

War and Transition to Peace: A Study of State Conspiracy in Perpetuating Armed Conflict

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Introduction

When the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) entered Sierra Leone in 1991, Corporal Foday Saybana Sankoh, the RUF leader, said he was waging a 'struggle' against the corrupt and oppressive regime of the All People's Congress (APC) government under President Joseph Saidu Momoh. A year later, Momoh was overthrown by disgruntled young officers from the war front under Capt. V.E.M. Strasser, who formed the government of the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC). Everyone believed the war would end but it did not. Sankoh said he was continuing his struggle against the NPRC because it was not a legitimate government of the people whom he assured he wished to 'liberate'. For the next four years, the RUF was pitched against the NPRC, or at least this was what the world was made to believe. A critical reading of the events surrounding the war and its continuation would reveal the rather complementary nature of the activities of both the RUF and the NPRC-cum-military.¹

Thus instead of fighting each other with the arms procured by the resources and taxes of the country, both tended for the most part to avoid each other, and turned against unarmed and defenceless civilians, when in

1 In this paper, NPRC denotes the 'inner core' of soldiers who kept their grips on power and determined the course of state actions, both in government and the Army, thereby engaging the latter in the former, and numbing the distinction between these two arms of state.

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actual fact they were supposed to have been protecting them. Both the RUF and the NPRC were engaged in pillaging the resources of the country, especially diamonds, and both succeeded to a very great extent, by deft subterfuge, to unleash a campaign of disinformation regarding their real intentions. The RUF and the NPRC were opposed to the holding of general elections as a prelude to ushering in the democratic process; they saw elections and peace as separate issues and preferred peace before elections. Above all, the conduct of the war seems in all probability to have been determined more by the NPRC government and less by the RUF. How do we explain the evolution of this extraordinary identity of interests between the RUF and the NPRC and the dominant role of the NPRC in determining the course of the war?

After a year in power, the NPRC began to entertain delusions of continuing to stay in power indefinitely, obviously taking a cue from the Rawlings's example in Ghana. Everything the NPRC did would appear to have been subordinated to this ambition of staying on in power-state governance, prosecution of the war, and other matters of public affairs. In the pursuit of this objective, the government failed in its duties, encouraged the continuation of the war, destroyed and/or displaced those it was supposed to protect, caused the state to wither, and shattered an already declining economy, until the people rose up at the first opportunity, to put an end to these brutish acts. The duplicity of their actions was obvious to the people who were thoroughly disgusted.

From Conflict to Collaboration

When the RUF captured Bomaru in Kailahun District in April 1991, it said it had come to 'liberate' the people from the 'corruption of the APC'. The army was in bad shape and 'were really caught with our pants down', the then Army Commander revealed in an interview (*West Africa* 1995). This enabled the RUF to advance quickly until, with the assistance of Guinean troops, the rebels were pushed back to the border area where they started. The nature of the savage RUF terror campaign has been widely reported and documented.²

In April 1992, disgruntled officers from the war front who came to Freetown ostensibly to protest poor salaries and conditions of service, ended up overthrowing the APC government, and formed a military government styled the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC). It has been widely

2 See Amnesty International Reports.

suggested that there was a secret 'collaboration agreement' between the RUF and the NPRC, but the young military officers, elated at the easy manner of their success, ignored the RUF, which remained quietly at base. The RUF itself confirmed this informal agreement, and saw the action of the NPRC as a breach of confidence, more especially because it attributes the origins of the NPRC to the political education that was provided by the RUF (Revolutionary United Front 1995:25-29). The NPRC was indifferent to negotiating peace and determined to resolve the problem by an outright military victory, and stuck to this position for the next two and half years. During this period, the army grew five times in size and pressure was put on rebel positions. Then in mid-1992, disappointed and desperate, the RUF took the offensive and over-ran the diamondiferous Kono District, recapturing some of its original positions in the process. The government continued to press the RUF and in April 1993, captured their 'capital', Pendembu.

Although it seemed as if the end of the war was in sight, the involvement of the army on a large scale in Kono probably brought a change for the worse in the official prosecution of the war. Diamonds were introduced into the war equation. 'Thereafter both parties to the conflict alternated military operations with alluvial diamond mining activities' (Richards 1996b). While the senior military officials were busy helping themselves to the resources of the state, the less privileged soldiers felt resentment and found ways of helping themselves as well. This was partly responsible for the rise of the *sobel* phenomenon, i.e. government soldiers by day becoming rebels by night, and law abiding citizens by day transforming themselves into rebels under the cover of darkness and committing atrocities. As the war continued, *sobels* operated in broad daylight posing a major security problem for those in the war-affected areas (*West Africa* 1995:24-30). The army hierarchy was never happy at any accusations the press levied against *sobels*.

What the public and most serious commentators believed to have been happening is this: the senior NPRC officials (civilians and soldiers), busy enriching themselves, could not satisfy the wants of ragamuffins they had put under arms, and so turned a blind eye to the misdeeds of the *sobels*. The *sobels* attacked towns under the guise of rebels and looted property; they could 'sell-game' — government forces withdraw from a town, leaving arms and ammunition for the rebels behind them. 'The rebels pick up the arms and extract loot... and then themselves retreat. At this point, the government forces reoccupy the town and engage in their own looting, usually of property (which the rebels find hard to dispose of), as well as engaging in illegal mining' (Keen 1995). With this kind of collaboration, the government soldiers shared an interest not only in looting to enrich themselves, but in creating the

(false) impression that the rebels were a formidable enemy. This way, the war would keep going to the benefit of both the NPRC and the RUF. The RUF itself has confirmed that NPRC troops run away and leave behind quantity of weapons and ammunition (Revolutionary United Front 1995:13). Foday Sankoh told the press several times that a vital source of obtaining arms was from the NPRC troops.

Government soldiers could use rebel tactics pure and simple, or reach an accommodation with the RUF, exchanging arms and uniforms for cash or diamonds. 'Sometimes, the method was to drive a supply truck into a pre-arranged ambush and abandon it' (Richards 1996a). Thus the RUF could rearm and continue fighting. Because of this *modus operandi*, government announcement of the capture of the myriad 'rebel bases' never led to an abatement of the war. The government clearly knew what was happening, and condoned it. To cover this up, a few 'rebel suspects' were usually incarcerated. The most glaring of government troops which attacked civilian targets were usually brought to trial on charges of aiding the enemy, in order to deceive the world. While government admitted the role of its troops in looting, it down-played the magnitude and significance, usually assuring the nation that the 'situation is firmly under control' and yet the war kept spreading (*West Africa* 1994).

The situation was further compounded by the probable multiplicity of 'rebel groups' involved in the war — about half a dozen or more (*West Africa* 1995). Apart from the RUF, these included not only bandits who saw an opportunity presented by the anarchy to acquire some wealth for themselves, but also disgruntled soldiers, with various loyalties and motives, e.g., those recruited into the Army by political means and were die-hard supporters of the APC; troops loyal to individual senior army officers who were not happy at the NPRC sweeping the carpet from under their feet; supporters of dismissed senior officers; or those fearing that the war was ending and wanted to acquire as much as they could before the game was over. All of these joined the war, and helped to create the impression that the RUF was very powerful.

But in actual fact, relative to the ambitious scale of its planned operations, the RUF was resource-poor. Hostage taking in 1995 was meant partly to bargain for 'logistics' — weapons, and in the case of the seven Catholic nuns, medicines, a generator and satellite telephone (*West Africa* 1995). The RUF were able 'to project an image of great power' due to high levels of organisational efficiency, but which in itself was meant to compensate for resource-poverty (Richards 1996a:8). Thus the RUF alone is not to blame for

'the continuing destruction of our country... the rebels have many different faces... there are rebels among us (soldiers), there are mercenaries among us, some of them our own people. The problem is not the RUF alone' (Conteh 1995). This was the honest view of someone who had been a commander of the army for a period during the war.

As early as the end of 1993, the NPRC was in a position to crush the RUF as it had promised the people. This has been abundantly confirmed by another ex-Army Chief, Brigadier J.O.Y. Turay, who saw service as Brigade Commander in the war. He attests that 'the war would have been history since 1993, but for the fateful command and orders of my then Commander-in-Chief, Captain Strasser' (*The Echo* 1996). The RUF rather shamefacedly admits this because there is no way to deny it. 'By late 1993, we had been forced to beat a hasty retreat... we were pushed to the border with Liberia. Frankly, we were beaten and were on the run...' (Revolutionary United Front 1995:10-11). But somewhere along the line, the young military officers had been awakened to 'the love of money', the proverbial 'root of all evil' and it dawned on them that if the war ended, the democratisation process must follow, and they would be out of power, and therefore lose the opportunity to enrich themselves. The new strategy then was to allow the RUF a hiatus to regroup if they were hard-pressed, and thereafter re-launch, and/or by encouraging *sobel*s to go on vicious rampages after the fashion of the RUF. In this way, the war would keep going; the NPRC would continue to stay in power; and the officers would continue enriching themselves; or at least, so the NPRC might have thought. Consequently, the NPRC had to accommodate the RUF.

This turning-point could be traced to quite early in the regime's life. It has been reported that Strasser's troops, engaged in mining diamonds in Kono in mid-1992, were unmindful of the RUF, who surprised them and captured Kono (Reno 1995:175). Perhaps more dramatic was the re-emergence of Serge Muller, an Antwerp-based diamond dealer, who through his agent, Mahmud Khadi, had been given the contract of marketing Sierra Leone's diamonds by President Momoh, and both of whom had fled when the APC was overthrown, and the NPRC took over. Muller is reported to have admitted undervaluing the country's diamonds at the instance of Khadi. Khadi was later found to have embezzled state funds and was ordered by the Marcus-Jones Commission of Enquiry to pay back to government about £1.5 million. It was believed that this action would have sealed the fate of Muller's involvement in the country, especially as the NPRC was trumpeting an official moral imperative of 'transparency, accountability, and probity'.

But Muller was to make a bold come back to the astonishment of most people who knew what was happening. In June 1992, a consignment of diamonds was exported to London which included a 73 carat light blue gem. Muller claimed to be the only channel by which to market Sierra Leone's diamonds abroad under the Momoh contract, and took a court injunction against the proposed public sale in London by the Government Gold and Diamond Office (GGDO). The consignment of diamonds was brought back to Sierra Leone by GGDO, but the public was not informed of what happened thereafter. But by the end of the year, Muller was back in Sierra Leone and was entertained at the highest level, and on his return to Antwerp in his private jet, went along with two high-ranking NPRC officials. A civilian cabinet minister in Strasser's government protested to Strasser about playing ball with Muller because, according to the disclosures at the Marcus-Jones Commission of Enquiry (Sierra Leone Government 1993), the government of Sierra Leone should not have had anything to do with the likes of Muller. He was politely listened to, but the new deal the NPRC was about to strike with Muller for the country's diamonds went ahead.³

Few months after this, one of the great mysteries of the NPRC regime occurred: Captain Strasser, Head of State, without any official information even to his deputy, stealthily disappeared from the country for over a week. He was later traced to Antwerp, apparently as guest of Muller. A Swedish newspaper reported that Strasser had gone to sell 435 carats of diamonds valued at £43 million! The story was latter carried by a local newspaper — *The New Breed* — whose editor, Julius Spencer, was charged for sedition, libel and false reporting (*The New Breed* 1993).

Towards the end of 1993, the NPRC ruled that anyone who disclosed information leading to the arrest of smugglers would be entitled to 40 per cent of the value of the goods seized. Then in early 1994, a 172 carat diamond was seized in a purported anti-smuggling operation. The public was not told who gave the information leading to the seizure of the gem, but after it was auctioned for \$2.8 million, the NPRC Principal Liaison Officer responsible for Mines instructed the GGDO to pay 40 per cent of the amount to one of his colleagues! Clearly, diamonds, as one obvious way of getting rich quickly, had been so impressed in the minds of the NPRC that nearly every major decision they took was subordinated to the desire to get rich at

3 Editor's note: The author, Arthur Abraham, was Secretary of State for Education, a cabinet post, in the NPRC government of Valentine Strasser.

any cost — and in this case, the price paid by the country for the avarice of the NPRC will take time to be fully assessed.

In April, the army recaptured Pendembu which had been used as Sankoh's 'capital'. The speed and determination of the army to recapture this vital town signalled the end of the war. Strasser himself echoed this national expectation, when during his first anniversary speech he stated that 'the conclusion of this brutal and savage war is in sight' (*West Africa* 1993). But in actual fact, no significant progress was made to recapture the district capital of Kailahun, only seventeen miles away for the next several months. When Kailahun and Koindu were finally captured at the end of 1993, civilians were not allowed to return there. And then, what was considered a fatal mistake, the 'fateful command' Brig. Turay referred to, was the announcement by Capt. Strasser of a one month unilateral cease-fire and amnesty for the rebels, apparently without any discussion with Brigade Commanders. This allowed the RUF to regroup and counter-attack from Pujehun District early in the new year. Thus, what was for all practical purposes the end of the war, did not materialise, and it sprouted forth in a manner that for the next two years, would instil terror into the hearts of all the civilian population.

Finally, a few imponderables are still worth considering. First, the RUF has been operating in several areas of the country and taking hostages from one end of the country to the other. It is difficult to imagine the RUF moving in small unobtrusive groups when carrying hostages. And yet they have gone on in this fashion officially undetected. Second, it is a well-known fact that Sankoh made his capital at Giema, some ten miles southeast of Kailahun when he was dislodged from Pendembu. But there was continued official silence about Sankoh's headquarters, and throughout the entire war operations, not a single attempt was ever made to assault Giema. This location is close enough to Buedu, which was given by Mrs. Iye Kallon as the seat of Foday Sankoh, after she and three other RUF agents were captured in Conakry on an arms procurement trip (*West Africa* 1996). The government invited the Press to interview each of them on television. However, after two of them — Mrs. Kallon, Public Relations Officer, and Mr. Barrie, diamond valuer for RUF — were interviewed, the interviews were abruptly discontinued. Were they giving out too much information to the public to suspect that indeed between the NPRC and the RUF, there was a lot in common or that they were collaborating?

War Against Civilians

From all accounts, it would appear that this is the only rebel war in Africa which is not an ethnic civil war, but gross human rights abuses are

perpetrated by the armed fighters. In a recent report, Amnesty International stated that 'Government soldiers were responsible for widespread human rights violations, including torture, mutilation and extrajudicial executions.... RUF forces were responsible for gross human rights abuses including torture, hostage-taking and deliberate killing of civilians' (*Expo Times* 1996).

Up to 1993, the RUF was mostly responsible for atrocities committed against the civilian population. The RUF terrorised villagers by committing violence against chiefs, traders, minor officials and persons of influence in the locality, and forcibly recruited and encamped youths for military training. These latter were 'sometimes forced at gun point to take part in atrocities against family members or community leaders. Villagers report being required to witness the terrifying spectacle of public beheadings in which the victim's neck was cut, working from back to front, with a blunt blade. The purpose... youth conscripts could not escape for fear of reprisals' (Richards 1995).

After the accommodation of the RUF by the NPRC in 1993, the *sobel* phenomenon came into existence, and both the government troops and RUF turned against the civilian population. The RUF burnt undefended villages and avoided direct confrontation with government troops. *Sobels* would attack the civilian population and loot their property, but commit atrocities similar to and sometimes worse than those of the rebels in order to shift the blame to the RUF. The majority of towns that were completely razed since 1994 were destroyed in this way. The *sobels* were just replicating at the local level, what their masters were doing at the national level. The ostentatious display of wealth by the NPRC soldier-rulers became a dangerous example, which poorly paid and badly trained troops wanted to emulate. Since the NPRC had no money to pay them adequately, it turned a blind eye to the atrocities they committed in the process of looting civilian property to equally enrich themselves.

West Africa magazine captured the mood correctly when it said 'the real tragedy is that both the NPRC and the RUF appear to be out of touch with the majority of the public. None... puts human suffering high among its priorities.... for some reason (they) do not seem greatly bothered....' (*West Africa* 1995). As for Sankoh, he has been rightly described as 'a man so blinded by the 'rightness' of his vague calls for social justice and his eclectic assortment of ideological influences, that he has become oblivious to the pain his struggle has brought his country' (*New York Times* 1996). It is precisely in response to this situation that civilian defence groups commonly called Kamajoisia have sprung up to do for the people what the NPRC government

abdicated from doing — defend them.⁴ In Bo, they confronted the military for control of the town and successfully took charge of it.

Disinformation and Subterfuge

Once the NPRC had set themselves to plundering the resources of the state to enrich themselves, they had to keep the war going in order to stay in power and thus maintain the opportunity to plunder. To cover their real intentions, it was in their interest to confuse the issues as much as possible. The RUF, for propaganda and political purposes, would take credit for what government troops were doing against their own citizens. At the same time this afforded the NPRC an opportunity to pretend to bow to pressure for democratisation, while intensifying the war in order to create a rationale for continuing to stay in power. In this, the NPRC succeeded by an extraordinary degree by disinformation, subterfuge and legerdemain, to deceive everybody including themselves, because in the end, the forces they had let loose by subterfuge went out of control and eventually swallowed them up.

The first thing was to allow or create 'political interference and overlap between the NPRC and the Army' so as to cloud the 'role of the Army beyond recognition'. With little or no professionalism in the Army, 'many of the young military men with their new-found powers have proven unable to perform in government roles for which they are so unsuited and untrained'. This was a 'serious handicap', which threatened to 'render the entire nation ungovernable'. Brigadier Kellie Conteh (1995) was writing like a professional soldier, wishing to divorce the Army from governing, because 'there is a direct link between the political overlap and lack of professional military leadership to the suffering of our people, in terms of looting, displacement from their homes, killing and other atrocities'. Brig. Conteh's worst fear for democratisation was 'the constraint of the civil war which can be used as an excuse for extension of military government' (Conteh 1995). Here, we can see clearly that he was obviously a misfit in the NPRC context, advocating the very opposite of what the NPRC now stood for.

When Pendembu was recaptured in 1993, the story of Sankoh having been shot in the leg but managed to escape was deliberately put out by the government. But for enquiring minds, this was unimaginable because having been shot in the leg, Sankoh would obviously have had to be limping on one leg. As such, what could have stopped government troops from out-running

4 See Patrick Muana in this volume.

him and physically capturing him? Of course, the last thing the NPRC would have wanted was to capture Sankoh. This story which gained currency for over two years, was fuelled by Sankoh's own silence and by 1994, it came to be believed that Sankoh no longer existed. Thus, while the people of Sierra Leone were being deceived by the government that the end of the war was in sight, the NPRC and the RUF continued to plunder the country, the former selling diamonds in Belgium, the latter in Ivory Coast, and yet each side kept blaming the other (*West Africa* 1995).

By the end of 1994, the NPRC which had previously refused to negotiate peace with the RUF, offered to do so for the first time having declared an unconditional cease-fire (*West Africa* 1994). This gave a hiatus to the RUF to regroup, and in the next few months, 'rebel attacks' spread like wild fire hitting every part of the country that had been hitherto immune from attack. Tonkolili and Koinadugu Districts were hit at the end of the year; early in 1995, Njala University College, Sierra Rutile mines, Sieromco mines, (all in Moyamba District), Port Loko and Kambia Districts were all hit and by April, the 'rebels' occupied Songo and Waterloo (only 20 miles from Freetown) and 'threatened' the capital (*West Africa* 1995, *New African* 1995).

By all accounts, the pattern of 'occupation' of all these districts was the same, and the active collaboration of government soldiers is beyond any dispute. For instance, according to Amnesty International, government 'soldiers present in Kambia that day (of the attack) and who should have protected them were nowhere to be seen at the time of the attack' (*New African* 1996).

The same is true of the ambushes on the highways linking Freetown with the provinces. The most celebrated was the attack in August 1995 on a food convoy of 70 vehicles escorted by armoured personnel carriers and one helicopter gunship, in which 30 people were killed and over 20 vehicles destroyed (*West Africa* 1995). The convoy left Freetown in the evening and was made to pass the night at Waterloo, only twenty miles from Freetown. The suspicion was that it was to enable the soldiers to study the contents of the vehicles. Half way towards Bo, the convoy was halted by the soldiers who said they were going to search the area for rebels. The next thing that happened was firing on the convoy.

When Executive Outcomes took over and did a reconnaissance of rebel positions, they launched an onslaught that cost the RUF a quarter of its estimated 2000 fighters. Their leader said 'time is running out' for the RUF (*West Africa* 1995). Indeed rumours circulated widely that the war could be ended by the Executive Outcomes, but that government was putting obstacles

in their way. Thus, time did not run out just then. Both the Gurkhas and Executive Outcomes were not meant to end the war. They were only part of the NPRC game of deception.

In April 1995, Strasser reshuffled his cabinet, apparently to impress the international community that he was committed to the democratisation process. He was trying to reduce the military presence in government, which was explained as a desire to concentrate on the war. There could be no greater hoax. The positions of Super-Ministers who supervised groups of ministries and were styled Principal Liaison Officers, were abolished. But key ministries such as Agriculture and Mines, remained under soldiers, and those who returned to the army, received most unjustifiable promotions and were placed in all the key positions. Deputy Chairman Bio was promoted from Captain to Brigadier and appointed Chief of Defence Staff; Lt. K. Mondeh was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel and appointed Director of Operations. The others were all promoted to rank of Lieutenant Colonel and appointed as follows: R. Glover, Director of Logistics and Planning; C. Mbayo, Chief Intelligence Officer; Idriss Kamara, Director of Internal Security and Special Operations; T. Nyumah, General Services Officer for Operations; and Karefa Kargbo, Director of Public Relations. The only odd man out was Kellie Conteh, promoted Brigadier and Chief of Staff, because he was not part of the original coup makers; he was a professional soldier with experience and did not like the involvement of the military in the government of the country. He was replaced in June by Brigadier J.O.Y. Turay, earlier retired, and then re-engaged on contract (*West Africa* 1995). Far from being a genuine step in the transition to civilian rule, these changes reduced the visible military presence in government (though not control), but tightened the grip of the NPRC on the army.

Strasser's message on the 30th independence anniversary was very interesting. To the astonishment of the whole nation, he announced a lifting of the ban on politics; the Interim National Electoral Commission (INEC) set up since January 1994, was to call a conference to discuss the electoral process; a national commission for reconciliation was to be established; elections were to be held at the end of the year, and a civilian president installed in January 1996 (*West Africa* 1995). There was obviously a lot of pressure on the government to speed up the transition to democracy, but in the light of subsequent events, the NPRC was not sincere about these pronouncements. Three months later, political parties could still not function, and legislation to enable elections to go ahead was not passed for another nine months.

At the same time, the RUF said it had over 2000 fighters in Freetown, and threatened to launch an all-out attack on the capital, starting with kidnapping wives and children of government officials. With the spread of the war over the whole country in the preceding few months until it reached the entry point of Freetown — Waterloo — everybody believed that the threat to Freetown was real (*New African* 1995). This 'threat' to Freetown, real as it appeared then, was the supreme example of the success of the campaign of disinformation employed by both the NPRC and the RUF.

The RUF case was being over-stated by the Western press, and the NPRC Minister for Information, Arnold Bishop-Gooding, accused them of being 'a propaganda machine for terrorists... in their determination to destabilise the government and cause misery, death and pain to innocent civilians' (*West Africa* 1995). Strasser was warned by the Western press not to take the threat lightly, as he did not know the strength and determination of the RUF fighting force. Thus, 'instead of crushing the rebels, he finds himself in the embarrassing situation of being crushed by them' (*New African* 1995). The NPRC was 'fighting for its own survival in the teeth of vicious rebel attacks to force the regime from power' (*West Africa* 1995). Strasser must have been smiling to himself as he read these warnings.

There was a direct correlation between the pressure for democratisation and the intensification of the war. The NPRC would apparently bow to pressure and announce measures towards democratisation, but then would create conditions on the war front to render those very measures meaningless — or at least so the NPRC might have thought. The pressure for civilian democratic rule from the international community in 1994 led to the massive war spillage of early 1995 as well as the announcement of various measures for a return to democracy in April — only that with the intensification of the war, no democratic reforms would actually be possible. At the same time, Foday Sankoh would take advantage of the situation and create the impression of being very formidable. The truth is that far from being the besieged victim of the RUF, the NPRC was far more in control of what was happening in the theatre of war than has hitherto been conceded.

Vox Populi: Elections and Peace

During 1995, several organisations were involved in getting the NPRC and the RUF to come to a negotiating table — the UN, the OAU, the Commonwealth Secretariat, and International Alert. As early as May 1995, the Chairman of INEC, Dr. James Jonah, had a radio conversation with Foday Sankoh who threatened to disrupt elections, and ordered Jonah to pack up and leave the country because the RUF was opposed both to the peace talks and

the elections announced for the end of 1995. 'We say democracy and elections will have to wait until we have freed the country', Sankoh said (*West Africa* 1995).

Western observers ridiculed Jonah because he 'thinks that as a UN official, he was able to hold elections in war-torn Cambodia, so he could do the same in Freetown, war or no war' (*New African* 1995). This shows the extent to which the NPRC/RUF disinformation campaign had succeeded in deluding otherwise insightful observers. The paper went on to explain the decision to hold elections as due to Strasser's 'inexperience and fear of the rebels. It might have dawned on him that his troops could not stop the RUF's threatened attack on Freetown So, to save his face and that of the government, he had to surrender now than wait to be beaten by the RUF' (*New African* 1995). As we have tried to show, this was a complete misreading of the situation. Strasser and his NPRC had been manipulating situations, and thought they had a card to neutralise the election process. But it was here that he miscalculated most.

Meanwhile, the National Consultative Conference (called Bintumani I) held in August 1995, agreed overwhelmingly to hold presidential and parliamentary elections on 26 February 1996 (*Wanpot* 1996). This must have been a real shock for the NPRC, which made several efforts to botch the democratisation process, but every time, Dr. Jonah deftly outmanoeuvred them. Then, less than two months later, the NPRC announced a coup plot to overthrow the government and stop the on-going democratisation process (*West Africa* 1995). As subsequent events proved, including the trial of the suspects or the lack of it, it was not clear whether this was not one of the subterfuges that the NPRC had become adept at.

The NPRC was running out of cards. It then sponsored the formation of a political party which crystallised into the National Unity Party (NUP), the leadership of which Strasser was interested in, but did not show it clearly or early enough. In December, the Party 'elected' Dr. John Karimu, Strasser's Finance Minister, as NUP leader and presidential candidate. It was widely believed that on a previous occasion Strasser had tried but failed to get Dr. Jonah to agree to reduce the age requirement for presidential candidates down to thirty. Even after the NUP 'election', Strasser did not abandon the wishful thinking of becoming president (*The Echo* 1996, *Concord Times Spectacular* 1996). On 16 January 1996, a palace coup ousted Strasser for 'his attempt to impede the democratic process'. NPRC spokesman, Karefa Kargbo explained that the move was taken because of 'Strasser's blatant attempt to, today, force the NPRC to make some major legislative changes in the electoral laws of

this country and start machinations to ensure that he is installed as the next President, come February 26 (the date for the elections)' (*West Africa* 1996). His deputy, Brig. J.M. Bio, was installed as Chairman.

Meanwhile, in the discussions between the RUF and the OAU in Abidjan in December 1995, an extraordinary statement that took observers by surprise was Sankoh's remark that he was not targeting Strasser and the NPRC, but rather 'corruption which is the ideology of the APC', even though the APC had been out of power for nearly four years. *West Africa* commented that 'in fact the RUF appeared to have been complaining about the APC and its excesses rather than the NPRC' (*West Africa* 1996). Regarding the pending elections, Sankoh said they were the 'best thing' but were being conducted at the 'wrong time'. The RUF position was peace before elections.

For the first time, the identity of interests between the NPRC and the RUF had come out in broad daylight. Kumar Rupesinghe, Secretary-General of International Alert, is surprisingly a victim of the NPRC/RUF system of disinformation and subterfuge. On the democratisation process, he said 'talking to the NPRC, I am fully convinced that they want to hand over power. They are committed to peace and civilian rule. However, they would really like to see peace before they leave power' (*West Africa* 1996). The RUF said the NPRC was not their target, but the APC, and both the NPRC and the RUF wanted peace before elections. Thus, military rule would be prolonged, and collaboration between them continued in order to pillage the country. And the human cost? This was not the concern of either.

When Brigadier Bio took over from Strasser, he said the elections were on course, but then 43 Paramount Chiefs from the Northern province made a petition, and Bio called for a second Bintumani because 'people all over the country appeared to have changed their views on the election'. Bintumani II was duly reconvened on February 12, and unanimously decided in favour of elections going ahead as planned for February 26 (*Wanpot* 1996; *West Africa* 1996). This over-riding popular desire for elections was expressed notwithstanding the intimidating array of weapons displayed along the route to discourage turn-out. The Chief of Defence Staff, Brigadier J.O.Y. Turay, tried to use the security situation alleging that 'due to limited resources, the army can barely guarantee security during the elections'.

The electoral commission went ahead with plans for the elections on 26 February but the NPRC too went ahead with plans for peace talks on 28 February. Despite RUF threats, the elections went on remarkably peacefully with only few incidents, although the military engineered a series of loud explosions in the capital. The presidential run-off elections of March 15 were

even more peaceful. In the peace discussions with the RUF in Abidjan, the RUF agreed to a two-month unconditional cease-fire as a gesture towards ending the conflict (*West Africa* 1996). The new president, Ahmed Tejan Kabbah of the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) was sworn in on 29 March, and wasted no time in meeting with the RUF in Abidjan at which Sankoh agreed to an 'indefinite' truce. According to then Minister of Information, Mr. George Banda-Thomas, 'a final peace accord is round the corner' (*West Africa* 1996).

Conclusion

When the NPRC came to power in 1992, it prosecuted the war against the RUF vigorously and nearly brought them to their heels by the end of the year. Then diamonds entered the war equation, and the young soldiers entertained the lust for money. From 1993 onwards, the desire of the NPRC was to stay on in power and enrich themselves. The only way to do this was to collaborate with the RUF. Both turned against the civilian population and continued to plunder the country. Having created an identity of interests, government troops did much of the work for the RUF, spreading the war all over the country and creating the impression that the RUF was very formidable. By skilfully contrived disinformation on both sides, they succeeded in deceiving most observers. The NPRC yielded to international pressure for democratisation without the slightest desire to see it through. The turning point was to allow the people to decide their own fate. The people already knew the role played by the NPRC in the war, and with the record of our troops, there was 'a mountain of bitterness and hate' against the army, which Strasser himself mentioned in the independence day anniversary speech he gave. Once Bintumani I and II had decided unequivocally for elections, nothing again could stop the democratic wheel from turning.

The antagonistic posture of the RUF to the NPRC was more apparent than real, especially since they came to share a common identity of interests since 1993. The parliamentary and presidential elections greatly exposed the weakness of the RUF. Peace talks, which the RUF had opposed ever since, had to get underway once Sankoh perceived that the NPRC was running out of cards. Although slow-going at the moment, the peace talks have to continue because a resumption of conflict is increasingly unlikely. The RUF is war weary, and it is feeling the sense of isolation from neighbouring countries. Of course, there have been rumours of RUF regrouping, with the probable aim of resuming the war (*Expo Times* 1996). But carefully disseminating rumours to frighten people and give the RUF a psychological advantage was one of the early strategies of the RUF. It is probable that this

strategy is being employed again to give the RUF a stronger bargaining position in the current peace process.

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