



# From Enemy to Peacemaker: The Role of Private Military Companies in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Private military companies (PMCs) provide services ranging from personnel training, and technical assistance to actual combat. They frequently have a dual role as government/corporate consultants and as stakeholders. In Sierra Leone one PMC's close ties with the diamond industry contributed to political instability and continued armed conflict. PMC involvement with the government of Angola prolonged a war that has taken hundreds of thousands of lives and has devastated that country's economy. The international system of conflict resolution must either be restructured to include a legitimate and restricted setting for the continued use of PMCs, or their activity should be banned altogether under international humanitarian law. *M&GS* 2002;7:90-95.

**W**ith the collapse of the Soviet Union, Africa ceased to be the playing field of the world's superpowers, and an abrupt withdrawal of governmental, financial, logistical, and technical support precipitated the most horrendous wars the continent has ever seen. The use of Private Military Companies (PMCs) to enforce and maintain peace has become a significant alternative for the maintenance of peace in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). The examples of Sierra Leone and Angola are useful in exploring the role of PMCs in these ongoing conflicts and in examining their influence in determining the outcomes.

The downsizing of professional armies after the Cold War led to an abundance of unemployed, trained soldiers who were

unattached to an established national army. Many of these individuals sought alternative opportunities in the conflicts in developing countries, especially in SSA. The shrinking of the world's armies brought a corresponding growth in the PMC sector. During the Cold War, African governments could count on support from the West to quell insurrections and rebellions. The withdrawal of western support greatly weakened African governments. Structural adjustment programs (SAPs) further reduced national budgets, adding to the need for military outsourcing. Left to their own devices, crippled by debt, and poorly managed, many African nations have proved incapable of containing the conflicts within their borders.

PMCs based in the US, the UK, South Africa, and elsewhere have tried to create the corporate image of an organized "military consultation" industry. Companies such as Executive Outcomes (now Sandline International) began to market themselves and to gain employment. They provided services related to security for whomever could pay, with the provision that the payer be a "legitimate government." These services have

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included personnel training, military support, arms sales, technical assistance, provision of military transport, and actual combat. Typically, they provide security to multinational corporations (MNCs) in unstable areas. Some of the military organizations also have subsidiaries that are directly involved in the extraction industries that they protect, such as mining and oil. Many wars in Africa are now waged over control of these industries, as has been the case in Sierra Leone and Angola. MNCs all over Africa have hired professional security services to protect their mines, plants, buildings, and foreign personnel. PMCs are paid in partial ownership of natural resources. In this way, the military companies move from consultants to stakeholders, complicating the objectivity of their stated role.

## Sierra Leone

The abundance of mineral wealth that resides beneath its soil is essential to the course Sierra Leone has taken. Sierra Leone is one of the world's largest producers of diamonds and has large reserves of bauxite and rutile, both rare minerals vital to the world market. Sierra Leone is second only to Namibia in terms of gem quality and size.<sup>1</sup> Since the 1960s diamond boom, diamonds and minerals have comprised the lion's share of revenues for the government.

In 1991, the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) entered Sierra Leone from Liberia and Burkina Faso and began a cruel civil war. The RUF's leader, Foday Sankoh, was intent on overthrowing the corrupt government of President Joseph Momoh. The RUF was financed, trained, and supported in large part by Charles Taylor, the incumbent despot in neighboring Liberia. Within four years, the RUF managed to seize most of the mineral operations and funded its war efforts with diamond revenues.

In April 1992 the government, initially run by the All People's Congress (APC), had been overthrown by the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC) and was headed by Captain Valentine Strasser. The NPRC was sympathetic to the RUF at first and had initiated moves to incorporate it into the political structure. But this attempt at reconciliation proved fruitless when it became apparent the RUF had no intention of ending its relentless campaign of terror throughout the countryside. When Strasser realized that the RUF intended to overrun the capital and took note of his army's inadequacy in the face of RUF incursions, he started mandatory conscription into the Republic of Sierra Leone Military Forces (RSLMF). As the nation's economy further deteriorated and the government became unable to adequately compensate its troops, the soldiers in the RSMLF became as much a

problem for the civilian population of Sierra Leone as had been the RUF.

Once the RUF had captured the diamond fields and the bauxite and rutile mines, the government's revenue came to a virtual standstill. At this point, Captain Strasser looked to the outside world for help, for with no diamonds there was no money. The MNCs that owned many of the mineral extraction industries were also seeking a way to contain the RUF and resume their profitable extraction business. This source of external assistance would come from Executive Outcomes.

Executive Outcomes (EO), a Private Military Company based in South Africa, was contracted at a cost of \$2 million per month to provide 150 to 200 fully equipped soldiers, helicopter support, RSMLF training, and other forms of assistance. Executive Outcomes is one of the few private military companies that is full service. It provides training of personnel, combat support (such as ferrying troops to the front in helicopters), and actual combat. This last function is referred to as "force multiplication." EO head Eeben Barlow is a former commander of the 32 Buffalo Battalion of the South African special forces under the apartheid regime. This espionage unit, formed by South African military intelligence specialized in disinformation and assassination.

EO was part of a larger organization with branches in the mining industry (Branch Energy and DiamondWorks) in the private security industry (LifeGuard) and in numerous offshoots that provided various types of security services. DiamondWorks was one of the four large MNCs in Sierra Leone that had very significant holdings in the diamond industry. EO was granted mining concessions through DiamondWorks and Branch Energy as partial payment for its services for the Sierra Leone government.<sup>2</sup>

Upon EO's arrival, the tide of war quickly began to change in favor of the government. By the end of 1995, the government had regained most of the mining areas, Freetown was no longer under siege, and mining operations for Sierra Rutile had resumed. EO's presence was critical to the maintenance of governmental domination and control of Freetown and other mining centers.

## The Aftermath

The next three years saw a series of political and military upheavals. There was an election in 1996, following the overthrow of

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Strasser by Brigadier Julius Maada Bio, who had family ties to the RUF. Tejan Ahmed Kabbah was voted into office. While he, too, realized that he needed the military presence of EO to maintain control, he was unable to procure the necessary funds. Operations in Sierra Leone were costing EO a lot of money and it became imperative that EO secure peace in Sierra Leone so the mining concessions it was granted could begin to generate revenue. Kabbah's hold on power was very tenuous and would not last long, but EO renegotiated and stayed on so Kabbah's government could remain in power and pay its debt to EO.

In 1997 the Abidjan Peace Accords were signed. A provision of these accords was that EO and the Nigerian component of the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) be expelled from Sierra Leone. EO withdrew, leaving Kabbah vulnerable. The loss of the presence of heavily armed and well trained EO mercenaries would prove decisive in the upcoming months.

The RSLMF was sewn with discontent, the Kamajors (a large and powerful militia group) were gaining prominence, the RUF was regrouping and it was only a matter of time before the military staged a coup. This occurred in May 1997 and Major Johnny Paul Koroma was put into power as the head of the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (APRC). The coup resulted in massive looting, indiscriminate rape, and mass murder in Freetown, ending only after over 200 people had been killed.<sup>2</sup> Kabbah fled to Conakry.

During this period, Kabbah approached another PMC, Sandline International, in the hope that they might provide the support necessary to defeat the RUF/APRC coalition and restore his government to power. Sandline, based in the UK, consisted of members of the former EO and, with some corporate restructuring, had a less tarnished reputation. EO, based in South Africa, had been disbanded in 1997 when the South African government passed tough legislation banning mercenary activity. Notably, the mediator between Sandline and Kabbah was Rakesh Saxena, who was subsequently discovered to have obtained large holdings in Sierra Leone's mining industry.<sup>3</sup> Sandline, like its predecessor, was linked to Branch Energy, DiamondWorks, and LifeGuard. Sandline mounted a military effort that incorporated ECOMOG, the Kamajors, and Sandline's communications and aircraft superiority, as well as the procurement of 28 tons of small arms from Bulgaria.<sup>2</sup> With the help of Sandline International, Kabbah's government was restored to power.

As of April 2001, the RUF still controlled 50% of the country, including many of the

diamond areas.<sup>4</sup> There has been little actual fighting in Sierra Leone since December 2000, but the nation is divided into government and RUF-controlled areas. The RUF continues to finance its operation through diamond sales. There are 13,000 United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) troops in the south, the largest contingent of UN peacekeepers deployed anywhere in the world. These troops have not been able to definitively end the conflict.

The overall effect of Executive Outcomes in Sierra Leone is not entirely clear. They proved a stabilizing force when the government of Valentin Strasser contracted them to help his forces defeat the RUF. The technical expertise and combat experience of EO proved too much for the poorly trained, poorly equipped RUF, and the government gained an advantage as long as EO was involved. EO trained and armed the RSMLF, making them into a stronger more adept fighting force. That training eventually assisted in the murderous campaign of the RUF once the political tides had changed, calling into question the actual effect of EO's training upon the resolution of conflict. But as long as EO was on the scene, there was a measure of stability in Sierra Leone and the government had the upper hand.

## Angola

The conflict between the Movimento Popular da Libertacao de Angola (MPLA) and União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola (UNITA), leading up to and following Angola's independence, was part of the larger system of proxy wars fought by the former Soviet Union and the United States. The war between the Cuban and Soviet-backed MPLA and the US and South African-backed UNITA was waged until around 1993. As the Cold War came to a close and UNITA was no longer seen as the Angolan bulwark against communism, the US joined much of the rest of the international community in recognizing the MPLA government.

After Gorbachev assumed power, there was general consensus that proxy wars in Central America, Afghanistan, and Angola were all counterproductive; against this backdrop, the superpowers initiated peace talks in Angola. The first round of talks took place between Angola, South Africa, and Cuba, negotiating the withdrawal of foreign military presence. These agreements would culminate in the formation of a Joint Political Military Commission (JPMC), consisting of the US, Russia, Portugal, and the MPLA government and UNITA under the Bicesse Accords in June 1991.<sup>2</sup>

Despite this resolution of peace, armed conflict again erupted in Angola in October

1992 in what is referred to as the second civil war. Over the next two years, 1,000 Angolans would die every day. By the end of this bloody rampage, 500,000 lay dead. More Angolans died during this period than in the previous 16 years of civil war prior to renewed conflict in 1992.<sup>2</sup> The increased scale of death has been attributed to the increased technological sophistication and the superior killing efficiency of the private security force, Executive Outcomes.

Executive Outcomes was not a stranger to this conflict. During its employment by the South African government, EO targeted enemies of the apartheid state and was deployed alongside the UNITA rebels to fight the MPLA Angolan government. Later, in Angola, EO would use its unique understanding of UNITA to destroy them under contract with the MPLA government.

The company conducted its first known operation in Angola in 1993. Angola seems to be where EO head Barlow met former SAS officer Buckingham, now believed to have ultimate control over EO and the complex web of some 80 companies involved in businesses ranging from landmine removal to water purification. Buckingham was representing Heritage Oil at the time of their meeting and had requested that Barlow recruit soldiers to recapture Heritage's assets in Soyo that had been taken by UNITA during the renewed conflict of the Second Civil War. The success of EO's special forces operation in Soyo had inspired the Angolan government to hire EO to direct frontline operations against UNITA.

As Angola slid into full-scale war, UN Secretary-General Boutros-Boutros Ghali was attempting to arrange peaceful reconciliation. UNITA's Savimbi accepted Boutros-Ghali's proposal for a meeting with MPLA government leader Dos Santos in Geneva but government forces were in the process of launching a major military campaign, cleansing the major cities of UNITA support. As one Médecins Sans Frontières relief worker remembered, "They didn't just kill men, they killed families."<sup>5</sup> By January, Savimbi's willingness to negotiate had expired and he assumed command of the UNITA forces. The UNITA refused to withdrawal and quarter its troops without the deployment of a UN peacekeeping force and the UN Security Council claimed a lack of available troops. The UN Special Representative to the region was told that the earliest possible troops would be six to nine months away.<sup>2</sup> Eventually, however, due to external pressure and a perceived military disadvantage, Savimbi and UNITA declared a unilateral ceasefire. The MPLA, feeling close to victory, chose to pursue a total military solution.

Beginning in September 1993, EO trained 5,000 government troops and 30 pilots in fighting techniques, weapons maintenance, and engineering.<sup>6</sup> EO also maintained two fighting units that were active in frontline conflict with UNITA troops. Without the backing of EO, the Angolan government most likely would have been brought to the bargaining table in response to Savimbi's ceasefire proposal. In the months prior to the procurement of EO's services, the government had been involved in negotiations with UNITA. After hiring EO, the government made a commitment to a military solution. Only after a visit from President Clinton in 1995, during which he exerted pressure to withdrawal EO forces, did military engagement cease.

There is little question that EO tipped the scales in favor of the Angolan government. The decision to pursue military engagement after UNITA's unilateral ceasefire is thought to have cost 200,000 lives that year, smashing the remaining infrastructure and lowering GDP. The conclusion that EO's involvement with the government prolonged the war in Angola is hard to avoid. To this day, corporate entities and personnel closely associated with EO remain in military conflict in Angola. In December 1998 UNITA and FAA forces intensified their conflict, resulting in Angola's third civil war. UNITA has obtained mercenaries of its own, some of whom were former EO employees.

One has to question the motivation of Executive Outcomes relative to its corporate associations. Buckingham, who is now thought to control EO and had originally obtained EO's services in Angola, had vital financial interest in mining territories. There is general suspicion that EO was not only fighting mercenary battles in Angola, but was defending their corporate interest in oil and diamonds. Payments for EO's services were made substantially in partial ownership in Branch Energy, were then transferred through a subsidiary, Carson Gold, and were finally exchanged for shares in DiamondWorks. Capture of vital diamond mining territory was part of the subtext of EO's operations in Angola.

### PMCs and the Law

Mercenary activity is outlawed on a national basis in the 1989 UN International Convention against the Recruitment Use Financing and Training of Mercenaries and the 1977 Convention for the Elimination of

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Mercenarism in Africa by the Organization of African Unity.<sup>7</sup>

In order for a PMC to act legally, it must be in the service of the ruling government in order to preserve national sovereignty. This requires both that the government is the established and recognized representative of the state and that the definition of the state is well known. Both requirements present serious epistemological problems with regard to Africa. The first problem has to do with the legitimacy of the government. Only in extreme cases does the international community call the legitimacy of the government into question. So even when governments commit atrocities against their own people, PMCs that work for a recognized government can legally abet these atrocities with impunity. Moreover, many of these governments or groups are recognized episodically over time. For instance, in Angola UNITA was backed by the US government until 1995 when, in a reversal of will, the US put its support behind the MPLA. Many of these vicissitudes rely on broad international agendas, not on the legitimacy of the government in question or its representation of the state.

On the other side, a PMC can legally provide support for insurgency only if the anti-government movement is recognized as valid and the government against which it is directed is considered illegitimate by the international community. The UN has been extremely reluctant to rule on the legitimacy of a government or on the struggles to undermine it, leaving PMCs to arbitrate the matter on their own and to fight for governments of their choosing. Tim Spicer, the head of Sandline, has recognized this problem and has called for the UN to direct traffic:

At Sandline, we maintain a strict, self-imposed code of conduct. We will only work for legitimate governments, those recognized by the UN. We then apply our own moral template. . . The real problem comes when you get a country where the insurgents are in the right. We can't work for them because if we did we would be helping to overthrow recognized governments.<sup>8</sup>

The more fragile the state structure and the more volatile the internal scenario, the more security for governments and for private corporations protecting business interests needs to be outsourced. Generally, private corporations must operate within the regulatory framework of the host country. When this framework is in shambles and a government has collapsed, however, the private company takes on much more responsibility. They often maintain stability as well as

basic security. These roles become further confused when the security force is paid with ownership in the business it is protecting and insidiously gains a stake in the outcome of the politics of the state. This is the type of mission creep that is regarded by some as neo-colonialization.

## Conclusions

The argument for the use of PMCs is that there are conflicts that require military intervention because of violations of human rights, where Western governments are politically unwilling to act. This situation is best represented by Rwanda. Because of the grizzly memory of a US soldier being dragged through the street in Somalia several years earlier, the international community stood idly by while 800,000 Rwandans were murdered in 100 days. Were PMCs hired by the UN Security Council in such settings, then the trade off between lives of Western soldiers would not be weighed in the decision of when to intervene in foreign human rights violations. The trickier situation is the use of these companies by other actors, when both employer and employee are suspect.

The actions of PMCs in the developing world should be subject to much stricter international scrutiny, both with respect to overt activity and corporate associations. Further, *le droit d'ingérence*<sup>†</sup> should not be limited to a show of force to restore a temporary order without engaging in post-conflict reconstruction or adequate prevention. If PMCs are permitted to operate to establish military order in an acute setting, even in a more systematic way, then there must be an immediate followup system in place to accomplish the task of post-conflict reconstruction with civil guidance and support. Omitting this step in places such as Sierra Leone may have actually prolonged the conflict due to the increase in arms and training provided.

Unfortunately, rather than resolving conflict, PMCs have contributed to the chronic destabilization of the African continent. They have failed to demonstrate the sort of good judgement in evaluating a conflict that earns the trust of the diplomatic community. One cannot, however, blame a wolf for its teeth. The more appropriate response is to address the root causes of the demand for such a service. It will soon become necessary to either restructure the international system of conflict resolution to include a legitimate and restrict-

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<sup>†</sup> This is a phrase coined by Dr. Bernard Kouchner that implies the international community's duty and right to intervene in a conflict when the victims of that conflict are predominantly civilian.

ed setting for the continued use of PMCs, or restructure international humanitarian law to ban their activity altogether.

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