

# The Heart of Darkness

A rebel offensive has made Sierra Leone into a bloody hellhole

By EDWARD BARNES/FREETOWN

**F**REETOWN IS BURNING. THE SKY IS BARELY visible through the gray clouds of smoke curling up from the eastern side of the city. The occasional finger of white African sunlight that pokes through the haze falls on piles of dead bodies. The sands of Lumley beach, which sits on the north edge of town, are blanketed with dead soldiers, and the bay that lies between downtown and the airport is an oily, grisly mess, teeming with floating bodies and body parts.

For the better part of two weeks, since the rebel forces of the Revolutionary United Front (R.U.F.) swept into Freetown from Sierra Leone's thick jungles, the capital city has been a killing zone. Last week the troops of the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG), a peacekeeping force led by Nigeria, struggled to throw the rebels out. It was bloody, street-by-street fighting. Aid agencies evacuated most of their personnel during the week. The only way in and out of the city was by Nigerian military helicopter. One Lebanese businessman who had stayed behind to protect his rice crop bought his way out on the same helicopter that carried a TIME reporter in, one of the few journalists to venture into Sierra Leone in the week following the killing of an Associated Press staff member and the wounding of two others.

Into Saturday night, ECOMOG fought to maintain control. Since most of the R.U.F. leaders had been

killed in the previous few weeks of fighting, most rebel positions in the city were held by 15- and 16-year-old boys, who looted and burned huge swaths of downtown. ECOMOG forces patrolling Freetown's main streets were continually harassed by Kalashnikov-wielding teenagers who slipped from dark alleys, machine-gunned them for 15 or 30 seconds and then slipped away again. After sunset the teenagers, many of them high on local hallucinogens, set houses on fire—night candles, they called them—to ward off the fearful dark.

Sierra Leone's descent into chaos began on May 25, 1997, when a group of rebel soldiers from the Sierra Leone Army staged a coup d'état, replaced democratically elected President Ahmed Tejan Kabbah with Major Johnny Paul Koroma, and soon allied themselves with R.U.F., the rebel movement that had waged a civil war earlier in the 1990s. Koroma was quickly isolated by some of Sierra Leone's West African neighbors, such as Nigeria and Guinea, which wanted to see Kabbah restored. Last February an ECOMOG military force pushed the junta from power, driving the rebels out of the capital, and Kabbah reassumed his office. ECOMOG hoped that once the rebels had been removed, they would scatter and disappear into neighboring countries such as Liberia, becoming less of a threat.

Instead, ousted from the capital, the rebels rearmed and, village by village, began terrorizing the countryside. For the better part of a year, ECOMOG has struggled to stamp out the fiercely violent

## DESCENT INTO CHAOS

Sierra Leone, the world's poorest country, has had a miserable, violent decade

**April 29, 1992**

**A MILITARY COUP**, led by a five-member military junta, sends President Joseph Momoh into exile in Guinea and establishes the National Provisional Ruling Council as the ruling authority in the country.

**March 29, 1996**

**ANOTHER COUP** dislodges the NPRC, but the new military government gives in to international pressure and agrees to hold elections. Ahmed Tejan Kabbah, a former lawyer, wins 59.5% of the vote and becomes President.

**May 25, 1997**

**AFTER 14 MONTHS** Kabbah is toppled by a coup. The head of the new regime, Major Johnny Paul Koroma, warns the Nigerian-led peace forces stationed in the country not to interfere, but clashes quickly follow.

**September 1997**

**FIERCE FIGHTING** breaks out between government soldiers and West African peacekeeping troops known as ECOMOG. Aerial attacks by the peacekeeping troops against commercial targets in Freetown kill 50 civilians.

brushfires. Nigerian Alpha jets have streaked through the skies of Sierra Leone bombing rebel hideouts. Tens of thousands of village-based militia—traditional hunters called *kamajors*—have stalked the jungles battling R.U.F. forces. But the Nigerians have discovered that the rebel fire seems to be nearly inextinguishable. Hopes for negotiations have been blocked by rebel demands for the release of Corporal Foday Sankoh, an R.U.F. leader who had been captured and sentenced to death. Two weeks ago, R.U.F. stormed the capital, using an army that included some 5,000 teenage soldiers who sneaked into Freetown unarmed and dug up weapons that had been buried in local graveyards.

The sheer dimensions of the brutalization in Freetown in the past few weeks have been hard even for resolute aid workers to withstand. The images that flash by them are otherworldly, they say. Marie de la Soudière, who heads the International Rescue Committee's Children in Armed Conflict Unit, is still haunted by the shy six-year-old girl outside Freetown who raised the stump of her arm and asked, "Will my fingers grow back?"

Ever since the rebels were driven into the countryside, they have used brutalization as a kind of strategic device, hoping the horror of war would lead Kabbah to sue for peace. One witness interviewed by Human Rights Watch said he saw rebel soldiers tell a boy that he was too tall. A soldier then took a machete and cut off the boy's left foot. When the boy fell to the ground, the soldier calmly shot him in the chest three times. Young rebels blithely ask victims if they want "long sleeves or short sleeves"—amputation at the wrists or elbows.



Such extreme violence is not characteristic of Sierra Leone. Jim Stearns, an emergency-relief-operations specialist for care, says that when he first started going to Sierra Leone in 1989, nearly all the violence was across the border in Liberia, which was then in the midst of a civil war. Freetown, which sits amid lush rice paddies and rolling green hills, was established in

1787 as a home for freed slaves. The British cut off the slaves' shackles on a block in front of a cottonwood tree that still stands today. But the country is no paradise: the U.N. ranked it the least-developed nation on earth in 1997. The average life expectancy is 34 years.

And there is no sign that the conflict that is ravaging the country will end soon. Though on-site negotiators pressed last weekend to get ECOMOG-R.U.F. talks started again, they faced a number of problems. The R.U.F. leadership vacuum is one. Another is that Kabbah's government, having seen the effects of a partial victory before, is in no hurry to sue for peace. Aid agencies say the city is still too hot to begin bringing in badly needed food and medicine. On Saturday night, civilians in Freetown were down to desperate rations: leather and pig food. Nigerian commanders planning an offensive for this week worried about what tactics could possibly contain thousands of drug-addled adolescents. Said a major: "This is a battle between democracy and dementia." ■

**Questions**

1. When and why did the rebel offensive begin in Sierra Leone?
2. What are the hopes for a cease-fire in the dispute? What are the obstacles to peace?

**February 1998**

**CLASHES CONTINUE**  
as Nigerian troops belonging to ECOMOG bombard Freetown, finally gaining control of the capital and ousting the junta. Thousands of civilians become part of a nightmarish refugee exodus.

**March 10, 1998**

**AFTER 10 MONTHS** in exile, President Ahmed Tejan Kabbah returns to the country in triumph. "We will make this a new beginning," he declares at a ceremony attended by Nigeria's leader, General Sani Abacha.

**January 3, 1999**

**A MAJOR OFFENSIVE** is launched by newly strengthened rebels trying to regain control of the country. As they push toward Freetown, U.S. diplomats are evacuated and the U.N. pulls out most of its staff.

**January 6, 1999**

**THOUSANDS FLEE** to the countryside as rebels fight their way into the capital. Witnesses said the presidential State House had been taken and that rebels were toting assault rifles on abandoned streets.

**January 16, 1999**

**CEASE-FIRE HOPES** dim as rebel leaders say they will not observe a scheduled truce unless their leader, Foday Sankoh, is released. Sankoh is imprisoned at a secret location following an October treason conviction.