

# Western powers consider further sanctions against Liberia

By Chris Talbot  
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Last week the United Nations met to consider the effect of its sanctions on Liberia. The meeting follows a campaign by the United States and British governments over so-called "conflict" diamonds, said to be financing the purchase of arms and fomenting wars throughout Africa.

The UN applied an arms embargo on Liberia in March this year. In May the UN decided to ban the export of uncut diamonds from Liberia, and restricted foreign travel by members of the Liberian regime. The main complaint was that Liberian President Charles Taylor was trading diamonds mined by the rebel Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in neighbouring Sierra Leone, thus endangering an UN-brokered truce.

A series of reports and newspaper articles have clamoured for further pressure to be applied to Taylor. No less than five articles in the *Washington Post* have focused on Taylor's human rights' record. Based on information said to have been given to them from US and European intelligence officials, the *Post* alleges that Taylor and the RUF sold millions of dollars worth of diamonds to Al Qaeda and other terrorist organisations. Al Qaeda could use diamonds to launder or hide cash, they suggest. The intelligence sources claimed that Taylor's connections with Blaise Compaore, president of Burkina Faso, and Colonel Gaddafi of Libya—which the UN and western governments have been claiming for some time is the axis of the diamonds for arms trade—is helping fund Al Qaeda and "other terrorist organisations".

The *Post* articles used material taken from Amnesty International's October report of Liberians arbitrarily detained, tortured and raped by Taylor's security forces. There is little doubt of the reliability of Amnesty's report. Taylor runs Liberia as his own personal business venture and uses his security forces to brutally suppress all opposition. But if one considers that Amnesty reports have been issued within the past week of human rights violations by African countries such as Guinea, Morocco and Algeria, it is clear that open season has been declared against Taylor.

Two reports produced for the UN to consider detail sanctions-busting by Liberia and call for firmer action against the regime. One is the official UN investigation, a 116 page detailed report prepared over six months and costing \$900,000. The other is a report by Global Witness in conjunction with the International Transport Workers Federation entitled, "Taylor-made, the pivotal role of Liberia's forests and flag of convenience in regional conflict." Global Witness is a non-governmental organisation

(NGO) that produced a report last year on conflict diamonds in Africa.

Both reports highlight the destruction of Liberian forests, with logging representing the main source of export earnings. Taylor personally grants timber concessions and much of the trade appears to be run by companies close to the regime. Global Witness alleges direct links between the timber trade and arms importing. The reports also point to Liberia's ship registry. The finance from ships registering under the Liberian flag to escape safety and labour legislation now goes to a company set up in 1997 by Charles Taylor when he came to power. It appears to be completely under the control of the Liberian regime. Both reports object to this arrangement, but the UN calls for the shipping revenue to be paid into an account monitored by the International Monetary Fund, whereas Global Witness and the ITF make the demand that "shipowners should break all links with the Liberian flag as soon as practicable."

An investigation carried out by the International Crisis Group (ICG), the think tank supported by a range of western politicians and dignitaries, has also produced a report entitled "Sierra Leone: managing uncertainty." This report also calls for more intervention in the West African region, calling on the UN to change from what it claims is a "softly-softly" approach to being more assertive in peace negotiations with the RUF.

At around 17,000 troops, the UN contingent in Sierra Leone is now the largest in the world and includes a crack force from Pakistan. The ICG calls on the British to maintain an "over the horizon force" that can readily move back in. Britain's armed forces in Sierra Leone are presently being reduced to 360 from a peak of 1,000 in May 2000, when they first intervened in the country.

Despite the deployment of UN forces throughout most of Sierra Leone and the UN's claim that over 30,000 combatants have turned in their weapons, the ICG contends that whilst the RUF has been temporarily thwarted—mainly due to the British intervention—conflict in Sierra Leone could easily resume.

Whilst fighting continues in the area of Liberia bordering Sierra Leone and Guinea, the scale is much reduced. The RUF had moved from Sierra Leone to fight with other Liberian-backed rebel groups against the Guinean regime. ICG say that the RUF has been prevented from destabilising Guinea because of a successful military response from the regime there, including Guinean support for Liberian and Sierra Leone based militias, and

the effect of UN sanctions on the Liberian regime.

What is made clear in the ICG report is that human rights violations have hardly featured in the calculations of the United States, Britain and other western powers as the occupation of Sierra Leone has proceeded. At the beginning of last year the atrocities committed by the RUF, including mass killings, rape and amputations, were the focus of media attention. A 500-strong UN peacekeeping force was held hostage, and questions were raised about the UN's ability to intervene in such a situation given its limited mandate and ill-equipped troops. It was at this point that the British army intervened. Britain virtually took over the running of the country, regrouping and training the Sierra Leone Army (SLA), as well as sending numerous "advisers" into government departments.

The ICG report explains that it was not the RUF, but ex-members of the SLA who joined the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) that committed the vast majority of mutilations during the invasion of Freetown, the capital of Sierra Leone, in January 1999. The AFRC under its leader Johnny Paul Koroma took power in Sierra Leone in an alliance with the RUF before the present regime of President Kabbah was restored with western backing. These AFRC forces have now been integrated into the SLA and are being trained by the British.

Officially the British have a screening and interview process to weed out those who committed atrocities, "but the effort is token, and virtually no one has been turned away on human rights grounds", the ICG report explains. The British privately argue that the best place for known abusers is "in the tent" where they can be monitored.

The disarmament process in Sierra Leone has not included the Kamajor-CDF militias, a tribal grouping that controls most of the south of the country. They sided with the government and the British against the RUF and have been allowed to operate unhindered. Their leader is Chief Sam-Hinga Norman, deputy minister of defence in the government. ICG point out that they are "composed in some parts of former RUF, who left the rebels when the SLPP [Sierra Leone Peoples Party—Kabbah's party] government won power in 1996." This group are also known to have committed atrocities, "though not to the same extent as the RUF". The RUF and Kamajors "actually cooperate in many areas, especially in the diamond-rich Tongo fields", explains the ICG report, even though much of the diamond producing areas are yet to be brought under UN control.

What irks the ICG is that Sierra Leone's resources are not firmly under western control. The RUF disarmament has been "more cosmetic than substantive", weapons that are collected being mainly low grade and with hardcore RUF members refusing to disarm, keeping their command and control structures. Most of the disarmed rebels are remaining in RUF-controlled areas fearing reprisals if they returned home. Major arms caches have been left intact and remobilisation of ex-RUF combatants would be an easy matter.

Moreover it seems that "despite the best efforts of the British" to determine the government's running of the economy—which meant opening up Sierra Leone's mineral resources to transnational companies without the local elite taking their cut—

this has "foundered on corruption and patronage." The report refers to "recent closed-door decisions to grant large and long-term diamond and oil concessions to foreign companies," and states, "At least four senior members of the government are reportedly engaged in illicit diamond mining".

It is not clear what will be the immediate outcome of either the ICG's recommendations or the demands in the UN and Global Witness reports for more sanctions against Liberia. The UN was asked to undertake further investigations to examine the alleged links of Taylor and the RUF to Al Qaeda. At the UN Security Council meeting, although the British called for sanctions on timber, the US called for a continuation of the present sanctions regime. The UN would be unlikely to agree on timber sanctions since most of the Liberian timber is sold to France and China, who would clearly oppose it.

US intervention in the region will continue through the Guinean regime. Its President Lansana Conte appears to have got away with a change in the constitution that allows him to continue for a further term in office. Blatant human rights violations in Guinea have been ignored by the western powers because, compared to Liberia and Sierra Leone, it is a relatively stable regime. Reuters quote a European diplomat in West Africa stating, "There has been military aid from the United States—some of it official, some of it unofficial."

Sierra Leone and Liberia are two of the poorest countries in the world. Little attention is given in any of the reports to the desperate plight of their populations, apart from denunciation of the governments' corruption. The ICG have to point out that less than half of the western aid pledged to give training to the RUF combatants that agreed to disarm has been received. At the UN meeting, Ed Tsui, Director of the UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs, pointed out, "the fragile situation could be worsened if sanctions were not accompanied by increased donor response. So far, the donor contribution had been disappointing". His concern about the effects of sanctions was swept aside amidst the moral condemnations of Taylor.

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