

DIAMOND MINING AND THE ROLE OF PRIVATE SECURITY FIRMS - THE SIERRA LEONEAN CIVIL WAR

1. Introduction

In this lecture I will highlight the historical emergence and specific nature of disparate exchange in the context of the West-African country of Sierra Leone. Through much of the decade of the 1990s, this mineral-rich country has witnessed a civil war, pitting a rebel movement supported by the government of neighbouring Liberia, called the Revolutionary United Front (R.U.F.), against the country's central government. The civil war which was ultimately wended up via a military intervention by Great Britain, to all accounts has been extremely violent. In the world press, it obtained prominence due to the mutilation of civilians by the R.U.F.'s rebels, and due to the misuse of children as combatants (1). Some 50 thousand citizens of Sierra Leone are reported to have lost their lives (2). And whereas the country's economic crisis predates the eruption of civil war, the disruptions caused by the decade-long civil war have contributed tremendously to the further impoverishment of Sierra Leone's population.

Since the focus of my lecture is Sierra Leone's participation in world trade via the mechanism of disparate exchange, I wish to record at the start that the country's exports had faced a situation close to collapse *preceding* the eruption of the civil war in the 1990s. Traditionally, the country's exports consisted in both major types of primary products, i.e. both in agricultural and in mineral commodities. The production and the exports of coffee and cocoa, the two principal agricultural commodities, fell dramatically following the initiation of structural adjustment programs (SAPs) by Sierra Leone's government at the behest of the IMF (late 1980s) (3). Again, official exports of rough diamonds too saw a dramatic decline, from a peak of two million *carats* in the 1960s, to less than 50 thousand *carats* by 1998 (4). While the latter decline appears to be rooted in the promotion of artisan mining, as promoted by Sierra Leone's domestic government, the reality is that by the early 1990s the country's official participation in world trade was quite limited.

In this lecture I wish to analyse Sierra Leone's official and unofficial participation in disparate exchange against the background of the pre-existing crisis in the country's economy. Preliminarily, it should be noted that the Sierra Leonean case cannot be fully equated with those of Angola or the Congo, discussed in other lectures. On the surface, the Sierra Leonean war shares with the wars in both mentioned Central African countries the fact that rough diamonds have played a very central role in the financing of rebel war operations. Moreover, as in the case of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, rough diamonds in the case of Sierra Leone are not only the very most prized trade-item for the rebel movement which in the 1990s challenged the state, but have also been keenly valued as source for the continuation of war by the country's (elected) government. Although Sierra Leone avails of other key raw materials (e.g. bauxite), it is the diamond economy that has taken centre-stage in course of the civil war of the last decade. This

only serves to underline once again how crucial rough diamonds are to any discussion on the mechanism of disparate exchange.

Nevertheless, the parallel exchange which has been taking place as basis of the Sierra Leonean civil war, is rather *exceptional*, since here we do not simply mark the parallel exchange of two commodities, the one expressing social wealth and the other social waste, by two parties-at-war. No, in this case diamonds, by the Sierra Leonean state at least, have not been traded primarily to gather money for the purchasing of military commodities. For in this case, the contract between the state and its foreign trade-partners has focused on the sale of military *services*, i.e. the fighting and training capacities of mercenary soldiers. And although the contracts have included the importation of weaponry (from Bulgaria and other East European nations), the primary aim of the agreements signed with *Executive Outcomes*, with *Sandline International* and with other private security firms, has been to counter an offensive of the R.U.F, and the threat to state-power which the movement posed, by purchasing military services from private transnational firms. Hence, there is reason to devote separate attention to the application of disparate exchange in the context of Sierra Leone's civil war.

2. The Phase of Corporate Diamond Mining

To start, let's note some basic facts regarding the history of its presence in Sierra Leone of the company *De Beers*, which holds a partial monopoly over production and marketing in the international diamond sector. Some five years after the first diamonds were discovered in Kono District, a company named the *Sierra Leone Selection Trust (SLST)* gained exclusive mining and prospecting rights over the entire country, and this for a period of 99 years, in exchange of an income tax (of 27, later 45 percent) on the company's profits (5). The company which obtained this huge concession, affecting communities where common property relations had prevailed, was a subsidiary of CAST, a company based in Gold Coast (now Ghana), which was controlled by *De Beers*. Thus the very same corporation which for many decades on end has held monopoly power in the diamond sector at the world level, held a monopoly during the first phase of diamond production in Sierra Leone under colonial rule. Up to the 1950s, all the country's diamond fields were under the SLST's control.

This situation, however, started changing in the 1950s, under the impact of a huge influx of illicit miners. In this period the main diamond area, i.e. Kono District, became the centre of a diamond *rush*, with individual miners entering the District to engage in small scale mining activities. The new miners are reported to have numbered 75 thousand in Kono District alone. Many sons of peasant families abandoned rice-cultivation to join the diamond rush. Meanwhile, diamond mining spread to new areas, and came to cover a quarter of the country. The colonial government reacted by establishing an alluvial mining scheme, under which licenses were granted to individual miners employing a limited number of diggers. The monopoly held previous by *De Beers'* subsidiary SLST was scrapped, and the company's rights, as laid down in an agreement concluded in 1955, were restricted to two main diamond mining fields (Yengema and Tongo), in return for a monetary compensation (of LB 1.6 million) (6). Whereas the company's mining

concessions had originally covered the whole country, they now amounted to an area of 450 square miles.

The situation evolved further in the beginning of the 1970s, when Sierra Leone, which had gained independence in 1961, was governed by a party advocating welfare state principles, ie. the SLPP. According to the interpretation offered by Smillie, Gbedie and Hazleton, the SLPP's leader Stevens emboldened illicit miners, whom he considered his natural constituency. Reportedly, the activities of the miners now came to include attacks on gravel trucks of the SLST. A professionally executed theft of the SLST's monthly haul of diamonds, in 1969, served as catalyst for change (7). Of its own, the company then decided to stop all prospecting efforts. Shortly after, in 1971, Stevens' government dealt the SLST a further blow, by announcing the formation of the *National Diamond Mining Company (NDMC)*, which partly nationalized the SLST. Reportedly, the new company took over 51 percent of SLST's shares, allowing the SLST to retain the remaining 49 percent. Once again, *De Beers'* rights were curbed. The Sierra Leonean government established effective decision making power over the Board of Directors of the NDMC.

Yet whereas *De Beers'* influence over diamond mining in Sierra Leone after 35 years of prospecting and mining now had been much curtailed, it would be wrong to conclude that the international monopoly company entirely left the scene. For by the early 1970s, the company had already shifted a part of its marketing operations of Sierra Leonean diamonds to the neighbouring country of Liberia. The above-noted informalisation of diamond production, which had started in the 1950s, was accompanied by the development of smuggling on a major scale, and *De Beers* adapted to the situation, by continuing buying operation both in Sierra Leone itself, and in Liberia. As Smillie, Gberie and Hazleton record, in the 1970s, *De Beers* attempted 'to manage the growing informal market' by using its Monrovia purchasing office to purchase smuggled Sierra Leonean diamonds in dollars (8). As in the case of Angola, where *De Beers* is reported to have purchased smuggled blood diamonds, here too the monopoly company is known to have facilitated the participation of rebels in disparate exchange.

3. The Informalisation of Production in Sierra Leonean History

Having briefly summed up the evolution of Sierra Leone's diamond sector via a discussion on the presence of *De Beers*, we now need to initiate a discussion on the reasons why the situation in Sierra Leone in the 1990s ran completely out of hand. First, - there is no doubt that the country's diamond production structure over the decades has been largely transformed. Whereas in the first decades mining was corporate-controlled, with diamond mines operating via recruitment of wage-labourers, today the predominant arrangement is that of a 'tributary' system, where miners are recruited by individual license-holders who provide them with food and simple tools needed for alluvial mining. The miners on their part sell their finds to the license holders at prices which reportedly are vastly inferior to those prevailing in the 'open market' (9). Whereas one may presume that the structure of production in the future may once again change under the impact of the diamond concessions which have been granted to junior international mining

companies (see below), there is no doubt that during the period of the civil war very informal production arrangements have prevailed in Sierra Leone's diamond fields.

Further, it is also true that historically speaking the smuggling of diamonds started in the period when corporate control over the country's diamond sector was loosened, and when indigenous miners were allowed all scope to engage in smallscale mining of rough diamonds. From the report by Smillie, Gberie and Hazleton and from other accounts it appears that the growth of informal marketing networks, largely run by Libanese traders, was a by-product of informalisation of production relations, and that the smuggling of rough diamonds from Sierra Leone's diamond areas located mainly in Districts in the country's Eastern part towards neighbouring Liberia also grew side-by-side with the transformation of diamond mining from a production structure under corporate control - to informal production arrangements. Hence, a major burden of responsibility for the growth of chaos is loaded onto the government of Stevens' SLPP which in the early 1970s nationalized *De Beers'* subsidiary, and gave a free hand to the indigenous miners operating on the basis of tributary relationships (10).

Yet such a picture of Sierra Leonean history too neatly allows Sierra Leone's international financiers to wash their hands in innocence. For another key pre-condition for the eruption of civil war in Sierra Leone was the fact that the state's socio-economic role, as in so many other countries of the South, from the second half of the 1980s was weakened dramatically under the impact of an agreement which the Sierra Leonean government was forced to sign with the International Monetary Fund (IMF). This agreement (1986) comprised a long list of standard structural adjustment measures, including the removal of subsidies on essential commodities, a reduction in the size of the state's bureaucracy, and limits on the growth of government expenditures (11). Although the government reportedly was slow to implement the agreement's provisions, by the turn of the 1990s, i.e. precisely in the years preceding the eruption of civil war, the social effect of the structural adjustment measures started being felt by various sections of Sierra Leone's population.

Thus, Zack-Williams records how development expenditures suffered, accounting for only 7.6 percent of total expenditure in the first six months of 1989/1990. Further, the social and economic infrastructure of the country was negatively affected, with schools and hospitals left to decay, and with health workers, teachers and civil servants having to go for months without salaries (12). These developments, no less than the reduction in corporate control over the diamond sector, contributed to an expansion in informal production relations, since many former state employees, as well as peasants deprived of subsidies, were forced to look for alternative ways to survive. In 1992, Sierra Leone descended into a civil war centered around disparate exchange. Undoubtedly, the R.U.F., which within barely three years was to become a major threat to the country's government, made use of the fact that structures of control in the diamond mining areas had been wiped out. However, the movement also found a fertile ground for recruitment and could very rapidly expand, in consequence of the programs of structural adjustment (SAPs) imposed by the I.M.F.

4. Smuggling and the Financing of Rebel Activity

Since in this lecture I primarily aim at analysing the services which in the 1990s have been performed by private security firms to defend the interests of junior international mining companies, I will devote only passing attention to the participation of Sierra Leone's rebel movement, the R.U.F, in disparate exchange. In the Western media, the R.U.F. has gained great notoriety in view of the barbaric methods which its members have used to gain the upper hand in the country's civil war, - methods such as the cutting off of hands and legs of civilians. The R.U.F.'s responsibility for having committed the given crimes is well-established and beyond dispute (13). Still, one wonders about the movement's social base and ideology. According Johan Pelemans, the R.U.F. drew on a vague mixture of pan-africanism, anti-colonialism, the ideas of Libya's leader Kadhafi, and images from American Rambo-movies (14). All analysts agree that the R.U.F. drew its principal strength from its access to rough diamond resources, and from their diamond smuggling to and sale in countries neighbouring Sierra Leone.

The R.U.F. launched an invasion from Liberia in March, 1991. Perhaps not coincidentally, in the previous year a reported 10 to 20 thousand illicit diamond diggers had been expelled by the state's armed forces from mining areas in Kono (15). In any case, the R.U.F. as early as in 1992 established a powerful presence in Kono District, and from then onwards up to 2001, the movement was able to more or less continuously control a major part of Sierra Leone's diamond mining areas. Precise figures regarding the size of the R.U.F.'s diamond trade are hard to come by. According to a report drafted by a Panel of Experts towards the U.N. Security Council, produced in December 2000, the movement's diamond income varied from \$ 25 million to \$ 125 million per year (16). Clearly, the size of earnings in any year during the 1990s was sufficiently large for the R.U.F. not to have to bother too much about the movement's popularity amongst Sierra Leone's impoverished population. It could safely rely on intimidation and on imports of foreign arms.

Analysts regarding the R.U.F's smuggling activities have identified Liberia, which borders Sierra Leone in the East, as a key avenue for the export of the R.U.F.'s rough diamonds, and have identified Liberia's leader Charles Taylor as the R.U.F.'s principal foreign backer. The smuggling of rough diamonds by Liberian small traders from Kono District and other diamond mining areas, as indicated above, has a long history. It surely predates the eruption of civil war by many decades. In the decade of the 1990s, smuggling, however, appears to have reached a historical *peak*. According to the data collected by Smillie, Gberie and Hazleton, Liberia's exports of rough diamonds to Belgium, where the world's main diamond trading centre is located, grew in value from \$ 8.4 million in 1989, to hundreds of millions of Dollars in the middle of the 1990s (17). And although a part of the exported diamonds hailed from UNITA-held territory in Angola, 'certainly a very high proportion originated in Sierra Leone' (18). Other smuggling routes for R.U.F.-diamonds appear to have been Gambia and Cote d'Ivoire (19).

That the control of diamond production and exports was crucial to the R.U.F.'s war efforts is also evidenced from the fact that, when negotiations were held in the late 1990s to reach a peace accord, the R.U.F. made the continuation of its control over diamond mining a pre-condition for any agreement to be signed. The appointment of its commander, Foday Sankoh, as chairman of a national commission on the management of mineral resources, was widely interpreted as a recognition of the R.U.F.'s factual control over diamond mining (20). On the other hand, arms to wage the rebel war were not produced or procured locally, but imported from countries outside the African continent. Although none of the reports at hand do offer us a systematic account of the trading relations which the R.U.F. through the civil war has maintained with the outside world, the R.U.F. is one more example of a contemporary rebel movement in Sub-Saharan Africa which has overwhelmingly relied on disparate exchange.

5. The Sale of Services Along with Arms by Private Security Firms

We now need to describe the manner in which Sierra Leone's *government* got involved in the method of disparate exchange. This can best be done by focusing on the contracts which in the second part of the 1990s were successively concluded with two foreign security firms, named *Executive Outcomes* and *Sandline International*, and by placing these contracts, as independent researchers have done, within the context of the keen interests which junior mining companies developed in getting diamond concessions in Sierra Leone. At least three such junior mining companies have been listed, including the Rex Diamond Mining Corporation and Amcam Minerals Limited. But the company which figures most frequently in reports about the Sierra Leonean civil war is *Diamond Works*, with its subsidiary *Branch Energy* (21). Although the facts cited to connect these two latter firms to the operations of private security firms vary, there is sufficient evidence to conclude that Diamond Works was/is linked to both Executive Outcomes and to Sandline International.

Executive Outcomes, before entering the scene in Sierra Leone, had achieved notoriety as a South-African based firm, largely consisting of men who had previously served the South African *Apartheid* regime's military and intelligence services. The firm was brought into Sierra Leone at a time when the government in Freetown was under siege from rebels of the R.U.F., in 1995. *Executive Outcomes* indeed succeeded in pushing back the rebels from the area surrounding Freetown, and along with rural militias with which its mercenaries formed an informal alliance, also succeeded in evicting the R.U.F. from a key mining area in Koidu, and from other diamond mining areas. The entrance of *Executive Outcomes* into Sierra Leone, however, virtually coincided with the signing of a contract with Branch Energy, in which the latter company was granted huge concessions, including a lease for a diamond area in Koidu District (22). Both in view of personal connections that existed between the diamond company and the private security firm's leading representatives, and in view of other facts, key investigators have concluded that the operations of *Executive Outcomes* were financed via a triangular deal.

Further, whereas *Executive Outcomes* left the scene in 1997, after the holding of elections in Sierra Leone, a second private security firm, *Sandline International*, was brought in subsequently, once again with the task of staging an offensive against the R.U.F. This time, however, the foreign mercenaries first had to clear Freetown itself of rebel forces, for these had in the meantime occupied the capital and expelled its elected government. Like *Executive Outcomes*, *Sandline International* became the centre of a major controversy, since this London-based security firm according to reports in the British press was/is very closely related to intelligence services of the British state (MI-6). Once again, the private intervention was the result of a triangular deal, for *Sandline International* was given the task of clearance of the capital and of diamond mining areas on the basis of a contract negotiated by one Rakesh Saxena, a banker wanted for embezzlement in Thailand. In the contract, Saxena committed to pay for *Sandline's* services and for the shipment of rifles, in exchange of mining concessions in Sierra Leone (23).

The above description, while inevitably brief with regard to the contents of the indirect exchange between diamond concessions and the provision of military services, suffices to illustrate how crucial the operations of *Executive Outcomes* and *Sandline International* were for the country's ruling class. For in both cases, private security firms were brought in, not just to guard the interests of mining companies on the spot, i.e. in the diamond mining areas themselves, but in order to ensure the survival of a collapsing, respectively collapsed Sierra Leonean government. This provides us a measure of the interests at stake on both sides in the given deals. For on the one hand, junior diamond companies seeking to challenge the hegemony of *De Beers* in the international diamond sector, saw their chance to capture large concessionary rights in Sierra Leone. On the other and, Sierra Leone's ruler and former ruler respectively decided to undertake commitments under disparate exchange, that inevitably made them tributary to the highest interests of foreign diamond mining companies.

6. Diamond Concessions in Exchange of Mercenary Services

The latter may be highlighted further, by comparing the nature of the concessionary contracts signed between Sierra Leone's governmental representatives and foreign company representatives, which as said can be listed under disparate exchange, -with the application of disparate exchange by Middle Eastern states. First, details regarding the deal which brought in *Executive Outcomes*, have been specified by the Belgian researcher Pelemans. According to his account, *Branch Energy* in the middle of 1995 obtained a leasing contract for 25 years, which comprised concessions for six separate mining areas in exchange for the services of the South African firm *Executive Outcomes*. Under the contract, there was to be a sharing of production benefits between *Branch Energy* and the Sierra Leonean state. Whereas *Branch Energy* was to make substantial capital investments, its long-term profits promised to be huge. According to Pelemans, the Koidu-lease alone covered diamond reserves valued at 1,2 Billion US Dollars (24).

The second deal, once again according to data gathered by Pelemans, likewise involved a payment for military services to be performed by Sandline International in this case, likewise in exchange of mining concessions. Here, Rakesh Saxena, the intermediary for the deal, is quoted, as having stating that his interest in financing the operations of the private security firm was to obtain two concessions in Sierra Leone, on behalf of a group of international mining companies. Later on a controversy was to arise over the shipment of arms under this contract, notably the shipments of thirty tons of Bulgarian Ak-47 rifles to Sierra Leone, which some deemed a violation of the arms' embargo imposed by Resolution 1132 of the United Nations (25), and which amounted to the immediate exchange of military commodities against rights relating to the civilian commodity diamonds. However, what was equally striking was the fact that the deal once again involved *long-term diamond prospecting and extraction rights* at the expense of the rights of Sierra Leone's own population over its own natural resources.

The two contracts, then, may be contrasted with the way disparate exchange was structured, when initiated as trading mechanism in the 1970s and 1980s. For although in certain cases, such as in the case of the famous El Yamanah deal, the relationship between the parallel transfers of military and civilian goods was very immediate, - on the whole the relationship was not just indirect, but was in fact structured via the payment of taxes or a part of company profit to the state's treasury. The relationship in any case was not structured via agreements covering the concessionary rights (for oil exploitation) of transnational firms. In the case of the two consecutive agreements which brought Executive Outcomes and Sandline International into Sierra Leone, however, the state 'mortgaged' its own rights over diamond extraction, which in the period when the state had been ruled by the SLPP had been retaken by the Sierra Leonean state. Under both mentioned contracts, payments of operations to be carried out by mercenary forces were promised in exchange of the mining concessions themselves.

All this, surely, was not accidental, but the consequence of the state-of-affairs existing inside Sierra Leone at the time. For at the moment when the two concessionary agreements were concluded, Sierra Leone's government stood with its back against the wall (first case), or had been forced into exile by the advance of the R.U.F (second case). Hence, the agreements were concluded at moments when foreign contracting parties could indeed snatch a maximum of concessions from their Sierra Leonean counterpart. In short, the two agreements were agreements signed under duress. And under the given circumstances, Sierra Leone's rulers, respectively former rulers, did not primarily aim at increasing their own share of minerals' extraction, or at increasing the state's economic benefits, such as had been the case when disparate exchange was instituted in the first half of the 1970s, but rather aimed at ensuring bare physical *survival*. Hence, the contents of the deals were, indeed, determined by the conditions of Sierra Leone's civil war. Both the demand side (Sierra Leone as buyer of services), and the supply side (the foreign contracting party as a buyer of mining rights), were influenced by these realities.

7. Conclusion

In this lecture I have highlighted a special case of the application of the trading mechanism of disparate exchange, here involving the exchange of concessionary rights *against a service*. When disparate exchange emerged, in the decade of the 1970s, it was conceived of as parallel exchange of commodities against money. The exchange in some cases could, as explained elsewhere, be *barter*, i.e. the direct exchange of oil against arms. It could also be, and most frequently was, the *indirect*, meaning parallel exchange of mutually distinct material goods against money capital. Yet no matter whether the exchange was direct or indirect, disparate exchange originally always involved two transfers of *material goods*, the one being the exported, and the other being the imported material good, from and towards a country located in one of the Southern continents.

Here, in the case of Sierra Leone, we have encountered a somewhat different type of application of disparate exchange. For whereas the contracts signed by the Sierra Leonean government with private security firms, such as with *Executive Outcomes* and with *Sandline International*, were preconditioned on the presence, in Sierra Leone, of lucrative minerals which could be extracted by transnational mining companies, i.e. on the possibility of the exports by these companies of a material good, - the goods offered by the foreign contracting party in exchange of the minerals or mineral concessions were not primarily arms or armament systems, but rather *services* performed by trained foreign mercenaries. Thus, whereas in general disparate exchange heralds parallel exchange of two commodities, in this case it has signified the exchange of extraction rights for a material commodity against a service by a foreign security firm.

This does not mean, however, that the contracts did not involve the importation of weaponry. As various reports written regarding the contracts signed between the Sierra Leonean contracting party and *Executive Outcome* and *Sandline International* bring out well, - as a part of the deal massive numbers of AK-47 rifles and other arms were brought into the country by the foreign security firms, and these were not only used by the foreign mercenaries themselves, but also by local personnel trained by the transnational firms. Moreover, although at least a part of the imported arms, it appears, remained the firm's own property, the contracts in any case have had the same detrimental result, as has disparate exchange in general when applied under the condition of a war. For whereas precious natural resources are to be transferred for sale abroad, the service contracts, along with the disparate exchange which the rebel movement in Sierra Leone engaged in, have led to further immiseration of Sierra Leone's people.

Thus, the costs which Sierra Leone pays in consequence of the fact that both warring parties have used the mechanism of disparate exchange, appear to be exceptionally large. For not only has a part of the country's diamond wealth been squandered in exchange for the imports of social waste; not only does it appear that the country's entire export-effort during the period of a full decade has been geared towards the imports of arms and of military services alone, meaning that none of the proceeds of the export-oriented strategy as pursued during this period resulted in any accretion of domestic wealth. No, since two successive governments have taken to signing concessionary agreements, they have also mortgaged the fruits of future extraction of the country's mineral wealth. Meanwhile, the use of the military services purchased by these

governments, along with the employment of the arms imported by the R.U.F., have caused an unprecedented amount of social and economic disruption. Sierra Leone has tasted the very bitterest fruits of the regime of 'free trade'.

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