

Security System Transformation in Sierra Leone, 1997-2007

Security Sector Reform in Sierra Leone and the Role of the Office of National Security

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The working paper series on Sierra Leone is part of the research programme 'Security System Transformation in Sierra Leone, 1997-2007'. These working papers present perspectives from both Sierra Leone and the United Kingdom regarding the implementation of activities broadly defined as security sector reform (SSR) in the period towards the end of and following the Sierra Leone war.

Following a core narrative constructed around four key events in the history of post-war Sierra Leone, starting in the mid-1990s and finishing with the successful General Elections of 2007, the work draws on a range of experiences from the process that may be used to inform future SSR policy and implementation. The final output of this research is a book documenting the security system transformation activities in Sierra Leone, 1997-2007.

This series is both an intermediate stage and an important output in itself. All papers were written by Sierra Leonean and British participants in security system transformation activities. The philosophy of the series is to edit as little as possible so that the views and opinions of the individuals are expressed, as much as possible, in their own words. As such, while the papers vary considerably in style and length, they provide a unique, collective insight into the Sierra Leone security system transformation process.

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Introduction and Background

Sierra Leoneans are anxious to make their individual and collective efforts to improve their country and its institutions, as we try to put behind us the most recent, ugly episode of conflict which ended in 2002. To that end, we want to learn lessons from our recent history of war and subsequent reform and share those lessons with the rest of the world.

There are, to my understanding, three significant reasons why Sierra Leone is an important case study in war and reform and how the international community can draw lessons from our experience. Firstly, the keen interest of the international community in developments in Sierra Leone underscores the phenomenon of globalization and global interest in conflict. Secondly, the international community may learn some positive lessons from the experiences in Sierra Leone that can be shared with other troubled areas in the global village. Thirdly, it is time to take stock and examine our 'report card', so that we may improve the way we have been doing business.

In this paper I will address the following issues:

- The significance of security sector reform (SSR) in Sierra Leone.
- The importance of the 2005 security sector review, including its production, key findings and recommendations.
- The 2002 National Security and Central Intelligence Act, which established the Office of National Security (ONS). Emphasis here is on the Act's provisions for coordination and oversight mechanisms within the security sector that have facilitated transparent decision-making at the highest levels.
- The coordination of security provision during the 2007 General Elections.

The Significance of Sierra Leone SSR

At war's end, Sierra Leoneans concluded that there must be a better way to define and provide security for themselves and for their country. They were no longer satisfied with the restrictive, conventional definition of security as military security; they had been exposed to this restrictive definition of security since colonial days. They realised that they deserve to live their lives with some degree of security from physical harm.

The experiences of the people of Sierra Leone during the war did not leave them with a good opinion about the delivery of personal security services by the existing security infrastructure. They had experienced the haphazard and uncoordinated way the war was conducted, resting on the pedestal of grotesque and uncorroborated intelligence support, which occasioned some of the greatest sufferings ever committed by man to fellow man.

For better or for worse, the war acted as a catalyst to move the focus of security away from exclusive emphasis on uniformed security forces (military and police) towards personal security for individuals.

Therefore, it was no surprise when the democratically-elected Government, after returning from exile in 1998,² decided that a functioning security sector is a critical precondition for development. The Government of Sierra Leone (GoSL) embarked on a programme to establish a coordinated security and intelligence architecture with oversight mechanisms. The focus and key principle was: without security, there could be no sustainable development.

To carry out the required restructuring of the sector, a Security Sector Review was conducted, led by the Office of National Security (ONS). The Sierra Leone Police (SLP) and the Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces (RSLAF) embarked on role-specific restructuring, which continues to this date. The ONS continues to grow and become more efficient in coordinating security sector activities. Since 2003, the sector has undertaken joint training activities embodied in study days and annual National Security Exercises.

During these exercises, we Sierra Leoneans have practiced our individual and collective responsibility to respond to issues dealing with national security emergencies. These exercises have helped build much needed trust and mutual respect among the various security sector institutions and actors. Perhaps more importantly, they have helped to build an understanding of our individual strengths and weaknesses and how we might all work together to achieve national security goals. This process gives the ONS the motivation and inspiration to lead in the formation of a national security policy, fine-tune procedures and establish mechanisms that foster cooperation and collaboration and strengthen oversight.

These initiatives have led to the development of policies covering a wide range of issues, which had not been addressed before. These policy developments include:

- Provision for military support to the civil authority, as detailed in the Sierra Leone Military Aid to the Civil Power (MACP) policy.
- A Protective Security Manual for Government Ministries and Departments, which provides guidelines on how we can protect our key national assets. These guidelines range from public utilities to sensitive information relating to the country's defence and economy.
- The Sierra Leone Disaster Management Policy.
- A Standard Operating Manual for private security companies to help regulate the mushrooming private security industry.
- Standard Response Guidelines to serve as a 'Bible' for all security sector institutions on the *modus operandi* for dealing with national emergencies and the national security decision-making process.

Apart from these key policy-making innovations, there have been several periodic security assessments to address emerging problems in need of GoSL attention. These assessments have greatly enhanced the decision-making process on post-war matters of national security.

The UK Department for International Development (DfID), supported by a Defence Advisory Team (DAT), which is well versed in multi-sector development, provided initial in-country advice to help give strategic direction to SSR. Subsequently, they have continued to provide remote advice to ONS. Equally, IMATT input proved critical, as one of the serving UK officers at the time had the skill sets necessary to plan and carry out a security sector review. While it was a considerable setback to the process when he left, new Sierra Leonean staff were able to fill the gap.

To assist the National Security Coordinator, a Secretariat was formed using ONS staff to provide both organizational and administrative support for the production of the security sector review.

The 2005 Security Sector Review

The security sector review process, begun in 2003, was vital in assessing the security requirements for a safe and enabling environment within a 5-10 year period. The objective of the review was to evaluate the main threats to the political, social and economic development of Sierra Leone, to identify relevant institutions to counter these perceived threats and to develop appropriate and affordable strategies to address them.

Good practice dictated that to take SSR forward, a broad range of security sector stakeholders must be engaged. In Sierra Leone, this range of stakeholders came to be known as the Working Group (WG). The WG was comprised of representatives from the military and police, prisons, fire service, civil society, (including local and international NGOs and the media), members of Parliament, traditional rulers (Paramount Chiefs), youth and women's leaders, civil servants, the judiciary and the private sector. Difficulties arose when some institutions sent junior representatives to WG meetings, an indication that some decision makers still saw security as an exclusively military issue. Later in the process, the ONS took on the role of ensuring that all parties understood why their input was of critical importance.

To initiate the work of the WG and to give its members a focus for the security sector review, a Framework Document was prepared by the ONS. This assessment identified the following threat areas: corruption, revenue loss, organized crime, subversion, cross-border issues, retardation, human rights violations by state actors and the confidence gap between the people and government.

The Framework was endorsed by the National Security Council and work began in August 2003. Whilst the list was (intentionally) not exhaustive, it helped shape subsequent discussions in WG committees. The WG also used the Framework in a series of workshops held in all regions of the country to ensure critical buy-in outside Freetown.

The first step was to conduct a diagnostic assessment of the strategic vision for Sierra Leone. Participants were divided into syndicate groups to determine the kind of Sierra Leone they envisage for the future, taking into account Vision 2025.³ They were then tasked to identify threats that would jeopardize the attainment of Vision

2025. Wider public consultations were also held, for example, through radio programmes.

The WG then conducted a series of workshops to produce a comprehensive Security Sector Review that would include:

- A review of the existing Security Policy Framework and an examination of existing institutions responsible for countering specific threats.
- A review of the security architecture required to curb threats and identify where effective coordination was required between institutions and how such coordination could be delivered most effectively.
- Establishment of an Individual Institutions/Agencies Policy Framework to identify the role that security institutions must play to effectively counter threats that occur within their jurisdiction.
- A Gap Analysis of the current role and capabilities of institutions and agencies against institutional requirements. On the basis of the Gap Analysis, a Transformation Strategy was developed.

Implementation of the Transformation Strategy is an on-going process; it continues to require the highest level of political commitment and support from all relevant stakeholders. In order to be successful, this strategy will also require the coordinated support, resources and expertise of donors.

Key Findings and Recommendations of the Security Sector Review

The security sector review was finalized and published in 2005. It identified external security threats to Sierra Leone as limited. Most of the identified threats come from within, including from the many ex-combatants across West Africa that are unemployed and impatient with the slow pace of development. Similarly, there are still thousands of small arms and light weapons in circulation in the sub-region, which continue to be a threat to individual security.

The review identified the need for a smaller, more flexible RSLAF, but a larger SLP to deal with critical law enforcement problems. The principal work of these forces will need to be both intelligence-led and supported by a well-developed and better-equipped intelligence

apparatus that ensures the appropriate focus of scarce resources and critical forewarning on threats to the stability of the state.

At the same time, relevant ministries and departments require considerable capacity-building programmes to minimize risks and vulnerabilities. These institutions should also complement the efforts of security services to ensure that instruments of other ministries, departments and agencies are deployed, including those in the diplomatic and economic spheres and civil society.

The following are key recommendations of the Security Sector Review:

- Foster capacity-building of security sector institutions to ensure better alignment and performance and provide an enabling environment for development.
- Institutionalise effective security partnerships, including the integration of efficient intelligence management mechanisms and non-state security actors.
- Enhance security sector coordination and oversight mechanisms, redefine the composition of oversight structures and strengthen security sector parliamentary committees.
- Increase the security architecture on the local level to help sustain the local governance decentralization process.

The 2002 National Security and Central Intelligence Act

Throughout the conflict, the country did not have a structured forum for intelligence coordination outside and independent of military structures. In other words, soldiers had no organised political direction. The public's experience of what this lack of coordination meant, coupled with an urgent desire to establish oversight mechanisms with civilian control of the security apparatus, led to the birth of the National Security and Central Intelligence Act in 2002.

The Act established the National Security Council, which is now the highest national security forum. It is chaired by His Excellency, the President; the Vice President is deputy Chairman. The Council's membership includes the Ministers of Finance, Foreign Affairs, Defence, Internal Affairs, Information & Broadcasting, and Justice and the heads of the primary security institutions, including:

- ONS, represented by the National Security Coordinator;
- SLP, represented by the Inspector-General of Police; and
- RSLAF, represented by the Chief of Defence Staff.

These officials, who represent key security architecture institutions, provide technical support during deliberations. The NSC meets monthly.

A critical component of the Act was the establishment of the ONS itself, which serves as the secretariat for the NSC and coordinates security sector activities. In that position, the ONS translates policy direction from the NSC to doable missions and tasks for the security institutions to implement. It feeds assessments and recommendations from intelligence and security committees up to the highest political level and chairs the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC) and the NSC Coordinating Group (NSCCG).

The JIC is a forum for the intelligence community to consider and endorse intelligence assessments provided by the ONS Joint Assessment Team (JAT). The NSCCG includes the heads of security sector institutions and senior civil servants of relevant line ministries. It provides specific guidance in the implementation of NSC directives. The collaborative work of these bodies fosters cooperation and keeps individual security institutions fully aware of the overall direction of activities. Keeping in mind that none of these coordination mechanisms existed 10 years ago, the fact that they were established is a major achievement. The Act also legalized the continued existence of the Central Intelligence and Security Unit (CISU), established by the Government in the late 1990s. The CISU collects and assesses intelligence on activities that may constitute internal or external threats to the security of Sierra Leone.

The Act also introduced for the first time an external dimension to Sierra Leone's intelligence efforts. At the same time, while the legislation gave the ONS a welcome confidence boost, it did not resolve the critical issue of recruiting and retaining appropriate personnel. While it is much to the credit of the post-conflict Government that functioning coordination of security was put in place, achieving political buy-in for the newly established ONS has proved to be a considerable challenge.

Periodic Security Assessments

Previously, intelligence and security services had simply written intelligence reports based on rumors and other unchecked sources. This ultimately led to not only an unreliable, but also a deeply politicized, intelligence service, whose reports targeted actual or perceived political opponents.

One of the significant results of the emerging structured approach to gathering and collation of legitimate and vetted intelligence are periodic security assessments produced by the ONS. Intelligence reports and other forms of covert and overt reports are forwarded to the Joint Assessment Team (JAT) in the ONS. These reports, based on National Intelligence Requirements (NIRs), are collected by the intelligence agencies, recommended by the NSCCG and approved by the NSC as constituting the greatest threat areas for the state. Each intelligence agency works towards specific collection targets assigned and prioritized against given deadlines.

Upon receipt of the reports, JAT assesses the issues as they impact the well-being of the state. These assessments are circulated to JIC members, who meet weekly to consider and may endorse, among other things, JAT assessments. Above all, these JIC deliberations are a built-in oversight mechanism that ensures that agencies limit their activities to national security issue. They also help avoid politically motivated intelligence analysis by 'situating the estimation' rather than 'estimating the situation' and vet assessments for veracity before they are forwarded to higher agencies and officials.

The critical process of identifying actions to be taken on the basis of intelligence reports is conducted within a forum that has wide ministerial and departmental participation, which ensures that a wide range of instruments at the disposal of the state are deployed. The ONS-led Strategic Situation Group is comprised of representatives from, *inter alia*, the Ministries of Defence, Foreign Affairs, Finance, Information and Internal Affairs. It is responsible for examining JIC-endorsed assessments in order to develop proposals for NSCCG action. In line with Standard Response Guidelines, these proposals include recommendations on the most appropriate instruments of power to be deployed.

Coordinating Security for the 2007 General Elections

The August 2007 Parliamentary and Presidential Elections were a major validation of the effectiveness of Sierra Leone's reformed security architecture and the coordinating role of the ONS. Under its leadership, security sector institutions stayed out of the election campaign process. Thus, politicians could not exploit divisions among these institutions; the security sector, coordinated by the ONS, spoke with one voice to the public and showed common resolve. This was done in a number of ways, in particular, through statements from the sector broadcast on the radio.

The elections were a critical test for the security architecture of Sierra Leone, indeed for the country as a whole. There were two reasons for this:

- They were the first post-conflict elections to be conducted using Sierra Leone's own resources and under the reformed post-war security architecture. Previous elections had been conducted under the umbrella of the UN Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL).
- They were the first elections marking a transition from one democratic government to another; their success would significantly enhance the country's image and potential for internal and external growth.

By mid-2006, the ONS Joint Assessment Team (JAT) began to discuss the security needed to enable the conduct of free, fair and violence-free general and presidential elections. The assessment was a priority topic in the National Intelligence Requirements (NIRs) endorsed by the NSC.

These assessments identified potential areas of security concern in order to assist both the National Election Commission and security sector institutions involved in election monitoring. Both Commissions and targeted institutions then planned appropriate responses to threats to the election process.

These potential threats included:

- Disruption and politicisation of party registration, constituency delimitation, voter registration, polling and campaigning, vote counting and the post-counting phase.

- Specific problem areas identified were the youth issue; arguments over party nominations, party court cases, ethnic, party and geographical affiliation, Freetown's cosmopolitan nature, the south-east issue and chiefdom boundary disputes.

The NSCCG considered these assessments, identified specific actions to be taken and made recommendations for consideration by the NSC. It came to a point where the NSCCG often met several times weekly in the period preceding the elections. Immediately before the elections, the National Security Coordinator met with the National Election Commissioner, Chief of Defence Staff and Inspector-General of Police every 48 hours or more, when necessary.

The following actions and recommendations were identified:

- Through a series of briefings, assure the diplomatic community of the Government's determination to conduct a free and secure democratic process.
- Explore possibilities for more financial and logistical assistance from the international community to ensure comprehensive support to areas which could affect the peaceful conduct of the elections.
- Develop a GoSL information line to sensitise the public on the merits of citizens using non-violent means in seeking redress and expressing their political persuasions.
- Encourage all, including civil society groups, community elders, traditional rulers and youth groups, to understand the need for security institutions to participate peacefully in the elections.
- Encourage the National Election Commission (NEC) to work with the security sector and civil society to inform the public about election requirements and procedures.
- Amend the Military Assistance to Civil Power (MACP) policy to empower the RSLAF to conduct border patrols without the SLP, who would need to muster all its manpower for internal policing during the elections.
- Ensure that security sector activities are coordinated in collaboration with the NEC, so that scarce funds would be spent appropriately before, during and after the elections.

The key judgment of this assessment was that the peaceful basis on which the elections were to be held was shaky and prone to erupt into violence unless overall efforts were well-coordinated and focused. The methodology developed to address threat areas and help implement NSC-recommended actions was integrated into the NEC's concept of operation and collaboration with the security sector. As the elections approached, the threat assessment continued to be discussed and updated, in order to advise the Government of the security climate.

The coordination forum provided by the ONS for the NEC, SLP and other security sector institutions engendered a structured approach that covered all phases of the election and resulted in successful security outcomes.

When the 2007 elections concluded, they were seen as a success for both security institutions and the comprehensive SSR process in Sierra Leone. However, rather than viewing this success as a highlight, these security sector successes – and the exemplary leadership provided by the ONS – should be seen in the future as 'business as usual.'

Conclusion

The relatively violence-free 2007 elections were a genuine success for Sierra Leone – not only for the security sector, but for the country as a whole. A new government was democratically elected, and crucially, the police and armed forces stayed out of the political process. The SLP provided internal security; the RSLAF was only engaged through the Military Assistance to Civil Power policy. By any measure, it is impressive that only five years after the end of conflict in 2002, the country's security sector was in a position to provide effective election security.

Footnotes

- ¹ Brigadier General (Ret) Kellie Hassan Conteh is the National Security Coordinator of Sierra Leone.
- ² The democratically elected Sierra Leone Government, run by the Sierra Leone People's Party, was exiled to Conakry, Guinea, in 1997 when the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) staged a coup. The Government returned to power in 1998.
- ³ Vision 2025 provides Sierra Leone with a national vision for long-term development and projects future scenarios for political and economic progress. It gives a direction to the country's medium-long term strategies such as Sierra Leone's Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper.

This, of course, does not mean that challenges to the ONS and other actors in the security sector have disappeared. There continue to be several issues which could threaten the stability of the security sector, and with it, the stability of the country.

One of the key remaining concerns is the general financial weakness of Sierra Leone. Poor conditions of service in the civil service, for example, cause a high rotation of trained staff, which leads to spending a disproportionate amount of scarce public funding on recruitment, induction and training, ultimately reducing effective service delivery. Under current financial circumstances, recruiting qualified individuals from the Sierra Leonean Diaspora to strengthen civil service staff capability is impossible without significant subsidies from the donor community. Finally, it is worth remembering that conditions of service were one of the reasons why the armed forces revolted against the Government in the early 1990s. At a very basic level, it was financial scarcity that led to the inability of the Government to provide services to the population.

The quality of civil service staff is a challenge to the continued success and integrity of the ONS, as high-quality, professional civil service staff helps ensure that politics stays out of the ONS. As noted above, intelligence services in Sierra Leone during the 1980s and 1990s were used to subvert political opponents. The police and armed forces operated in silos; there was virtually no coordination of security activities. The fact that a rigorous process for intelligence gathering, collation and assessment is now in place and that Sierra Leone now has the ONS to coordinate security sector activities proves that a fundamental overhaul of the security sector has occurred. However, these developments have taken place within a short period of time. Consolidating institution-building successes is a long-term process; we have much more work to do.

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