

Sierra Leone became independent in 1961 and became a one-party state in 1978. Opposition grew and the civil war began in 1991, with the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) launching a rebellion. A coup in 1992 brought a military government which came under increasing domestic and international pressure and finally agreed to multi-party elections. Ahmed Tejan Kabbah was elected in 1996, but the civil war continued, with the RUF controlling much of the countryside. In May 1997 there was a second military coup; an Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) took power, and formed an alliance with the RUF. The Kabbah government fled to Conakry in neighbouring Guinea.

The military government was strongly opposed domestically. Strikes kept the banks closed. Internationally, other governments and international institutions continued to recognise the Kabbah government in exile. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and then the UN imposed sanctions on the junta, and the sanctions were widely supported.

Eventually, a West African military force – ECOMOG, which was sanctioned by ECOWAS and composed of Nigerian soldiers – expelled the AFRC and RUF from Freetown (the capital) in early 1998 and Kabbah returned in March after ten months outside the country. The war continued for another four years, seeing the United Nations and then the British intervene, with the war finally ending in 2002.

The sanctions that were imposed on Sierra Leone proved to be highly controversial. This is because the sanctions, unusually, included humanitarian assistance, namely the delivery of food (especially rice, which was the staple food of Sierra Leone) and medicine, unless specifically authorised by the special ECOWAS sanctions committee.

Britain, with the encouragement of its Department for International Development (DfID) and Foreign and Commonwealth Office, refused to fund humanitarian aid. By contrast, the United States and European Commission continued to fund humanitarian agencies. ECOWAS delayed organising an exemption mechanism for humanitarian goods, and the Guinea authorities disrupted goods crossing the border into Sierra Leone.

Why was rice – a food staple – included in the sanctions? The reason is because rice had become a *de facto* ‘currency’ in war-torn Sierra Leone, and was seen as a resource that could be fuelling the continuation of conflict. For many years, rice had been used for barter within the economy. In fact, the 1997 coup took place, in part, because Kabbah had reduced the rice allocation to soldiers and junior officers, which meant they could no longer sell it to supplement their salaries. After the 1997 military coup, the widespread strikes and boycotts against the military government meant banks were closed and so rice became a *de facto* currency as well as a food.

The inclusion of rice in the sanctions was fiercely debated at the time, and continues to be a highly contested issue. Looking back, there is now general agreement that humanitarian aid was reduced as part of an attempt at what is now called ‘regime change’. Both sides on this sanctions debate claim to be defending human rights. Opponents argue that any block on

humanitarian aid violates neutrality and the Geneva Conventions. Proponents argue that it was a necessary action to defend an elected government against a sadistic and brutal military junta which was responsible for egregious human rights violations.

Let us now take a look at the range of issues and opinions that are raised in this debate.

Alfred Carew, a civil society leader whom you'll meet in the first video, argues that 'aid could have continued, humanitarian assistance could have continued – that would have softened the blow on the people'. By contrast Abu Brima, also a civil society leader, argues that 'sanctions were responding to the demands of the people'. In fact, when making the audio-visual materials in Sierra Leone, we found that most civil society leaders we spoke with said they supported sanctions on rice, as you will see. Yet a major international humanitarian organisation in 2003 called the rice sanctions 'shameful' and 'distressing', and in 2000 the British House of Commons International Development Committee said the sanctions had 'catastrophic humanitarian consequences' and 'resulted in a high level of civilian death and destruction'.

Similarly, the Henry Dunant Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue called the Sierra Leone sanctions 'one of the most shameful episodes regarding international humanitarian action in modern times'. The Centre is a highly respected organisation 'dedicated to the promotion of humanitarian principles, the prevention of conflict and the alleviation of its effects through dialogue' (see Box 1.1). It seems, however, that many Sierra Leoneans had a different view. Box 1.2 gives quotes from three men who had been civil society leaders in 1997. In 2004 when they were interviewed for the course, two were still civil society activists and one was a government minister.

Box 1.1 'One of the most shameful episodes ... in modern times'

[In Sierra Leone, when] political and humanitarian objectives appeared to clash, humanitarian concerns unquestionably came second to political ones. The clearest example was when a junta took power in Sierra Leone in 1997, and the withholding of humanitarian assistance to the country was used as a tool to try and effect the political objective of regime change.

A distressing feature of this 'Conakry period' is that the withholding of humanitarian assistance was strongly supported by the UN political leadership, the UK government (including DfID) and the Humanitarian Coordinator. The policy of preventing humanitarian assistance from reaching Sierra Leone was implemented through a combination of cutting off funding and blocking aid supplies at the border with Guinea. The policy was 'coherent' with the political strategy of isolating the Armed Forces



Revolutionary Council (AFRC). However, the political strategy of regime change was not ultimately achieved by depriving civilian populations of food and medicines, but by the military intervention of ECOMOG, a regional force.

Based on the reasonable assumption that civilian lives that may otherwise have been saved were lost unnecessarily, this period stands as one of the most shameful episodes regarding international humanitarian action in modern times. Those encouraging the policy may well have been in breach of the Geneva Conventions through attempts to block humanitarian assistance from reaching a civilian population.

'Politics and Humanitarianism: Coherence in Crisis', February 2003, p. 10. Henry Dunant Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, Geneva.

Box 1.2

The civil society; the people, the general populace were ready for anything. They were prepared to do anything to make sure the junta was overthrown, or at least removed from power. So, in that particular context the sanctions were like responding to the demands of the people, so it was very useful. It helped because ... whatever humanitarian assistance would have been given, was going to be utilised by the junta.

Abu Brima, national coordinator of the Network Movement for Justice and Development

If humanitarian assistance was brought here, those that carried out the war are fed and have the energy to carry on. If the war was to be ended, humanitarian aid must be included [in sanctions. Initially High Commissioner Peter] Penfold did not support humanitarian sanctions, but we insisted. [The AFRC government needed food] so their first demand was food aid. ... Clearly, humanitarian sanctions helped bring the rebels to the table for dialogue.

Alfred Timbo, in 2004 Minister of Labour, but in 1997 a civil society leader.

We were prepared to sacrifice. We knew it was only a period of time, and we were right. It was through that [the sanctions] that we gained the present stability. ... We supported sanctions. They were critical to stifle their [the AFRC's] support on the ground. Without sanctions it would have been difficult for the [elected] government to come back.

Davidson Kuyateh, secretary general of the Sierra Leone Teachers Union and director general of the civil society movement.

[All three interviews carried out in Sierra Leone in 2004.]

In a moment, we will turn to video and audio material that further illuminates this debate. The video interviews civil society activists about the sanctions. By contrast, the audio captures a discussion between two people who took active parts in the sanctions debate in 1997, and seven years later, when this discussion was recorded, continued to hold strongly opposing views. They are:

- Peter Penfold, who as British High Commissioner in Sierra Leone took refuge in Conakry, Guinea, accompanying the elected government of Sierra Leone into exile. He was one of the most influential people in the decision to include rice in the sanctions.
- Margie Buchanan-Smith, who was both emergency and policy head of the British NGO Action Aid and was one of the most outspoken opponents. Action Aid was also one of the biggest critics of the sanctions in evidence to the International Development Committee.

We interviewed them both in 2003 and they made their positions clear. Peter Penfold said:

The most important thing was to remove the junta. Sending in rice allowed the AFRC junta to remain longer. Bags and cups of rice had become money, so sending rice meant sending in bagloads of money. People told us: 'Yes we are hungry, but don't send food because the soldiers will take it.' People telephoned friends and family in Conakry and I talked on the telephone to church people, media, sports groups, NGOs and so on. I talked with DfID and we agreed we were opposed to humanitarian aid.

He stressed the need 'to demonstrate that the junta could not run the country. If it could have gotten hospitals, schools and businesses running, it might have led to some international acceptance, especially from some West African governments.' The political goal was to back the elected government and force the removal of the junta. Humanitarian assistance would have blocked that.

But Margie Buchanan-Smith argued that

while I agree that it was important to get rid of the junta, my starting point is that you send in humanitarian assistance impartially, according to need. Forget about the long-term impact. It is purely about saving lives – reducing mortality and morbidity.

We brought the two of them together in a radio studio with Robin White, who for many years edited the BBC's *Focus on Africa* programme. This debate is complex because the proponents are well informed, experienced, and believe they acted in the best interests of Sierra Leone, yet they came to totally opposite conclusions. Perceptions of apparently well-informed people were sharply different. Starting points, principles and assumptions were also different.

There seems to be an unbridgeable gap between the two sides, but in the discussion that follows, you may also find some surprising areas of agreement.

We take up this debate in detail here, for two reasons:

- First, because interveners in civil wars and in postwar peace support operations are often faced with such stark and complex choices. We cannot provide you with a ‘right answer’, because there are no ‘right answers’ or ‘magic formulas’ for effective peacebuilding. Interveners have to make the best decisions they can in the face of complex and contradictory pressures. However, our primary aim is to provide you with perspectives, tools and skills to help you better understand civil wars and their roots, recognise and understand the different assumptions that underlie intervention choices, and thereby make better, more reflective choices in a context of peacebuilding.
- Second, we have chosen this particular debate because it is typical of the real, hard choices we expect you to have to face. You could easily find yourself in the position of Margie Buchanan-Smith or Peter Penfold, or of their advisers or of people in the military or aid agencies debating with them over this issue.