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*Nigeria in West Africa Peacekeeping Operations: A Study of the Sierra Leone Crisis, 1997-2002*

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**Abstract**

This study examined the concept of peacekeeping as an activity aimed at resolving, preventing and halting military action, with a view to uphold law and order in a conflict zone. Peacekeeping is seen as a global conflict management system, which aims at employing a non-violent, rather than enforcement ethic. This study traced the roots of the civil war in Sierra Leone to the excesses of a corrupt elite, political misrule, and the deteriorating economic condition and collapse of the country's diamond revenues. The study adopted the conflict resolution theory as the framework of analysis. Based on the data, the study found that the challenges of regional peace and security, and national interest, accounted for Nigeria's intervention and peacekeeping roles in Sierra Leone. The success recorded by the Nigeria-led ECOMOG in Sierra Leone testified to Nigeria's dominant position in West Africa, and a reflection of the capacity of her army to requite itself creditably as a reliable African peace enforcement military body. The Nigerian military will continue to play essential roles in the sub-region so long as armed conflicts that require intervention are emerging. Nonetheless, Nigerian leaders should not merely be satisfied with the ability of the Nigerian armed forces to pursue peacekeeping operations. Part of our recommendations is that it is important to embark on preventive measures that can break the cycles of violence in the region, in order to immunize the loss of resources that might arise from avoidable conflicts.

**1. Introduction**

In Africa continent, West Africa is currently the most volatile conflict-ridden and unstable sub-region. 37 out of 73 successful military coup d' etats in Africa (about 50%) between 1960 and 1990 occurred in West Africa sub-region with about a third of the membership of the Organization of Africa Unity (OAU) now African Union (AU) (Adebayo, 2002:40). In the last decade, local bush fires have ranged from Liberia to Sierra Leone to Guinea to Guinea-Bissau to Senegal in interconnected web of instability. Liberia and Sierra Leone among others have been embroiled in protracted civil wars. Guinea-Bissau experienced conflict in the last 1990s. Casamance separationists have continued to battle Senegalese government for two decades, the Tuareg problem have

*The prevention, containment, moderation and termination of hostilities between or within states through the medium of third-party intervention organized and directed internally, using multinational, military, police and civilian personnel to restore and maintain peace. (Adeleke cited in Isumomoh, 2005:195).*

It presumes an end to violent hostilities or a ceasefire that has to be maintained to avoid the re-occurrence of violence. As such, it includes observer's missions, maintenance of ceasefire, election monitoring and limited use of force for self defense.

However, the concept of peacekeeping flows from the idea of peaceful settlement of disputes engraved in the UN Charter Article 2(7) of the Charter provides:

*All members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, or in any other manner inconsistent with the purpose of United Nations (United Nations Charter, 1945).*

Bassey (1993) sees it as a confidence building "regime" directed towards the localization, stabilization and eventual resolution of global flashpoints. As a confidence regime, peacekeeping activities are directed towards dispelling mistrust, mitigating tensions and opening the way for further security cooperation between states. Peacekeeping gives international prominence to regional conflicts and thereby places the disputants on notice that their behaviour must become congruent with international norms (Hampson, 1990:46).

The United Nations itself conceptualizes peacekeeping as:

*An operation involving military personnel, but without enforcement powers, undertaken by United Nations to help maintain or restore international peace and security in areas of conflicts" (UN, 1991:4).*

As a concept, peacekeeping involves the use of multinational military, civil police and in some cases civilian personnel for the prevention, containment and termination of crisis which the United Nations or any other international organizations feels might threaten international peace and security (Akintola cited in Okeke, 2009). It is used to describe certain military actions authorized by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and geared towards supervising ceasefire agreements and separating belligerents in conflicts situations. Boutros B. Ghali described it as the deployment of a United Nations presence on the field, hitherto with the consent of all parties concerned. Such presence to him expands the possibilities for both the prevention of conflicts and making of peace (Ghali, 1992).

In 1985, Steven handed over the reins of power to his loyal Army Chief, General Joseph Momoh, who inherited a divided APC, a weak Army and an economic crisis. The downward economic spiral continued under Momoh; between 1984 and 1992, official diamond export declined as a percentage of total exports from 31 to 21 percent, and 33 to 50 percent of diamond were thought to be smuggled out of the country (Richards, 1997:45). Between 1980 and 1987, state spending on health and education declined by 60% and in 1988, Momoh was unable to pay arrears of the country's debt even as inflation reached triple digits (Reno, 1998:116-118). These governance failures mirrored those faced by Master-Sergeant Samuel Doe on the eve of Liberia's civil war in 1989 with similar catastrophic results.

The ethnic war in Liberia has its contagious effect in Sierra Leone where a seemingly ethnic strife raged over six years. Besides, Sierra Leone politics has its own peculiar internal dynamics which principally revolves around the military and civil populace as the major opposing parties. Sierra Leone had its own age long tradition of political instability inspired by coups and counter-coups. It recorded two coup within three days in 1967. The third was in 1968 (Ajayi, 2003:171). Many attempted and aborted coups were planned against the Momoh regime before it was finally ousted in the fourth successful coup in 1992 by Captain Valetine Strasser. Yet the fifth and sixth coup took place respectively in February 1996 when Brigadier-General Julius Bio toppled Strasser in a counter-coup. And in May 25, 1997 Major Johny Koromah ousted the democratically elected regime of President Kabbah whose election was the first in a multiparty system in 23 years (Ajayi, 2003).

The Sierra Leone's civil war erupted in March 1991, when RUF rebels consisting of about 300 Sierra Leonean fighters who with Liberian members of the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) had received military training in guerrilla warfare in Libya and Burkina Faso, invaded diamond-rich Southeastern Sierra Leone from Liberia and conducted a guerrilla war with the government while terrorizing and looting the country side. This unlikely coalition of rebels, rabble-rousers, and renegades led by roaring photographer, plunged the country into a protracted decade-long civil war (Adebajo, 2002:83).

Taylor had promised that Sierra Leone would "taste war" for its support of ECOMOG efforts in Liberia. Freetown had been the staging post of ECOMOG intervention in Liberia in August 1990 and remains the rear base for Nigerian soldiers in Liberia and the base for Nigeria's jets used in bombing NPFL position in Liberia. Taylor's other three main motives in spite of the above for backing the rebels is to (i) force the withdrawal of Sierra Leone from ECOMOG, (ii) to help install his RUF allies in power in Freetown (iii) to profit from diamond trade in Sierra Leone.

But the RUF rebels failed to rally local support for their cause. Their brutal methods, including beating, torture, execution and mutilation, alienated the rural population. As Yusuf Bangura noted:

Nigeria's involvement in the peacekeeping operation in Sierra Leone was largely under the arrangement referred to as ECOMOG II. In Sierra Leone, the Tejan Kabbah government was confronted by a brutal insurgence by the RUF led by Corporal Sankoh. On 25 May 1997, Major Jonny Koromah ousted the regime in a coup d'état. The combination of institutional foreign policy mandate, moral/humanitarian appeal and the desire of sub-regional order and stability for economic development have acted as the needed push for Nigeria not only to assume the responsibility to intervene and protect, but also more importantly to assume a leading role in peacekeeping operations in West Africa. These considerations dictated her leading role in the formation and operations of ECOMOG since 1990. ECOMOG was able to halt and arrest the further carnage that took place in the sub-region and re-instated the elected government of Kabbah in March, 1998 by overthrowing the Junta. Nigerian led-ECOMOG in conjunction with the UN mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) successfully ended the crisis. The disarmament of the factions was completed by January 2002. Parliamentary and presidential election conducted on May 2002.

#### 4. THEORETICAL DISCOURSE

The occurrence of conflict in human societies seems pervasive. It is an unbidden phenomenon and is found in every nook and cranny of the world. It engenders interaction at all levels more intense than that of competition. Although as Schelling cited in Cunningham (1998) argues, conflict, competition and cooperation are inherently interdependent. Conflicts occur when competing groups objectives, needs or values, clash and aggression, although not necessarily violence, is a result. To this extent, the various organs of the world body and the efforts put so far have not borne much fruit as evidenced by increasing incidence of wars and conflicts in virtually every part of the globe, and especially in Africa in the post colonial and post-cold war era. To this extent, the study adapts conflict resolution theory as expounded by John W. Burton (1998).

John Burton (1998) states that:

*If conflict resolution is to be taken seriously, if it is to be more than just introducing altered perceptions and good will into some specific situations, it has to be assumed that societies must adjust to the needs of people, and not the other way around...*

Burton (2001:31) clearly asserts that:

*Conflict resolution means termination of conflict by methods that are analytical and that get to the root of the problem. Conflict resolution, as opposed to mere management or settlement, points to an outcome that, in the view of the parties involved, is a permanent solution to a problem.*

From the above, Burton distinguishes between conflict resolution and management and settlement. Management is "by alternative dispute resolution skills and

These purposes clearly and unequivocally underline the UN's concern for peace and security and the need to chart a collective force to prevent or arrest the breach of the twin issues.

In the same vein, the OAU, which metamorphosed to the African Union (AU), also puts the issues of peace and security at a very high pedestal. Charter Article II (1) of the OAU spells out the basic purposes of the organization which among others include:

*To promote the unity and solidarity of African states, to coordinate and intensify their cooperation and efforts to achieve a better life for the people of Africa; to promote international cooperation, having regards to the charter of the UN and universal Declaration of Human Rights.*

The charter embraces the need for cooperation among Africa States for the purposes of enhancing the promotion of the welfare of the African people. Such cooperation and promotive efforts can only take place in an atmosphere of peace and stability.

The charter of AU equally provides for the principle of intervention. According to its Article 4(h), the Union has the right "to intervene, where genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity are being committed within member states. The peace/security and cooperative promotional clauses in the UN and AU charters provide the basic legal and constitutional basis for Nigeria's peacekeeping interventions globally and in West Africa.

The political-economic imperative of Nigeria's peacekeeping efforts is found in the aspiration for economic development both at domestic and sub-regional levels. Nigeria is a leading economy in West Africa and consequently, its manufacturing sector plays significant roles in the rest of the economies of the sub-region. Instability anywhere in the sub-region cannot but therefore have implications for the nation's economy. Added to this, is the problem arising from influx of refugees. At the peak of the Liberian crisis, Nigeria played host to as many as 141,000 Liberian refugees (Nwolise, 1992:58) and hundreds of others from the Sudan, Democratic Republic of the Congo and others camped at the international refugees Centre, Oru near Ijebu-Ode.

The refugees, apart from causing unnecessary pressure on social infrastructure of the host community, have also on many occasions become social miscreants. Sometimes they undermine domestic insecurity by engaging in such vices as armed robbery, burglary and economic sabotage, particularly in situations where they live below minimum comfort level arising from poor funding of the camps.

Another very important political-economic motivation for the nation is the overriding economic development objective of ECOWAS. ECOWAS is a sub-regional economic integration arrangement. The broad aims of ECOWAS are contained in Article 2(1) of the Community's Treaty. The aims and objectives are:

*Promote cooperation and development in all fields of economic activity particularly in the field of industry, transport, telecommunication, energy, agriculture, natural resources, commerce, monetary and financial question and in social and cultural matters for the purpose of raising the*

In addition to the nation's security/defence policy, which dictates keen interest in her neighbours and ECOWAS states, part of the nation's foreign policy objective/national interest is the promotion of her citizen's well-being. Nigeria has the utmost responsibility to safeguard the lives and properties of Nigerians anywhere in the world, particularly in war-torn zones. This concern also dictated her earlier interventions in the Liberia conflict. For instance at the heat of the Liberian war in 1990, more than 5800 Nigerians, including ordinary citizens, embassy officials, university lecturers, journalists and medical staff were trapped in Liberia (Vogt, 1992:332). At a point, Nigeria became targets of attack by warring groups. Two Nigerian journalists among others, were killed by NPFL rebels. Under these circumstances, Nigeria had the moral obligation to come to the rescue of her nationals by way of humanitarian intervention to arrest the carnage in the hot spots.

Moral obligation is rather the parameter for Nigeria's interventionist peacekeeping role in Sierra Leone and West Africa (by extension). States have moral responsibility toward each other. The moral appeal in intervention revolves round human protection by averting and halting human suffering. According to the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (2001:71), all the catastrophic loss and misery that go with slaughter and ethnic cleansing and mass starvation are inspiring and legitimizing for intervention in almost any political environment.

## 6. CHALLENGES AND IMPLICATIONS

The Nigerian sub-regional peacekeeping in Sierra Leone was not easy as can be seen from the following challenges and set-backs encountered in the process of securing some measure of peace in the sub-region

- (i) Poor knowledge of the terrain and the rebels' better knowledge of it hampered her efforts to gain control of the hinter land. Nigeria's superior firepower was not effective against the rebels' guerilla tactics, to which the densely forested region in the northeastern part of the country is known. Significantly, the rebels continued to control several diamond mines and use the proceeds to fund their activities (Adebajo, 2000:187).
- (ii) In addition to the inherent difficulties, a conventional force faces when fighting a guerrilla war on a foreign territory, her peacekeeping mission has also experienced operational shortcomings of its own making. Nigeria lacked the requisite equipment and logistical support to accomplish her objectives. Shortage of trucks and helicopters (Morse, 1998) as well as weapons and ammunition has restricted its activities and limited its effectiveness. Former force commander of Nigeria led ECOMOG, Timothy Shelpidi, attested that his force did not have sufficient number of helicopters. He claimed that the Nigerian led force could have defeated the rebels if it had possessed appropriate counter insurgency military equipment such as ML 24 helicopter gunship (IRUN-West African update, 380).
- (iii) Troop-contributing countries added to their woes by failing to contribute or coordinate their actions. With many ECOWAS States facing logistic and financial

- (viii) Lastly, in spite of the foregoing, the peacekeeping assignment continued to benefit the Nigerian military with the necessary experience in actual combat and administration of peacekeeping insurgency. The Nigerian military would have become very rusty in contemporary combat techniques had it not been for that mission. Engaging the military constantly in international peacekeeping therefore gives it the necessary exposure to modern tactics. It also gave the soldiers the opportunity for training and re-training in such operations as cordon and several, anti-ambush drill, road-blocks, day and night patrols, manning of checkpoints and observation posts, acquiring skills on radar warfare (Dickson, 2000:31-32). Soldiers were also exposed to social training in conducting, observing and monitoring elections. The assignment also afforded the military to acquire necessary discipline. It is based on these benefits to the forces that Colonel Yohonna M. Dickson, believes that opportunity of peacekeeping operations are the best training ground for Nigerian officers and soldiers (Dickson, 2003:23).

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the study examined the root causes of the Sierra Leonean war and the factors at domestic, sub-regional and extra-regional levels that prolonged the war. On the purely theoretical and practical reason, Nigeria's basis of participating in peacekeeping operations in Sierra Leone were highlighted and they include- as an instrument of foreign policy pursuit and execution, maintenance of international and global peace, national interest, nations' security and defence policy, moral responsibility.

Others are to gain political or economic favour from the main or initiating powers of the operations as to linkup structure and diplomatic process and tentacles with international organizations. It provided opportunity for Nigerian troops to be exposed and thus enhance their knowledge, skill and professional abilities. Thus Nigeria's involvement in Sierra Leone war is clearly a 'hegemonic' substitute role which also turned into a willing substitute role for the UN since she did not challenge the initiative when it began.

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