

Security System Transformation in Sierra Leone, 1997-2007

Formulating Sierra Leone's Defence White Paper

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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

This paper outlines the process of producing Sierra Leone's 2002 Defence White Paper. Unique to this process was the document's explicit aim of explaining *to the general public* both the progress and shortcomings of security sector reform (SSR) in Sierra Leone's defence system. The White Paper was produced on the assumption that without making this information publicly available, opportunities to engage ordinary people in future reform initiatives would be limited.

In addition to outlining the process of producing the White Paper, this paper also describes some of the challenges faced in its production, including challenges from military counterparts in the Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces (RSLAF) and from international military and civilian advisers.

After a complex process of consultation and debate, the Defence White Paper is a strong statement of where Sierra Leone's defence sector stands today and the direction it should take in the future. It is obvious that all of this paper's recommendations will not necessarily be implemented in practice. It is also clear that while Sierra Leone has come a long way in building up a strong and democratically accountable defence system, there are still many challenges ahead.

Background

For several decades, the military in Sierra Leone was run on an ad hoc basis. Its purpose was regime preservation and personal security of politicians. The military was run as a more or less secret cult with little or no accountability to the public or any form of oversight mechanisms in place. In particular, senior officers displayed little concern for the people whom they were supposed to serve. Indeed, the people, as well as state institutions, were not taken into consideration at all by the military/political regime. Loyalty of the military rested upon the political class that guaranteed them promotion and job security. This situation, prolonged over a period of years, contributed to the total collapse of security throughout the country. By 1991, when the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) unleashed its terror on Sierra Leone, the military was in no position to defend the territorial integrity of the state or the lives and property of the people. Its 3,500-

4,000 personnel were ill-prepared; its logistical support and levels of arms and ammunition totally inadequate.

By 1996, when a democratically-elected civilian government was installed, it was apparent that there was an urgent need to reform the Ministry of Defence (MoD) and the military in general. Sierra Leone needed well-trained, effective and disciplined armed forces and a transparent, accountable military structure subject to democratic civil control. In essence, this was why the Sierra Leone Security Sector Programme (SILSEP) began implementation to restructure the MoD and restructure and retrain the RSLAF.

MoD restructuring saw the transformation of a state department that had hitherto been a 'clearinghouse' for all military financial matters to that of an institution which ensured democratic oversight and accountability of the armed forces. This restructuring process involved a wide range of issues, from the formulation and implementation of a strategic defence policy to that of making the RSLAF broadly representative, non-partisan, professional and democratically accountable.

The success of all the reforms both in the MoD and RSLAF depended on:

- A clearly defined objective, particularly in an environment where the majority of the military personnel lack insight as to why they and their institution need to be transformed.
- Allaying fears and apprehension of the people about how reforms would affect them, either directly or indirectly.
- Matching social realities of mass unemployment with political exigency.

Thus, there was a need to inform both RSLAF personnel and the people of Sierra Leone of all steps taken to restructure the MoD/RSLAF. This was tacitly explained by the President, when he stated in the Foreword of the White Paper that "with openness, responsiveness and accountability forming the cornerstone of Government policy this White Paper [...] explains how our thinking is being shaped and influenced by internal and external threats [...]. The key to this rests in having an effective and affordable defence policy that can sustain the long-term peace and security needed".

Purpose of the Defence White Paper

As reforms of Sierra Leone's defence system progressed, the MoD embarked on the writing of the Defence White Paper. Its aim was to explain to the people what steps had been taken thus far to restructure both MoD and RSLAF and to initiate a wider consultative process that could take their views into account when designing a strategic Defence Review of the armed forces. The overall objective of the Paper was to create an environment where the RSLAF would be able to operate under the guidance of a comprehensive and codified Defence Policy.

Unlike many defence white papers, the Sierra Leone Defence White Paper deliberately goes beyond the consultative process. It explains not only the substantial progress made, but also outlines past and present shortcomings and the MoD's aspirations for the future. This wider scope was intended to provide the people of the country with sufficient information to allow them to form opinions on defence in general, as well as on military personnel and their welfare and the new management of MoD/RSLAF structures. The Paper was also designed to serve as the stream from which the people could source information to help them make informed judgments about how best to allocate government funds for defence purposes. The Defence White Paper is the first time in the history of Sierra Leone that a document was published whose main objective was the right of the people to know and be informed.

The Defence White Paper Process

The process of compiling the paper involved a wide range of consultations within and outside the country's defence system. Stakeholders were consulted on their respective roles and their interface with defence-related institutions throughout the Government's restructuring exercise and beyond. However, apart from Campaign for Good Governance (a Sierra Leonean non-governmental organisation supported by the National Democratic Institute), consultations involved government ministries, departments and agencies that have direct dealings with the MoD and the military. In addition, members of parliamentary sub-committees on Defence and Finance were consulted. This process enabled an in-depth informative document to be prepared on work performed to date and future plans and strategies for the RSLAF.

The approach used in the development of the Paper was consultative and participatory. It was designed to ensure that all those involved in the restructuring process were able to understand their roles and responsibilities within the larger goal of making the RSLAF a democratically accountable force. At the same time, the process sought the support of the political head of the MoD, particularly in the area of the future role of the military.

At the MoD level, a proposal for the Paper was put forward to the Defence Policy and Operations Committee (the highest policy-making body), seeking approval for a separate committee to manage the Paper's information-gathering process. The proposal was discussed thoroughly; approval was given for a Committee of representatives from the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Internal Affairs, the Sierra Leone Police (SLP), Office of National Security (ONS), Marine Resources and a Civil Adviser, amongst others. After a number of consultations, a template of what to include in the Paper was designed and agreed upon, although there were slight differences of opinions as to whether the White Paper should precede a Defence Review or wait until a National Security Policy had been designed. Because the ONS was only in its teething stage in the early 2000s, a number of stakeholders felt there was a fundamental need to inform the people on developments undertaken to date in restructuring the military. The Director of Defence Policy persuaded the Defence Policy and Operations Committee of the importance of taking work on the Paper forward. This, the Director of Defence Policy argued, would lay the foundation for a future Defence Review that would be inclusive and embrace divergent opinions throughout the country.

On the basis of the template, a consultative tour was organized to visit all RSLAF Brigade Headquarters and some strategic battalions to gather accurate, first-hand information from troops on their perception of the restructuring exercise and other issues affecting their welfare. The team also wanted to assess current deployment strategy and determine the present state of national security and future operational needs. The consultations also supported the development of informed recommendations regarding the Paper that could be used to convince the Government of Sierra Leone and the donor community of the need to provide more resources for the restructuring and democratisation of the RSLAF.

Whilst consultation within RSLAF was underway, the team also embarked on a series of meetings with civil society organisations on the issue of military restructuring and their vision for RSLAF. These meetings were very fruitful; for one thing, civil society saw the process as a novelty, as it was the first time the people had been consulted about government policy in such a comprehensive fashion. Of particular note was the emergence of strong public opinion about poor troop living conditions. For example, in the towns of Kono and Kabala, the people, including area parliamentarians, strongly advocated not only improved living conditions, but asked for a review of the design and structure of Operation Pebu (see Working Paper No. 5, by Aldo Gaeta). They also requested a government/international effort to improve troop living conditions that had come under strong criticism. Furthermore, they further expressed dismay over the poor state of logistics and communication within RSLAF operational areas. With those concerns, it became glaringly clear that in the Defence White Paper should focus on troop conditions and welfare, as well as on the overarching goal of the military performing their constitutionally-mandated duties.

At the completion of the consultative exercise, a harmonisation of the findings was completed and a report was submitted to the MoD. However, the report was not well-received by the Joint Support Commander of the United Kingdom (UK) International Military Assistance Training Team (IMATT). Criticism of the report included accusations that the report was ‘imaginary’ and geared towards ‘discrediting’ the efforts of the military high command. Notwithstanding such condemnation, the Defence Policy and Operations Committee gave clearance and support for the drafting of the first Defence White Paper. This was completed and circulated to members of the Committee itself and the SILSEP Team in the UK for their professional comments and input. Their comments, in turn, were incorporated, where appropriate, into the draft of the Paper; a number of meetings were held to discuss further issues raised in the document. A second draft copy was produced and submitted to the Committee where approval was sought for its submission to the Defence Council for publication approval. Upon submission to the Defence Council, the contents were thoroughly discussed and approval given for publication of the White Paper for public consumption. It should be noted here that because of inexperience in writing such a

defence policy document and the relative newness of members of the Committee to democratic management of defence, contributions from Committee members was not so much based on substantive content, but more on language and style.

Contributions from the UK SILSEP team were tremendously helpful in terms of contents, style, and presentation of the final Paper. However, as discussed below, tension also arose between Freetown and London on the nature and scope of the Paper.

To indicate the importance of the people in the process of democratizing the military, the President launched the White Paper in the presence of all Paramount Chiefs and other traditional leaders in the country and stressed the importance of their contribution in designing the size and shape of the armed forces. Publication of the Defence White Paper provided the basis for future discussion of structural reorganization and management of RSLAF, and helped focus on rightsizing of the military to make it robust and operationally effective. The RSLAF is now closer than it ever was to being equipped with the skills, knowledge and sense of discipline required to perform its duties.

Output of the Defence White Paper

Stemming from the Defence White Paper, a fundamental re-organisation of RSLAF and the MoD ensued, with special attention paid to restructuring and streamlining the armed forces. This involved the creation of a new military structure within and outside the MoD by:

- Merging the Joint Support and Joint Force Commands into a single RSLAF command structure.
- Establishing a new Assistant Chief of Defence Staff at the MoD in charge of Personnel and Training.
- Ensuring that the Director of Organisation Management and Audit report directly to the Deputy Minister of Defence instead of to the Director General, who serves as MoD’s Vote Controller.

This process also involved reorganization of committee structures within the MoD to ensure efficient MoD/RSLAF management. This reorganisation was made with particular emphasis on financial management that guarantees transparency, accountability and probity. In

adhering to the government policy of rationalizing the defence budget, the armed forces were to be downsized to ensure savings which could then be reinvested back into the RSLAF to make it leaner and more robust in the longer-term.

The most important result emanating from the Defence White Paper was improved clarity of roles within the RSLAF, between the MoD and the Joint Force Command and the sometimes difficult relationship between civilians and military staff working at the MoD. In 2003, a Command Structure Review Committee began to review the structure of the MoD/RSLAF established by the Ministry of Defence Advisory Team and IMATT. The Committee's objective was to adapt the structure designed by the UK Government to local needs and culture and to ensure that local participation and ownership were incorporated in any new structural design that emerged from the Command Structure Review. Thus, membership of the Command Structure Review Committee was purely Sierra Leonean, with IMATT and MoD's Civil Adviser providing technical advice on how the exercise should be conducted. At the end of the exercise, a structure emerged that reflected the aspirations of a majority of Sierra Leonean players in the area of management and governance of the country's defence system. It was endorsed by both the Defence Policy and Operations Committee, chaired by the Deputy Minister of Defence, and by the Defence Council, headed by the President.

The Role of Advisors in the Defence White Paper Process

In keeping with the concept of local ownership of the reform process, MoD advisers, particularly the Civil Adviser and related personnel at the UK MoD, embarked on a policy of enhancing the capacity of Sierra Leonean civil servants through mentoring. In particular, the Director of Defence Policy was focused on policy design and analysis, whilst the Deputy Minister and other MoD senior staff were encouraged to cooperate, support and participate in the process of collating information for the Defence White Paper. Meanwhile, the UK Department for International Development (DfID) provided opportunities for overseas study tours for comparative country case studies in South Africa and the UK. The

most fundamental role of external advisers in the writing of the Defence White Paper was that of editing the final version for publication. This role was appropriate, as it allowed an incisive review of the issues and a comparison of past, present and future responsibilities and management of the RSLAF before the document was launched by the President.

Local Ownership

From the outset, the Director of Defence Policy was determined to ensure that work on the Defence White Paper was steered by Sierra Leoneans, whilst recognizing the important role of UK Advisers, who were always ready to help.

Notwithstanding this determination, the Director was faced with the challenge of convincing external Advisors of the importance of Sierra Leone context, both in terms of the Paper's content and, perhaps more importantly, in the process of developing and publishing the Paper. For example, during development of the Paper, some Advisors observed that "the Paper appeared to us to contain the kind of detail and direction that we would expect to see in a completed White Paper, written after a Defence Review and full country-wide consultation". What they did not understand at the time was that the people of Sierra Leone had not been involved or informed about the military reform process. Therefore, any attempt to undertake a Defence Review would mean, in the first instance, informing them of developments undertaken so far in order to enable them to contribute to such a review from an informed point of view. Thus, the Defence White Paper would perform the function of preparing the public for the scheduled Defence Review.

In another instance, whilst the UK Civil Adviser to the MoD supported the idea of continuing work on the Paper, the IMATT Commander wanted a Defence Review to precede it, a disagreement that created a rift between the two personalities involved. These differences aside, the Civil Adviser continued his support for the writing of the Paper, as it was what the Sierra Leoneans wanted at that point in time. That support strengthened the determination of the Director of Defence Policy to continue work on document. Meanwhile, it was apparent that the only thing Advisers based in UK could do was to give support to the process by asking the Civil Adviser to work closely

with the Director of Defence Policy to complete the piece. The Civil Adviser was requested to edit the draft paper, remove some of the details and change some of the statements relating to the RSLAF's future direction. It should be noted that all work performed by the Adviser was in full consultation with the Director of Defence Policy and approved by the Defence Policy and Operations Committee. It should also be noted that the character and determination of the Director of Defence Policy guaranteed local ownership of the process. Without the Director's commitment to local ownership, the whole process might have been hijacked or micro-managed by foreign advisers.

Challenges

Notwithstanding the successful production of the Defence White Paper narrated above, the process was faced with a number of other challenges. Among these were engaging the interest of both civilian and military personnel in the process. Most MoD/RSLAF personnel were disinterested, because they felt the exercise was tedious and had no immediate tangible gains.

There was also the challenge of securing adequate funding to organize and undertake nationwide consultations. Generally speaking, the defence funding situation seriously affected the implementation of some of the issues contained in the Paper. For example, in 2004, the MoD bid for Le58.8 billion to run its business and the Ministry of Finance announced an allocation of Le42.7 billion, thus leaving MoD with a shortfall of Le16.1 billion. Significantly, while an amount of money was thus allocated, the MoD remained unable to access these funds. This situation left the MoD with the problems of payments to personnel retired under the restructuring exercise, subsidies to those wounded-in-action (WIA) or to families of those killed-in-action (KIA) and funding of adequate troop living accommodation and mobility and communications equipment.

All these issues had a telling effect on the Force Training Cycle, Command and Control and rapid response capability of RSLAF. It was this state of affairs, coupled with the planned draw-down of the UN Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL), which led DfID to give direct budgetary support to the MoD to effect payment to officers retrenched under the rightsizing programme and to WIA and KIA beneficiaries.

There was also the challenge of ensuring that IMATT Officers relinquish executive roles and revert to their initial advisory functions. The snag here was that there was a dearth of competent officers grounded in the modern concept of democratic governance of the military. This was what I refer to as the "donor's dilemma" because it became apparent that either:

- MoD/RSLAF achievements would become stunted by allowing Sierra Leoneans complete control of MoD affairs, even when it was clear that they were still grappling with the new concept of defence reform in post-conflict countries; or
- IMATT would continue to perform some executive roles to ensure sustained professional transformation of the MoD/RSLAF, thereby undermining the concept of local ownership.

This was not an easy challenge to overcome, but a minimalist approach that returned IMATT to its advisory role was eventually employed.

In addition, there was the difficult situation faced by MoD civilian employees when IMATT officers refused to accept input from them on topical issues, insinuating that civilian ministry employees lacked the competence to make informed contributions. This issue created a great deal of tension between MoD civilians and IMATT officers. For example, when the civilian/military team (including representatives of IMATT) submitted their report on the Brigade and Battalion HQ tour, the IMATT Joint Support Commander debunked the report's contents, claiming that it did not reflect the on-the-ground reality observed during the tour. There were also instances when intimidating tactics were employed to prevent officers from making objective contributions that could lead to outcomes unexpected or unwanted by IMATT.

There was also the great challenge of ensuring UK agreement to open debate and transparency in decision making and accounting practices, particularly with regard to the disbursement and management of UK funds. For example, when questions were asked how decisions were arrived at for the procurement of over 100 used/reconditioned Land Rovers for the RSLAF, the response from IMATT was that it was UK money and that UK decisions were not accountable to the MoD. In other instances, military officers who challenged the views or positions of IMATT officers were seen as negatively

impacting the SSR process and potentially dangerous to the new army and were subsequently ostracised. Added to this was the issue of IMATT Commanders gaining direct access to the President by bypassing the MoD chain of command, a situation that undermined the MoD's authority.

Above all was the challenge of ensuring that members of the RSLAF accept the principle of civilian oversight. Due to the culture which had dominated the armed forces until then, many members of the RSLAF perceived that civilians had taken their jobs from them and that a signal was being sent that the RSLAF was not competent. To some extent, this issue still exists today; it exacerbates latent tensions in the MoD and affects the civil-military defence management partnership.

For instance, the military continue to see civilian defence employees as inexperienced in defence and security issues and therefore lacking in competence to manage and oversee them. On the other hand, civilians see most of the higher echelon of the military as obstructing the reform process. This mutual distrust undermines MoD management to the degree that, for example, there is no commitment by the senior military cadre to participation at Procurement Committee meetings. This situation makes it difficult, if not impossible, to collect accurate information. The (partially true) argument of the military is that since the Director General has tended to have a set position before meetings, it would have been meaningless for military officers to contribute. At the same time, there is the perennial problem of senior military programme managers dodging assignments, either due to incompetence or negligence, which forces the Director General to ask his civilian directors to undertake jobs that should have been done by the military. The bottom line of this mistrust between civilians and the military has to do with who 'controls the purse' and, in a larger sense, with the reality that changing an organizational culture takes a considerable amount of time.

Footnotes

¹ Al-Hassan Kharamoh Kondeh was formerly Deputy Secretary of Policy and Procurement in Sierra Leone's Ministry of Defence; in that capacity, he was in charge of producing the country's Defence White Paper.

Conclusion

The publication of the Defence White Paper in Sierra Leone was a watershed in the history of governance and management of defence in the country. It laid the foundation upon which all reform programmes, including the future size and shape of the armed forces, has been built. The Paper contained lucid guidelines as to the direction of the country's defence reforms vis-à-vis where the defence system had been prior to the restructuring process. However, the process involved in writing the Paper indicated that MoD/RSLAF restructuring should not be focused only on force reduction and strengthening institutional capacity. It should also take into account the provision of adequate financial resources that guarantee the institution's capability to deliver its assigned tasks. At the same time, the perennial problem of accessing allocated financial resources has made it difficult for the MoD to fully implement its desire to reform the RSLAF into a lean, affordable and capable force for Sierra Leone.

The strong commitment of the Government of Sierra Leone to SSR and the support of the UK Government played a crucial role in seeing the Defence White Paper published. In addition, the role of civil society organisations in the process indicated the importance of their involvement in the reform of the military. Finally, a conclusion that emerged out of the Defence White Paper process is that external Advisors should never display a 'know-it-all' or 'do-it-for-them' attitude. If the principle of local ownership is to take root, a 'do-it-with-them' attitude on the part of Advisors is the most effective method to engender sustained development achievements in a post-conflict country such as Sierra Leone.

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