

Reference Focus - Assessment

The Sierra Leone Civil War 1991-2002

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The Sierra Leone Civil War was a brutal conflict that took place in West Africa from 1991 to 2002 culminating in the displacement of over 2 million people and the estimated deaths of over 50,000 people ¹.

The war began when the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) led by Foday Sankoh launched an armed assault on 23 March 1991 from the neighboring country Liberia with the intention of overthrowing the then president Joseph Momoh's All People's Congress (APC) regime which had dominated Sierra Leonean politics since 1968 and led-up to a one-party state in 1978.

The conflict gained international attention due to its brutality, systematic violence against civilians, mutilations, mass killing and the recruitment of child soldiers.

The lead-up to the conflict was a culmination of multiple factors, including deep-seated corruption, political instability and exclusion, and economic decline under the one-party rule of All People's Congress (APC) ².

The recruitment of rebels and child soldiers played a major role in the escalation of the conflict, as many young men of fighting age were unemployed, marginalized, disillusioned and vulnerable. This led to an extensive number of civilians feeling excluded from economic growth and political opportunities, thus creating a substantial opportunity for rebel growth and momentum ³.

Paul Richards has argued that the RUF's mobilization "cannot be understood solely as a war of greed; social marginalization played a critical role", Highlighting that the motivations of conflict were already present in the male fighting age population and that when social grievance and economic instability combined, the rebels were ready to fight.

¹ Gberie, L. (2005) *A Dirty War in West Africa*. London: Hurst, p.25

² Richards, P. (1996). *Fighting for the Rain Forest*. Oxford: James Curry, p.45

³ Keen, D (2005) *Conflict and Collusion in Sierra Leone*. Oxford: James Currey. P 78.

The term “blood diamonds” is closely linked to the Sierra Leone Civil War as diamond extraction was a key form of resource exploitation that supported and sustained conflict, rebel groups financed and used profits from the illicit trade of minerals, specifically diamonds to fund military operations, purchase weapons and recruit soldiers ⁴.

David Keen wrote “war can be understood not simply as a breakdown of order, but as the emergence of an alternative system of profit” In this, he highlights how the significance of resource exploitation was instrumental in not just the cause but the sustainability and objective of the conflict, it facilitated rebel activity and encouraged the economic objectives.

The conflict was significantly marred by its brutality; its civilians were deliberately targeted and faced with terror, fear and extreme systematic violence, specifically with the use of mutilations and sexual violence in local communities. The targeting of civilians became synonymous with the conflict in an extreme example of “New War” contemporary conflict which blurred the lines between civilians and military/rebels.

In 1999 the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) was established with the objective of providing peacekeeping troops into the conflict area to aid the stabilization of the country, disarming of the rebels and ending the conflict. Key countries that were part of the UNAMSIL mission were Nigeria, Kenya, India and the United Kingdom, with the maximum number of combined authorized personnel reaching approx. 17,500. This played a decisive role in ending the conflict ⁵.

Paul Richards notes that “the war was not senseless violence but had its own internal logic” which helps underline the root causes and motivations that led to this war, it was a complex and multi-layered example of a number of factors all intertwining at the same time, this understanding and analysis showcases the economic incentives and political environment that created the grounds of violence to emerge.

The origins, motivations and suffering from the Sierra Leone conflict were deeply rooted in its political, economic and social instability, which marked an example of ‘New War’ conflict that was shaped by decades-long one-party political instability, political corruption and the widespread marginalization of unemployed, disenfranchised male youth. This, combined with access to illicit mineral resources and economic downfalls, created the foundations of an extremely brutal and violent conflict.

⁴ Global Witness (2003) Blood Diamonds Report, pp. 12-15

⁵ United Nations (2000) UNAMSIL overview.

Thousands of people died and millions of people were displaced in the conflict, and its long-term psychological impact in communities remains visible today, particularly among former child soldiers. The legacy of war continues to shape Sierra Leone today; despite increased political stability it remains fragile and challenged by poverty and youth unemployment.

Bibliography

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