

# Human Rights & Human Welfare

---

Volume 7 | Issue 1

Article 22

---

2007

## Making Sense of a Senseless War

J. Peter Pham

*James Madison University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/hrhw>



Part of the [African Studies Commons](#), [Human Rights Law Commons](#), [International Humanitarian Law Commons](#), [International Law Commons](#), [Military, War, and Peace Commons](#), and the [Peace and Conflict Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Pham, J. Peter (2007) "Making Sense of a Senseless War," *Human Rights & Human Welfare*: Vol. 7: Iss. 1, Article 22.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/hrhw/vol7/iss1/22>

This Review Essays is brought to you for free and open access by the Josef Korbel School of International Studies at Digital Commons @ DU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Human Rights & Human Welfare by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ DU. For more information, please contact [jennifer.cox@du.edu](mailto:jennifer.cox@du.edu), [dig-commons@du.edu](mailto:dig-commons@du.edu).

---

## **Making Sense of a Senseless War**

### **Abstract**

A review of:

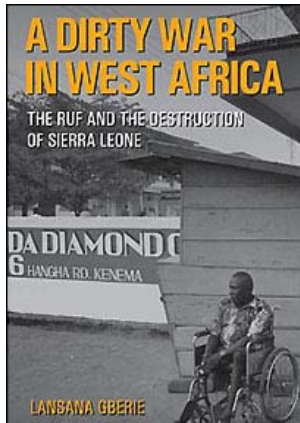
A Dirty War in West Africa: The RUF and the Destruction of Sierra Leone by Lansana Gberie. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005.

and

Young Soldiers: Why They Choose to Fight by Rachel Brett and Irma Specht. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2005.

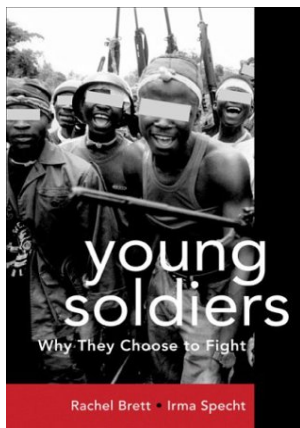
### **Keywords**

Africa, Child soldiers, Civil conflict, War crimes



## Making Sense of a Senseless War

By J. Peter Pham



*A Dirty War in West Africa: The RUF and the Destruction of Sierra Leone* by Lansana Gberie. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005.

*Young Soldiers: Why They Choose to Fight* by Rachel Brett and Irma Specht. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2005.

### A “Senseless” War

In a report on the United Nations-supervised disarmament process in Sierra Leone, veteran *Washington Post* correspondent Douglas Farah described the *pathos* of the ragged Revolutionary United Front (RUF) fighters: many were barely into their teens, straggling into a processing center in the diamond-rich eastern district of Kono with little more than ill-fitting rags draped over their emaciated bodies (Farah 2001). There was little evidence that these broken youths had, just a short while earlier, been part of one of the most brutal and effective insurgencies in the world, one whose strategy was predicated on terror in its most primordial expression. Farah’s piece was headlined, “They Fought for Nothing, and That’s What They Got,” a succinct description of a conflict that struck many as senseless, despite its heavy toll in lives and property.

Founded by a group of British philanthropists in 1789 as a haven for freed black slaves, (thus the name of the capital, “Freetown”) Sierra Leone boasts of being one of the oldest modern polities in Africa. The foundation in the colony of the oldest university-level institution in sub-Saharan Africa, Fourah Bay College, in 1827 made it the “Athens of West Africa,” the *alma mater* of countless African leaders. By the time Sierra Leone achieved its independence in 1961 under the leadership of Sir Milton Margai and the Sierra Leone People’s Party, it had inherited as its legacy a Westminster-style parliamentary democracy that was the envy of the region. This especially was the case after the

general elections of 1967 constitutionally handed the reins of government over to the opposition All Peoples' Congress (APC), led by Siaka Probyn Stevens.

Unfortunately, like all-too-many African leaders of his generation, Stevens was more interested in consolidating his personal power than in state-building. In short order, he set about turning Sierra Leone's parliamentary democracy into a highly-centralized presidential republic and, by 1978, completed the country's transformation into a one-party state when a farcical referendum made his machine the only legal political organization. Perhaps even worse than what Stevens did to the political system was what he did—or, as the case may be, failed to do—with Sierra Leone's economy. Upon entering office, Stevens had inherited a sound, if poor, economy based on diamond and iron mining as well as agriculture (primarily coffee and cocoa production) that expanded between 1965 and 1973 at the respectable, if not particularly stellar, annual rate of 4 percent against an annual population growth rate of 1.9 percent. Unfortunately, the 1973 global oil crisis coincided with a decline in diamond and iron ore prices, creating a deficit in Sierra Leone's international balance of payments. The conventional response to such an economic downturn would have been to cut public spending and devalue the national currency in the short term and, over time, attempt to diversify exports. Instead the Stevens regime did the exact opposite, opting to finance the deficit by borrowing from the central bank—effectively, printing money—as well as from international governmental and commercial institutions and extending state control of the economy. Not surprisingly, inflation went through the roof, averaging 50 percent per annum in the 1980s where it had been 2.1 percent between 1965 and 1973. The annual rate of growth dipped to an average of 0.7 percent between 1980 and 1987, before going into negative figures (Chege 2002).

Dwindling revenues, compounded by governmental corruption and profligate spending on non-essential “prestige projects,” accelerated the sharp economic decline. Sierra Leone went from being the model for democratic governance and economic prosperity to being the exemplar of Africa's post-colonial “neo-patrimonial” malaise whereby national resources were redistributed as “marks of personal favor to followers who respond with loyalty to the leader rather than to the institution that the leader represents” (Richards 2002: 34). In no sector was this more evident than in Sierra Leone's fabled diamond industry. Before the APC took over, the diamond trade constituted one-third of national output and contributed over 70 percent of Sierra Leone's foreign exchange reserves. By the mid-1980s, less than \$100,000 worth of the precious mineral passed through legal, taxable channels. Most of the rest was appropriated by Stevens and a coterie of his closest associates, who also embezzled profits and other assets from various state enterprises, including the oil and rice monopolies (Hayward 1989).

Having looted an estimated \$500 million and leaving a balance of barely \$196,000 in foreign reserves in the Bank of Sierra Leone on the day he left office (Pham 2005a), Stevens retired in 1985, designating the army chief, Major General Joseph Saidu Momoh, as his successor (armed with Stevens's endorsement, Momoh's accession was duly “ratified” by a plebiscite in which he claimed to have won 99 percent of the vote). Unfortunately for Sierra Leone, Momoh proved to be not only more corrupt than his predecessor, but an even more incompetent captain of the ship of state. Sierra Leone's straitened circumstances fed a vicious cycle of political, economic, and social lethargy. As one former United States ambassador to Sierra Leone, John Hirsch, observed:

*Unpaid civil servants desperate to keep their families fed ransacked their offices, stealing furniture, typewriters, and light fixtures... One observer has noted that the government hit bottom when it stopped paying schoolteachers and the education system collapsed. Without their salaries, teachers sought fees from the parents to prepare their children for their exams. With only professional families able to pay these fees, many children ended up on the streets without either education or economic opportunity (Hirsch 2001: 30).*

Bereft of the resources which “typical” neo-patrimonial regimes exploit to provide their clients with jobs and educational opportunities, Sierra Leone’s lost its base of support and began to unravel altogether at the very moment when contracting services and collapsing infrastructure left the Sierra Leonean state itself most vulnerable to attack. The *coup de grâce* came in the form of a spillover from the civil war in neighboring Liberia, a country whose history has unfolded along parallel lines with that of Sierra Leone since the former’s foundation as a haven for freed slaves from the United States. Liberian warlord (and later president), Charles Taylor, had initially wanted to launch his insurgency from Sierra Leone and had traveled to Freetown in 1988 where he offered to pay Momoh for permission to operate out of bases in the country’s east. However, as Stephen Ellis succinctly observed in his study of the Liberian civil conflict: “The notoriously venal Momoh promptly sought from [then Liberian president] Samuel Doe a higher sum, turning the approach into an auction, an action for which his country was later to pay dearly” (Ellis 1999: 70-71).

To make matters worse, just as Taylor was on the verge of victory in early 1990, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) decided to intervene in the Liberian conflict with its own military “monitoring group” (ECOMOG). Momoh not only permitted ECOMOG to use his country’s major international airport at Lungi, near Freetown, to bomb areas in Liberia controlled by Taylor’s rebels, but sent Sierra Leonean units to join the intervention force. Taylor never forgave the Sierra Leonean ruler. On March 23, 1991, Foday Saybana Sankoh, a charismatic former Sierra Leonean army corporal,<sup>1</sup> invaded eastern Sierra Leone from Liberia. Sankoh, supported by Taylor, issued a call for anti-government uprising in the name of the previously unknown “Revolutionary United Front.”

The RUF, originally a diminutive force consisting only of several dozen disaffected rural youth to whom Sankoh had promised free education and medical care, and who, in turn, hailed him as “Papa,” ostensibly fought for a redress of the iniquities of Sierra Leonean society. The APC regime had been exploiting the rich diamond resources for the benefit of its elite, even as the living standards in the country sunk to the very bottom of international scales. Instead, as they sent the government’s forces reeling and quickly seized control of most of the eastern part of the country, including the diamond fields, the rebels themselves soon became a by-word for terror; they routinely amputated the limbs of civilians as a terror tactic, raped women and girls, and abducted young boys

---

<sup>1</sup> Sankoh had been jailed for several years in the 1970s for his alleged role in the failed 1971 revolt against the Stevens regime and subsequently underwent military training with a small group of Sierra Leonean dissidents in Libya (where Taylor had also drilled his insurgents).

to fill their ranks and young girls to “marry” to their fighters—inspiring, together with the conflict in Liberia, Robert Kaplan’s celebrated *Atlantic Monthly* essay, “The Coming Anarchy.”<sup>2</sup>

In April 1992, a group of soldiers on leave in Freetown from the fighting on the front, led by a 27-year-old captain named Valentine Strasser, overthrew President Momoh. The coup was actually popular at the time as most Sierra Leoneans had grown disgruntled with the APC’s corrupt and ineffectual rule. The current president of Sierra Leone, Ahmad Tejan Kabbah, then a senior official with the United Nations Development Programme, even offered his services to the young *putschists* and was appointed the chairman of their national advisory council. Strasser, however, formed a military junta that grew increasingly despotic in its turn, thus shifting popular momentum to the RUF; they not only seized control of the diamond fields, but subsequently also took the iron mines, the other major source of state revenue for the Freetown government. Confronted by these reversals, as well as the waning capacity of the national army, Strasser turned to mercenaries to assist in repelling the RUF offensive, first bringing in the UK-based Gurkha Security Group, a firm with close ties to the British military, and then the South Africa-based firm Executive Outcomes.

In January 1996, Strasser was overthrown by his deputy, Brigadier Julius Maada Bio.<sup>3</sup> Under increasing foreign and domestic pressure, the new Sierra Leonean leader was forced to hold elections, which were boycotted and sporadically disrupted by the RUF. To discourage people from voting, Foday Sankoh ordered his guerillas to cut off the hands of people who had cast a ballot.<sup>4</sup> In the rural areas where these amputations took place, they were especially cruel since they destroyed the livelihoods of the subsistence farmers who were thus rendered incapable of working if they survived their injuries. The elections took place nonetheless and were won, after two rounds and several serious disputes, by the newly-revived Sierra Leone People’s Party, led by Kabbah, who became the country’s first directly elected head of state.

In November 1996, a peace agreement was signed in Abidjan, Côte d’Ivoire, between the new SLPP government of President Kabbah and the RUF. The accord granted an amnesty for all acts committed prior to its signing and called for the transformation of the RUF into a political party. The agreement quickly unraveled, however, as violence resumed after only the briefest lull. When Sankoh was arrested, allegedly for arms trafficking, while visiting Nigeria in March 1997, the complicity of the Kabbah government in the arrest was widely suspected, contributing to the final collapse of the peace accord. Two months later, yet another group of disgruntled Sierra Leonean soldiers led by Major Johnny Paul Koroma drove President Kabbah into exile, replacing his government with an Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) that invited the RUF to join it. The country fell into complete chaos as most of the judiciary system—judges, attorneys, police

---

<sup>2</sup> See Robert D. Kaplan, “The Coming Anarchy: How Scarcity, Crime, Overpopulation and Disease are Rapidly Destroying the Social Fabric of Our Planet,” *Atlantic Monthly* 273, no. 2 (February 1994): 44-76—republished along with related articles and a new introduction in Kaplan (2000).

<sup>3</sup> Strasser nonetheless met a kinder fate than many deposed African rulers. The British government procured for him a scholarship—funded by the United Nations—to study at Warwick University. His academic career proved, however, to be short-lived: the military ruler-turned-scholar was recognized by a fellow student from Sierra Leone and ensuing campus protests led to his removal.

<sup>4</sup> The mutilations represented a macabre *double entendre*: those who voted received an indelible ink mark on their hands to prevent them from voting more than once while the campaign itself was organized under the slogan “the future is in your hands.”

officers, and other law enforcement professionals, all of whom had previously been targeted by RUF rebels—fled the country before what it imagined to be the imminent entrance of the dreaded insurgents into government. The angry populace, fearful not only of the RUF but also of the continuing decline of the country, launched a series of civil disobedience campaigns as schools, banks, and commercial services ceased to function.

The international reaction to the coup proved, for once, to be swift and unequivocal. The overthrow of President Kabbah had taken place on the eve of the annual summit meeting of the heads of state and government of the then Organization of African Unity (OAU) in Harare, Zimbabwe. Despite the fact that many of the leaders present at the meeting had themselves come to power through military coups, and in contrast to the OAU's usual practice of non-interference in the internal affairs of member states, the sixty-sixth session of the OAU Council of Ministers called for "the immediate restoration of constitutional order" in Sierra Leone and urged "all African countries and the international community at large to refrain from recognizing the new regime and lending support in any form whatsoever to the perpetrators of the *coup d'état*" (OAU Council of Ministers 1997).<sup>5</sup> In particular, the African leaders, called upon "the leaders of ECOWAS to assist the people of Sierra Leone to restore constitutional order to the country" and to "implement the Abidjan Agreement which continues to serve as a viable framework for peace, stability and reconciliation in Sierra Leone" (OAU Council of Ministers 1997) When, in October 1997, the U.N. Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 1132, imposing economic sanctions against the AFRC regime, the embargo was scrupulously enforced by another ECOMOG contingent. Koroma quickly capitulated and promised to allow Kabbah to return to power by April 1998. However, when the junta was slow to cede power, ECOMOG forces, under the command of a Nigerian general and supported by yet another mercenary outfit, the British-based firm Sandline International hired by exiled President Kabbah, launched an offensive against the now-combined AFRC/RUF forces in February 1998, restoring Kabbah to power the following month.

The restoration, however, was tenuous, with the government's writ extending barely beyond the municipal boundaries of the capital. Increasing numbers of regional peacekeepers were required—by the end of the year nearly a quarter of the entire Nigerian army, some 20,000 men, were in Sierra Leone—to prop up the Kabbah government. The RUF military commander, Sam "Mosquito" Bockarie, backed by Major Koroma—designated deputy commander of the RUF, threatened to make the country ungovernable if Sankoh, sentenced to death for treason by the Kabbah government, was not freed and included in the government. In January 1999, rebel forces encircled the capital. Using women and children as human shields, some RUF units managed to bypass ECOMOG forces and join comrades who had already infiltrated the city. Kabbah fled the country once more as apocalyptic scenes—at one point, 40,000 people sought refuge in Freetown's National Stadium—became commonplace.

Eventually, after ferocious fighting, ECOMOG forces managed to reestablish control over the capital and its environs, but at the cost of some 7,000 dead civilians and two-thirds of the city leveled. Some of the atrocities that took place during this phase were documented by Sierra Leonean filmmaker Sorious Samura (2000), whose *Cry Freetown*, was eventually aired around the globe by the

---

<sup>5</sup> This and other documents relating to the conflict which are subsequently cited are found in the appendices to Pham 2005a.

BBC, CNN, and other major outlets. Compounding the human tragedy, as the RUF units retreated they abducted some 3,000 civilians, many of whom were never seen again. As a consequence of the mayhem, about 600,000 of Sierra Leone's estimated four million people sought refuge in neighboring countries, while two-thirds of those who remained were internally displaced. The Nigerians, worn out by the fighting which claimed an estimated 800 of their peacekeepers and was costing them about \$1 million daily, announced their intention to withdraw and force the two Sierra Leonean parties to enter into negotiations, which resulted in the July 7, 1999 Lomé Peace Agreement, signed in the Togolese capital. The deal made Sankoh the "Chairman of the Board of the Commission for the Management of Strategic Resources, National Reconstruction and Development" and accorded him "the status of Vice-President answerable only to the President of Sierra Leone." The accord also promised the rebel leader and his followers a "complete amnesty for any crimes committed...from March 1991 up to the date of the agreement."<sup>6</sup> The Lomé Agreement was initialed by the two parties as well as by an impressive array of international guarantors, including a special representative of the U.N. Secretary-General, although the latter signed with the reservation that the amnesty provisions did not apply to "international crimes of genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and other serious violations of international humanitarian law."

The Lomé Agreement was ratified by the Sierra Leonean National Assembly and initially endorsed by a U.N. Security Council resolution. A second U.N. resolution also authorized the creation of the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) with 6,000 military personnel charged with assisting in the implementation of the peace agreement and facilitating humanitarian assistance. However, the accord, like its predecessors, quickly fell apart. In several incidents in late 1999 and early 2000, U.N. peacekeepers were themselves disarmed by RUF forces. In response, the Security Council increased UNAMSIL's personnel to 11,100 and revised UNAMSIL's mission to include protecting the government of President Kabbah. The situation only worsened, however. In early May, the RUF killed seven U.N. peacekeepers and captured fifty others. The number of peacekeepers taken prisoner soon increased to over 500 as the U.N. forces under the command of Indian Major General Vijay Kumar Jetley, who was experiencing difficulties with the Nigerian component of his command, apparently surrendered to the rebels without firing a shot. British forces, operating independently of the U.N. command structures, then landed in Freetown, ostensibly to help evacuate foreign nationals, but in fact to shore up the Kabbah regime and rescue the beleaguered U.N. force.

The capture of Sankoh while he led an incursion in Freetown, however, saved the situation when the U.N. prisoners were released as the RUF forces began to disintegrate after their leader's arrest. Meanwhile the Security Council authorized UNAMSIL to increase its strength to 13,000 military personnel (a limit that was later raised to 17,500, making it the largest U.N. peacekeeping operation in the world up to that time). As the country was gradually pacified during 2001, UNAMSIL celebrated the success of its disarmament program with symbolic arms destruction ceremonies in January 2002. No one really knows the total number of casualties in the decade-long conflict. It was conservatively estimated that some 70,000 people lost their lives in the fighting, while hundreds of thousands of others suffered amputations or were otherwise maimed. By the

---

<sup>6</sup> *Lomé Peace Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Sierra Leone and the Revolutionary United Front of Sierra Leone (RUF/SL)* (July 7, 1999), in Pham 2005a.



conclusion of the hostilities, more than half of the country's population, some 2.6 million individuals, was either internally displaced or had taken refuge in neighboring countries (Richards 2002).

### The Search for Meaning

Since most of the coverage on the Sierra Leonean war has focused on the brutal outbursts of violence—exemplified by the quasi-voyeuristic broadcast media fixation on the “rebel hand choppers” of the RUF—the symptoms of the conflict have largely overshadowed its underlying pathology. This is not particularly surprising given that as one African human rights scholar has observed, the focus on conflict pathologies provides “academia, mainstream media, and political organizations an amiable platform from which to configure their response” (Juma 2002: 88). In the case of Sierra Leone, moral indignation over human rights abuses, logistical concerns about the provision of humanitarian aid, the repatriation of refugees, the rehabilitation of child soldiers, and plans for the trial of accused war criminals, were among the many reactive programs that figured prominently on the international agenda for the West African country.

The Sierra Leonean civil war first burst onto the general consciousness of policymakers in the West through Kaplan's influential essay, written three years into the conflict. Kaplan painted an alarming panorama of the post-Cold War world increasingly bifurcated between “societies like ours, producing goods and services that the rest of the world wants, and those mired in various forms of chaos” (Kaplan 2000: xiii). Among the latter, Sierra Leone, was, according to the author, an obligatory study which he described in the opening paragraphs of his article:

*Sierra Leone is a microcosm of what is occurring, albeit in a more tempered and gradual manner, throughout West Africa and much of the underdeveloped world: the withering away of central governments, the rise of tribal and regional domains, the unchecked spread of disease, and the growing pervasiveness of war. West Africa is reverting to the Africa of the Victorian atlas. It consists now of a series of coastal trading posts, such as Freetown and Conakry, and an interior that, owing to violence, volatility, and disease, is again becoming, as Graham Greene once observed, “blank” and “unexplored.” However, whereas Greene's vision implies a certain romance, as in the somnolent and charmingly seedy Freetown of his celebrated novel The Heart of the Matter, it is Thomas Malthus, the philosopher of demographic doomsday, who is now the prophet of West Africa's future. And West Africa's future, eventually, will also be that of most of the rest of the world (Kaplan 2000: 9).*

The essayist's thesis was, in essence, a Malthusian interpretation of post-colonial African history, with engaging prose skillfully weaving a tapestry out of the variegated strands of his anecdotal observations and the precision of some of his insights making up for the lack of more scholarly evidence. In very simple terms, Kaplan noted that in West Africa, environmental stress—especially deforestation, followed by flooding, and, hence, mosquito infestation and rampant malaria—has driven a large number of young people in the rural interior to pull up stakes and move to the teeming shanty-towns surrounding coastal urban centers. Here, cut off from the salutary ties of their ancestral peoples and land, these lost migrants became “loose molecules in a very unstable social fluid, a fluid that was clearly on the verge of igniting” (Kaplan 2000: 5). Once some event or person sparked the flame, the conflagration consumed entire societies, which quickly reverted to bizarre

forms of violence, unchecked by the social bonds that would have otherwise restrained some of the participants. For Kaplan, emblematic of this pattern of environmental, demographic, and social upheaval were the gangs of Sierra Leonean teenagers that, during the country's civil war, roamed the countryside armed simultaneously with modern weapons and primitive fetishes, and likened by the author to the mercenary bands that ravaged Central Europe during the Thirty Years War.

Kaplan's analysis almost instantaneously captured the imagination of influential policymakers. Undersecretary of State for Global Affairs, Timothy Wirth, faxed a copy of "The Coming Anarchy" to every United States embassy around the world. Reportedly, the piece "so rattled top officials at the United Nations that they called a confidential meeting to discuss its implications" (Bradshaw 1996: 18).

Kaplan also disturbed scholars, including anthropologist Paul Richards, whose Fighting for the Rain Forest: War, Youth and Resources in Sierra Leone, originally published in 1996, was the first academic study of the conflict. Relying on his extensive ethnographic studies of Sierra Leone, however, Richards cautioned against interpreting the violence as "senseless barbarism," much less imputing some sort of "African primitivism" to it, arguing that:

*Whereas it is true that the war in Sierra Leone is a terror war, and involves horrifying acts of brutality against defenseless civilians, this sad fact cannot in any way be taken to prove a reversion to some kind of essential African savagery. Terror is supposed to unsettle its victims. The confused accounts of terrorized victims of violence do not constitute evidence of the irrationality of violence. Rather they show the opposite—that the tactics have been fully effective in disorientating, traumatizing and demoralizing victims of violence. In short, they are devilishly well-calculated (Richards 2002: xvi).*

Furthermore, Richards argued, substantial evidence also suggested that other abuses attributed to the RUF leadership were likewise "rational." Although government commanders were hardly innocent on this count, other researchers have documented that the RUF leadership sanctioned the use of narcotics and other drugs in order to "prepare" its young fighters for battle:

*It is also clear from talking to combatants that both sides in the war tolerated and in some case actually encourage use of drugs like amphetamines and crack cocaine, as ways of preparing terrified young combatants for battle. Combatants on both sides also report having used marijuana extensively. Before major battles RUF fighters were officially "de-sensitized" with a concoction of amphetamines and herbal intoxicant in order to eliminate a sense of fear on the battlefield (Abdullah & Muana 1998: 190).*

Thus rejecting what he labeled Kaplan's "New Barbarism thesis" (Richards 2002: xiii), Richards went to the opposite extreme and ended up, however unintentionally, depicting the RUF as a rather distinctive social experiment in the large swathes of forests and other isolated territories to which it retreated after its 1993 setbacks and where established isolated civilian enclaves, guarded by its separately-run military camps, based on the egalitarian "ideology system" outlined by its "head of ideology," Foday Sankoh:

*These camps were a forcing ground for egalitarianism...[with] a rather distinctive approach to social justice typical of an isolated sectarian organization...It was death to leave the movement. As with many closed sects, the defection of one threatened the solidarity of all. But within the confines of the camps, tribalism was eschewed, religious pluralism was cultivated, age hierarchies were abolished, Krio was the lingua franca, cases between members were settled by open group arbitration, and basic items—notably whatever few health and educational resources the movement could command—were distributed to members according to need...Severe punishments were levied on those who tried to hide items for personal use or accumulate their own sources of wealth (Richards 2002: 27-28).*

Richards's analysis—and its seeming defense of a group notorious for its attacks on the very people it was purportedly “liberating”—provoked a spirited response from Sierra Leonean scholars. Notably, political scientist Yusuf Bangura (1997) castigated him for uncritically accepting the RUF's propaganda tract; in his earlier book *The Search for Identity*, which was only published four years after the conflict began and clearly aimed at appealing to Western audiences, Bangura had argued that whatever the “rationality” of the RUF's actions, they were no less criminal for their effectiveness (Bangura 1994).<sup>7</sup>

Another attempt to understand the conflict was made by Mariane Ferme, an anthropologist who had done considerable fieldwork in the rural south of Sierra Leone, whose *Underneath of Things: Violence, History, and the Everyday in Sierra Leone*, published in 2001, tried to explore “not only questions of origins (‘How could this occur?’) but also issues of a socio-cultural nature, examining institutions, values, and views of self and sociality that sometimes are associated with violent outcomes” (Ferme 2001: 1). In terms reminiscent of, albeit perhaps not to the same effect, as Stephen Ellis's magisterial disquisition on the “religious dimension” of the civil conflict in neighboring Liberia, Ferme argued that:

*The point is to understand how the visible world (as it appears, for instance, in ritual, political, and domestic appropriations of public space) is activated by forces concealed beneath the surface of discourse, objects, and social relations...Material objects themselves may be invested with potent forces, influencing people who come into contact with them, and thus becoming potential sources of conflict (Ferme 2001: 2-3).*

However, Ferme's emphasis on the material culture of the war (this was, after all, the conflict that brought “conflict diamonds” to the fore) ignored a key element to its understanding: it was a very *human* enterprise, one predicated on a strategic calculus and driven by an economic engine. During the Sierra Leonean civil war, all the parties in the conflict—including peacekeepers and other international agents who intervened ostensibly to stop the violence—eventually became engaged in the diamond traffic: the Sierra Leonean government, the various mercenary forces it recruited to its cause, the RUF, the rebels' Liberian supporters, soldiers and other armed factions acting on their own account, and officers of the regional and United Nations peacekeeping contingents. The biggest

---

<sup>7</sup> The critiques of Richards's thesis by Yusuf Bangura, Ibrahim Abdullah, Ismail Rashid, and others are collected in Abdullah 2004. Richards responded last year with a review essay of these efforts, published in the *African Studies Review*, in which he accused their authors of “reprinting outdated arguments” in order to carry out a personal attack (Richards 2006: 120) as well as neglecting “information based on access to former members of the RUF” (Richards 2006: 123).

offender, the RUF, alone was estimated to have received between \$30 million and \$50 million a year from diamond trafficking during the war, primarily through its Liberian patron Taylor who, once he became that country's head of state in 1997, facilitated the transactions (under Taylor, Liberia was exporting openly about six million carats of uncut diamonds annually at a time when the country's total production capacity could not have possibly exceeded 150,000 carats).

### **Towards a Comprehensive Explanation**

To this body of literature on the war in Sierra Leone, Lansana Gberie, a Sierra Leonean political journalist and co-author (with Ian Smillie and Ralph Hazleton) of Partnership Africa Canada's influential 2000 report *The Heart of the Matter: Sierra Leone, Diamonds, and Human Security*, now adds an impassioned, yet highly readable, first-hand account of his native country's civil war. Gberie covered the conflict as a reporter from 1991 to 1996, before it forced him, like many of his fellow citizens, to seek refuge abroad, where he pursued graduate studies in history, eventually earning a master's degree from Canada's Wilfrid Laurier University and a doctorate from the University of Toronto. Despite settling in North America and later Ghana, where he served as a senior research fellow at the Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre, Gberie kept close tabs on the ongoing war and returned to it often to interview the principals and pursue his research into the links between the conflict and the exploitation of natural resources, especially the diamonds which he and his colleagues helped make infamous. Along the way, he scored a number of journalistic coups, including an interview with RUF leader Foday Sankoh during the negotiations preceding the Abidjan peace accord.

While Gberie's succinct recounting of a rather complex, decade-long conflict<sup>8</sup> and his extensive "inside access" to government officials, rebel commanders, and civil defense leaders as well as civil society activists and representatives of international agencies are both highly valuable, his real contribution comes in his attempt to understand the war's violence, especially the RUF's almost gratuitous use of terror tactics. He largely succeeds by eschewing singular (and reductive) causality in favor of three overlapping aspects of the rebel phenomenon: its composition, its mercenary character, and the social and political context of impunity for organized violence in which it arose.

Gberie's analysis of the make-up of the RUF begins with social historian Ibrahim Abdullah who developed the theory that the rebel group's propensity to violence was a consequence of its members being drawn from what he termed the "lumpen culture" of marginalized, largely urban, youth easily prone to violence given their alienation from traditional societal restraint (Abdullah 1998: 203). Gberie acknowledges the validity of this argument up to a point:

*The RUF was undoubtedly dominated by ill-educated—indeed largely uneducated—young men with extremely confused and demagogic notions of statecraft. Many of these young men were unemployed (and probably unemployable) before the war, and lived lives bordering on criminality. Many can surely be described*

---

<sup>8</sup> *A Dirty War in West Africa* covers the period from the outbreak of hostilities in early 1991 until the end of 2001, when the U.N. mission announced that the disarmament process had been completed.

as “*lumpens*” (Gberie: 148).

On the other hand, Gberie points out that the rebels were “overwhelming[ly] dominated by very young people, a large number of them teenagers or in some cases pre-teenagers,” that is, fighters who literally grew up within the RUF and were not steeped in the *lumpen* youth culture described by Abdullah. In fact, almost half of the 18,354 RUF combatants disarmed by early 2002 were children who had committed horrible atrocities during the war (Gberie: 149). Gberie asks: “Why did the RUF have to do this? Why, with the degree of resentment and poverty in Sierra Leone, did the RUF not attract willing, politically motivated recruits in numbers large enough to wage a more organized insurgency campaign? Why didn’t it even try?” (Gberie: 151)

The answer, he posits, lies in the fact that the RUF “was largely conceived as a mercenary enterprise, and never evolved beyond banditism: it never became a political, still less a revolutionary organization” (Gberie: 153). Although he and his colleagues at Partnership Africa Canada contributed mightily to raising consciousness about the role of “conflict diamonds” or “blood diamonds” in the Sierra Leonean war, Gberie argues:

*Diamonds may not have been the cause of the war; the question of “causes” can often seem wholly misdirected—Taylor, the real mastermind, aimed at both revenge and pillage...and his protégé Sankoh’s grudges against the ruling All Peoples Congress (APC) party went beyond a simple wish to steal, with many among the country’s despairing poor sharing his incoherent political sentiments. But diamonds were soon to become much more than a handy resource underwriting the RUF’s campaigns: they became the principal motivation for the RUF and its outside backers. Throughout its campaigns, the RUF failed to articulate a coherent ideology or even practical political aims beyond its leaders’ fulminations against the country’s ever-changing and pedestrian leadership (Gberie: 6-7).*

The author makes a convincing case that the RUF’s reliance on child soldiers—who would not be expected to have the maturity to see through the leadership’s lack of political vision—and its extensive use of brutal tactics arise from the same source: the group’s lack of serious backing among the population. The atrocities, including the mass amputations during the infamous 1999 “Operation No Living Thing,” were carried out openly at particular moments which enabled the RUF to “project power in great disproportion to its actual size and capacity for military combat” (Gberie: 153).

While one should be cautious about treating any of the participants in complex conflicts like the Sierra Leonean war *solely* as rational actors, Gberie makes an eloquent case that “the perpetrators clearly felt they were beyond reproach, perhaps that there was simply no mechanism that could hold them to account for their crimes...for them there was a war, and what happened during that period did so because of that immutable fact” (Gberie: 154). Certainly such was the case in Sierra Leone for nearly three decades at the time the first shot was fired. The conflict itself neither began with the invasion of eastern Sierra Leone by Foday Sankoh and his little band nor truly ended with the rebel leader’s death while awaiting trial before the Special Court for Sierra Leone—a turn of events which, Gberie reports, bewildered the senior RUF members who were under investigation by the tribunal. Rather, the eruption of violence and conflict was the culmination of a process that involved a host of factors, including a lack of national identity, weak governance structures and capacity, corruption

and economic mismanagement, ethnic tensions, and the various problems of disconnected urban poverty—none of which are auspicious indicators for social responsibility.

All in all, Gberie does an excellent job mapping out an immensely complex civil conflict—one that metastasized into a regional conflagration—as well as chronicling the international community’s reasonably successful effort to reestablish a modicum of order in Sierra Leone. Regrettably every author must bring his work to a conclusion and Gberie chose to end his narrative with just minimal considerations of the implications of the international involvement, the post-conflict accountability mechanisms (especially the groundbreaking Special Court for Sierra Leone), and the long-term consequences of actions (or lack thereof) on the part of a number of governmental and nongovernmental actors during the conflict.<sup>9</sup>

### **Suffer the Children**

As comprehensive and convincing as Gberie’s analyses of the overarching issues of conflict and violence are, they nonetheless leave unanswered a perhaps even more disturbing question concerning the Sierra Leonean war. While some children were abducted and others forced to join combatant groups on all sides of the conflict, it is also true that still others joined them voluntarily and, indeed, committed atrocities *without* or even *against* orders (Abdullah & Muana 1998: 190). In their short survey, *Young Soldiers: Why They Choose to Fight*, Rachel Brett, a human rights and refugee activist with the Quaker United Nations Office in Geneva, and Irma Specht, an anthropologist formerly with the International Labor Organization, attempt to provide a conceptual framework within which to seek an answer to this question whose significance reaches far beyond the conflict in West Africa.

With ratifications from 193 state parties (the United States and Somalia are the only exceptions, having signed, but not ratified the accord—the latter really has no government to speak of), the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which sets 15 years as the minimum age for recruitment into military and other armed groups, is the most widely subscribed-to human rights instrument in international law. The Convention’s 2000 Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict, which has been ratified by 110 countries, established an even higher minimum age of 18. Despite this near universal consensus, backed by an impressive array of regional declarations, that children should be kept protected from the ravages of war, studies conducted by intergovernmental agencies, nongovernmental organizations, and academics estimate that at any given moment some 300,000 minors are still being used as child soldiers in approximately two-thirds of the ongoing conflicts around the world (Singer 2006).

Even more disturbing, there seems to a global trend towards *more* involvement of increasingly younger children. The civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone, which wracked West Africa through the 1990s and continue to reverberate through the subregion, were perhaps most infamous for the “small-boy units” of children under the age of 12 who committed unspeakable crimes. Until the recent tenuous truce, the Lord’s Resistance Army in northern Uganda not only used preteens, but with the sexual enslavement of girls “married” by rebel Joseph Kony to his fighters, children were

---

<sup>9</sup> For more on these questions, see, respectively, Pham (2005b, 2006a, and 2006b).

literally being born into the conflict. A recent study by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) found that the average age of recruitment for child soldiers in six Asian countries was 13 years, with more than one-third of all child soldiers being younger than 12 years of age (UNICEF 2003).

In the last few years this humanitarian (and human) tragedy has become the object of a growing body of literature. Most of these works, however, have been either political and security analyses of the epiphenomenon<sup>10</sup> or case studies of the use and implications of using children in specific conflicts.<sup>11</sup> Largely missing from the conversation, however, have been the voices of the child soldiers themselves who have, more often than not, been the subject of voyeuristic attention when not abandoned as an irredeemable "lost generation."<sup>12</sup>

Brett and Specht focus their attentions on those children who join armed groups by free choice, in part because their data show that two-thirds of the child soldiers African conflicts were such "volunteers" (Brett & Specht 1). Their study is rather modest: 53 boys and girls who had been involved in armed forces or armed groups before they reached the age of 18 were interviewed in depth. Some analyst will undoubtedly question the authors' decision to extend their research to ten different conflict situations—Afghanistan, Colombia, the Republic of Congo (Brazzaville), the Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire), Pakistan, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Sri Lanka, and two different situations in the United Kingdom (paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland and the British military)—but some similar patterns do emerge from the diversity, confirming earlier research such as Graça Machel's which identified environmental factors such as socio-economic status, proximity to conflict zones, and familial life (Machel 2001).

Where Brett and Specht make an advance is their analysis of *why* these factors are critical and how they interact with each other. "War itself," they assert, "is the most crucial and fundamental environmental factor in the participation of young people in warfare." However, they admit "this does not explain why some young people in war zones join and other do not...the specific combination of different environmental factors makes some significantly more vulnerable" (Brett & Specht: 36). War, of course, creates both a need for a sense of security and real material needs, which belonging to armed groups is at least perceived to provide. The family (or lack thereof) is important "both as a push factor and as a pull factor in the decision of the young person to become involved" (Brett & Specht: 48), as is group identity. According to the authors, the "trigger" often "is not an isolated event so much as a specific moment in a chain of interrelated factors that have cumulatively put the young person at risk" (Brett & Specht: 73). Abdullah and Muana, for example, document how the beleaguered Sierra Leonean government, borrowing a page from the RUF playbook, went about recruiting youth into its ranks as "apprentices" or irregulars to supplement its

---

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Singer (2006).

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Pham (2005a).

<sup>12</sup> Just recently, Ishmael Beah, who was recruited at the age of twelve into an irregular unit of the Sierra Leonean army after his parents and two brothers were killed by the RUF, published his autobiography, *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier*, chronicling the three years he spent as a combatant, including poignant accounts not only of the atrocities he not only witnessed, but also of those he committed (see Beah 2007). Previously several authors had attempted to convey similar experiences through fictional literary narratives, including Uzodinma Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation* and Emmanuel Dongala's *Johnny Mad Dog*. See Iweala (2005) and Dongala (2005).

depleted ranks:

*Some recruited youths had lost parents or guardians in the first wave of RUF attacks and were keen for revenge. Others were seeking, in military training, a substitute for educational opportunities disrupted by the conflict. Older recruits were inducted into the army. Very young irregulars were taken on as “apprentices,” personally loyal to their recruiting officer, without army identification. A combatant refers to this officer as his or her bra (big brother). Like the rebels, the government side also recruited young girls, some of whom proved highly effective combatants. These juvenile and underage combatants became the cannon fodder in the war, with drugs being used as “morale boosters” to get them into action (Abdullah & Muana 1998: 180).*

While they offer no definitive conclusions—their contribution is to outline the bases on which others might conduct further research in specific contexts or more expansive broad studies (as Michael Wessells (2001) has recently done with his Child Soldiers: From Violence to Protection)—Brett and Specht nonetheless offer a ray of hope on the dismal subject of their inquiry:

*It is equally clear that each young person is an individual. Even those who share common characteristics with respect to the key issues identified will not all become involved. As the stories of the young people demonstrate, there are many additional and complex factors that may or may not crystallize into a critical moment of decision. They also demonstrate that these young people may be obstreperous, impulsive, and unaware of the full implications of their actions, but that faced with the difficult or unbearable circumstances, they do exercise choices, and often display extraordinary responsibility, courage, persistence, independence, determination, and resilience (Brett & Specht: 82-83).*

## Conclusion

What is true in the lives of individuals is likewise true in the lives of nations. Conflicts like the one in Sierra Leone—relatively speaking, a small but nonetheless devastating war—are often presented by sensationalist media as the reality for most, if not all, of Africa. While there is no denying the underlying basis for the portrayal, especially in cases like Sierra Leone’s where there is graphic documentation of atrocities “committed with no attempt to cover them up, and RUF commanders were sometimes happy to be photographed committing them” (Gberie: 155), there is nevertheless no justification for fatalism or determinism.

Nor did the tragic events in Sierra Leone occur in a vacuum, even if the juridical mandate of the post-conflict international war crimes tribunal was necessarily circumscribed both temporally and geographically. The roots of the tragedy can be traced back many years as a succession of increasingly corrupt and despotic regimes, often abetted by foreign powers and an international network of shady characters, permitted the systematic decay of state institutions and capacity. As the economic and political malaise set in, the national government lost what legitimacy it had enjoyed in the eyes of the populace, setting the stage for alienated youth and other marginalized groups to violently lash out. And once the violence began, the dynamics of the global economy enabled the various armed factions to exploit their control of territory to appropriate the country’s natural resources by selling it off to far-off markets.



Still, perhaps by trying to discern the complex threads of individual and institutional responsibility for conflicts like the Sierra Leonean war as Gberie does as well as attempting to understand terrible social phenomena like child soldiers as Brett and Specht do and then reviewing the lessons to be learned, one might nonetheless fulfill the sage counsel of an old Krio proverb from Freetown: *If yu no no sai yu de go yu fo no usai yu comoo* (“You must be certain of from where you come even if you are uncertain of where you will go”).

## References

- Abdullah, Ibrahim. 1998. “Bush path to destruction: the origin and character of the Revolutionary United Front/Sierra Leone.” *Journal of Modern African Studies* 36, no. 2: 203-235.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (ed.). 2004. Between Democracy and Terror: The Sierra Leone Civil War. Dakar: CODESRIA.
- Abdullah, Ibrahim, and Patrick Muana. 1998. “The Revolutionary United Front of Sierra Leone: A Revolt of Lumpenproletariat,” in Christopher Clapham (ed.), African Guerrillas. Oxford: James Currey.
- Bangura, Yusuf. 1994. *The Search for Identity: Ethnicity, Religion, and Political Violence*. Geneva: UNRISD.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1997. “Understanding the Political and Cultural Dynamics of the Sierra Leone War: A Critique of Paul Richards’s Fighting for the Rainforest.” *African Development* 22, nos. 3-4: 117-148.
- Beah, Ishmael. 2007. A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Bradshaw, S. 1996. “The Coming Chaos?” *Moving Pictures Bulletin* 25: 18-19.
- Chege, Michael. 2002. “Sierra Leone: The State that Came Back from the Dead.” *Washington Quarterly* 25, no. 3 (Summer): 147-160.
- Dongala, Emmanuel. 2005. Johnny Mad Dog. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Ellis, Stephen. 1999. The Mask of Anarchy: The Destruction of Liberia and the Religious Dimension of an African Civil War. New York: New York University Press.
- Farah, Douglas. 2001. “They Fought for Nothing, and That’s What They Got.” *Washington Post* (September 1): C1.
- Ferme, Mariane. 2001. The Underneath of Things: Violence, History, and the Everyday in Sierra Leone. Berkeley: University of California Press.

- Hayward, Fred. 1989. "State Consolidation, Fragmentation, and Decay," in Donal Cruise O'Brien, John Dunn, and Richard Rathbone (eds.), Contemporary African States, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Hirsch, John L. 2001. Sierra Leone: Diamonds and the Struggle for Democracy. Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Iweala, Uzodinma. 2005. Beasts of No Nation. New York: HarperCollins.
- Juma, Laurence. 2002. "The Human Rights Approach to Peace in Sierra Leone: The Analysis of the Peace Process and Human Rights Enforcement in a Civil War Situation." *Denver Journal of International Law and Policy* 30, no. 3: 81-138.
- Kaplan, Robert D. 1994. "The Coming Anarchy: How Scarcity, Crime, Overpopulation and Disease are Rapidly Destroying the Social Fabric of Our Planet." *Atlantic Monthly* 273, no. 2: 44-76
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2000. The Coming Anarchy: Shattering Dreams of the Post Cold War. New York: Vintage Books.
- Machel, Graça. 2001. The Impact of War on Children. London: Hurst & Company.
- Organization of African Unity Council of Ministers, *Decisions Adopted by the Sixty-Sixth Ordinary Session of the Council of Ministers* (May 28-31, 1997, CM/Dec. 356 (LXVI) C).
- Pham, J. Peter. 2005a. Child Soldiers, Adult Interests: The Global Dimensions of the Sierra Leonean Tragedy. Hauppauge, New York: Nova Science Publishers.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2005b. "Democracy by Force? Lessons from the Restoration of the State in Sierra Leone." *Whitehead Journal of Diplomacy and International Relations* 6, no. 1 (Winter-Spring): 129-147.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2006a. "A Viable Model of International Criminal Justice: The Special Court for Sierra Leone." *New York International Law Review* 19, no. 1 (Winter): 37-109.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2006b. "Liberia and Sierra Leone: A Study of Comparative Human Rights Approaches by Civil Society Actors." *Interdisciplinary Journal of Human Rights Law* 1, no. 1 (Fall): 69-105.
- Richards, Paul. 2002. Fighting for the Rain Forest: War, Youth and Resources in Sierra Leone. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Oxford: James Currey.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2006. "Rebels and Intellectuals in Sierra Leone's Civil War." *African Studies Review* 49, no. 1 (April): 119-123.
- Samura, Sorious. 2000. *Cry, Freetown*. London: Insight News Television. Documentary film.
- Singer, P.W. 2006. Children at War. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Smillie, Ian, Lansana Gberie, and Ralph Hazleton. 2000. The Heart of the Matter: Sierra Leone, Diamonds, and Human Security. Ottawa: Partnership Africa Canada.

United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). 2003. *Adult Wars, Child Soldiers*. Bangkok: UNICEF Publications.

Wessells, Michael. 2007. Child Soldiers: From Violence to Protection. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

---

*J. Peter Pham, Director of the Nelson Institute for International and Public Affairs at James Madison University, served as an international diplomat in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea, from 2001 through 2002. His research interest is the intersection of international relations, international law, political theory, and ethics, with particular concentrations on implications for United States foreign policy and African states as well as for religion and global politics. Among other works, Dr. Pham is the author of two recent books on African politics, Liberia: Portrait of a Failed State (Reed Press, 2004) and Child Soldiers, Adult Interests: The Global Dimensions of the Sierra Leonean Tragedy (Nova Science Publishers, 2005). He is also a member of the editorial board of *Human Rights & Human Welfare*.*

© 2007, Graduate School of International Studies, University of Denver.