Sierra Leone: the Perpetual Struggle for Security
Between 1991 and 2002, the Sierra Leone civil war left approximately 70,000 people dead, hundreds of thousands mutilated and displaced over half of the population of five million.¹ This tragedy is a result of various factors that became intertwined. The country’s “historical, cultural, sociological and political milieu” combined with the complexities of natural resources and economic issues all “contributed to and fueled the conflict.”² The aim of this research is to investigate the severity of events and violent acts along with how society functions today that can provide pertinent information on Sierra Leone’s stability and what threats to security may currently exist or are likely to occur. Analyzing such a historical event and its aftermath provides crucial information on what is lacking in peace efforts and the significant gaps in programs that hinder developing and maintaining stability in countries that have experienced conflict.

The atrocities committed during the civil war are infamous to Sierra Leone. A decade of violence that included drug-induced children who “hacked off the limbs of thousands of civilians, including women and babies,”³ has left a psychological imprint on a nation. Sierra Leone’s civil war and its aftermath can be held as a prime example when attempting to predict probable outcomes and possible solutions in similar conflicts. Examining the situation in post-conflict Sierra Leone can assess the effectiveness of its DDR (disarmament, demobilization and reintegration) program and what issues have remained persistent that can be properly addressed in current and future dilemmas, such as the marginalization of girls.

The country has remained relatively stable over the past 15 years and “represents one of the most successful cases of UN peacekeeping and peacebuilding.”⁴ Information learned from Sierra Leone was used to draft the Handbook on Security System Reform (2005-6), profoundly informed the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) on guidelines and best practices and the procedures for war crimes tribunals are substantially influenced by the Special Court for Sierra Leone.⁵ “It can also be argued that lessons from Sierra Leone have done more to inform current international thinking on stabilization issues than any other conflict of the past 25 years.”⁶

Analyzing the history and current impacts of the civil war in Sierra Leone is notably relevant for these reasons. While Sierra Leone may have acquired relative stability, the war still lives on in its population that is severely impacted by post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).⁷ Despite its successes, there are still gaps that remain in the country’s transformation and, as it has been shown time and again, evaluating history can provide pertinent information on the present and future. Investigating such conflicts requires “the sort of realistic vision whose wisdom is encapsulated in a Krio proverb: If yu no no sai yu de go yu fo no usai yu comoo… You must be certain of from where you come even if you are uncertain of where you will go.”⁸

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¹ (Pham)
² (Pham)
³ (Junger)
⁴ (Rashid)
⁵ (Rashid)
⁶ (Rashid)
⁷ (Thomas)
⁸ (Pham)
Independence & the Roots of Conflict

First a Portuguese colony in the latter 15th century, Sierra Leone became a long standing British colony until the latter 20th century. The history of the pre-colonial and colonial period by the British laid down the foundation of certain practices that would continue in the post-colonial era, primary among these is ethnocentrism. Therefore, this research does not mean to dismiss this period but will begin at the independence era which began on April 27, 1961.

Independence resulted more from the international community and its negatives views of colonialism than from the natural development from the nation’s community. “Tragically, the ensuing decades turned [the promise of freedom and aspirations] on its head and made Sierra Leone the poster child for all that is wrong with post-colonial Africa, the embodiment of the continent’s dysfunctional politics, environmental exploitation, economic misery and fratricidal conflicts.” Sierra Leone attempted to form a country without a nationalist tradition, which is common throughout Africa. Unlike nationalism that developed in other countries to unify and integrate, African nationalism was characterized negatively because it developed from opposing colonial rule and once independence was achieved, the unifying force built by nationalists dissipated.

Two major political parties – the All Peoples Congress (APC) and Sierra Leone Peoples Party (SLPP) – continued to follow British colonial policies that were “predicated on ethnic and cultural exclusivity.” Sierra Leone failed at acquiring a national vision because of its continuation of ethnocentrism, which has produced generations of corruption and has “repeatedly marginalized and excluded groups that are not deemed as central to the country’s ethnocentric politics.” The country’s history with various interactions between different groups that were brought together by the transatlantic slave trade and the continuation of colonial ‘divide and conquer’ would develop severe consequences.

Between 1961 and 1991, the government was incapable of establishing policies, programs or providing crucial services to its population, such as clean water, electricity, education or health. Because the APC regime was unable to fund its own programs, the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) put Sierra Leone in structural adjustment programs. “For almost two decades, the APC repressed its opponents, conducted fraudulent elections and fostered a culture of corruption and impunity.”

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Radical college students became discontent with the repressive government and assisted in recruiting Sierra Leoneans, including Foday Sankoh, “for military training in Benghazi, Libya, for an armed revolution against the APC regime in 1987.” Two years later, the students vacated their mission but they had given rise to the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) and its foundation for a civil war. Sankoh then met and developed a relationship with Charles Taylor in Libya in 1988. Taylor, the head of the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), “had started his own revolution […] in Liberia in 1989,” which provided Sankoh and “his comrades a fertile recruiting ground and a launching pad for their war in Sierra Leone.”

Charles Taylor had an ambition for a pan-West African revolution in order to replace suppressive dictators. Taylor saw the role that the RUF could play in accomplishing this goal and had the NPFL combine with the RUF for “training, recruitment and resource networks that stretched across Sierra Leone, Liberia, Guinea, Cote D’Ivoire, Ghana, Burkina Faso and Libya.” According to the 2004 Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission report, Taylor also aimed to dismantle the “Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Monitoring Group’s (ECOMOG) deployment and its use of Sierra Leone as a base for Liberian operations” and combat other groups in order to access the diamond mines in Sierra Leone.

Sankoh stated during an announcement on BBC African Service that the RUF invasion was to liberate Sierra Leone from the APC and establish “a just, democratic and egalitarian society.” But Taylor proved to be predominately in charge of the movement, as he determined the “timing, strength, control and direction.” During the invasion of March 1991, of the 2,000 troops that entered Sierra Leone, the NPFL consisted of 1,600 and the RUF only numbered roughly 360. Field operations were also commanded by NPFL generals and Taylor had provided the materials – vehicles, rocket-propelled grenades and AK-47s. Unsurprisingly, Sankoh stated that the NPFL providing arms to the RUF was “nonsense” and were “calculated lies” to justify military action by the government and ignore the RUF’s attempt to have peaceful dialogues. Taylor withdrew his troops a year later but his support and command “had set the RUF on the path to becoming a lethal and intractable illicit power structure.”

Blood Diamonds – the Heart of the Matter

President Joseph Momoh inherited weak foundations from the preceding government, yet whether his motive to root out corruption is true or not remains debated. However, in 1990 the
The prior president, Siaka Stevens, distributed mining licenses as political favors and created a patrimonial system, engaging in “economic sabotage” because illegal “mining and smuggling siphoned off resources that should have been used for national development.” Less than $100,000 worth of minerals passed through legal channels, with the majority being reserved by Stevens. By the time Momoh took office, Stevens had accumulated a wealth of $500 million and left the country $196,000 in foreign reserves. Because Sierra Leone’s finances had severely been degraded, Momoh had to turn to associates for a loan in order to pay the international printers of the country’s currency. Civil servants received their pay infrequently and members of parliament received monthly rice vouchers. By 1987, the government had reached a triple-digit inflation, were incapable of providing funds for radio and television, cut investments in health and education services by 60% and only earned $22,000 in diamond exports, “while an estimated $250 million worth of the gems were exported illegally.”

With the fragile economy that Momoh inherited, he rested all of his hopes on the country’s greatest natural resource: diamonds. Diamonds are pointed to as the largest contributor to Sierra Leone’s conflict and have played a difficult role throughout the country’s history since mining began in the 1930s. The Sierra Leone Selection Trust (SLST), who were given mining rights over the territory for 99 years, struggled to control its monopoly. By the 1950s, there were an estimated 75,000 illegal miners overrunning the SLST holdings in the Kono district alone, with still other trespassers mining at the margins of the Tongo Field and the Kenema district. The Kono district was a crucial mining area as it accounted for 65-70% of the total production of nine million carats acquired by 1969. Illegal miners would then sell their diamonds to Mandingo traders from neighboring countries and businessmen from Lebanon.
The market demand grew so great that De Beers was compelled to open a buying office in Monrovia in result from the smuggling trade controlling one-fifth of the world’s diamonds.\(^5\)

The Great Diamond Rush of the 1950s produced various erroneous conditions in Sierra Leone.\(^5\) Rice production experienced a significant decline because people left their jobs in agriculture in order to procure diamonds.\(^5\) Between 75,000 and 80,000 men “left their homes to search for diamonds as had left it over a half century to seek wage employment” over a few year period.\(^5\) As a consequence, Sierra Leone who had been an exporter of rice became a net importer and the underdeveloped local administration became completely overpowered due to the inability of SLST to control the situation.\(^5\) The perpetual influx of miners into Kono quickly put the district into a state of “anarchy, with armed bands of as many as 400 to 500 men raiding SLST areas, and on occasion doing battle with the police.”\(^5\) Between 1952 and 1954, forty murders were committed by agitated diggers, including one man being disemboweled in order to collect a stone he had swallowed.\(^5\)

In response to the chaos, the chairman of SLST’s parent company, Sir Ernest Oppenheimer, established the Diamond Protection Force (DPF), a private army that numbered up to 1,200 men.\(^5\) While the DPF managed to restrain the smuggling, it was only momentarily. Taxes paid on diamonds went straight into the government’s pocket.\(^5\) “While this meant some accountability during the pre-independence period, after independence it meant that the money was fair game for those fortunate enough to be well-connected with the government of the moment.”\(^5\) SLST was viewed by the public as a racket that robbed the nation of its minerals and only profited foreigners.\(^5\) Therefore, smugglers were considered to be heroes.\(^5\)

In order to terminate illegal mining and transfer diamond control to the government, President Momoh formed two military operations in 1990: Operation Clean Sweep and Operation Clear All.\(^5\) Through these operations, 30,000 miners were expelled, many of who turned to illegal mining out of desperation because they were unable to gain employment.\(^5\) While these campaigns can be viewed as being successful in the short term, they would prove to add to the country’s dysfunction as those who were driven out of mines turned to even more illegal professions for an income.\(^5\) Additionally, “the army lost some of its soldiers, who [were] generally poorly paid, when they deserted to set up their own illicit mining operations, either on their own or under the very same Afro-Lebanese and Lebanese patrons of the minders they had
dispersed.” The methods that attempted to strengthen the country in fact only further depleted it.

**Invasion**

“The only way to a democratic future for all the Africans of Sierra Leone lies in the abolishment of militarism and dictatorship. And the only force that can defeat militarism and dictatorship is the armed force of the suffering people as expressed in a guerilla campaign.” – Foday Sankoh

In 1990, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) produced its Human Development Report that included a Human Development Index (HDI) which examines dimensions of human development, disadvantages of certain groups and provides recommendations for countries in order to increase human development. At that time, Sierra Leone was ranked fourth from the bottom despite its natural resource wealth and by the time the conflict began in 1991, its HDI rank reached the bottom in the world. The collapse of the country socially, politically and economically were also shown through the country’s dire state of human capital. This was evident in a near total collapse of civic infrastructure during the period.

Source: (Higbie and Moigula)

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65 (Pham)  
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67 (Sankoh)  
68 (UNDP)  
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70 (Pham)  
71 (Hirsch)
RUF attacks in March 1991 against undermanned, under-equipped SLA forces resulted in tens of thousands of Sierra Leonean citizens displaced internally with greater numbers of refugees in neighboring Guinea.\(^72\) Due to the severe inadequacy of the SLA in comparison to the well trained and equipped RUF and NPFL, insurgents were able to capture and control almost one-fifth of the entire country by June, including Kailahun district that contained two-thirds of agricultural exports.\(^73\) In a statement later produced by the RUF, “often times towns have fallen to our advancing troops without a single shot being fired. The rebel NPRC [National Provisional Ruling Council] troops run away leaving behind quantities of weapons and ammunition. We are blessed by God/Allah because of our just cause.”\(^74\) Over the course of less than three months, over 100,000 Sierra Leonean refugees fled to Guinea.\(^75\)

While Foday Sankoh stated that part of the aim of the RUF was to overthrow the APC regime and redistribute Sierra Leone’s wealth and land equally,\(^76\) civilians were oblivious to any political agenda of the RUF until 1995.\(^77\) Two documents that the RUF distributed, *About the RUF (1994)* and *Footpaths to Democracy (1995)* both mention revolution and the reform of Sierra Leone, but fail to produce a “clear or coherent political program of how this was to be done.”\(^78\) *Footpaths to Democracy* ironically states that they seek “a path of peace” and appeal to the UN Security Council to pass an arms embargo on Sierra Leone.\(^79\) Sankoh also writes that they have a “defined program and liberation ideology” and strive to build a country for the people in order to rid it of poverty and “human degradation.”\(^80\) The RUF’s propaganda promised equitable distribution of resources, free education and free healthcare,\(^81\) negating how exactly this democracy would provide and afford it. Overall, the RUF’s manifesto unsurprisingly contains denial of facts, erroneous statements regarding their actions and intent and is vague in addressing any structured reformatory plan for the country post its “liberation.”

**Guerillas & Sobels**

Despite advancements during their first year, the RUF failed in their attempt to control the main route to Koindu to establish a base and capture the principle military base in the Eastern Province, the Moa Barracks.\(^82\) Sierra Leone and Guinea had relocated troops from Liberia and were able to establish a stronghold at Moa.\(^83\) However, the conflict produced a shift in the country’s political administration and in the manner in which the war would be conducted.\(^84\) On April 29, 1992, a group of officers from the Republic of Sierra Leone Military Forces (RSLMF) conducted a military coup, overthrowing the APC regime and forcing Momoh into exile in

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Guinea. These officers, who were in their 20s, formed a new junta aimed to “end the war quickly, reduce corruption and restore multiparty democracy;” calling themselves the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC).

At age 25, Capt. Valentine Strasser became the ruler of the NPRC junta and the youngest dictator in African history. Strasser and the NPRC were highly supported by the population, even calling him a “savior.” Within two years, Strasser “cleaned the trash from the capital, resumed tax collections, cut street crime, slashed civil service rolls by one-fourth and lowered inflation from 115% annually to less than 15%.” This was achieved by adhering to IMF restructuring conditions and through receiving $300 million in aid. However, the public also overlooked his human rights abuses, which included executing without trial 29 alleged coup plotters, repressing the media and drafting 12-year-old boys into the military.

Despite the NPRC regaining control from nearly all of the towns that the RUF had captured, the RUF began to resort to “guerrilla tactics, employing small, highly mobile units in stealth attacks and ambushes of military and civilian convoys.” Additionally they also employed elaborate false flag operations where they wore SLA uniforms and targeted civilians in order to discredit the government and military. Through these tactics, the RUF wanted to cripple the NPRC administration and security forces, cease industrial and commercial enterprises and control the diamond provinces.

By 1995, the RUF achieved some of these goals by shutting down two companies: Sierra Rutile and Sierra Leone Ore and Metal Company. Additionally, they gained control of diamond mines in the Eastern and Southern Provinces, allowing them to finance their operations and become a “transnational criminal enterprise.” To return the favor for their share in profit from diamonds, Liberia, Cote d’Ivoire and Burkina Faso trafficked weapons to Sierra Leone. In the beginning of 1999 alone, Burkina Faso purchased from Ukraine “68 tons of weapons and ammunition, including 715 boxes of weapons and cartridges, 408 boxes of cartridge powder, anti-tank weapons, surface-to-air missiles and rocket propelled grenades and launchers.”

The RUF also managed to contrive a compound of soldier and rebel, called a sobel. A sobel would entail a combatant to act as a soldier by day and a rebel by night; discrediting the SLA.
Sobel operations were so successful that the SLA was inadmissible to regions throughout the country and communities began to form their own militias of hunters, Kamajors, which created the Civil Defense Forces (CDF).\textsuperscript{101} Soldiers became sobels due to socioeconomic factors and guerilla warfare tactics as it was hard to locate rebels.\textsuperscript{102} “Frustrated, they would brutalize citizens suspected of being RUF members or sympathizers.”\textsuperscript{103} Animosity towards soldiers began to form by civilians and accelerated soldiers’ low morale, which when combined with minimal government provisions, propelled soldiers to join the RUF in looting citizens.\textsuperscript{104} “Eventually, the sobel phenomenon was exposed and the NRPC, under pressure, admitted that at least 20% of the government troops were disloyal.”\textsuperscript{105}

Power Transition

As the NPRC gained success, groups began to pressure the junta to uphold its promise to hand over power to an elected official by 1996.\textsuperscript{106} Therefore, in 1995, the NPRC appointed the UN’s under-secretary-general for political affairs, James Jonah.\textsuperscript{107} Jonah wanted to hold elections in March 1996 in order to raise funds for the poll, however, some disputed having the elections while still in the midst of war.\textsuperscript{108} They noted that the “massive dislocation caused by the conflict – an estimated one-quarter of Sierra Leone’s population was either displaced internally or refugees in neighboring countries – would result in the de facto disenfranchisement of a significant proportion of the electorate.”\textsuperscript{109}

Strasser attempted to make himself the leader of the National Unity Party as a candidate for the elections despite the constitution’s age restriction.\textsuperscript{110} But the vice-chairman of the NPRC, Brigadier Julius Bio, quickly performed a coup d’état and forcefully sent Strasser into exile.\textsuperscript{111} The British government secured him a spot at Warwick University as a law student that was funded by a scholarship provided by the UN.\textsuperscript{112} It was not until another student recognized him and demanded his removal for his atrocities that the university expelled him.\textsuperscript{113} He became homeless and later returned to Freetown after the war ended where he currently lives in poverty with his mother.\textsuperscript{114}

While Bio attempted to negotiate with the RUF, the RUF was provoked by their exclusion from participating in the election and reacted by conducting a “new series of hit-and-run attacks on villages in the Northern and Eastern Provinces.”\textsuperscript{115} While John Hirsch and British high
commissioner Ian McCluney quickly began organizing the elections due to the international community’s demand, the RUF declared a boycott of the polls and began to indiscriminately mutilate civilians in order to deter them from voting. Rebels began to amputate limbs in order to make it known that people who used their finger to mark a ballot with a print would risk losing their limbs. According to an International Crisis Group Monitor:

“Hundreds of Sierra Leoneans had their fingers, hands, arms, noses or lips chopped off with machetes in the cause of democracy. […] They were teenagers or younger, members of the world’s fastest-growing army – children. [One man I met] had his right ear and his lips slashed off. Someone had carved with a knife the word TERROR on his chest and on his back AGAINST THE ELECTION FEBRUARY 26. Some men and women had had their arms hacked off above the elbow; some had lost their hands at the wrist.”

Despite the RUF’s attempt, the election proceeded on the 26th and also on the 27th due to the massive turnout of voters. As the RUF continued to mutilate civilians, Ahmad Tejan Kabbah, a former UN official, won the election on March 15th. Before handing power over to Kabbah, Bio attempted to once again negotiate with the RUF. The meeting was ultimately ineffective due to Sankoh demanding the control of Sierra Leone’s natural resources and the position of vice president. Defeated, Bio transferred power over to Kabbah on March 29th.

Kabbah continued Bio’s aim of negotiating with Sankoh and signed the Abidjan Peace Agreement in November 1996. The peace agreement called for a cease-fire, amnesty to RUF members, a DDR program and the recognition of the RUF as a political party. “Ultimately, the agreement failed because neither the government nor the RUF had the will or international support to implement it and both sides repeatedly breached the cease-fire.” Kabbah’s deficient command of the army “led to renewal of conflict.” Neither the government nor the population trusted the army, especially due to sobel, and civilians were largely disenchanted with the new government they risked their lives to vote for. On May 25, 1997, soldiers who were discontent from the reduction of rice rations (which was their only payment) and the downsizing of the army, staged a coup that forced Kabbah and thousands of civilians into exile. After taking over the arsenal at the Murray Town barracks and releasing prisoners at the Pademba Road Prison, thousands of SLA soldiers embarked on a
“rampage of shooting, looting and other random violence.” Mass damage was done to infrastructure, including the UN compounds, State House, City Hotel, Bank of Sierra Leone and the Ministry of Finance.

Major Johnny Paul Koroma, who was released during the prison break, became the chairman of the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) and took control of the country. Koroma suspended the constitution, banned Kamajors and political parties and stated that elections would be held in two years. The AFRC also invited the RUF to join forces, end the war and offered Sankoh the position of vice chairman. ECOWAS and the UN condemned the coup and imposed an arms embargo on the junta. In 1998, ECOMOG troops who were supported by loyal SLA soldiers and Kamajors defeated the AFRC and the RUF in Freetown. Kabbah’s government was restored to power, however, the country had resumed its war as the AFRC and RUF could not be overthrown in towns in the north and east.

Operation No Living Thing

The RUF “vowed to make the country ungovernable” and the AFRC began a massive recruitment campaign and abducted civilians for its ranks. The AFRC destroyed major towns and committed atrocities in the Norther Province, pushing out ECOMOG troops. As the situation became more hostile, the UN and remaining diplomatic missions fled Freetown, along with hundreds of thousands of Sierra Leoneans that raised the refugee total in Guinea back to 300,000.

On January 6, 1999, the RUF joined forces with the AFRC and reentered Freetown, initiating Operation No Living Thing. “Teenage soldiers, out of their minds on drugs, rounded up entire neighborhoods and machine-gunned them or burned them alive in their houses. They tracked down anyone whom they deemed to be an enemy—journalists, Nigerians, doctors who treated wounded civilians—and tortured and killed them.” Women were raped and not even nuns or priests were safe from the killing.
ECOMOG soldiers who were not prepared for the assault reacted by executing, torturing and raping anyone remotely suspected of engaging with the RUF.\textsuperscript{146} It is important to note that the RUF had enlisted many children, meaning that those beaten and tortured by ECOMOG were the very same youths.\textsuperscript{147} Even a “retarded 9-year-old boy […] was stripped naked, beaten and tortured by Nigerians who suspected him of being an RUF sniper.”\textsuperscript{148} The SLA also imitated the RUF by amputating anyone they thought could be a rebel.\textsuperscript{149} “ECOMOG’s wanton targeting of civilians and their property led Sierra Leoneans to quip wryly that the force’s acronym actually stood for ‘Every Car or Moving Object Gone.’”\textsuperscript{150}

Freetown experienced such horror until the rebels began to fall back from attacks by the Nigerian military.\textsuperscript{151} “Realizing that they were going to lose the city, they started rounding up people and detaining them until special amputation squads could arrive.”\textsuperscript{152} These squads consisted of teenagers and children who were intoxicated with cocaine that had been inserted under the skin

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\textsuperscript{147} (Campbell)  
\textsuperscript{148} (Campbell)  
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\textsuperscript{150} (Campbell)  
\textsuperscript{151} (Campbell)  
\textsuperscript{152} (Junger, The Terror of Sierra Leone)
from gashes. They amputated people at random with rusty axes and machetes. Reports state that hands were collected and taken away in bags of grain, hands were hung from trees and that even hands were eaten. After several weeks, ECOMOG drove out the RUF from Freetown, leaving the death toll at 6,000. Journalist Sebastian Junger who witnessed Operation No Living Thing stated that “war does not get worse than January 6, 1999.”

### Child Soldiers & Atrocities

“We have not lost our sense of humanity.” – Foday Sankoh

The use of child soldiers is synonymous with the Sierra Leone civil war, however, the use of children in combat is actually more common than the attention it receives. “In over three-fourths of the armed conflicts around the world, there are now significant numbers of children participating as active combatants;” including children as young as six. Child soldiers have been used across the globe throughout history, including the United States. Yet it is the degree in which children were recruited, manipulated and used that makes this case so heinous.

According to the UN, around 10,000 children were used during the civil war. The RUF was first to use child soldiers in the conflict, but the SLA also began to utilize them under Strasser’s command. While an exact number is not known, a widely accepted study states that “half of all combatants in the RUF/SL[A were] in the age range of 8-14 years,” with minors under the age of 18 also providing a significant amount. The RUF also used tattoos on soldiers in order to deter escape attempts and identify deserters. Tattooing also assisted in instilling fear into the children that if they returned to their villages, civilians would seek revenge upon them. One 12-year-old girl, titled Small Soldier, was so ashamed of the branding she received by the RUF that she poured acid on her chest to try to remove the letters.

### Recruitment and Indoctrination

“The only way out of their cringing poverty is for the youth and able to yield to the false attraction of urban and cosmopolitan life. We opened their eyes to the widening cycle of poverty and degradation and the increasing opulence of the very few. We encouraged them to rebel. We encouraged them to desert. We encouraged them to join us.” – Foday Sankoh

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153 (Junger, The Terror of Sierra Leone)
154 (Junger, The Terror of Sierra Leone)
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158 (Sankoh)
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167 (Sweeney)
168 (Sankoh)
The RUF promised children that they would be able to escape poverty if they fought in the war.\textsuperscript{169} One child soldier stated, “They told us we’d all have our own vehicle. They told us they’d build houses for us. They told us many things.”\textsuperscript{170} Fully removing children from their families and communities while altering their daily life and identities furthered the RUF’s assimilation process.\textsuperscript{171} This became even more effective when the RUF became more reclus and primarily stayed confined in the forest.\textsuperscript{172} It provided vulnerable children with a sense of community and safety, furthering bonds with other rebels and compliance.\textsuperscript{173}

While most children were kidnapped or forced to join the war,\textsuperscript{174} one study stated that “many mothers have remarked on the joy of seeing their 10-year-old dressed in a brand-new military attire carrying an AK-47. For some families the looted property that child soldiers brought home further convinced them of the need to send more children to the war front to augment scarce income.”\textsuperscript{175} It is also important to understand the motive of why some children would volunteer to join armed forces. Roughly 80\% of child soldiers in Africa have witnessed war, 70\% have had their home ravaged and over 59\% have lost a family member to conflict.\textsuperscript{176} Children who are encompassed with conflict and violence may “decide that they are safer in a conflict group, with guns in their own hands, than going about by themselves unarmed.”\textsuperscript{177}

Vengeance is also a common factor among children who choose to participate, especially those who survive a family slaughter and then have survivor’s guilt.\textsuperscript{178} “A number of child soldiers are motivated to join warring factions by the seemingly noble belief that they are helping to prevent other children from losing their parents. Only afterwards do they reflect that they may end up creating the same cycle for other children.”\textsuperscript{179}

Additionally, combat groups, especially in the case of the RUF, use children’s adolescence against them and take advantage that they are still forming a self-identity.\textsuperscript{180} “Conflict groups offer what are perceived as glamorous or honorable roles (soldier, hero, leader, protector), as well as membership and acceptance in a group.”\textsuperscript{181} This psychological manipulation is particularly effective with children who have been severely victimized.\textsuperscript{182} Children were given positions and ‘honorary’ titles by the RUF, such as “Colonel Bloodshed, Commander Cut Hands, Superman, Mr. Die and Captain Backblast.”\textsuperscript{183}

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The RUF, AFRC and CDFs all used children in combat and it was these soldiers that typically committed the most violent acts in the war. RUF and government soldiers both forced upon and provided children drugs in order to assist in their manipulation, lessen fear in battle and commit terrible acts. Alcohol, hallucinogenic drugs, marijuana and brown brown (a mix of cocaine and gunpowder) were all used during training and manufactured child addicts. Often, children were injected with drugs immediately after being abducted in order to make them more obedient.

“We were very much aware of the effects of drugs on children … Drugs and alcohol were prevalent and served as [a] prerequisite for combat activities. Fighting with a gun is not an easy task because it puts so much pressure on the mind. So we needed to free the mind by taking drugs, and it worked.” – Former RUF commander

Once recruited, training and the indoctrination process began. The content and quality of training differed greatly among rebel groups. Some were given crash courses in weapons training when experiencing time restraints; others were given extended technical training and were taught how to cut throats and dismantle guns. When children performed violent acts, they were forbidden to show any grief or anguish.

Other children who were not soldiers were forced to perform other duties, such as cooking, cleaning, carrying artillery and caring for other children. While these children’s positions are viewed as less significant, their contributions to daily operations were crucial and also grueling. One child described how she had to beat rice for many hours and was not allowed to stop even when her hands were bleeding. Another child who was seven had to drag a weapon because he was unable to carry it.

**Bush Wives and Girls**

“While girls and the roles that they play are frequently deemed peripheral and insignificant by governments, national and international NGOs, policy-makers and programme developers, girls were fundamental to the war machine – their operational contributions were integral and critical to the overall functioning of the RUF.” Everyday life under the RUF was stated by many girls to have been very similar to life as it was beforehand. Social structures, division of labor,
hierarchies and the sense of community still continued. However, hierarchies were run by children, violence ensued and kinship was terminated.

Girls were attacked, taken, raped and forced to carry loads of looted items for rebels. Girls primarily lived in the ‘bush’ where rebels had a superior strategy of keeping out of reach of the SLA who traveled freely on roads. Yet rebels would also take over villages where civilians had either been killed or deserted. “The contrast between bush and town signifies the extremes between exuberant disorder and social order, or between uncontrolled power and restraint.”

While most women and girls who lived with armed groups were abducted, there were a rare few who volunteered. Those who voluntarily joined the RUF, however, would state after the war that they were taken for their own best interest. Reason why women would join such a group can be understood when taking gender equality into consideration. “Being marginalized by both customary practices and the APC regime, women’s involvement in armed conflict can also be seen as a revolt.”

Girls had many roles in the Sierra Leone civil war. While typical domestic duties were performed, attractive girls were used as spies in order to inform missions and find essentials. In order to do this, they would go to towns and make friends or form relationships with soldiers. After a couple of weeks, they would return to the group and report the schematics of the village. Rebels also used intact villages that displayed peaceful and normal life to lure in unsuspecting women. Girls also performed as combatants which is common in recent conflicts in Africa, where 30 to 40% of child soldiers are girls.

Women who were not married became slaves, typically for commanders’ wives, and performed domestic labor. Being a bush wife provided protection and some women claim that their husbands treated them well. “Young women in the war zone had no choice but to cling to a fighter with enough power to protect them.” Those who had no husbands experienced more

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hardship, rapes and received less food.\textsuperscript{216} Interestingly, a number of women still remain with their ‘husbands’ from the war.\textsuperscript{217}

Women were trapped with rebels for weeks or months if they were able to escape, while others remained for up to a decade.\textsuperscript{218} Severe drug use made life even more difficult as it made the men want to have sex more often, forcing some women to be raped several times a day.\textsuperscript{219} Several survivors stated that marijuana, called jamba, and cocaine or brown brown were the drugs most used and made men the most amorous and violent.\textsuperscript{220} Their first experience with rape was typically during abduction where it was conducted by several men and could last for several days.\textsuperscript{221} Afterwards, a rebel of higher stature would claim the woman as his wife.\textsuperscript{222}

According to Human Rights Watch, “child soldiers as young as 10 and 12 committed rape against women of all ages.”\textsuperscript{223} Sex slaves were used by child soldiers and commanders alike, including female officers.\textsuperscript{224} During attacks on villages, rebels often committed sexual assault by “inserting objects including firewood, pestles and weapons such as machetes and rifles into the victim.”\textsuperscript{225} Rebels also induced abortion by violently inserting sticks and other objects into the vagina.\textsuperscript{226} Acts were used in order to humiliate and instill fear into not just the victim, but also her family, such as forcing families to witness and “sing in praise” for rape or forcing a father to rape his daughter.\textsuperscript{227}

Sexual violence is frequently used as a war strategy around the world throughout history and Sierra Leone was no different.\textsuperscript{228} The RUF used rape in order to control civilians and initiate men and boys into the movement.\textsuperscript{229} Girls who fought back or tried to refuse attacks were killed.\textsuperscript{230} Many women still suffer from sexual abuse either from physical damage or from STDs.\textsuperscript{231} Throughout the war, between 215,000 and 257,000 women and girls experienced sexual violence by the RUF, CDF, AFRC and SLA.\textsuperscript{232}

Many children when captured were forced to either witness or participate in torturing and executing their own families.\textsuperscript{233} Those who performed the worst mutilations and killings belonged to the Small Boys Unit and Small Girls Unit.\textsuperscript{234} The mass amount of drugs induced the

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children to become fearless and extremely violent. 

“When they killed human beings they put the blood in cups and give to the smaller boys to drink. So they were drinking that blood and they were not afraid of nothing.” Approximately 27,000 people were left disabled or experienced amputation during the civil war.

Members of these units frequently raped, cut off hands and tortured people, such as rubbing hot peppers into someone’s eyes. One soldier described in detail “how you cut down the rib cage and get at the liver, to eat it for ‘main power’. [...] you can cut off the ears and nose and lips, and give them to the victim to eat. You drink the blood from the back of the neck. If you slash the neck at the front, the blood spurts too fast and is wasted.” Occasionally child soldiers caught pregnant women. In order to settle arguments over what they thought the gender of the child was, they would remove the fetus with a machete.

**Intervention & Peace Settlement**

After the Nigerians had driven out the rebels from Freetown, President Kabbah, the AFRC and the RUF were able to reach a peace agreement in July 1999. “Although the rebel assault had failed militarily, it had so traumatized the civilian population that they were prepared to do almost anything—including accept the rebels as part of their government—in order to bring an end to the war.” The Lomé Peace Accord granted full amnesty to combatants, permitted 11,000 peacekeepers, a DDR program and provided government positions to rebel commanders. Sankoh became the vice president and was given full control of the country’s diamond resources as chairman of the Commission for the Management of Strategic Resources, National Reconstruction and Development.

Kabbah did not want to accept a unified government but was pressured by President Clinton and the US government. The US Department of State sent negotiators to secure the peace agreement including Jesse Jackson who appallingly compared Sankoh to Nelson Mandela. This gave discredit to the agreement, along with Jackson’s supportive relationship with Charles Taylor. The RUF was permitted to form a political party but had to dissolve its forces. While the Lomé Peace Accord also established a Truth and Reconciliation Commission in order to address human rights violations, civilians were understandably displeased with the agreement.

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as Sankoh and other leaders were exempt from prosecution by the Special Court for Sierra Leone.\textsuperscript{251} Kabbah even displayed his personal dissent of the accord by bringing a child who had lost an arm to the RUF to the signing ceremony.\textsuperscript{252}

“As far as security issues were concerned, the accord recognized the role of the miniscule United Nations Observer Mission in Sierra Leone (UNOMSIL) in monitoring the ceasefire and requested ECOWAS to revise ECOMOG’s mandate to include peacekeeping, security, protection of the UNOMSIL observers and disarmament of combatants.”\textsuperscript{253} Not only were RUF leaders and Sankoh absolved of prosecution, the peace agreement, contradictory of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, stipulated that no judicial action could be taken against the RUF, AFRC, SLA or CDF for any of their actions.\textsuperscript{254}

While Sankoh supported the peace agreement, his chief field commander, Sam Bockarie, refused to disarm.\textsuperscript{255} It is believed by some that this was a tactic created in order for rebels to abstract diamonds from mines under their control.\textsuperscript{256} “By the end of 1999, less than 10,000 of the 45,000 combatants had disarmed at the demobilization centers.”\textsuperscript{257}

During 2000, the RUF managed to disarm UN peacekeepers and 100 Guinean soldiers during the process in which they were actually supposed to disarm.\textsuperscript{258} In response, the UN Security Council strengthened UNAMSIL’s numbers to 11,100, yet the situation only continued to decline.\textsuperscript{259} On May 1st, ECOMOG’s mission was terminated and the RUF was encouraged to advance openly with the exit of regional peacekeepers.\textsuperscript{260} UN peacekeeping prisoners soon escalated to over 500 and the death of 11.\textsuperscript{261} The situation was fortunately saved from turning into complete chaos by a British force of 700 paratroopers and seven Royal Navy warships.\textsuperscript{262}

“The arrival of British forces, ostensibly present to evacuate British and other foreign nations, proved to be not only a significant support to the Kabbah government, but a major psychological boost to Freetown’s population.”\textsuperscript{263} Civil societies conducted a massive protest on May 8th, demanding that the peacekeeping hostages be released and an end to the fighting.\textsuperscript{264} Tens of thousands of people crowded at Sankoh’s home.\textsuperscript{265} In order to prevent violent acts, Nigerian soldiers that were a part of UNAMSIL fired warning shots, but this only created a panic and caused people to enter the house.\textsuperscript{266} “Sankoh’s bodyguards then opened fire indiscriminately,
killing seventeen demonstrators and wounding scores more.”

Sankoh escaped via a back entrance while wearing women’s clothing. He was later found “naked and beaten” on May 18th by government soldiers who saved him from a mob.

Sankoh’s capture led to the release of the UNAMSIL prisoners and their increase to 17,500 troops in 2001. Reinforced, the UNAMSIL contingent, led by the independent British expeditionary force, took the offensive in early July, freeing some of its comrades still held hostage by the RUF in Kailahun, recapturing the strategic town of Masiaka and clearing illegal checkpoints in the Occra Hills by August. During 2001, Sierra Leone gradually reached a peaceful state as Guinean forces isolated the RUF. Charles Taylor, by then the president of Liberia, also disengaged his forces from the RUF after the Security Council initiated sanctions on his regime.

On January 17, 2002, UNAMSIL celebrated with an arms destruction ceremony. However, up to 5,000 RUF soldiers had not been disarmed and instead left to join other conflicts, predominately the Liberia civil war. The following day, Kabbah officially announced the end of the war. Elections were held on May 14th with over 2.3 million people registered to vote, granting Kabbah with 70% of the vote. The APC won 27 parliamentary seats and the SLPP won 83. The new political party of the former rebels, the RUF-P, won only 1.7% of casted votes.

At the opening of the Sierra Leonean third republic’s first session of the first parliament, President Kabbah announced:

“All Sierra Leoneans, at home and abroad, suffered considerable loss. Some lost their cherished and loved ones, others their belongings, and still others, their dignity and honor. The bitter experience of armed conflict will linger in our memories for as long as we need to remind ourselves of the mistakes that should never ever make again.”

Post-Conflict

While peace was finally accomplished in 2002, the conflict left over half of the country’s population internally displaced or as refugees in neighboring states. Additionally, hundreds of...
thousands of people had been left deliberately mutilated and amputated. With the country’s economic collapse, nearly 75% of Sierra Leone was living in extreme poverty.

The blanket amnesty was criticized by those in Sierra Leone and in the international community, including executive director of the Africa division of Human Rights Watch Peter Takirambudde, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Mary Robinson and Amnesty International. Some pointed to the UN under scrutiny for facilitating the peace agreement amnesty measures. While the accord did have those who defended it, such as Special Envoy of the UN Secretary-General Francis Okelo, the angst over the dismissal of a decade of atrocities is highly understandable.

President Kabbah responded by requesting that the UN would form a special court “to try and bring to credible justice those members of the RUF and their accomplices responsible for committing crimes against the people of Sierra Leone and for the taking of the United Nations peacekeepers as hostages.” He acknowledged that the peace agreement was formed hastily due to ongoing threats and that the RUF would have refused to sign if it had originally included a provision for judicial action. The Security Council authorized the negotiation with the government to create a special tribunal (Resolution 1315), titled the Special Court for Sierra Leone. It was passed by parliament and signed by Kabbah into law.

Chief Prosecutor David Crane “announced indictments against seven defendants: RUF leader Foday Sankoh; AFRC leader Johnny Paul Koroma; RUF military commanders Sam “Mosquito” Bockarie, Issa Hassan Sesay and Morris Kallon; AFRC member Alex Tamba Brima; and the Sierra Leonean Interior Minister, Chief Sam Hinga Norman, who, as Deputy Defense Minister in the first Kabbah administration led transformed the kamajors into the highly effective Civilian Defense Force.” Four others of the RUF, AFRC and CDF were also arrested and indicted. Charles Taylor was also indicted on 17 counts of crimes against humanity and violations of international humanitarian law. Sankoh died while in custody, along with Bockarie who died while in Liberia by Taylor-loyalists, and Koroma could not be located. Trials did not begin until June 2004 and Norman died during his trial in 2007 before receiving a verdict. “Nine persons were convicted and sentenced to terms of imprisonment ranging from 15 to 52 years,” and are completing their

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sentences at Rwanda’s Mpanga Prison.\textsuperscript{296} Charles Taylor was convicted on 11 counts and sentenced to 50 years in prison.\textsuperscript{297} His legal team called the sentence “clearly excessive” and filed an appeal, which was denied.\textsuperscript{298}

**DDR & Its Failures**

“You were only recognized as somebody if you were carrying a gun. You felt like you belonged. You felt powerful and protected ... Without your gun you were shit.” – Child soldier\textsuperscript{299}

“At the macro-level, and with some justification, Sierra Leone’s DDR process is widely regarded as a success story, and elements of the Sierra Leone ‘model’ are being replicated in neighboring Liberia, in Burundi, and now as far away as Haiti.”\textsuperscript{300} Despite the amount of soldiers who fled to other conflicts, DDR participation was high with the disarmament of 72,490 and the demobilization of 71,043.\textsuperscript{301} In regards to reintegration, 63,545 participated, including 6,845 child soldiers.\textsuperscript{302} Additionally, 46,435 weapons and one million munitions were collected through the program.\textsuperscript{303} DDR programs are beneficial and important to the process in achieving peace and stability. However, its implementation has critical gaps that have been ignored or glossed over by the United Nations and some researchers’ reviews.

While the successes of Sierra Leone’s DDR program should not be dismissed, its failures are extremely significant. The program’s implementation process was repeatedly “stifled” by mistrust, several cease-fire violations by both parties and the continuation of violence.\textsuperscript{304} DDR also suffered from lack of funds by donors and the inability to assist ex-combatants.\textsuperscript{305} “The entire DDR program was estimated to cost some U.S. $50 million. But only U.S. $31.5 million was committed to the World Bank's MDTF, meaning that there was, in fact, a funding shortfall for the DDR program of U.S. $18.5 million.”\textsuperscript{306} Additionally, the anticipated number of disarmed combatants was exceeded by 27,500; adding tension to the already inadequate funds.\textsuperscript{307}

In order to qualify for DDR, participants must be 18 years and older and present a weapon at official posts and would be tested if they had knowledge of weapon assembly and disassembly.\textsuperscript{308} This is incredibly shortsighted as many did not have weapons to turn in, such as the CDF, many were poorly trained and this process left out bush wives and other women.\textsuperscript{309} “In Kono, 1,999 of the total number of Donso militia (CDF), over 45 per cent of them, were

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excluded because of this as the ratio of militia to a weapon was 6:1.”310 Additionally, a significant number of combatants were ineligible for DDR because they possessed shotguns which were not accepted by the program.311 In one district, only 14% of fighters possessed weapons that were deemed acceptable by the DDR program.312 Even though the CDF fought for the government, they were left behind while the RUF was awarded with “incentive packages, jobs training and reintegration benefits.”313

Girls and women were especially discarded during Sierra Leone’s post-conflict reforms.314 Those who were bush wives and had children were ineligible for entry into DDR.315 Girls and women were also unable to participate because they did not have weapons to turn in.316 “There were several reasons why women and girls found themselves without weapons at this critical time, key of which were that their guns were taken away by their commanders and handed to male fighters; and many had used weapons from a communal source not possessing guns themselves.”317 Ex-combatants would even deny that female combatants existed in order to perpetuate the myth that the CDF remained chaste because it would “reverse the perceived magical powers of a fighter’s charms.”318 Absurdly, this prevented women from entering the program.319 For those women who did manage to enter into the DDR system, they continued to experience sexual violence due to poor security in the camps which was ran by men who did not understand gender issues.320

Children who were incapable of proving knowledge of their weapons did not pass the screening process and were sent back to their families without receiving demobilization benefits.321 While girls made up nearly one-third of child soldiers, only 8% of girl soldiers entered the DDR process.322 “This confirmed that the focus of DDR was on the main fighting forces and ‘peripheral’ groups were inadequately catered for.”323

People also complained that the DDR program lacked competence, efficiency and stated issues of corruption.324 The coordination of communication was severely lacking, leaving children and women to depend on their commanders for information on the process which was unsurprisingly fabricated, depriving “some of the most vulnerable groups the full benefit of the program.”325 Photo ID cards distributed did not have a universal format and non-combatants were able to enter the program and steal benefits.326 Civilian clothing and basic necessities were rare to come by
and women did not receive feminine hygiene products. They were told by some DDR officials to use leaves as they used to do in the bush.

The reintegration portion of the DDR process in Sierra Leone “proved the most problematic.” A paper by the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) described reintegration as the “the Achilles heel of DDR.” This segment “falls within the long-term processes of reconciliation, reconstruction, governance reforms and poverty reduction,” all of which have been inadequate since the end of the war. The reintegration process assisted 63,545 former combatants to reenter society, including 6,845 children. While these numbers are impressive, “one in eight ex-combatants did not make it to the reintegration phase.” Persistent problems lied with border security threats, partners lacking training and trainers being unqualified and unmotivated.

“Skills acquisition through apprenticeships and vocational training was seen as a key component in keeping ex-combatants from returning to violence and to help ease their re-entry into the local economy.” However, reintegrating people into an impoverished economic situation created a severe challenge. DDR officials and other researchers have stated that ex-combatants had problems transitioning their training into employment because of their high expectations and refusal to accept “unattractive options.” However, this ignores that the process lacked a proper planning strategy and training was shortened from six months to two-three months. Many participants complained of delays in receiving their toolkits, some waiting six months, and being forced to sell them in order to survive.

The complaints of participants should be seriously taken into consideration and severe gaps, such as the omission of tens of thousands of combatants including women and children, should be reformed in order to improve such processes. Unfortunately, even a decade forward we continue to see these mistakes repeated not only in Sierra Leone but in other DDR programs. Those who have put Sierra Leone’s program on a pedestal do so because of the high amount of fighters that were disarmed and that the country has relatively remained peaceful. However, a report that interviewed ex-combatants provides a crucial point in arguing that DDR did not play an important role:

“Success in post-war reintegration is largely the result of the war coming to an end. The RUF was defeated decisively; the country was tired of fighting; and there was broad
acceptance of the terms of the peace. DDR programs, while important, may not have been determinative in giving rise to a stable post-war outcome.”

However, the fact that the experiences of participants and non-participants of DDR hardly differ could be explained by the possibility that non-participants were more easily accepted back into society or that DDR had “positive spill-over effects” that benefited non-participants as well.

“There is little evidence that needs assessment and socio-economic profiling of ex-combatants was properly surveyed in Sierra Leone to determine sectors where sustainable economic livelihoods could be built for ex-combatants.” ISS acknowledged this issue by describing ex-combatant training as “blanket training in one or two vocational areas” that forms a saturation of entrepreneurs that have no market for them to gain employment. Many former members of the RUF were also sent to areas to work where they were away from their families and there was no demand. “Further, alternatives to violence were not created for the majority of ex-combatants who are also among the poorest groups in Sierra Leone – a potentially worrying situation.”

Persistent Issues

Despite the country’s economic growth over the last ten years, Sierra Leone relies heavily on aid. The country has been unable to achieve economic recovery for a variety of reasons. “These include a largely unchanged economic structure at low levels of productivity, with agriculture remaining the mainstay of the economy (46% of Gross Domestic Product) and providing employment for about 75% of the rapidly growing population; inequalities in life expectancy, gender, education and income; an inadequate, poorly maintained infrastructure; shortcomings in the business climate despite recent gains; and, as a consequence of these factors, a small private sector.”

Leonard Fofana, MP, reported that soldiers currently serving the Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces are experiencing “poor accommodation, delay in the payment of salaries and take-home rations, poor welfare conditions and mobility constrains among several others.” Fofana added that if not seriously addressed, it could significantly affect the security of the country. Police units are also severely understaffed, with only 100 officers serving nine jurisdictions. Borders remain porous and boundary disputes are common in the Kono district. Ambassador Patrick Foyah stated these problems as “worrisome and grave especially considering the volatile

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nature of Kono district.”353 Because the government was unable to pay for soldier’s pensions, the UK’s Agency for International Development had to step in and provide the payments in order to avoid having former combatants in poverty on the streets with a “grievance against the government.”354

Marginalization of Women

“In their eyes we will always be rebels.” – Female ex-fighter355

In addition to the issues of the DDR process, women continue to face marginalization and stigma in society. “Many found themselves back in a society that, if not openly, at least covertly ostracized them, or even actively discouraged them from speaking about the war, about what had happened to them, or what they had done.”356 Additionally, in post-conflict society, many referred to those from the ‘bush’ in negative connotations along with rebels, identifying them as “animals, demons and beasts – they were not human.”357 UNAMSIL took no effort to encourage women to disarm and led women to have a negative view of disarmament due to them being shamed by the public.358

Because of the massive amount of rapes that occurred during the war, it became a common occurrence after the conflict ended.359 “A Human Rights Watch report on Sierra Leone […] pointed to this, arguing that because of its prevalence, rape became less stigmatizing.”360 Additionally, girls experience severe shame and anger and are stigmatized by their communities.361 In the Kono district, women turned to squatting in abandoned houses, live on the streets and often turn to prostitution.362 Women who have sex with men outside of marriage, whether voluntary or not, are “considered to no longer have value in society.”363 Those who have returned home have been verbally and physically abused by their communities and families.364 Society sees that any participation in the war, even for those abducted, meant that they, too, were rebels.365

Mental Health Crisis

Sierra Leone’s past has created a barbaric image of violence that is synonymous with the country’s national identity.366 “In this regard, Sierra Leone’s collective historical memory has been scarred by the trauma of war and, in a sense, reprogrammed only in short-term mode.”367

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367 (Ojukutu-Macauley and Rashid)
Because of Sierra Leone’s lack of resources, especially for mental health, the country has a small amount of mental health workers and only two psychiatrists, one being Dr. Edward Nahim. Recruiting people to enter the mental health field is extremely difficult in all African countries as it is highly stigmatized. According to Dr. Nahim, the civil war and Ebola outbreak has “resulted in serious psychological problems such as post-traumatic stress disorder, psychosis and depression.” He believes that these issues can develop further illegal activity, use of drugs, stigmatization and poverty.

According to a Ministry of Health and Sanitation and WHO survey in Sierra Leone, “more than 700,000 people are with severe mental health problems needing medical treatment [and] more than 350,000 psychotic patients [are] induced by drugs and alcohol abuse. In response, the government has decentralized the health sector and WHO is developing a national mental health policy.

However, 80% of hospitals were destroyed by the RUF during the war and the current facilities cannot keep up with the psychiatric problems that need immediate attention. A nurse at Kissy Mental Hospital stated that drug addiction has increased among children and that psychiatric patients are left out on the streets. Those who are identified as having mental health issues experience social isolation, lose their jobs, lose their dignity and are even ostracized by their families.

Dr. Nahim states that the health ministry needs to provide more for those with mental health conditions by “providing community based services, respecting people’s autonomy, including their right to make their own decisions about their treatment and care, and ensuring access to good quality care which promotes their human rights.” But these improvements appear far down the road when Sierra Leone’s only psychiatric hospital remains in poor condition and is referred to as a dumping ground for the dying.

Sierra Leone gained its second psychiatrist earlier this year, Stephen Sevalie, who works for the armed forces. Sevalie states that “because we have so few professional resources, people are used to understanding mental illness in their own way and most would never even think of coming to a hospital for psychiatric treatment.” In addition to rampant drug use, people crowd bars that sell cheap liquor and roam the streets, begging out of desperation. Health programs
that were provided after the war were only temporary and international donors cared less about mental health because of the long progress and inability to see results.\footnote{Brown}

**Conclusion**

The history of Sierra Leone has shown that its problems go much further back than before its independence. Unfortunately, the years of trauma from a civil war and plague have formed a nation to have neither compassion nor unity. Researchers and officials frequently point to Sierra Leone as a triumph and argue against the country reentering conflict.

Yet recently the “Minister of Finance and Economic Development, Momodu Kargbo said […] that the government of Sierra Leone considers extreme poverty as a prevalence of injustice and a serious threat to national security.”\footnote{A. R. Thomas} The lack of mental health services, payment and proper conditions of soldiers, marginalization and disenfranchisement, severe drug abuse, a horrible economy and a society that struggles with reintegration and empathy all make Sierra Leone highly susceptible to becoming a hotbed of violence once again.

Kargo has stated that the government has been making efforts over the last year to reduce poverty and provide protection for certain groups, such as women.\footnote{A. R. Thomas} However, more immediate action needs to take place and cannot be done without international aid. While the government of Sierra Leone is working with the World Bank in order to receive financial help to build the country’s private sector, “critics of the government have denounced the administration for relying on donor partners to maintain its economy as unsustainable; and that the World Bank’s new approach of financing development puts poverty reduction at risk.”\footnote{A. R. Thomas}

Not only is Sierra Leone susceptible to another conflict, but with the increase of al-Qaeda activity in neighboring Mali,\footnote{Guitta} it is crucial to acknowledge how this may impact the country. Extreme poverty, lack of resources and a general mistrust of the government could make Sierra Leone a prime candidate to be easily influenced by al-Qaeda. Additionally, diamonds have greatly funded the group throughout the years\footnote{Farah} and if their territory continues to grow in Africa, diamond producing countries become more vulnerable. As problems continue to grow in Africa, the US should act more proactively and understand that if ignored, they will eventually have to deal with tactics that the RUF invented. “While the sobel phenomenon […] may appear to be an African problem, the Western world’s increasing involvement in fighting terrorists on that continent make it one America’s military forces might encounter. Unfortunately, it could add a significant layer of complexity to US operations as American troops attempt to differentiate allies from enemies. In Africa, sometimes they are one and the same.”\footnote{Feldman and Arrous}
While there is research that states that participants’ of the DDR program had “unrealistic expectations” and this may be true to a degree, evidence of marginalization, denial of entry for those who needed it and the inability to protect and provide basic necessities shows that the program was inept. This program may have brought peace that was direly needed but its recognition of being one of the most successful programs in the world is questionable when thousands were left behind and even those who participated continue to struggle in a failing state. Countries like Sierra Leone are unlikely to have the capability of reintegrating ex-combatants.  

“The tangible benefits of DDR in Sierra Leone seem scant. Little attention has been paid to whether or not the program was similarly successful at the micro or individual level, that is, whether DDR, with related programming, was human security oriented in its design and implementation.” A case study found that “the encampment period was widely viewed to be too short to effect any substantial and sustained change in behavior and attitudes, and was, in some cases, certainly too short to break up existing command and control structures amongst the armed factions.” Even five years after the war ended, commanders still maintained control over their supporters.  

It is stated by the accord’s supporters that without blanket amnesty the country would have continued the conflict, yet it is difficult to determine how true this is. Even after the Lome Agreement was signed and instated, several RUF groups refused to disarm and continued with violence, even shooting down a UN helicopter. It is understandable that in order to bring peace, sacrifices and compromises must be made. But for the 70,000 who died and the hundreds of thousands who remain mutilated and traumatized, justice has hardly been served. By offering full amnesty and government positions to those who started a horrific war and were in charge of the worst atrocities, how can a society actually achieve peace? Ignoring a decade of extreme violence not only leaves a nation psychologically traumatized even further, it also leaves the door wide open for future conflict. The population of Sierra Leone is not only suffering from mental and physical strife, but they have also been thrown into extreme poverty and show no sign of significantly improving any time soon. What is there to hold the population back, whether victims or former perpetrators, from fighting against their suffering and disenfranchisement? What is deterring them from taking justice into their own hands?  

While elections have continued to be peaceful and successful since the end of conflict, the persistent status of a poor economy and struggling population puts the nation at a great security risk. While civilians may be less likely to reinstate violence after what they have experienced, soldiers are ever more likely to commit another coup or rebel while they live in poor conditions and infrequently receive pay. The mental health crisis adds to this risk greatly and should be taken seriously by the international community. Programs in Sierra Leone have been frequently  

389 (Kilroy)  
390 (Meek and Malan)  
391 (Solomon and Ginifer)  
392 (Solomon and Ginifer)  
393 (Solomon and Ginifer)  
394 (Rashid)  
395 (UNDP, About Sierra Leone)
inadequate or only temporary; unable or unwilling to address severe issues head on. “Sierra Leone is a country not just of amputated limbs; nine years of war have left the children with amputated minds.” Reforming the mental health sector should be a top priority and receive more attention and funding. Ignoring trauma has only led the country to have severe problems with drug addiction, rape, violence, illegal activity, stigmatization and lack of empathy. According to Chris Coulter, none of the humanitarian efforts in post-conflict Sierra Leone that address gender relations acknowledge the violent male culture and only focus on the victims. It is extremely alarming and disheartening to see that even after 15 years, Sierra Leone’s reformation continues to be meager.

We should learn lessons from Clinton’s desire to stay out of entanglements in Africa that led to conflicts like Rwanda and Sierra Leone. Ignoring root causes of conflict and early onsets of violence lead to severe wars, loss of resources, costly reconstruction efforts, the increase of the disenfranchised to join rebel or terrorist groups and, of course, the loss of human lives. While the people of Sierra Leone are certainly strong in spirit, the country needs proper programs and assistance to pull themselves out of poverty and trauma so they can become a functioning society.

Sierra Leone is a country that is exponentially rich in natural resources and yet the Western world has been the only party to reap the benefits. Even if Western nations, such as the US, only want to look at Sierra Leone from a security standpoint, they should see the potential for Sierra Leone to either become a great nation that rises from the ashes or comprehend the potential for it to become another failed state under the control of violence. “As the international community shifts its attention to other conflicts, drawing in outsiders to influence the government will become more difficult and could potentially require a return to violence.”

Using Sierra Leone’s DDR program as a model for future interventions should be highly questioned. Regardless of one’s view of DDR in Sierra Leone, it is clear that a significant portion of combatants were left out, there was little to reintegrate to and the impact has been inconsequential. Defining the situation currently in Sierra Leone as ‘stable’ would be a gross oversight and a complete disregard of its people and their persistent struggles.

The Stockholm Initiative on Disarmament Demobilization and Reintegration states, “when implemented, the DDR programme should ideally influence and contribute to a secure environment that can provide minimum basic conditions to enable long-term development without the immediate threat of violent conflicts.” Based on this definition of success, Sierra Leone’s program has proven inept at providing such conditions based on its consistent post-conflict status. To describe the actions of UNAMSIL, ECOMOG and other parties involved in the peace process as “outstanding” and consider it the “best practice example throughout the world of a successful disarmament, demobilization [and] reintegration programme” is

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396 (Sweeney)
397 (Coulter)
398 (Pham)
399 (Humphreys and Weinstein)
400 (Banholzer)
401 (United Nations, United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone: Fact Sheet 1: Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration)
preposterous when examining their inability to provide security or basic necessities, their heinous involvement with committing atrocities and the abuse against women and ex-combatants in their care. Continuing to overlook the security risks by praising the DDR program while ignoring its gaps and its deplorable outcome, the situation in Sierra Leone remains dire and is at high risk of, once again, engaging in violence.
References


