

FILE NOTE

VISIT TO THE WAR FRONT IN KENEMA DISTRICT: 1-3 NOVEMBER

1. The purpose of the visit was to get a personal feel for the war situation in Kenema District and thus to complement my earlier visit to Kono District. I visited Kenema, Segbwema, HQ Tiger Battalion at Daru, and the devastated villages of Daru Junction and Bandajuma.

Colonel Mansaray

2. Col Mansaray, a Madingo Limba, and CO Tiger Battalion, welcomed me to Daru. He said that it was good that someone should come from Freetown to see for himself what was happening. Freetown itself did not know.

3. On the end August-early September move by the RSLMF into Kailahun District, Col Mansaray said that his objective had been to recover Pendembu. Although his own proper place would have been to control the operation from HQ at Daru, he had personally taken the lead to recover the strategic town of Baiima and three nearby villages. He had left a Major in charge while he returned to HQ to report to Freetown. But in his absence, officers and men had withdrawn. He implied that the Major and the two other officers concerned had fully deserved the severity of their Court Martial sentences. Asked about the quality of his men, Col Mansaray said that the most experienced NCOs were all now in Freetown.

4. Col Mansaray said that the RSLMF had just re-occupied Bunumbu in Kono District.

5. Col Mansaray said that his current objective was to cut off the rebels in Kono District by occupying the major crossing points of the River Moa, eg at Maloma and Manowa.

Note: Chief Secretary Benjamin was dismissive of this when I saw him last Friday.

Enemy

6. Asked who the enemy were, Col Mansaray took refuge in history. He said Charles Taylor had had a grudge against Sierra Leone because Momoh had refused his request that Taylor should base his campaign to take over Liberia in Sierra Leone. Taylor had even spent time in Pademba Road. The original invaders of Sierra Leone from Liberia had been Liberian Kissy Tribesmen linked with indigenous Sierra Leoneans centred around Sankoh. Asked what proportion of prisoners

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he was now taking were Liberian, he replied none. Col Mansaray said that the rebels in Kailahun District had the benefit of earlier caches of Liberian arms. They continued to be supplied from Liberia via Koidu. The Guineans continued to deny supply through the road at Dawa. Later on, two soldiers told me independently and unequivocally that the enemy were Sierra Leoneans. One soldier said that the original motive of these Sierra Leoneans had been to oppose the APC and Momoh. RSLMF soldiers had subsequently sent them letters asking why they continued to fight after the APC had fallen, but there had been no reply.

7. Col Mansaray claimed that the relations between the RSLMF and Ghanains were good, but he qualified the statement by saying that it was the Sierra Leonean task to make them so.

Note: As a Madingo, he is well qualified in that sense.

8. Col Mansaray claimed that the RSLMF relations with the local community were now also good. The local Chiefs were cooperating (contrast Kono District) and local hunters were being used to show the way through the bush.

Devastated Villages

9. I visited the devastated villages of Daru Junction and Bandajuma and the derelict Methodist Girls' Boarding School on the road between them. In all cases, the buildings were merely guttered ruins, often with only the walls remaining. Scattered on the ground were scores of empty cartridge cases of different calibre. At Daru Junction the house was pointed out where a lady RSLMF officer was shot by rebels, her soldiers having fled despite her shouting that the rebels numbered only eight. The only sign of life was 10 or so soldiers guarding each village. There was no sign of life at the school. The graves there of 9 or so civilians and a similar number of "rebels" were unmarked. It was put to me later in Kenema that only RSLMF soldiers could have stripped the two villages and the school so completely.

Water Aid

10. In Kenema, I visited the Water Aid premises and met Paul Everett from Freetown and two of his British colleagues. In view of the events in Koidu, they said that they would abandon Kenema at the first sign of trouble there. The security situation apart, their main problem continued to be the denial of duty free facilities for their supplies. They could last three months with the equipment they had.

Business Confidence

11. Mr Johny, the Manager of Standard Chartered Bank in Kenema, told me that business activity there was about 60% of normal. The diamond business was depressed, with a damaging knock-on effect in

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other areas. A Lebanese diamond dealer told me that he was sending his family to Freetown. Producers outside were frightened to bring their goods in for fear of them being stolen by the army. A Lebanese shopkeeper spoke of emigrating. The Barclays Bank Manager in Bo spoke in similar terms of reduced business activity there. We noted that most of the military checkpoints on the road from Freetown to Bo to Kenema had just been removed. This should encourage local trade.

Segbwema

12. I visited the Nixon Memorial Hospital, built in the early 1950s to honour a distinguished citizen of Newcastle-on-Tyne. The hospital was about two-thirds full. There were two or three soldiers in-patients. Dr George explained that the RSLMF sent its serious casualties to the military hospital in Bo, partly to avoid population panic in Segbwema. They sent their out-patients, however, to the Nixon Hospital; but failed to pay for the treatment given. At the time of the visit, there were three soldiers guarding the hospital, including one ULIMO soldier who had just returned from Bunumbu. Mr Barnes, the hospital administrator, explained that a short time ago 10 ULIMO soldiers had been guarding the hospital.

13. The people at Segbwema appeared unconcerned by their proximity to the "war front". Dr George explained that they were not themselves from Segbwema, but from Kailahun. The original inhabitants had fled. The present inhabitants were cheerful enough because they were better in Segbwema than they had been in Kailahun.

14. Mr Geoff Crawford showed me round the hospital and pointed out the works which he and his local work people were carrying out to restore a proper water supply, electricity supply and basic furniture. It is clear that Mr Crawford has done a first-class job in his several years at the hospital on behalf of the Methodist Church and with the help of ODA equipment and supplies. It will be a tragedy if the hospital is overrun by "rebels" and then the army, and everything destroyed or removed.

Red Cross

15. The Pastoral Centre at Kenema were very concerned to know whether the American Red Cross man, Michael O'Neil, had been released. It appears that he had had words with the army about their use of WFP rice. This made me wonder whether the army had kidnapped him. However, John Benjamin told me later that Col Mani's wife had told him that rebels had taken Mr O'Neil from her house in her presence.

