Fighting Irregular Fighters

Confronting Africa's Sobels

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ABSTRACT: While the phenomenon described in this article may appear to be an African problem, the Western world's increasing involvement in fighting terrorists make it one that America's military forces might encounter. Unfortunately, it could add a significant layer of complexity to US operations as American troops attempt to differentiate allies from enemies. In Africa, sometimes they are one and the same.

Sobel, a portmanteau of "soldier" and "rebel," appears to have been coined in Sierra Leone during the 1990s. This was a period marked in parts of West Africa by fighting over conflict diamonds, also known as blood diamonds, when government soldiers discovered how lucrative it could be to serve as "soldiers by day, rebels by night" or, as the villagers called them, "sobels." On closer examination, it can be observed that the relationship between the soldiers of the Sierra Leonean Army and the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), the rebel group which during the country's civil war occupied large portions of diamond-rich land, changed over time, thus making the sobel phenomenon more like the sobel phenomena.

Unfortunately, the presence of sobels is often an indication that a war is profitable for both rebels and soldiers, providing them with an incentive to lengthen the conflict to maximize their earnings. With neither side able to score a decisive win, both sides profit. Meanwhile, the rural population, essentially held hostage during the conflict, is often terrorized so as not to intervene. As an example, the RUF started not only to amputate people's hands, but to *publicize* such mutilations as a way of preventing people from casting ballots and putting a political end to "unpolitical" brutalities.

Though Sierra Leone appears to be where the "sobel" neologism originated, variations of the soldier-by-day, rebel-by-night phenomenon can be found in many parts of Africa (and, indeed, in other parts of the world). By studying the sobel phenomenon and its variations, it is possible to determine what factors influence government soldiers to join rebel forces, ways to dissuade them from joining, and, if they do join, possible ways to induce them to return permanently to government service.

While the sobel phenomenon described within these pages may appear to be an African problem, the Western world's increasing involvement in fighting terrorists on that continent make it one America's military forces might encounter. Unfortunately, it could add a significant layer of complexity to US operations as American troops attempt to differentiate allies from enemies. In Africa, sometimes they are one and the same.

Background to Sobel: The Sierra Leone Civil War

Sierra Leone's civil war started in 1991, when the RUF, led by Foday Sankoh, and backed by Liberian warlord Charles Taylor, launched an attack in a diamond-rich area in Eastern Sierra Leone.[1] Though ostensibly the RUF's *raison d'être* was to oppose the corrupt government, it morphed more into a group of bandits and less a band of revolutionaries. As for Taylor, who later would become President of Liberia, his interests from the outset appear mostly financial.

The war lasted eleven years, during which time both the RUF and the army were responsible for heinous atrocities against civilian populations. Estimates of the number killed range upwards of 50,000.[2] It took foreign intervention, in particular the country's former colonial power, the British, to help end the war.

Atrocities as a Contributing Factor

There were many factors which led to some of Sierra Leone's soldiers becoming sobels, including several socioeconomic ones discussed later. A significant driving force, however, was the civilian hatred of the army because of the atrocities the soldiers committed fighting the RUF. The soldiers, when willing to hunt down the RUF—an inconsistent process as the army was sometimes afraid of direct combat with the rebels—often had difficulties locating their enemy. Frustrated, they would brutalize citizens suspected of being RUF members or sympathizers. Additionally, when the army would recapture a town, it would sometimes relocate the population in a program reminiscent of the hated "strategic hamlet" initiative of the Vietnam War.

The soldiers' actions generated a great deal of hatred on the part of the mistreated people; some even joined the RUF. Being hated by the civilian populace caused the already low morale among the soldiers to sink even further. Eventually this low morale, combined with low government rations, convinced the soldiers that instead of fighting the villagers—who fought back at their mistreatment—it was more lucrative to join the rebels in looting civilian populace.[3]

Socio-Economic Factors

Particularly interesting with regards to the sobel phenomenon in Sierra Leone were the socioeconomic differences between the initial rebel recruits and the army recruits: there were none. Both the RUF and army "recruited from the same social stratum, the underprivileged youth of Freetown, who had often gone to the same schools with no job prospects, and shared the same revolt."[4] This shared background and these common ties likely made it more difficult for the soldiers to view the rebels as true enemies. Combined with poor training, poor pay, and

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1 Lansana Gberie, *A Dirty War in West Africa: the RUF and the Destruction of Sierra Leone* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 6.

2 "Sierra Leone," *GlobalSecurity.org*, 26 Apr 2012, http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/sierra_leone.htm

3 Lansana Gberie, *A Dirty War in West Africa*, 102.

4 Michel Ben Arrous and Robert Feldman, "Understanding Contemporary Conflicts in Africa: A State of Affairs and Current Knowledge," Unpublished Manuscript, January 2013.

little *esprit de corps*, there was no mental barrier to breach for the soldiers to see themselves as helping or becoming rebels.

The Sierra Leone experience demonstrates the difficulties inherent in quelling a rebellion with soldiers cut from the same cloth as rebels. Often, opposing forces try to demonize or dehumanize the other side, perhaps making it psychologically easier to kill. It is difficult for soldiers, however, to dehumanize the enemy when as youngsters they lived and played together.

To be sure, not all African nations have armies composed of people from the same location and socioeconomic background as rebel groups. In instances where they are different, and frequently that difference is ethnicity, the opposing forces appear more likely not only to fight but to brutalize each other. Press reports from Africa are filled with stories of human rights abuses, including descriptions of activities bordering on, or maybe even crossing into, ethnic cleansing by soldiers and rebels alike.

One must remember that Sierra Leone soldiers were not defending their families from attack. The military mission was far from home, so there was no added sense that failure to destroy the RUF would be personally disastrous. For that matter, there was also no sense that joining the rebels, even temporarily, would endanger families back home. If anything, the converse was probably true: joining the rebels was a way for the soldiers to enrich themselves and, in turn, their families.

Finally, with regards to the socioeconomic factors leading to the sobel phenomenon, one must remember the long tradition in many African countries of both rebels and governments recruiting, voluntarily or forcibly, children into their ranks. These young rebels and soldiers, who are still quite impressionable, easily swayed by peer pressure, and usually followers rather than leaders, can readily and perhaps even effortlessly switch sides when those around them are doing so.

Evolution of the Sobel

It is difficult, if not impossible, to ascertain the exact date sobels first emerged in Sierra Leone. But certainly by 1993 government soldiers had begun their ruse of dressing as RUF fighters at night and attacking villages. As these nocturnal soldiers-turned-rebels retreated, they would leave weapons and ammunition for the "real" RUF rebels who, in turn, would also terrorize and pillage the villages. With daybreak, the army, now in uniform, would appear, offering protection from the rebels . . . for a price. Eventually, the army developed ways to supply the rebels even during daylight, such as prearranging a rebel ambush and losing a truck laden with military equipment.

Sobels and real rebels coordinated attacks to avoid fighting each other. Finding an isolated village, they would take turns terrorizing and pillaging it, ensuring both were not there at the same time and avoiding the possibility they would accidentally come to blows.

Adding to the confusion of who attacked a village—soldiers or rebels—were rebels who conducted raids in stolen army uniforms.[5] Thus, it worked both ways: actual soldiers dressing as rebels at night

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5 "Revolutionary United Front," *GlobalSecurity.org*, http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/para/ruf.htm

(the sobels), and actual rebels dressing as soldiers. Poor communications from the region, in conjunction with a lack of independent confirmation, probably did little to help clarify which group, soldiers or rebels, actually carried out an attack.

The sobels, during these and other attacks, were particularly brutal. From a philosophical standpoint, perhaps this fact can be attributed to the ideological void left by the exhaustion of grand narratives such as nationalism, pan-Africanism, African socialism, and others. Lacking both the analytical tools to understand their own underprivileged status and a coherent agenda to redress it, they were more prone to extreme levels of brutality than a soldier or a rebel clearly standing on either side. In this regard, the sobel phenomenon could also be read as a product of current ideological disenchantment.

Sobels and Sierra Leone's Military Junta

Sierra Leone's ruling military junta, the National Provisional Ruling Committee (NRPC) ironically benefitted, at least initially, from these soldiers who would betray their government and periodically join the rebels. The junta explained they were anxious for a return to democracy, but could not relinquish power until the RUF was defeated and the country was at peace. Such proclamations created the appearance that the NRPC had the country's—as opposed to their own—interests at heart. However, like many juntas, once in power their desire was to stay in power. The troops, by failing to defeat the RUF and increasing the number of RUF rebels by periodically and clandestinely becoming rebels themselves, created enough concern that the NRPC declared it was not yet safe for a return to civilian rule.

Having soldiers periodically join the rebels and share in their profitable ventures had another benefit for the military officials. As happens in many African militaries, conditions in the field for lower-ranking troops can be miserable. Irregular and meager pay contributed to the conditions for mutiny against superior officers. By allowing these soldiers to join the rebels, mutinies and perhaps even coups were avoided.

Eventually the sobel phenomenon was exposed, and the NRPC, under pressure, admitted that at least 20 percent of the government troops were disloyal.[6] The exact percentage is unknown, but, given the economic incentives to share in the rebels' profits, the lack of oversight from the military junta (who benefitted from the sobel phenomenon), and the familiarity of troops with the rebels (since they had both come from the same social stratum), it would not be surprising if the percentage of troops serving as rebels was much higher than the 20 percent claimed by the NRPC.

Knowing a percentage of his troops were disloyal, and realizing his military was incapable of securing the diamond areas from the RUF, Sierra Leone President Captain Valentine Strasser turned to a private military company, Gurkha Security Groups, for help in 1995.[7] Largely comprised of Nepalese ex-British army troops, they were led by an American, Robert

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6 Lansana Gberie, "The May 25 Coup d'Etat in Sierra Leone: A Militariat Revolt?" *African Development* 23 (3-4): 149-70.

7 Simon Akam, "The Vagabond King," *New Statesman*, February 2, 2012, http://www. newstatesman.com/africa/2012/01/sierra-leone-strasser-war

MacKenzie. Unfortunately, MacKenzie, along with Strasser's aide-de-camp, Abu Tarawalli, were ambushed and killed. Strasser then turned to a South African-based private military company, Executive Outcomes, whose success in combating the rebels is described below.

From Rebels to Soldiers to Rebels

While not quite the sobel description of soldier by day and rebel by night, a related phenomenon is apparent in several other parts of Africa. Former rebels integrate into government armies and then revert to rebels at a later date. An excellent example can be found when examining the recent history of the Tuareg, a traditionally nomadic people who live in the Sahara and northern Sahel of Mali and Niger. There have been several Tuareg insurgencies, detailed descriptions of which are beyond the scope of this article; however, these conflicts were often over issues such as the Tuareg feeling slighted by central governments regarding sharing of wealth from minerals mined in Tuareg regions. Peace treaties to end these rebellions often included an agreement to integrate the former rebels into government militaries. However, sometimes these rebels-turned-soldiers became disenchanted with the army or the way fellow Tuareg were treated, resulting in many deserting the military and returning to being rebels.[8]

This Tuareg changeover between rebel and soldier contains elements of the sobel phenomenon: the possibility exists that whatever state—rebel or soldier—the Tuareg or the Sierra Leoneans are in, they are capable of changing; that change can be relatively easy, and when the change occurs, it is frequently removed from oversight by the central government.

Clearly there are also some differences between the sobel phenomenon and the Tuareg rebel-soldier-rebel changeover: while the sobels change daily, the Tuareg rebel-soldier-rebel transition can be measured in months. Another difference is the Sierra Leoneans continue to cycle between soldier and rebel, whereas the Tuareg seemingly stopped at rebel, though this might yet change again if there is another attempt to bring more Tuareg into the army. However, these and other differences should not obscure the most noteworthy similarity: both can leave governments and foreign analysts guessing as to the true strength and loyalties of the rebels and military forces.

Adding to the confusion of estimating the strength of various forces is the contradictory nature of information regarding rebels and soldiers who switch. An infamous but uncorroborated claim of Tuareg defections from the army occurred during one of the Tuareg rebellions.[9] The *Mouvement des Nigériens Pour la Justice* (the Nigeriens Movement for Justice or MNJ), a mostly Tuareg-based group in northern Niger fighting for greater revenue sharing from uranium mining, claimed an entire special forces unit, the Niger Rapid Intervention Company, which had been trained by the American military, defected in 2007. The government, though acknowledging some desertions, denied they had occurred en masse. Other unsubstantiated claims have also been made regarding this

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8 "Tuareg Rebels Leave Mali Town," *BBC News*, May 24, 2006, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/5008224.stm

9 "NIGER: Five Killed as Army Clashes with Tuaregs in Desert North, " *IRIN News as carried by GlobalSecurity.Org*, October 7, 2004, http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/news/2004/10/mil-041007-irin02.htm

unit. Such claims and counterclaims in regions where it is hard to document the truth underscore the difficulties in assessing the magnitude of "soldier by day, rebel by night" and related phenomena.

Private Military Companies as a Possible Solution

One suggestion to avoid risking soldiers becoming rebels is to outsource the army; in other words, hire private contractors to provide security. Indeed, there have been some successes with private military companies, perhaps the most notable one in Africa with the aforementioned Executive Outcomes, which successfully wrested control of the diamond fields from the RUF in the mid-1990s, eventually forcing a negotiated peace between the rebel organization and the government. Further evidence of the superiority of private military companies to at least some African peacekeeping forces was provided when Executive Outcomes, under international pressure, was compelled to leave.[10] Unfortunately, it was replaced by an ineffective United Nations (UN) peacekeeping force; the RUF soon returned with a vengeance, implementing Operation No Living Thing, aptly named, as many were mutilated or killed in a butchering spree that reached all the way to the capital, Freetown.[11]

As evidenced by the pressure on Sierra Leone to stop using Executive Outcomes, there is substantial animosity by African leaders and governments against the employment of private military companies. Several reasons for this animosity are as follows:

- The embarrassment that African militaries are incapable of handling internal security issues.

- The appearance of neocolonialism if troops from another country, even if the other country is African, are brought in. Executive Outcomes may call themselves a private military company, but to many Africans they are mercenaries, and Africa's long and bitter history with mercenaries—especially white mercenaries—used by colonial powers is not forgotten.

- The potential loss of income to African militaries because the UN pays governments to supply peacekeepers. By not allowing private military companies, the UN is essentially forced to use African militaries, providing a lucrative source of revenue for those countries which furnish the troops.

- The concern that mercenaries are not bound by the laws of states as private military companies fall outside the normal chain of command. They could be used as a tool against political opponents and may "fight in a non-regulated, wanton fashion."[12]

- The belief that employing private military companies dissociates the technical aspects of security from the legitimacy, or lack thereof, of the government. As a result, such companies are unable to provide

10 Simon Akam, "The Vagabond King."

11 Catherine Hawley, "A Country Torn by Violence," *BBC News*, January 12, 1999, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/special_report/1999/01/99/sierra_leone/251377.stm

12 Mayank Bubna, "The Case for Mercenaries in Africa," *Institute for Defense Studies and Analysis*, June 1998 http://www.idsa.in/system/files/IB_MercenariesinAfrica.pdf

long-term solutions to problems required by a political process.

Despite the concerns and protestations of some African leaders regarding the use of private military companies, there are others who call not only for their use but also for their compensation based on outcomes. There are also those in the middle, looking at security needs in various regions but unsure if private military companies should fill them. This tenuous outlook is perhaps best exemplified in a statement by former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan regarding the Rwanda genocide during the time he was head of the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations: "When we had need of skilled soldiers to separate fighters from refugees in the Rwandan refugee camps in Goma, I even considered the possibility of engaging a private firm. But the world may not be ready to privatize peace."[13]

Conclusion

There appears to be a tradeoff with regards to recruiting soldiers from the same location and social stratum as where the rebels recruit. In this situation, the soldiers generally appear to be less likely to commit atrocities against the rebels. The tradeoff is the soldiers are likely to be less effective at putting down the rebellion and, in fact, may even serve as part-time rebels themselves. The converse also appears true. While having soldiers who are significantly different from the rebels enhances the likelihood they will actually engage them in combat, it increases the risks for the commission of atrocities—on both sides—during the fighting. Certainly there are exceptions. Depending on the location, additional factors may alter these generalizations; however, those who have spent time in Africa can attest to both the close ties within ethnic groups and the frequent animosity among ethnic groups. In Sierra Leone the soldiers joined the rebels; in some African countries the soldiers massacre the rebels.

Perhaps the step an African nation can take which would have the greatest impact on preventing soldiers from serving with the rebels is for the government to get its own house in order. Corruption is contagious, and it is probably unreasonable to ask soldiers to risk their lives for a few dollars a month while officials, far removed from the fighting, live in splendor. Additionally, by having a legitimate and at least minimally effective government, one that appears to be trying to make a better life for its citizens, soldiers may feel more committed to serving the nation honorably.

Related to the government being effective is the need for it to be competent when it sets domestic and foreign policy objectives. Irrational objectives which antagonize ethnic groups within the country or governments of neighboring countries, or which dedicate disproportionate amounts of money to projects of questionable benefit, or any of the other untold numbers of dubious policies, are often an obstacle to developing a sense of nationalism. Having rational policy objectives will help obtain commitment from soldiers who see benefits to the citizens.

Unfortunately, there are numerous African governments which are largely corrupt, grossly ineffective, or both. It is hard to be cynical

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13 Kofi Annan, "Thirty-Fifth Annual Ditchley Foundation Lecture," *UN Press Release SG/SM/6613*, 26 June 1998.

about soldiers who decide to moonlight as rebels when the government is enriching itself at the expense of the people or directing that only certain groups, inevitably tied to the politicians in office, benefit handsomely from government largesse while others receive nothing.

African nations can take several actions to minimize the likelihood their troops will become sobels. These include:

- Improving pay for troops so there is less incentive to supplement their income.

- Improving training for troops so there is a greater sense of professionalism. Especially important in this training is an emphasis on human rights. As stated earlier, one of the reasons soldiers became rebels was because they were already battling the villagers whom they had abused.

- Developing and enforcing regulations against children serving as soldiers.

- Improving command and control of African troops.

- Setting clear expectation of military objectives in operations against rebels, and, along these lines, clear rules of engagement.

- Utilizing private military companies, at least in part, for operations where there might be strong incentives, such as in diamond-rich areas, for soldiers to become sobels. This measure does not guarantee private military company mercenaries will not illegally enrich themselves, but often these companies have better control over their employees than African militaries do over their troops.

- Stating clearly soldiers are prohibited from serving with the rebels and offering strong, though humane, punishments for those who do.

The reader might note that foreign military assistance could be valuable in helping African nations implement some of these suggested courses of action. United States Africa Command (AFRICOM) could take a role in improving command and control, raising the quality of training, and assisting in the development of clear military objectives. An additional, though significantly more controversial, action would be the use of unmanned aerial vehicles, drones, to monitor African troops to ensure they perform in a professional manner. These initiatives could make a tremendous difference, relatively inexpensively, with a small footprint on the ground and not in combat. Of course, an AFRICOM venture is not risk free . . . adverse outcomes are definitely a possibility. The potential benefits that would accrue from the cessation of a percentage of African soldiers in certain countries not engaging in rebel-like activities need to be weighed against potential costs—including the possibility of American deaths—of US involvement, even if limited to advising.

When discussing whether to utilize AFRICOM, one must remember that benefits from such a venture would accrue not just to African countries but to other nations as well, including the United States. America, especially in helping to decrease abuses by African soldiers, could improve its image not just in African countries with important mineral resources but throughout much of the continent. Additionally, more professional African militaries could mean more stable countries, resulting in better investment opportunities for American companies previously hesitant to enter certain regions because of dangers involved.

The existence of stable African coastal nations decreases the likelihood of pirates launching from their shores and interfering with international shipping. Such benefits, while appealing, are only potential, and unanticipated consequences to interventions are always a possibility, a problem amplified by the vagaries of African ethnic and political rivalries.

Though some actions to turn the sobel phenomenon around may be fairly easy to implement, such as providing clear rules of engagement, others, such as improving a nation's governance, are far more difficult. Therefore, in the long run, expect the sobel phenomenon and its variants to continue, making it difficult at times for American military operations to distinguish allies from enemies. As stated earlier, in Africa sometimes they are one and the same.

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