The Sierra Leone Civil War and the Remaking of ECOWAS

Ismail Rashid
Vassar College


The destructive and interrelated conflicts of Liberia (1989-1996; 1999-2003) and Sierra Leone (1991-2001) reenergized citizens in the two countries and reawakened the members of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to the challenges and opportunities facing their region in the twenty-first century. The humanitarian tragedy and regional security threat generated by the two conflicts shocked regional leaders out of their general complacency to the everyday plight of ordinary West Africans. Led by Nigeria, ECOWAS members provided significant resources and military personnel to minimize loss of lives and restore political stability in Liberia and Sierra Leone.¹ Shifting their focus from economic integration to regional security, West African leaders mobilized diplomatically and militarily to contain and resolve the conflicts.

The wars in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and later Guinea Bissau spectacularly exposed the limits of national and security calculations based on the protection of inherited colonial borders, and the fallacy that regional economic development and integration could be successful without democratic governance and human security. They called into question the sovereignty of the three states, the processes of regionalization in West Africa, and their place in a security-conscious post-Cold War global environment. The efforts of Nigeria and other ECOWAS governments to ensure the survival of Sierra Leone and Liberia as viable sovereign states would lead to the redefinition and broadening of the vision and mandate of ECOWAS.²

As part of the new vision and mandate, ECOWAS members reconfigured the priorities, policies, and governance mechanisms of the organization. They developed a
Security Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Resolution and Peacekeeping in 1999 and A Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance to encourage the democratic governance and coordination of the different national security agencies in West Africa to ensure regional stability.iii The regional security vision advanced by ECOWAS was particularly crucial in the case of Sierra Leone, where the various national security agencies had become disloyal, factionalized or disintegrated in the course of the conflict, and had turned their guns on civilians and international peacekeepers. Despite its bold regional vision, lack of political will and resources has retarded ECOWAS in its operationalizing of the Security Mechanism and the Protocol in different member states. In Sierra Leone, after contributing to the strengthening of the UN peacekeeping mission, it lost the initiative on security reform in Sierra Leone to the British-led International Military Assistance Training Team (IMATT). Nonetheless, IMATT maintains a commitment to the regional security architecture envisioned by ECOWAS, especially in the training of the Sierra Leonean troops for the standby force. This article discusses the regional and national dynamics of the conflict and postwar reconstruction of Sierra Leone, especially the security sector.

Regional Significance of the Sierra Leone conflict

The broad outlines of the Sierra Leone conflict have been extensively recorded and are well known. On March 1991, an obscure group of disaffected Sierra Leonean youth, supported by Liberian and Burkinabé mercenaries, crossed the Liberian border and attacked Bomaru, a small village in the eastern region of Sierra Leone. The group, the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), claimed it wanted to remove the All Peoples Congress (APC) government from power.iv Over the next year, a three-pronged military response emerged to counter the RUF insurgency. ECOWAS, fearing a regional expansion of the conflict, redeployed some of its troops from its monitoring group (ECOMOG) in Liberia to Sierra Leone to help beef up national security.v The APC government of Major-General Joseph Saidu Momoh dispatched soldiers to crush the insurgency. The government also actively supported a new faction in the Liberian conflict, the United Liberian Movement for Democracy (ULIMO), in its military activities against the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) and the RUF on the Sierra Leone side of the border.vi The military response by the ECOWAS and the Sierra Leone government failed to secure the Momoh regime in the short-run or contain the RUF insurgency and the disintegration of the Sierra Leone state and society in the long-run.vii

The young army commanders, who had undertaken most of the fighting against the RUF, overthrew Momoh in 1992. The youth and the majority of the people in Sierra Leone enthusiastically received the coup. The coup-makers instituted a junta called the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC) under the leadership of Captain Valentine Strasser; they promised a rapid conclusion to the war, reduction in corruption, and end to media repression. Apart from drawing on the support of ECOMOG troops, the NPRC hired foreign mercenaries from Nepal (Gurkhas) and South Africa (Executive Outcomes) to help fight the RUF. Despite scoring some military successes, the NPRC failed to end the insurgency. In its four-year reign the junta became corrupt, repressive, and deeply unpopular. Soldiers colluded extensively with the RUF, and several communities across the country organized hunter-militia groups, later renamed the Civil Defense Forces.
(CDF), to resist the RUF insurgents and renegade soldiers. By 1996, the shifting tide of war against the RUF had forced them to the negotiating table in Abidjan, Côte D’Ivoire. The pro-democracy campaign of a resurgent Sierra Leone civil society and different political parties forced the junta to organize multiparty elections, which led to formation of the Sierra Leone Peoples Party (SLPP) government headed by Ahmad Tejan Kabbah.

Neither the Abidjan Accord nor the election of a civilian government ended the civil war. The RUF kept fighting, and the soldiers refused to stay out of national politics. On May 25, 1997, renegade soldiers forced the newly elected Kabbah government into exile in neighboring Guinea, and purportedly set up a new junta, the Armed Forces Redemption Council (AFRC), headed by Major Johnny Paul Koroma, who had been awaiting trial for treason at the Pademba Road Prisons. The AFRC invited the RUF to form a united movement and a “people’s army;” the alliance received neither national nor international recognition during its nine-month occupation of Freetown. ECOMOG troops, supported by the CDF, eventually dislodged the renegade AFRC soldiers and their RUF allies from Freetown in 1998, but the alliance would reinvade the capital with equally horrendous consequences in less than a year. ix

Fresh battalions of mainly Nigerian ECOMOG troops and CDF once more defended the city, and pushed out the renegade alliance from the Western Area peninsular. Unable to resolve the conflict militarily, even with the support from ECOMOG, the Sierra Leone government eventually negotiated and signed a peace agreement with the RUF in Lomé, Togo in July 1999. x The agreement paved way for the seven-year deployment of the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL), a force of over 17,000 multinational troops, which included a substantial number of ECOMOG troops. UNAMSIL survived the initial attempts by the West Side Boys (a faction of the AFRC) xi and the RUF to derail its peacekeeping mission, and eventually succeeding in facilitating the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of over 70,000 ex-fighters, securing the country and extending government authority nationally, and in supporting the organization of the 2002 national elections.

The full consequences and overall impact of the Sierra Leone war may take a long time to be fully understood. For a small country, the human cost was staggering. It is estimated that armed combatants killed over 100,000 people during the decade-long conflict. They maimed, raped, and brutalized thousands. They utilized children as combatants, drudges, and sexual objects. xii The RUF, adjudged by the Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) as the greatest perpetrators of war crimes against Sierra Leoneans, kidnapped children and adolescents, drugged and forced them to commit unspeakable crimes against the population, and even their own families. The insurgents systematically destroyed public and private infrastructure throughout the country. xiii By 1995, they had succeeded in crippling the production of rutile and bauxite, the major prewar revenue bases of the government, while entrenching themselves in the country’s diamond fields. The war destroyed the economic and social infrastructure of an already impoverished country, and sent it to the bottom rung of the United Nations Human Development Index.

Interpreting the proximate as well as underlying causes of the Sierra Leone conflict has been the subject of contentious debates amongst journalists, politicians, and scholars of different disciplinary persuasions and worldviews. The Sierra Leone war has
been variously interpreted as: a Liberian spillover; a bellwether of post-Cold War new barbarism and environmental disintegration; an example of the rise of African warlordism and a struggle to recreate new market domains; an intergenerational youth conflict for resources and political power, an ill-conceived insurgency of radical university students and the urban lumpenproletariat; and finally, a “greed” driven resource war.\textsuperscript{xiv} The interrogation of the efficacy of these different interpretations has been done elsewhere; this article is more interested in underlining the significance of the conflict for the Sierra Leonean state and the West African sub-region.

The main significance of the overlapping conflicts in Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea Bissau is that they revealed the limits and inherent weaknesses of the postcolonial West African state, and the two-decade old project of regional integration. The conflicts showed the inability of postcolonial governments to forge meaningful social contracts with their populace and to develop commonwealths reflective of the collective interests and aspirations of all citizens within a fiercely competitive global system.\textsuperscript{xv} They also highlighted the predatory nature of the ruling elite of these countries and their incapacity to reproduce themselves without violence.\textsuperscript{xvi} Even before the RUF fired a single shot in 1991, the Sierra Leone president, Joseph Saidu Momoh had conceded that his presidency and the APC regime had failed the nation.\textsuperscript{xvii} In truth a Sierra Leone nation hardly exists. For almost two decades, the regime had repressed its opponents, conducted fraudulent elections, and fostered a cancerous and pervasive culture of corruption and impunity.

The Sierra Leone populace was disconnected from the political system, and the infrastructure of the state was in disrepair. The state was incapable of delivering basic services, potable water, regular electricity, motorable roads, affordable education, accessible health services, and employment opportunities, to the people.\textsuperscript{xviii} By the mid-1980’s, the inability of the APC regime to stimulate economic development and mobilize enough resources to fund their own government made them and the country hostage to World Bank and International Monetary Fund structural adjustment programs and their harsh conditionalities.

Perhaps, the most glaring failure of the postcolonial Sierra Leonean state (as well as that of Liberia, Guinea Bissau, and later Côte d’Ivoire) was its inability to perform the most fundamental function of the modern nation-state, ensuring the security of the state and its inhabitants. Sierra Leonean life was valueless and citizenship meaningless. The national army, which was supposedly responsible for the protection of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the country, crumbled in the face of the RUF insurgency, and perhaps, most egregiously, repeatedly turned its guns on the very state and citizens it had sworn to defend. The decade-long conflict called into question the very ability of the Sierra Leone state to remain a sovereign and autonomous entity.

Just as the war exposed the political limits of the postcolonial West African state, it also exposed the fallacy of national and regional security calculations based on colonial borders. Even though the insurgencies in Liberia and Sierra Leone were driven by immediate national imperatives, they were built upon and they depended on regional networks. In a perverse fashion, the NPFL and the RUF conceived of their greater “revolutionary” enterprise as a pan-West African project that would extend from the Senegal River to the Niger Delta.\textsuperscript{xix} The training, recruitment, and resource networks of the various factions in the Sierra Leone and Liberian conflicts stretched across Sierra Leone, Liberia, Guinea, Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana, Burkina Faso, and Libya.\textsuperscript{xx}
between these countries became frontiers of insurgencies rather than meaningful protective boundaries. Insurgents, mercenaries, small arms and light weapons, and looted resources flowed easily across the different frontiers, albeit with the complicity of more stable governments of some of these countries.\textsuperscript{xiii}

Different West African governments, especially those bordering Sierra Leone and Liberia, found it difficult to control the movement of insurgents within their borders. The problem was compounded by the scale of population displacements within and outside the two countries. Over the duration of the two conflicts, an estimated two million Sierra Leoneans and Liberians were displaced; almost half of these people at various times found themselves strewn across the region from Senegal to Nigeria. Though they found refuge with their West African neighbors, this displaced population also triggered fears of insecurity in their host communities. The specter of refugees reconstituting themselves into armed factions, as demonstrated by ULIMO in Sierra Leone, or providing support for restive dissident factions, as in Guinea and Côte d’Ivoire, haunted many host communities. It is not surprising then that as best as they could, stable West African host governments tended to contain and camp refugees far from national borders, where they could be potential sources of instability.

**Strengthening the State, Revitalizing Regionalism**

The civil wars in Sierra Leone and Liberia reignited the struggle for national democratic governance in both countries, and reenergized the languid process of West African regional integration. In Sierra Leone, the war spurred the long-repressed citizenry to protest the depredations of the RUF and the NPRC junta. Several civic groups sprang up across the country to demand peace and civilian democratic rule by 1995. Two of the most active and prominent civic groups were the Sierra Leone Women’s Movement for Peace (SLWMP) and the National Coordinating Committee for Peace (NCCP), a coalition of over sixty labor, professional and youth organizations, and expatriate Sierra Leone groups. The constitutional reform and (re)democratization process, which had been initiated during the Momoh regime and interrupted by the RUF insurgency and the NPRC coup d’etat of 1992, was restarted from below.\textsuperscript{xxiii} At two popular conferences (Bintumani I and II), civic groups and the now emboldened political parties insisted that the NPRC organize elections and return power to a civilian government, with or without agreement with the RUF.\textsuperscript{xxiii} The brutal hacking of limbs by the RUF and the intimidation of voters by soldiers did not deter the majority of the electorate from participating in the 1996 elections that ushered in the government of Ahmad Tejan Kabbah. The civic campaign for peace and return to multiparty civilian democracy signaled the remobilization of Sierra Leone citizenry, and their reengagement in political processes designed to generate more political openness, political competition, and democratic governance.

This popular democratic reawakening was briefly interrupted when the renegade soldiers turned their guns on the newly elected Kabbah government in 1997. As in 1996, the citizenry steadfastly resisted the new junta and denied it the recognition that it sought locally and internationally. The renegade soldiers and their RUF allies failed to grasp the normative shift that was occurring in Sierra Leone society. They failed to understand that the public opposition to violent seizure of power and popular commitment to democracy were far greater than any apparent disapproval of the omissions of the Kabbah regime.
Similar public disapprobation was directed against the concessions granted by the Kabbah government to the RUF and AFRC at the Lomé peace negotiations in 1999. Sierra Leoneans felt that the violence of the armed factions should not be rewarded with any political concessions.

Ultimately, the decade-long war had posed a fundamental question about the future of state and society in Sierra Leone: Who would be able to enforce its own political vision of the society: the citizens of Sierra Leone or the armed groups? In insisting to be ruled by the ballot rather than the gun, Sierra Leoneans restarted the process of reconstituting their postcolonial nation, hopefully, and in a fashion that would enable them to respond to local, regional as well as international challenges and opportunities. As shown above, the process of reconstituting and democratizing the postcolonial state of Sierra Leone was buttressed by the military contribution of groups (in addition to the loyal segments of the army and the Sierra Leone Police Force), namely ECOMOG, CDF, and UNAMSIL.xxiv

Reconfiguring ECOWAS

By the late 1990s, the conflicts and repeated regional troop deployments in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea Bissau led ECOWAS governments to a number of realizations. First, the conflicts of the 1990s were not simply the old-type localized national violence but complex conflagrations with far-reaching regional implications. Second, in the aftermath of the United Nations and United States disaster in Somalia (UNISOM II) and the disintegration of Yugoslavia, West African security and suffering do not constitute priorities for European and American countries. Initiative and leadership of resolving future regional conflicts would have to come from within rather than outside Africa. Third, the various ECOMOG missions in the 1990s had been reactive, ad-hoc, and plagued with all kinds of problems in their conception, deployment, operation, financing, and oversight. The deployment and operations of the various ECOMOG missions tended to exacerbate rather than ameliorate the different fault lines in the organization, with “anglophone” members frequently at loggerheads with “francophone” members, and smaller countries being suspicious of Nigerian power and hegemonic designs. The conduct of ECOMOG missions varied greatly in the Liberia, Sierra Leone and Bissau conflicts because of the absence of collective or clearly articulated norms, principles, rules, structures and resources for the missions.xxv

These realizations motivated Nigeria, the largest troop contributor and chief financier of the ECOMOG missions in Liberia and Sierra Leone, to push for the creation and adoption of the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping, and Security (hereinafter referred to as Security Mechanism), in 1997, which had been envisaged in the revised ECOWAS Treaty of 1993.xxvi The mechanism was adopted two years later at an ECOWAS summit in 1999. Another Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance was added as an annex to the Mechanism in Dakar in 2001. Both protocols have been described as “epoch making” documents which “[I]f fully implemented could form the basis for prosperity which has eluded the sub-region especially since the end of the Cold War.”xxvii

Until the 1990s ECOWAS security considerations and cooperation had been premised on Cold War realities and a number of “fallacies.” Security was thought of as a state matter and responsibility, and narrowly conceived in terms of institutions and
relations dealing with military, police, customs, and immigration matters. State security was deemed regime security rather than the overall security of the citizenry and the state. Finally, ECOWAS members had regarded threats to state and regime security as externally generated. It is rather ironic that Sierra Leone should be at the crux of the explosion of these fallacies and the normative shift in ECOWAS. In 1981, the country had been the venue for the adoption of the ECOWAS protocol on mutual non-aggression and collective defense of member states against external aggression premised on the principles of non-interference in the internal affairs, and protecting the national territorial sovereignty of members. President Joseph Saidu Momoh and Abass Bundu, the erstwhile Executive Secretary of ECOWAS had invoked the protocol to get ECOMOG deployment in the country in 1992. The situation in Sierra Leone, and Liberia, made the adoption of the new ECOWAS Security Mechanism not only compelling but also urgent.

The Security Mechanism embodied a major paradigmatic shift and extensive structural changes within ECOWAS to meet the new post-Cold War political realities in the region. The Mechanism had three defining features. First, it elaborated a regional peace and security architecture, with clearly defined strategies, rules, and structures, to anticipate, prevent, manage, and resolve conflicts within the sub-region. The notion of security underpinning the architecture was radically different from those underpinning earlier security agreements and arrangements. Second, the mechanism provided a framework for the definition and evolution of new “normative instruments” and “confidence-building measures” to govern regional security cooperation and politics in West Africa. Third, it subordinated the much-cherished principles of non-interference in the internal affairs of individual states and their sovereignty to the principles of supranationalism and humanitarian intervention. The regional impact of the violence, atrocities, and human suffering in Sierra Leone and Liberia had made the much-cherished principle of non-interference in the sovereign affairs of individual countries indefensible and unsustainable.

The peace and security architecture envisioned in the Security Mechanism consists of a number of bodies and institutions, namely a Security and Mediation Council (SMC), Committee of Elders, The Defense and Security Commission, the ECOWAS Standby Force (ESF) and the Regional Early Warning System (REWS). Some of these bodies and institutions had been ad-hoc and emergency political and military instruments created during the different ECOMOG interventions. The SMC, an ad-hoc body originally made of five members, was formalized and expanded to nine members, which were to be elected on a rotational basis. It was expected to meet regularly at the levels of heads of state, ministers, and ambassadors, and to take emergency decisions in crisis situations. The Committee of Elders, drawn from eminent West African personalities, is expected to play an advisory, mediatory, conciliatory and arbitral role. ECOMOG was regularized and transformed into the ECOWAS Standby Force (ESF); each member state was expected to contribute a battalion to the force. The Defense Security Commission, whose membership will be drawn from heads of various national security agencies, is expected to discuss and advise security issues of regional importance to ECOWAS and the SMC. The REWS was expected to have a regional observation and monitoring centre in Abuja with four zonal bureaux headquartered in Banjul, Cotonou, Monrovia and Ouagadougou. The new ECOWAS peace and security architecture privileged human and regional security over that of particular national regimes.
The 2001 Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance deepened regional and human security with democratic governance, social justice, and equitable distribution of national economic resources, a perspective that was very much in tandem with the new international thinking on the nexus between security and development in international circles. A weighty document, the 2001 protocol contained fifty provisions on Constitutional Convergence Principles; Elections, Elections Monitoring and ECOWAS assistance, Role of Armed Forces in a democracy; Poverty Alleviation and Promotion of Social Dialogue; Education, Culture and Religion; Rule of Law, human Rights and Good governance; and Women, Youth and Children.\textsuperscript{xxxii}

The 2001 Protocol extended the normative shift in political values, which had begun with the ECOWAS Declaration of Political Principles in 1991, a document that focused primarily on freedom, popular rights, and democratization.\textsuperscript{xxxiii} It outlined a broad set of constitutional principles that should be shared by member states, including the guarantee of the freedoms of expression, association and representation; the separation of powers, decentralization of state authority, and popular participation in politics; and the establishment of regular elections as the legitimate vehicle to power. The 2001 Protocol indicated even though members of the national security forces should be guaranteed constitutional rights like their civilian counterparts, they should be apolitical, neutral, and subordinated to the legally constituted civilian authorities.\textsuperscript{xxxiv} Scholars of civil-military relations in West Africa have long recommended the democratic subordination of the army forces. Ultimately, the Security Mechanism and its annex signify the recognition of the ECOWAS leaders of the inextricable link between security and politics and sought to address some of the political, social and economic root causes of conflict.

Operationalizing the Security Mechanism and its annex, Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, has been a mixed bag at regional and national levels.\textsuperscript{xxxv} The creation of ECOWAS community levy of ½% duty on imports into the region has helped generate much needed revenue, especially given the frequent default on membership dues, for the new institutions and programs envisaged by the organization. The refusal of ECOWAS to recognize the 1997 AFRC in Sierra Leone and the military-orchestrated transfer of power to Faure Gnassingbe on the death of his father, Gnassingbe Eyadema in 2004 have been praised as practical applications of the newly emerging political norms. The timely intervention of ECOWAS in the 2007 Sierra Leone presidential run-off elections and the suspension of Niger over disputed parliamentary elections have also been seen in similar light.\textsuperscript{xxxvi} Since the adoption of the mechanism, political power has been transferred peacefully and through elections to opposition parties in Senegal, Ghana and Sierra Leone.

However, application of the Security Mechanism and emerging norms remains inconsistent as was evident in the organization’s fuzzy response to the political debacle in Guinea in 2006, and the Nigerian elections of 2007. In general, the lack of political will, low national commitment, poor implementation, and inadequate financing from member states continue to hamper the full realization of the Security Mechanism. Yet, even the most acerbic critics agree that it is full of tremendous potential that can transform the region and its constituent nations.\textsuperscript{xxxvii}
Post-Conflict Reconstruction: Lost Opportunity?

Even as the ECOWAS Security Mechanism was being created, adopted, and operationalized, the organization’s visible and much-appreciated presence in Sierra Leone through ECOMOG was transforming and receding from public imagination. As mentioned earlier, the 1999 invasion forced the Kabbah government to negotiate and reach an agreement with the RUF and the AFRC in Lomé, Togo. The main highlights of the agreement are well known and exhaustively discussed by scholars. They include, among other things, the call for a ceasefire; the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) of all combatants and the incorporation of some of them into a new restructured national army; inclusion of the RUF/AFRC members into government; the establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), and other commissions dealing with consolidation of peace, human rights, and mineral resources. Despite their relentless hostility to ECOMOG, which had included a call for its complete withdrawal from Sierra Leone, the RUF and AFRC conceded to a revision of the mandate of ECOMOG, and its continued presence in postwar Sierra Leone.

The principal parties and guarantors made an effort to embed the agreement within a normative framework that was in line with the unfolding democratic changes in Sierra Leone, ECOWAS protocols, and international human rights regime. This was evident in the language of the preamble which called for “full respect for human rights and humanitarian law,” “popular participation in the governance of the country and the advancement of democracy,” and “refrain from the threat and use of armed force to bring about any change in Sierra Leone.” Particularly striking was this statement in the preamble to the agreement:

Guided by the Declaration in the Final Communiqué of the Meeting in Lomé of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of ECOWAS of 25 May 1999, in which they stressed the importance of democracy as a factor of regional peace and security, and as essential to the socio-economic development of ECOWAS Member States; and in which they pledged their commitment to the consolidation of democracy and respect of human rights while reaffirming the need for all Member States to consolidate their democratic base, observe the principles of good governance and good economic management in order to ensure the emergence and development of a democratic culture which takes into account the interests of the peoples of West Africa. xxxvii

Rather than retaining a reformed ECOMOG as specified in the Lomé Accord, the United Nations Security Council decided to reconstitute United Nations Observer Mission in Sierra Leone (UNOSIL) into a new international force, the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL). A significant proportion of ECOMOG were rehatted as UNAMSIL peacekeepers, and their experience and knowledge of Sierra Leone were crucial to the stabilization and eventual success of the UN led peacekeeping mission. By the end of its mission in 2005, UNAMSIL had helped the Sierra Leonean government and people achieve several benchmarks that advanced security, peace-building and democratic renewal in their country. xxxviii The Sierra Leone government
secured control and monopoly of institutions and instruments of organized violence in the country. The army and the police had been subordinated to a large extent to the civilian democratic control. Credible national and local government elections were held in 2002 and 2004. The central role of ECOWAS in rebuilding post-conflict Sierra Leone, and in ensuring security in West Africa, is recognized and very much appreciated by the UN and other international agencies.

However, despite the laudable role of West African peacekeepers within UNAMSIL, the post-conflict reconstruction process in Sierra Leone, especially in the area of security sector reform, xxix represented a missed opportunity for ECOWAS to put its own stamp on the emerging security architecture of a member country. In 1997, Tony Blair, the British Prime Minister, belatedly took up the Sierra Leone cause and committed his country’s financial and international diplomatic muscle to the restoration of the Kabbah government. As pointed out earlier, it was mainly ECOMOG (mostly Nigerian) men and materiel that eventually returned the Kabbah government to Freetown in 1997 and 1999. The British supported military effort via Sandline turned out to be a fiasco. The British military redeemed themselves with their operation to rescue six kidnapped colleagues that had been captured by the West Side Boys, a recalcitrant faction of the AFRC. xl The operation dislodged the faction from Okra Hills and helped stabilize the tottering UNAMSIL. It also signaled the beginning of a sustained effort to reform the security sector in Sierra Leone, through the British Military Assistance Training Team (BMATT) and its reformed and enlarged version, the International Military Assistance Training Team (IMATT). The British government, through the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, has provided the bulk of the funds for IMATT. xli The Ghanaian and Nigerian governments initially helped with the training of military and police officers but their roles in IMATT declined over time.

The minimal West African contribution to Sierra Leone security sector reform is disappointing given that the conceptualization of the process began with ECOWAS and a former ECOMOG commander, General Maxwell M. Khobe. The disloyal conduct of the army had led the Kabbah government to seriously contemplate the disbandment and abolition of the military. Charles Margai, the erstwhile Minister for Internal Affairs, actually met with Oscar Arias, the Costa Rican president to discuss his country’s experience without an army. The Kabbah government had to shelve the plan because it would have violated the 1991 Constitution, and because of the professionalism displayed by Nigerian troops in retaking Freetown from the rebel alliance in 1997. General Khobe, who later became the Sierra Leone Chief of Staff, Defense, also advised against the disbandment of the Sierra Leonean military. Instead, he recommended the paring down of the bloated army to around 5,000 troops, the reform of its structure, and the retraining of its rank and file.

In a piece authored in 2000, Khobe also used his considerable field experience to analyze ECOMOG operations in Sierra Leone and Liberia, and to recommend ideas for future missions. Aware of the considerable differences in language, equipment, command and control processes, military capacity, and training standards amongst the various West African armies, he suggested the earmarking of specific units in the different armies for ECOMOG service. Within these units, Khobe recommended that equipment, arms and ammunition, training standards, doctrine, and staff procedure be standardized and harmonized by a permanent ECOMOG headquarters. xlii Taken together,
Khobe’s recommendations on the reconstitution of the army and the implementation of ESF represented, perhaps, the first serious attempt at security sector reform in Sierra Leone that was in synch with the emerging peace and security architecture of ECOWAS. By the time the process of security sector reform got underway in Sierra Leone, Khobe had passed away.

The British did not contribute any troops to UNAMSIL because of the United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR) experience in the Balkans. Instead, even though it supported and cooperated with UNAMSIL, it ran its own separate political program, whose expressed aim was “the establishment of sustainable peace and security, a stable democratic government, the reduction of poverty, the establishment of accountable armed and police forces, and the enhancement of the U.N’s reputation in Africa and more widely.” As a consequence, British funding, presence, “technical advice,” and “capacity-building” have permeated virtually every major sector of Sierra Leone government since 2000.

The major plank of the British political program or “engagement” with the Sierra Leone government has been in the area of security sector reform, particularly the reform of national intelligence, the police, the army and the judiciary. They succeeded in pushing the Kabbah government to pass new laws, devise new policies, create new agencies, and develop new political structures to meet the imperatives of the new reforms. The centerpiece of the British effort has been the passage by the Sierra Leone Parliament of the Sierra Leone National Security Act, and the production of a white paper by the Kabbah government, which established a new security architecture for the country that is conceptually and organizationally very similar to the British model. The architecture consists of three bodies, the Sierra Leone Police (SLP), the Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces (RSLAF), and the Office of National Security, existing in overlapping relationships to each other, with SLP and RSLAF being co-equal and subordinate to the Office of National Security (ONS).

Although the British contributed extensively to retraining the SLP, their efforts—through IMATT—have been largely invested in the systemic reorganization of the new RSLAF army, which was reconstituted from former soldiers, insurgents, and new recruits. The project encompasses the overall training, equipping, and deployment of the army, the navy and air force. It also involves the wholesale overhauling of the training organization, command and control structure, administration, maintenance, and personnel management systems. According to Major General Jonathon P. Riley, “[u]nless we did this, we could never walk away—a lesson which has had to be relearned in Iraq.” As a consequence, IMATT officers are present in every area and level of administration and function of the RSLAF, from the Ministry of Defence to Military Headquarters to the training camp at Benguema.

All indications are that since 1991, the overall condition and cohesion of the RSLAF has improved greatly. IMATT as well as senior Sierra Leonean military commanders laud the seamless integration that has taken place between former combatants of the SLA, AFRC, RUF, and CDF. The soldiers are better trained, disciplined, and their standing has improved in the public perception. Soldiers also now have a better understanding of their relationship vis-à-vis the government, other security agencies (in particular, the police) and civilians. However, there is the perception, especially among senior officers that they are not respected by IMATT, and their talents and inputs are not
being utilized. They feel that much is not being done in the direction of encouraging and fostering “ownership” of the reform process among Sierra Leoneans in the army. Occasionally, this latent discontent amongst Sierra Leonean soldiers about IMATT has been expressed anonymously in the local print media.

The new army also faces other major challenges. It remains inadequately equipped and maintained. Regular maintenance and fuelling of its donated vehicles have been a problem. Adequate compensation also remains an issue since at around 10,000 troops the RSLAF still remains bloated relative to financial allocations from the Sierra Leone government. The infrastructure of the military remains deficient. Potable water, electricity, and decent billeting for soldiers still remain intractable problems. There is also lingering discontent over compensation, rice, fuel, promotions, and the ongoing downsizing of the force. The retrenchment of old soldiers has created hiccups and tensions in the reorganization process. However, these problems have not yet produced any major security crisis.

The soldiers of the new army were conscious of the deep public mistrust of them, and the extent to which their role in the conflict and politics had discredited them. It must be noted however that main norms governing the British-sponsored National Security Architecture of Sierra Leone, namely the democratic governance and control of the security forces, subordination of the military and other security forces to civilian control and oversight, and demystification of security matters to include civilian actors, are very much in line with those in the ECOWAS Security Mechanism. The litmus test of the extent to which these norms were taking hold was the 2007 and 2012 national presidential and parliamentary elections. There was no doubt that major political parties mobilized former members of civil war factions as “security squads” in their electoral campaigns, especially in 2007. Yet, the military remained neutral in posture and in the public perception; it intervened only to support the Sierra Leone Police at their request and with the authorization of the government.

Most important, IMATT has ensured that the Sierra Leone government and RSLAF maintain their commitment to West African Security Architecture, by training a company towards the ESF in the process of the restructuring of the army. A company is currently being trained to serve in the ESF, the African Standby Force and other international peace support operations. It is hoped that a battalion of the RSLAF would eventually be trained for such purposes as specified by the ECOWAS security mechanism and the African Union Peace and Security Architecture (PSA). However, according to some of the officers in the army, there are problems with the equipment and type of training being received by the company in particular, and restructured RSLAF in general. Contrary to recommendation made by Khobe and in the ECOWAS Security Mechanism for the standardization and harmonization with similar units in other West African armies, the training and equipment are dictated by British rather than West African standards. West African participation in IMATT remains very minimal; about two Nigerians are usually included in the team at any given point. They are however mostly of less senior ranks compared to the British and Canadian IMATT officers.

Conclusion

Ironically, the conflict, with its destructive and traumatic consequences, has been a catalytic force in the mutual reconstitution of failing postcolonial nation-states and
revitalization of regionalism in West Africa. With the support of ECOWAS and a citizen’s militia, the people of Sierra Leone mobilized against inchoate violence and around new democratic norms to start the rebuilding of their failing state and society. Sierra Leoneans recognize the tremendous sacrifices and contributions of their fellow West Africans in rescuing their country from the abyss of war. However, they need to channel their appreciation into strong advocacy for popular and official support for ECOWAS and its activities. The agreement of the Sierra Leone government in July 2010 to provide land at Lungi near the international airport for the construction of a facility for the ESF is a significant step in this direction. As a result of its involvement in the conflicts in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Guinea Bissau and Coté d’Ivoire, ECOWAS mandate is no longer limited to the fostering of economic integration and cooperation; it has now taken on maintaining regional security as well as fostering democratic government in the region based on the consideration that both projects are inextricably connected. It is now an ideologically and structurally different organization from what its founders envisaged in 1975.
Notes

1 For an excellent analysis of the three wars, see Adekeye Adebajo, *Building Peace in West Africa: Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea-Bissau* (A Project of the International Peace, Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner, 2002).


xx Ibid.


xxiv The Nigerian-led ECOMOG intervention to restore the Kabbah regime in 1997 was certainly one of the most incongruous political developments in the region, in which you had General Sanie Abacha, a military despot that was deeply despised in his home country defending democracy and being serenaded as a hero in Sierra Leone.


Protocol relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security.


Security sector in this essay is loosely defined as the reformation of all agencies, structures, laws, policies, and processes dealing with the safeguarding of territory, population and resources of the country.


The United Kingdom was as of 2003 involved in the “Office of the President, the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Development and Economic Planning, The Ministry of Defence and the Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces (RSLAF), the Office of National Security, the Anti-Corruption Commission, the National Commission for Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration, the National Commission for Social Action, and Other Government Institutions,” See DFID, “Sierra Leone: A Long-Term Partnership between the Government of the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland and the Government of the republic of Sierra Leone.” February 2003.


Interviews with officials of the NSA, IMATT officers, and senior RSLAF military commanders, who preferred to remain anonymous. August 2007.


Interviews with officials of the NSA, IMATT officers, and senior RSLAF military commanders, who preferred to remain anonymous, August 2007.

Interviews with senior RSLAF military commanders, August 2007.

The total number of IMATT advisers has varied over the years. It currently stands at around 105, of which 88 are British, 11 Canadian, 2 Nigerian, 3 Americans and 1 Jamaican. The tour of duty for the officer is normally six months, with some spending up to a year. Among the Nigerians who have served with IMATT are Lt. Col. Okoh, Major B.E. Oyefuga, Major J. Ataguba, and Staff Sergeant Direala.
Works Cited


Turay, Edward Dominic Amadu and Arthur Abraham. The Sierra Leone Army,
