

# Commentary on War and Warlordism in Africa: The Role Of Western Democracies In Fuelling Africa's Wars & Warlordism

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Some scholars perceive conflict as a means of co-operation and a chance whereby problems could be solved in a constructive way.

This has not proved the case in Africa's warlordism politics. Though warlords claim their armed "struggles" are all about making better the lives of their compatriots, their primary goal has frequently demonstrated quite the opposite.

They promise to provide the basics of life — indiscriminate access to health care, universal education, proper drinking water, better roads and infrastructure, a sound legal system, justice and a secure income. Invariably, the infrastructure for these services has been left to dilapidate by deceitful people full of greed, who lack the sense of foresight, maintenance and continuity; and who call themselves politicians and policy makers.

It is against the backdrop of such an environment that most disadvantaged youths answer the "take up arms" call by Africa's warlords. In the process, the youth become immersed in the defence of their personal right to life and opportunities, despite the consequences. This is a consequence sustained by the economic logic of unprecedented, shocking violence and banditry.

After examining 47 civil wars between 1960 and 1999, a 2000 World Bank Report authored by the Director of the Economic Department suggested that civil conflicts are more often caused by rebel groups competing with governments for resources rather than political, ethnic or other reasons.

The World Bank Report, *Economic Causes of Civil Conflict and their Implications for*

*Policy*, showed that countries which earn about a quarter of their GDP from the export of raw materials face a far higher likelihood of civil war than countries with more diversified economies. It also showed that rebel groups loot primarily commodities in order to remain viable.

One could disagree to agree that, this in turn, allows them to maintain their fighting forces and keep their rebellion alive.

Thus, the emergence of warlordism has in no way improved the living conditions of the citizens of those countries waging hate and revenge (as in the case of Sierra Leone), civil (formerly, Liberia), religious (pacified in Nigeria) or ethnic cleansing (Burundi) wars.

On the contrary, citizens of distant countries have continued to benefit from war and warlordism. This has been in the form of a strengthened economy, better-paid jobs, employment creation and improved standards of living, through the manufacture and sales of arms and ammunition by arms magnates and the inflow of invaluable raw materials, into Western countries such as Switzerland that neither has nor mines, or such raw materials, but exports diamonds, whether conducted on individual (profit-seeking security firms) or national interest.

The United Nations estimates that up to 60 percent of the 500 million small weapons around the world are used in 46 of the 49 conflicts raging around the world since 1990. This has translated into the deaths of four million people, most of them women and children.

What is clear is that these small arms are neither manufactured by African entrepreneurs, nor on the continent. This

makes a mockery of the Mali Moratorium on small arms.

The overwhelming majority of African countries are yet to establish, develop and manage their primary industries (and even their agrarian economies) — it could take several decades for such industries to attain competitive status in the world market. Even more so is the establishment of secondary industry, including Internet technology and modern weaponry in countries like Angola, Sierra Leone and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), which logically at least, is another half century or more away.

The historical record reveals that African warlords and the respective states they come from do not manufacture the deadly weapons used as catalyst for the continuing misery of millions of innocent children, women and other vulnerable people.

Nonetheless, warlords have not been short of supply of ammunition used to maim and kill the very people they claim they are fighting for and to redeem from the abyss of poverty.

After a two-week session of a United Nations conference on small arms that ended 20 July 2001, developing, war-affected and other countries succumbed to United States pressure, ending up with non-binding recommendations and a resolution that does little or nothing to address the arming of rebels by governments.

Despite a plan to curb the small arms traffic around the world, most countries of the global community accepted a watered-down version, filled with many compromises, in a bid to appease the United States' resistance to limiting small weapons sales.

From the very first day of the conference the atmosphere of inaction was felt across the board. The United States made it clear it would veto any plan that infringed on legal civilian ownership of weapons. The United States-based NGO Human Rights Watch accused the United States of exhibiting an isolationist outlook that put the powerful American gun-ownership lobby first.

The rapidly increasing incidences of armed violence are a direct consequence. The outbreak of civil conflict in Niger, Senegal, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia and Sierra Leone during the past decade has increased the demand for light weapons.

Recent international relations have proved that most of these warlords have merely continued in the footsteps of politicians, by employing inciting slogans and agitation to gain support and influence for their personal greed and gain.

The rest of this commentary attempts a brief look at the experience of Sierra Leone, but also the DRC and Angola.

On 23 March 1991, a little-known former corporal in the Sierra Leone military, Foday Sankoh, declared himself the leader of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) and commenced a war in Bomaru in the Kailahun District, in the east of the country.

He claimed his war was to oust the then one-party dictatorship of the All People's Congress (APC) party and to provide the fundamental amenities that a God-endowed rich Sierra Leone should provide for her citizenry.

Barely a year later, in April 1992, a group of young soldiers staged a *coup d'état* that overthrew the APC and formed the National

Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC) under the leadership of twenty-eight-year-old Captain Valentine Strasser.

The RUF did not end its war. The war raged on for a decade, leaving more than 75,000 dead, over half of the 4.5 million inhabitants either displaced or as refugees and hundreds amputated and maimed.

As "reward" for his war crimes, the 1999 Lomé Peace Agreement appointed Sankoh as Chairman of a Commission for the Management of Strategic Mineral Resources (CMRRD) and conferred upon him the status of a vice-president, an agreement reached through intense pressure (on the Sierra Leone government) from US envoy the Reverend Jesse Jackson.

Jackson, in his Lomé Agreement, begged the question behind the rationale of the patchwork diplomacy of western countries, who label themselves as human rights advocates and democracy champions and protectionists

*While the West offered high political offices to people accused of crimes against humanity in Sierra Leone — such as Sankoh and Major Johnny Paul Koroma, who was the AFRC junta boss — it simultaneously sent Yugoslav's Slobodan Milosovich to answer for war crimes in the Hague. It is this western-imposed style of impunity that equipped Koroma with the daring, insulting effrontery to refer to the Commission for the Consolidation of Peace (CCP) — which he headed — as a lame duck*

Between Lomé and 8 May 2000, civil demonstrations that called on Sankoh to respect the Lomé Agreement which led to his arrest, the CMRRD never functioned. In fact, it never met as a body. Instead, Sankoh signed dozens of agreements with

international business firms and solicited financial favours from other entities in his own name, in the name of the Commission, and in the name of the RUF, according to business files found in his office after his arrest.<sup>1</sup>

Diamond trade documents discovered in a search of his residence after his arrest portrayed an image of a two-faced figure, chasing financial opportunities for personal and political gain, outside of the governmental framework in which he was supposedly working.

He encouraged a wide variety of potential investors including the Integrated Group of Companies based in McLean, Virginia, from which he received 14 vehicles with the logo of the RUF Party painted on the side of each.

Even while the Lomé talks were still under way, another US-based, self-employed Belgian made contact with the RUF in Togo, with which the former's US-based Trading & Investment Company, recalled an arrangement with Sankoh which would have given them authority to broker rights to all of Sierra Leone's diamond and gold resources for a ten-year period.

Despite the fact that there was no official source of income, the warlord controlled a fleet of expensive vehicles, satellite telephones and ostentatious wealth.

In 1999, British imports of rough unsorted diamonds (code 71021000) totalled £107 million (down from £347 million in 1998). Of this, Switzerland was recorded as the "country of origin" for 41 per cent or £44.2 million, despite the fact that Switzerland is a non-producer of diamonds.

The same situation is evident in the case of The Gambia, which produces no diamonds, but in recent years has become a diamond-exporting nation. In 1998, Belgium recorded imports from The Gambia of 449,000 carats valued at \$78.3 million, an average value of \$174 per carat. In diamond trade circles, The Gambia is referred to as Mini-Antwerp.

In the process of double-dealing, personal gains and greed, the RUF established what is referred to as the RUF Mining Ltd. This is truly what warlordism is really all about.

The end of the Cold War brought unemployment and unmasked the socio-economic status of the countries behind the "Iron Curtain", most of whom, employing the highest degree of hypocrisy (like their Western counterparts) — and double-dealing like the warlords themselves — turned to their sales of massive stockpiles of military hardware to bolster their economies.

For instance, the Ukrainian *Duma* (Parliament) on 14 December 2000, overwhelmingly approved President Leonid Kuchma's proposal to send an 800 troop-contribution to the United Nations military mission in Sierra Leone.<sup>2</sup>

Seven days later, through her representative Sergei Lavrov, the Ukraine blocked the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) from taking any action on recommendations put forward by the UNSC-August 2000-appointed panel of international experts (who came from diverse fields including weapons, law enforcement and diamonds), linking the conflict diamond trade in Sierra Leone to Liberia, President Charles Taylor and other parties including the Ukraine herself, of supplying arms to Sierra Leone.

This development did not go down well with members of the UNSC Sanctions Committee for Sierra Leone, whose Bangladeshi Chair, Anwarul Chowdhury, blasted the suppression of the Report as disappointing and unhelpful in terms of transparency. This is not simply a question of the governments of Liberia and Burkina Faso directly contributing to a human rights catastrophe in Sierra Leone by using international criminal networks with tentacles in other African countries. It is also a tragic failure by powerful governments such as those of Belgium, Switzerland and the United Kingdom to set up proper regulatory systems to control arms brokers in rough diamonds.<sup>3</sup>

In March 1999 Human Rights Watch alleged that 68 tonnes of weapons flown from Ukraine to Burkina Faso were diverted to the Revolutionary United Front (RUF). The shipment apparently included Kalashnikov assault rifles, machine guns and rocket-propelled guns.

In the first quarter of 2001, the Kharzakh Customs Administration began an investigation into the attempt to export to Sierra Leone, two Mi-8T military helicopters.<sup>4</sup>

According to reports, Customs certifications indicated the vessels were bound for Russia. However, Russian Customs Authority presented another document, which certified that the helicopters were bound for Sierra Leone, in transit through Russia. The helicopters were sold to a non-existent American business enterprise based in Russia, "named" the United States International Development Company, as collateral for unredeemed credit, the Turan Alem Bank export certificates showed.

The East European blood diamonds cartel plays no less a role in stimulating and maintaining the socio-economic and political

tornado in the DRC, Sierra Leone, Angola and Liberia. At the centre of the United Nations Security Council's (UNSC) investigations into the diamonds-for-arms trade is a thirty-three-year-old former *Komitet Gosudarstvennoi Bezopasnosti* (Committee for State Security — KGB) officer (interpreter and pilot), Victor Anatolyvich Bout, who is currently based in the United Arab Emirates and has seven passports with names including Vadim Aminov.

In contravention to UNSC arms embargo, he is believed to have carried out no less than 38 diamonds-for-weapons transactions within the Southern African region, including deals with Angola's National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) rebels, with supplies of Ukrainian, Moldovian and Bulgarian-made ground-to-air-missiles (SAM), 122mm artillery weapons and other sophisticated military hardware.

Bout dismissed the report as untrue in an interview with Russia's *Nezavisimoe Televidenye* (Independent TV — NTV),<sup>5</sup> claiming that third parties such as his business rivals in the Southern Africa region were behind the unfounded findings, which he considered a big plot to destabilise his business interests. Far from the situation on the ground, he claimed his company deals in Russian technology, but does not include weapons.

Apart from Liberia and the Ukraine, other countries implicated in Sierra Leone's diamonds-for-weapons trade included Russia, The Gambia, Niger, Côte d'Ivoire and South Africa.

Diamond trading in Angola, Sierra Leone, and the DRC has come under international criticism as rebel movements from these countries have been financing their forces

through the sale of blood diamonds, which account for almost 4% of the world diamond trade.

A UN panel dealing with sanctions against Angola issued an addendum in 2001 that concluded that although the attitude of impunity may have lessened, the intentions of sanctions busters to continue to derive profit from war remains firmly intact.<sup>6</sup>

Monitoring agencies indicated that the level of UNITA's diamond output for 1999 and 2000 could not be estimated, but was almost certainly larger than US \$150 million in 1999. The question is not whether UNITA had

access to diamonds, but how easily it moved them to markets. A strategy of mining and stockpiling high-value stones ensured that UNITA could always find buyers.

Africans have always dreamt and spoken about unity in the form of a selfless, genuinely concerted effort towards righting the wrongs of the past.

Egoism and inaction overshadow this goal. However, a united voice could be achieved only when Africans, this time not in theory but in practice, face the truth.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> UN Panel of Experts Report on Diamonds and Arms in Sierra Leone, December 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Radio Ukraina, 14 December 2000.

<sup>3</sup> Amnesty International Press Release, December 2000 (response to the UN Report).

<sup>4</sup> Khabar TV, 9 January 2001.

<sup>5</sup> *Zerkalo Nedeli*, (Mirror of the Week), February 2001.

<sup>6</sup> IRIN, June 2001.