

# Mercenaries or Peacekeepers? Comparing Executive Outcomes and ECOMOG in Sierra Leone

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## Introduction: From Private Security to the African Regional Tools for Security

Private Military Companies (PMCs) – i.e. corporate enterprises providing a different yet related range of armed security services, from armed combat to security services (See Ilustração 01) – represented a genuine novelty in sub-Saharan Africa since the early 1990s (Musah & Fayemi, 2000). The origins of private security are rooted in a series of macro processes characterising the post-Cold War, such as the erosion of the nation-state, the so-called ‘New Wars’ (Kaldor, 1999), and the spread of neoliberalism.

As a market player, private security is regulated by the law of supply and demand.

As for the supply, military downsizing at the end of bipolar era determined a huge availability of arms and military personnel (especially from the hotspots of the Cold War, such as Eastern Europe, South Africa, etc.) in the market. Moreover, rising neoliberal policies, the globalisation and the reduction of nation-state power (i.e. the global trend toward privatisation) led to the widespread assumption that even national security could become marketable.

Concerning the demand, at least three factors should be taken into account. Firstly, the decay of nation-state in Africa, due to incomplete/failed nation-building processes, new wars as a result of severe economic crisis and socio-political (i.e. rising ethnic and religious tensions) cleavages, often led to widespread insecurity, ‘Low-Intensity Conflicts’ (Van Creveld, 1991) or asymmetric conflicts fought by a wide range of non-state armed groups (militias, terrorist groups, etc.). Secondly, the end of the ‘patronage’ system by superpowers determined the unwillingness to intervene – both diplomatically and militarily – in sub-Saharan African conflicts. Finally, this loss of strategic interest also added to the failure of some UN Peace Operations (e.g. the United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda, the United Nations Operation in Somalia) that caused a re-thinking of direct military involvements of Western powers in African scenarios.

This context was the perfect set for the rise of the PMCs. Their main features – making them quite different from traditional 1960s-style mercenarism – can be summarised as follows: a-political groups, corporate structures made up by highly trained and skilled military staff coming from special forces and units (such as the British Special Air Service, the South African Defence Force’s ‘Koevoet-Crowbar’, etc.) and able to provide ‘integrated security packages’ (Musah & Fayemi, 2000: 23) to national governments with major internal security

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issues, but also non-governmental organisations, aid-workers, and even anti-poaching groups (Duffy *et al.*, 2016: 19). Services range from military escorts to economic assets, crisis management, threat assessment, to military advisory, military training and combat. Then, PMCs used to have strong connections with mineral and oil corporations based in Western countries, e.g. Branch Heritage Group and EO (Pech, 1999: 81-109).

Besides private security and PMCs, it should be noted that the African continent had started to envisage African regional security systems since decolonisation and the emergence of the nation-states. In particular, an important debate arose since the creation of the Organisation of African Unity in 1963 between the ‘Brazzaville Group’ and the ‘Casablanca Group’. States belonging to the first group favoured close co-operation with the former colonial powers and the preservation of the state system bequeathed by the colonial era, while Casablanca states placed their hopes for the future of Africa in the creation of a supranational organisation (McKeon, 1966), in order to overcome the divisions between the African peoples within a higher political unit. The most significant proposal among the Casablanca states was carried forward by the Pan-Africanist leader and president of Ghana Kwame Nkrumah and related, *inter alia*, to the establishment of an African High Command to strengthen and consolidate political independence by the neo-independent states. Governance, development policies and security were some of the areas on which Nkrumah hoped for regional control. However, the reluctance of many countries to renounce their sovereignty prevented the newly-formed independent states from tackling common security issues within a shared framework of mutual assistance, thus defending their collective interests.

Only many years later, regional and sub-regional security-related tools such as the OAU ‘Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution’ in 1993 (following the Organisation of African Unity’s *débat* in Chad), the ‘New Partnership for Africa’s Development’ in 2001, the Peace and Security Council and, the African Stand-by Force, inspired by the ‘sovereignty-as-responsibility’ assumption (Deng, 1996) marked a return to a shared security framework. As for ECOWAS, even if it was inherently an economic organization, former agreements such as the 1978 Protocol on Non-Aggression and 1981 Defense Protocol had set the trend for more effective peacekeeping tools. This quest for a regional and sub-regional security system, mostly since the 90s, was also a response to the ineffective African national armies that are often characterised by military unprofessionalism, top-down co-optation, personal loyalties, ethnic-based recruitment, etc. These aspects are clearly reported by the following section as they represent the wider context for state failure and the outbreak of the civil war in Sierra Leone.

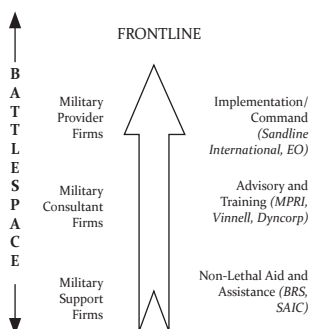


Ilustração 01 – The “Tip-of-the-spear” typology (Singer, 2003: 93).

## State failure and Civil War in Sierra Leone

With some of the world's best diamond fields, Sierra Leone started to experience a brutal civil war in March 1991 leading to economic decline, the collapse of the state apparatus (Francis, 1999: 324) and a typical state failure. The war in Sierra Leone started after an attack of a small group of rebels supported by Liberian rebel Charles Taylor, but the conflict was fuelled by a complex mix of internal (state decay, ethnic cleavages and economic grievances, etc.) as well as external (spillover effect from neighbour Liberia, unwillingness to intervene from Western countries, etc.) factors that turned into one of the cruellest civil wars of sub-Saharan Africa (Hirsch, 2001; Keen, 2003).

State sovereignty declined to the extent that it became unable to perform its basic functions (controlling state resources, defend citizens' lives and properties, etc.). Ethnic cleavages between the Temne (North) and the Mende (South) played a role, as well as economic grievances such as poverty, unemployment, state bankruptcy.

RUF rebels, backed by Gaddafi's Libya and Taylor's Liberia, gathered both alienated and 'lumpen' (Abdullah & Muana, 1998: 172) young men from urban areas, and 'socially-disconnected village youth' (Keen, 2003: 78), taking advantage with radical rhetoric propaganda. RUF soon became notorious for its abuses and brutality. Diamonds played a major role in funding the RUF, through their smuggling to neighbour Liberia. However, corruption poverty and bad governance account as much as diamonds for the spread of violence, so that the Sierra Leonean scenario seemed to fit in the pattern of the 'greed and grievances' (Berdal & Malone, 2000) often related to the new wars.

The lack of interest from the international community in terms of effective conflict resolution can be explained by the absence of strategic resources at stake, the end of the patronage system by Superpowers and Great Powers, as well as the failure of former UN Peace Operations.

In the mid-nineties, what remained of Sierra Leone were only areas controlled by warlords and bandits, since the state authority was completely absent. Together, RUF guerrilla, rebel soldiers – the *Sobel*s ('*Soldiers by day, rebels by night*') – military commanders in disarray and local leaders controlled the agri-food and diamond illegal markets for an amount of \$ 200 million, when government revenues totalled just \$ 60 million a year. Beware of an underpaid and undisciplined army, the foreign mining industry along with the besieged government decided to turn to the mercenaries in order to guarantee their businesses.

## EO Intervention in Sierra Leone

The first PMC to operate in Sierra Leone was British Gurkha Security Guards (GSG), with the aim of protecting Sierra Rutile, a US and Australian-owned mining plant, and training some Republic of Sierra Leone Military Forces units. Fifty-eight Gurkhas were deployed in February 1995, but their mission failed shortly afterwards, as twenty of them fell into an RUF ambush and were killed. Despite this incident, GSG remained in the country until April of the same year, but refused to seek direct confrontation with the RUF (Vines, 1999: 130).

None of the PMCs that worked in those months in Sierra Leone agreed to engage militarily with the RUF. Only EO was an exception. The South African PMC decided to assist the army against the RUF when the latter was just 20 kilometres from the capital Freetown. Furthermore, the army had lost control of the Sierra Rutile titanium mine in Gbangbatok and the Swiss-owned Sierra Leone Ore and Metal Company bauxite mine in Mankanji.

Together, these mines produced two-thirds of the country's exports. Finally, even the eastern diamond area of Kono had fallen into the hands of the rebels. EO's plan was to: **i)** secure Freetown; **ii)** regain control of the US-owned Sierra Rutile mine (generating revenue for the government and helping to guarantee payment to EO); **iii)** destroy the RUF's headquarters; and **iv)** clear the remaining areas (Shearer, 1998: 49).

EO started to train both the army and the '*Kamajors*' local militia, a group of traditional hunters from the Mende ethnic group which was later called Civil Defence Forces, becoming a paramilitary organisation fighting against the RUF. Then, EO led five major offensives thus playing an important strategic role. The first offensive was launched in April 1995 on the outskirts of Freetown, thus easing the pressure on the capital: the rebels were forced to retreat into 126 km, suffering heavy losses with hundreds of militants killed and at least a thousand desertions. The second offensive was aimed at liberating the Kono diamond fields, thus enabling the government to exploit the mine again. Then, in December 1995, following the recapture of the Sierra Rutile mine, EO started to directly hit the RUF, taking advantage of an additional 200-man force from South Africa and destroying the RUF stronghold near Kangari Hills with a ground attack. A last attack was launched at the end of 1996, when, following the elections that had given power to Ahmed Tejan Kabbah, the RUF had failed in the promise of a negotiated solution to the conflict. Following yet another defeat, Sankoh signed the Abidjan Peace Accord on November 30, 1996. EO was given credit for pushing rebels to momentary surrender and signing peace agreements. In fact, Sankoh himself admitted that he would have been able to occupy Freetown and win the war if EO had not intervened and conditioned the signing of peace agreements on the cessation of activities by the South African PMC (Isenberg, 1997; Shearer, 1998).

The 21 month-long operation cost \$35 million – a high price considering that Sierra Leone's foreign trade was only worth \$39 million. According to speculation, EO was paid in diamond concessions, as Branch Energy acquired the Kono diamond concessions after EO's entry into Sierra Leone. Even the International Monetary Fund approved payments to EO as part of Sierra Leone's overall budget (Shearer, 1998: 51-2). Although EO's success forced the RUF to sign the 1996 Abidjan Peace Accord, just ninety days later a new military coup plunged the country into chaos once again. In fact, the RUF attacked Freetown and committed abuses and atrocities against the civilian population that culminated years later during the 1999 'No Living Thing' operation, which was the most notorious mass killing of the Sierra Leone civil war.

EO's short-lasting achievements were benefitting the mining companies (mainly Branch Group) rather than the ordinary people and showed that 'security' and 'stabilisation' were only instrumental to foreign investments. This led some analysts to consider EO as a '*recolonising agent for British and South African corporate interests*' (Rubin, 1997: 6), as the country's debt increased and permanent insecurity as well. Furthermore, the use of 'new mercenaries' seemed to prove the 'resource-curse' theory (Streeten, 1993; Atkinson & Hamilton, 2003) – i.e. the presence of valuable natural resources leading to economic failure and destabilization, rather than economic growth and development – given that PMCs fight their battles for profit and strategic minerals on behalf of a corporate establishment.

The momentary success provided by private security interventions may lead to deem private security as cost-effective option when a state has serious threats – or even regime survival is at stake – and no way to tackle them. As will be discussed later, further issues such as legitimacy, human rights and accountability need to be taken into account when it comes to assessing neo-mercenary interventions.

## Sub-regional Security at Work: ECOMOG in Liberia

ECOMOG was established in 1990 as an 'improvised response' (Berman & Sams, 2000: 83) to the Liberian Civil War by ECOWAS, with the aim to support Samuel Doe's Liberian government against the rebellion launched in December 1989 by Charles Taylor and his National Patriotic Front of Liberia. The reason for improvisation was the lack of a functioning security apparatus (though the Defense Protocol remained in effect) combined with a determination among a small group of ECOWAS States to intervene militarily in support of a fellow member.

At the request of the Nigerian President Ibrahim Babangida, the ECOWAS Authority established the Standing Mediation Committee at the May 1990 ECOWAS Summit in Banjul which included Ghana, Mali, Nigeria and Togo, in order to activate mediation procedures. ECOMOG was born from the Standing Mediation Committee on August 7, 1990, in a climate of sharp contrasts. The legitimacy of the intervention was immediately questioned, as the Liberian crisis was deemed internal and the Standing Mediation Committee did not represent all member countries: however, the spill-over effect of the conflict (a factor sufficient to trigger the intervention mechanisms provided for by the Defense Protocol) would emerge within a short time. Then, another problem was that whilst Doe did request aid, it was from Nigeria, not ECOWAS (Tuck, 1999: 4). At that point, Lagos decided to intervene under the umbrella of the sub-regional organization. After losing support from Mali and Togo, ECOMOG landed in Monrovia on August 24, 1990 with 3,000 men initially from five countries (Gambia, Ghana, Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Guinea) to start the 'Operation Liberty'.

This operation revealed a number of weaknesses, as financial and material constraints were a major issue and made ECOMOG inadequate for any peace-making programme. As for the military domain, ECOMOG showed lack of military experience and professionalism. The unavailability of naval and aerial force, poor intelligence and communication, command and control, along with inefficient logistics and low standard operating procedures among member states, deeply affected the whole operation from its beginning: hence the local joke that ECOMOG was an acronym for '*Every Car or Moving Object Gone*' (Tuck, 2000: 9). Moreover, ECOMOG was blamed for its strong political ambiguity. Firstly, it was highlighted that ECOMOG was an alliance of authoritarian regimes (Nigeria, Côte d'Ivoire, etc.) promoting democracy abroad (Hutchful, 1999; Ero, 2000). Similarly, Nigerian claims to act as a regional power were stressed by some ECOWAS countries, such as Burkina Faso, thus revealing a further cleavage within the sub-regional organisation, namely the fear of Nigerian dominance from Francophone countries. In fact, ECOMOG started to be affected – since its creation – by the same cleavages that have been historically involving ECOWAS, such as regional rivalries, e.g. the Anglophone-versus-Francophone countries competition, and the mistrust towards the Nigerian leading role.

As for the operations in the field, ECOMOG had erratically shifted several times from peacekeeping – under the Ghanaian command – to peace enforcement, and then implemented peacekeeping again at the end of the eight month-long operation. For its part, Taylor's truces were basically tactical, agreed upon more by the need to reorganize its forces than by a genuine desire to put an end to the conflict. In fact, some armed groups believed that the benefits of a continuation of the war would have been greater than those deriving from a peace agreement.

Having said that, observers agreed that the outcomes on the intervention were blurred. In fact, further UN peacekeeping missions (the United Nations Observer Mission in Liberia from 1993 to 1997) and regional agreements (the 1993 Cotonou Agreement and the 1995

Abuja Agreement) were necessary in order to stabilise the country and schedule the 1997 free elections which were won, eventually, by Taylor himself (Tuck, 2000).

As shown in the following sections, ECOMOG's performances in Sierra Leone will not fully capitalise from its previous experience in Liberia.

## ECOMOG II: The Intervention in Sierra Leone

Although ECOMOG's intervention in Liberia is a paradigmatic case of sub-regional multilateral peacekeeping, this analysis will focus on the second intervention of ECOMOG in West Africa, i.e. the involvement in Sierra Leone (1997-2000) – also known as 'ECOMOG II' (Mortimer, 2000) – which is less known and documented.

A number of factors should be considered before introducing this intervention.

Firstly, ECOMOG II is somehow linked to ECOMOG in Liberia, due to the spillover effect (Fawole, 2001) of the Liberian Civil War: Charles Taylor supported the RUF that smuggled diamonds to neighbouring Liberia and purchased weapons and ammunition there. Secondly ECOMOG II in Sierra Leone was affected by the same legal constraints and technical deficiencies as the first intervention in Liberia, due to the controversial application of the ECOWAS treaties. Thirdly, ECOMOG II intervened along with a plurality of armed groups, ranging from ethnic-based local militias, to PMCs (EO/Sandline International<sup>1</sup>), foreign armies (the British army), which were simultaneously operating in Sierra Leone: as a result, it is not easy to accurately assess ECOMOG II – and namely to what extent it contributed to the end of the Sierra Leone Civil War. Finally, the predominant Nigerian presence within ECOMOG II – even more than in Liberia – led in to be considered more a unilateral armed intervention by a third country, rather than a regional peacekeeping mission, thus determining inevitable concerns of interference in the internal affairs of another state. The intervention started when the Nigerian army – that had in Sierra Leone its headquarters (ECOMOG Forward Operation Base) for the operations carried out in Liberia – provided the first response following the military coup (25 May 1996) led by J. P. Koroma and its Armed Forces Ruling Council (AFRC) that had overthrown the democratically-elected President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah. The coup, carried out by a group of disgruntled army officers who soon teamed up with the RUF rebels, marked the acme of the collusion between the army and the RUF, as demonstrated by the role of the 'shadow state' and the 'sobels', thus determining 'a strangely co-operative conflict' (Keen, 2005: 107). Soon after Kabbah was overthrown, the Nigerians took control of the strategic positions in the country and tried to repel the coup leaders in early June 1997 through the operation codenamed 'Sandstorm', which had been planned together with the Civil Defence Forces led by Sam Hinga Norman. A week later, another military operation led to the Nigerian recapture of Lungi (Adeshina, 2000: 14-16; Gberie, 2005).

In the meantime, Nigeria went on searching for a diplomatic solution too: ECOWAS, then chaired by the Nigerian head of state General Sani Abacha, decreed economic sanctions

<sup>1</sup> The 'Arms-to-Africa affair' is another example of the complex scenario where ECOMOG was involved. This incident refers to the late-1997 importing of weapons in apparent violation of the UN Security Council Resolution 1132 – which obliged member states to prevent their nationals from importing arms to Sierra Leone – through the British PMC Sandline International. Rakesh Saxena, an Indian financier, was allegedly supposed to fund a plan – supported by the ousted president Kabbah and Sandline International – of hiring mercenaries with the aim to overthrow Koroma. Later, the plan partly aborted following the arrest of Saxena in Thailand and only involved an arms transfer from Bourgos, Bulgaria to Lungi, Sierra Leone: this arms and ammunition load from the Bulgarian National Arms Company included a Soviet-made Mi-17 and further air equipment that had helped ECOMOG in its operation. The scandal in the United Kingdom emerged in early 1998 when it appeared that both the British High Commissioner in Sierra Leone, Peter Penfold and the Foreign Office had given a tacit approval to the arms transfer. Finally, the Arms-to-Africa affair led some observers to further blame ECOMOG in Sierra Leone for its reliance on mercenaries and their legitimization in order to enforce peace (Ero, 2000: 62-63).

that ECOMOG should have put in place and established the Committee of Four (made up of Nigeria, Ghana, Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire, and later extended to Liberia) in order to negotiate the return of the civilian government with the military junta. Then, these efforts were endorsed by the UN Security Council Resolution N.º 1132 of 8 October, 1997 – upon request by the United Kingdom – that imposed sanctions on oil products and arms supplies.

The regional rivalries that had characterized ECOMOG's intervention in Liberia emerged here again. In fact, some countries (mainly the ECOWAS francophone countries) argued that the goal of ECOMOG was the application of the embargo and not the use of force against the Freetown junta, while the Nigerian minister of foreign affair and ECOWAS Chairman Tom Ikimi, for his part, was convinced that regional peacekeeping was the key strategy in order to respond to the crisis in Sierra Leone (Mortimer, 2000: 198; Fawole, 2001: 17-18).

However, these disagreements did not prevent Sani Abacha from ordering the invasion of Sierra Leone, on 5 February, 1998, in the name of collective security. Within a week, after a carefully planned operation with the help of air force and ground troops, the Nigerian commander of the ECOMOG Peacekeeping Force, Colonel Maxwell Khobe, entered Freetown at the head of Nigerian troops, moving from the eastern suburbs. It was clear that the operation had been prepared in advance and the goal of bringing Kabbah's legitimate government back to power was achieved. Nigeria, under the auspices of ECOMOG, had unilaterally decided to evacuate the coup leaders from Freetown. Unlike what had happened seven years earlier in Liberia, no attempt was made by ECOWAS to legitimize the intervention on the basis of existing protocols – the 1978 Protocol on Non-Aggression and 1981 Defense Protocol. On the contrary, Nigeria leveraged on the widespread disapproval of the coup to justify its expedition. Abuja's troops made up 90 percent of the entire ECOMOG contingent (around 12,000 out of 13,000), while Ghana and Guinea had 600 men each, and Mali 500 (Adebajo, 2002: 91). In addition, Colonel Khobe was appointed by Kabbah as Chief of Staff of the Sierra Leonean army, with the aim of reforming it. Along with the triumphant Nigerian entry into Freetown, the unilateral conduct of operations and the continued use of air bombings further increased the mistrust from the francophone ECOWAS countries towards Nigeria. However, Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso at the same time continued to show their unwillingness to send their own troops.

Originally, the intervention had three main goals, namely *i*) restoring the Kabbah government; *ii*) training and supporting the Sierra Leonean army; and *iii*) chasing the RUF and the AFRC. Only the first two goals were accomplished. As for the third goal, given that the rebels and the junta had retreated into the bush, ECOMOG chased them eastward and liberated Lunsar and Makeni, relying on the air force support. Subsequently, ECOMOG headed towards the rich diamond area of Kono, with the aim to occupy the district and establish a headquarters in Koidu. However, the rebels' 'hit and run' tactics began causing heavy losses to the Nigerian contingent. Then, military operations moved to the northern territories of Karene and Koinadugu in the spring of 1998, where the rebels were pursued with the aviation support. At the end of July, rebels attacked the diamond district (31 July 1998), taking back the city of Kabala after having pretended to be refugees and having freely circulated in the area in the previous days (Adeshina, 2002: 93-94). The rebels were reorganizing themselves, while ECOMOG did not succeed in liberating the diamond-rich area of Kono and started to think about an exit strategy. In September 1998, ECOMOG lost the liberated territory, as the rebels – still in control of several diamond mines and led by Sam 'Mosquito' Bockarie (Sankoh had been arrested months earlier in Nigeria, where

he had gone to buy weapons) – attacked Freetown during the “No Living Thing” operation (6 Jan. 1999). It was precisely in the attempt to recover Freetown (during the operation code-named ‘Death Before Dishonour’) that ECOMOG’s troops were blamed for atrocities (Gberie, 2005: 131).

Finally, suffering almost 700 casualties, the Nigerian Army decided it would withdraw by May 1999, also as a result of power being shifted from the military to the civilians (President Olusegun Obasanjo). Actually, ECOMOG withdrawal completed only in May 2000 in a context of tensions and mutual accusations (illicit diamond trafficking, collusion with the RUF, etc.) between the UN and Nigeria over ECOMOG’s role in Sierra Leone (Montague, 2002; Gberie, 2003). Following the Nigerian withdrawal and the failure of the controversial Lomé Peace Agreement<sup>2</sup> in July 1999, the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) peacekeeping operation was launched, thus replacing both the United Nations Observer Mission in Sierra Leone (UNOMSIL) and ECOMOG, and shifting the commitment to the international community and the UN.

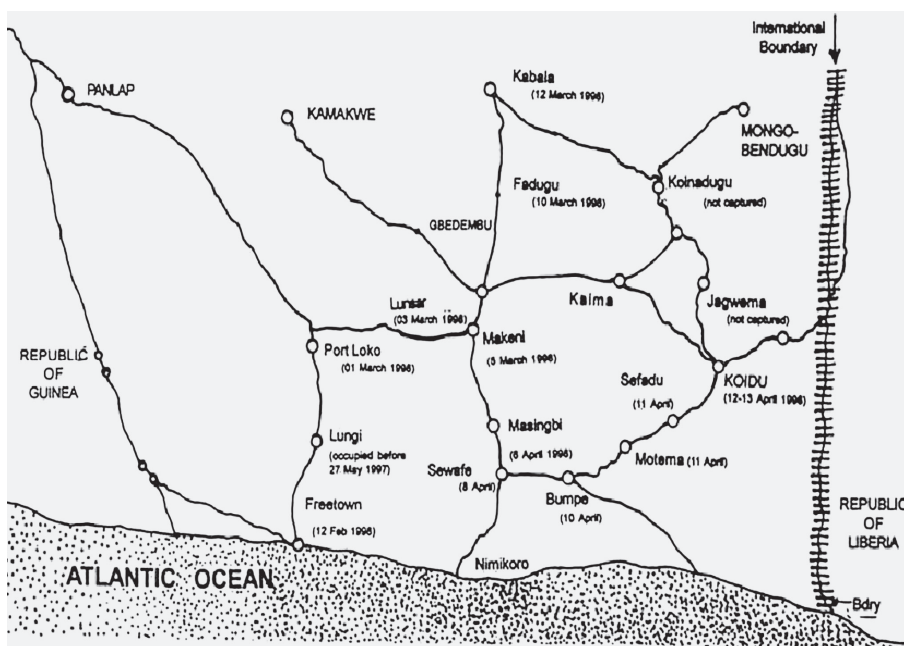


Ilustração 02 – Areas liberated by ECOMOG by June 1998 (Adeshina, 2002: 49).

## Assessing EO and ECOMOG Interventions

Neither EO nor ECOMOG were able to end the Sierra Leone Civil War. A number of factors, including the joint effort by the UNAMSIL, the *Kamajors*, the British military intervention in May 2000 (the 2<sup>nd</sup> largest UK intervention after the Falklands/Malvinas

<sup>2</sup> The Lomé Peace Agreement signed on the 7<sup>th</sup> of July 1999 was heavily criticized for being an appeasement towards the rebels. In particular, the agreement granted Foday Sankoh a position in the transitional government (vice president and Chairman of the Commission for the Management of Strategic Resources) as well as amnesty for him and all combatants. As a result, the Lomé Peace Agreement was considered ‘*A feast for the sobels*’ by Adebajo, 2002: 79.



War that saved UNAMSIL from the brink of collapse and shifted the power in favour of the Kabbah government), and the arrest of Foday Sankoh in Freetown, led to the end of conflict in January 2002.

However, as already said, it is difficult to precisely assess to what extent both private security involvements and sub-regional peacekeeping contributed to the end of the civil war.

As for EO, it has been argued that the short-lasting stabilisation provided did not convert into a viable peacekeeping option. The intervention in Sierra Leone – following a previous engagement in Angola (1993) and further activities in sub-Saharan Africa<sup>3</sup> – marked the start of the debate on private security. This debate hinged on different aspects, namely international law, legitimacy, human rights and international humanitarian law records, and accountability. In particular, international law has been challenged by the PMCs since their rise, due to the ambiguous definition of mercenary provided by the 1949 UN Protocols and the 1997 Organisation of African Unity Convention. At the national level, some steps forward have been made by South Africa through the *Regulation of Foreign Military Assistance Act* (which caused EO to close officially in 1999), which was enacted in 1998 and toughened in 2006 with the *Prohibition of Mercenary Activity Bill*. These laws explicitly prohibit the recruitment of nationals abroad. In terms of legitimacy, the question is whether EO jeopardized the nation's monopoly on the use of force, thus undermining national security structures, or whether it was a viable, cost-effective option, taking into account the state of the Sierra Leonean military and the threat represented by the RUF. Training the army was supposed to be an investment in confidence-building: this is often a common pattern in some PMC interventions. However, when mercenaries and contractors are perceived as competitors by local officers, increasing tensions are more likely to emerge. This was the case in Sierra Leone, where pay disparities and the perceived risk to military corporate interests led to a lack of confidence and widespread mistrust towards the PMCs from the military (Shearer, 1998). Further issues at stake relate to human rights and international humanitarian law records. According to foreign non-governmental organisation employees in Sierra Leone, injured civilians were reported to be brought to the hospital after that EO's air force flew over Freetown (Chatterjee, 1997). Finally, this links to accountability: in fact, the unavailability of reliable sources of PMC interventions (EO in Sierra Leone as well) is quite frequent, due to the lack of publicity, the opacity around contracts and network ties, the controversial image of the mercenary soldiers, and the unwillingness of the client state to reveal its reliance on private security (Singer, 2003; Renou *et al.*, 2005).

Regarding ECOMOG, it should be stressed that it contributed to stabilise the capital Freetown – although further military involvements were later necessary – but it proved unable to solidly defeat the rebels and secure the surrounding countryside (Berman & Sams, 2000: 119). However, the end of this intervention in 2000 and its follow-ups led many analysts to assess it either in comparison with private security, or with an eye on previous and contemporary African regional and/or sub-regional peacekeeping involvements. The reasons for ECOMOG 'defeat' were deemed both military and political.

The operations in the field soon revealed that ECOMOG mandate and rules of engagement were unclear and not fully agreed upon by ECOMOG countries: in particular, peace

<sup>3</sup> In 2015, Specialized Tasks, Training, Equipment and Protection (STTEP International, Ltd), a South African PMC born from the ashes of EO, intervened against Boko Haram, the Islamic terrorist group in Nigeria. It was an unprecedented use of PMCs against Islamic extremist groups, though STTEP intervention and previous EO efforts in sub-Saharan Africa reveal many similarities, including in terms of results (Bisbjerg, 2016; Freeman, 2015; Nossiter, 2015). For a report of the 1993 EO intervention in Angola, see Shearer, 1998: 46-48.

enforcement would have been preferable in Sierra Leone at that moment, rather than peacekeeping or peacemaking, but ECOMOG countries had different military approaches. Then, poor logistics was due to both persistent financial constraints and third countries' difficulties in funding a non-UN peacekeeping operation. This coupled with the lack of equipment – armored vehicles, ambulances, communication equipment, spare parts, uniforms, medicines, food – and poor intervention planning, poor knowledge of terrain and widespread mistrust towards the *Kamajors* who were supposed to operate as ECO-MOG allies. This situation determined the low morale of the troops and added to further tensions, such as the limited turnover, the pay differences with UN soldiers, as well as the grievances within ECOMOG between Ghanians and Nigerians – the former blaming the Nigerian contingent for occupying the majority of the leadership positions within ECOMOG, and the latter claiming they were the only ones to carry the burden of the operation.

As for the political reasons of ECOMOG 'heroic failure' (Gberie, 2003) or 'Pyrrhic victory' (Berman & Sams, 2000: 118), at first it should be noted that there were no conditions for ECOMOG intervention in Sierra Leone to fall under the specifications provided by the ECOWAS protocols. In fact, the Defense Council, the Defense Commission and the Allied Armed Forces of the Community – aimed at implementing the protocols – were not operating at that time. As a result, Nigeria unilaterally decided to intervene and later claimed to act under the auspices of ECOMOG. Similarly, it was not possible to call ECOWAS to the rescue as the Liberian Samuel Doe did in 1990: in fact, the possibility that the overthrown Kabbah government could still exercise authority should be ruled out (Fawole, 2001). This background led the ECOWAS countries to feel a widespread mistrust towards Nigeria's attitude, thus fearing that Abuja could pursue a hidden agenda during its intervention in Sierra Leone. For sure, Nigerians had their foreign policy targets, namely pushing ahead Nigeria's aspirations as a regional power and attempting to avoid sanctions to their dictatorial regime: an option was that of playing the role of a reliable regional power able to provide regional security in West Africa. Finally, the opportunity to gain mineral concessions cannot be ruled out, given the widespread corruption within the government and the military, and the accusations of illicit diamond trafficking involving Nigerian military officers<sup>4</sup>. Then, another factor weakening the political dimension of the intervention was the controversial relationship between Nigeria and the international community that ambiguously relied on Abuja as a viable tool for sub-regional peacekeeping, but at the same time considered it a pariah state for its dictatorial regime and the alleged role in international drug trafficking. Similarly, Abuja feared that ECOMOG would easily become the scapegoat of the international community in the event of further interventions and failures. Then, there was growing resentment for the alleged ingratitude of the international community towards a country that had been in frontline but felt to be treated by the western media and human rights activists as a gang of assassins and mercenaries (Adebajo, 2002; Olonisakin, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> The accusations against Nigeria for the questionable conduct within ECOMOG were published in a confidential report by UNAMSIL Head General Vijay Jetley of India addressed to the United Nations in September 2000. Nigerian officials and civilians were accused of having attempted to sabotage the UN mission by colluding with the RUF in order to prolong the conflict and benefit from the illicit trafficking of diamonds. These declarations involved General Khobe himself (nicknamed 'Ten Million Dollar Man'), who was accused of having pocketed \$ 10 million to allow the RUF to continue its activities. The Nigerians opposed these allegations and requested the removal of Jetley, threatening not to take orders and accusing him to adduce lies in order to hide his ineptitude. A Kenyan general was called to replace Jetley and New Delhi, in retaliation, withdrew its contingent which was promptly replaced by 4,000 Pakistani soldiers (Gberie, 2005: 168-169; Montague, 2002: 236).

**Tabela 01 – A comparison between EO and ECOMOG interventions in Sierra Leone**

<u>EO in Sierra Leone (1995)</u>	<u>ECOMOG in Sierra Leone (1998-2000)</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Client:</b> National governments</li> <li>• <b>Opponent:</b> Armed groups with political aspirations (RUF)</li> <li>• <b>Payment:</b> Mineral concessions/Cash (The EO-Branch-Energy network)</li> <li>• <b>Results:</b> Ephemeral military/political success: restart and/or prolongation of conflict</li> <li>• <b>Comments:</b> Controversial positions between those considering PMCs a tool of conflict solutions and those questioning about HR records, legitimacy and accountability.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Client:</b> same</li> <li>• <b>Opponent:</b> same</li> <li>• <b>Payment:</b> None (speculations of widespread corruptions and diamonds used as a commodity-based payment to the Nigerian army)</li> <li>• <b>Results:</b> Blurred: The conflict ends only in 2002 following further developments</li> <li>• <b>Comments:</b> Despite military, political and legal limitations. ECOMOG II in Sierra Leone avoided further sufferings to the Sierra Leoneans, especially in 1999, and prevented Freetown at the cost of hundreds of Nigerian soldires.</li> </ul>

## West Africa between Private Security and ECOWAS/ECOMOG Developments

Nowadays, private security is increasingly perceived as more acceptable than in the past. This is also due to some recent developments concerning private security, such as the huge deployment of Western contractors not only in Africa (Aty & Elaggoune, 2019), but also in Iraq and Afghanistan as employees of Private Security Companies – allegedly less controversial than PMCs.

As a result, the *case for* PMCs now relies on assumptions, such as: **i)** they increase the military independence of African states, which do not need to rely on the intervention of foreign countries; **ii)** Their codes of conduct (many PMCs autonomously decide to apply a set of rules) would prevent unacceptable behaviour on the battlefield; **iii)** They are legally registered, highly dynamic, highly-trained, quick and easy to deploy, and to some extent cost-effective. In 2003, the International Peace Operation Organization consortium – now International Stability Operations Association – launched one of the best known initiatives relating to the use of private security in peacekeeping missions: this consortium proposed the UN to support the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo with air surveillance and humanitarian support for \$100-200 million. Another proposal came from a Green Paper released by the British government in 2002 (Norton-Taylor, 2002). This envisaged hiring PMCs for peacekeeping missions in order to reduce costs and political constraints, such as the reluctance to send national troops. However, many concerns within the British parliament halted the political, highly-controversial debate over the use of PMCs as peacekeepers.

The failure of these initiatives demonstrates that there is still strong scepticism about private security capabilities as a tool of conflict resolution and/or peacekeeping. In fact, the *case against* PMCs highlights some key points. Accountability is one of the most important. The difficulty of implementing and enforcing checks-and-balance systems and political oversight derives from the problem of determining to whom PMCs are accountable and who can effectively guarantee oversight. Similarly, it is difficult to define a legitimate client: EO tended to consider sovereign and internationally-recognized governments as legitimate, even though there was a military junta ruling in Sierra Leone at the time of the intervention. Regarding accountability, some observers warn of the risk of ‘adverse selection’ (Singer, 2003: 221) that might allow disreputable players to do their job at a lower cost. Neutrality and reliability is another key point. As already discussed, EO’s interventions in Sierra Leone seemed to be part of a larger plot involving mineral corporations

and prolonged the conflict. Moreover, the survival of the government in exchange for the alienation of natural resources looked like ‘imperialism by invitation’ (Singer, 2003: 167). Within similar contexts, one may assume that PMCs are primarily responsive not to their clients, but rather to their stakeholders (Renou *et al.*, 2005: 171-3). Then, efficiency and cost-effectiveness are challenged by further evidence. On the one hand, EO’s interventions in Sierra Leone revealed that PMCs are more likely to intervene if the client state is a commodity-rich country. On the other hand, some studies (Singer, 2003; Leander, 2005) have revealed that the supply in the market for private security tends to self-perpetuate, as supply creates its own demand: in fact, private security is skilled in marketing its services, thus increasing the perceived need for military services, selling alleged customer-tailored services and maximising their profits. Moreover, given that private security often offers better salaries than public forces, it drains human resources and diminishes the status of public armed forces, further reducing public investments. Finally, starting from this premises, it can be said that the development of a market for force ultimately undermines (rather than helps) the consolidation of public security in the weakest African states (Leander, 2005: 618).

On the contrary, multilateral peacekeeping enforced by African regional and/or sub-regional organizations (Adebajo, 2004) is still being used as the most viable option for conflict resolution, even though previous and existing peacekeeping interventions have not been successful enough, due to the reasons presented in the previous sections: political ambiguity (reluctance, overlapping of conflicting national interests), lack of economic resources, poor coordination, absence of peacekeeping expertise, etc. Current tools for peacekeeping in Africa include the African Union’s African Stand-by Force (Kent & Malan, 2003) that was deployed within the framework of the African Union Monitoring Mission in Sudan (2004-2007) and the African Union Mission in Somalia (2007-to date), and ECOMOG itself that was also deployed in Guinea Bissau (1998), following Liberia and Sierra Leone (Aning, 2000 and 2004; Ero, 2000; Gberie, 2003; Olonisakin, 2000) and before a new series of involvements in more recent times.

In particular, ECOWAS has evolved a comprehensive conflict management and security framework and has made significant achievements in conflict management in the West African sub-region. ECOMOG, for its part, has been incorporated into the new security framework (De Wet, 2014; Odobo *et al.*, 2017; Agbo *et al.*, 2018). In particular, the ECO-WAS Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security, established in 1999, is aimed at responding to the inadequacy of the previously existing Protocols to address with emerging security issues (such as in Liberia and Sierra Leone). The ECOWAS Mechanism comprises a framework that would ensure wide consultation and inclusiveness of relevant stakeholders in managing issues that affect sub-regional security. It is made up of **i)** The Authority of Heads of State and Government, which is the decision making apex; **ii)** The Mediation and Security Council, which deliberates on all matters of peace and security on behalf of the Authority and represents a replica of the United Nations Security Council at sub-regional level; **iii)** The Defence and Security Commission, which assesses all technical issues and reviews logistical requirements for any peacekeeping missions; and **iv)** The Council of Elders: it is a body of preventive diplomacy made up of eminent and prominent individuals such as renowned diplomats and religious leaders working as mediators, conciliators, or facilitators. Furthermore, the ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance has been established (2001) with the aim of taking into account the underlying (political) triggers of instability, conflicts and insecurity, a with focus on human rights, the rule of law, and government’s commitment to delivering good governance, free, fair and credible elections. Finally, the

ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework aims at preventing the conflict outbreak, escalation, spread or relapse, once a conflict has already started. It comprises the ECOWAS Early Warning and Response Network, designed to help ECOWAS member states predict the emerging conflicts and facilitate interventions (Odobó *et al.*, 2017: 145-149).

Following Sierra Leone, ECOMOG deployed peacekeepers in Guinea-Bissau in 1998, after the outbreak of an armed conflict between the president and rebel military chief. It was ECOMOG's last pre-Mechanism involvement. Although ECOMOG force was undermanned and heavily dependent on French and Portuguese logistical support (De Wet, 2014: 363) – Nigeria not being involved – this intervention marked some improvements in terms of efficacy in comparison with the former experiences in Liberia and Sierra Leone. ECOWAS institutional developments have positively affected in-field performances. Post-Mechanism operations comprise the interventions in Côte d'Ivoire (2002), Liberia (2003) and the Gambia (2017-to date). As for ECOWAS Mission in Côte d'Ivoire (1,478 troops), it was quickly deployed in October 2002. It was mainly financed by France and carried out by Senegal, Ghana, Niger, Togo and Benin, provided with the mandate of monitoring the ceasefire and assisting the government of national reconciliation in maintaining law and order, the disarmament of armed factions, humanitarian assistance, and the protection of United Nations personnel. Then, ECOWAS launched in 2003 a peacekeeping mission named ECOMIL to halt the occupation of Monrovia by the rebel force and to ensure that transition to democracy was successful (Agbo *et al.*, 2018: 27): ECOMIL succeeded in preventing a conflict escalation and monitoring the ceasefire. These two interventions revealed an effective pattern of burden-sharing in multilateral peacekeeping, namely the 'first-instance enforcement action' (De Wet, 2014: 363) by sub-regional organisations (ECOWAS/ECOMOG) before the huge involvements by the United Nations. In fact, in both cases, the UN soon replaced and absorbed the ECOMOG contingent through the United Nations Mission in Côte d'Ivoire and the United Nations Mission in Liberia. Finally, ECOWAS has deployed a mission in the Gambia (ECOMIG) in 2017 which is currently ongoing and is aimed at restoring the breakdown of the internal order, following a harsh dispute over the country's presidency: ECOMOG is provided with a UN endorsement that does not imply the use of military means.

These developments seem to recall the enthusiastic remarks of some observers, who thought in 2000 that the retention of the ECOMOG would be in the interest of the security of the West African sub-region (Saliu, 2000). However, analysts recommend that more steps forward still need to be done in order to enable these achievements to convert into fully-effective peacekeeping strategies. In particular, peace-building efforts should also address poverty, human rights abuses and election fraud as well as more synergy and political will to handle religious extremism in the sub-region (Odobó *et al.*, 2017: 143). In other words, it is argued that the securitisation of West Africa and its economic integration and development strategies still need more institution building that enhances democratic consolidation, the rule of law, the respect for and protection of the minorities, etc. (Agbo *et al.*, 2018: 32). Without reaching these requirements, ECOWAS' goals will not be fully attained.

## Conclusions

Neo-mercenary interventions are carried out by PMCs that keep a strong corporate structure – this being their most interesting feature that distinguish them from 'old' mercenaries. Since the 1990s, there has been a growing demand and supply of security

services in sub-Saharan Africa: low-intensity conflicts, new wars and state decay often set the conditions for private security business.

At the opposite of the privatization of war, regional and sub-regional peacekeeping have their roots in the 1960s, namely during the debate on shared frameworks for collective security: however, this approach did not convert into real opportunities for effective regional and sub-regional peacekeeping until the end of 1990s.

The Sierra Leone civil war – due to the insurgence of rebel movements eager to seize power and the state resources, thus leading to governmental inability and state collapse – represents the case study for both private security and sub-regional peacekeeping involvements. It can be argued that both interventions revealed a lot of military and political shortcomings and did not accomplish their goals. However, some clarifications can be made. EO claimed it had been able to defeat the RUF, but it provided only a short-lived security umbrella that seemed more investment-oriented rather than genuine peacekeeping. ECOMOG intervened in a complex scenario and – despite a number of deficiencies and ambiguities – succeeded in stabilising Freetown and enabled further peacekeeping interventions to finally put an end to the conflict in Sierra Leone. In other words, ECOMOG was the tile – albeit defective – of a mosaic represented by the universally-accepted multinational peacekeeping framework (the UN and regional organisations somehow inspired to it) whose moral acceptance goes far beyond the limits of private security.

Despite the best efforts of PMCs and their attempts to be seen as acceptable, accountable, responsive and reliable, a number of issues regarding efficiency, accountability and cost-effectiveness still remain unresolved. Some argue that PMCs are much cheaper than multinational peacekeeping (Brooks, 2000), but one should wonder who will ultimately pay for them (Olonisakin, 1999: 234-235). If the cost is to be met by foreign companies, it is likely that the security provided will be primarily targeted at the safety of those companies, and the majority of people will bear the human and material costs of war.

Finally, investing in regional and sub-regional peacekeeping in West Africa seems to be the best option to overturn that new neoliberalism-style security assumption through which security is basically a commodity and only those who are able to pay for it will benefit. Regionalising peacekeeping and empowering both states and sub-regional organisation to commit to sub-regional security not only avoids the mercerization of the national security domain in West Africa, but also enables economic integration and development as major goals of ECOWAS (Agbo *et al.*, 2018: 18).

## Acronyms

CEDEAO – Communauté économique des États de l'Afrique de l'ouest

ECOMIG – ECOWAS Mission in The Gambia

ECOMIL – ECOWAS Mission in Liberia

ECOMOG – Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group

ECOWAS – Economic Community of West African States

EO – Executive Outcomes

GSG – Gurkha Security Guards

OAU – Organisation of African Unity

PMC – Private Military Company

RUF – Revolutionary United Front

UN – United Nations

UNAMSIL – United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone

UNOMSIL – United Nations Observer Mission in Sierra Leone

US – United States

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