

Sierra Leone

Response to Information Request Number:	SLE00001.HKC
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Subject:	Sierra Leone: Background information on the Republic of Sierra Leone Military Force (RSLMF) and the conflict in Sierra Leone in general
From:	INS Resource Information Center, Washington, DC
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Response:

RSLMF

The Republic of Sierra Leone Military Force (RSLMF) is the national army responsible for external defense; however, during the civil war, the RSLMF and the police force provided internal security. Initially, the RSLMF fought with the *Kamajors*, or civil defense groups, against the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), but in 1997, the RSLMF, now known as the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRP), joined forces with the RUF to overthrow the democratically elected government (RIC Apr. 1998, 8).

History of the Conflict

Since gaining independence from British rule in 1961, Sierra Leone has followed a difficult, even chaotic, path toward development. Financial crisis, corruption, conflict, civil unrest, and war have marked the state's short post-colonial history. Fourteen coups d'etat, either failed or successful, have taken place since 1961, and the military has always played a crucial role in Sierra Leonean politics (UNHCR Nov. 1998, 12).

The conflict in Sierra Leone began in 1991 when the rebel Revolutionary United Front (RUF) led a guerilla campaign to end the 23-year one-party rule by the All People's Congress (APC). Despite the adoption of a new constitution restoring a plural political system, the APC was ousted from power in a military coup led by Captain Valentine Strasser and junior army officers who protested poor pay and working conditions within the Republic of Sierra Leone Military Force (RSLMF) (RIC Apr. 1998, 3).

Captain Strasser's government, known as the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC), ruled for nearly four years. The NPRC administration's unwillingness to enter into negotiations with the RUF led to an intensification of the rebel campaign, and in 1994, the government launched a "total war" on the RUF as the conflict spread to the northern part of the country (RIC Apr. 1998, 3). In January 1996, military officers ousted the NPRC government and scheduled presidential and legislative elections for the following month (UNHCR Nov. 1998, 4).

During this time, civilians began to organize local militia groups, such as the *Kamajors*, to provide protection from the fighting as well as lend support for a democratic government.

Reports indicate that both the RUF and government soldiers targeted civilians in an effort to deter the scheduled democratic elections. They cut off hands, arms, ears, and lips of civilians, and they brutalized some by carving slogans denouncing the elections into their backs and chests (AI 25 Sept. 1996, 9).

Despite these atrocities, democratic elections were held in March 1996, and Ahmad Tejan Kabbah of the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) was elected president with 59.9% of the vote. Peace negotiations between the new government and the RUF led to a cease-fire, but confrontations between the civil defense groups (*Kajamors*) and rebel forces persisted (UNHCR Nov. 1998, 4).

On May 25, 1997, the RUF and the national army, former enemies, joined forces and overthrew the fourteen-month-old democratic government (UNHCR Nov. 1998, 7). The coup was led by Major Johnny Paul Koromah, an army officer, under the umbrella of the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC), which is composed of members of the RSLMF and a majority portion of the RUF (now also referred to as the People's Army). The AFRC accused President Kabbah of humiliating the army, inciting tribalism, and blocking peace negotiations with the RUF (RIC Apr. 1998, 5).

According to the UNHCR,

Members of the international community, including the UN, OAU, EU, UK, and US, condemned the AFRC overthrow of the government and subsequently severed all diplomatic ties with Sierra Leone (RIC Apr. 1998, 5).

In 1998, the democratically elected government headed by President Kabbah was by Nigerian-led West African troops. According to the U.S. Department of State Sierra Leone desk officer, those involved in the coup, including the RUF and AFRC, have been given full amnesty and pardon for their actions (U.S. Department of State 22 Dec. 1999). Other sources, however, indicate that the government has "adopted a hard line toward captured ARFC coup leaders, 24 of whom were publicly shot by firing squad in October [1998]" (*Freedom in the World 1998-1999* 1999, 408). Nevertheless, the July 1998 peace agreement is still in place, and the demilitarization of civilians and rebels in exchange for amnesty continues.

Human Rights Abuses by the Government

Prior to the 1997 overthrow, the Kabbah government had uncovered a coup plot in 1996. President Kabbah announced the discovery of the plot after large quantities of munitions were found near his residence. Several soldiers, including Staff Sergeant Salifu Mansaray (26), Warrant Officer Idriss Kamara (31), Corporal John Manor (25), and Private Abdul Kamara (31), all of whom were with the former military junta (AFRC), were arrested in connection with the coup attempt (AP 12 Sept. 1996).

The soldiers testified that they were tortured during police interrogations and forced to confess to treason. One soldier claimed that he "was stripped naked, ice water was poured on his back, and he was given four electric shocks" (AFP 24 Jan. 1997). The police also burned the suspect with cigarettes and refused to let his lawyer and a Red Cross official visit him while in detention. In addition, one of the detainees, Sergeant Lamin Kamara, died while in police custody after a fall from a second story window. The incident was ruled a suicide, but Kamara's family contested the ruling (AFP 24 Jan. 1997).

Human Rights Abuses by the Military

The majority of human rights abuses are reported to have been committed by RUF/AFRC forces. According to the U.S. Department of State, those involved in pro-democracy activities were often detained, beaten, sexually assaulted, mutilated, and killed, and the rebel campaign known as "Operation No Living Thing" drove thousands out of their homes

where many died from wounds, disease, and starvation (*Country Reports 1998* Apr. 1999, 369). In a letter to the United States Congress, President Clinton identified the RSLMF soldiers as "engaging in looting, rape, armed robbery and carjackings " (*M2 Presswire* 3 June 1997).

Since the 1998 restoration of the Kabbah government, the incidence of human rights violations, including torture, committed by the retreating RUF/AFRC has increased dramatically. "According to multiple sources, hundreds of victims who sought treatment in hospitals have been maimed, most notably with their limbs cut off, while thousands of victims are believed to have been killed or abducted" (UNHCR Nov. 1998, 22). Since the start of the conflict, tens of thousands of lives have been lost due to combat, starvation, and disease (UNHCR Nov. 1998, 22).

Conclusion

The conflict in Sierra Leone has been a brutal one. Reporting indicates that human rights violations have occurred at the hands of all parties involved, including the government, civilian defense forces, the military, and rebel groups.

This response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the RIC within time constraints. This response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum.

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