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**“SINCE I AM A DOG, BEWARE MY
FANGS”: BEYOND A ‘RATIONAL
VIOLENCE’ FRAMEWORK IN THE
SIERRA LEONEAN WAR**

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“Since I am a Dog, Beware my Fangs”: Beyond a ‘rational violence’ framework in the Sierra Leonean War

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Introduction

It has become fashionable for commentators on contemporary civil wars to discuss the causes of civil wars in terms of ‘greed’ and ‘grievance’. World bank researcher Paul Collier has been prominent in emphasising ‘greed’, minimising or dismissing grievance as a factor in civil wars, and even going so far as to say there is no point in asking rebels why they are rebelling since they will inevitably draw attention to their grievances even when their motivation is greed. In place of such enquiries, Collier and his collaborator Anke Hoeffler rely on their numbers.¹ Their work is vulnerable on a number of other fronts. A major methodological concern is the dubious use of proxies: for example, low literacy is taken by Collier and Hoeffler as a proxy for greed, but could equally (or better) be taken as a proxy for grievance - particularly in a country like Sierra Leone, where anger at a collapsing education system has powerfully fed into conflict. This ‘greed’ discourse can also be seen as de-legitimising grievance – a politically-conservative but also a variation of the colonial tradition of dismissing every rebellion as the work of criminals.² Another danger with Collier’s analysis (which I will come back to) is the danger of fuelling violence by stigmatising those who use violence as being purely criminal or purely self-interested - without even attempting to hear what they have to say.

There are also dangers in going too far in embracing the discourse of grievance. One can agree with Collier when he points out that grievances – stemming from poverty, poor education, and so on - are very widespread in Africa and the wider world but do not necessarily spill over into civil war. My own investigations of Sierra Leone’s civil war have convinced me that a great deal of the violence has been motivated by greed. Indeed, rebels’ idealistic statements contrast sharply with their abuses (including looting and ejection from resource-rich areas) against precisely the civilians they have claimed to be fighting for (see, for example, Bangura). Many Sierra Leoneans, moreover, have emphasised that the existence of a grievance is hardly an adequate justification for violence. For example, Olu Gordon, a leading light of the radical newspaper *For Di People*, told me:

I was beaten up by thugs in 1977 under [President Siaka] Stevens. I’ve been arrested eight times. So why don’t I take up a machete and start chopping off people’s hands? The RUF has no solution. They just force us to choose between a corrupt government and a set of brutal killers.

Emphasising the discourse of grievance can sometimes seem dangerously close to justifying violence - a tight-rope walked, for example, by anyone trying to explain the destruction of the

¹ Paul Collier & Anke Hoeffler, ‘Justice-seeking and loot-seeking in civil war’, 1999, at <http://www.isnie.org/ISNIE99/Papers/collier>.

² Cf. Mark Duffield, *Global Governance and the New Wars: The merging of development and security*, London/New York: Zed Books, 2001.

World Trade Centre in New York on September 11th 2001. Perhaps the dangers of over-emphasising grievances as the root of violence are most clearly brought out if we think of sexual violence, which has been extremely widespread in the Sierra Leonean war.³

Many Sierra Leoneans are profoundly conscious of the moral hazards of explaining atrocity; some, perhaps a smaller number, have spoken of the hazards of simply condemning atrocities. Both views were encapsulated in the words of one man who was held hostage by the West Side Boys in July 2000, a faction drawing heavily on former Sierra Leone army soldiers and later decimated by British troops:

Some of them [those responsible for atrocities] really believe, even until now, that what they have done is absolutely right – mostly because of the indoctrination. If you seem to be justifying the violence, you make it hard for them to admit that it was wrong. But if you condemn them, they will not listen and will withdraw from you... Some civilians who have really suffered will react very strongly against you if you seem to be justifying what they have suffered.

There is always a risk of accepting too readily the ‘explanations’ and rationalisations that are offered after the event, as combatants try to justify the unjustifiable, not least to themselves. At the same time, pure condemnation may sometimes be useless – or even counter-productive.

A Rational Violence Framework: War as a System

After my fieldwork in Sierra Leone in mid-1995, I was leaning towards an explanation of conflict that put greed at the forefront.⁴ A great deal of the violence portrayed by Robert Kaplan and others as ‘mindless’ seemed, on the contrary, to have its own rationality - most notably in allowing armed groups to acquire economic resources at the expense of civilians whilst minimising their own exposure to violence by avoiding pitched battles with ‘the other side’.⁵ War appeared to be a system as much as it was a contest, and the aim was not necessarily to ‘win’. Indeed, political and economic considerations created a powerful vested interest in keeping the conflict going: though the line between intention and action was not always crystal-clear, prolonging the violence seemed to be serving several functions – helping army officers to retain lucrative postings in resource-rich areas; assisting military leaders and autocratic politicians in warding off the threat of democracy; and postponing the day when human rights abusers might be held accountable for their abuse.

After the initial insurrection in 1991, it quickly became clear that rebels were sustaining themselves from diamonds and looting. While this was in part a way of funding the insurrection, it soon came to assume a dominant role. The rebel Revolutionary United Front (RUF) showed itself to be a deeply abusive movement and it rapidly lost the support of most civilians – despite the extreme unpopularity of a corrupt elite in Freetown and the All People’s Congress (APC), which had dominated a single-party system in the 1970s and 80s.

³ Neither can this be fitted within an economic emphasis on greed, incidentally.

⁴ See, for example: David Keen, ‘The Economic Functions of Violence in Civil Wars’, *Adelphi paper No.320*, Oxford & London: Oxford University Press & International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1998; also ‘When war itself is privatized: The twisted logic that makes violence worth while in Sierra Leone’, *Times Literary Supplement*, (December 29 1995).

⁵ Kaplan (1994)

In the 1990s, a relatively small number of rebels, initially just a few hundred, were able to wreak massive destruction in Sierra Leone and eventually to displace roughly half the country's population. This was possible in large part because a range of other groups found it convenient to lend support to the rebellion for purposes of their own. These groups included not only disgruntled politicians and chiefs but most importantly many government soldiers. Indeed, nothing helped the insurgency in Sierra Leone quite so much as the counter-insurgency. Government soldiers were typically under-trained and under-paid, and often under-aged. Those at the front were often deprived of adequate logistic support. Significantly, soldiers often shared with the rebels a hostility to established politicians and a perception that the educated strata had betrayed their country (or their constituency) through corruption. As with the rebels, many government soldiers used the war to loot and mine diamonds illegally - a chance to rise quickly and violently above the lowly opportunities that peace had offered them. Many of the rural recruits to the army might equally, under slightly different circumstances, have joined the rebels. Sending this kind of rag-tag, disgruntled army to diamond-rich areas to suppress a rebellion was a recipe for disaster.

In a bizarre and terrifying process labelled by some Sierra Leoneans as 'sell-game' (a term for a football match that has been fixed in advance), government soldiers in the early and mid-1990s were observed not only looting and engaging in illegal diamond mining but also killing civilians, engaging in illegal diamond mining, dressing up as rebels, selling arms to rebels, and co-ordinating movements with rebels so as to minimise clashes and maximise the exploitation of civilians. Whilst there were some clashes with the RUF (particularly in diamond-mining areas), the evolving war system allowed the RUF leadership to take credit for violence actually carried out by soldiers, while many soldiers (often backed by disgruntled politicians) used the existence of 'rebellion' as impunity for their own abuses. With enemies like these, it is tempting to ask, who needed friends?

Though the final years of colonial rule were a partial exception, the peacetime Sierra Leonean state had never succeeded in controlling or properly taxing the valuable primary products pouring out of the country, and state officials were habitually complicit with a flourishing illegal economy. In many ways, this pattern was mirrored during the war, as state soldiers proved unable to control the rebellion and the illegal trade on which it was based (primarily diamonds), and many soldiers chose instead to participate both in the insurrectionary violence and in the illegal trading. Neither in peace nor war did a weak state succeed in controlling a lucrative illegal economy linked to the world market.

The lack of development in Sierra Leone, and the 1980s collapse of state provision (notably, of education, health and government salaries) from already-minimal levels, led not only to grievances that fuelled the insurrection but also to a marked inability (or unwillingness) on the part of the state to bring this insurrection under control.

The war system created powerful interests opposed to peace. When elements of Sierra Leonean civil society and international pressures gave momentum to elections and a peace process in 1995-96, rebels and many government soldiers resisted forcibly. A significant factor in propelling the electoral process was the military impact of civil defence fighters (formed to stand up to the twin threat of rebels and government soldiers) and South African mercenaries (Executive Outcomes), who between them inflicted heavy casualties on RUF rebels and some rogue government soldiers.

Tejan Kabbah's more-or-less-democratic⁶ administration was overthrown in a May 1997 military coup. The coup confirmed the impression that war had become a (partially collusive) system. Large elements of the Sierra Leonean military joined together with the RUF to create the new military junta – a bizarre 'marriage' between two entities that had ostensibly been fighting each other for the best part of the previous six years. Both factions were concerned to preserve the benefits of warfare, to consolidate their hold on key diamond areas, to eliminate the civil defence forces that had threatened this system, and to prevent recriminations and prosecutions under Kabbah. The war system was mutating, moreover, as new groups increasingly used violence or the threat of force for economic purposes. After the predominantly Nigerian forces of ECOMOG (ECOWAS⁷ Monitoring Group) overthrew the junta in February 1998 and Kabbah was restored to power, civilians increasingly accused the civil defence of pursuing their own economic agendas, notably the mining of diamonds on behalf of a Mende elite that dominated the south and was highly influential in both Kabbah administrations.⁸ ECOMOG forces themselves attracted increasing criticism for involvement in diamond mining.⁹

Emotions and Warfare

It is an interesting part of academic life that if one says something that people find interesting – in this case, the portrayal of war as a kind of rational system – one is encouraged to repeat it in various forms, and to defend it. A major danger is that one comes to believe one's own propaganda – at least to repeat and rigidly to defend an insight that was never more than part of the picture. However, alongside an interest in the economic functions of violence and the rationality of apparently irrational warfare I have tried (not always successfully) to maintain and develop an interest in aspects of violence that do not fall readily within this framework – in particular, those that are in some sense related to grievances and, more generally, to emotions. It was clear even from my research in 1995 that an emphasis on the 'functions of violence'¹⁰ should include not only economic and political functions but also what might be called psychological functions – for example, the immediate sensation of power and reversal of perceived injustice that violence seemed to offer. In this sense, the functional violence paradigm always had a back-window through which 'irrationality' (or at least violence for its own sake) could enter. It was also clear to me that the anger and fear manifest in the extreme violence in Sierra Leone could not easily be incorporated and explained within a 'rational violence' framework that conceptualises individuals as calmly deciding between alternatives on the basis of their self-interest. In other words, the subjectivity of the violent – the way violence was seen by them, their perceptions and emotions as well as their interests - had to be taken seriously.¹¹

My subsequent work on this topic was strongly influenced by further fieldwork in August-September 2001 – as part of the DfID-funded Crisis States Programme at DESTIN, London

⁶ Many made accusations of elitism, corruption and electoral irregularities.

⁷ Economic Community of West African States.

⁸ See, for example, Caspar Fithen, *Diamonds and War in Sierra Leone: Cultural strategies for commercial adaptation to endemic low-intensity conflict*, PhD thesis, University College, London; Regional Reconciliation Committee (RRC), 'Southern Region, Report on Unacceptable Behaviour of CDF in the Southern Region', August 2000.

⁹ See, for example: ICG, *Sierra Leone: Time for a New Military and Political Strategy*, 2001; Report of the Panel of Experts, Appointed Pursuant to UN Security Council Resolution 1306, para 19, in relation to Sierra Leone, December 2000, p.30.

¹⁰ Cf. Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1988, on the functions of the Soviet gulag.

¹¹ (cf Das, Kleinman, Ramphela and Reynolds). Cf also Tim Allen on "inverted morality" and violence.

School of Economics. After that trip, I wrote to a particularly able former LSE student explaining my reservations about the ‘rational violence’ framework that forms a large part of the ‘Complex Emergencies’ course I teach at LSE, and she replied that she had actually considered the rational framework a pretty good one, adding with some scepticism, “I take it the violent do not agree.” That is actually a fairly good summary of how and why I have amended my position, and it certainly alerts us to the danger of giving too much weight to how violent people explain and justify their violence – to others and to themselves. At the same time, I believe it is also possible to give these discourses too little weight, to fall into the Collier trap of dismissing everything that a rebel (or some other violent party) might have to say.

Before looking in more depth at some of the grievances surrounding and infusing the war, it is worth stressing that coercion and drugs played a major role.¹² Forcible recruitment into the RUF was routine. To give one example among so many, a young man who survived amongst the rebels occupying the Freetown suburb of Waterloo between December 1998 and February 1999 explained how coercion could feed into violence:

They are facing pressures from their commanders in order to survive... The rebels were flogging or killing -- there was no imprisonment. This was the brutal message. If you don't go along with atrocities, you knew what might await you. There was one rebel -- a devout religious guy. He didn't take women. But he said he wouldn't tell the others not to. His religious sense had no influence in that world. And he said if he opposed the others, it is dangerous for him...The rebels feel like its jungle life, like the strongest will always survive. That's why they commit atrocities.

On top of outright coercion, the consumption of drugs – including cocaine, alcohol and many others - by young fighters was encouraged both within the RUF and the army. Drugs were used to give fighters ‘courage’ for atrocious acts and to help to assuage their consciences afterwards. Many combatants reported that drugs made civilians seem “very small” or like insects. Drugs were also used to help combat hunger and cold.

However, coercion and drugs are not the whole story, and, with the war seemingly in abeyance, an exclusive emphasis on these can risk contributing to a process of reconstruction that simply reinstates the inequalities, indignities and injustices that fuelled the war in the first place. We need to understand the appeal of violence, recognising that some young people joined the rebels (or the violence more generally) with enthusiasm. Coercion and drugs cannot explain such widespread social collapse as occurred in Sierra Leone.

So what is the appeal of violence in this context? I mentioned the immediate sensation of power from the wielding of arms. In a perverse way, much of the violence in Sierra Leone has been an attempt to command ‘respect’ through the barrel of a gun. Young men have been disillusioned with lack of education and employment opportunities.¹³ In the course of the war, status and visibility have been inverted by young people through violence.

¹² See, for example, Yusuf Bangura, ‘Understanding the Political and Cultural Dynamics of the Sierra Leone War: A Critique of Paul Richards’s *Fighting for the Rain Forest*’, *Africa Development*, 22:3 & 4 (1997).

¹³ See, notably, Paul Richards, *Fighting for the Rainforest: War, Youth and Resources in Sierra Leone*, London & Portsmouth, NH: James Currey & Heinemann, 1996.

First-hand accounts of rebel atrocities suggest that many youths and young men in Sierra Leone have been interested in inflicting not only violence but also some kind of humiliation. This has included attempts to compel 'approval' of, or indifference towards, atrocities from the relatives of those directly abused, as if the rebels were staging a bizarre drama with a script that made them, for once, look like 'big men'. The humiliation inflicted through sexual violence has also been a marked feature of the war. Chiefs have been repeatedly targeted in rebel violence, and much of this can be seen as an attempt to turn previous roles on their heads by imposing the power of the gun on local big men who had previously 'lorded it' over the young gunmen. On many occasions, failure to pay (arbitrary) fines in peacetime had led to the humiliation of youths and their ejection or flight from a chiefdom in wartime; many of the aggrieved returned, violently, as rebels.

One local worker with Catholic Relief Services emphasised that violence could help to reverse other kinds of shame and loss of face, including that associated with dropping out of school:

The educational system has increased rebel and soldier numbers. A lot drop out of school early and these do not have fair job opportunities and, having gone to [secondary] school, they do not want to go back to their villages and till the land. They feel they are a little too enlightened to go back and till the soil! They feel their friends will laugh at them, and say you're still farming even though you went off to school. They saw that being a rebel you can loot at will, then you have a sway over your former master, who used to lord it over you, or the others who might have laughed. You might as well go to the bush and become a rebel. There is no master there. You are master of yourself... In my time, there were no celebrations at the time of exams. Now they make elaborate parties and the children feel big and then when the results come, they have all failed! They cannot get jobs. They cannot go back to school.

To some extent, both rebels and soldiers of the National Provisional Ruling Council (who came to power in a 1992 coup) were concerned to 'turn the tables' on elites who had dominated under the APC in the 1970s and 80s, to invert the social pyramid so that they too could experience what it was like to be rich or powerful.

One perceptive analyst, Amy Smythe, a minister in the first Kabbah regime, suggested that in a system where people were seen and labeled as poor and even somehow less than human, they may end up behaving in a less than human way. The ideology of development and modernity sits dangerously alongside a failure to deliver it:

People in the communities have a sense of justice and respect for life, but people have been so disempowered and being told they are useless, they are poor, they are illiterate, and they have lost their humanity and are behaving like animals. People are not poor – they are rich in potential... Before, their self-perception was different. They carried on in their communities, getting young women and men together in so-called 'secret societies' for six months and that was a kind of education.

This is part of the problem with labels like 'lumpen', short for 'lumpenproletariat', which some analysts like Ibrahim Abdullah have used to provide a sociological explanation of the

war.¹⁴ Abdullah's work contains important insights, but the term itself seems to be an insult as much as it is an analytical category.

All this implies that there was some kind of political element to the violence: indeed much of the apparent greed of fighters seemed to spring directly from their grievances. Whilst many will object to anything other than a comprehensive condemnation of the violent, I would go further and argue that extreme violence in Sierra Leone is not related simply to the absence of political beliefs or idealism but also to their presence, albeit in poorly articulated and often highly perverted form. Abuse of civilians has been rife within the ranks of the rebels and the government soldiers. I do not wish to minimise this; indeed, I have tried to document this in some detail.¹⁵ And certainly, the weakness of political ideology has fed into selfish behaviour and the abuse of civilians. But it would be a mistake to imagine that these factions had no elements of idealism or political ideology at all. In the case of the army, there has also been some genuine desire on the part of some soldiers to defeat the insurrection and to protect civilians (alongside very widespread abuse of civilians by other soldiers). There has also been some degree of political consciousness, a sense of the injustice of society, however poorly expressed. Similarly, in the case of the rebels, the desire to effect a (violent) transformation of a corrupt society cannot simply be dismissed as non-existent or pure propaganda. Both 'sides', as noted, have been recruited from disadvantaged youths, who often express the idea that there could be a better and fairer Sierra Leone if power could be taken away from a corrupt older generation of party politicians centred on Freetown. This hardly qualifies as a fully-fledged ideology (and some of it comes from a rigid and often unthinking indoctrination by the RUF); but neither does it represent a total ideological vacuum.

In this paper, I want tentatively to propose a model that may help to explain the occurrence of widespread violence against civilians. I would suggest that this can help to explain violence against civilians in many contexts, not just in Sierra Leone, though the implications of this analysis beyond Sierra Leone are not followed through in this paper. The stages set out below cannot be neatly identified with particular time periods in Sierra Leone, particularly since violence against civilians has come at various points from several different military factions.

In the first stage, some elements of military factions turn away from their ideals (fighting on behalf of civilians, effecting political change, protecting civilians from rebels, and so on) and elements of these factions engage in self-centred violence at the expense of civilians. This happened pretty early on with the Sierra Leonean rebels, and the numbers participating in abuse grew quickly.¹⁶ It was a slower process – but still a far-reaching one – in the government army. This first stage is intimately linked with the mutation of war from a contest to a system. In Sierra Leone, there were complex reasons for the shift within both the army and the RUF towards attacks on civilians and exploitation of civilians, but major factors included poor or non-existent salaries/payments in both factions, the existence of readily-exploitable resources (notably diamonds), the weakness of ideological or military training, and a (related and not unnatural) desire to avoid dying at the hands of the enemy. In the case of the rebels, abuses by (particularly violent) Liberian and Burkinabe mercenaries also played a role, as did the RUF leadership's policy of killing relatively educated and moderate

¹⁴ Ibrahim Abdullah, 'Bush Path to Destruction: The Origin and Character of the RUF/Sierra Leone', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 1998.

¹⁵ David Keen, *The Best of Enemies: Conflict and Collusion in Sierra Leone*, Oxford: James Currey, forthcoming.

¹⁶ Indeed, many were purely self-interested from the outset.

members of the RUF early in the war – after they had objected precisely to the growing abuse of civilians.

In the second stage, civilians condemn or turn away from the armed factions - a highly understandable action given the increasingly widespread abuses by military factions.¹⁷ In Sierra Leone, RUF rebels were increasingly dismissed at home and abroad as mindless thugs, even as animals or devils. Meanwhile, particularly by 1994-95, government soldiers were increasingly accused by civilians of being ‘sobels’ (soldiers by day and rebels by night). By the late 1990s, even the civil defence forces and ECOMOG peacekeepers were attracting significant criticism from civilians (and some international observers and officials) – not only for pursuing economic agendas but also for instances of physical abuse against civilians. Part of this pattern of increasing civilian condemnation consisted in labelling armed groups (whether rebels or government soldiers or, later, civil defence forces or peacekeepers) as ‘greedy’. Such labelling chimes with Collier’s analysis (though it largely preceded it) and indeed with much of my own emphasis on ‘greed’;¹⁸ at the same time, this kind of labelling runs the risk not only of oversimplifying a complex reality but also of contributing to the damaging dynamics in stage three.

In the third stage of the model, the military factions turn with renewed intensity on the civilians, accusing them of being disloyal, ungrateful and a threat to the fighters’ own security. Naturally, the escalating abuse of civilians tends to produce further disillusionment among the civilians, and the cycle may be renewed and deepened. Even where abuses are carried out by a relatively small group, they may set off a process of alienation (civilian disgust, fighters’ perception of civilian ingratitude) that encourages abuses by a much larger group. In this third stage, anger and fear – and not just the ‘rational’ pursuit of wealth and safety – feed more and more into an escalating abuse of civilians. Among Sierra Leonean rebels, for example, there was anger at civilians turning away from them and fear of civilian betrayal and recrimination. Among government soldiers, there was a sense that the efforts of loyal soldiers in defending civilians were not being recognised, and again a fear of civilian betrayal and recrimination.

In his analysis of the early part of the war, Paul Richards stressed that the RUF was driven not just by greed but by political grievances nurtured in peacetime. I would add that, as civilians recoiled from RUF atrocities, grievances could also include rebels’ resentment at civilians turning away from the struggle and betraying or attacking them. Of course, this perception was to a large extent a distortion and a perversion: if anyone had been betrayed, it was the civilians. But war does distort and pervert: the consequent perceptions are none the less real for that, and their consequences also – the escalating rebel violence – were all too real. For many rebels, the most concrete (and dangerous) manifestation of civilian ‘betrayal’ was the rise of the civil defence forces, who inflicted increasing casualties on the rebels and perceived rebel supporters, particularly from 1995. It was quite natural for civilians to arm themselves against abusive rebels and government soldiers: ordinary Sierra Leoneans decided to save themselves when large elements of the army proved to be part of the problem rather than part of the solution. But the process also tended to erode the very idea of a civilian as

¹⁷ This process may also contain some seeds for peace and for an isolation of these factions (Matthew Preston, *Rhodesia, Lebanon and Civil War Termination*, D.Phil thesis, University of Oxford, 2001), though this is not the focus of the current paper.

¹⁸ Cf Duffield (2001); Stephen Ellis, ‘Liberia 1989-1994: a study in ethnic and spiritual violence’, *African Affairs*, 94:375 (April 1995).

someone who is unarmed and should not be attacked – and idea whose abuse by rebels and soldiers had of course spurred the growth of the civil defence in the first place.

In January 1999 (during Kabbah's second administration), RUF and ex-government soldiers attacked Freetown and its suburbs, killing up to 6,000 civilians. (By this point, the identity of these two groups had fused to a large extent, and the term 'rebel' was generally used to refer to both). One resident recalled how he had survived the incursion by getting to know the occupying forces (notably, on his verandah) and trying to understand their motivations. His summary of the predicament of ordinary fighters is enlightening:

On the one hand there's pressures from commanders, from colleagues' expectations, and sometimes drugs. On the other hand, they face pressure from civilians. A lot of the rebels were outsiders initially. Success was not a question of manpower but how much people were prepared to follow their ideology. They still don't want to accept that their philosophy does not appeal, so they want to do it by force... They unleash punishment, which makes the civilians shy away or treat them as enemies. At the same time, they want some kind of recognition from the civilians because they have some kind of ideology and beliefs.. They would tell me, "If we don't 'perform' -- a common word for atrocities against civilians -- we can get killed or persecuted, or it makes us vulnerable to our enemies. But by that performance, we unleash punishment on the people we should be defending." They are left feeling: who really gives us the recognition? They won't get it from civilians -- understandably.

Paradoxically, in various ways and at various times, RUF fighters have insisted on their humanity. Even in the midst of inhuman atrocities, many have wished to insist that they are human beings and even sometimes that precisely because of this there are some things that they will not tolerate without recourse to violence. Significantly, after the May 1997 coup, the RUF broadcast an "Apology to the Nation". It included the statement: "We did not take to the bush because we wanted to be barbarians, not because we wanted to be inhuman, but because we wanted to state our humanhood..." (my emphasis) (SLBS, June 18). Two years earlier, the RUF pamphlet *Footpaths to Democracy* had complained: "The rebel NPRC [National Provisional Ruling Council, the military government of 1992-96] behaves as if we are despicable aliens from another planet and not Sierra Leoneans".¹⁹

The RUF's 1997 'Apology to the Nation' in particular is reminiscent of the famous speech by Shakespeare's Shylock in 'The Merchant of Venice'. While the speech is often interpreted as a protest against anti-Semitism, it seems to be more besides. Shylock explains his seemingly inhuman desire to mutilate Antonio (who owes him money) precisely as a manifestation of his own humanity in a context where others have dehumanised him:

He hath disgraced me... laughed at my losses... and what's his reason? I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions?... If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?... The villainy you teach me I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction.

¹⁹ RUF, 'Footpaths to Democracy', 1995, p.12.

Significantly, whilst presenting his violence as a manifestation of his humanity, Shylock is also ready to adopt the inhuman persona he has been saddled with: “Thou call’dst me dog before thou hadst a cause; But, since I am a dog, beware my fangs.” (There can, incidentally, have been few better schools of ‘villainy’ than the years of abuse under the single-party rule of the APC in Sierra Leone).

One senior RUF figure told me that colonialism and post-colonial elites had lauded Westernisation at the expense of the humanity of the black man who was forever trying to impress those, including the Westernized elite in Freetown, who thought of him as inferior. Violence, he added, was a response to this humiliation, and it was not done for ‘greed’ but for ‘respect’. Whilst most rebels would certainly have been unaware of Frantz Fanon, his work (and in particular the idea of asserting and re-establishing humanity through violence) seems to have struck a chord with some of the better educated members of the RUF.

In his study of violent criminals in the United States, James Gilligan argues that most violence arises from the impulse to restore self-respect and eliminate a sense of shame – in extreme cases, by physically eliminating the person who is arousing, or re-awakening, that sense of shame.²⁰ Those prone to extreme violence feel this sense of shame with particular intensity, he adds. An interesting implication, not fully spelled out by Gilligan, is that our most immoral actions may stem precisely from our moral impulses, since without these moral impulses we would have no sense of shame in the first place.

At least three psychological dynamics would appear to be working alongside each other when shame feeds into extreme violence. First, there may be an impulse to eradicate a person (or group) arousing a sense of shame (as Gilligan stresses). Second, there may be an impulse to conform to the insulting description which this shaming person or group is attaching to the violent individual or group (“Since I am a dog, beware my fangs”). Third, there may be an attempt to use violence in order to insist that one is not negligible, a mere animal to be abused at will, but a human being who must be respected, even if this ‘respect’ is compelled through violence (“If you prick us, do we not bleed?... If you wrong us, shall we not seek revenge?”).

If it is possible (as I contend) that some rebels were trying to use violence to draw attention to their existence (and even, bizarrely, their humanity), it was nevertheless quite natural that atrocious acts – including amputations and multiple rape - made them seem less than human. In other words, the more brutal the rebels’ behaviour, the more civilians perceived them as ‘brutes’ or less than human. Particularly where violence was related to a desire for recognition, the condemnation and rejection following rebel cruelty seems only to have deepened the rebels’ sense of alienation – a particularly vicious circle that significantly deepened the violence in Sierra Leone. As one human rights worker put it, “When we realised it was a war against civilians, the rebels became our enemies. And because the civilians now condemned them, they actually turned [all the more] on the civilians”.

Among both government soldiers and rebels, civilians were often seen as supporting or harbouring ‘the other side’. The more civilians were alienated (whether by government soldiers or rebels), the more plausible this betrayal must have seemed. Although government soldiers were usually distinguishable by their uniforms,²¹ they themselves often had difficulty distinguishing between civilians and rebels in civilian clothes. Adding to the elusiveness of

²⁰ James Gilligan, *Violence: Reflections on Our Deadliest Epidemic*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 1999.

²¹ Apart from those dressing as rebels, that is.

the rebels was their skill in adopting more elaborate disguises (face-paints, soldiers' uniforms), their mobility, and their familiarity with bush-paths and forests.

If fighters on opposing sides were often coming to the conflict with similar backgrounds and similar grievances, the experience of war seems itself to have strengthened the bonds between some of them. The theme of having been betrayed by politicians, and even by civilians in general, has been repeatedly emphasised by both rebels and government soldiers. Some have also conveyed a sense of betrayal by senior figures within their own ranks.

In another context, the shared psychological space of enemies in battle has been perceptively analysed by Omer Bartov. Discussing the First World War and its aftermath, Bartov writes in *Mirrors of Destruction*:

The soldiers could thus both hate the war and experience a sinister attraction to its desperate camaraderie and ruthless, indifferent, wholly unambiguous, outright destructiveness; they could both hate the men across no-man's-land and appreciate that they alone could empathize with their own predicaments, due to that bond of blood and suffering that had been sealed between them. The 'real' enemy was therefore to be found in the rear, among the staff officers, the noncombatants, the politicians and industrialists, even the workers in the factories, all those who were perceived as having shirked the fighting and thus having excluded themselves from that community of battle increasingly celebrated by the fighting troops.²²

Part of Bartov's argument is that this search for the 'real' enemy fed into the subsequent Nazi holocaust: the mass destruction of soldiers turned into a mass destruction of civilians, and the process was driven in part by the human need both to glorify and to explain suffering:

The search for those guilty of the massacre in the trenches, the 'real' enemy, began in Germany even before the deteriorating military situation at the front and its ultimate collapse made for open accusations of subversion against those least capable of defending themselves. The legend of the 'stab in the back' (Dolchstoßlegende) was preceded by the notorious 'Jew count' (Judenzahlung) of 1916, an official inquiry aimed at gauging the alleged underrepresentation of Jews in the army.²³

The idea that ordinary soldiers had been betrayed by senior officers and politicians was to emerge as a powerful theme in the Vietnam war,²⁴ and this 'betrayal' has often been seen as compounded by the indifference or hostility of US society to Vietnam veterans.²⁵

In the context of Sierra Leone, understanding soldiers' sense of betrayal means looking closely at grievances within the army. These seem to have fed strongly into soldiers' abuses.

²² Omer Bartov, *Mirrors of Destruction: War, Genocide and Modern Identity*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, p.95.

²³ This alleged under-representation was a myth. In an argument related to Bartov's, Klaus Theweleit has stressed that some of the origins of Nazism lay in a hostility among German soldiers in particular to the forces and people – broadly, 'women', 'revolution', 'Jews', 'corruption' – that were seen as undermining the strength, masculinity, pride and purity of Germany (Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987).

²⁴ See, for example: Susan Faludi, *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the Modern Man*, London: Chatto and Windus, 1999.

²⁵ E.g. Allan Young, *The harmony of illusions: Inventing post-traumatic stress disorder*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995; the Rambo films.

The 1992 coup that ushered in the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC) was, in large part, a revolt against the neglect and abuse of front-line soldiers. In part, this reflected an inability to pass resources to the designated recipients – something that afflicted most aspects of the Sierra Leonean state, including the distribution of international aid. When the NPRC failed to address the grievances of troops who remained upcountry (and indeed created new grievances among many senior APC officers whom it sidelined), many within the military turned on civilians – either directly or by assisting the RUF behind the scenes. This seems to have been partly an assertion of power by those who felt frustrated and impotent. It was also partly a political tactic – designed to undermine a military cabal that had ousted the APC and was seen as lining its own pockets. It may be significant that Rambo (who takes various kinds of direct and violent action after officialdom lets him down in Vietnam and in the US) was a common icon among government soldiers as well as rebels.

Under Kabbah's first administration (1996-97), hostility within the army towards senior officers did not disappear. Grievances were compounded by Kabbah's attempts (strongly encouraged by the International Monetary Fund) to 'downsize' the army and cut rice rations. (This pressure for reducing military spending was part of the IMF's anti-poverty programme but seems to have been counter-productive in this case.) Indeed, it came out strongly in the May 1997 coup that toppled Kabbah. The late Brigadier-General Maxwell Khobe, who became ECOMOG Task Force Commander and Chief of the Defence Staff for Sierra Leone in 1998, commented:

The mutiny completely destroyed any semblance of order within the Armed Forces. Its own soldiers daily humiliated the entire Officer Corp... The situation was so bad that Corporals and other NCOs who initiated the mutiny demanded that officers should pay them compliments and this was done.²⁶

When Kabbah's administration was restored in 1998, a sense of grievance in the army was compounded by the role of Nigerians in this restoration and by subsequent attempts further to reduce the army and to eliminate (sometimes by execution) those associated with the junta. This fed into the January 1999 attack on Freetown, which (whilst normally attributed to the RUF), saw former government soldiers playing a dominant role. Significantly, when Kabbah's administration was restored in 1998, many of the attackers seem to have felt their violence was justified. When I interviewed a young man who had been part of the West Side Boys and part of the January attack, he said proudly, "I was the first into Freetown on January 6. I don't mind who knows it!" I asked the man who was held hostage by the West Side Boys in July 2000, about the attitude of those holding him hostage to the January 1999 attacks in which they had taken part. "No remorse," he said. "For some, it was like an achievement." The hostage had a good deal of information that throws light on the West Side Boys and their motivation. He said some were not actually soldiers but youths released from prison or streetboys. Some seem to have been the children of rogue soldiers. Some had direct experience of the Sierra Leonean army, and seem to have been embittered by it; indeed, grievances within the army had often exacerbated a prior sense of grievance:

They were angry with the system – politically, and the economic effect it had. Truly there has been misrule with those at the top amassing wealth and using the young people, like in elections.²⁷ After elections, some were abandoned and some

²⁶ (Brigadier-General Mitikishe Maxwell Khobe, in Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD), 'Sierra Leone: One year after Lome', *CDD Strategy Planning Series*, London, 2000, p.62.

²⁷ Many youths were used as thugs at election time, notably by the APC.

turned to crime. Some who were lucky found themselves going into the army. One way they tried to compensate some people was to put them in the military. And even within the army, they feel they are not treated fairly, not receiving sacks of rice, and feel they are being used or bullied... When they find themselves in the bush, they inflict the same injustice on those under them that they are complaining about.

Significantly, the practice of bullying seems to have been replicated among the West Side Boys themselves:

Even among them, the young ones were not very comfortable with the higher ranking ones, especially in cases where they have been bullied. You will hear them grumbling in the corner. The camp commandant in the house where we were being held hostage had some younger boys. If certain chores were not done, or they were not keeping watch, they were beaten seriously. There was one fellow who had had polio. I met him grumbling, saying 'That house you are in, I deliberately moved out. I don't like the way they were beating small boys.' Their magazine on the gun, they use it to inflict corporal punishment on each other...

The West Side Boys' violence was interpreted by the hostage as, ultimately, a means of compelling respect:

They have the gun and they've seen a way how people of their ranks can mobilise and get some worth and some money. Without money, they don't have self-worth. And when they have the gun, whether you like it or not, you must respect them...

The January 1999 attackers seemed to be relishing the power of violence. When they gave their victims a 'choice' of how they wanted to be killed, it was as if the perpetrators were trying to enjoy the greatest possible sense of power over their victims.²⁸ Some victims were forced to listen to the rebels arguing about what kind of atrocity to commit against them.²⁹

I pressed the former hostage further on why his captors might want to pick on the innocent in an attack such as January 1999:

It could be a bit emotional. They're finding worth, attention and respect, and they think one way is by bullying those under them. They want to be powerful. They want to control people. It's some kind of normal human tendency, picking on those less strong than themselves... Corporal or regimental sergeant-major – those were the highest real ranks of the West Side Boys. But when they got to the bush, they promoted themselves. There were five ranks – private, major, colonel, lieutenant and brigadier – those were the only ranks.

Part of restoring respect, for many, was regaining the status as soldiers in the national army that they had lost when it was 'downsized' under Kabbah. One Sierra Leonean aid worker said, "They wanted to be reinstated in the national army. That's what they were fighting for."

²⁸ Forcing people to participate in violence against themselves was a common feature of rebel violence. When rebels went on the rampage near Makeni the following year, one boy begged them not to take his bag. They told him to slap himself, which he did about 10 times (Interview by Andrew Mawson, May 2000).

²⁹ Human Rights Watch, *Sierra Leone: Getting Away with Murder, Mutilation, Rape*, 1999, IV, p.9.

For many of those in the RUF, too, this desire for recognition also seems to have been a powerful motivation. This included the leadership. Sam 'Mosquito' Bockarie was considered the principal strategist behind the offensive that culminated in the January 1999 attack on Freetown. In an interview he gave by satellite phone in the midst of the fighting, the self-styled General said "I never wanted myself to be overlooked by my fellow men. I think I am at a stage where [sic] am satisfied. I have heard my name all over, I have become famous".³⁰ At the time of the July 1999 Lome peace agreement, which brought members of the RUF into the government in the wake of the January 1999 attack, RUF leader Foday Sankoh seems to have been delighted at the international recognition. Clinton had phoned Sankoh during the Lome negotiations, and Sankoh told an American journalists later: "What rebel leader gets called by the president of the United States? I only got that call because I fought in the bush for so many years".³¹

For ordinary fighters, too, respect seems to have been a key issue. I asked the man (mentioned above) who survived among the rebels in Waterloo if his insight into the rebels' need for recognition gave him any leverage in his attempt to survive: "Yes, this did give me a little bit of power. I could offer recognition. As well as a number of practical things they needed. Of course, they had most of the power!" The eyewitness elaborated:

I tried to come to some kind of psychological understanding, that this is the situation and this is the way they will probably react. I was always thinking about the psychology of their behaviour and also judging the level of intoxication. You may know if this person is dangerous. By running away from him, this is going to make things worse. Hence the [rebel] slogan: "Why are you running from us, and you don't run away from ECOMOG? What do you see in us that you don't see in them?" So sometimes running away is going to exacerbate more cruelty. You have to say "OK, I'm with you. I support you. There's nothing wrong with you." Running away is isolating or alienating them further. I was able to use this tool to survive.³²

The value of not insulting people whose circumstances were already degrading had been pressed home by the witness's earlier humanitarian work; his account also casts doubt on the sharp dividing line that is often drawn between the attitudes of rebels and those of civilians:

My background helped me. I was working for CRS [Catholic Relief Services] with very vulnerable and poorer communities in Sierra Leone. There's no fooling around. I'm going to address the 50 to 100 poor people. I don't go around the camp with a briefcase. Neither do I go in tatters - they know I earn a salary. I go in clean jeans -- not too poor. The moment they sense a link -- in the camps, or among the rebels -- to the people who are exploiting them, you're in trouble. You don't want to treat these people as animals. There has to be some respect. I think that was one of the reasons I survived [in Waterloo] for all that time.

³⁰ In David Lord (ed.), *Paying the Price: The Sierra Leone Peace Process*, London: Conciliation Resources, 2000, p.93.

³¹ In Lord (2000), p.93.

³² Part of the reason for punishing those who tried to run away at this time seems also to have been because it threatened to undermine the strategy of using civilians as human shields.

After the January 1999 incursion into Freetown, a 50-year-old police officer recalled how he was tied and beaten in the face and abdomen. Then a rebel commander calling himself ‘Major S’ “put me in the corner of my house. He threw me on the ground so I was sitting, tied on the ground about a yard from Major S. and he said, you think we should remain in the bush don't you, but the bush is made for animals”.³³

If part of the context for violence was resentment at neglect and abuse (and a concomitant desire for respect, however forced), then another seems to have been the soldier's fear of the civilian. The phrase itself is a bizarre one: how can one speak of the soldier's fear of the civilian in a context where, on any reasonable view of the facts, it is civilians who should be fearing the soldiers? Yet it does appear that fear of civilians became increasingly strong among rebels and rogue government soldiers in the course of the war.

Whilst fear of the innocent is a counterintuitive concept, there are sometimes reasons why the innocent may be particularly feared. First, they may be used by the other side precisely because they are not usually suspected of involvement in conflict – as in the use of women and children as spies. Second, the importance of flows of information means that it is not only the armed or the physically strong that can hurt you: pointing a finger, or passing a secret, might be just as deadly, particularly where a government is looking for retribution against abusive armed groups. Third, only those who appear benign can actually betray: those who are unambiguously enemies might kill you but they could never betray you since you never trusted them in the first place; it is natural, in some ways, to fear the ‘unknown quantity’.³⁴ Fourth, the perceived importance of the spiritual sphere in relation to conflict - whether in terms of witchcraft, charms, prayer, and so on - means even the apparently weak and unarmed may be seen as a threat: you do not have to be armed to exert spiritual power.

Government soldiers were on the receiving end of a long-standing condemnation by a wide range of civilians of the army's role in the war – a violent legacy of ‘sell-game’. On top of this, many members of the RUF and Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC, the government soldier component of the 1997-98 junta) were angry at civilians for having rejected their junta. In addition, there was considerable fear of civilian recriminations. In September 1998, after the restoration of Kabbah, a courts martial sentenced 24 military personnel to death for their role in the May 1997 coup. In October, they were executed. Significantly, it appears that the execution of these soldier colleagues was taken by others within the AFRC and RUF to mean that a similar fate awaited them.³⁵ To the extent that soldiers had done their duty, condemnation and recrimination only made them more angry. One participant in the January 1999 attack, pointing his finger as he spoke and making it clear that no interruption would be tolerated, said, “Those people they killed, the 24, they are the nucleus of the army. They were wiped off! These so-called people were barbaric! We have sacrificed our life for this nation!”. One local aid worker said: “The fighting in Freetown [in January 1999] was completely different to the provinces. The SLAs [former Sierra Leone Army soldiers taking part in the January attack] felt rejected, that nobody had confidence in them.”

³³ HRW (1999) , IV, p.15. Some analysts have compared the rebels' antipathy to Freetown with the antipathy to Angolan coastal entrepreneurs among many UNITA supporters (for example, Philippe LeBillon, personal communication).

³⁴ Cf. Bartov (2000).

³⁵ Focus on Sierra Leone, March/April 1999, p.5.

One former Sierra Leonean army soldier told me: “People are not talking about February 1998 [when ECOMOG ousted the junta]. Soldiers were being burned alive in Freetown then. In January 1999, soldiers came in to revenge. Each and every part of the society did his own wrong”. Another young man, who had initially had some sympathy with the rebellion but now described himself as ‘objective’, said “We asked why were they burning particular houses in January 1999. It was linked with the February 1998 recriminations when people were saying ‘This man had a relative in the AFRC’, and some fled for their lives. Soldiers had addresses of people who had taken part in these things – they followed these lists in January 1999”. Not for the first time, the desire to avoid being accused of collaboration seems itself to have fed into collaboration.³⁶ A former RUF combatant commented:

In Freetown, we have this turncoat strategy. So after the intervention with the restoration of Kabbah, civilians were trying to show they were not part of the AFRC but part of the democracy and started pointing at junta people. Unarmed civilians have killed so many just by pointing! A man called ECOMOG and said ‘This is a junta man.’ It was his own son, they shot him and killed him - the attitude of those in Freetown to those remnants of AFRC. So when they came on January 6, they treated us as less than dogs. So you see the issue of betrayal between soldiers and civilians. So soldiers are told civilians are your farming fields [that is, a resource to be exploited]... After the restoration, soldiers who had surrendered were being systematically eliminated... The 1992 recruitment [into the army] was fluid, irregular. So streetboys, highway robbers and known thieves were given guns. So they vandalised their fellow civilians – more than the trained soldiers. But they were all blamed in the army. Soldiers ask, ‘Why do the civilians reject us?’.

Distrust of civilians and anger at their turning away were recurrent themes during the January 1999 incursion. The attackers stated repeatedly that civilians should be punished for their support for the existing government and ECOMOG, and for collaborating in the search for rebels. A resident of Wellington said he and his family had been stopped by rebels when driving away from gunshots: “One of them ordered us out of the car and said, you people have been deceived by ECOMOG, why are you fleeing towards them, we’re your brothers.” The rebels then shot and killed six of this man's seven children, as well as his grandson.³⁷

An eyewitness to the January 1999 attack told me: “There was a great fear of civilians betraying them.” Another said: “They worry about betrayal to the army or the kamajors. One wrong move would have meant death or amputation for me and my family.” Some rebels used a tactic they'd employed in past offensives and dressed up in ECOMOG uniforms, trying to illicit a favourable reaction from civilians. They would then catch civilians who showed support, and punish them.³⁸ At Rogbalan mosque, an organised, premeditated massacre took place. It involved two groups of rebels and lasted around 45 minutes. The mosque was packed, with both Muslims and Christians inside. “One of the rebels... walked around the mosque sprinkling petrol on people and I heard one of them say, you bastard civilians; you don't like us and we don't like you”.³⁹

³⁶ Compare also Arthur Miller, *The Crucible*.

³⁷ HRW (1999), IV, p.4.

³⁸ HRW (1999), IV, p.9.

³⁹ HRW (1999), IV, p.5.

It is clear that civilians were seen as a possible source of potentially harmful information leaks. There was also an attempt to find an ‘explanation’, however far-fetched, for military set-backs in betrayals (again, echoes of Bartov’s argument). This could be betrayals by politicians, senior officers, civilians, or by those people occupying an ambiguous position between civilian life and various factions. The hostage of the West Side Boys said:

Another reason [for picking on the innocent], it’s out of fear. Because if people of junior ranks don’t comply [with you], they can easily tell tales to higher ranks and put you in trouble. Some boys went to the so-called brigadier and told him that the head of communications was about to defect to UNAMSIL [United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone]. The feeling was: these boys under us could be a danger to us, and the civilians could react against us – they could give information about us. In 1998/99, civilians set some of these military officers alight. So they are afraid of what those under them could do to them. You could tell on them, or cause someone to inflict punishment on them... Six ladies were executed. After that, the commander put on Rasta religious music and took a lot of marijuana. They accused them of being witches – so again you see the fear. Fear and anger - the idea that people who are practicing witchcraft are impeding their progress. Some [of the young women killed] had their boyfriends there and were more or less part of the group. They [the West Side Boys] had the illusion that they could capture Freetown, gain power, be in charge of diamonds, drive expensive cars... These guys, they were telling us, ‘When we fire two shots, the whole of UNAMSIL will go away.’ The UN had run away in May, and ECOMOG collapsed in January 1999... But these boys were getting blocked. They were not making progress. Yes, they have an exaggerated idea of their own power. Maybe a kind of indoctrination. They’ve been told, ‘If you just have 10 guns, you could storm that position.’

The anger at rejection by civilians and the fear of civilians seem to have been reinforcing each other, and these feelings had been brewing for some time. In conversation with a Sierra Leonean aid worker, who stressed that the West Side Boys wanted reinstatement in the national army, I suggested that this could hardly explain the extremity of the atrocities in January 1999. He said:

The extremity of the violence? Before they took to the jungle, we heard elements of the army were joining secretly with the RUF. They were calling them ‘sobels’. So people never wanted them. Civilians were not respecting that presence any more. Secondly, with the kamajors [civil defence fighters], there were stories that whenever a kamajor kills a soldier, no action is taken, and when a soldier kills a kamajor, there’s no immediate action. So all those grudges were fermenting in their hearts. So they took over in 1997 [the May 1997 coup]. So civilians preferred to stay at home. We never went to work for nine months [a strike against the junta]. They felt that the civilians had gone against them, so they started killing the civilians indiscriminately. They thought they were unimportant in the eyes of the civilians. So they were finding every way to find recognition.

Conclusion: Restoring Respect

In responding to conflict, it is very difficult to tread the right line between, on the one hand, condemnation and punishment (which may deepen alienation and promote further violence) and on the other hand forgiveness and understanding (which may involve making excuses for

the inexcusable and may help to perpetuate a climate of impunity). Part of the trick seems to be timing. Discussing the 'Never Again' peace campaign (aimed at ex-combatants and their communities attacked) in which ActionAid has been a key actor, one worker with the agency said:

You have to be sure of where you are in the campaign, because the message on the T-shirt or the slogan may not be appropriate for that time. For example, you put on a T-shirt which says 'We want peace, No more war, Amnesty for combatants', and take it to the amputees' camp. It will not go down well. They will say 'You tell me to embrace rebels because you have arms to do so!' When you go to ex-combatants and say you must demonstrate remorse, they will kill you. You have to time it. As far as he is concerned, he has done the right thing. You have to gauge the mood before you went in. When they have evidence of their colleagues being reintegrated and their colleagues have not been in jail and have schools, jobs, they can use that as a basis to trust. So they can talk more openly and feel remorse. You have to examine your own self as someone who is not in any way responsible. If they suspect you're one of the people that caused the war, they can suspect you.

If much of the violence is to be understood as (perverse and ultimately counterproductive) attempts to command respect, it follows that providing respect has to be part of the solution. There are signs that this can work.

Under Kabbah's second administration, a British team has been retraining, re-equipping and reorganising the Sierra Leone army. Salaries have been improved and soldiers were given a living wage of 140,000 leones a month, plus rice. Good conditions and training have been widely seen as the key to improved behaviour in the army. Former minister Amy Smythe commented:

Those soldiers who fought in the '39 to '45 war were sound soldiers because of training in the colonial system. Under Strasser [Captain Valentine Strasser, President under the NPRC, 1992-96], they could not have the same standards because there was not the same training. If the British go today, it will deteriorate again. If you are not supported, you will deteriorate.

British officers stressed that they were trying to instill a fundamentally different ethos in the army. There was an emphasis, a new departure, on inculcating the history of Sierra Leone's armed forces and instilling a sense of pride in this history. Despite its rather imperialist tones, the comment of one senior British officer on the damaging ethos he found in Sierra Leone seems significant:

The idea among officers was not that they had a responsibility to look after their men but that their men had a responsibility to look after them. A lot were trained in Nigeria, not a very good military schooling – particularly with the military regimes, there's not much idea that soldiers are there to serve civilians. We have training in human rights law, international law, the laws of war. They want to learn about this. They want to get the proper training, what they see as 'the white man's training'.

In the short-term at least, the strategy seemed to be working. One young man, who had wanted to get into the army but had been denied because he lacked the right connections, said:

The soldiers now have pride in the job, because they have been given the basic things. The British have done well here. The British are providing bread and tea for the police. They are proud. They have mobile phones. If you deprive him, he will become undisciplined. Civilians have started praising the military. You can be naturally peaceful, but the situation can make you behave like an animal. People can change. The environment is the thing .

Still, the reliability of the army remains in doubt. One senior British officer commented: “There has been collaboration and passing of information. People say ‘We don’t know who’ll win, and I’ll have an each-way bet.’” Even in 2000, he said, “SLA [Sierra Leone army] soldiers were passing information to the rebels.” Many government soldiers still harboured an affinity for the rebels. In August 2001, one RUF ex-combatant said:

Sankoh and Johnny Paul Koroma fell out. Johnny Paul has a lot of following in the rank and file in the army. Even now, there are thousands of SLA who do not want to be identified as SLA or even called SLA. They want to be called RUF. In February 1998 many surrendered and were manhandled. Some were poisoned. Many were placed at Pademba Road. Most of those have gone in the army. [Chief of Staff Brigadier Tom] Carew was a very junior officer, but had a key role in court-martial of the 24. So most of the West Side Boys, very loyal to the guys executed, have gone back into the army. They feel chief Carew is a stooge for the government. So the military is divided.

Asked if there was not a case for putting military pressure on the RUF, one experienced Sierra Leonean analyst closely involved in the peace process stressed that ties remained close between many soldiers and the RUF rebels:

OK, [military] pressure [on the rebels] from the Guineans is one thing, or from the British or UNAMSIL, but when you send this SLA against these boys, it’s a disaster – because they have more in common with these boys than anything else. They have a common background and often common experience. They are the youths, young people, they speak the same language and same slangs. That’s why it was so easy to have sobels and so much communication across the lines. The RUF and the army were recruiting from the same pool – the large pool of unemployed and hopeless.

There is a continuing danger, then, that fighters in apparently opposing camps will remain ‘the best of enemies’. These bonds are fuelled not just by greed and the calculating exploitation of civilians but also by a shared experience of anger and fear. To the extent that perpetrators have come to see themselves as victims, this has only added fuel to the violence against civilians in Sierra Leone.

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The aim of the Crisis States Programme (CSP) at DESTIN's Development Research Centre is to provide new understanding of the causes of crisis and breakdown in the developing world and the processes of avoiding or overcoming them. We want to know why some political systems and communities, in what can be called the "fragile states" found in many of the poor and middle income countries, have broken down even to the point of violent conflict while others have not. Our work asks whether processes of globalisation have precipitated or helped to avoid crisis and social breakdown.

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Research Objectives

- We will assess how constellations of power at local, national and global levels drive processes of institutional change, collapse and reconstruction and in doing so will challenge simplistic paradigms about the beneficial effects of economic and political liberalisation.
- We will examine the effects of international interventions promoting democratic reform, human rights and market competition on the 'conflict management capacity' and production and distributional systems of existing polities.
- We will analyse how communities have responded to crisis, and the incentives and moral frameworks that have led either toward violent or non-violent outcomes.
- We will examine what kinds of formal and informal institutional arrangements poor communities have constructed to deal with economic survival and local order.



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