

An assessment of India's role under UN Peacekeeping Operations in Sierra Leone

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Abstract

Africa, one of the most conflict-ridden and insecure places of the world has experienced some of the most violent conflicts in the world over the last five decades. From the early 1950s and especially in the post cold war period, Africa has witnessed an increasing number of internal conflicts arising from ethnic and religious rivalries. The conflicts have caused the increased number of failed states and regional destabilization in Africa. The ethnic strife so-called “new wars” are accompanied by a mixture of humanitarian emergencies, major human rights violations, the fall down of law and order, and the collapse of functioning governments. In response to these challenges, the United Nations (UN) launched a series of peacekeeping missions throughout the world, particularly in Africa. India participated in only one UN Peacekeeping Operation in Africa,

when it served in the UN mission to the Congo (1960–1964) during the cold war period. Since the end of the cold war, India has been engaged in most of the United Nations peacekeeping missions in Africa. The present paper sets out to explore India's role under UN Peacekeeping Operations in Sierra Leone.

Keywords: - United Nations, Security Council, Peacekeeping, Sierra Leone, Civil Defense Force (CDF), UNOMSIL, UNAMSIL, Sierra Leone Army (SLA)

Historical Background of Sierra Leone Civil War

The history of Sierra Leone is a product of mixed grievances from its colonial period. A two-class society with a weak bureaucracy was established during British colonial rule, thereby sowing the seeds for the later popular discontents. Post-colonial

mismanagement, poor governance, endemic corruption, exclusion and marginalisation especially of the youth, even made the already weak state system completely collapse. The young population both in cities and rural areas became even more marginalised from their society, without access to appropriate education and employment. This directly fuelled political and economic grievances against the feeble government and ruling classes.

Sierra Leone gained its independence from the United Kingdom in 1961. After gaining its independence from British, successive regimes in Sierra Leone failed to deal with the collapse of a patrimonial system of wealth redistribution and inequitable exploitation of the country's natural resources.¹ In the years following the death of Sir Milton Margai Sierra Leone's first prime minister in 1964, politics in the country were increasingly characterized by endemic corruption, mismanagement, poor governance, electoral violence and the collapse of the education system. The consequential social tensions created military governments and armed rebels who shared a common origin in the ranks of the disaffected and unemployed youths on the fringes of both urban and rural

society.² The entire generation of the disillusioned youth were attracted to the rebellious message of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF).³ Upon Sir Milton Margai's death in 1964, Sir Albert Margai, was appointed as Prime Minister by parliament. Albert Margai, half-brother of Milton saw the state as a tool for personal gain and self-aggrandizement and even used the military to suppress multiparty elections that threatened to end his rule.⁴ Due to Albert Margai's growing authoritarianism from 1964-1967, the democratic process became limited.

Following a year of military interregnum, Albert Margai's great rival, Siaka Stevens, leader of the All People's Congress (APC) party headed the government from 1968-85. Sierra Leone was a constitutional democracy when Siaka Stevens in 1968 entered into politics and when he stepped down in 1985 Sierra Leone was a one-party state.⁵

Siaka Steven's seventeen years rule, sometimes called "the 17 year plague of locusts,"⁶ saw the destruction and perversion of every state institution. Parliament was undermined, judges were bribed, and the treasury was bankrupted to finance pet projects that supported insiders.⁷ When Stevens failed to co-opt

his opponents, he often resorted to state sanctioned executions or exile.⁸

In 1985, Stevens stepped down, and handed the nation's preeminent position to Major General Joseph Momoh, former head of the Sierra Leone Army. With government being almost bankrupt, it became impossible to pay most civil servants, those desperate enough ransacked and looted government offices and property. Even in Freetown, important commodities like gasoline were scarce. But the government hit rock bottom when it could no longer pay school teachers and the education system collapsed. Since only wealthy families could afford to pay private tutors, the bulk of Sierra Leone's youth during the late 1980s roamed the streets aimlessly.⁹ To overcome the lack of state resources, Momoh tried to revive Sierra Leone's flagging political and economic fortunes by talking of a 'New Order'. Momoh's government pursued structural adjustment measures and embarked upon a slow process of political liberalization in the early 1990s.¹⁰ In 1990, President Momoh set up a constitutional review commission to review the 1978 one party-constitution with a view of broadening the existing political process, guaranteeing fundamental human rights and the rule of law and consolidating the

democratic foundation and structure of the nation. However, Momoh was not taken seriously as there was increasing abuse of power in Sierra Leone.

The biggest victims of the patrimonial system collapse were, in fact, young people who were not able to be educated and employed in this deteriorating situation. To make things worse, President Momoh delivered a speech in the eastern district of Kailahun saying that education was not a right but a privilege and then, not surprisingly, the RUF promptly used his speech as 'one of its justification to go to war'.¹¹ Sierra Leone was ranked as one of the poorest countries in the world by 1991, even though it benefited from abundant natural resources including diamonds, gold, bauxite, iron ore, coffee, cocoa and fish.¹²

In March 1991, the fighters of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) led by Mr Foday Sankoh, a former army corporal, launched a war from the east of the country near the border with Liberia to overthrow the government. With the support of the Military Observer Group (ECOMOG) of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), Sierra Leone's army tried at first to defend the government but, the following year, the army itself overthrew the government in

1992. Despite the change of power, the RUF continued its attacks, however on contrary, it brought about widespread destruction across the country, both in terms of human lives and material loss. In addition to forcing about a tenth of the population to seek refuge in neighbouring states and making some thirty percent internally displaced, the hostilities also destroyed much of the infrastructure and ruined the country's economy.¹³ In February 1995, the United Nations Secretary-General appointed a Special Envoy, Mr. Berhanu Dinka (Ethiopia). He worked in collaboration with the Organization of African Unity (OAU) and ECOWAS to try to negotiate a settlement to the conflict and return the country to civilian rule. Parliamentary and presidential elections were held in February 1996, and the army relinquished power to the winner, Alhaji Dr. Ahmed Tejan Kabbah. The RUF, however, did not participate in the elections and would not recognise the results.¹⁴

Amidst the Chaos, in November 1996, Special Envoy Dinka assisted in negotiating the Abidjan Accord- a peace agreement that took place between the RUF and the government. However, these peace efforts were derailed due to military coup when the Armed Forces

Revolutionary Council (AFRC) under Major Johnny Koroma overthrew President Dr Ahmad Tejan Kabbah on 25 May 1997; invited the RUF to form a government and formed the ruling Junta. President Kabbah and his government went into exile in neighbouring Guinea.

A new Special Envoy, Mr. Francis G. Okelo (Uganda) and other representatives of the international community tried, but failed, to persuade the junta to step down. The Security Council imposed an oil and arms embargo on 8 October 1997 and authorized ECOWAS to ensure its implementation using ECOMOG troops. After 10 months in office, the junta was ousted by the Nigeria-led ECOMOG forces, and the democratically elected government of president Kabbah was reinstated in March 1998. Kabba took power once again with Albert Joe Demby as vice president. The Security Council terminated the oil and arms embargo and strengthened the office of the Special Envoy to include UN military liaison officers and security advisory personnel.

United Nations Observer Mission in Sierra Leone (UNOMSIL) July 1998- October 1999: In June 1998, the Security Council established the United Nations Observer

Mission in Sierra Leone (UNOMSIL), with the authorized strength of 70 military observers, for an initial period of six months. The UN Secretary-General named Special Envoy Francis G. Okelo as his Special Representative and chief of the mission. Brigadier S.C. Joshi of India was appointed as the Chief Military Observer. The mission monitored and advised efforts to disarm combatants and restructure the nation's security forces. Unarmed UNOMSIL teams, under the protection of ECOMOG, documented reports of ongoing atrocities and human rights abuses committed against civilians.¹⁵ In spite of the continuing peace process, fighting went on and more than half of the country came under the control of the rebel alliance. In December 1998 the alliance began an offensive to retake Freetown, and in January 1999, they overran most of the city, following which UNOMSIL personnel were evacuated. Later in the same month, the Military Observer Group (ECOMOG) of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) managed to regain control over the capital and again installed the civilian government, although thousands of rebels were still reportedly hiding out in the surrounding countryside.

In the aftermath of the rebel attack, the Special Representative Francis G. Okelo of UNOMSIL, in consultation with the West African States initiated a series of diplomatic efforts aimed at opening up dialogue with the rebels. On 7 July 1999, all parties to the conflict came together and signed an agreement in Lome known as the Lome Peace Agreement, to end hostilities and to form a government of national unity. According to the power sharing agreement, RUF leader Sankoh became minister of Mines and was granted the status of Vice President. The parties to the conflict also requested an expanded role for UNOMSIL, which would work in conjunction with the regional ECOMOG.¹⁶

United Nations Assistance Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL): Nov 1999- Dec. 2005

On 22 October 1999 the UN Security Council through a resolution 1270 (1999) established the UN Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) with an initial authorised force of 6,000, including 260 military observers and acting under chapter VII of the charter, decided that UNAMSIL “to take necessary actions to ensure the security and freedom of movement of its personnel, and, protect civilian under imminent threat of physical

violence, taking into account the responsibilities of the Government of Sierra Leone and ECOMOG".¹⁷

UNAMSIL a new and much larger mission than UNOMSIL was to assist the government in implementing the Lome peace agreement with the RUF. UNAMSIL was also given the responsibility to assist the government of Sierra Leone in the implementation of the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) program; establish a presence at key locations throughout the territory of Sierra Leone including disarmament centres and demobilisation centres; ensure the security and freedom of movement of United Nations personnel; monitor adherence to the ceasefire; facilitate the delivery of humanitarian assistance, and to provide support for the elections.

On 7 February 2000, the Security Council with resolution 1289 UNAMIL's authorized strength to 11,000 soldiers and also added new provisions for civil affairs, civilian police, and administrative and technical components. By the early 2000, UNAMSIL had succeeding in disarming more than 10,000 men and by mid April, more than 24,000 troops were demobilized.¹⁸ In response to the challenges on the ground, the Security

Council further extended the mandate first through resolution 1299 (2000), increasing the troop level to 13,000, and later, through resolution 1346 (2003), to 17,500 and also revised the mission's concept and pledged to provide better equipment and more financial resources.¹⁹ The Guinean Forces, in conjunction with the Civil Defense Force (CDF) and Sierra Leone Army (SLA) offensives, inflicted casualties on the RUF, leading it to capitulate in Abuja II Peace Agreement of May 2001. From May 2001 to January 2002, UNAMSIL was able to disarm most of the remaining RUF and CDF forces in Sierra Leone. By the early 2002, approximately 47,000 combatants have been demobilized and 30,000 weapons were destroyed.²⁰ The Government of Sierra Leone expanded its authority throughout the country and the country held peaceful democratic elections in May 2002.

Over the course of its mandate, the UN assisted in holding national and local government elections, which enabled people to participate in decisions that affected their daily lives; helped to rebuild the country's police force to its pre-war strength and contributed towards rehabilitating the infrastructure and bringing government services to local

communities. The UN also helped the government stop illicit trading in diamonds and regulate the industry. During the war, rebels had used money from “blood” or “conflict” diamonds to buy weapons which then fuelled the conflict. Now diamonds have become an engine of growth, with government income from diamonds soaring from just \$10 million in 2000 to \$160 million in 2004, according the International Monetary Fund figures.

UNAMSIL completed most of the tasks assigned it by the Security Council: the mission assisted the voluntary return of more than half a million refugees and internally displaced persons. It helped the Government restore its authority and social services in areas previously controlled by rebels, trained thousands of police personnel with the help of a team of officers from common wealth countries, and constructed or reconstructed dozens of police stations.

UNAMSIL monitored and trained Sierra Leoneans in human rights and was instrumental in setting up the Special Court for Sierra Leone to try those most responsible for war crimes. The Mission also assisted the Government in setting up a Truth and Reconciliation Commission, tasked with healing the wounds of war by bringing together perpetrators and victims

of atrocities. Working together with UN agencies, the Mission launched quick-impact and income-generating projects to provide jobs to thousands of unemployed youths and ex-fighters and basic services to local communities. UNAMSIL troops reconstructed schools and clinics, launched and funded agricultural projects, and sponsored free medical clinics in far-flung areas.²¹

In spite of concerns about government authority outside Freetown and the capacity of the Sierra Leonean army to provide security, the strength of the UNAMSIL was reduced and by October 2004, only 5000 peacekeepers remained in Sierra Leone. Although several organizations expressed concern over the downsizing of the UNAMSIL, but the repatriation process had proven to be a success so far. At the beginning of December 2005, UNAMSIL mandate came to an end and was succeeded by a new mission- the United Nations Integrated Office for Sierra Leone.

India's Contribution to UN Peacekeeping in Sierra Leone

India initially deputed Brigadier SC Joshi, Chief Military Observer with two military observers to the UNOMSIL. India also provided a medical unit and civilian police personnel to UNOMSIL.

When the mission was changed to a full-fledged peacekeeping mission and renamed as UNAMSIL, Indian was the second largest troop contributor after Nigeria, until its unilateral withdrawal from the mission. Major General VK Jetley of the Indian army was appointed as a Force Commander of the UNAMSIL.

The Indian contingent was initially the largest contingent in Sierra Leone numbering over 3,000 personnel which included peacekeepers and military observers. The Indian contingent in Sierra Leone was deployed for diverse tasks ranging from providing a Guard company for the security of the UNMASIL Headquarters, Quick Reaction Company (QRC) to provide escort duties to convoys moving from Freetown to Port Loko and to deal with the emergencies, Indian Air Force contingents to provide valuable reconnaissance, casualty evacuation, communication, troop deployment, search and rescue, air patrol, provisions of air support to ground forces and a sizeable

number of officers to establish the newly formed UNAMSIL Headquarters. Gradually Indian troops got involved in almost all the activities of the mission and were deployed in all the parts of the country even to the remote Eastern part of the country at Kailahun which borders the Liberia.²²

With its participation in Sierra Leone, India had the second largest number of troops in UN Peacekeeping operations worldwide at that point in time. This was the first UN assignment, in which the Indian contingent carried indigenously made INSAS rifles. 5/8 GR Battalion Group consisting of the battalion headquarters, two rifle companies and two mechanised companies, one engineer field company, a field artillery battery, a level-III field hospital, and other service support units was deployed in December 1999, arriving at Lungi airport in 31 An-124 Cargo planes.²³

The Government of India also contributed an Indian air Force (IAF) contingent initially consisting of eight helicopters. The contingent comprising four Mi-8 and four Chetak helicopters, commanded by Group Captain B.S. Siwach, arrived at Lungi on 15 March 2000, before moving to a more permanent

base at Hasting airfield, 25 kilometres from Freetown.

In May 2000, the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) laid siege to two Indian peacekeeping companies at Kailahun and took 23 peacekeepers as hostage. After protracted efforts by the UN and the Indian government, RUF released the Indian peacekeepers held hostage but the siege of Kailahun continued. During the first week of July when all other means to come to an agreeable solution had failed, it was decided to execute OP KHUKRI. The plan was to relocate the two besieged companies from Kailahun to Daru, through a combination of road and air extrication. The operation was launched by British Special Forces, along with the Indian contingent, led to the relocation of the two besieged companies from Kailahun to Dam. Operation Khukri not only put to rest myths about RUF capabilities, it is also put the RUF on the defensive and helped solve the crisis to a large extent. The resounding success of the operation executed by Indian peacekeepers in the heartland of RUF controlled territory won praise from all quarters²⁴ and even India earned praise from Kofi Annan for its efforts:

“The Indian contingent in that operation did a brilliant job and I think you all recall Operation Khukri, where they freed the peacekeepers that had been taken hostage. I pay tribute to them who took part in that operation and redeemed the honour of United Nations peacekeeping”.²⁵

In the meantime, in June 2008, Indian contingents launched Operation ‘Rogberi’ to clear RUF from an important junction point, which was under the clutches of the rebels. The operation was successful in chasing away the rebels and won accolades. President Kabbah of Sierra Leone personally praised the battalion for its brave action and visited the location. In an another operation, troops from 18 Grenades of Indian battalion freed Masiaka, a big township, 110 km southeast of Freetown, from the rebels and re-established normalcy in the war-ravaged town.

During the period until its return to India, Indian battalions carried out extensively operational and civic activities and made efforts to encourage the RUF cadres to disarm and join the peace process. 18 Grenadiers operations like Thunderbolt dismantled illegal checkpoints set up by the West Side Boys,

a gang formed by the deserters from the Sierra Leone Army (SLA).

The Indian contingent's operational professionalism, willingness and readiness to determinedly pursue the UN mandate yielded great dividends and generated goodwill and trust within UNAMSIL circles, as well as among the local population of the Sierra Leone.

Apart from their operational role, the Indian contingents also took part in humanitarian activities by repairing and maintaining the Daru-Kailahun road. The contingents provided safe drinking water, medical assistance to the civilians and regularly disturbed the food to the hospital patients and civilian in Kailahun. The 5/8 GR battalion organised a 'Kick Polio out of Sierra Leone' campaign in Daru and Kailahun. The battalion also organised weekly medical clinics for the children at Daru and also provided mid-day meals and stationary to the primary children while in Kailahun. Many items of sports equipments, facilities of library and reading room were provided by the Indian contingents to various villages located in their area of responsibility (AOR).

The officers and men of 18 Grenades interacted with the government officials, Sierra Leone police and locals before launching peace building projects

with the aim to alleviate the trauma and sufferings of the local population located at 'Mile 91' and in areas surrounding it. It also initiated vocational training programmes to develop job skills to the war-ravaged local populace in the 'Mile 91' area. The battalion launched a massive campaign to spray insecticides and DDT in all community areas with the fear of a cholera epidemic breaking out. In addition taking care of health and hygiene, the battalion built a large community hall named as Shanti Bhawan (Hall of Peace) for the local population at Mile 91. The battalion with the help of the local population repaired and generally gave a facelift to all the mosques and churches at 'Mile 91' which touched the hearts of all sections of society.²⁶

The Indian units in the mission were 18 Grenadiers, Companies each from 14, 23 and 11 Mechanised Infantry Battalions, two Field Company Engineers, an Artillery Battery and a Medical Unit from the Indian Army.²⁷ Moreover, it also included Special Forces, Logistic and Engineering Groups Force, Head Quarter Personnel as well as a fully functioning and independent Aviation Unit from the Indian Air Force.²⁸

The Indian troops and their commander in the Sierra Leone were

subjected to controversy and physical pressures. Unnecessary allegations were circulated by West African governments about the Indian Force Commander. The Heads of State and Governments of West African countries in a resolution adopted by the ECOWAS asserted that the Indian Commander, being unfamiliar with West African conditions had mismanaged the operations and that he should be replaced by a commander from the West African region.²⁹ However there was public acknowledgement of the outstanding success of operation Khukri and other operations launched under General Jatley's leadership.

Jetley's increasing strife with army officials and diplomats from Nigeria came into the open after the international press published several official documents he had submitted to UN headquarters, which had allegedly been stolen from his computer in Freetown. However, an embarrassed Jetley subsequently denied the existence of these reports, in which he informed the UN that some Nigerian officials were directly linked to the lucrative diamond trade in Sierra Leone and neighbouring Liberia, and that this was undermining the position of the peacekeeping mission. Furthermore, Jetley confirmed rumours that he was having

difficulties with insubordinate Nigerian officials disobeying his commands, specifically naming his Nigerian second-in-command Gen. Mohammed Garba, as well as the UN Secretary-General's Special Representative, Oluyemi Adeniji. Nigerian officials vehemently denied all these charges, alleging that Jetley had been high-handed and aloof, often acting without consultation with close colleagues.³⁰

The Secretary-General, Kofi Annan tried to reconcile the two commanders but was unsuccessful with no options left except to fire one of the commanders. India was the choice because the UN could not antagonize Nigeria, given the fact that it was the largest contingent in Sierra Leone. Moreover, Nigeria had led a West African peace force that fought against the RUF during the nine-year civil war in Sierra Leone. So, as of December 2000, India was replaced by Kenya as the Force Commander of UNAMSIL. New Delhi also put forth the argument that the UN has been seeking to mandate UNAMSIL under Chapter VII of the UN Charter and that would conflict with India's policies on peacekeeping.³¹ De-induction was completed by February 2001.

Conclusion

India can be regarded as the most consistent and active supporter of UN

peacekeeping operations throughout the globe. But Africa has a special emotive resonance for Indian forces, which have won great compliments from the international community and also from the local populace for promoting cooperative living among various tribal communities. India's cultural, religious and linguistic diversity have helped Indian forces to deal effectively with African societies comprising different tribes. The Indian peacekeepers fought so valiantly in Sierra Leone and worked hard to win the hearts and minds of the people. Though the Indian experience in UNAMSIL was unpleasant by the allegations made against the Force Commander, and the speculation that accompanied the withdrawal of Indian troops, but India still remains committed to the cause of UN Peacekeeping for maintain the international peace and security and has not slackened in its traditional support of UN Peacekeeping operations.

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