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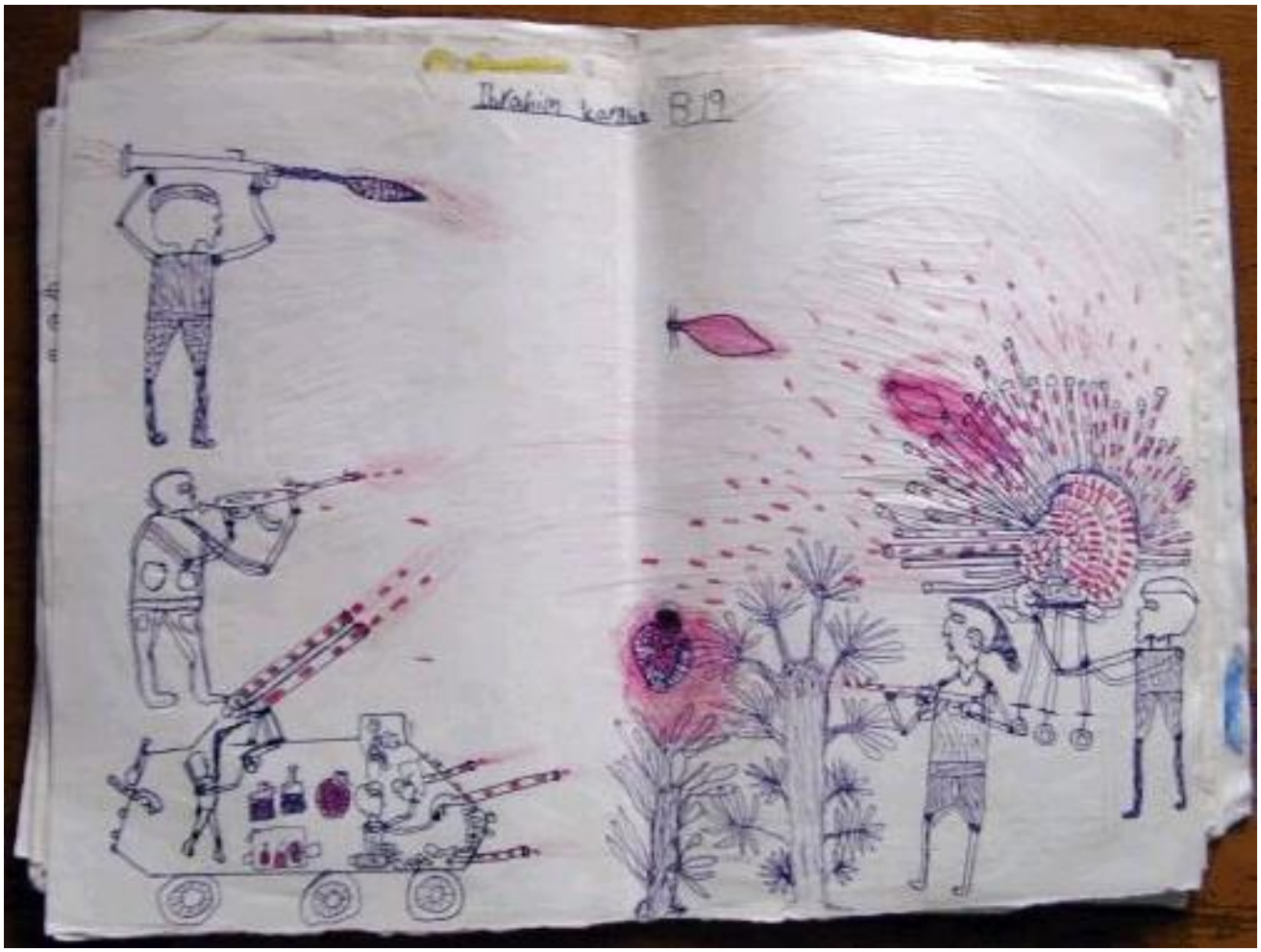
The call for tough arms controls

Voices from Sierra Leone



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Summary

> 'Before the war we had lights, there was water in the taps, but now because of these guns we have nothing. Now we put kerosene in our lamps and have to fetch water. We had school libraries, now the buildings are standing empty.'
>
> — Zainab Kamara, counsellor, Makeni, Bombali District

The recent Hollywood film *Lord of War* depicted an arms broker who did not care who bought his guns, as long as somebody was buying. He procured weapons and ammunition in Eastern Europe and sold them in conflict zones in Africa, including Sierra Leone and Liberia. He used false documents, and exploited every available loophole in the law.

For once, the screenwriters were not making it up. The character might have been fictional, but his activities and methods mirrored those of the real arms dealers who supplied the rebels in Sierra Leone throughout the brutal war that ended in 2002. What the film showed little of was the human cost of those arms deals.

Fighting began in Sierra Leone in March 1991, when a small number of rebels of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) crossed the border from Liberia and began attacking civilians. By the time the war was declared over, tens of thousands had been killed out of a population of five million, thousands had been mutilated or raped, and an estimated 10,000 children had been abducted to be child soldiers. Up to two-thirds of the population had been displaced from their homes, and another 600,000 had fled the country.

With these kinds of numbers, it is impossible to comprehend the magnitude of people's losses. This report tells the stories of just four survivors. The arms trade impacts on real people; here are the stories that Hollywood will not show you.

In 2006, beginning in January, a series of debates on disarmament are due to take place at the United Nations. There will be technical arguments and diplomatic negotiations. The purpose of this report is to add to these discussions the voices of at least some of the people who bear the cost of the world's continuing failure to control the arms trade.

The deep roots of Sierra Leone's 11 years of war went back decades, involving corrupt governments that alienated the country's youth and all but destroyed basic institutions, including parliament, the police, and the civil service. This dissatisfaction led to support for the rebels in the early years of the war. Inadequate government control of the armed forces permitted coups and allowed government soldiers to switch from one side to the other. Another major source of fuel for the conflict was the support that the RUF rebels received from Charles Taylor, then president of Liberia, who had wider ambitions for power in West Africa.

However, there was one factor that underpinned all of the others in sustaining the violence, and that was the continued supply of weapons, many of them paid for by the illegal sale of diamonds. Sierra Leone does not manufacture weapons. The outside world had to be prepared to supply them, and supply them it did.

War crimes, crimes against humanity, and other violations of international humanitarian and human rights law were committed by all sides:[1] the RUF rebels, who were responsible for violations throughout the war; the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC), which took power when army officers overthrew the elected government in a military coup in 1997; government troops; and the pro-government Civil Defence Force civilian militias, which were based on local tribal hunting societies.

In addition, Nigerian (ECOMOG) soldiers who restored President Kabbah to power in 1998, before UN peacekeepers arrived, were reported not to have taken enough measures to minimise the risk to civilians.[2]

During all these years, both the countries that provided the weapons, and the countries through which they were shipped, failed to stop the flow of arms and ammunition to the rebels in Sierra Leone. The even wider failure is that of the international community at large which, even after these atrocities and others elsewhere, has failed to take the necessary measures to control the international arms trade. The rest of the world must take responsibility for the arms it supplies. To do that, governments should agree a new international Arms Trade Treaty (ATT).

2006 presents a major political opportunity to begin to do this.

- The Review Conference for the UN Programme of Action on Small Arms and Light Weapons, in June and July 2006, must agree clear principles for the international transfer of these arms, based on existing international law, to prevent them getting into the wrong hands.
- The Conference's Preparatory Committee, taking place in New York in January 2006, must set the stage for this.
- Then, the UN General Assembly's First Committee, meeting in October 2006, must finally start a process to negotiate an Arms Trade Treaty.

The proliferation of conventional arms is too severe to ignore any longer. Since the atrocities in Sierra Leone took place, arms have been transferred to many other countries with records of human rights violations. Responsible arms exporters and arms-affected states must not be held back by the few states that want to hold up progress. In 2006, they must begin negotiations to agree an Arms Trade Treaty.

1 The real impact of irresponsible arms sales

> 'They had guns and axes. I saw them bring out Sulaiman. I saw them cut off his hand, then the other hand. Sulaiman begged them to release him. One of the rebels said: "Don't waste this man's time, let's just kill him." They took him towards the next village. That was when I heard Sulaiman's voice, crying, "Oh, you have shot me." He died.'
>
> — A man describes what happened to his neighbour when RUF rebels attacked his village of Mayongbo, Bombali District, on 7 May 1998

Fatu Kamara, 39, from Foredugu in Port Loko District, was making plans with her elderly mother to flee the advancing rebels on the day when they attacked her village. She thinks it was in late 1998.

Anthea Lawson/Oxfam

'My mother wanted me to leave her behind but I couldn't, and I was sitting with her when a rebel grabbed me. I turned round and saw many of them surrounding me, all holding guns. There was an argument. Some said I should be killed, but one soldier was a man I recognised, and he asked them not to kill me.'

Instead she was taken to another village, where she was held captive and raped by five men. 'When they had finished raping me they took me out and I was sitting crying, and then suddenly they brought my husband and my daughter. I was so troubled that I even forgot my own pain.' Fatu's husband was tortured and killed in front of her.

'I and my daughter were crying. They told my daughter to stop crying, otherwise they would kill her. She said to them: "Now my mother is lying there in pain and you have killed my father. If you want to kill me, I am ready to die." Right in front of me, the

commander ordered one of the small rebels, a child, to kill my daughter using a pistol. The pistol belonged to the commander — he took it out and gave it to this child soldier, and instructed him to fire at my daughter twice. This small boy fired at my daughter once and she fell down but she was still not dead. After the first shot he took the pistol and pointed it in my daughter's ear and shot the final shot. Right in front of me.'

Fatu was with the rebels for a month, unable at first to walk because of her injuries. The soldier that she had recognised eventually helped her to escape. She walked for four days to the nearest large town and received treatment at the hospital.

Life is now a struggle for survival and her health is still not good. 'My husband used to fend for me, doing petty trading. Now I look after my 14-year-old daughter and the three children of my daughter who was killed. Even with the schooling of the children there is nobody to help. If it was just fees, no problem, but I have to get shoes and books, and they are pressuring me for rent.'

Appallingly, Fatu Kamara's story is not unusual in Sierra Leone.[3] From the first attacks by the nascent RUF on villages in the east of the country in 1991, the victims of the war were primarily civilians. People died when they were shot, or they survived the immediate attack on their communities only to die agonisingly a few days later, because there was no medical treatment for their gunshot injuries. Machetes were used to hack off people's hands and feet, and thousands of women were raped, often at gunpoint. People were repeatedly forced from their homes, losing their children as they fled the gunfire in the dark, or losing family members to malnutrition, disease, and childbirth as they hid in the bush for weeks or months at a time.

The guns that the arms dealers sold to Sierra Leone were not just used to fire bullets, but also to threaten and to allow other human rights violations to take place. Amputations might have been carried out with machetes, but they took place at gunpoint. So did rapes, forced displacement from homes, and forced conscription of child soldiers.

'These people should stop selling guns to people who want to make war, because if they didn't have the guns they would not fight. If they take a stick, I will take a stick too. But if they take a gun, I will run away,' says Adama Michael, a nurse from Makeni , Bombali District, who now provides counselling to girls and young women raped during the war.

By 1992, the violence that had started in the east was beginning to spread out across the rest of the country. In April 1992 the government of president Joseph Momoh was overthrown by army

officers, and a young captain, Valentine Strasser, was installed as the head of the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC).

At first the NPRC was no more successful than the previous government in stopping the RUF rebellion, which was being fuelled by the sale of diamonds from mining areas under rebel control. The NPRC hired mercenaries from a South African firm, Executive Outcomes, who drove the RUF away from the capital Freetown, allowing elections to take place. The RUF practice of amputating people's hands took hold in this period, reportedly to intimidate people into not voting or to punish those who did.

The elections were won by Ahmed Tejan Kabbah, a former UN official, and in a peace agreement he brokered with the RUF in November 1996, Kabbah agreed that Executive Outcomes should leave. However, he was then overthrown by the military who formed the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC). Kabbah fled to Guinea. Any last semblance of the rule of law collapsed, with widespread killings and human rights violations committed with impunity by both the AFRC and the RUF during 1997.

Nigerian forces deployed by ECOMOG — the Economic Community of West African States Cease-Fire Monitoring Group — eventually restored Kabbah to power in February 1998. But they could not control the AFRC and RUF rebels, who raped and mutilated hundreds of civilians as they withdrew from Freetown, and who systematically committed serious violations of international humanitarian law and human rights throughout the north and east of the country in the following months. Other civilians were caught in the fighting between the rebels and the pro-government Civil Defence Force local militias.

Sanpha Sesay, a man in his fifties, was working as a farmer when the RUF attacked his village of Mayongbo in Bombali District on 7 May 1998. He had been forced to move back there because of attacks in the east of the country, where he had been working as a trader.

Anthea Lawson/Oxfam

'It was early morning. Some of them started firing in the mosque and some started chopping people. I tried to escape from the mosque but one of them grabbed me. He took his gun with a bayonet and pierced my stomach. As

he drew it out my intestines came out with it. One of them said, "I am going to shoot him." But the man who bayoneted me stopped him, saying, "This man will clearly not survive, let's leave him.'"

'I picked up all of my intestines in my long shirt. I thought I would get to the road and just lie there and die so people could see me.'

Sanpha Sesay started walking towards the nearest town, which is about six miles away across the bush. Somebody saw him and told his wife, the imam, and the village chief, who all came and found him lying on the ground. He was taken to hospital by the Red Cross, staying for a month before he was moved to another hospital.

Asked if he still suffers pain, he said: 'Maybe you should only talk about the lessening of the pain, because even when I sit here I feel the pain at times. And I really feel it when I try to work. So I can no longer do serious work. I still get flashbacks. Whenever I hear a loud noise my mind runs back to what happened. If I hear a sound from a motorbike like a shot, that is the sound for me of somebody being killed, and I am seized with fear.

'If I had the money, I would set up a small business. I had been about to build a house when they attacked, and they took all of the materials. Because somebody else is taking care of me this brings shame on me, and I know it is difficult for this person to take care of me, my wife, and my children.'

According to the village chief, eight people were killed that morning in Mayongbo, and 17 abducted, of whom eight were girls and young women. Of the 48 houses in the village, 31 were burnt down. All of the farm animals were taken by the rebels. Now, when asked how they farm without their oxen, all of the men hold out their hands. Their palms are covered in calluses from the basic hand tools they use to plough. The village has received no assistance since the end of the war, and they have great difficulty in growing enough food for their families.

Fereh Musu Conteh was abducted from Mayongbo in the same attack on 7 May 1998, when she was 13.

'They attacked at six in the morning when we were sleeping. They destroyed the doors in the house and entered, and took us all outside and threatened to kill us. My sister and I held hands and decided to escape. But as soon as we moved, one of them cocked his gun and said he would kill us if we took a step further.

'A man tore off all our clothes. We were taken to the river. One of them commanded that all of those that were caught should be killed and thrown in the river. Another one said no. Instead they agreed that everybody should choose a person from among us for himself.

Anthea Lawson/Oxfam

'Then we moved on. Before we reached Freetown I had become pregnant. Before I gave birth, the man who impregnated me had left and gone to surrender.'

She was with the rebels for a year and a half before she managed to escape with her baby and two younger abducted girls she was looking after. She made her way to Freetown and, by chance, she bumped into her older brothers in the city. 'Then I came back to my village only to discover that my mother was dead. She got sick because she was so sad, and she died.

'I saw what they did, they would kill, they would burn houses, they would amputate people and tell them to go to the president. Everybody had his own woman, and we had to cook for our men. There were plenty of other girls my age. At times we were in thick forest and my health was not too good. There was no bed, you had to lie on the ground and sleep. At times we had good food but sometimes it was very difficult and we lived on cassava we uprooted from farms.

'They carried guns all the time. I was afraid of the guns. Actually, I was in constant fear. I didn't have much confidence in them because I thought they would just take us and kill us one day. If you were caught trying to escape, they would kill you.

'Now I live with my elder sister. My child is six and lives with my aunt in Freetown. I'm in Form 2 of junior secondary school. I want to continue school, even though I am not sure who will continue to pay my fees. But I am determined to continue my education, and I want to learn a trade.'

By the end of 1998, hundreds of thousands of Sierra Leoneans had fled to neighbouring Guinea and Liberia, or were internally displaced within the country. The RUF and AFRC attacks increased further with the invasion of the capital, Freetown, in January 1999. Six thousand people were killed, thousands raped, and several hundred had hands or feet amputated. Four thousand children were reported missing, 2,000 of whom still had not been accounted for a year later.[4]

Jabati Mambu, now 23, was 16 and living in the east end of Freetown when the AFRC and RUF attacked the city on 6 January 1999. When they heard gunshots, Jabati and his brother fled closer into town and stayed with friends. During the middle of January, as the rebels overran the eastern half of the city, Jabati got to know some of the rebels who were in Kissy, a district to the east of the town centre. 'Some of these rebel guys became my friends,' he says.

Anthea Lawson/Oxfam

But then, on January 24, the government broadcast a message on the radio warning people to stay indoors, because ECOMOG forces were coming in to push the rebels out. 'When the rebels heard this they went crazy, they knew they were going to be captured. At 7pm the rebels came to my house and said "Everybody out". They poured petrol on the house but didn't light it — it was just to get us out. Everybody scattered, but three of us were captured. They put us in a queue, and I was at the front of it. They made us sit on the floor.

'We had heard about amputations in the east of the country but I didn't know they were doing it here. I was confident that these guys were my friends. Then one of the commanders asked one of the little boys, 10 or 12 years old, to bring the axe, and told me to put my hand on the floor. I asked why I should do this. The commander said, "If you don't, we'll blow your head off."

'I placed my left hand on the floor. When the guy lifted his axe, I lifted my hand away.' Jabati has a scar across his left wrist where the axe caught him. 'Then he said, "Oh, you want to challenge us?" Then the other guy came and held me and they cut off my right hand. I was unconscious until 4am. An ECOMOG soldier came and took me to the hospital.'

Jabati was in hospital for two months, receiving medical care and counselling and learning to write with his left hand. He sat his school exams for that year in hospital. 'When people were initially injured, they were very angry. People would sit and cry for the rest of the day. There's no human being who could say he feels joy for this

thing. It is very horrible and a very uncomfortable situation, but I accept it because, with life, all things are possible. Some of my colleagues died for lack of medical attention, but some of us still grow strong.'

According to humanitarian agencies, only one in four victims of mutilations survived their injuries.[5] Jabati has been working as a monitor at the Special Court for Sierra Leone in Freetown, which is trying those suspected of having committed serious violations of international humanitarian law. He is now trying to find the money to start studying for a diploma in international relations. He was a founding member of the Single Leg Amputee Sports Club of Sierra Leone, which runs three amputee football teams. All of the outfield players are leg amputees and play on crutches, while the goalkeepers are single hand or arm amputees.

How the conflict ended

The Lomé Peace Accord was signed in July 1999, providing for an immediate cessation of hostilities, and a general amnesty for all acts undertaken in pursuit of the conflict. The agreement gave political roles to both AFRC and RUF members, including the RUF's leader Foday Sankoh. A UN mission, UNAMSIL, was set up to help ECOMOG implement it.[6] For a while, the scale of human rights abuses diminished.

However, within three months the RUF attacks were increasing again and the peace accord collapsed within a year, when the RUF captured 500 UN peacekeepers in May 2000. Sankoh was arrested. Attacks on civilians continued. Hundreds of civilians were still trying to flee the country, and a million people were by now internally displaced.

UK troops were first sent to Sierra Leone in May 2000. In August that year, UK special forces rescued British troops who had been taken hostage by an offshoot rebel group, the West Side Boys, killing a number of their combatants. This had a significant psychological impact on the West Side Boys and the other rebel groups, including the RUF. The UK forces stayed to train and supply the government troops.

A ceasefire was signed in November 2000 between the government and the RUF. The number of UN troops was eventually increased to 17,500, the largest peacekeeping mission in the world at that time. Disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration programmes, started a few years earlier, began again during 2001 for thousands of combatants. The war was officially declared over in January 2002.

By the end of the war, Sierra Leone was ranked by the UN as the poorest country in the world, with the world's highest under-five mortality rate and an adult female literacy rate of only 23 per cent.[7]

Roads, schools, hospitals, and electricity supplies had been destroyed, and judicial institutions were barely functioning. Progress has been made since then, but the slow road to peace and development is still only just beginning.

The Special Court for Sierra Leone, established in 2002, began holding trials in June 2004. Under its mandate to prosecute those bearing the greatest responsibility for war crimes, crimes against humanity, other serious violations of international humanitarian law, and certain crimes under Sierra Leone national law committed since 30 November 1996, only 13 people have so far been indicted. Of these, nine are in custody and their trials have begun. Two, including Foday Sankoh, have died, and two more remain at large including former Liberian President Charles Taylor, who was granted refugee status in Nigeria after relinquishing power and leaving Liberia on 11 August 2003. The former AFRC leader Johnny Paul Koroma (reported dead, though this is unconfirmed) also remains at liberty.

3 Where did the guns come from?

> 'With the emergence of guns, whoever has them is God and government together, because they can do anything. There was no authority in the country, because all these people had guns.'
>
> — Florella Hazeley, Co-ordinator of Sierra Leone Action Network on Small Arms
>
> 'A firearm is power, they feel they are almost invincible, that they can do whatever they want. I can tell you specifically what happened when they had the guns. It enabled them to loot. They didn't need to work any more. They were just looting, and any resistance to their looting ended in death… It's very important that these young people do not get hold of guns again.'
>
> — Father Gabriel Koroma, lecturer at Northern Polytechnic, Makeni, Bombali District

Sierra Leone's war was fought primarily with small arms and light weapons. Some 25,000 small arms, 1,000 light weapons, and almost a million rounds of ammunition were handed in during the various disarmament processes for rebel forces and pro-government militias between September 1998 and January 2002.

From the weapons that were handed in, it was possible to get an idea of what the rebel forces had been using. By May 2000, when the Lomé peace process collapsed and fighting resumed, 12,500 weapons had been handed in, including the following:[8]

- 496 pistols;
- 4,000 AK-47 rifles — originally from China, the Soviet Union, and Eastern Europe;
- 1,072 AK-74 rifles;
- 940 G3 rifles — originally from Germany, seized from peacekeeping units or re-exported from third countries;
- 440 FN-FAL rifles – originally from Belgium;
- 451 SLR rifles;
- 140 machine guns — originally from China;
- 217 grenade launchers;
- 1,855 grenades;
- 45 mortars.[9]

Also found or handed in were unexploded cluster bomblets from French Beluga cluster bombs (cluster munitions were reportedly used by ECOMOG forces)[10], a British Blowpipe anti-aircraft missile, a Soviet Spigot anti-tank guided weapon, two Soviet SA-7 surface-to-

air missiles, and 23mm anti-aircraft guns and Katyusha 122mm rockets from Eastern Europe.[11]

Arming the rebels

None of the weapons named above are manufactured in Sierra Leone. Nor should many of them have been allowed to enter the country. A UN arms embargo was imposed in May 1997, which was amended in June 1998 to permit the sale of weapons to the government only. In October 1998 the ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) Moratorium on the production, procurement, and sale of small arms and light weapons in the sub-region was adopted.[12] This is a non-legally binding agreement that prevents weapons imports, unless all ECOWAS member states agree to make an exception.[13]

So how did the guns and ammunition get there? Essentially, because the international controls on weapons transfers are too weak to prevent embargoes being broken — and because the embargoes themselves are usually imposed as a reaction to violations that have already started taking place. Of the minority of transfers that are known about, weapons came from Ukraine, Bulgaria, and Slovakia. Supply lines went through Burkina Faso, Niger, and Liberia. Libya, Côte d'Ivoire, and Guinea are also reported to have helped in providing weapons to the RUF. Other countries were also complicit: air cargo companies from the UK, Senegal, and Belgium carried weapons to Sierra Leone.[14]

The RUF could certainly pay for its guns. It was estimated to be earning between $30m and $125m a year from diamond sales, with much of this trade going through Liberia and former president Charles Taylor, which also helped to finance Taylor's own war.[15] Whenever the RUF signed a peace agreement, it used the lull in fighting to re-arm itself.[16]

Liberia played a crucial role. From 1991, the RUF was supported by Charles Taylor. There were longstanding connections between Taylor and the RUF leader Foday Sankoh, going back to their days in insurgency training camps in Libya during the 1980s. Taylor denied to the UN Panel of Experts (established by the Security Council in 2000 to investigate arms transfers to Sierra Leone and Liberia) that he provided support or weapons to the RUF, but strong evidence of his involvement in supporting and arming the RUF has been clearly set out in the UN Panel report.[17]

Not only did RUF forces receive military training in Liberia, but there was a constant flow of weapons, ammunition, food, and other supplies over the border into RUF territory in Sierra Leone. For example, weapons were sent from Liberia to the RUF between May 1997 and February 1998, and again in late 1999. Transfers were reported to be continuing in June 2000.[18]

Libya is also reported to have provided weapons to the RUF, with Libyan transport aircraft flying the cargo to Burkina Faso and then Liberia. Burkina Faso was the first arrival point for many of the shipments intended for the RUF via Liberia.[19] Helicopters then transported the guns and ammunition into Sierra Leone. Côte d'Ivoire is also reported to have provided direct flights of military equipment to the RUF.

The RUF also obtained a number of weapons from within Sierra Leone, seized during its encounters with government troops, ECOMOG forces, and UN peacekeepers. Lack of discipline by soldiers in the Sierra Leone army meant that they abandoned their weapons — and in some cases, sold them to the RUF. The RUF seized hundreds of rifles and several tons of ammunition from a Guinean UNAMSIL unit in January 2000, and Kenyan and Zambian UNAMSIL contingents were disarmed when they were taken hostage by rebels in May 2000.[20]

Examples of specific weapons transfers to Sierra Leone

Many countries were involved in sending arms to Sierra Leone's rebels. As documented by the UN Panel of Experts, in March 1999, Ukrainian weapons were sent to Burkina Faso in a Russian aircraft, operated by a British company, Air Foyle, under a contract between a Gibraltar-based company representing the Burkina Faso Ministry of Defence and a Ukrainian state-owned company. Ukraine had issued the arms export licence after receiving an end-user certificate from the Ministry of Defence of Burkina Faso, stating that the weapons were for use in Burkina Faso and that this was their final destination.

But within days, the weapons were shipped on to Liberia in an aircraft owned by an Israeli broker of Ukrainian origin, Leonid Minin, with several journeys required to transport them all. The aircraft was registered in the Cayman Islands and was operated by a company registered in Monaco. The weapons were then moved on from Liberia to Sierra Leone.[21]

Minin's aircraft had also carried an earlier shipment of weapons in December 1998, from Niamey Airport in Niger to Monrovia in Liberia. The weapons were then loaded into vehicles belonging to the Liberian military.[22] A few days later, the RUF rebels over the border in Sierra Leone began a major offensive. This included the attack on Fatu Kamara's town, and culminated in the January 1999 attack on Freetown in which Jabati Mambu and hundreds of others lost their limbs, and thousands were killed.

In August 2000, Minin was arrested in Italy, and in June 2001 charged with arms trafficking and the illegal possession of diamonds. He was found with contracts, faxes documenting arms deals, weapons

catalogues, and forged end-user certificates. He was later released on the grounds that the prosecution lacked jurisdiction on Minin's arms trafficking activities because the arms transfers did not pass through Italy. He was, however, convicted and fined for the illegal possession of diamonds.

In February 2003, the public prosecutor appealed against the judgement that Minin could not be prosecuted for arms trafficking. The prosecutor submitted evidence that supported the right to prosecute Minin, arguing that the Ukrainian judicial authorities were also prepared to prosecute him since Minin allegedly purchased the arms from within the Ukraine. However, in January 2004, the Court of Appeal rejected this appeal and Minin was acquitted. He remained subject to a UN Travel Ban List established in June 2001 and reiterated in March 2004.[23]

Weapons also came from Slovakia and Bulgaria. In January 1999 a UK-based company, Sky Air Cargo, and a Belgian-owned company, Occidental Airlines, flew guns from Bratislava to Gambia and Liberia; a third air cargo company then flew the deadly load on to Kenema in eastern Sierra Leone for the RUF. And in July 1999 the Continental Aviation Company, which was based in Dakar, Senegal, took 68 tonnes of weapons to the RUF from Bulgaria.[24]

Weaknesses in air traffic control systems in West Africa, combined with abuse of aircraft registration systems, made it hard to monitor such flights, and allowed the traffickers to operate with impunity.[25]

Why were these arms transfers allowed to happen?

None of this trade could have functioned without the private brokers — the 'middlemen' who arrange the transfer of weapons between the seller and the buyer. Weapons come either direct from the factory, or from surplus stocks of armed forces in other countries. If weapons are being purchased by non-state actors (such as rebel forces) or governments under embargo, it is the arms brokers who act as middlemen. Those brokers who arranged for the transfers of weapons to Sierra Leone were able to operate unregulated, because there is no global system of controls on arms brokers.

Nor could these weapons transfers have taken place with such impunity if there were robust, legally binding international transfer controls. In the examples above, arms and ammunition were being moved through several countries, with stop-overs and cross-border shipments. At each of these transit points, controls and legal regulations should have prevented the weapons moving on. But lax export controls, the tacit assistance of transit countries, and the lack of a global system of verifiable end-user certificates meant that they

continued unchecked towards their destination, where the cost was measured in human lives.

Sources of weapons for government-allied forces

Most atrocities during the war were carried out by the RUF and AFRC rebel forces. But violations were also committed by government forces and their allied Civil Defence Force militias.

The Civil Defence Force, a group of tribally-based hunting societies, defended their communities mostly using hunting rifles but, when they were disarmed, CDF members also handed in some assault rifles, including AK-47s and G3s.[26] According to Amnesty International research in 1998, the CDF was reportedly responsible for the recruitment of child soldiers and for many cases of torture, ill-treatment, and extra-judicial executions of captured rebel combatants and civilians suspected of collaboration with rebel forces.[27]

There were also reports of human rights violations by some government forces, who obtained arms from a number of sources. Foreign suppliers shared the almost universal sense that the government was facing rebels who had committed countless atrocities. But they failed to guarantee that some of their weapons could not end up in the hands of abusers as well.

After the RUF rebellion began in 1991, Guinea and Egypt donated ammunition and Nigeria provided 2,500 rifles. As the rebellion spread during the first half of the 1990s (despite the increase in the numbers of government troops), private security companies were employed: Gurkha Security Guards Limited and the South African company Executive Outcomes. The government also provided guns to the Civil Defence Force militias. The government procured weapons from Romania (rocket-propelled and automatic grenade launchers, machine guns, mortars, and rifles); from Russia (armoured and amphibious vehicles); and from Ukraine (two helicopters, an Mi-17 transport plane, and an Mi-24 gunship).[28]

A government Mi-24 helicopter gunship, piloted by a South African mercenary, was used for the aerial bombardment of central areas of the rebel-held towns of Magburaka, Makeni, and Kambia in May and June 2000. These attacks were reported by Human Rights Watch to have killed at least 27 civilians and wounded 50; thousands of people were displaced.

In Makeni, the gunship dropped leaflets on 31 May, warning the RUF of an attack. Bombs were dropped on the busy lorry park in the centre of town only a few minutes later. The victims, some of whom had rushed to collect the leaflets, included Umar Bongo, 29, Alhadji Jallo, 33, Ibrahim Conte, and a pregnant woman.[29]

Peter Y. Koroma, now a councillor for Bombali District, had to bury his neighbour John Fornah, a building contractor, after a bomb hit his house on the same day as the lorry park bombings:

'The rebels had already put down strong roots in Makeni so it was very difficult for the government troops to attack without aerial support. So the helicopter gunship was visiting every day for more than two weeks. Once in a while it would just fly and threaten. But four days in five it would drop bombs.

'It was difficult for the gunship to distinguish the civilians from the rebels. But at that time any vehicle, even bicycles, had been looted by the rebels, so if they saw something moving they thought it was a rebel and would drop a bomb. The rebels learnt this, and whenever they heard the helicopter, they would abandon the vehicle they were in and run.

'This time, the gunship was coming from the direction of the barracks. A group of rebels abandoned their vehicle outside John's house on Teko Road. The front door was wide open, and the rebels ran in through the house and out the back door. So they dropped a bomb on the house and the fragments killed John where he was hiding in his wardrobe. He had two wives and several children.'

A British company, Sandline International, arranged for 35 tonnes of Bulgarian arms to be shipped to assist ECOMOG forces trying to restore President Kabbah to power after the coup of 1997. Another British company, Sky Air, flew the weapons via Nigeria in February 1998. Most of the weapons were allegedly taken by Nigerian ECOMOG troops.[30] The Nigerian ECOMOG soldiers who eventually did restore Kabbah to power in 1998, before UN peacekeepers arrived, were reported to have taken inadequate measures to protect civilians.[31]

Once the embargo on the government side was lifted in 1998, the UK became the biggest arms supplier to the Sierra Leone government, particularly once it began training the Sierra Leone armed forces — a role it continues to undertake.[32]

4 What needs to be done?

> 'If only these major manufacturers and the dealers could be put under control, then we would not be suffering here. We are not the manufacturers, but we end up the victims.'
>
> — Mohamed Kamara, Project Co-ordinator of UNDP Arms for Development Programme, Sierra Leone

The case studies in this report tell the stories of just a few of the people who suffered appallingly because guns found their way into the hands of rebel armed groups and uncontrolled members of government forces that had already been committing violations of international humanitarian law and human rights for years. However, these are just a few cases. Every year around the world, hundreds of thousands of men, women, boys, and girls are killed because of the uncontrolled proliferation of arms; many more are maimed, tortured, or forced to flee their homes. Their stories would fill too many books to read.

Of course, action must be taken at the national level, in Sierra Leone and in other countries whose societies have been ripped apart by violent conflict. Suspected perpetrators of violations of human rights or international humanitarian law should be brought to justice in accordance with international principles of fair trial and without recourse to the death penalty. Ex-combatants must be disarmed, demobilised, and reintegrated into their communities. Ongoing weapons collection programmes, such as the Arms for Development Programme run by UNDP in Sierra Leone, must continue to ensure that communities are free of weapons. And there must be attempts to provide alternative livelihoods so that the gun is not the only means of survival.

However, the rest of the world must take responsibility for the supply of weapons. The international arms trade lacks effective control. Irresponsible arms transfers fuel human rights abuses and are a proven catalyst for conflict, prolonging wars once they break out, increasing their lethal effect, and adding to the immense human cost.

The primary responsibility for controlling the flow of arms rests with governments — all governments, whether they are manufacturers of arms or not, that transfer, re-export, transit, or export arms. States do have the right to buy weapons for legitimate self-defence and responsible law enforcement. But they should not authorise arms transfers where they will be used or are likely to be used for violations of human rights or international humanitarian law, or to hold back development.

Despite the suffering and poverty fuelled by international arms transfers, there is still no comprehensive, legally binding international treaty on the conventional arms trade. The current system of transfer controls is full of gaps and inconsistencies that are exploited by the arms dealers and brokers.

A new international Arms Trade Treaty (ATT), based on principles of international law including international human rights and humanitarian law, would create minimum global standards for arms transfers, preventing those likely to be used to violate human rights or to hinder development. If these had been applied to Sierra Leone — if the ATT had existed — it would have obliged governments to prevent the transfer of arms to those who committed the atrocities we have described. It would reduce the human cost of irresponsible arms transfers and prevent unscrupulous arms dealers finding the weakest point in the supply chain.

The list of governments that support the principles behind the ATT is growing.

2006 presents a major political opportunity to build on this momentum:

- The Review Conference for the UN Programme of Action on Small Arms and Light Weapons, in June and July 2006, must agree clear principles for the international transfer of these arms, based on existing international law, to prevent them getting into the wrong hands.
- The Conference's Preparatory Committee, taking place in New York in January 2006, must set the stage for this.
- Then, the UN General Assembly's First Committee, meeting in October 2006, must finally start a process to negotiate an Arms Trade Treaty.

The proliferation of conventional arms is too severe to ignore any longer. Since the atrocities in Sierra Leone took place, arms have been transferred to many other countries with records of human rights violations. Responsible arms exporters and arms-affected states must not be held back by the few states that want to hold up progress. In 2006, they must begin negotiations to agree an Arms Trade Treaty.

Notes

[1] Amnesty International press release, 'Sierra Leone: Special Court rejects amnesty for the worst crimes known to humanity', 18 March 2004, (AI Index: AFR/51/007/2004).

[2] Amnesty International, *Sierra Leone: 1998: A Year of Atrocities Against Civilians*, 1 November 1998 (AI Index: 51/022/1998).

[3] Ibid; this Amnesty International report of the same year describes many other atrocities similar to Fatu's.

[4] Amnesty International press release, 'Sierra Leone: escalating human rights abuses against civilians, 30 November 1999, (AI Index: AFR 51/13/99).

[5] Amnesty International, *Sierra Leone: 1998: A Year of Atrocities Against Civilians,* op. cit.

[6] A UN observer mission, UNOMSIL, had been deployed in July 1998.

[7] Statistics provided by UNICEF Sierra Leone from the UNICEF report 'The State of the World's Children, 2004'.

[8] This was only a fraction of the weapons that the RUF possessed. The age of the weapons handed in suggested that the newer and better-functioning equipment had been kept. However, the fact that a gun is more than a decade old does not stop it being lethal, as long as ammunition is available.

[9] Report of the Panel of Experts Appointed Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 1306 (2000), Paragraph 19, in Relation to Sierra Leone S/2000/1195, 20 December 2000, para 173; and Small Arms Survey (2000) *Re-Armament in Sierra Leone: One Year after the Lomé Peace Agreement*, Occasional Paper 1, p.25.

[10] Landmine Action UK, Actiongroup Landmine.de, and Mines Action Canada (2004), *Explosive remnants of war and mines other than anti-personnel mines, Global Survey 2003-2004*, pp.152-3.

[11] Small Arms Survey (2000), *op. cit.*, p.25

[12] ECOWAS Declaration of a Moratorium on the Importation, Exportation and Manufacture of Small Arms and Light Weapons in West Africa, October 1998.

[13] Report of the Panel of Experts Appointed Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 1306 (2000), Paragraph 19, in Relation to Sierra Leone, op. cit., paras 167-168.

[14] Small Arms Survey (2000), *op. cit.*, pp 16-17; this cites the roles of the Ukraine, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Burkina Faso, Liberia, Libya, Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea, Senegal, Belgium and the UK.

[15] Small Arms Survey (2000), *op. cit.*, p.15.

[16] International Crisis Group, *Sierra Leone: Time for a new military and political strategy*, 11 April 2001, p.ii.

[17] Report of the Panel of Experts, op. cit., para 180.

[18] Small Arms Survey (2000), *op. cit.*, p.14.

[19] Small Arms Survey (2000), *op. cit.*, p.16.

[20] Small Arms Survey (2000), *op. cit.*, p.19.

[21] Report of the Panel of Experts, *op. cit*., paras 203-211.

[22] Report of the Panel of Experts, *op. cit*., para 211.

[23] Amnesty International, *A Catalogue of Failures: G8 Arms Exports and Human Rights,* 19 May 2003 (AI Index IOR 30/33/2003).

[24] Small Arms Survey (2000), *op. cit.*, p17.

[25] Report of the Panel of Experts, *op. cit*., para 218.

[26] Nicolas Florquin and Eric G. Berman (eds) (2005), *Armed and Aimless: Armed Groups, Guns and Human Security in the ECOWAS Region*, Small Arms Survey, p.372.

[27] Amnesty International, *Sierra Leone: 1998: A year of atrocities against civilians*, op.cit.

[28] Small Arms Survey (2000), *op. cit.*, p.22.

[29] Human Rights Watch press release, 'Sierra Leone government bombing causes civilian deaths', 7 June 2000.

[30] Small Arms Survey (2000), *op. cit.*, p.22.

[31] Amnesty International, *Sierra Leone: 1998: A year of atrocities against civilians*, op. cit.

[32] Small Arms Survey (2000), *op. cit.*, p.23.

Copies are available to download from www.controlarms.org

AI Index number AFR 51/001/2006

Amnesty International is an independent worldwide voluntary activist movement working for human rights, with more than 1.5 million members, supporters, and subscribers in over 150 countries and territories. It has national sections in 54 countries, in every region of the world.

E-mail: info@amnesty.org.uk

The International Action Network on Small Arms is the global movement against gun violence — more than 500 civil society organisations working in 100 countries to stop the proliferation and misuse of small arms and light weapons. IANSA seeks to reduce the impact of small arms through advocacy, promoting the development of regional and thematic networks, supporting capacity building, and raising awareness.

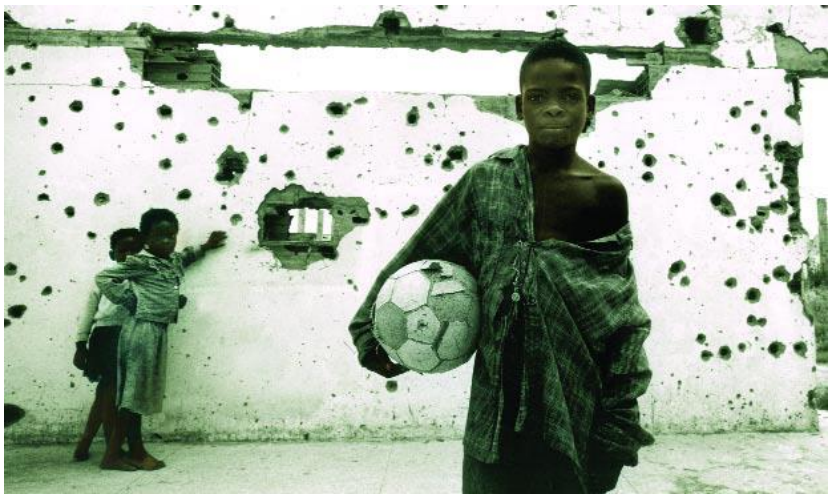
E-mail: contact@iansa.org

Oxfam International is a confederation of twelve development agencies which work in 120 countries throughout the developing world: Oxfam America, Oxfam-in-Belgium, Oxfam Canada, Oxfam Australia, Oxfam Germany, Oxfam Great Britain, Oxfam Hong Kong, Intermón Oxfam (Spain), Oxfam Ireland, Novib Oxfam Netherlands, Oxfam New Zealand, and Oxfam Quebec.

E-mail: advocacy@oxfaminternational.org

The call for tough arms controls

Voices from Sierra Leone



Arms are out of control

Arms kill more than half a million men, women, and children on average each year. Many thousands more are maimed, or tortured, or forced to flee their homes. The uncontrolled proliferation of arms fuels human rights violations, escalates conflicts, and intensifies poverty. The time for world leaders to act is now.

To confront this crisis, Oxfam, Amnesty International, and the International Action Network on Small Arms (IANSA) have together launched an international campaign calling for effective arms controls to make people genuinely safer from the threat of armed violence.

You can help us to put an end to this horrific abuse.

Log on to the control arms website and become part of the largest, most effective visual petition in the world.

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Amnesty International

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