

What Started the Civil War in Sierra Leone

By Bianca Chan

The ten-year war in Sierra Leone began as a revolutionary guerilla insurgency. A group of students, who did not like the political system and deteriorating conditions in Sierra Leone's university and schools during the 1980s, dreamed of a new and more accountable government. A handful of them, supported by Libya and led by arm corporal Foday Sankoh, began training in Benghazi, later gaining combat experience in the civil war in neighboring Liberia before launching a cross-border strike into Sierra Leone in March 1991 (Richards).

Their theory suggested that a handful of dedicated revolutionaries taking to the hills or forests can outlast a much larger conventional army if their group had local support. The organizers of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) hoped to gain support from alienated peasants in the eastern border districts before rallying students and unemployed young people throughout the country. However, by deploying Liberian-style terror against rural chiefs and merchants, the RUF failed to gain any significant peasant following. The only reason RUF survived was because it seized and forcibly inducted young children as loyal supporters, making them child soldiers (McIntyre). The RUF also looked in rural areas for adult dissidents, and found willing recruits among laborers in border-zone diamond pits.

After the 1996 election, the army was sidelined and nominal peace was reached with the RUF. The civil defense militia that helped to bring about the peace, however, came mostly from the South and East of the country and government reliance on it upset the balance of power among the political elites. As a result, the northern-dominated army

started a revolt in 1997, hoping to avoid war by inviting the RUF to enter into a power-sharing regime. However, the civil defense remained loyal to the democratic president and the war continued. The only beneficiary from this was the RUF, which used its brief access to state resources to reorganize and rearm and in January 1999, a reequipped RUF sacked Freetown, the capital of Sierra Leone, and quickly withdrew to await the outcome of further negotiations leading to a new, and perhaps, more stable, peace agreement that was signed in July 1999 (Richards).

Almost immediately, however, the RUF began to violate the agreement, most notably by holding hundreds of hostages and capturing arms and ammunition in the first half of 2000. In that same year, members of the RUF shot and killed as many as twenty people demonstrating against the RUF violations outside Sankoh's house in Freetown. As a result, Sankoh and other senior members of the RUF were arrested and the group was stripped of its positions in government. In May 2000, the situation in the country deteriorated to such an extent that British troops were deployed in to evacuate foreign nationals and establish order. The stabilized the situation, and were the catalyst for a ceasefire and ending of the civil war.

After the events of May 2000, a new ceasefire was necessary to reinvigorate the peace process. This agreement was signed in November of that year in Abuja. However, the fighting continued. In late 2000, Guinean forces entered Sierra Leone to attack RUF bases from which attacks had been launched against Liberian dissidents in Guinea. A second Abuja Agreement, in May 2001, was needed. As disarmament progressed, the government began to reassert its authority in formerly rebel-held areas. By early 2002,

many ex-combatants had been disarmed and demobilized. In January 2002, President Kabbah declared the civil war is officially over (Pham).

How You Can Help

Even though the civil war in Sierra Leone has ended, the country is still in a reconstructing phase. There are many ways you can help and some suggestions on how you can help are listed below. Your generous donations can and will help a lot of people in Sierra Leone.

The Gondobay Manga Foundation

<http://www.gondobaymanga.org/>

Established and inspired by founder Isaiah Washington's discovery of his genetic link to the Mende people of Sierra Leone, the foundation helps with planning to achieve positive improvements in Sierra Leone.

Friends of Sierra Leone

<http://www.fosalone.org/>

Friends of Sierra Leone is a nonprofit organization established in 1991 by a small group of returned Peace Corps volunteers and was soon joined by many Sierra Leonean and other volunteers who had also served in Sierra Leone. They are currently working on sending a volunteer to Sierra Leone to assist in education, and any donations will greatly help to achieve this goal.

All As One – Helping the Orphans of Sierra Leone Build a Better Future

<http://www.allasone.org/>

All As One, established in 1997, is a nongovernmental organization dedicated in providing Sierra Leone orphans and destitute children a better and loving home, education, medical care, and a chance at a better future.

EducAid – A Charity Helping to Improve Education in Sierra Leone

<https://www.educaid.org.uk/>

EducAid, founded in 1994, encourages education among underprivileged and refugee children in Sierra Leone. Their belief is that with the access to education, this will promote dignity and empowerment for the children.

SOS Children's Villages – USA

<https://www.sos-usa.org>

SOS Children's Villages – USA is a member of SOS Kinderdorf International. Their mission is to build families for children in need, help with their futures, and developed their communities all around the world.

WORKS CITED

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