

Security System Transformation in Sierra Leone, 1997-2007

Operation Pebu

Aldo Gaeta¹

Edited by

Dr Paul Jackson, University of Birmingham

Mr Peter Albrecht, International Alert

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.

Paul Jackson and Peter Albrecht

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Introduction

This paper documents the history of Operation Pebu (Op PEBU) between April 2003 and March 2006. It is an overview of the progress and development of the project and does not attempt to document every change in contract between the Government of Sierra Leone (GoSL) and its contractors, nor those relating to contracts let by the United Kingdom (UK) Department for International Development (DfID). The focus of the narrative below is the construction of accommodation for soldiers of the Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces (RSLAF) and their families with which Op PEBU has become synonymous.

Background

Following the end of the civil war, there was a need to restructure the RSLAF in preparation for its assumption of national security responsibilities once the UN Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) terminated. This restructuring included the need to consolidate and reduce RSLAF locations outside Freetown from over 50 Headquarters (HQs)/company/platoon sites to nine battalion barracks and three brigade HQs. Restructuring and development plans recognised the need to construct new accommodation for the RSLAF, or, where possible, to refurbish existing accommodation.

Initial cost estimates for the development of suitable infrastructure was in excess of \$200 million dollars. Since it was expected that most of the required funding would be forthcoming from the international community (given the magnitude of the amount required), there was no attempt by the GoSL to build this project into its own expenditure plans. However, after being tabled at the 2002 Donors' Conference in Paris, the project's bid for international assistance was rejected. Given the importance of infrastructure redevelopment, meetings were held involving the RSLAF, the Ministry of Defence and the International Military Advisory and Training Team (IMATT) to consider how to proceed. Op PEBU (pebu means "shelter" in the Mende language) was conceived at these meetings.

The intent of Op PEBU was to facilitate better control, direction and maintenance of RSLAF units and improve the morale and welfare of soldiers and their dependants

by providing a better standard of living accommodation. Its concept was:

"To establish and implement a development plan that will deliver new or refurbished barracks, built to an interim standard, in order to put in place the infrastructure necessary to allow the development and implementation of a Formation Training Cycle by May 2004".

Aim

The project foresaw the refurbishment of an existing Brigade HQ and barracks (in Teko) and the building of seven battalion barracks for soldiers and their families and two brigade HQs on greenfield sites (GFS). Battalion barracks were to be built (after some debate and negotiation with Paramount Chiefs) at Simbakoro, Moyamba, Yele, Kambia, Kabala, Pujehun and Kailahun. Brigade HQs would be located at Kenema and Bo. (Note, the Brigade HQ at Kenema was not part of the original plan, but was added in June 2003, when a request for additional support was submitted.)

Each battalion site would have technical infrastructure (offices and stores) and family quarters. The brigade HQs would have similar technical infrastructure. All sites would have wells and deep trench latrines.

The battalion sites were to be self-build projects, using soldiers as construction workers, while the brigade HQs were to be built by contractors. Work began in February/March 2003 and was (ambitiously) scheduled to be completed by May/June 2004.

Funding

Because the GoSL could not finance the entire cost of Op PEBU, DfID were approached through IMATT for assistance. Initial funding was set at £3m in January/February 2003, with DfID contributing £1.9m and GoSL £1.1m. A formal Exchange of Letters was signed by the British High Commission and GoSL in May 2003. Although some of the funding was used to pay the contractors building the Brigade HQs, most of it was scheduled to be spent on materials and rudimentary tools, since construction on greenfield sites was to be carried

out by RSLAF personnel. Supervision of the project was the responsibility of IMATT personnel.

By June 2003, changes in the initial design of the family accommodation (discussed below) required additional funding. The GoSL (through the Deputy Defence Minister and His Excellency President Kabbah) approached DfID for additional support. Additional funding was forthcoming; DfID would supply another £1.7m and GoSL, another £0.9m. This additional money was pledged without a formal investment appraisal.

DfID funds were expended both locally and through an international procurement contract. Funding provided by the GoSL was spent locally on materials procurement. Between 2003 and 2004, rapid inflation in Sierra Leone had a major impact on available funding.

Because there were several elements to the project, it was a relatively straightforward process, at least in the early stages, to allocate financial responsibility for discrete elements to either GoSL or DfID. However, with the upgraded barrack design, this became more difficult because GoSL could not afford the changes on all three sites initially allocated to them. By June 2003, responsibility for development of the Simbakoro greenfield site was split between GoSL and DfID, causing management difficulties, particularly in relation to materials procurement.

Design

The original design for barracks accommodation was a one-room mud brick construction, a decision made on the assumption that this housing was a 3-5 year temporary measure. However, within a few months of initial funding, concerns were raised within GoSL and RSLAF about accommodation standards (for example, rudimentary sanitation facilities, lack of a ‘chop house’ and overall lack of space). (It is likely that there was some political pressure applied at this juncture, since opponents of Kabbah’s government were voicing concerns over the accommodation standards.)

There is little existing documentary evidence to support decisions made at that time or what the catalyst was, but by June 2003, the initial design for a family quarter evolved into a 3-room structure with veranda, using

Hydraform block technology (the Hydraform process is discussed below). No written evidence exists to indicate that any re-evaluation of the timeframe for completion of the project occurred. It is also clear that these changes were not factored into any work schedule; project timelines were not extended.

Project Management

Project management of Op PEBU was, with the benefit of hindsight, not well planned.

Although it was jointly funded, Op PEBU was a GoSL-owned project. The Project Director was the RSLAF Joint Support Commander² (JSC); the Project Manager was a RSLAF Lieutenant Colonel. It should be noted that, at the start of the project, the post of JSC was being filled by an IMATT officer, pending the appointment of a suitable RSLAF officer. This, however, did not make Op PEBU an IMATT project, since all IMATT officers were on loan service to RSLAF. The regular rotation of IMATT personnel (generally yearly, or on a 6-month basis) caused significant problems for the management and development of Op PEBU, which, by any standards, was a complex project.

IMATT engineers, embedded within the RSLAF Engineer Regiment (the CO Engineer Regiment post was filled by an IMATT officer), both supervised and advised the construction process. DfID had a very limited technical presence in Freetown and, thus, did not provide dedicated engineering support to Op PEBU. (DfID did not have a country office in Sierra Leone at the time, but a small administrative set-up with authority for policy and funding vested in DfID’s West Africa Department in London.) DfID’s main link to Op PEBU was through the DfID-funded Civil and Financial Advisers in the Ministry of Defence (MoD), who tried to keep a handle on the complex financial arrangements. By default, these posts came to represent the DfID presence on the ground, although it could be argued that because of their primary duties, neither could devote the necessary time to Op PEBU.

An Op PEBU Steering Committee was formed under the leadership of the JSC; it met for the first time in early May 2003. From this, an “integrated project team” emerged which would deal with the practical aspects of PEBU,

taking its direction from the Steering Committee, and an “Op PEBU Cell” created within the Joint Force HQ. It is worth noting here that – despite advice from UK advisers – there was no senior or significant involvement from the MoD in Op PEBU committees. This lack of senior management “buy-in” was responsible for the lack of commitment and control witnessed throughout the project, but notably in the early stages.

Construction

Whilst the refurbishment of Teko and the construction of the Brigade HQs were carried out by local construction companies, the bulk of the building work (i.e., the development of the greenfield sites) was to be performed by soldiers as labourers which, ideologically, appeared to have benefits.

The basic mud-block construction required no construction training, but some artisan skills were required for tasks such as carpentry. IMATT used their own development funds to train a number of artisans within the RSLAF infantry battalions.

There was, however, a flaw in this plan to self-build. Whilst the CO of the Engineer Regiment had a major responsibility for the development of the project, he did not have responsibility for the manpower – this remained with COs of the individual battalions. Thus, responsibility for productivity was vested in an individual who had no defined role in the project. Consequently, it was not possible to know in advance how many labourers would actually be available at any one time. This flaw was particularly significant when the production method changed to Hydraform blocks.

Other drawbacks of the self-build scheme emerged as the project progressed, including soldiers’ training and morale issues. The adverse effect on soldiers’ morale was further exacerbated when it became known that, through a DfID-funded programme, accommodation for the Sierra Leone Police (SLP) was being built commercially and to a much higher standard than that of Op PEBU.

Hydraform

With the proposal to change the design of the barrack accommodation in June 2003, a plan was put forward to change the construction method from mud blocks to Hydraform blocks. This change was included in the submission for additional funding at that time.

Although, on paper, changing to this technology appeared to offer some positive benefits that would aid the construction process, it is fair to say that it was one of the most disastrous decisions made during the lifetime of Op PEBU.

To the best of anyone’s knowledge, Hydraform blocks had *never* been used on a major construction project in Sierra Leone. The decision to purchase hydraform machines was based on an advertisement in the back of a local magazine. No trials of the machines ever took place, nor did anyone visit South Africa (where they are produced) to carry out a proper appraisal of Hydraform’s applicability to Op PEBU.

In brief, using soil and cement, this technology uses machines to produce construction blocks. In theory, the machines produce blocks more quickly and in a more consistent form than a manual process. This, however, is only one part of the process. The soil has to be the right type of soil, which is not generally found in West Africa (a fact that only came to light a year after the first machines were purchased for Op PEBU). Moreover, the blocks also had to undergo a strict curing process.

Although the mixing of soil and cement was a mechanical process, there was still a labour-intensive element to the work. The soil had to be dug out and transported manually, by wheelbarrows, headpans and jerrycans, to the production site. The construction team had no access to any form of mechanical transport, such as diggers, dumpers and lorries, to aid this process.

Hydraform machines are technically sophisticated; machine down time through breakdowns, some of which could be attributed to poor maintenance of the machines by RSLAF personnel on site, decreased the rate of block production. To deal with this problem, personnel from the Engineer Regiment were tasked with the maintenance of the machines, but were largely ineffective because of lack of fuel and transport to the sites where the machines were located.

Six Hydraform machines were purchased from additional funding approved in July 2003; another nine were purchased in February 2004 in an effort to speed up married quarters' construction. Despite the assurance in Hydraform's advertising that they were capable of producing 1500 hundred blocks per day 'under factory conditions', the machines used on Op PEBU never produced more than a maximum of around 800 per day. Even at that rate of production, many of the blocks were unusable because of problems with the soil and poor curing procedures. (The curing process required significant quantities of water, which was not always available at some sites with non-functioning wells.

Procurement

The procurement of materials caused further problems. DfID specified at the time of the agreement that all their funds had to be used in accordance with their procurement processes. In essence this meant using the International Procurement Agency (IPA) for purchasing of materials. This caused some resentment within the higher echelons of RSLAF and MoD. There was a widely held view that, given DfID's role in international development, GoSL should have been allowed to use its funds to support smaller local businesses

In order to control the materials once they arrived in country, DfID engaged the services of a local civil engineering company, which allocated personnel to each 'DfID' site. The civil engineers' role was to receive and issue the material required for construction. However, it became clear later that some personnel did not perform effectively, often allowing themselves to be pressurised by military personnel on site, who acquired material for personal purposes. Since there were no established audit requirements, there was very little control over materials once they arrived in country.

GoSL procurement of materials was effected through a limited tender exercise carried out by the Central Tender Board (CTB)³. This brought with it other problems, including severe delays in issuing tender documents and awarding contracts. Some contracts were being paid 100% up-front; in some cases, material turned up on site significantly in advance of need. In the case of cement, this lack of project organisation was particularly wasteful, with hundreds of bags deteriorating because they could not be stored under proper conditions.

The GoSL procurement process for Op PEBU materials received significant attention from the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) because of allegations of corrupt practices in awarding contracts. Although nothing was ever proven, the Op PEBU tendering process appeared to be restricted to a limited number of contractors, all of whom quoted much higher prices than those being paid for similar goods by DfID for other projects. Rapid in-country inflation during 2003/2004 also had a major impact on procurement, with commodities such as cement costing significantly more in 2004 than in 2003.

Progress

In all probability, the initial planning timeframe was entirely unrealistic. For example, before construction of family and technical accommodation could begin, the seven greenfield sites had to be completely cleared and prepared. The initial planning did not take into account the difficulties and delays in procuring construction material on this scale in a country with very poor road infrastructure; nor did it take into account the lack of mechanical transport available to the project. There was also a naïve view that RSLAF soldiers would be enthusiastic about spending their time as soldiers, performing manual labour.

In early 2003, initial funding was based on a simple mud-block design. By the time the request for additional funding for the upgraded married quarters design was submitted in June 2003, little construction had occurred. Further delays occurred during the introduction of the Hydraform machines and their initial use. Lack of engagement by senior MoD personnel adversely impacted progress.

Early in 2004, following a change of IMATT personnel, engineers visited the Op PEBU greenfield sites and conducted an in-depth progress analysis. The stark conclusion of this analysis was that it was unrealistic to expect more than 12% of soldiers' married quarters to be completed on the greenfield sites by the onset of the 2004 rainy season. (The original plan for Op PEBU had envisaged 100% completion by this time⁴.) Based on a mathematical calculation of the number of blocks required per site in relation to production actually achieved, it would take at least another six years to complete the project.

This assessment led to the procurement of the additional nine Hydraform block-making machines in February 2004 in an effort to increase block production. Although the extra machines increased the number of blocks produced, they did not have the expected impact for a number of reasons, including the intensely manual nature of the process outlined above and ineffective equipment care procedures. In addition, the realisation that the building project would not deliver houses for the soldiers and their families within the planned timeframe was also a source of motivational problems. Although the original concept of the Op PEBU project was put forward as a morale booster for the army, the reality of the tedious and arduous block-making process did little to encourage enthusiasm.

In keeping with the RSLAF ownership concept of Op PEBU, both the Project Director and Project Manager were RSLAF officers. Block-making, as with construction of the dwellings, was the responsibility of individual infantry battalion COs on each of the sites. The differing rates of progress on each site, caused in some instances by inefficient use of resources or insufficient deployment of personnel, could be attributed to some extent to the management and supervision skills of the individual COs.

In May 2004, following much discussion with various parties in Freetown, Commander IMATT and the senior UK Civil Adviser to the MoD approached DfID for additional funding. This time, however, the request was put forward with several well-considered options to accelerate project progress, the favoured one being the removal of the block-making task from RSLAF and transferring it to IMATT (using local labour), with an estimated cost of some £3.8m. This request was rejected by DfID, which was now concerned at the spectacular lack of achievement to date. Instead, DfID instructed an independent review of Op PEBU by a team from Levitt Bernstein, an international housing consulting firm.

It should be noted that all contractor-built elements of the project were either completed or near to completion by this point.

What Happened Next?

The Levitt Bernstein visit to Sierra Leone took place in August 2004, but prior to this, having accepted that there would be no additional funding for Op PEBU, IMATT, RSLAF and local DfID personnel began to consider more radical options to achieve project progress, given that no single battalion site had more than 10-12% of quarters constructed. The option proposed at a meeting chaired by the Deputy Defence Minister was to concentrate efforts and material on the two sites deemed to be of most strategic importance because of their proximity to the border areas – Kailahun and Pujehun. There was no proposal that considered what would happen after completion of these sites, because nobody could predict what materials would still be available or what the chances of additional funding would be. At this time, it was evident that, because of waste, loss of materials and the effects of inflation, original funding would not be enough to complete the entire project. The proposal to concentrate on the two border sites was accepted and all efforts of the Op PEBU project team were focussed on completing them by the end of 2005. This involved not only the logistical challenge of moving material to the two sites, but also structural changes in project management affecting both IMATT and the Engineer Regiment, which would have control of the labour force.

The Levitt Bernstein report, produced in late August/early September, was, not surprisingly, highly critical of the project, stating that essentially the project was ill-defined, poorly managed and that there was a danger that “it could result in the creation of new slums”. Although it was a damning assessment of what had happened, the report made little attempt to suggest any sensible way forward, except to recommend that construction should be procured commercially. (Subsequent costing suggested that this could amount to £10.5m per site.)

From late 2004 to early 2006, work progressed on both sites, but again the planned timescale for completion was not achieved. During 2005, two significant events happened. First, the demarcation that had existed between GoSL and DfID funding was removed, allowing all funds to be pooled for the benefit of the project;

second, the Head of DfID (a Country Office was established in early 2005) wrote to the Deputy Defence Minister releasing the remainder of DfID funds to the project. At this stage, all parties were advised that no further funding would become available for Op PEBU.

By the end of 2005, the sites at Kailahun and Pujehun were not completed.⁵

Looking Back

Where did Op PEBU go wrong? There is no easy answer to this question. The project failed on so many counts that it is best described as conceptually flawed.

Although there were some successes, notably in the contractor-built elements of the project (i.e., Brigade Headquarters, wells and latrines), Op PEBU is synonymous with the construction of family accommodation on seven greenfield sites to house the restructured RSLAF outside of Freetown. The sheer scale of the project was never really considered. Taking into account soldiers and their family members, the estimated population to be housed would be in excess of 2500 per site. In addition, it was perhaps over-ambitious to plan to carry out simultaneous construction on seven remote greenfield sites in a country where roads and communications infrastructure are very basic and, in some cases, non-existent. To think it possible to achieve 100% completion within one year (bearing in mind that Sierra Leone has a 5-month rainy season) using soldiers to carry out the bulk of construction defies explanation.

No single organisation is completely to blame. Op PEBU was jointly funded by DfID and GoSL, with DfID providing the greater part of the funds and GoSL “owning” the project. In addition, IMATT played a significant part in the management and supervision of the project. There was no Project Manager, which would be unthinkable in a project of this magnitude in the developed world. DfID funding was decided in a random fashion; there was no attempt to construct a project strategy. IMATT personnel rotated frequently and its internal structure changed during the life of Op PEBU based on issues unrelated to the project. Finally, whilst the project was owned by GoSL, there was no technical expertise within the RSLAF to lead such an undertaking.

The procurement of materials was badly handled by both sides. Although DfID procedures were largely effective in getting the materials into the country and on site, local arrangements for receipt and issue were less than satisfactory.

The decision to switch to Hydraform block-making was based on nothing more than an advert. It is difficult to believe that any major project in the developed world would incorporate new and untested technology across a major project when that project was already showing signs of delay.

Although the original house design changed, no attempt was made to re-assess project timelines in light of those changes.

No senior personnel in the MoD ever actively engaged with Op PEBU. Given the problems encountered with obtaining local resources (for example, transport, fuel, and rice) and the lack of motivation within all ranks of the RSLAF, involvement by personnel who could influence these areas would likely have been beneficial.

There were motivational and morale issues affecting the soldiers. Op PEBU was sold as a project that would be completed within one year. Even though it was obvious that the project was drifting, the expectations of soldiers and their families were not well-managed. From a military training perspective, it appears to be unwise to take soldiers away from their work as soldiers and assign them to manual labour.

The realisation that the SLP were provided with contractor-built accommodation (paid for by DfID) constructed to a higher standard than Op PEBU had a significant effect on RSLAF motivation and morale.

Finally, each battalion site was envisaged as a small town; however, there were no family/quality of life enhancements (e.g., proper sanitation, schools, churches, mosques or markets) incorporated into the design.

Footnotes

- ¹ Aldo S Gaeta was Civil Adviser to the Sierra Leone Ministry of Defence from 2003-2006.
- ² Following a restructuring of RSLAF in 2004, the role of JSC was subsumed by the Joint Force Commander and, accordingly, JFC became the Project Director.
- ³ The CTB was the main body responsible for letting contracts that were in excess of a certain value. This organisation was effectively disbanded in 2005 when the new Procurement legislation came into being.
- ⁴ Accordingly, the start date of the new Joint Force Cycle was set as June 2004. This cycle, designed to give structure and focus to infantry battalion life and to provide opportunities for real capacity-building, foresaw rifle companies rotating between training (where targets would have to be achieved), operations (support to police land border patrols) and regimental life. Each would be for 4 to 5 months.
- ⁵ They were completed in early 2008.

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