

Bringing the Good, the Bad and the Ugly into the Peace Fold:

The Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces after the Lomé Peace Agreement

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Introduction

Almost a decade after the end of the civil war that ravaged the country for most of the 1990s, Sierra Leone has come a long way. The same small country in West Africa that to many outsiders for years was known for its brutal civil war, numerous coups, flagrant human rights abuses, and the almost complete collapse of state institutions, has witnessed a remarkable process of transformation. State authority has been re-established and the security situation throughout the country has improved considerably. The second post-war elections in 2007 were followed by a peaceful turnover of government, a rare event even in many established democracies on the African continent, and there has been a slow but steady progress of change in a range of vital development areas. The almost complete overhaul of the security sector institutions of the state through an extensive reform process under international supervision has very much been at the core of the peacebuilding efforts. Critically, the various armed groups; rebel forces, renegade army soldiers, and militias that tore the country apart during years of armed conflict are now joined together into one single national army. In a country where poor governance and abuse of the armed forces has been the norm rather than the exception, the outcome of this reform attempt is likely to be critical to the prospects of establishing sustainable peace and security.

The purpose of this study is to take a closer look at the integration of the armed forces in Sierra Leone after the end of the civil war and the development of the new Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces (RSLAF). Specially, the aim is to discuss why a military merger was decided on in the Lomé peace agreement, how this process was subsequently carried out, and to point to some of the achievements and shortcomings of this reform attempt almost ten years down the road. The argument will be made that although there are many reasons to suggest that the transformation of the armed forces in Sierra Leone represents a success story in the making, which yields important

implications for future policy making in this field, there are also reasons for concern. The armed forces are not yet fully under civilian and democratic control, the financial sustainability of the current size of the armed forces remains in serious question, and the risk of another coup cannot be ruled out. In addition, the true test is likely to come in a few years when the last representatives of the International Military Advisory and Training Team (IMATT) are withdrawn.

This paper is structured into five main sections. First, a brief background to the civil war in Sierra Leone is provided, with focus on the role of the warring actors and the disintegration of the national army. Thereafter, the Lomé peace negotiations are discussed, with attention given to the provisions in the peace settlement concerning the integration of the various armed factions into a single military force in Sierra Leone. In the third section, the paper discusses the process of military integration in more detail, tracing the developments from the early reforms carried out in the immediate post-settlement period to the training and reconstruction of the RSLAF following the renewed disarmament and demobilisation process and the ending of the civil war. Last, some of the major achievements and shortcomings of the still ongoing reform process are addressed, followed by some concluding remarks.

Towards State Collapse: Civil War, Coups and Treacherous Collaborations

The civil war in Sierra Leone officially began in early 1991, when a small group of insurgents, consisting of Sierra Leonean political exiles, mercenaries from Burkina Faso and soldiers loyal to Charles Taylor in Liberia, crossed the border from Liberia and attacked villages in the eastern and south-eastern provinces of Sierra Leone. However, due to the initially isolated effects of these attacks, the one-party regime of the All People's Congress (APC), largely dominated by Temne-speakers from northern Sierra Leone, did not take the threat seriously at the time.¹ It was soon

¹ Interview with a former Minister of the APC regime, Freetown, 15 October 2004.

announced over the radio that a group called the Revolutionary United Front of Sierra Leone (RUF) led the invasion for the purpose of overthrowing the corrupt regime and restore multi-party democracy to Sierra Leone (Richards 1998, 7).² Despite their small numbers, the rebel forces quickly advanced into the country, and were initially successful in capturing large parts of the southern and eastern parts of the country.

One of the reasons for the failure of the government to contain the rebellion in its early stages was the poor state of the national army. In order to prevent it from posing a threat to the political elite, it had deliberately been denied the necessary means and resources to play much more than a ceremonial role (Albrecht and Jackson 2009, 43). In addition, it was heavily corrupt and recruitment and promotions were based almost exclusively on patronage and ethnic affiliation, much like all other public sector institutions (Ebo 2006, 483; Ginifer 2006, 793). The pressure on the army to counter the invasion in spite of poor condition of service and lack of equipment, soon led to mounting internal dissent and in 1992, a group of lower ranking frontline soldiers staged a coup to overthrow the government. A military junta, the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC), was established, which initially gained widespread popularity due to its populist rhetoric to end corruption and abuse of state power as well as its promise to bring peace to the country (Abraham 2004).³ A recruitment campaign was launched, expanding the army from about 6000 to nearly 14 000 soldiers in less than a year, and the rebels were soon pushed back to the border regions (Gberie 2005, 64; Keen 2005, 95).

However, the massive expansion of the forces further strained the army's already limited resources. The rushed recruitment process had also attracted a large number of street boys and other unemployed youth, and faced with declining conditions of service and little military training, the army soon experienced a collapse in discipline and morale (Albrecht and Jackson 2009, 44). In

² For an in-depth account of the origins of the RUF, see Abdullah (1998).

³ See Zack-Williams and Riley (1993) for a discussion on the causes and consequences of the coup.

addition, the rebel forces were again making military advantages after having taken control over Kono, the country's premier diamond district in the eastern area, which enabled them to capitalise on the black market diamond trade to buy weapons and supplies, and recruit new soldiers. Allegations soon emerged that army soldiers were in fact cooperating with the rebels in the illegal diamond trade and in the looting of the civilian population, giving birth to the expression 'sobels', soldiers by day, and rebels by night (Keen 2005, 107–131). From 1994, violence increased across the country. In response to the deteriorating security situation, civil militias formed out of traditional hunting societies surfaced as the most significant resistance force against both the RUF and renegade soldiers. Most prominent among these was the south-eastern-based militia known as the Kamajors.⁴ In spite of this, by early 1995, the rebels controlled much of the rural areas outside the capital and some major provincial towns, and rumours spread that the capital was about to be attacked (Adebajo 2002, 84).

Faced with this imminent threat, the military government called in a private South African security firm, the Executive Outcome (EO), to help the remains of the army and the civil militias to counter the rebels.⁵ Although the NPRC was soon able to yet again push back the RUF and initiate peace negotiations with the rebel forces, its popular support had by now began to dwindle. The junta was forced by growing internal and international pressure to announce the holding of multi-party elections and the return to civilian rule. In early 1996 elections were held, and Ahmed Tejan Kabbah, leader of the Sierra Leone Peoples' Party (SLPP), a party foremost supported by the Mendes in the south-eastern regions, was elected President.⁶ The new government resumed negotiations with the RUF and on 30 November 1996 a peace settlement was signed in Abidjan,

⁴ For an account of the origins of the Kamajors, see Muana (1997).

⁵ Another private security force, the Ghurkha Security Group, was first contracted in early 1995, but was soon withdrawn after suffering heavy losses against the RUF.

⁶ For a detailed account of the 1996 elections in Sierra Leone, see Kandeh (2004).

Côte d'Ivoire.⁷ The RUF leadership, however, soon stalled on its commitment to implement the Abidjan agreement, and dragged its feet in regards to the disarmament and demobilisation process (Bangura 1997, 217). After Kabbah had expelled the EO from the country according to the provisions of the Abidjan agreement, the rebels again saw an opportunity to gain power through the use of force.

Meanwhile, due to the close ties that existed between the SLPP and the Kamajors, Kabbah had increasingly come to rely on the civil militia for the protection of himself and his government rather than the national army, whose loyalty he questioned (Gberie 2005, 86). In addition, plans were announced that the size of the army was to be reduced to 3–4000 men (Gberie 2005, 104–106; Keen 2005, 197–199). The violent response from the army to these developments came on 25 May 1997, when a new military coup took place in Freetown, forcing Kabbah and his administration to leave the country for Guinea. Major Johnny Paul Koroma was announced as the leader of the new Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC), which was mostly made up of junior officers. It soon became apparent that the coup was planned and executed in close collaboration with the RUF, who was invited to share power with the new junta (Gberie 2005, 99–106).

The AFRC/RUF junta was however soon met with strong resistance domestically and internationally (see Gberie 2004). The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) refused to recognise the junta, and committed itself to reinstate Kabbah and his cabinet.⁸ Nigerian troops under the banner of the Economic Community of West African States Military Observer Group (ECOMOG) were dispatched to Freetown, and from now on effectively came to act as Sierra Leone's national army. In early 1998, in cooperation with the civilian militias now formally united as the Civil Defence Forces (CDF), they were able to drive out AFRC/RUF from Freetown

⁷ For a detailed account of the Abidjan peace agreement, see Bangura (1997).

⁸ The failure to realise the difficulties of gaining international recognition for the coup was one of many serious tactical mistakes by the junta, which indicates the political immaturity and inexperience of the junta leadership. Interview with member of the AFRC leadership, Freetown, 20 October 2004.

with force and restored Kabbah to office. In January 1999, however, the capital came under attack again, mainly by AFRC soldiers acting in collaboration with the RUF. The attack was accompanied with excessive violence on the civilian population and destroyed large parts of the city (Gberie 2005, 120–126). Although ECOMOG, aided by the CDF, soon managed to drive the insurgents out of the capital, the event clearly signalled the continued military strength of the armed opposition.

Precarious Peace: The Lomé Peace Negotiations

Following the January 1999 attack, Kabbah came under strong regional and international pressure to initiate negotiations with the RUF to seek an end to the war.⁹ Despite having been driven out of the capital, rebel forces and renegade soldiers were continuing to dominate large areas of Sierra Leone, particularly in the north and east. The governments in Liberia and Burkina Faso were still providing the rebels with active support, training and weaponry. Simultaneously, it was becoming increasingly clear that the ECOMOG forces were preparing to leave the country, which contributed to a sense of urgency (Keen 2005, 248–250). Consequently, Kabbah reluctantly agreed to meet with the RUF leader, Foday Sankoh, to renew the peace process.

Negotiations between the government and the RUF were initiated during the spring of 1999 in the capital of Lomé in Togo.¹⁰ The 45 days of negotiations were presided over by the UN, some foreign diplomats and a handful of civil society representatives, who functioned as facilitators and moral guarantors of the agreement (Hirsch 2001, 81). The rebel delegation was officially treated as a joint AFRC/RUF team, but no representatives of the AFRC were present at the table nor were they officially named in the agreement. Most observers at the time suspected that there had been a split

⁹ The United States sent its Special Envoy for Africa, Jesse Jackson, to Sierra Leone to pressure Kabbah to initiate negotiations, based on a promise of future UN intervention once the settlement was in place (Gberie 2005, 157). Britain announced that it would link its 10 million pound aid programme with the government progressing in the pursuit of political dialogue with the rebels (Bangura 2000, 564). As noted by Francis (2000, 364), “[a]fter years of de-legitimizing the RUF and branding Sankoh a war criminal, London and Washington pressured the Kabbah regime to do business with him as a ‘legitimate’ political actor”. The pressure on Kabbah from the international community was confirmed in interviews with a former Minister in the Kabbah administration, Freetown, 19 October 2004.

¹⁰ For a discussion on the Lomé peace process, see Rashid (2000).

between the former allies, and it was later revealed that Koroma was held hostage by the RUF at the time of the negotiations (Adebajo 2002, 97, Keen 2005, 252).¹¹ Unlike the negotiations in Abidjan, the rebels held the upper hand at the negotiations in Lomé and were making far-reaching demands for the price of peace. Although ECOMOG had been able to drive out the rebel junta from Freetown twice, it had not been able to altogether defeat the armed opposition. In addition, it was well known that the Nigerians were eager to pull out of the country as soon as possible. Kabbah, meanwhile, was worn down and weakened by the 1997 coup and the January 1999 attack, and strongly depended on regional assistance for the defence of himself and his government (Hirsch 2001, 81–82). The Sierra Leonean government was also under considerable political pressure from the international community to reach a settlement, in spite of all costs (Keen 2006, 259).¹²

The Lomé agreement was finally signed on 7 July 1999.¹³ It was a far-reaching version of a power-sharing agreement. It provided four cabinet posts for the AFRC/RUF in the government and four deputy-ministerial positions for the duration of the term of office of the government. It also lifted the existing death sentence on Sankoh and gave him the Chairmanship of a Commission for the Management of Strategic Resources, National Reconstruction, and Development. The Lomé accords also gave all combatants and collaborators “absolute and free pardon” for any actions committed during the armed conflict, something that was strongly criticized both domestically and internationally.¹⁴ Article XVII in the agreement called for the reconstruction of the Sierra Leone Armed Forces, “with a view to creating a truly national armed forces”. It explicitly stated that those ex-combatants of the RUF, CDF and SLA who wished to be integrated into the new restructured national army would be able to do so provided that they met “established criteria”, without further

¹¹ Interview with civil society representative present at the Lomé negotiations, Freetown, 22 April 2010.

¹² Interview with civil society representative present at the Lomé negotiations, Freetown, 22 April 2010.

¹³ Downloaded from Sierra Leone Web. Available at: <http://www.sierra-leone.org/lomeaccord.html>. (Last visited 5 June 2010).

¹⁴ Sierra Leoneans and human rights activists openly expressed their opposition to the amnesty clauses and Kabbah was strongly criticised from within his own cabinet. The UN, for its part, added a separate disclaimer to the amnesty article in the agreement (Francis 2000, 365–366).

explaining what these criteria were. In addition, the recruitment into the new force should reflect the “geo-political structure of Sierra Leone within the established strength”.¹⁵

The military merger of the armed forces into a single army was a negotiation demand by the RUF who had serious security concerns for its troops. But it was also a solution in the interest of the SLPP government, who wished to see the inclusion of the CDF into the new armed forces. Hence, the idea of a military merger and the formulation of Article XVII did not spark any particular debate or controversy at the negotiation table. However, when the Lomé agreement was announced and the content of it became known, the idea was opposed among large parts of the public and the civil society, as they feared a repetition of the past.¹⁶ In addition, no other alternative to a military integration process was ever seriously discussed at the negotiation table. Although President Kabbah was known to endorse the option to disband the armed forces altogether, as he feared another coup, this alternative was never seriously considered in the negotiations process.¹⁷ The idea of disbanding the armed forces had first been discussed in the circles around Kabbah during his time in exile in Conakry, and for a short period of time after his return to Freetown, the army was officially disbanded, but was reinstated again shortly thereafter due to security considerations (Albrecht and Jackson 2009, 22–23).

Joining Forces: Military Reintegration in the Shadow of Violence

The first attempts at reforming the security sector institutions had been initiated long prior to the signing of the Lomé agreement. A series of minor reform programs sponsored by the British

¹⁵ The full Article XVII of the Lomé Peace Accord, entitled “Restructuring and Training of the Sierra Leone Armed Forces” reads: 1. The restructuring, composition and training of the new Sierra Leone armed forces will be carried out by the Government with a view to creating truly national armed forces, bearing loyalty solely to the State of Sierra Leone, and able and willing to perform their constitutional role. 2. Those ex-combatants of the RUF/SL, CDF and SLA who wish to be integrated into the new restructured national armed forces may do so provided they meet established criteria. 3. Recruitment into the armed forces shall reflect the geo-political structure of Sierra Leone within the established strength. Downloaded from Sierra Leone Web. Available at: <http://www.sierra-leone.org/lomeaccord.html>. (Last visited 5 June 2010).

¹⁶ Interview with civil society representative present at the Lomé negotiations, Freetown, 22 April 2010.

¹⁷ Interview with civil society representative present at the Lomé negotiations, Freetown, 22 April 2010.

government were set up already following the Abidjan peace accord, but came to an abrupt halt with the May 1997 coup. More serious reform initiatives were initiated following the restoration of Kabbah to office in 1998, only to be thwarted again by the January 1999 attack on Freetown. After the attack, the need for immediate reforms was apparent, and the British agreed to provide some military training for new SLA recruits and trainee officers as well as some technical and material assistance (Albrecht and Jackson 2009, 22–23). In addition, in June 1999, another British-sponsored reform programme was initiated for the purpose of reconstructing the Sierra Leonean Ministry of Defence (MoD), in an attempt to bring the armed forces under civilian control (Albrecht and Jackson 2009, 28).

The signing of the Lomé accords shortly thereafter, in July 1999, provided a timely opportunity for a more fundamental and coordinated approach. In addition, it had gradually become clear that some of the planned reform programmes could not be carried out in a vacuum, and that serious changes were needed across the entire defence sector, including the armed forces at all levels. Detailed plans for a complete reorganisation and reconstruction of the MoD and the armed forces were drawn up, and it was suggested that international military and civilian personnel were to be posted in advisory roles to support and assist in implementing the reforms. Although the original proposal stipulated that the advisory group should come from Britain, it was later decided that support should also be solicited from other donor countries, and subsequently, the International Military Advisory and Training Team (IMATT) was established (Albrecht and Jackson 2009, 46–48). It was suggested that the reformation of the armed forces under IMATT supervision was to have the following core aims: to reduce the size of the army, making it better trained and more professional, improve its operational capacity and effectiveness, change its command structures and staffing, improving military-civilian relations, and developing new roles and responsibilities suitable to a post-war context. In addition, the plan was to make the army democratically accountable and

under civilian control through the construction of an entirely new MoD based on the British model of joint civil and military management (Ginifer 2006, 799; Horn et. al. 2006, 119). The reform proposal was submitted to the Sierra Leonean Government and endorsed by President Kabbah in March 2000 (Albrecht and Jackson 2009, 48–49). In addition, plans for the establishment of an IMATT-assisted Military Reintegration Programme (MRP) was outlined in April 2000, in response to a formal request from the Government of Sierra Leone and the National Commission for Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (NCDDR) to implement the provisions of the Lomé peace accord regarding the integrations of ex-combatants from the various former warring factions into the new armed forces (Albrecht and Jackson 2009, 63–64).

Meanwhile, however, political realities on the ground were to change the course and pace of events. The implementation of the Lomé peace agreement took place within a political framework that was fragile already from the outset. RUF tried to maximize the benefits of its newly acquired position of government power, while refusing to present itself at the allocated disarmament and demobilization sites. A UN peacekeeping force, United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL), acting under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, was deployed to oversee the implementation, replacing the ECOMOG troops as these were gradually withdrawn. However, the newly deployed and lightly armed UN forces came under attack as they attempted to deploy in RUF-controlled territories, and many were seized and taken hostage by the rebels. This was to culminate in the ambush and abduction of 500 newly arrived Zambian troops near the northern town of Makeni in May 2000, and the rumour was spreading that the rebel forces were again marching towards Freetown (Gberie 2005, 161–166).

This became a turning point in the peace process. A contingent of British troops was dispatched to Sierra Leone, originally for the purpose of an evacuation mission of civilians. However, it soon became clear that UNAMSIL and the existing remnant forces of the SLA, having

already partly disarmed and demobilised under the peace agreement, were in acute need of direct military assistance in fighting the RUF. President Kabbah took a critical decision to form an “unholy alliance” of remnant SLA forces, the AFRC and the CDF, joint together under government command and supported by the British, for the purpose of preventing the RUF from entering Freetown (Albrecht and Jackson 2009, 51–53, Dorman 2009, 93). It was further decided that the SLA was not to re-enter the disarmament and demobilisation process or the MRP, and instead British-led Short Term Training Teams (STTT) were to be deployed to assist and train the SLA in six-weeks intensive training courses, while IMATT was being deployed during the summer and fall of 2000 (Dorman 2009, 98–100). By the spring of 2001, the RUF had been severely marginalised and virtually defeated.¹⁸ Following a renewed ceasefire agreement signed by the parties in Abuja in May 2001, the disarmament and demobilization process was finally reinitiated and in January 2002 the war was officially declared over. At the same time, the new Ministry of Defence was inaugurated and President Kabbah announced that the army would be unified with the tiny Sierra Leone Air Force and the Sierra Leone Navy, to form the new armed forces, officially renamed the Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces (RSLAF).¹⁹

All former ex-combatants who participated in the renewed disarmament and demobilisation process were briefed on the existence of the MRP and given the option to seek entry into the new armed forces (Albrecht and Jackson 2009, 65, Box 9). However, only about 3000 former combatants out of a total number of 72 000 registered in the disarmament and demobilisation programme,

¹⁸ The group also suffered economically from Charles Taylor’s forced disengagement from the RUF following diplomatic and economic pressure on the Liberian president. By this time, there has also been a leadership change in the rebel organisation, which was more willing to accept that the RUF was now a spent military force, with little prospects of returning to power thought the use of force and more willing to embrace the option to transform into a political party (International Crisis Group 2001b, Söderberg Kovacs 2007).

¹⁹ In 2001 there were also plans for the creation of a Territorial Defence Force, a reserve security force of some 7 500 men to provide a back up for the military and the police, much like the British Territorial Army. However, these plans were postponed and eventually abandoned by the government, both due to a lack of funding and due to the failure of most of the CDF, but especially the Kamajors, to fully disband. In addition, there were concerns expressed by the international community, who feared a simple re-branding of the CDF (International Crisis Group 2002, 11–12. See also Albrecht and Jackson 2009, 61–62).

decided to enter the MRP.²⁰ Of these, only about 2350 were eventually posed into the new army after having completed the training programme. About two-thirds of these volunteers came from the RUF and the rest from the CDF (Albrecht and Jackson 2009, 66, table 2).

After having signed up to join the program, the potential recruits were subsequently brought into temporary holding camps to undergo basic military exercises and formal screening processes based on their medical and martial status and age. The police and army intelligence agencies also provided background checks to rule out any formal criminal records (Albrecht and Jackson 2009, 65, Box 9). In addition, the local paramount chiefs from the recruits' home areas were consulted.²¹ All potential recruits also underwent a full medical examination, and physical, educational and military tests were carried out (Albrecht and Jackson 2009, 65, Box 9). However, concerns were raised about the screening process from the public and the civil society, as it appeared to pay little attention to human rights abuses committed during the war, or the potential recruits' psychological health and willingness to abide by civilian oversight and control (Albrecht and Jackson 2009, 66; Keen 2006, 284). It has been suggested that, in reality, "virtually no one" was turned away on human rights grounds (International Crisis Group 2001c, 12). British soldiers involved in the process acknowledged that the screening process primarily focused on whether the individual had actually been discharged previously from the army or had a criminal record (Keen 2006, 284). The reason is very likely to have been pragmatic in nature, and based on the rationale that it was better to keep these people in the army where they could be monitored and controlled than to have them roaming the streets causing trouble, an argument still being voiced by IMATT personnel ten years later (International Crisis Group 2001c, 12).²²

²⁰ The total number of disarmed RUF soldiers was 24, 352 and CDF was 37, 377 (Thusi & Meek 2003, 33). One possible reason for the lack of interest in pursuing for this option, in addition to war-weariness, was probably the high expectations that the ex-combatants generally had on the civilian reintegration program. Interviews, Freetown, 20–30 April 2010.

²¹ Interview with representative of the Human Rights Commission, Freetown, 22 April 2010.

²² Interview with high-ranking IMATT officer, Freetown, 22 April 2010.

In a next step, everyone who wanted to enter the RSLAF also had to attend a formal selection tribunal. These tribunals were normally chaired by a UNAMSIL Colonel and included RUF and CDF liaison officers employed by the NCDDDR. IMATT officers provided the secretariat and sometimes chaired the sessions. The successful recruits were subsequently put in platoons and underwent a nine-week programme of basic infantry training before joining already existing units (Albrecht and Jackson 2009, 65, Box 9). When entering the army, there were deliberate efforts to break up the former ex-combatant groups into different units and subunits and avoid the formation of distinct ex-RUF, ex-CDF, ex-AFRC or ex-SLA units (Albrecht and Jackson 2009, 67; Malan 2003, 99).²³ After six months, subject to their performance and recommendation, their temporary rank was substantiated (Albrecht and Jackson 2009, 65, Box 9). The last ex-combatants graduated from the MRP on 17 May 2002 (Malan 2003, 99).

During the MRP, there were no reports of incidents or violence occurring between ex-combatants from the former warring factions (Malan 2003, 99). However, after the MRP graduates had entered RSLAF, there were reports of factions emerging between former SLA soldiers and former rebel faction members. It has been suggested that this was probably partly due to old civil war rivalry, and partly due to jealousy on part of some of the ex-SLA officers, as many of the new recruits were better trained and faced greater career prospects. Many of those who expressed discontentment with the new recruits were also the same soldiers who had been about to be disbanded from the army before the Abuja II agreement was signed, but was later denied this opportunity (International Crisis Group 2002, p. 10). In addition, former RUF combatants often had comparatively higher levels of educational background and better skills in military combat.²⁴ IMATT personnel were often tempted to turn to the new generation of up-and coming officers and consider

²³ Ten years later, there are still few if any units that are more readily identified as belonging to one group or the other. To the extent that there are identifiable groupings of certain ex-combatants factions in the field, they are primarily due to the fact that the rotations schedules are not fully functional, and that soldiers prefer to be stationed in their home communities. Interview with civilian advisor with IMATT, Freetown, 22 April 2010.

²⁴ Group interview with RSLAF officers, Freetown, 28 April 2010.

them more beneficial for the reform efforts (Albrecht and Jackson 2009, 155). However, importantly, these reported tensions did not cause any major problems with the integration process, and other than being the cause of something of an internal joke this issue does no longer seem to be the cause of any internal disgruntlement in the RSLAF.²⁵ In addition to decommissioning some officers, the military has also been recruiting new officers to seek a gradual renewal of the forces. However, the core of the RSLAF today still consists of former ex-combatants and ex-army soldiers.²⁶

Ten Years Down the Road: RSLAF as Guardian of a Promising Peace

In the Constitution of Sierra Leone, the primary tasks of the army are identified. In order of importance, its role is to safeguard the territorial integrity of the country, create and maintain a safe environment for the people and assist with development of the country (Malan 2003, 93). Most observers contend that the RSLAF today has the capacity to defend the country against the most likely external and internal security threats.²⁷ The operational capacity and professionalism of the armed forces is widely considered to have improved under IMATT supervision. The army is now much better trained and equipped to perform its duties, although outstanding issues remain in regards to the lack of heavy military equipment, communications, transportation and accommodation (Ebo 2006, 487–491; Ginifer 2006, 799–800; Horn et al. 2006, 119–120; International Crisis Group 2007, 12–13).

The security situation in the greater Mano River region remains a source of potential threat to the stability in Sierra Leone. A number of incidents in 2003 raised concerns about the operational capacity of the new force as Liberian rebel forces fighting the government of Charles Taylor were

²⁵ Group interview with RSLAF officers, Freetown, 28 April 2010 and interview with high-ranking IMATT officer, Freetown, 22 April 2010.

²⁶ Interview with high-ranking IMATT officer, Freetown, 22 April 2010.

²⁷ Interview with high-ranking IMATT officer, Freetown, 22 April 2010, interview with civilian advisor with IMATT, Freetown, 22 April 2010, and interview with high-ranking RSLAF officer, Freetown, 28 April 2010.

able to cross over the Sierra Leonean border (International Crisis Group 2003, 6). Following the ending of the civil war in Liberia in late 2003, however, the situation has improved. Although there are still unresolved border disputes between Guinea and Sierra Leone, dating back to the time of the civil war in Sierra Leone, that are still causing tensions, the experience so far suggests that the RSLAF has been able to manage these border disturbances in a professional manner.²⁸ However, it should also be pointed out that notwithstanding the improved training and professionalisation of the armed forces, Sierra Leone lacks the general military capacity to counter a large-scale military intervention by another country, due to its lack of modern weapons technology and an effective air force.²⁹

The most prevalent security threats against Sierra Leone, however, remain internal in nature. Most observers agree that one of the country's most pressing security threats is the large pool of marginalised and disillusioned youths, many which are former ex-combatants or child soldiers.³⁰ While generally identifying this group as a key security concern, many politicians also strategically make use of these youths for their own benefits, for example as unofficial security guards at the time of elections (Christensen and Utas 2008). Another source of concern is to the lack of delivery of basic social goods, such as electricity and water, and the inability of the government to sufficiently address problems related to decaying infrastructure, high unemployment and widespread corruption.³¹ In fact, most of the socio-economic issues that are well recognized to have fed into the outbreak of the civil war in 1991 remain present and unresolved in society (Höglund and Söderberg Kovacs 2010). In addition, although the 2007 elections and the subsequent peaceful change of government power was largely interpreted as a sign of democratic progress, the election results also testify to a return to traditional politics characterised by a strong north-south divide, closely

²⁸ Interview with UK security advisor, Freetown, 26 April 2010.

²⁹ Interview with civilian advisor with IMATT, Freetown, 22 April 2010 and interview with Government representative, Freetown, 29 April 2010.

³⁰ Interviews, Freetown, 20–30 April 2010.

³¹ Interviews, Freetown, 20–30 April 2010.

intertwined with an ethnic dimension (Kandeh 2008, Wyrod 2008). It has even been suggested that there are worrying signs that the government in power is deliberately taking steps to conflate the party with the state, in an attempt to consolidate its electoral gains.³² Yet, at the same time, the risk of another outbreak of a large-scale civil war along the lines of the RUF rebellion is considered to be relatively small. In 2003, some ex-soldiers and civilians attacked an RSLAF armoury in Wellington, outside Freetown, allegedly an attempt to overthrow the government and reinstate Johnny Paul Koroma (International Crisis Group 2003, 6–7). Since then, however, not only has the security situation improved throughout the country, it is also widely believed that the security institutions of the state are in a much better position to counter low-level incursions and unrest before they are allowed to escalate.³³

One critical part of the reformation process of the RSLAF has also been the identification of new roles and tasks for the army to perform in times of peace. In 2004, the Military Aid to Civil Power (MACP) policy was introduced, which made it possible for the army to legally provide support to the Sierra Leonean Police (SLP) when deemed necessary and appropriate due to security concerns (Ebo 2006, 486–487). For example, RSLAF supported the SLP during the 2007 elections within this framework (Albrecht and Jackson 2009, 151–153). RSLAF also aspires to contribute to and participate in international peacekeeping missions. A company for Peace Support Operation for ECOWAS, the AU and the UN has been set up. A Sierra Leone reconnaissance company was also deployed to Darfur as part of UNAMID in 2009, and the experience of this operation so far is claimed to be positive. There are also plans for a contribution of troops to the ECOWAS Standby Force (Ebo 2006, 486).³⁴

³² Interview with UK security advisor, Freetown, 26 April 2010.

³³ Interview with UK security advisor, Freetown, 26 April 2010.

³⁴ Interview with Government representative, Freetown, 29 April 2010.

In addition to external and internal security threats, one of the most critical threats to the Sierra Leonean state has traditionally come from within the military itself. A great concern in the early years of the RSLAF was the lack of loyalty in the army towards the government and the continued risk for another coup (Keen 2006, 283–287). In the 2002 elections, the security forces voted separately, and the results showed overwhelming support for the ex-AFRC leader Johnny Paul Koromas' party People's Liberation Party (PLP), in some areas an estimated 80 percent (International Crisis Group 2002, 7).³⁵ Although the relationship between the political elite and the army has improved over the last few years, there is still a strong sense of suspicion remaining at the level of the executive regarding the armed forces (Albrecht & Jackson 2009, 149).

At present, there are three different coup scenarios that are at least theoretically possible. First, the initiative may come from lower-ranking soldiers if they do not receive their expected salary and rice allowances, and see little improvements regarding their general conditions of service. Second, it may come from middle-ranking soldiers who are not promoted according to expectations due to the presence of something of a bottleneck effect in the ranking system. Third, it could come from the top, and driven by issues of personal power and prestige.³⁶ At the same time, however, it is commonly believed that the real risk of a military coup in Sierra Leone is relatively low for the moment, as there appears to be little appetite for a coup in the top-layers of the RSLAF, and because there has been a gradual process improvements when it comes to conditions of service for lower-ranking soldiers.³⁷ A new open and competitive recruitment procedure has also been introduced, and there are deliberate efforts to recruit new soldiers from all the four major provinces

³⁵ It has been suggested that at least part of the support for Johnny Paul Koroma may be attributed to the fact that he was one of the few candidates to explicitly target ex-combatants and the army in his election campaign, promising military salary increases and improvements in living conditions. It remains unclear who exactly was behind the decision to release the results of the votes of the security forces. It has been speculated that Kabbah was behind the decision in an attempt to display the army as disloyal and promote the influence of the CDF, especially the Kamajors. Alternately, it may have been an act by the Kamajors in an attempt to keep its influential role with the President (International Crisis Group 2002, 10–11).

³⁶ Interview with civilian advisor with IMATT, Freetown, 22 April 2010.

³⁷ Interviews, Freetown, 20–30 April 2010.

in Sierra Leone.³⁸ There has also been a review of the payment, pensions, allowances, leave and resettlement packages, and there have been some improvements when it comes to the living conditions of soldiers, with accommodation in particular being identified as a core priority (Ebo 2006, 487; Gbla 2006, 8; Ginifer 2006, 799–800; Horn et al. 2006, 119–120).³⁹ A perception survey carried out among RSLAF staff and published in early 2007, also noted that significant changes had occurred in regards to the attitudes of RSLAF soldiers themselves and in their perceptions of their own role and identity (Albrecht and Jackson 2009, 149).

As part of the transformation of the armed forces, much has also been done to try to improve the public perception of the armed forces (Malan 2003, 99). In the early years of the reconstruction efforts, the army was still very much feared among large sections of the population. Trust in the armed forces was low, and many believed that the army was still violent and enjoyed impunity (ICG 2004, 16–17). Ten years down the road, public surveys show that perception of the security forces more generally seems to have improved and they enjoy a better reputation than before or during the war. RSLAF is no longer considered a security threat, soldiers enjoy more trust among the population, and civilian–military relations have improved (Albrecht and Jackson 2009, 194–195). In addition, while there were a number of instances of clashes and hostilities between the civilian population and army soldiers during the constituent years of the RSLAF, remarkably few incidents have occurred since (Horn et al. 2006, 120).

The Road Ahead: Outstanding Issues of Concern

Although the reformation of the RSLAF, including the integration of former ex-combatants into a single army, has largely been successful in terms of addressing the security needs of the Sierra

³⁸ Group Interview with RSLAF officers, Freetown, 28 April 2010.

³⁹ Interview with high-ranking RSLAF officer, Freetown, 28 April 2010 and interview with Government representative, Freetown, 29 April 2010.

Leonean state, there are a few outstanding issues of concern. First, the RSLAF is not yet fully under civilian and democratic control as envisaged by the Lomé peace agreement. Although progress has been made in that direction, not least in terms of institution building and establishment of official decision-making structures and procedures, much remains to be done before these institutional changes become entrenched and self-reinforcing in the Sierra Leonean political culture. Certain areas of responsibility, such as budget and procurement, are more decisively in the hands of civilian personnel, whereas other areas, such as policy, still remain under military control. This is probably both due to deep suspicion and resentment on part of the military for leaving such vital matters in the hands of civilians, and due to a lack of capacity and, perhaps even more importantly, willingness on part of the civil servants to enforce their control.⁴⁰ The problem of how to retain and pass on institutional memory has also been identified as a major obstacle in this respect. Many officials who were drawn from across the civil service and trained and advised to build the new MoD in the early years has subsequently left the Ministry and with them, much of the institutional memory also disappeared (Albrecht and Jackson 2009, 147). There has also been a lingering perception in the military that civilian oversight primarily has been a measure taken for the purpose of preventing another coup, and a failure to understand the reform as a key aspect of the general process towards democratisation (Albrecht and Jackson 2009, 148).

In addition, and related to above, there is a lack of effective and functioning democratic oversight mechanisms beyond the administrative monitoring by civilian bodies at the level of the executive (Ebo 2006, 494). Even in those instances where there are institutions in place with the purpose of providing oversight over the security sector, such as the parliament and its committees, in reality their powers to do so are severely restricted due a lack of both capacity and willingness to

⁴⁰ Interview with civilian advisor with IMATT, 22 April 2010.

fulfil these duties (Gbla 2006, 88; Ginifer 2006, 802).⁴¹ It is also well recognised that the civil society and the media frequently lack the information, capacity and political independence necessary to function as the democratic watchdogs they are intended to be (Horn et al 2006, 120).⁴²

Second, the ambitious nature of the transformation of the RSLAF, as well as the current size of the armed forces, has raised questions about the long-term sustainability of the security sector reform process in Sierra Leone (see Horn et al. 2006, 120). The size of the army in particular is a matter of concern. Most international observers, including IMATT representatives, argue that the current size, a little short of 8500 men, is too large for the country, both from the point of view of long-term affordability for the Government of Sierra Leone, but also in the light of the current threat scenarios to the state.⁴³ It has been suggested that in terms of what the government could afford to sustain without significant external funding, the optimal force size is likely to be closer to 2-3000 troops, which also corresponds to the size of the army before the civil war. In terms of operational requirements, however, the right size might be somewhat larger, perhaps up to 5000 troops, considering the still volatile security situation in the greater Mano River region, and the promising potential of further participation in international peacekeeping operations.⁴⁴

The question of downsizing, or perhaps rightsizing, the army is, however, a very sensitive political issue, and has been so already from the outset of the reform process. It was not until late 2002 that the Defence Council approved that the RSLAF was to be downsized from its estimated size of approximately 14 500 men to 10 500 within four years. The first reduction in force began in 2005 and was based on voluntary discharges with the help of substantial donor support to offer attractive retirement packages (Albrecht and Jackson 2009, 155). Another round of downsizing

⁴¹ Interview with civilian advisor with IMATT, Freetown, 22 April 2010.

⁴² Interview with civilian advisor with IMATT, Freetown, 22 April 2010 and interview with University Professor, Freetown, 29 April 2010.

⁴³ Interview with high-ranking IMATT officer, Freetown, 22 April and interview with civilian advisor with IMATT, Freetown, 22 April 2010.

⁴⁴ Interview with civilian advisor with IMATT, Freetown, 22 April 2010.

based on voluntary discharges was subsequently carried out, bringing down the numbers to about 10 500 men in 2006. The new APC government set the new target at 8500 after coming to office in 2007, and a third round of downsizing was initiated.⁴⁵ Although there seems to be an understanding of the need for further downsizing of the army in the years to come in the political corridors of the MoD, any such concrete proposal is likely to be met by great resistance from its military counterparts, who generally disagree that the current size is too large.⁴⁶ Such a decision also carries with it certain security risks, as most of those that will be asked to leave are likely to face relatively bleak prospects of finding another employment. The last round of downsizing in particular was met with loud protests and official complaints about its management and procedures.⁴⁷

Third and lastly, another source of controversy has been the question of local versus international ownership over the security sector transformation process in Sierra Leone. This is not least the case when it comes to the reconstruction of the RSLAF and the MoD, where international personnel have occupied high-level executive and advisory posts for the last ten years. Although IMATT's role from the outset was identified as advisory, political realities on the ground soon dictated that IMATT personnel became more directly involved, and often ended up taking a leading role both in the reform process and in terms of operational matters. Some Sierra Leonean officers have complained that they have been sidelined or insufficiently consulted, while IMATT has claimed that such initiatives sometimes have been necessary due to the lack of capacity and willingness displayed by RSLAF officers (Ginifer 2006, 801). Clearly, the substantial and long-term commitment on part of the international community, not least the UK government, to the security sector reform process in Sierra Leone is something of a two-edged sword. On the one hand, there can be no doubts as to the significance of this commitment for the success of the transformation of the

⁴⁵ Group Interview with RSLAF officers, Freetown, 28 April 2010.

⁴⁶ Interview with Government representative, Freetown, 29 April 2010 and Group interview with RSLAF officers, 28 April 2010.

⁴⁷ Interview with representative of the Human Rights Commission, Freetown, 22 April 2010.

security sector more generally, and the RSLAF specifically. On the other hand, there have been instances of problems when vital or personal interests have been at stake or when international advisors have shown signs of arrogance and lack of respect.⁴⁸ However, there seems to be a clear understanding of this issue among the international stakeholders, and steps have been taken to gradually remove international personnel from command and executive posts to advisory and support roles. In 2007, the last remaining executive powers were handed over from international control (Albrecht and Jackson 2009, 145). In early 2010, there were 45 international IMATT personnel still remaining in Sierra Leone. The plan is to maintain the current mission and mandate until after the 2012 elections, at which point a review will be carried out.⁴⁹

Conclusions

The various armed factions that made up the core of the new armed forces at the time of its inception— whether they previously belonged to the former SLA, the AFRC, the CDF or the RUF— were all in various stages of disarray, having survived a decade long armed conflict known for its brutality and human rights abuses. Ten years down the road, the RSLAF is a military force that is well trained, professional, and institutionally under civilian and democratic control. Conditions of service have improved, and there are new recruitment policies in place with the aim to create a regionally and ethnically diverse force. Most importantly, the armed groups that were previously engaged in civil warfare are now working side by side towards a common purpose. Although the military reintegration process in its initial years was met with some tensions and clashes between ex-combatants from the various warring factions, the overall experience has been positive. There are no identifiable groupings of former ex-combatants groups in the current force, and few reasons to believe that the wartime divisions and faction identities play any significant role today. The army

⁴⁸ Interview with UK security advisor, Freetown, 26 April 2010.

⁴⁹ E-mail correspondence with high-ranking IMATT officer, 24 May 2010.

does no longer constitute one of the most significant security threats against the state, and civil-military relations have improved. However, there are also serious shortcomings to this transformation process, which may potentially undermine the long-term benefits of these changes. The armed forces are not yet completely under civilian and democratic control, the affordability and sustainability of the current size of the army is in question, and there are concerns about the future pertaining to the continuously large presence of international personnel and strong donor dependency.

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