



War, intervention and development

ECOMOG's role in Sierra Leone's civil war.

Narrator

In 1997 following the AFRC coup which toppled Tejan Kabbah's newly elected government, The organisation of West African States mandated their Nigerian led military force ECOMOG, to reinstate Kabbah by military means.

Davidson Kuyateh. Secretary General, SLTU

We were almost losing hope because we had nowhere to look up to for security. The government was determined, but it didn't have the necessary security back up to protect the people, because we saw them frantically making efforts with ECOWAS, with the UN, the OAU then, to have a back up that would help them maintain stability but there was none.

Abu Brima, Network Movement for Justice and Development

ECOMOG intervention started very well, it started in a timely manner and it could have helped actually stop the war much earlier.

Davidson Kuyateh

But they lacked the logistics, as well as the numbers, to be able to effectively control the security situation all over the country.

Peter Penfold, British High Commissioner 1997 -2000

At the end of the day ECOMOG was doing pretty good. I think there has been far too much criticism of the role of Nigeria and yet they were the one country in the world prepared to send soldiers in to die for the cause of democracy in Sierra Leone when nobody else was prepared to do that.

Screen caption:

EMOG succeeded in removing the commanders who had staged a military coup but they were unable to contain the RUF rebels who took Freetown.

Peter Penfold, British High Commissioner 1997 -2000

I was here at the time of course when there was the discussion about how much support ECOMOG should be given, and I think we have to bear in mind what the position was there particularly as regards Nigeria itself. That was the time when Sunny Abacha was president of Nigeria, and Nigeria was somewhat shunned by the international community. There were sanctions imposed upon it. Indeed within the UK context there was no assistance and no was there any dialogue going on between military and military, so it was a difficult time in which to consider assisting ECOMOG, which predominately was being led by Nigeria. That being the case what I do think was very praise worthy was that we were able to persuade British ministers that whatever was happening in Nigeria that here in Sierra Leone, Nigeria and ECOMOG was a force for good and indeed we should support them.

Abu Brima

The call by West African leaders to the international community to support ECOMOG fell on deaf ears. They could have stepped in and actually helped beef up ECOMOG and supported logistically and ECOMOG would have been more effective and more supportive.

Davidson Kuyateh

With the effort they put it when they were here with more support and more coordination ECOMOG would have been able to solve the problem.

Screen caption:

The UN arrived in 1998 but initially they had a very limited mandate

Davidson Kuyateh

ECOMOG was here simply to work with government to protect government as well as the citizens, especially those within government controlled areas but UNAMSIL came and eventually the people came to understand that they were here as a peace keeping force who could not fight either party and that didn't go down well with the people.

Peter Penfold

Some would argue that the mandate just wasn't strong enough - it didn't have the chapter seven capability of being able to engage the enemy because it was essentially a peace keeping mission. But others said there was actually no peace to keep – peace had to be made. As a result of that equally the UN force, initially the mandate from the Security Council only allowed a 6000 man force, which quite frankly was not enough to undertake the task.

Davidson Kuyateh

The problem with that is they were here with all the arms and ammunition but they could not fight. Even when the rebels attacked civilians with all the atrocities, all over the country

Peter Penfold

I think the RUF, initially were wary of the UN coming in, but when they realised, certainly in the early days, that the UN were not going to take them on, they felt sort of encouraged to change up their tactics and become more aggressive.

Abu Brima

The UN came and came merely as observers. You can't observe in a situation of war, therefore they themselves were eventually captured, 500 or more of them were captured, because they were not even capable of defending themselves let alone Sierra Leoneans, that phase of UNAMSIL was very useless for this country. It didn't help anybody it didn't help them selves even. But I think in a situation of crisis you have to be clear, you have to side, and side I believe with the people, with the sovereignty of the state, that was at stake. Sierra Leone was being destroyed. It was being ruined. People were being killed, being maimed. Everything was going down the drains. Sierra Leone was going to be effaced from the face of the earth. So I don't think any well meaning force would sit by and say let us be neutral, and let us negotiate, and see how they will manage to come out of this mess.

Davidson Kuyateh

We thought we were a sovereign state; we were a member of the United Nations. We are part of the international community and we have a democratically elected government which was observed and which was endorsed. So we thought that an affront to the sovereignty, and that of the elected government of this country would have been challenged by the United Nations. So since that was not the case when we couldn't put up any force, but we saw that role being played when the British came, because they came and they said we are going to support and protect the government, and for us supporting and protecting the government at that crucial moment, as long as it was the government we elected, we thought supporting the government is supporting the people, and protecting the people, because it is the principle role of our government to protect the citizens.

Clare Short, MP

I think Sierra Leone policy was run out of the Foreign Office. It might be that ministers weren't very engaged, it wasn't very high priority, and it became much higher priority, and that's partly because the Department for International Development was created, with this much more powerful commitment to development and therefore to Africa and therefore to end some of these conflicts and help people build modern states.

Screen caption:

British forces intervened initially to protect British nationals in Sierra Leone but eventually on the side of the government

Clare Short, MP

The military engagement came unplanned and was originated from an evacuation operation, and then the realisation that it would be turning our back on Sierra Leone, and letting down Sierra Leone, for British troops to go in, with all the historical reputation Britain has in Sierra Leone, and take out our own citizens and leave them to it. We were flying by the seat of our pants and we won that argument to keep them there and then we had to engage much more seriously and that was how it happened.

Screen caption:

When some British troops were captured by The West Side Boys, a Freetown militia, the SAS lead a dramatic rescue attempt

Peter Penfold

The British demonstrated when they brought in their forces, that they were prepared to use force and use it very effectively, and that was the turning point. And from there on, all the time there was a British presence here there was no suggestion that the RUF and AFRC were going to be able to mount any serious challenge.

Abu Brima

They could have done what they did much earlier. They could have actually helped forestalled this crisis by coming in. They shouldn't have actually allowed Sierra Leone to degenerate to the extent that it did, and they remained partners, remained quite supportive of all the governments that came and went, and so to some extent they were part of the problem of this country.