilation of victims and the often forced recruitment of child soldiers. Thanks to the military efforts of the UN and British troops, the rebel group was defeated and peace was restored in Sierra Leone.⁴¹

The establishment of the United Revolutionary Front seemed like a salvation for the Leonese people. Their slogan, "No slaves, no masters. Power and well-being to the people," gave the impression that their interest was centered on the good of the population, by renewing a system that was collapsing. The hope of entering a path to prosperity led people to put their faith in the false and baseless promises of the rebels. The mistake of believing in the RUF later proved fatal. Seen from the inside, the rebel group was no longer the same. Within the group, followers were forced to respect strict rules, and deviation from them would cost them dearly. That is why many of the group's followers found themselves under the mask of *suspended identities*. These identities represented the ability of an individual to claim and identify with a certain type of person and character, and to manifest themselves according to the circumstances. Within the RUF, not everyone identified with the types of people who committed the terror and violent acts, despite the fact that those children grew up under that horrendous mentality, RUF being a way of life for them, both theoretically and practically. Even though everyone apparently obeyed the laws and

³⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁰ Herfried Münkler, *The New Wars*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005, p. 14.

⁴¹ McHugh, *op. cit.*

principles of the RUF, some had other moral principles, which they were forced to hide. They managed to mask their identity by obeying orders.⁴²

One of the most recognized and condemned practices of the RUF was the recruitment of child soldiers. They took an active part in the war, having considered *combatants*, and by obtaining this status, there was legal permission to fight against them, even if they were minors. The training of child soldiers was a complex process, taking place over an extended period of time. Both girls and boys inevitably experienced forms of insecurity and kidnapping by revolutionaries. Minors were violently separated from their families and forced to be part of the RUF. Most have followed a path to violence, starting with the experience of kidnapping other children. Some were injected with drugs when they were taught to handle weapons or kill.⁴³

Much of the specialised and policy literature has portrayed child soldiers as a male phenomenon and has failed to include a gender perspective in armed conflict. Girls have always been considered peripheral and with an invisible presence in the armed force. In current discussions and analyses of armed conflict, the experiences of girls in war have represented only a small percentage of the scientific work or in terms of the social environment, and the diverse roles that girls have played both during and after the war have only recently been recognized. Indeed, officials, governments and national and international bodies have overlooked or refused to acknowledge the presence of girls, their needs and their rights, during and after the armed conflict.⁴⁴

Within the RUF, children were trained both physically and psychologically. Physically, through strength training, and psychologically,

⁴² Se Young Jang, "The Causes of the Sierra Leone Civil War", *E-International Relations Study*, 25 October 2012, [https://www.e-ir.info/2012/10/25/the-causes-of-the-sierra-leone-civil-war-underlying-grievances-and-the-role-of-the-revolutionary-united-front/#google_vignette], accessed on 14 November 2024.

⁴³ Jan Goodwin, "Sierra Leone Is No Place To Be Young", *The New York Times*, 14 February 1999, [<http://www.nytimes.com/1999/02/14/magazine/sierra-leone-is-no-place-to-be-young.html?pagewanted=all>], accessed on 14 November 2024.

⁴⁴ Jean Friedman-Rudovsky, "The Women who bear the Scars of Sierra Leone's Civil War", *The Telegraph*, 16 November 2013, [<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/sierraleone/10450619/The-women-who-bear-the-scars-of-Sierra-Leones-civil-war.html>] accessed on 14 November 2024.

through techniques that induced violence in then back of their minds, starting with language and by initially participating in acts of violence as eyewitnesses. Thus, they gradually came to see these actions as normal and began to actively participate in the respective acts. Language was one of the factors that contributed most to helping them detach themselves from what they had previously done as active participants. Black humor and irony were strongly emphasized by commanders at the expense of corpses or victims. It is worth noting that the transition from 'victim' to 'participant' was not linear nor consciously achieved: the children were confused, pressured by superiors, becoming impulsive, but even if they became participants, they were not freed from the status of victims.⁴⁵

Opinions on the category in which child soldiers should be classified were divided. In the aftermath of the war, three dominant but contradictory pathologies emerged. One of them classified them as "dangerous and disorderly", considering that they were conscious at the time of committing those horrific acts. Another category in which they were classified was that of "unfortunate victims", subjected to forced maturation processes, tortured and tormented to do their duty to the RUF. The last pathology places them in the zone of "heroes". These young people were portrayed as courageous survivors of extreme violence and who, in the end, despite their participation in the violence, were acquitted.⁴⁶

Although the amputation of limbs was the particular feature of this war and the RUF's *modus operandi*, the atrocities committed by them were not limited to this, but also used sexual violence as a weapon of war. Girls and women were used as sex slaves, being taken by force and used whenever the men needed them. Many young women were forced to marry RUF soldiers, thus becoming the property of the men.⁴⁷

Because of the way they behaved, RUF members came to be comparable to mercenaries. The only difference between them was that the rebels fought in their own state, financing themselves from the illegal

⁴⁵ *** "Sierra Leone Rebels Forcefully Recruit Child Soldiers", *Human Rights Watch*, 31 May 2000, [<https://www.hrw.org/news/2000/05/31/sierra-leone-rebels-forcefully-recruit-child-soldiers>], accessed on 14 November 2024.

⁴⁶ Denov, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

⁴⁷ Zoe Marks, "Sexual Violence in Sierra Leone's Civil war: 'Virginisation', Rape, and Marriage", *African Affairs*, 2013, p. 85, DOI: 10.1093/afraf/adt070.

exploitation of diamond mines, while those who had the status of real mercenaries were employed by foreign states and fought in exchange for considerable sums of money.⁴⁸

On the other side of the barricade, the private military corporation *Executive Outcomes* (EO) came to the aid of the state. The government of Sierra Leone asked for help from the South African security company, which had once assisted the government of Angola in the fight against the rebels. PMC was founded in 1989 by Eben Barlow, a former deputy commander of the 32nd Battalion of the South African Defence Force, before being employed by the South African Office of Civilian Cooperation.⁴⁹

EO was originally established to provide intelligence training for South African special forces, with most of its personnel, with the exception of specialists such as Ukrainian pilots, coming from the same special forces background. The company engaged in its first significant military operation in Angola in 1993.⁵⁰

The Angola operation demonstrated that this private company was capable of providing security specialists to governments to help train their security forces and also provide military protection against local insurgencies. It also demonstrated that a private military corporation, or mercenary army, can have a positive impact on a country's security. This is likely what prompted the Sierra Leonean leadership to call on *Executive Outcomes*. In the case of Sierra Leone, the contract was signed in April 1995. The company's task was to provide military support and advice to the national army, which was in the midst of a civil war. The main objectives that the mercenaries set for themselves were to secure the capital, Freetown, regain control over the country's diamond mines, thus allowing the government to generate revenue to help pay the company, destroy RUF headquarters, and clear areas still under rebel occupation. Within eight months, these objectives were more or less achieved, forcing the RUF to negotiate with the Sierra Leonean government for the first time in five

⁴⁸ United Nations, *Protocol additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the protection of victims of international armed conflicts (Protocol I)*, no. 17512, Geneva, 8 June 1977, [<https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/Volume%201125/volume-1125-I-17512-English.pdf>], accessed on 20 November 2024.

⁴⁹ Kinsey, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*.

years.⁵¹ *Executive Outcomes* spent 21 months in Sierra Leone, during which time the British government appears to have shown no interest in the company's military operations. In return, the company took responsibility for ensuring peace, while the local government worried about the costs of the operation. On the other hand, Britain's commercial interests in the country's diamond trade were now safe, as a result of the intervention of mercenaries on behalf of the local government, while a healthy distance was maintained between the British government and the EO.⁵²

While companies like *Executive Outcomes* were attempting to open up to the commercial world, leaving behind the secretive world in which they operated, government officials were not aware of the change these companies had made. At the same time, official reports on the Sierra Leone civil war referred to the company as a mercenary army, even though it tried hard to distance itself from this label that no longer fully represented it. What followed was a lengthy investigation into its Sierra Leone operations to prove that the paramilitary group had acted legally. The report exonerated the company of any wrongdoing, which succeeded in distancing itself from the mercenary label for a while, even if they keep being referred to as "mercenaries".⁵³

Can Mercenaries Save the State?

The decision to use mercenary troops in the Sierra Leonean civil war was a controversial one. At first, the people, the citizens of Sierra Leone, were extremely reluctant about their commitment or their methods. Terrified by the horrors committed by the Revolutionary United Front, civilians lost faith in anything that promised them protection, whether it was their own government or the national army. In March 1995, Strasser hired the company *Executive Outcomes* to begin an immediate training program. The contract stipulated that the company would provide between 150 and 200 soldiers (fully equipped with support helicopters) to support, train, and assist the state's special forces in their war against the RUF. The price was set at \$2

⁵¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 61–63.

⁵² David J. Francis, "Mercenary Intervention in Sierra Leone: providing national security or international exploitation?", *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 20, No. 2, 1999, p. 329.

⁵³ *Ibidem*, pp. 330–331.

million per month, but the company agreed that the government would pay only 50 percent of the fee, with the other half to be paid from the revenues generated by the opening of the Sierra Rutile mine. In addition, the contract between EO and the West African state stipulated considerable concessions over diamond mines in the Kono region.⁵⁴ The government delegated significant authority to the company over training, logistics, and command and control of the Sierra Leonean armed forces. EO arranged an intensive three-week training program for 120 soldiers at a time at the state military base, where it was able to teach the soldiers basic skills, tactics, discipline, and procedures. They also established effective secret services and radio communications. The company's intelligence operators identified potential informants, isolated them, trained them, and then provided them with communications equipment. The company handled the logistics of the operations it was involved in, employed a doctor on the board of a combat aircraft that carried troops to all ground operations, and brought in two aircrafts to evacuate the wounded. Although they were aware that their main mission was to train the state's military forces, *Executive Outcomes* director Lafras Liutinhg acknowledged that his forces acted effectively when under attack.⁵⁵

Private troops arrived in Sierra Leone in May 1995 and within days forced the revolutionary forces to withdraw from Freetown and regained control of the diamond mines shortly thereafter. The company continued its assaults on the RUF until 1996, when the rebels were weakened and called for a ceasefire. Under the mercenaries' command, the rebels suffered hundreds of casualties and about 1,000 defections.⁵⁶ Despite efforts of boycott, elections were held in 1996, and a lawyer who had worked for many years for the UN, Ahmed Kabbah, became president. The new president did not even read the contract he had with *Executive Outcomes* until a considerable period later, when he announced that he could no longer pay them. The company renegotiated the contract and agreed to a salary of \$1.2 million per month. Then the amount began to decrease, until it got \$700,000. However, EO continued to fight for the Sierra Leonean government, with the

⁵⁴ Avant, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

⁵⁵ *Ibidem.*

⁵⁶ McHugh, *op. cit.*

aim of evicting the rebels from the Kono region, where the most important diamond mines were located, and to destroy the RUF headquarters.⁵⁷

In the following months, Kabbah managed to achieve a ceasefire and open peace talks with the rebels, but tensions between the army and the revolutionaries increased and erupted into several clashes. Finally, the rebels agreed to sign the peace agreement, on the condition that the foreign military presence leave the country. Under these conditions, the company withdrew in 1997, having been paid only half of the total amount stipulated in the contract.⁵⁸

Executive Outcomes fulfilled the functional security needs of Strasser's government. This enabled the state military to liberate the capital, take control of the diamond mines in the eastern part of the country, and destroy the RUF headquarters. Although Strasser's successor, Kabbah, was not even aware of the existence of the contract he had with the company when he took office, the South African group continued to provide short-term training.⁵⁹

The peace agreement was seriously violated by the RUF, and after the mercenaries left the state, Sierra Leone returned to hell. The rebels tried again to seize the mines in the Kono region and enter the capital. Even the UN peacekeeping troops, who were numerically superior to the revolutionary army, were unable to control the situation in Sierra Leone. This led to the return of the South African company to the center of the civil war. They managed to counterbalance the power of the rebels, thanks to their extremely professional preparation. The RUF, with its assaults largely led by child soldiers inexperienced in the art of war, was again driven out by the much more experienced mercenary paramilitary unit. Together with UN troops and British support, the company managed to put an end to the suffering of civilians.⁶⁰

The difference between the Revolutionary United Front and the *Executive Outcomes* was huge, no matter how you looked at it. Apparently, the roles were reversed in this civil war, with the function of the "mercenary

⁵⁷ Francis, *op. cit.*, p. 332.

⁵⁸ Carlos Ortiz, *Private Armed Forces and Global Security. A Guide to the Issues*, Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2010, p. 98.

⁵⁹ *Ibidem.*

⁶⁰ Francis, *op. cit.*

army" falling to the rebel group, due to its ruthless, unrestrained manner of action. From this point of view, the RUF became comparable to the old mercenary armies, which used to torture, rape and mercilessly kill innocent people who got in their way, in order to achieve the goal for which they were paid. Even though the revolutionaries did not fall under the formal "mercenary" status internationally, their actions horrified the entire world, proving an inhuman character and a deep contempt for the lives of their fellow men. Although they began as a group that promised the well-being of the population, always stating that their goal was to free the Leonese people from the corrupt aristocracy and to fairly distribute the income obtained from the sale of diamonds, eventually, the revolutionaries almost succeeded in destroying an entire state, just to fulfill their own interests.

The overwhelming accounts of child soldiers, and abused and tortured women accurately describe the horrors of the war. For example, one boy recounts how he was recruited: "The rebels attacked my village and separated me from my parents... [They] threatened to kill me if I tried to run away. I didn't want to die, so I followed them. I was afraid to be around these dangerous people with all kinds of weapons. I had no mother, no father, for the first time I was alone."⁶¹ Another heartbreaking confession comes from a little girl who says: "I wanted an education, not to learn how to use a weapon. I didn't feel strong, I felt disgusted. It was not the place for a little girl to use a weapon." Another girl testifies that she was trained to kill: "I learned to kill, to cut someone's throat... They trained us to use a gun." The horrific events left their mark on the children who took part in the fighting. Another child soldier recalled that "some fighters danced with the dead bodies of their enemies."⁶²

What they saw every day and the training they underwent left their mark on these children. They came to view death as normal, as another child soldier admits:

"Murder became a daily occurrence, and we all got used to it. We got to the point where we would come out of the room, find a dead body, and just jump over it to continue on our way."⁶³

⁶¹ Denov, *op. cit.*, p. 96.

⁶² *Ibidem*, p. 100.

⁶³ *Ibidem*, p. 102.

In order to participate in the atrocities committed by the RUF, children were often drugged. When asked about this method applied to young soldiers, a former rebel commander stated: "We were aware of the effects of drugs on children. Drugs and alcohol were used as a pre-requisite for combat activities. Fighting with a weapon is not easy because it creates a lot of mental pressure. So we needed to free their minds using drugs, and it worked."⁶⁴ In general, belonging to a group is of significant importance to human beings, providing a sense of security, fulfilling emotional needs and often helping people to cope with difficult situations. Creating a sense of belonging among children proved to be an important measure to ensure compliance, to strengthen the bond between the rebels and to clearly delineate the boundaries between members of the RUF group and the perceived enemy, *i.e.* the government and its allies. The RUF used several techniques to increase solidarity and cohesion among children, especially boys. The most important of these techniques was the breaking up of the community and family.⁶⁵

On the same note of the sentiments expressed in interviews after the end of the armed conflict, the statements of women/girls that were abused and tortured during the war highlight other terrible actions developed by the rebels, carried out, predominantly, towards females. Like any other members of the group, women and girls had to carry out various tasks that facilitated and supported the activities of the rebels.

As in the case of child soldiers, women/girls ended up being part of the RUF following violent abductions, often followed by rape. During the period spent in the midst of the rebel group, they were constantly abused, many of them stating that they were used as sex slaves. For women in the RUF, providing sexual services to fighters was part of their duties. They were taken by force and used whenever the men needed them.⁶⁶

One former member of the group described the horrific experience she went through when she was recruited by the RUF: "About 30 girls were captured from my school, aged between 10 and 20. One of them was abused

⁶⁴ *Ibidem.*

⁶⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 102.

⁶⁶ Marks, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

by ten men. On that first day, five men raped me too and used guns to threaten me.”⁶⁷

A young girl who went through this ordeal also recounted how she was sexually abused in front of her parents by ten soldiers, who threatened to kill her if she cried. Furthermore, another victim testifies that, when she refused to have relations with two of the rebels, she was beaten terribly, losing some of her front teeth. She was then raped by them in front of her children and other civilians.⁶⁸

These abuses, along with genital mutilation, acid burns, public mockery and torture, were used as weapons of war by those in the Revolutionary United Front. In contrast, those who “rightfully” fit the mold of mercenaries defined by international conventions, showed an unexpected humanity. Based on iron-clad and continuous training, the obvious numerical inferiority between them and the RUF was not felt in the heat of the fighting. This time, the mercenaries used their training not only to obtain profit for any purpose, but also to save a population that was beginning to drown in the blood shed by their own countrymen, for no particular reason. Even if their efforts were rewarded financially, the situation was a win-win for both *Executive Outcomes* and the entire civilian population of Sierra Leone.

Extremely reluctant to hear that a paramilitary army had been contracted by the state government to defeat the RUF, the citizens of Sierra Leone have come to thank and even pay for the well-being of those who saved them from the massacre that lasted 11 years.

There are two types of differences between the EO and the RUF. On the one hand, there are the differences at the formal level, those of status and the way they are recognized worldwide, which are negligible. They refer to the fact that the RUF could not be classified as a mercenary due to the fact that they were fighting in their own state and were self-financing from the illegal exploitation of diamond mines, while also being a party to the conflict, and Article 47 of the First Additional Protocol to the Geneva Conventions

⁶⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁸ *** “Sexual Violence in the Sierra Leone Conflict”, in *Human Rights Watch*, Vol. 15, No. 1, January 2003, p. 29, [<https://www.hrw.org/reports/2003/sierraleone/sierleon0103.pdf>], accessed on 15 November 2024.

provides, among other things, that the status of mercenary cannot be attributed to residents of territories controlled by a party to the conflict or that they are specially recruited and hired in exchange for considerable amounts of money.⁶⁹ On the other hand, there were colossal differences between the two groups in terms of their mode of action on the battlefield. Initially, the RUF seemed to be fighting for the people and their freedom, but their true goal was to obtain wealth, and in order to achieve it they became the most feared threat to society. There were visible discrepancies between their despicable behavior and the saving intervention of the EO mercenaries. Through their professionalism, the South African group managed to escape the label of mercenaries, being seen more as a private military corporation, but more actively involved in the fight. Starting with the disadvantage of being considered warlords, EO ended up being the saviors of the state.

The behavior of the EO on the battlefield was beyond decent when compared to RUF, appearing to bring elements of military professionalism and respect for international values. The citizens of Sierra Leone considered the company's behavior to be professional and declared themselves extremely satisfied with its ability to end the violence. In this context, *Executive Outcomes* claimed to have operated on the assumption that winning the hearts and minds of the civilian population was the key to success, and in this way they managed to operate in the country for so long without being constantly accused of looting, atrocities, harassment or other disciplinary offenses.⁷⁰

By analyzing the behavior of the paramilitary group *Executive Outcomes* in the civil war in Sierra Leone, we came to the conclusion that "good mercenaries" did exist. EO managed to save a lot of civilians from the massacre caused by the rebels, their intervention proving to be savior for the entire state. The involvement they demonstrated, won the hearts of the five and a half million inhabitants of the state. If before they were capable of betraying their own mother for wealth and mercilessly mocking or torturing innocent people, now they are the heroes of the story, fighting against antagonists, who took over from them the habits devoid of human values.

⁶⁹ United Nations, *Protocol additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the protection of victims of international armed conflicts (Protocol I)*, no. 17512, *op. cit.*

⁷⁰ Avant, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

The *Executive Outcomes* has left the country after paving the path for the international intervention, starting with a neutral international monitoring group.⁷¹

In these conditions, the oxymoron *good mercenaries* proved to be true. Certainly, we have here a contradiction between the terms, starting from the negative connotations of the word “mercenary”, which are in obvious contrast with the adjective “good”. However, we cannot attribute this “quality” to all paramilitary troops of the contemporary era, in terms of their behavior on the battlefield. The most prominent negative example and the most famous worldwide is the American company Blackwater. Their actions were truly controversial, often being correlated with the terrorist attacks of this era.

In conclusion, during the civil war, a change of roles is observed between the EO and the Revolutionary United Front. This change seems inversely proportional, since the more humanity the mercenaries showed, the more vile the behavior of the RUF soldiers was. The rebels were amused by the suffering they caused innocent people, often making jokes about them before abusing them, amputating their limbs or killing them for no logical reason. In this context, it seems that the real mercenaries were the RUF, but they could not get this label on international stage due to insignificant differences, but they did “earn” this status, even if informally.

Reconstruction and Development of Sierra Leone

The end of war began with the agreement signed in the capital of Togo in July 1999 – the Lomé Accord. The document urged for immediate ceasefire and offered amnesty for actions that did not include war crimes and crimes against humanity.⁷² The same deal imposed a power-sharing system, in a coalition government, bringing some RUF members (including Foday Sankoh) to the leadership of the country. The solution to keep peace and security that has been widely promoted by the international community was

⁷¹ Andrea Edoardo Varisco, *Research in Security Sector Reform Policy. The Case of Sierra Leone*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, pp. 12–14.

⁷² David Harris, *Sierra Leone. A Political History*, London: Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 113.

the adoption of democracy.⁷³ As expected, the Accord was repeatedly violated by the RUF members, leading to a much bigger rupture between the parties and more crimes made by the rebels, even against the international community installed in Sierra Leone to maintain the peace.⁷⁴

After external intervention, weakened due to several military defeats, RUF was forced to re-join peace negotiations in 2001, starting the disarmament of the rebels. The president of Sierra Leone, Ahmed Tejan Kabbah, has officially declared the end of the civil war in January 2002 and the demobilization of the rebel troops began.⁷⁵

After the civil war, there is limited evidence that mercenaries/PMCs participated in post-war recovery and reconstruction. Slight mentions appear in unofficial sources stating that these external actors were ensuring the security of the country's diamond mines and other natural resources for a small period of time after the civil war. In the aftermath of the war, these areas were particularly vulnerable to theft and illegal exploitation by outlaws. Nonetheless, after years of conflict, the military and police were undertrained and lacked proper organization. PMCs could have been an easy option to provide training in modern combat tactics, intelligence gathering, and leadership development. However, the high costs associated with PMCs training services would have affected even more the financial stability and accountability, particularly in a nation recovering from war.

From a political point of view, the state made strides towards stabilization. Democratic elections have been held regularly since 2002, with peaceful transfers of power, despite political tensions. International intervention, such as the establishment of the UN-backed Special Court for Sierra Leone or the Truth and Reconciliation Committee, has helped foster reconciliation and accountability for war crimes.⁷⁶ The country's governance

⁷³ Fredline A. O. M'Cormack-Hale, "The Role of NGOs in the Democratization Process in Postwar Sierra Leone", in Marda Mustapha and Joseph J. Bangura (eds.), *Sierra Leone beyond the Lomé Peace Accord*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, pp. 97–99.

⁷⁴ C. Magbaily Fyle, *Historical Dictionary of Sierra Leone*, Lanham, Toronto, Oxford: The Scarecrow Press, 2006, p. XXV.

⁷⁵ Harris, *op. cit.*, pp. 114–116.

⁷⁶ Davidson S.H.W. Nicol; Shekou M. Sesay; Christopher Fyfe, "Sierra Leone: Post-civil war", in *Encyclopaedia Britannica* [f.a.], [<https://www.britannica.com/place/Sierra-Leone/Post-civil-war>], accessed on 30 November 2024.

systems have become more stable, though issues of corruption and political polarization still hinder progress.

Economically, Sierra Leone has leveraged its natural resources, including the much-disputed diamonds, to accelerate growth. The country's had a 5.7% GDP growth in 2023, but they face high inflation and a reduced economic base which constrain broader development. For instance, only around 16% of the Leonese population has access to basic sanitation services, while just 26.2% can benefit from using electricity. Also, 63.8% of the population has access to a basic clean water source, significantly higher than the majority of the African countries.⁷⁷

They have made notable efforts – like the "Feed Salone" initiative – to diversify the economy and achieve food security.⁷⁸ The Government recently unveiled the Medium-Term National Development Plan (2024–2030) that proposes policies to achieve sustainable growth, governance reform, and economic diversification.⁷⁹

When it comes to the justice system, Sierra Leone has used the *transitional justice* as the cornerstone of its recovery from the devastating civil war. Two mechanisms were used to address simultaneously the aftermath of the civil war – the Special Court for Sierra Leone (SCSL) and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC).⁸⁰ The two institutions have had complementary roles. If TRC has focused on rehabilitation through *restorative justice*, promoting functional instruments for democratization, peace-building and the reintegration of ex-combatants, the SCSL implemented the *retributive justice*, prosecuting those responsible for war crimes.⁸¹ There has been a lot of room for improvement, as these mechanisms faced great challenges due to limited resources. However, both of them have proved essential for the reform of the state and reconciliation of Leonese society.

⁷⁷ *** "Sierra Leone Country Report 2024", in *The Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI)*, 2024, [<https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/SLE>], accessed on 30 November 2024.

⁷⁸ *** "The World Bank in Sierra Leone", in *World Bank*, 21 October 2024, [<https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/sierraleone/overview>], accessed on 30 November 2024.

⁷⁹ *** *Sierra Leone Country Report 2024*...

⁸⁰ Rebekka Friedman, "Restorative Justice in Sierra Leone: Promises and Limitations", in Kirsten Ainley; Rebekka Friedman; Chris Mahony (eds.), *Evaluating Transitional Justice*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, pp. 55–76.

⁸¹ *Ibidem*.

Sierra Leone's post conflict reconstruction is of tremendous complexity. The overwhelming paradox of the state reaching the brink of collapse due to its own wealth has become known globally. The country is still haunted by the ghost of the inferno unleashed in 1991, which left deep wounds in the souls of its citizens. Their wounds can literally be felt, but above all, they can still be seen. Millions of civilians, regardless of age, were mutilated, assaulted or tortured, and the pain can still be read on their faces today. Those who lived through this war are up to this time tormented by the shadow of memories, especially since the traces are still visible, and some of them even impossible to erase.

In conclusion, after long periods of political and social instability, which culminated in a civil war that seemed interminable, the small state in West Africa has, at some extent, managed to produce the effect of a Phoenix bird, to gather its ashes scattered over its entire territory and be reborn. Slowly, the state has been rebuilding itself both structurally and psychologically. Even though it is often said that time heals all wounds, in the case of this state, much more is clearly needed to rebuild the psyche of its citizens. Now, Sierra Leone is going in a good direction, as it has been at peace for more than 20 years after the brutal civil war.

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