

First stages on the road to peace:

the Abidjan process

(1995–96)

by Lansana Gberie

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In 1991, the RUF launched the war ostensibly to overthrow the one-party dictatorship of Joseph Saidu Momoh and usher in what it called 'genuine democracy'. Less than eight months after the initial RUF incursions, Momoh signed into law a new multi-party constitution, promising general elections for late 1992 and allowing political parties to organize. Momoh broadcast a call to the RUF to stop fighting and join the political process but this was not backed up with any attempt to open direct talks. Indeed, Momoh later repeated in several radio broadcasts that Sankoh and the RUF were merely a front for Liberian warlord Charles Taylor. The war was said to be under control. After the RUF's first advances were checked by the Sierra Leone army, as well as troops from Guinea and Liberians opposed to Taylor, Momoh mistakenly concluded that his grip on power was safe.

The NPRC coup

By April 1992, the government's ill-trained and ill-equipped frontline troops had not been paid for three months. A group of them, led by 26-year-old Lt Solomon Musa, descended on Freetown on 29 April 1992. The protest escalated into a coup and Capt. Valentine Strasser, a friend of Musa's, emerged to be chairman of the National Provisional Ruling Council.

The NPRC, which claimed an expeditious end to the war as one of its principal aims, had unique opportunities to open dialogue with the RUF. By the time of the coup, the RUF had been confined to remote areas of Kailahun District in the east of the country and Pujehun in the south. The NPRC's anti-corruption and anti-elite rhetoric was popular across the country and appeared to be in tune with the RUF's own pronouncements. Expectations that the coup offered prospects for a peaceful end to the war were raised in the first week, when RUF spokesmen broadcast messages through the BBC announcing a



unilateral ceasefire and a readiness to work with the NPRC in the interest of 'peace and reconciliation'. Both sides celebrated what they saw as an end to a repressive and corrupt era.

This promising start to peace, however, did not gain momentum. The NPRC vacillated in dealing with the RUF, publicly offering an amnesty in return for unconditional surrender, but without initiating further overtures. Meanwhile, Strasser dismissed the RUF in much the same terms as had Momoh: as 'bandits sent by Charles Taylor' to wreak havoc in Sierra Leone. In retrospect Strasser's successor, Julius Maada Bio, said the young soldiers had convinced themselves that, with the resources of the state at their disposal, they would – and should – easily crush the RUF rebels, rather than negotiate and share power with them. Revenge may also have been a motive behind the NPRC's hardline stance. Many leading NPRC figures, including its powerful civilian secretary general, John Benjamin, hailed from southern and eastern parts of the country that had suffered heavily at the hands of the rebels.

In October 1992, the RUF's surprise takeover of Kono – Sierra Leone's principal diamond mining district – recast the war into a contest for control of the country's diamond resources and the war became national, rather than south-eastern. The NPRC launched a mobilization campaign suggestively code-named 'Genesis' – the real beginning of the war – to beat back the 'bandits'. By June 1993, the offensive had forced the RUF to pull back to its remote base camps. In December 1993, Strasser announced a unilateral ceasefire and called on the remaining rebels to surrender. But the ceasefire was a strategic blunder. It coincided with a major football tournament in Freetown and the NPRC's largely volunteer troops, interpreting the announcement as a sign that the war was over, abandoned their positions at the front and went to Freetown to watch the matches. The RUF renewed its offensive operations with surprising strength and over-ran key army positions in devastating hit-and-run attacks.

Elections and the promise of peace

As 1995 came to a close, the pursuit of a negotiated settlement and a return to democratic rule were inextricably entwined. While government forces, now backed by mercenaries of the South African private security group Executive Outcomes (EO), had scored some battlefield successes, the RUF was still capable of operating throughout the country. Militarily and politically, a stalemate had developed. The rebel movement lacked widespread popular support and the military regime had lost credibility for not being able to ensure security or to show any marked economic recovery from the devastation of the war. Although civilians had clearly demonstrated their wish to vote out the military, Sankoh said he wanted a peace settlement before any elections.

As the long-promised general election date of February 1996 drew nearer, Strasser had begun to show increasing signs that he would join the race. To do so he would have to change the constitution, as he was too young to run for president. On 16 January 1996, Strasser's deputy carried out a palace coup that sent Strasser into exile and made Bio the new head of state. Bio's coup resulted from anxieties about Strasser and other NPRC members' commitment to democratization. Bio was equally unhappy with Strasser's clumsy handling of the peace process, yet he also had a personal stake in talking with

the RUF as his elder sister and her husband had been abducted by the RUF in 1991. Both were rumoured to have become leading RUF officials.

On the day that he was sworn in as the new head of state, Bio made a terse appeal, broadcast live on national TV and radio: "To you, Corporal Foday Sankoh, the message from my government is that we are prepared to meet with you anywhere, any time and without precondition." The RUF had been waiting for such a gesture, but there were other factors that made the offer particularly palatable. Since the launching of the *Kamajor* militia and the arrival of EO, the RUF had suffered serious setbacks. The two forces had collaborated closely to seek out RUF bush camps and in less than two months they killed an estimated 1,000 of the RUF's best fighters and destroyed several of their bases. More importantly, they had also pushed the RUF away from the main diamond districts.

Sankoh quickly sent word through the International Committee of the Red Cross that he was willing to talk to Bio, who responded publicly on 3 February that he too was ready to talk. He announced that both Ivorian president Henri Konan Bedié and Burkina Faso's Blaise Compaoré were actively attempting 'to get the NPRC and the RUF to the table'. A few days later, over an ICRC radio hook-up witnessed by journalists, Sankoh told Bio he had to postpone the scheduled elections before any progress towards negotiations could be made. Bio's response was



Paul – aged 12

interviewed by Ambrose James in March 2000

I used to live near Serabu with my parents when the town was attacked in 1997 and captured by the RUF. I was taken to Makeni, where I was trained by my commander and given a two pistol grip gun. I was injected with cocaine twice. We used to loot, rape girls and burn houses. I liked to loot tape recorders but they were taken from me by my commander. An Action Contre la Faim vehicle was passing through the Occra Hills. Our commander asked the driver to take us to the Adventist Development and Relief office so that we could be registered as child combatants. This time round, I think everybody is tired of fighting, disarmament has started, UNAMSIL is deploying, and there is hope that the Accord will hold. The older generation has to give way to the young people so that they will have a chance to be exposed to facilities and jobs, especially in the political sphere. That is [how] they will be able to prepare the ground for youth development in the country. If youths do not control the politics of this nation, there is no way for them.

that such a decision was ultimately up to Sierra Leoneans and suggested that the two meet in Côte d'Ivoire or Burkina Faso. These venues were rejected by Sankoh at first in favour of talks within Sierra Leone, but his resistance quickly evaporated and a meeting was set in Abidjan for the end of February 1996.

Behind the scenes an independent London-based conflict resolution organization, International Alert (IA), had helped to bring about a meeting between the assistant secretary general for political affairs of the OAU, Dr. Daniel Antonio, and RUF officials in Abidjan in December 1995. Previously, in April 1994, IA had been one of the organizations that had helped to secure the release of a number of European and Sierra Leonean hostages held by the RUF. IA was also instrumental in helping Ivorian Foreign Minister Amara Essy to travel to Sierra Leone in February 1996 to meet with Sankoh in order to persuade him to enter negotiations. Essy later said: "I told him that as long as he stayed isolated in the bush, he would be considered a butcher by the world. 'No one even knows why you are fighting. Once you have explained yourself, you can put the war behind you'".

Meanwhile, Bio reconvened a National Consultative Conference, where civil society leaders demanded overwhelmingly that elections go ahead on schedule. Despite resistance from within the NPRC and advice from both Nigeria's Sani Abacha and Ghana's Jerry Rawlings to put off the elections in order not to provoke greater violence, Bio acquiesced – a move warily welcomed by many Sierra Leoneans and lauded by the UN Security Council. The UN also launched an international donor appeal for humanitarian assistance.

First encounters

On 25 February 1996, the day before Sierra Leoneans were to begin voting, talks got underway in Abidjan, chaired by Essy. The fourteen-person NPRC delegation, led by intelligence chief Lt Charles Mbayo, met an eight-person RUF delegation, headed by abducted medical doctor turned RUF enthusiast Mohamed Barrie. Also present were four international 'facilitators': the UN Special Envoy, Ethiopian diplomat Berhanu Dinka, and representatives of the OAU, the Commonwealth, and IA. The ICRC flew the RUF delegation from their jungle bases to Abidjan. The day after the talks began, about one million Sierra Leoneans defied the violent RUF campaign of intimidation – the amputation of hands of would-be voters, beheadings, and attacks on towns, villages and election officials – to cast their ballots for a return to civilian government.

The preliminary encounter in Abidjan lasted four days, with the RUF stating that it rejected the elections and

would refuse to co-operate with elected politicians. The NPRC delegation made the point that they would be relinquishing power and the RUF would be dealing with the elected government. Two concrete outcomes of the session were agreement on a face-to-face meeting between Sankoh and Bio and for Essy to draw up an agenda for further negotiations. Two days later, RUF spokesman Fayia Musa told the BBC that the rebels had decided to call a two-month truce 'in profit of peace', but he also threatened that fighting would continue if a civilian government came to power through the elections.

Dealing with Kabbah

Results in the run-off presidential election on 15 March 1996 gave SLPP candidate Kabbah a 59 to 40 per cent winning majority over John Karefa Smart. Pending Kabbah's inauguration on 29 March, Bio remained head of state and went ahead with the planned meeting with Sankoh. On 24 March, he headed for Abuja for a meeting with Nigerian leader Abacha and then travelled to Yamoussoukro, Côte d'Ivoire, to await the arrival of the RUF. Sankoh and other RUF delegates were picked up by an ICRC helicopter at an undisclosed location in eastern Sierra Leone, reportedly a four-day walk from Sankoh's base. On board the helicopter was Essy, who flew with the RUF delegation first to Guinea, and then on to Côte d'Ivoire. It was Sankoh's first sortie from the bush since 1991.

Ivorian President Bedié spent several hours one-on-one with Sankoh and with Bio, before bringing them together to shake hands for the cameras. When the time came for a general session, Sankoh delivered a twenty-five-minute statement that ranged from religion to war to Pan-Africanism and clean drinking water, food and shelter for Sierra Leoneans. Sankoh said to Bio: "We are tired of being in the forest. Do you think we are happy?" He asked the uniformed NPRC delegates why they had come in combat dress and whether they were 'ready for peace'. Later, Sankoh and Bio met privately for three hours. Reportedly, the second day of talks explored a role for the RUF in the civilian government. After the talks broke up, the RUF delegation, including Sankoh, remained in Abidjan as guests of the Ivorian government.

Awaiting his inauguration, Kabbah reiterated his willingness to enter negotiations. "As leader of the country, my position will have to be that I will not take 'no' for an answer. I will keep on pressing, keep on pursuing and, if necessary, get the assistance of friends and others to help us get to the bottom of this problem". A few days later, as he officially assumed office, Kabbah declared: "The pursuit of lasting peace is my priority and in this regard I emphasize here that I am ready to meet the

leader of the RUF, Corporal Foday Sankoh, at the earliest opportunity." Sankoh, now with ready access to the media in Abidjan, publicly replied that he was willing to travel to Freetown or any other location for talks. But he indicated that he distrusted Kabbah, whom he called a 'rogue' and accused of playing a part in mismanaging the country's resources after independence.

Early in April, word emerged from Abidjan that Kabbah and Sankoh had agreed to meet on 15 April. Meanwhile, Kabbah unveiled a coalition cabinet, drawn from parties that contested the election, and ordered the release of sixty-six suspected RUF members as a gesture of 'national reconciliation'. International creditors announced that they would provide debt relief for Sierra Leone after it reached an agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) on economic reform. According to an RUF spokesman, Sankoh was planning a regional tour with a first stop in Ghana to argue the RUF's position.

On 22 April, Kabbah and Sankoh finally met face-to-face in Yamoussoukro, Côte d'Ivoire. "The time has come for the RUF and the people of Sierra Leone to work together", Kabbah said. "My government is prepared to give a general amnesty to all members of the RUF in the name of peace. We should discuss a permanent ceasefire, disengagement, demobilization, and encampment of combatants. We will also reintegrate these combatants into our society and we hope that these discussions will lead to an accord". Sankoh said that the RUF had come to talk peace but he continued to reject the recent elections. "We, as a people's revolutionary front, still say 'no' to these elections because they were not in the interests of the majority of the people in the rural areas."

The talks take shape

The following day, despite the apparent chasm between their opening positions, the two sides agreed to a 'definitive ceasefire' and to establish joint working groups to deal with a peace accord, the encampment, disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of combatants, as well as a plan on how to secure international assistance for the process. Drafts of proposals from the working groups were to be submitted to a plenary session in two weeks. Before the signing of a joint communiqué, Sankoh demanded that EO be expelled immediately from Sierra Leone, and that the contract between the Sierra Leone government and the mercenaries be published. "The presence of Executive Outcomes in Sierra Leone violates our national dignity and sovereignty as well as hinders our development, since they are additionally rewarded with the benefit of mining activities," he said.

After the talks, Kabbah headed directly for a meeting with Abacha, after which they issued a joint statement calling on the RUF 'to fully embrace dialogue and continue the process of peaceful negotiations'. Kabbah also lauded Nigeria's support for Sierra Leone and asked for continued co-operation, 'particularly in Sierra Leone's post-war task of national reconciliation, reconstruction, and rehabilitation'.

Within days of the Yamoussoukro meeting, Kabbah broadcast that the US would provide financial support for the OAU to supervise disarmament in Sierra Leone and that the UK was prepared to help 'resettle' RUF fighters. A few days later, the European Union approved emergency food and medical aid for a quarter of a million internally displaced Sierra Leoneans. Despite accusations by the RUF that the government was violating the ceasefire, Kabbah said, in his first Independence Day speech to the country that he was optimistic that negotiations would lead to peace. "My recent discussion with the RUF and the agreement signed on that occasion provide ample evidence that the RUF is now thinking seriously about ending the war."

Stalemate

On 6 May 1996, talks resumed in Yamoussoukro without Kabbah, in an attempt to draft a comprehensive peace plan. But the negotiations stalled on the issues of the RUF's rejection of the elections and a government proposal for power-sharing that the RUF found unacceptable. Substantial agreement was reached at this stage on most of the issues. A draft document called for disarmament of the army and encampment of the army and RUF. Finally, the talks were suspended on 28 May. The RUF demands for the expulsion of EO and power-sharing were apparently the main obstacles for further progress.

As sporadic attacks on villages and highway traffic continued over the next three months there were conflicting reports as to whether they were being carried out by the RUF or renegade soldiers ('sobels'). The government played down their impact on the peace process. More aid for disarmament and relief was promised by the EU and by the ICRC. In early July, the government ordered the ICRC to stop its activities in the country, apparently suspicious that some relief supplies being shipped through Guinea for refugees along the Liberia–Sierra Leone border were going to the RUF. Two weeks later, the ban was lifted when the ICRC agreed to use Freetown for all shipments. In mid-August, Vice President Joe Demby pointed to the spontaneous demobilization or release of about 1,200 people from RUF custody, as showing the RUF was serious about peace.

In an effort to break the stalemate in the formal negotiations, the OAU became more actively involved in attempting to mediate between the parties. It named former Zimbabwean President Canaan Banana as special envoy. Banana and Capt. Kojo Tsikata, Ghana's intelligence chief, spent three days with Sankoh and Essy attempting to unblock the talks.

By early September 1996 there were indications that behind the scenes negotiations and direct contact between Kabbah and Sankoh over a special 'hotline' had achieved some progress and that a formal settlement might be in the offing. Press reports suggested that Sankoh would be flown to Sierra Leone to consult with his followers. Government advisor Sheka Mansaray said the government had agreed to major economic, political and social reforms proposed by the RUF, as well as to the establishment of a trust fund to transform the RUF into a political party. The reform proposals went a long way to satisfy the RUF's aspirations for power-sharing – short of immediately entering government. "We have done all the groundwork to reach an agreement and there is a fair amount of understanding of each other's positions, so it could happen any time", Mansaray said. Two weeks later Finance Minister Thaimu Bangura announced that the RUF had dropped a demand that it be involved in drawing up the national budget. The government also said it would allow the ICRC to ferry Sankoh back into Sierra Leone for three days. Bangura said the announcement of the 'breakthrough' on the budget issue was meant to show international donors that progress was being made in the negotiations: "International donor funding of the rehabilitation and reconstruction of the country is predicated on the negotiations. News of this breakthrough will certainly encourage the donors to help." Ten days later, donor countries pledged \$212 million for post-war reconstruction and rehabilitation.

Outside the talks the military situation remained fluid. Rebel attacks on villages and road traffic continued and EO and government forces reportedly conducted devastating counter-attacks against rebel bases. At the same time, the IMF pressed the government to cut back its expenditure, much of it war-related, as a precondition for economic assistance.

In October Kabbah travelled to New York, where he told the UN General Assembly that Sankoh had indicated his readiness to sign a peace agreement drafted by Côte d'Ivoire after the government had made extensive concessions. These included a general amnesty for all RUF members, the promise of a trust fund for the RUF to convert itself into a political party, and 'jobs to the RUF leader and his followers, including their absorption into the army, the police and other government institutions'.

Yet Kabbah indicated his belief that Sankoh 'seems to be unwilling to honour his commitment to sign the agreement, manufacturing several excuses to justify his prevarication'. Kabbah warned that RUF intransigence could lead to a 'full-scale resumption of the hostilities, given the current level of distrust between the two sides'. To prevent this, he urged the international community to put pressure on the RUF to sign the draft agreement. Kabbah said that if the RUF did not sign, sanctions against the RUF should be considered, including the denial of access to third countries and 'the prospect of their arraignment before a war crimes tribunal for the serious crimes being perpetrated against innocent civilians'.

Endgame

Two weeks later, Kabbah travelled to Abidjan for a second face-to-face meeting with Sankoh, again chaired by Ivorian President Bedié. Published accounts of the talks said Kabbah agreed to Sankoh returning to Sierra Leone with international observers to meet with RUF members. He also set a deadline of 1 December for signing the agreement. Sankoh told reporters in Abidjan: "I need to renew my mandate from my combatants and the People's War Council for further negotiations or signing any peace accord with the so-called government in Freetown." On 15 November, the government broadcast an announcement of a general amnesty for RUF members. It signalled its willingness to allow 'qualified' RUF fighters to join the national army. A week later, Sankoh flew back into eastern Sierra Leone to meet with his followers, accompanied by Red Cross and Ivorian officials. "I am going to consult my people on this peace accord – whether I can get a mandate to sign it". To reassure Sankoh, Kabbah broadcast that he had ordered government forces to abide by the ceasefire.

On his return to Abidjan, Sankoh said the talks with RUF members had been positive but would not give any details. "I can't say anything until the next seventy-two hours. I am waiting for the foreign minister and president of Ivory Coast. Everything I do must be approved by the foreign minister as chairman of the peace talks". Media reports indicated, however, that Sankoh's followers had argued for the deployment of international monitors and that the *Kamajor* militia be disbanded before Sankoh signed any agreement. On 28 November, Sierra Leone government officials and international representatives involved in the negotiations gathered in Abidjan. Accord came the next day and the formal signing ceremony was held on 30 November 1996. Ordinary Sierra Leoneans rejoiced in the streets.



Aspects of the Abidjan accord

The accord called for the immediate cessation of all fighting, proclaimed an amnesty for RUF members, and the transformation of the RUF into a political movement. It stipulated the withdrawal of EO within five weeks and regional forces within three months. It also set out a process for the encampment, disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of RUF combatants. The Sierra Leone army would be reduced in size and RUF members would be allowed to enter the restructured armed forces.

The agreement also called for electoral, judicial and police reform, probity in government, protection for human rights, and a focus on rural areas and the urban poor in reconstruction and rehabilitation efforts. A 'quality of life' segment called for improved health care, housing, educational services, clean drinking water, job creation, and protection of the environment.

A Commission for the Consolidation of Peace was created to oversee implementation, along with a 'Neutral Monitoring Group from the international community'. The peace commission was to supervise and monitor a range of other bodies – a Socio-Economic Forum, annual Citizens' Consultative Conferences, a Multi-Partisan Council, a Trust Fund for the Consolidation of Peace, a Demobilization and Resettlement Committee, and a National Budget and Debt Committee. Funding and other support was to be sought from the international community.

Beyond the actual terms of the accord, Sankoh was to receive housing and chairmanship of a government commission or committee either on 'veterans' affairs', handling development projects stemming from the peace process, or on corruption and government transparency. RUF members were also expected to receive some government jobs, including deputy ambassador posts.



Street scene, Freetown, March 2000

Source: Lennart Johansen

Collapse

On the ground, the ceasefire that had gradually broken down during the pre-signing stalemate was never firmly re-established with the RUF, *Kamajors* and regional forces (mainly Nigerian and Guinean) skirmishing for control of territory and tactical advantage. With EO out of the country, Sankoh refused to allow the UN to deploy peacekeepers and monitors. By late January 1997, the RUF was accusing the government of waging all-out war against it.

In spite of the deteriorating security situation a limited demobilization did get underway but it was handicapped by poor planning, corruption, mismanagement, and lack of funds. Meanwhile, the largely discredited army was further marginalized by Kabbah's decision to effectively disband the existing force and rely on ECOMOG and the *Kamajors*.

Sankoh stayed in Abidjan after the signing and delegated his lieutenants to go to Freetown and become involved in implementing the accord. In March 1997 Sankoh was arrested in Nigeria – reportedly for carrying a handgun and some ammunition. A hasty attempt by a few senior civilian members of the RUF to claim the leadership, ostensibly to move the peace process forward, was quashed by field commanders still loyal to Sankoh. Two months later, on 25 May 1997, the army staged a coup and the RUF, at Sankoh's instigation from detention in Nigeria, joined in.

Despite the speedy collapse of the Abidjan Accord, substantive parts of its contents – in particular the references to human rights and humanitarian law and a framework for the participation of civil society in the achievement of peace – were carried over into the Lomé Agreement and may well continue to be relevant in future. So far, however, realities on the ground have not lived up to any of these terms.