

# **The Kamajoi Militia: Civil War, Internal Displacement and the Politics of Counter-Insurgency\***

Patrick K. Muana\*\*

## **Introduction**

On 23 March 1991, a group of armed combatants attacked and subsequently occupied the remote border town of Bomaru in Kailahun District. The Revolutionary United Front (RUF/SL) led by a cashiered corporal, Foday Saybana Sankoh, then declared its intention to overthrow the centralised, corrupt, and repressive All People's Congress (APC), and revamp the economy by wresting control of the national mineral wealth from foreigners.<sup>1</sup> This armed insurrection soon turned reckless massacre, culminating in the mass displacement of the civilian population, food blockades, disruption of humanitarian supplies and the effective destruction of all income generating sectors of the national economy.

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1 Foday Saybana Sankoh officially declared his intention to invade Sierra Leone in an interview on the BBC Focus on Africa programme.

\* Most of the information contained in this paper was obtained from individuals whose identities cannot be compromised for security reasons. These include Kamajoi leaders, commanders, and rank and file, former RUF combatants, Republic of Sierra Leone Military Forces (RSLMF) personnel, Sierra Leone Police personnel, Chiefs, Elders, Members of the local defence committees, staff of non-governmental organisations involved in humanitarian relief work, internally displaced civilians, senior government officials, and former government officials. I would like to thank Professor Paul Richards, Department of Anthropology, University College, London, and Dr. Ibrahim Abdullah, Department of History, University of the Western Cape, South Africa.

\*\* Department of Linguistics and Languages, University of Sheffield, England.

As insurgency became mass murder and starvation, counter-insurgency degenerated into wanton pillaging and murder. Large ungovernable swaths of the country were controlled, exploited, and fought over on the one hand by rebels who proffered pseudo-revolutionary scruples, and on the other hand by undisciplined soldiers who enriched themselves by looting with zealous intent. With the seeming breakdown of the national army, squalid refugee camps situated around the safe urban enclaves of Bo, Kenema and Makeni which had been inundated by Internally Displaced Civilians (IDPs), organised self-defence militias. These self-defence militias became the counter-insurgency forces.

The most important of these militias, which has been deployed in all the contested conflict zones, is the Kamajoi militia.<sup>2</sup> This paper examines the failure of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) to maintain mass civilian support for the movement, the formation of the Kamajoi militia, its controversial status as a parallel defence institution, and issues surrounding its future role in nascent democratic politics.

### **Youth Culture and Insurgent Military-Civilian Relations**

The immediate origins of the RUF can be explained in terms of the interaction between campus-based radicalism and violent youth activism. Alie Sanjhan Kabba's 'revolutionary philosophy' of 'We-ism' at Fourah Bay College had sought not only to establish a 'sane enclave' of new politics through mass activism but to make students active participants in the process of change at the university and national level. The deteriorating relations between students and college administrators led to a campus-wide protest in 1985. The expulsion of students and the dismissal of three faculty on charges of participation in subversive politics opened the road to insurrectionary politics.<sup>3</sup> Libyan agents facilitated Alie Kabba's exit from the country to Ghana from where he maintained close contacts with Libyan embassy agents

2 'Kamajoi' is a Mende word that has been defined in the media as hunter. The word itself comprises two components: Kama and Joi. 'Kama' is usually used in an adjectival position as in Kama kama hinda: 'something mysterious'. 'Joi' is the clipped form of the word soweï meaning a 'past master, an expert'. With consonant mutation in southern and southwestern Mende dialects, 's' is mutated in intervocalic positions to 'J'. With some words in the eastern dialects however, there is no mutation. This explains why the word is 'Kamajoi' in those southern and southwestern dialects and 'Kamasoi' in the eastern dialects. Kamajoi or Kamasoi literally means 'a past master at doing mysterious things'.

3 See Ishmail Rashid and Ibrahim Abdullah in this volume.

or 'People's Bureau' officials, and recruited youth from 'radical' study cells and *potes* into what he has euphemistically called a 'self-defence cadre' for the citizens of Sierra Leone.<sup>4</sup> Youth activists from urban based 'study cells' were recruited to undergo military and ideological training in Benghazi, Libya. After striking a tactical military alliance with Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), this group launched the RUF insurrection in 1991.

The urban disenfranchised youth who formed the bulk of the original invading force have always been significantly removed from the civilian population. Their aberrant recreational pursuit of smoking marijuana and their disregard for traditional authority structures made them appear as 'social deviants' to others in the community. Conceptions of marijuana as a drug that induces clinical delusion and anti-social behaviour persist in the country. The less educated of these unemployed youth had been intermittently unleashed on the civilian population as the youth wing of the repressive APC. The violent and often fraudulent activities of the *rarray man* is social anathema. A prejudiced Sierra Leonean populace was unlikely to heed calls from this sub-group of perceived social drop-outs and malcontents for a 'foreign act' of bloodshed and mass pillage as a way of changing their own lives.

Such behaviour partly explains the failure of the RUF to mobilise the civilian population. The appalling atrocities committed by this so called 'cadre of self-defence fighters' only galvanised the civilian population into counter-insurgency. The humane front of the RUF which involved lavishing looted goods on the captive population was soon defaced by public executions, rape, public beatings, forced labour and crass disregard for traditional norms of social propriety that had existed in that region. The beheading of traders in Koindu and other local notables in the border districts, and the public humiliation and execution of authority figures like chiefs and Imams did not reinforce the revolutionary message of the RUF that it had ostensibly launched the insurrection to overthrow the APC government.

The Liberian Special Forces (from the National Patriotic Front of Liberia), whose brief was to spearhead the RUF insurrection and establish training bases deep inside Sierra Leone, brought over ethnic grievances unique to the Liberian civil war. The public executions of Mandingo and Fula traders made the APC government's propaganda about the foreigners of the 'incursion'

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4 Personal communication. With the atrocities committed by the RUF against civilians, the term 'self-defence cadre' smacks of sadistic hypocrisy.

more credible to the majority of Sierra Leoneans. Their acts of pillage and rape were endorsed by Foday Sankoh as necessary courtesy to their NPFL commando allies who were central to the RUF programme for the total liberation of Sierra Leone. Their position became untenable only when they unleashed their wrath on a group of captive 'medicine men' who they accused of not preparing genuine bullet proof jackets for them (iron jackets). The summary execution of most of these 'medicine men' and the subsequent execution of some of the indigenous Sierra Leonean recruits led to the withdrawal of a large section of the Liberian contingent.

But the actions of the RUF remained unchanged even after their NPFL allies were supposedly withdrawn. Civilian captives were forcibly worked as carriers and virtual slaves on pain of death. Their movements were restricted and every move from one town to another had to be authorised by a Town Clerk. Errant civilians were publicly tied and beaten — *tabay* and *halaka*. Civilians were also deprived of scarce food resources and the saying that 'the civilian has no blood' was common currency in RUF combat ranks.<sup>5</sup> In RUF-controlled enclaves local 'town commanders' comprising the unruly youth in the villages — *njiahungbia ngonga* — were handed a carte blanche to enforce their understanding of discipline and compliance. Local vendettas were exacted by public beatings, killings, and wanton pillage. Certainly, the dissonance between RUF 'ideology' and 'humanitarian' record was no incentive for target populations to embrace the RUF cause. Government propaganda played on these fears. An act of changing civilian lives that involved summary executions, rape, forced labour, pillaging of their possessions, burning of their houses, and depriving them of food served more to alienate the civilian population from the RUF combatants. Although the APC government was widely detested, the RUF was unlikely to overthrow it by a popular nationwide uprising. The coup d'état in 1992 and its promise of a democratic dispensation initially took the moral initiative from the RUF cause. The large scale offensive in late 1992 and early 1993 led to a recapture of RUF occupied territory in the Kailahun and Pujehun Districts.

The RUF recovered from this large scale offensive launched by a newly recruited and equipped army and embarked upon what they termed as the second and third phases of their struggle. The movement devised a two-pronged strategy to revamp its image both at home and abroad. At the national level, it played on the increasing evidence of indiscipline and

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5 This saying devalues civilian life; it justifies starvation of civilian captives.

mismanagement of the expanded army. It must be noted that the NPRC government had recruited mainly urban unemployed youth to augment the dearth of manpower to resist and crush the rebellion. Like their colleagues in the RUF, these new recruits could not resist the temptation to appropriate the properties of civilians fleeing the fighting and to harvest cash crops and work alluvial diamond mines. Professionalism became mired in incompetence. This same group of unemployed urban youth was impelled by the same impulse of self-enrichment that had motivated them to participate in violent urban activism. The much detested 'desensitisation' of RUF fighters by the administration of marijuana, amphetamines, and *kumijara* also became common practice in an erstwhile professional force that also added crack cocaine and morphine to the concoctions.<sup>6</sup>

Soldiers looted, raped, ambushed civilian traffic and even raided towns far behind the front-line. The RUF played on this increasing indiscipline by launching a new hearts and minds campaign pointing out that the soldiers were responsible for atrocities against civilians. RUF units wore captured military fatigues in bloody raids on civilian settlements and deliberately littered the site of the raids with military identification tags. This campaign was so effective that no difference could be made between the RUF and renegade soldiers that the civilians referred to as 'sobels' — soldiers in large civilian settlements and potential rebels outside those areas. Long range patrols by the RUF, hit and run raids, and abductions deep behind government lines only validated the RUF campaign that soldiers were fighting against themselves and exacting appalling atrocities on civilians. The army was demoralised and it was not uncommon for soldiers to abandon their positions at will as rumours of conspiracy between their officers and the RUF made the rounds.

With the loss of faith in the army, a traditional hunter guild from the Koranko dominated Koinadugu District called the Tamaboro was formed. It played a significant role in the 1993 offensive against RUF forces in Kailahun District. But the movement was effectively destroyed when its headquarters at Kabala was attacked and its leader killed. That the Tamaboro group was not significantly influential in the south and east of the country was because it lacked real traditional support from the displaced civilians. The ethnic and cultural differences between the Tamaboro and the displaced predominantly

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6 *Kumijara* is a local herb that is a potent intoxicant when boiled. Crack cocaine is known in military circles as 'brown brown'.

Mende population meant that active participation in the counter-insurgency force could not be facilitated.

Meanwhile, the moral ambivalence of the RUF hearts and minds campaign further alienated civilian support. The RUF's revolutionary objective changed from an overthrow of the APC to a call for democracy against a hapless military junta that controlled not more than a few urban enclaves. This was given resonance in the international media by the widely publicised abduction and release of foreign nuns and volunteer expatriate workers in 1994. Humanitarian relief and food convoys were attacked and burnt down with the intention of reinforcing the RUF's message of the government's incompetence to provide security for its own people and the need for the junta to submit to the call for democracy. The RUF even threatened to shoot down Medecins Sans Frontieres' aircraft air.lifting food supplies into Kenema and Bo where hundreds of displaced civilians were dying everyday. Their plan for the subjugation of the civilian population through terror and demoralisation by starving those civilians holed up in urban areas backfired. The RUF had again misjudged the civilian disposition to their movement. The RUF image as a contemptible force of bloody killers who raped, pillaged at will, and abducted civilian captives for use as slave labour had not been reformed in the least.

The increase in the size of the army had also compromised professionalism with the result that some of their own troops either defected to the RUF or operated as autonomous bands of renegades protecting only areas of economic interest to themselves. Civilian resentment for this ineffectual army of deserters and looters was as intense as it was for the RUF fighters, notwithstanding the several attempts by the junta to change the leadership and management of the force. The starving and displaced population was convinced that the notion of national defence and governance had collapsed and this consequently galvanised them into effective resistance of both the RUF and the undisciplined national army.

### **The Politics of Internal Displacement : The Making of the Militia**

If the RUF's offensive and propaganda had demoralised the army and consequently led to a collapse of central authority, it had failed to break the hold of traditional chiefs on the civilian population. The RUF's rural administration through unregenerate town commanders and its treatment of captive populations had been no incentive for the civilians to stay in RUF-controlled territory. The large scale displacement of civilians to urban settlements meant that the powers of the traditional chiefs were maintained. This power was reinforced by the politics of relief distribution. Humanitarian agencies relied on the co-operation of chiefs not only to maintain lists of

civilians from their chiefdoms but also to communicate donor policy and assist in the occasional monitoring and verification exercises. Raids on a refugee camp at Gondama only reinforced the image of the RUF as wanton killers. Attempts to take Bo and Kenema in December 1994 met with stiff resistance from the civilian population who stormed their attackers with shotguns, machetes and stones. Here and in other areas, traditional chiefs confidently endorsed the formation of self-defence militias to protect displaced civilians.

In this they were encouraged by the precedent set by the late Captain Prince Ben-Hirsch who had recruited and armed local vigilantes to stem the RUF advance in the Segbwema sector as early as 1991-1992. His death in an unlikely ambush was interpreted as a deliberate deterrent to other members of the armed forces and, some contend, a ploy by the APC government to prolong the war and therefore defer the democratic process. Dr. Alpha Lavalie's role with the Tamaboro offensive and the organisation of local vigilante forces was a convincing signal that local defence initiatives more than the tattered national defence mechanism could succeed in ending the war. His political stature was derived from his leadership of the SLPP, which enjoys traditional support among the majority of the displaced population. His cordial relationship with the traditional leaders meant that his local self-defence initiative was very popular and well supported. He deployed displaced *Poro* (male secret society) initiates to act as guardians of their settlements, enforce traditional Mende warfare curfews, and act as a local defence force. He also elicited support from the military junta to procure shotguns and ammunition for these militias. His death in a land mine explosion did not dissuade traditional leaders from replicating the exercise in other large civilian settlements threatened by the RUF and renegade soldiers.

The case of Chief Hinga Norman of Telu Bongor, the incumbent Deputy Minister of Defence, is instructive. A Sandhurst trained ex-military officer, he deployed a local defence militia in his chiefdom headquarters of Telu to resist RUF fighters. Although lightly armed, these local defence militias were effective against the RUF by not only using their knowledge of the local terrain to good advantage but in engaging the small mobile guerrilla units that are the hallmark of RUF battle formation in the second and third phases of the war. The RUF reacted to this stubborn resistance with a bloody attack in late 1994, allegedly decapitating a minimum of 100 inhabitants of the town. Chief Norman evaded the attackers and from the southern provincial headquarters, Bo, he co-ordinated the formation of the Kamajoi militia. The politics of displacement and the need for security aided this development. Chiefs replaced the loss of central authority with a reasonable degree of semi-autonomy. On the military front, they could ensure total allegiance and

commitment of the force under their command and also monitor all military risks of possible defection and infiltration.

The panoply of factors which account for the failure of the RUF to convince the civilian population and the relationship of distrust between the civilians and the army has been delineated. The politics of displacement and the collapse of central authority expedited the formation of local self-defence initiatives by displaced civilians on whom the RUF and the army had unleashed a reign of terror. This coalition of interests was necessitated by their shared predicament and the largely uniform cultural and ethnic identity in the south and east. It was invested with adequate moral legitimacy and it enjoyed universal communal acceptance. The return to multi-party politics and the victory of the SLPP in 1996 emboldened the displaced population to register long suppressed regional sentiments. This happened against rumours that the indifference of the central government to the war was a deliberate conspiratorial ruse to maintain political hegemony over the Mende. Only legislative power could facilitate this and more significantly, only a block vote in the southern and eastern areas could determine the outcome of a democratic multi-party contest in their favour. The traditional leaders therefore ensured the emergence of a political party and president that would support their own defence agenda as much as alter the nature of political hegemony and power distribution in the country. The emergence of the Kamajoi movement was therefore not fortuitous.

### **The Formation of the Kamajoi Militia**

The myth of RUF invincibility had been established in the Sierra Leonean psyche both through its terror campaign and in its defiant successes against government troops and the Tamaboro militia. As in most modern and ancient African conflicts, RUF fighters allegedly indulged in cannibalistic rituals to harden them in battle. This was reinforced by a resident pool of medicine men who manufactured 'iron jackets' and prepared herbal solutions for the protection of RUF fighters. The army was demoralised by persistent reports of RUF commando-style raids deep behind what was supposed to be the front-line, and units were run ragged and ambushed by RUF patrols. The RUF took advantage of this massive disarray to launch its biggest offensive of the war that brought its units within 30 miles of the capital. For a counter-insurgency force to succeed, this myth of RUF invincibility had to be challenged by an even greater myth with the requisite psychological force to restore confidence in the displaced population. The revival of the mythic qualities of the Kamajoi hunter guild with similar accoutrements of war and magical powers of divination was therefore urgent.



This aspect of the Kamajor militia meshes neatly with other civilian based counter-insurgency militias in Africa. For instance, the myth of the invincibility of RENAMO fighters had been established not by reference to the copious military assistance from the Rhodesian and apartheid South African armies but by its reign of terror and its claim that its fighters were protected by ancestral spirits. Like the RUF, conscripts were forcefully committed to their ranks through a process of inductive violence — the committal of a witnessed public act of violence. Effective counter-insurgency came by way of the establishment of an even greater myth in the person of Manual Antonio who claimed to have died as a child and had been resurrected to conscript a counter-insurgency force to fight the RENAMO rebellion. His Naparama militia recruited mainly local *deslocados* who were tired of RENAMO terror and the scorched earth offensive occasionally undertaken by the FRELIMO. As with the Kamajoi militia, these *deslocados* had a shared ethnic identity — most of them, including Manual Antonio, belonged to the Macua ethnic group which dominates Zambezia province. The Naparama challenged RENAMO's reliance on ancestral protection with a potent concoction of magic, *Barama*, which not only neutralised the opposition's magic but made their weapons of war useless against the spears, bows and arrows with which most of the militia were armed. The nature of this magic of invincibility is such that the military victories reinforced communal support and acceptance so crucial in ensuring voluntary conscription and demoralisation of the opposition's forces (*Africa Confidential* 1991). It is worth exploring how African wars have been fought at this psychological level through traditional magic and assistance of the spiritual world. For psychological supremacy to be achieved, the counter-insurgency force has to be invested with a superior myth. It also has to command a reasonable level of success and moral legitimacy to be assured of a reserve force of volunteers.

To situate the Kamajoi in historical and socio-cultural context is to discuss the centrality of the guild in narratives about Mende origin, settlement patterns, and cosmology. Mende verbal art, from oral historical narratives to folk tales, is redolent with references to the Kamajoi. Reverence is accorded this guild of largely reclusive professionals that has persisted in all oral historical narratives about the Mende.<sup>7</sup> Their inexplicable feats; their intimate

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7 Patrick Muana, 'Mende Verbal Art', Ph.D. Dissertation, 1997; University of Sheffield, England.

knowledge of the terrain, medicinal and edible flora and fauna; relentless spirit, and indomitable courage are not only ideal qualities of manhood in Mende culture but have also underlined and reinforced the mysticism and near reverence that has characterised this institution. Membership of the guild is strictly masculine and potential candidates are rigorously selected by past masters who judge a candidate's suitability with the intervention and assistance of supernatural powers. As with all 'reclusive' professions, their esoteric knowledge is transmitted and attained through a prolonged process of apprenticeship and initiation, and maintained only by strict observance of the taboos and proscriptions that govern membership of the guild.

The centrality of the Kamajoi guild in narratives about the establishment of Mende settlements and in the defence and administration of those settlements is the single key legitimising factor. Endowed with powers of divination, invincibility, and omnipotence, the Kamajoi embarks on a symbolic quest into the unknown. Alone or accompanied by a reputable 'medicine man', he travels to distant lands, conquers either man or nature and starts off a settlement. The conquest of nature is symbolically achieved in the killing of the king of the beasts — either the leopard or the elephant. Little wonder, therefore, that the leopard coat as symbolically used for decorating the most important incarnation of Mende spirits — the *gbeni* — and the elephant tusk (*buwui*) are very central to the institution of Mende chieftaincy and Mende society in general. The blowing of the *buwui*, for instance, to announce the arrival of chiefs is a symbolic restatement of the power of the chief as established by the founding father over man, beast, and nature.<sup>8</sup> The Kamajoi all at once straddles and transcends this tripartite but intertwined Mende cosmological divides of man, forest/beast and spirit. After killing the animal, the Kamajoi, out of benevolence, invites people to build a settlement in the vicinity and partake in the spoils of his adventure. In return for the provision of food and security (by killing the king of beasts and defending them in times of war or attacks by other warriors) the Kamajoi received loyalty and in this way established his power over the settlement, its people, and the surrounding forests.

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8 All hunters must report the killing of a leopard to the chief. While the dead animal is being moved to either the chief's palace or the shrine for initiation into the Poro (*Kaamei*) the head is veiled with a piece of cloth and all women are expected to bow and cheer in submission as the procession goes along.

A number of issues emerge from the above discussion. There is the intricate relationship between traditional magic, mysticism and Islam. This historical relationship remains unexplored and an investigation may be very informative for understanding aspects of modern Mende religion and society. There is also the issue of community support which is very central to counter-insurgency operations. It is apparent from experiences elsewhere that without the hearts and minds of the people counter-insurgency becomes either an exercise in genocide or voluntary mass suicide. The Kamajoisia can take legitimacy for granted because of a viable and extant traditional pattern of communal loyalty. Although, until the establishment of 'ruling houses' by British colonial administrators, leadership was determined by the warrior who at anytime could guarantee the security of a people in a certain settlement and other settlements inhabited by his military allies, the unwritten contract between the ruler and the ruled in Mende society has not changed significantly (Abraham 1975). It may have been weakened by British indirect rule and centralised APC dictatorship but its role in traditional cultural organisations like the Poro and Wundeï has been sustained. The politics of displacement and the NPRC's loss of effective administrative control over large areas of RUF- and RSLMF-occupied territories meant that alternative governing systems that could provide protection, facilitate, and possibly expedite, the resettlement of a displaced and besieged population, were sought. The emergence of a traditional leadership guild naturally filled this vacuum.

But to justify its popularity amongst the internally displaced civilian population, the Kamajoi image had to be reinvented, its activities recontextualised to invest the institution with the moral legitimacy of a self-defence force whose final objective is to bring the war to a conclusion and resettle people back in their villages destroyed by the RUF. The origin of the Kamajoi militia as it is presently constituted, however, remains obscure. Interviews with Kamajoi militia fighters and displaced people in the camps around Bo yielded the following amorphous account:

Following an RUF attack on a village in the Jong (Jange) Chiefdom, the rebels are reported to have massacred people in the village including a great 'Kamajoi' and medicine man called Kposowai. His brother Kundorwai, is said to have been captured by the rebels, forced to carry looted goods and tied ('tabay') securely for the night whilst the rebels pitched camp. As he drifted to sleep in spite of his pains, Kundorwai is said to have had a vision of his brother who had been killed the day before. The ropes fell loose and the elder brother invested him with the authority to take the message to all able-bodied Mende men that the defence of their own lives, homes, wives and children was

a sacred duty. To assist them in that task, Kposowai is said to have shown Kundorwai a secret concoction of herbs and instructed that a stringent initiation process should precede the 'washing' of the warriors in the herbs. This concoction would make them invincible in battle, impervious to bullets, and endow them with powers of clairvoyance if all taboos were kept. Kundorwai is said to have then slaughtered the RUF rebels, freed the other captives, and trekked several miles to a secret hiding place where he initiated the first set of men (Interviews 1996).

The veracity of this account cannot be ascertained by recourse to empirical interrogation, but the structure of the narrative fits into the pattern of Mende historical and mythical narratives explaining spiritual and physical phenomena. The dominant trope of the dream, the prescription of a mission, and an adherence to a set of rules is vaguely familiar in Mende verbal art (Patrick Muana, 'Mende Verbal Art'). This 'mystical' dimension of the origins of the Kamajoi movement achieves the requisite psychological clout even amongst the opposition's forces. It serves as both propaganda and spiritual weapon against the RUF whose conscript ranks comprise mainly Mende and Kissi youth. The psychological powers of the Kamajoi is known and feared by this group of RUF combatants.

The Kamajoisia are neither peasants nor village dwelling hunters as most uninformed media sources suggest. The pre-war occupation of the Kamajoisia varied from farming and driving to working as casual or seasonal labourers and craftsmen. These fighters are conscripted with the approval and consent of the traditional authority figures, maintained and commanded by officers loyal to those chiefs. This ensures a high level of commitment on their part and an insurance against atrocities on the civilian population on whom they rely for sustenance, legitimacy and support. Conscription is by Chieftom levies imposed on chiefs and their people. The Chieftom elders (*ndorblaa*) are responsible for the financial and other responsibilities that are needed to facilitate initiation (*ngiyei*). More significant is the selection of the conscripts. The prime condition for conscription is to be a Mende of local parentage; good behaviour can be guaranteed by reference to the Chieftom people and the chief. The prospective conscript must also be a member of one of the traditional societies for cultural induction. Membership of the guild has always been masculine for cultural reasons. Most Kamajoisia interviewed justified the exclusion of women as an expedient strategy against the risks of the secrets of the society being compromised.

Initiation of the conscripts is undertaken by a resident 'medicine man': a *Kamo* who is versed in the Koran and has a very high reputation for interaction with immanent supernatural forces. During initiation, one of the

Kamos claimed, all seven heavens would open up. The conceptual parallels between this process and the administration of *Barama* as in the Mozambican case is revealing. However, the unique relationship between Mende cosmology, Islam and the nature of protective magic is evident in this ritual. From the intricate web of taboos that rein in the activities of the Kamajoisia, an intelligent postulation may be that initiation involves a process of exclusion and tutelage during which they are taught the nature of the magic they are receiving, the taboos and other proscriptions, the procedural steps for implementing that magic, and the expressive and behavioural culture of the guild. Former RUF combatants, former collaborators and infiltrators are said to be weeded out by a supernatural detection system at the initial stages. If all these fail, the infiltrators and people associated with witchcraft will fail the penultimate graduation test, which involves firing at the conscripts with live rounds of ammunition. The graduation ceremony is claimed to be a public event and most IDPs and others in the area can vouch for the veracity of the act, although fewer than none would be guaranteed eye-witnesses. On graduation, the Kamajoisia are armed and deployed in accordance with their native administrative divisions into chiefdoms and sections. With the prescription of a disciplined code of conduct, this recruitment procedure safeguards against infiltration. It also deploys local citizens with intimate knowledge of the terrain on their own turf. More significantly though, it consolidates the power and hold of the traditional Chiefdom authorities who are mainly resident with the civilian IDPs and play a crucial role in the decision making process of the guild.

The Kamajoi command structure is rigidly hierarchical. The head of the whole structure is called the Grand Commander, but the identity of the individual is a matter of secrecy amongst the Kamajoisia. It is thought that he is the founder of the movement and he resides somewhere in the Bonthe District — Bomu liehun. He is represented in different sectors by lieutenants who have been apprenticed to him and who have been granted licence to initiate other Kamajoisia. It is thought that he heads a 'super-council' of Chiefdom and sector representatives. These sector commanders are called 'Chief Kamajoi' and they liaise with the traditional chiefs, initiate, deploy, and command the Kamajoisia in their own sectors. Most are resident in hotels within Bo and Kenema. In consultation with the Chiefdom authorities and at short notice, they can deploy men in areas to be fortified, conduct preliminary trials for former RUF combatants and then refer them, where necessary, to the Chiefdom authorities. They are linked to the Deputy Defence Minister, through the chiefs, who maintain very close but questionable relations with this force. An important rank within the Kamajoi militia is the Kamajoi

Police (KP) who, like the military police of the national army, are entrusted with the duty of enforcing discipline and strict codes of conduct amongst the Kamajoisia. They are usually outstanding Kamajoisia who have excelled in battle and command a lot of respect within the force.

Of importance to the counter-insurgency unit is the Patrol Commander. Usually chosen on the strength of their experience and expertise in battle, they co-ordinate intelligence gathering, select targets, survey the terrain, and act as vanguards for joint Kamajoi/military offensives. The Kamajoisia also have an intricate intelligence network of spies and informants who are either veteran Kamajoi militiamen or usually civilians who live in IDP camps and villages. They announce their presence to uniformed Kamajoisia by a secret network of coded signals. They spy on the Kamajoi militiamen and report back to the chiefs and Chief Kamajoisia. This group of spies regulates the conduct of Kamajoi fighters in combat zones. Some of them are former RUF captives and usually scout enemy territory to either help other civilian captives escape or gather information on the disposition of RUF forces in a certain target area. The procedure for recruitment and monitoring the Kamajoi fighters, therefore, ensures discipline, cohesion and loyalty. There is commitment to serve on the part of the militiamen who are restrained from committing atrocities on civilians or conducting themselves in any unauthorised way. The commitment inherent in this dual security and peace contract between the Kamajoi and the community calls for moral and logistical support from the civilians in return for the total commitment of the fighters in 'liberating' the towns and villages.

The size of the Kamajoi militia has given rise to numerous speculation. Although there does not seem to be a central high command where figures are collated, there is evidence that Kamajoisia are issued with identity cards showing their name, place of origin and photograph. On the basis of a rough estimate of 100 villagers per Chiefdom in the south and east of the country, the figure as at October 1996 could be put at just over 2,500 men. However, this figure has been increasing as a result of the influx of potential recruits in the IDP camps. Recently, recruitment has been based on the township (*taawui*) rather than the larger chiefdom level (*ndiwui*). Volunteers have been encouraged to travel to centres where they are screened by local Defence Committee officials in conjunction with chiefs and other IDP authorities and then passed on to the *Kamos* for initiation. As noted above, the *Kamo*, who is also a Chief Kamajoi, is the operational commander of that force, and all the fighters are personally loyal to him and the local Defence Committee that facilitates and co-ordinates logistical support. The Kamajoi force has been expanding as the capture of chiefdoms necessitates the initiation of another

force for the outlying areas and adjoining chiefdoms. The volunteers are encouraged by the self-justifying rhetoric that the war is one of survival of the fighters and their kinsmen.

This communal support extends far beyond the ready pool of voluntary conscripts and the provision of strategic intelligence for the Kamajoi fighters. Unlike other counter-insurgency movements, the Kamajoi militia relies mainly on the community for material and logistical support. Most are dressed in a locally woven 'V' neck designed cloth sewn as a sleeveless (*kpakibaa*). This is worn with the big shorts (*mbele gutiiwai*) that reach down to the knees; a design reminiscent of the traditional Kamajoi attire. It must be noted though that poplin and other types of fabric have been used for the uniform although the style is generally identical. A couple of Kamajoisia have been sighted wearing long flowing robes. Depending on the Chiefdom that one is from and the unit one is attached to, the colours of the Kamajo uniform (*maayii*) are the traditional cream and khaki (*joun*), maroon to darkish brown (*kigbi*), and green (*nimii*). The garments are usually spotted (black) almost to resemble a leopard's coat. Caps are made of the same materials. The Kamajoi apparel is bedecked with cowry shells, horns, small mirrors, and talisman in woven notches. Some carry fly whisks and wear jingles on their calves. They wear an assortment of footwear: from plastic sandals to sport shoes.

A major question about logistics that emerges is that of troop transportation, deployment, supply and communication among Kamajoi units. The war in Sierra Leone has been a series of low technology guerrilla engagements. Few major battles were fought for the Daru Military base, the Koidu diamond mines, and the repulsion of the RUF offensive on Freetown. With a network of highly inaccessible roads, the insurgents isolate and destroy military outposts. After the dissolution of the RUF-NPFL military pact, weapons and medicine were procured by ambushing army supplies and raiding hospitals. There is also evidence that RUF traded cash crop produce and diamonds with Guinean traders for 'sardine tins': small arms and ammunition. Using bush paths (bypass) to evade concentrations of government forces, RUF fighters raided villages and towns far behind the government's official front-line. This strategy had the effect of throwing the government troops into disarray. These bush paths were also very important for communication between RUF bases. Although there is evidence that the RUF operated a number of solar-powered radio sets, they relied on an efficient courier system using these bush paths especially when there was a danger that information broadcast to other units on the airwaves could be intercepted by high technology equipment used by Executive Outcomes. Knowledge of this network of bush paths (which was

mastered by local boys conscripted into RUF ranks) was therefore crucial to RUF military success in the second and third phases of the war.

The army of mainly urban unemployed youth who had been domiciled in the cities for most of their lives were at a perpetual disadvantage and in constant danger of running into ambushes. The torrid atmosphere of civilian mistrust for their professional misconduct did not help the situation. The formation of the Kamajoi counter-insurgency force meant that the great tactical advantage enjoyed by the RUF over the army has been lost. The Kamajoisia are local people, some of whom have been hunters and farmers in their chiefdoms with a very intimate knowledge of the local terrain. Some of the Kamajoisia had been civilian captives who had been used by RUF combatants for the portage of loot and therefore have excellent knowledge of routes used by the RUF to evade the army and access their bases. Infiltrators and escaped captives updated this information on the latest location of RUF camps. The Kamajoisia also used these same bypass routes for faster access to their rear bases and towns. Most of the Kamajoi units trek on foot to and from the front-line and important information is relayed by an efficient traditional *tutunjiangamui*.<sup>9</sup> This ensures strict confidentiality and secrecy and highly reduced military risk. Some Kamajoi units have been transported to distant areas by army and public vehicles. In public vehicles they sit at the top of the vehicles because proximity to women and to where women sit is proscribed. However, it must be stressed that the Kamajoisia do not have their own fleet of vehicles and some of their senior commanders justified this with a witty remark that 'the Kamajoi is a fighter, not a driver, so he does not need a car'.

It has been emphasized that the war is one of small guerrilla engagements. The organic fighting unit of the RUF, the commando group is less than normal platoon size and large scale deployments have been few.<sup>10</sup> Air power, such as the bombardment of Pendembu by Nigerian Alpha Jets in 1992, resulted in huge civilian casualties. Howitzers and other high calibre mortars have been effective only in discouraging appreciable RUF reinforcements for major military engagements; they have not been decisive. Armoured Personnel Carriers and Tanks have been confined to army bases because of their

9 This is the spy who acted as courier under cover of darkness in traditional Mende warfare.

10 Information from RUF combatants is that the regular 'commando unit' (which is the raiding party) does not exceed twenty-five men under arms. See *Footpaths to Democracy*, 1995, pp.10-11.



worthlessness in engagements in much of the hinterland. Anti-aircraft guns and heavy calibre machine guns have been used by government forces. The war in Sierra Leone is being fought with small arms: the rocket propelled grenade being the heaviest weapon used in most engagements. The insurgents had the advantage of mobility with their sparse equipment — usually a rifle and a spare magazine or a grenade launcher and some rockets — through the bush paths. This tactical advantage has also been challenged by the Kamajoi who have only small arms and use the same bush paths. They carry small knives (*kpekei*), swords (*kibowei*) and shotguns (*singubaa*: single barrel shotgun). Some carry automatic rifles which they claimed have either been captured from defeated RUF fighters or seized from renegade troops and army deserters.<sup>11</sup> These automatic rifles are mainly AK47 rifles — most with sawn-off stocks — and a couple of them were armed with G3 automatic rifles. RUF fortifications have been softened by mercenary-operated military attack helicopters, and artillery and rocket barrages by the Guinean and Sierra Leonean armies. It is not immediately clear how the Kamajoisia procure ammunition and more weapons for their growing numbers apart from the few captured from RUF combatants or seized from army deserters and renegades. Their complaint that they were still anticipating a long overdue supply of high calibre arms and ammunition from the SLPP government through the Deputy Defence Minister, was public secret among the Kamajoisia in October 1996.

### **The Militia in Action**

The Kamajoisia have registered stunning successes on the battlefield. An initial southwestern sweep saw the demolition of the major RUF training and operations base at the African Development Bank oil palm project in Gambia. This was followed by a slight northern swoop on the diamond mining town of Sumbuya and the seizure of the strategic Bumpeh and Serabu towns which had been crucial deployment areas for RUF attacks on the bauxite and rutile mines in the Moyamba district. From their operational Headquarters in Bo, the Kamajoisia have opened up another front to the north of Bo towards the gold mines of Baomahun which they captured in September 1996 along with the RUF fortified camp at Tungie. Further south and southeast, the RUF had embarked on the American Vietnam-war strategy of building strategic hamlets by burning villages and herding all the civilian captives into a secure and

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<sup>11</sup> Soldiers and some of their officers interviewed complained that some of their colleagues had been forcibly disarmed by the Kamajoisia especially in the Moyamba and Kenema sectors.

monitored single location. As in the American case, these were effectively concentration camps where civilians were arbitrarily detained, and, in the RUF case, worked to death on communal rice farms.<sup>12</sup>

The capture of Kortumahun was followed in quick succession by the overrunning of Bandawor. Jui Koya, Sendumei, and Menima fell and by mid-October 1996, the Kamajoisia had surrounded the national headquarters of the RUF at their inaccessible Gola forest hideout called the Zogoda. The headquarters were destroyed and hundreds of surviving civilian captives were 'liberated' and taken to Kenema and outlying towns. A final lunge from the southeast led to the capture of the heavily fortified southern RUF base in the Soro Gbema chiefdom in November 1996. To the northeast, the Kamajoisia have consolidated the military hold on Panguma and Tongo and have captured the strategic RUF base at Peyama in late October 1996. By the time the Abidjan Peace Accord was signed on 30 November 1996, the Kamajoisia had deployed in the Manowa-Segbwema-Bunumbu axis to deter RUF advances and cut off the retreat of stragglers into their only remaining operational base in the Kailahun District at Giema. The Kamajoi military successes can be explained in part by the desertion of RUF bases by combatants who lacked the will to confront this counter-insurgency force. Other RUF captives complained about everything from the lack of ammunition to the fear of the supernatural powers of the Kamajoisia as reasons for their easy defeat. Their comrades in arms have fled across the border into western and northwestern Liberia. Humanitarian organisations have reported the arrival of about 3,000 RUF combatants under the command of RUF Major Mark Lamin in ULIMO-K occupied Bopolu in Liberia.

The Abidjan Accord has not led to the cessation of hostilities as expected. IDPs have complained that returning villagers have been maimed by RUF fighters and expressed disquiet about their suffering as displaced persons whilst the despoilers of the land were selling off their cash crops in a cross border trade between the RUF and Guinean traders. The RUF has been trying to isolate its captives and followers from the Kamajoisia and other potential security risks by depopulating villages and insisting that their demobilisation and re-integration should naturally precede a resettlement of civilians. With

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12 Testimonies from captives who survived the ordeal intimate that more people died of starvation whilst working on these propaganda-driven rice farms than were killed by RUF combatants. *Foothpaths to Democracy*, p.12 refers to these rice farms as a triumphant 'communal and private enterprise' and that 'seedlings were supplied free'.

fears that the core of RUF combatants that had escaped the south-southwestern offensives into Liberia may re-group and re-launch a counter-offensive from their remaining Giema base, the Kamajoisia have launched a preemptive offensive into the border Kailahun District. This January offensive has seen the capture of the last remaining RUF base at Giema and the strategic towns of Mendebuima, Giehun, Bandajuma Sinneh, Borborbu, Kailahun (District headquarters), Gbalahun, Dia, Sandiallu and Nyandehun Mambabu. The RUF losses have included high profile members of the leadership such as their overall military commander, Lieutenant Colonel Mohamed Tarawallie. The remnants of RUF forces in the Moyamba District around the Bradford-Rotifunk area were surrounded and starved of provisions by the Kamajoisia in spite of an official government White Paper released in January advising RUF to receive food and medicine at specified locations in the country.

In the Tonkolili District, RUF remnants have run amok on a number of occasions on looting sprees to augment their dwindling supplies but remain hedged in by both a military presence to the north and west and a Kamajoi presence to the south. The RUF leadership has complained bitterly in the international news media and has recently questioned the reasons and procedure for the UN's decision to deploy 720 peacekeeping troops in Sierra Leone. They have argued that the decision violates or ignores Articles 8 and 11 of the Abidjan Accord, and have called for a smaller force of 50 to 60 neutral monitors. For a force in danger of incurring the wrath of Kamajoi militia men, the doubts remain whether another phase of the Sierra Leone war is imminent.

The Kamajoi militia remains resolute in its bid to resist and fight the RUF and, for the present, it remains a highly committed, well-motivated and disciplined force. It should be reiterated that a majority of these Kamajoi militia have not only been victims of RUF violence but have lost property and relatives in the bloodbath perpetrated by the RUF. In these cases, the nature of the counter-insurgency war cannot easily be divorced from individual inclinations to exact revenge for personal ills suffered. There is evidence that RUF prisoners of war have been summarily executed once their roles are ascertained either by captives or by supernatural divination through one of the several Kamajoi charms. RUF combatants interviewed revealed that a majority of them would rather flee to a military outpost where they may be sure of staying alive than surrender to the militia.

The Kamajoisia have also clashed with government troops. Military personnel thought to be disloyal or committing acts of civil impropriety have

been beaten and in some cases summarily executed. The Kamajoisia have stepped up action against soldiers who have been looting in the countryside albeit with significant losses on both sides. Soldiers have been executed in Matru Jong over palm oil that the soldiers had looted, and several Kamajoisia were killed in the ensuing clashes. A tussle over roofing zinc allegedly looted by soldiers at Njala led to the summary execution of 12 Kamajoi militia men in November 1996 after they were stripped of their protective charms. Brutal and bloody clashes took place in Bo around the military bases of the First Brigade Headquarters and the 17th Battalion in the Government Reservation area. The biggest clash was at Kenema in September 1996 where an unspecified number of Kamajoisia and soldiers were killed after Mwalimu Sheriff, a Chief Kamajoi, was tortured and killed by soldiers revenging the death of some of their number. Health workers put the figure of dead at over 80 on both sides. In both cases, the Chief of Defence Staff and cabinet ministers had to intervene to reconcile the fighting forces. The animosity runs deep and there is still so much mistrust between the soldiers and Kamajoisia that some government troops refuse to mount joint patrols and military operations with the Kamajoisia. The Kamajoisia have extended the remit of their duties to threatening perceived RUF collaborators in the NGO sector such as workers of the Red Cross, by pronouncing that their safety cannot be guaranteed in combat zones. These excesses seemed to have been accepted by the government and the community at large as part of the operational brief of the Kamajoisia.

### **Peace, Insurgency, and Counter-Insurgency**

The controversies dogging the Kamajoi militia seem to transcend their operational excesses. The constitution of the Republic of Sierra Leone is unequivocal in investing the armed forces of the Republic with the duty of defending the territorial integrity and the lives and properties of Sierra Leoneans. The army's ordinances clearly state conditions for eligibility to serve in this constituted national force. The constitution proscribes the formation of armed militias within the sovereign Republic of Sierra Leone excepting overwhelming parliamentary consent for such a force and following a clear procedure of due review by the armed forces and services committee, including armed services chiefs, defence staff, and the defence secretary. There is no evidence that this statutory procedure was followed in the formation and deployment of the Kamajoi force. Unless perhaps one justifies the existence of the Kamajoi force as an exceptional force constituted by the people of Sierra Leone in defence of the country's territorial integrity, the militia's status is unconstitutional. The legislature has yet to regularise the

status of the militia as an armed force within the borders of the Republic of Sierra Leone.

What intensifies this constitutional ambiguity about the status of the militia are those uncanny undercurrents of party politics and ethnicity. The Kamajoi militia guaranteed security during voting in February 1996 after the armed forces chief, Brigadier J.O.Y. Turay, announced that the army was pre-occupied with other duties. Fearing that this was a ploy by the army to maintain its hold on the reins of power, the Kamajoisia were deployed in the south and east of the country. They provided security for the electorate in spite of RUF threats of renewed violence. The election results indicate a near hundred per cent vote for the ruling SLPP which the majority Mende ethnic group in the south and east of the country has traditionally supported. The urgency of that region's security needs was apparent in the appointment of a Kamajoi chief, retired Captain Hinga Norman, as *de facto* Defence Minister. This coupled with the strict ethnic criteria for conscription into the Kamajoi militia provides reason for asking whether the government has prudently tackled the issue of ethnicity that has historically dogged democratic and repressive politics in Sierra Leone since independence.

Kamajoi commanders have deflected the ethnic charge by noting that a majority of the RUF combatants also belong to the Mende ethnic group. This argument may set the Kamajoi apart from the Interamhwe militia of Rwanda. What it does not justify is the unwholesome ethnic composition of the force and whether its armed existence does not pose a threat to inter-ethnic peace in Sierra Leone if it is perceived as a guarantee for Mende domination of politics in the new democratic dispensation. One would argue that whereas a reorganisation of the national army is an urgent task, the strengthening of a regional militia with identifiable but questionable loyalties seems to have been given pride of place.

As with other counter-insurgency forces on the African continent, there is possibility of a danger that it can be manipulated for the same macabre purposes. The Kamajoisia themselves openly express definite political and ethnic loyalties to the SLPP and the force seems to be firmly bonded together by a collective experience of trauma, privation and victimisation both under the APC and with the RUF insurrection. Some even perceive this as a historic opportunity to redress the injustices of partisan development and thuggery suffered under the APC by the Mendes. Kamajoi military success has been rooted not only in their fighting prowess but in the large number of desertions from RUF ranks. Ideological fatigue and a perceived loss of focus in the armed struggle has convinced a number of RUF cadre to surrender.

Government military and logistical support for the Kamajoi militia has been covert although government-hired military advisers in Executive Outcomes closely co-ordinated all the Kamajoi offensives. The President, Ahmed Tejan Kabba, has consistently identified his government's military and peace strategies with the Kamajoi agenda. He threatened to sanction an all out Kamajoi offensive if the RUF did not sign the Abidjan Accord by 1 December 1996 and again justified the recent Kamajoi offensive in the Kailahun district in his Myohaung Day Parade speech on 23 January 1997.

The government is also relying on the power of traditional chiefs in the south and east of the country to whom the Kamajoisia are loyal. As army units are being disarmed, re-organised and confined to barracks, the Kamajoi militia has assumed a prominent role as the major combat force for the government. Although the management of the army has changed and the reported incidents of indiscipline on the decline, the Kamajoisia still remain distrustful of most of the soldiers and not much co-operation has been negotiated between the two fighting forces in the country. This new web of political loyalty is fraught with grave implications. The chiefs have more than a consultative role in national defence and politics. They are guarantors of the electoral success of the SLPP government. It is therefore unlikely that Kamajoi excesses may be investigated and punished. The hope is that the army-Kamajoi clashes can be reduced to a minimum if a country-wide conflagration is to be avoided. The consolidation of the SLPP's administrative hold on central authority through the chiefs, may hinder proceedings for urgent local government reforms that may witness a delimitation of the power of chiefs. The SLPP government is unlikely to alienate the chiefs who can deliver the electorate in the south and east of the country. Besides, alienation could easily culminate in the formation of semi-autonomous warlords and have a destabilising effect in the country.

The government is also unlikely to honour all its statutory obligations under the Abidjan Accord without reference to the goodwill of the Kamajoi commanders and chiefs. There are reports of restlessness amongst the Kamajoi militia men who face an uncertain future whilst RUF combatants are being rewarded with generous resettlement and re-integration packages. This is against popular anger at the scale of destruction of lives and property by the RUF during its six year insurrection in the country. Although the Abidjan Accord calls for the complete cessation of hostilities and a general clause on the demobilisation of all combatants, there are no specific references to what the government's plans are for this expanding force. That the Kamajoisia are an obstacle to the peace process is an observation recently made by the RUF in the wake of the 'unprovoked' Kailahun offensive. With a record of

operational excesses against RUF combatants, it is even more unlikely that RUF combatants would be guaranteed security if they are disarmed and resettled in communities where armed Kamajoisia reside. Most Kamajoisia and IDPs have sworn revenge on RUF combatants for atrocities visited on them and are unlikely to be deterred by government indemnities. The Kamajoisia themselves pose a real security problem for the state. Its ranks of mainly unlettered and unskilled men are expecting generous bonuses from the SLPP government in recognition of its services. A high percentage of them are hoping to settle down in civil life after the war. However, with a damaged economic infrastructure, it is unlikely that the government can provide requisite opportunity and employment structures to absorb them.

There are grave implications for national security if these trained fighters remain unemployed and government undertakings to them remain unfulfilled. A seemingly unjustifiable resettlement policy for IDPs and former combatants may cause real disaffection amongst the ranks of the Kamajoisia. Even when the RUF leadership concedes to general demobilisation, the government may need a security system that can guarantee the safety of the resettled people and improve security in the country. Deep mistrust for the army by the IDPs means that the government may still need the armed presence of the Kamajoi militia. In the event, what will be the fate of demobilised RUF combatants? If the force is reconstituted as an armed national guard, one wonders whether its relationship with the national army will improve. Can its strict ethnic orientation be changed without enervation of its succinct social and cultural specificity? Answers to these outstanding issues can only be speculative. Whatever decision is eventually taken by the government about the management of the Kamajoi militia, there are seamless implications for the democratic dispensation in Sierra Leone.

In spite of all these controversies, the Kamajoi militia remains a significant military force to reckon with. The nature of RUF insurgency and the wanton unprofessional conduct of a bedraggled army, coupled with the politics of internal displacement and ethnic uniformity gave rise to this counter-insurgency force. Unlike guerrilla movements elsewhere, the RUF lost the initiative in the war not only because it failed to mobilise the population but also because it lost control of the terrain to a popular community inspired and supported counter-insurgency force of victims of its atrocities. The controversial status and role of the Kamajoi militia in democratic politics in Sierra Leone has yet to be fully played out. This makes the Kamajoi militia an urgent social and constitutional issue that should be tackled as a matter of national priority.

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