**SUMMARY OF THE SIERRA LEONE CIVIL WAR (1991-2002)**

**A PROJECT DONE BY OPURUM IJEOMA**

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**YOUTUBE VIDEOS**

1. **Africa's Civil Wars; Sierra Leone Documentary.**

* **Author: ifreeyourmind**
* **Upload: 2014**

1. **The True Story of Blood Diamonds**

* **Author: Documentary Warehouse**
* **Upload: 2017.**
  1. **Introduction**

At the beginning of the first video, the then president of Sierra Leone President Ahmed Tejan Kabbah, addressing Sierra Leoneans telling them that the day when the peace Accord was signed, was a great day. Telling them that the war had come to an end and there will be no no more bloodshed. He then goes ahead to carry a little baby girl who lost her right hand saying “ you see this child, she’s going to grow up without her right hand. This is the product of Wars”. Thereby urging the people to embrace peace.

In the same video, the leader of the RUF Foday Sankoh also spoke saying “the armed struggle which we started in the 23rd March 1991, has been painful for all of us for too long. We had lived in Sierra Leone in which the corrupt government held majority of the people at ransom. Because of this, violence erupted in the society.....”.

The Sierra Leone Civil War was an armed conflict in the West African country of Sierra Leone from 1991 t0 2002. The war began on March 23, 1991, when the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) under Foday Sankoh, with support of Liberian rebel leader Charles Taylor and his group, the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NFPL), attempted to overthrow the government of Sierra Leonean President Joseph Momah. The Sierra Leone Civil War was one of the bloodiest in Africa resulting in more than fifty thousand people dead and half a million displaced in a nation of four million people. The conflict was particularly violent and long because both the RUF and the Sierra Leone government were often funded by “blood diamonds” mined with slave labor.

During the first year of the war, the RUF took control of the diamond-rich territory in eastern and southern Sierra Leone. On April 29, 1992, President Joseph Momah was ousted in military coup led by Captain Valentine Strasser who created the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC). Strasser said the corrupt Momah could not resuscitate the economy, provide for the people of Sierra Leone, and repel the rebel invaders.

The rebels terrorised the people, believing that they voted and supported a corrupt government Their motto was “No more slaves, no more masters. Power and wealth to the people “. Cutting off their (civilians) hands and legs because ‘they used them to vote for an exploitative government’.

* 1. **Causes of the Sierra Leone Civil War**

**Sierra Leone and its Diamonds:** in initiating the civil war, it is quite clear that diamonds played an essential part in the war by offering the RUF an invaluable funding source to sustain its warfare. With the growing interests of both parties – the RUF and government soldiers – in illegal diamond-mining, battles often occurred over diamond-abundant areas.

The RUF is estimated to have made an approximate profit of 200 million dollars a year between 1991 and 1999 through the illicit diamond trade. These illicit diamonds are widely known to have been traded with Charles Taylor in return for arms and ammunitions, which were later falsely identified as Liberian in origin and then legitimately exported abroad.

Although diamonds played a significant role in financing the war, this factor solely cannot explain the initial intention of actors involved in the conflict. Rather, some of the problems caused by the abundant diamond reserve are more useful to explain the structural inequality in Sierra Leonean society which later fed into the war. For instance, unequal benefits arising from diamond extraction were augmented as the ownership of diamond mines and mining licenses had been mostly given to the ruling families and loyal supporters of the ruling regimes. Thus, this economic inequality led to growing frustration among the population who were excluded from the benefits. To make matters worse, the Sierra Leone government was not able to properly collect tax from the diamond sector. The low purchase price of the Government Diamond Office (GDO) encouraged smuggling and, as a result, failed to increase tax revenues necessary for empowering civil sectors including armies.

In order to understand the relationship between the war and the diamonds, it is essential to note that ; although diamonds played a significant role in financing the war, this factor solely cannot explain the initial intention of actors involved in the conflict. Rather, some of the problems caused by the abundant diamond reserve are more useful to explain the structural inequality in Sierra Leonean society which later fed into the war. For instance, unequal benefits arising from diamond extraction were augmented as the ownership of diamond mines and mining licenses had been mostly given to the ruling families and loyal supporters of the ruling regimes. Thus, this economic inequality led to growing frustration among the population who were excluded from the benefits. To make matters worse, the Sierra Leone government was not able to properly collect tax from the diamond sector. The low purchase price of the Government Diamond Office (GDO) encouraged smuggling and, as a result, failed to increase tax revenues necessary for empowering civil sectors including armies.

**History of ‘Grievance’**

The history of Sierra Leone is a product of mixed grievances from its colonial period. A two-class society with a weak bureaucracy was established during British colonial rule, thereby sowing the seeds for the later popular discontents. Post-colonial mismanagement, particularly in the government of Siaka Stevens (1967-1984), even made the already weak state system completely collapse. As a consequence, the young population both in cities and rural areas became even more marginalised from their society, without access to proper education and employment. This fuelled political and economic grievances against the government and ruling classes. This section will examine how those grievances were generated in Sierra Leonean society.

However, the ‘Legacy of British Colonial Rule ‘ played an important role. The modern history of Sierra Leone goes back to 1787, when the Black Poor, mostly former soldiers from the British army, settled on the northern end of the Sierra Leone peninsula. After the area of Freetown and its environs became a Crown Colony of Britain in 1808, Sierra Leone was used as a principal navy base for a British anti-slavery squadron operating in western African waters.

The discriminatory aspects of the colonial period resulted from and were strengthened by the British tradition of indirect rule. Britain recognised only the Crown Colony as part of the British Empire while dividing the Protectorate into many small ‘chiefdoms’ and then controlling them indirectly. Under this rule, instead of establishing a strong centralised bureaucracy, the colonial government allowed the most important chiefs, known as Paramount Chiefs, to have considerable power – i.e. ‘decentralized despotism’.

Under British protection, the chieftaincy became a lifetime and inheritable position, and the chiefs played principal roles in local economic development and exerted real authority over the indigenous population by enforcing their customary rights.

**Marginalised Youth**

Shrinking opportunities for education apparently made the young generation increasingly marginalised from their society. the number of students registered in secondary schools increased from 16,414 in 1969 to 96,709 in 1990. However, only about 60,000 were in paid employment by 1985, and the situation in job markets deteriorated; even university graduates found it difficult to secure jobs in the public sector by 1990, whilst the private sector was also rapidly downsizing. In this period or even before, many middle-class students and school drop-outs became associated with poorer alienated youths in urban areas. This created the general circumstances enabling student protest to move beyond campuses particularly in 1977.

The youths who were not in school, had the only option of semi- substantial and commercial agriculture, and trying to find jobs in the urban informal sector. It was hard to differentiate the motives of the rival combatants because many of them shared similar opinions in a rationale for participation in the war – i.e. political corruption and lack of education and jobs. The interview with one former RUF combatant, who ‘did not join the rebel completely voluntarily but neither was bluntly forced’, clearly shows the resentment of young people against the whole society and what they really wanted.

**The Formation of the RUF and its Invasion of Sierra Leone**

It was in August 1987 that Sankoh left to Libya for insurgency training, where he met his future RUF co-founders, Kanu and Mansaray: as the PANAFU members, Kanu was also ‘a founding member of Future Shock club and a graduate of Njala University College’, and Rashid was ‘an activist from Freetown east end, who had left the country in 1986 to join the MPLA in the fight against UNITA in Angola’. Originally, the PANAFU congress discussed the issue of sending recruits to Libya on behalf of the organisation, but the majority was against the enterprise. Kanu and Mansaray were among those who were finally expelled from the union as a result of their support for the move to Libya. Once rejected by the PANAFU, the project became a matter of individual choice; in the end, there were three groups, not more than thirty five men, sent to Libya from July 1987 to January 1988 including Sankoh and the two former PANAFU members.

Initially, the RUF was seen as a bunch of individuals who had returned from military training in Bengahzi, with a collective leadership of three; Kanu, Mansaray and Sankoh. The three travelled a lot in Sierra Leone and Liberia to recruit combatants and open a link with the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), and eventually by 1989, they managed to make an informal deal with Charles Taylor to help him in return for his military assistance. Even though there is no specific evidence that ‘any Sierra Leonean took part in the initial NPFL attack on Nimba county in December 1989’, some RUF members, notably Kanu and Mansaray, allegedly participated in NPFL battles by November 1990.

**External Assistance**

Though it was originally a civil war, the bloody conflict in Sierra Leone was also closely intertwined with varied external factors prevalent in West African politics. First, as widely known through the recent conviction of Taylor, the civil war in Sierra Leone cannot be explained separately from the Liberian civil war. Although some of the charges could have been exaggerated by the Sierra Leone government for its sake during the war and repeated by the media without thorough consideration. Taylor’s supplies of arms to the RUF and the participation of the NPFL in the Sierra Leone civil war are no longer controversial; in this context, it is significant to examine why Taylor decided to assist the RUF in waging the war.

Sankoh and Taylor are thought to have first met in Ghana in 1987 and then again in Libya in 1988, but it is uncertain how seriously Taylor regarded Sankoh at that point. In 1989, Taylor, who had already secured his forces, visited Freetown to request the endorsement of President Momoh for ‘the use of Sierra Leone as a base to launch his armed insurgency’ in Liberia. His request was, however, rejected summarily and, to make things worse, he was detained at Pandemba Road prison.

There is another major external factor which should not be disregarded: that is Libya. In light of the early influence of Gaddafi’s Green Book on Sierra Leone students’ movement and, more practically, the military training offered to the three co-founders of the RUF in Benghazi, it is obvious that the Libya connection laid the foundation for the emergence of the RUF. Yet it is controversial how deeply Libya was involved in assisting the RUF except providing the military training programmes to Sierra Leone rebels.

**CRITICISM**

The Sierra Leoneans believed that Nigeria ‘s intervention in the war was part of an economic strategy. According to them Nigera sought to tie its oil and gas to Sierra Leone natural resources, because the future of Nigeria as a regional industrial power relied on the economic ties. Nigeria had political, private and commercial interests in Sierra Leone political affairs, especially in irons and diamonds.

Secondly, the Sierra Leone soldier did little to nothing to protect the citizens. It was so bad to the point that the soldiers were referred to as “sobels “ which was a nickname for soldiers who had turned themselves to rebels. The alliance between the rebels and the government posed a serious problem. This led to the emergence of the civilian defence armies called the “Kamajors” in the south.

Lastly, the rebels claimed that they were fighting against the corrupt government. But in actual sense, the were fighting against the citizens and the sad part was that the used the diamonds gotten from the mines of the civilians to fuel their ammunition.

**1.3 CONCLUSION**

The Sierra Leone civil war was the result of varied interactions between structural problems in Sierra Leone society which increased grievances among people and, accordingly, led to the emergence of the RUF. Although diamonds seemingly played a significant role in financing the war once it started, diamonds more likely contributed to corrupting state institutions in the pre-war period, thereby increasing grievance, rather than directly triggering the conflict. The problems of marginalised youth following the collapse of patrimonial society were also serious issues: without proper education and employment, many young people were left vulnerable to be easily recruited to the rebel forces. Lastly, the RUF was not merely mindless and violent bandits without any legitimate political cause as widely believed. The early co-leadership reveals some roots of radical student movements in the earlier period, and by successfully eliminating these roots, Sankoh consolidated his power and conducted the war in his own ruthless way.

Even though the war had ended, the Kamajors soldiers are still fighting with the sobels.

**REFERENCE**

* YouTube; Africa's Civil Wars; Sierra Leone Documentary. YouTube page (ifreeyourmind, 2014; an hour long video).
* YouTube; The True Story of Blood Diamonds. YouTube page (Documentary Warehouse, 2017; also an hour long video)
* **Abdullah, I 1998, ‘Bush path to destruction: the origin and character of the Revolutionary United Front/Sierra Leone’, The Journal of Modern African Studies, vol. 36, no. 2, pp. 203-235.**
* Davies, R 1996, ‘The Sierra Leone situation: the spill-over of the Liberian civil war into Sierra Leone: peace-making and peace-keeping possibilities,” report, UN Institute for Training and Research/International Peace Academy, New York.