



War, intervention and development

The military and civilian relationship.

Narrator

In the early months of 2004 the last of the refugees are returning from Guinea, with their meagre possessions. Many of them left Sierra Leone at the start of the war in 1991, and UNHCR has told them that they will not be supported in exile any longer, as it is now safe for them to return to their homeland. UNHCR is entering the final phase of its work in Sierra Leone, in which collaboration with other Agencies, NGOs and the Security Services is crucial.

Elizabeth Cossor, UNHCR Protection Officer

It's extremely important that we work very closely with the military, in fact with all of the government authorities here in Sierra Leone. One of our main partners here in the country is the Sierra Leonean police, but we also work closely with the RSLAF the armed forces, the reason being, at the moment Sierra Leone is peaceful and it feels very secure, but certainly, prior to my arrival here in the country, it was extremely unstable, and we need to work closely with those people to know where the safe areas are both for our staff and when we talk about population movements.

Bruce Sharp, Logistician MSF

Obviously all the military play their part, and it's usually the UN, we do rely on them for a certain number of things. For security briefings, they are fairly well informed, and for us we need that back up, because even though we are an emergency medical organisation, we sometimes, you know it's easy to overstep the mark, and we need that information and that back up, to know that we can always evacuate with their help.

Elizabeth Cossor

When bringing refugees home they have a right to safety and dignity, so for safety of course we look to the security agents in the country, so both the national security agents and the international security agents. In the context of Sierra Leone, we have the peace keeping forces as well, but we need to liaise very closely with them to know where are the safe areas. Is it safe to bring Sierra Leonean refugees back to certain parts of Sierra Leone?

Narrator

Although both UNHCR and MSF need military cooperation for security reasons, operationally they have different approaches especially when it comes to concepts of neutrality. MSF depend on their neutrality to allow them to deliver medical assistance to civilians in rebel held areas in neighbouring Liberia.

Bruce Sharp

MSF have a fairly good reputation, it always amazes me how our charter and independence is quite well established. And if it's not we can talk to rebel leaders and explain to them our situation of neutrality and independence, and they do understand it, and it does seem to have a good impact. They also understand that the community is in dire need of medical care, so they are actively encouraging us to go in there. Especially with us being a medical organisation. There's a lot of encouragement for us to go in, so we are getting full support from the rebels.

Narrator

In contrast, neutrality for UNHCR means creating secure space between combatants and civilians and this involves some reliance on government security forces.

Elizabeth Cossor

It's very important for us to maintain our neutrality and also to maintain the civilian nature of asylum. So in doing that part of our protection role is to interview all those claiming to be refugees, to ascertain whether they really are civilians, civilian refugees or potentially combatants, ex-combatants who are trying to come into the country as refugees. This is also very very important for national security of course, so the police and the army are also very concerned about this. So in fact we have a kind of common interest there to separate those two groups of people and we rely very much on the opinion of the national security agents, both army and police, here in the country because they know the situation very well and it's also in their interests to ensure that those ex-combatants are separated and taken to internment facilities so that they don't actually go to the refugee camps with our refugees.

Lt.Col. Bill Laurence – IMATT

There would be, occasionally in a remote location you'd get one of two of the civilians running away, because they would have flash backs from the war and seeing soldiers in uniform, men in uniform, whether black or white, and I think that's understandable and but that's one of the reasons we are here as part of the hearts and minds game.

Narrator

IMATT, the international military advisory and training team, is one of the major interventions in Sierra Leone since peace was achieved. Their key mandate is to help develop the old Sierra Leone Army, now renamed as the Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces, into a well trained, disciplined, and reliable force which will serve the people, rather than terrorise them.

Lt.Col. Emile Dumbaya, RSLAF

When I took over command I got to realise that there is a need for us to actually promote civil military relationships. And one of the projects we identified was this one because there was no seating accommodation for the people here, people used to stand around this area and along the road waiting for transport. So we thought it necessary for us to come up with this project and the community is highly appreciative. We are doing it in collaboration with the civilians. I had a team of masons and carpenters from my unit and we had a team of civilians provided by the community so it was a joint project.

Narrator

Some argue that development activity is not a good role for the military and should be left to civilian organisations.

Lt.Col. Bill Laurence – IMATT

I don't see it as development per se, to me it's very much a military task these days particularly in this context here in Sierra Leone, the important thing is, we are being seen, the military, to be put to good use within the civilian community, working side by side, along side the civilian community.