

THE MESS IN SIERRA LEONE

Humiliation of Indian Army

By PUNYAPRIYA DASGUPTA

TWENTY-THREE Indian soldiers are sitting encircled by a brutal private army in a West African bush territory for a fortnight at the time of this writing. India shows no sign of concern. Many of us do not care to know about it. Our Parliament is in session in New Delhi but its members seemed to be interested last week mainly in legislating for more undeserved perks for themselves and not at all in finding out from the government the facts about hundreds of soldiers of an Indian-commanded multinational UN peacekeeping force falling into the hands of a thug army in Sierra Leone.

Defence Minister George Fernandes, habituated to poaching with his glib tongue into territories not his own, does not talk about it. He may take the plea that none asked anything. If he does, he should be told that a Cabinet Minister of the Government of India should consider it his duty to make a suo motu statement in the Lok Sabha and make the country aware of a worrisome situation faced by an Indian army contingent on UN duty in a foreign id.

The UN decided to help Sierra Leone in West Africa implement a peace agreement which had raised slender hopes that an accord signed by the parties concerned might end the nearly ten years of civil war which had dragged the small country down to the status of the world's poorest. India was given command of the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL).

Far too difficult

The mission on the ground soon started looking far too difficult than had been originally thought in New York. The initial tenure of six months for the force was given the first extension in March and the originally sanctioned strength of 6,000 men was raised to 11,000, making it the

UN's biggest current peacekeeping operation. The task was to support the peace efforts of the Sierra Leone government and rebels formalised on paper in the Togolese capital of Lome last July, monitor the disarming and demobilisation of the rebels, called the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), and reintegration of the combatants, especially the child soldiers, in civil society.

The peace of Lome was made on sand. It suited the RUF leader, Foday Sankoh, a one-time photographer calling himself a colonel, who had been caught by the elected Sierra Leonean government, tried for rebellion and atrocities and sentenced to death by hanging. He and his incredibly cruel followers, who specialised in chopping off the limbs of the child soldiers fighting them, were all amnestied.

Breaking the pact

The RUF agreed to end the civil war, join the government in Freetown with Sankoh as the Vice-President of Sierra Leone and also the head of a body created to look after what he has been really after the diamonds found in the alluvial eastern areas of the country. Additionally, several RUF men were made ministers in the government of President Ahmed Kabbah. Yet Sankoh refused to pay the agreed price of disarming and disbanding his RUF and broke the peace agreement as soon as the UNAMSIL began implementing its mandate.

UNAMSIL ran into serious problems soon in spite of what UN Secretary-General often extolled as the "robust rules of engagement". Some 500 of the troops contributed by Kenya, Zambia, Nepal, Bangladesh and India and deployed by the Force Commander, Major-General Vijay Kumar Jetley of India in the Sierra Leonean countryside, found

themselves cut off by the RUF and made virtually hostages. At least one Kenyan was killed and most of the Zambians were disarmed. The Indians were, according to a UN spokesman in New York, treated a little better and allowed to use their own transport to get food.

There was much confusion all round. The President of Sierra Leone accused UN troops of weakness before his enemies. The President of Zambia found India's General Jetley wanting. At one stage, panic overtook Freetown as rumours, which the UN helped to spread, that the advancing RUF was perilously close to the capital. Prima facie, there was some failure at the command level. In New York, UN officials tried to argue that UNAMSIL had not yet completed deployment and the force had assumed a level of willingness, on the part of those who had signed the peace agreement, to abide by it. Sankoh was pointed to as the villain. Yet, while Sankoh's men were taking UN troops captive and holding them as hostage, he himself was being allowed to come and plot inside his residence in Freetown as he wished.

What happened to Mr Annan's confidence that UNAMSIL would be "able to act to ensure its personnel's security and freedom of movement and, within its capabilities and areas of deployment, to protect civilians under imminent threat of physical violence ...?"

Brutish warlord

The UN had to accept the additional humiliation of begging Charles Taylor, another brutish West African warlord currently President of Liberia, who is still remembered in Sierra Leone as the promoter of Foday Sankoh in civil warring and diamond smuggling. For Charles Taylor, this is an opportunity to give an honourable look to his image. Last

week he got the RUF to free a number of UN troops — most of them Zambians and 11 Indians.

In the coming days, weeks and months, we may expect to hear more of the many controversies that have risen around the UNAMSIL. Mr Annan sounds unhappy with General Jetley. After tossing at the general a faint praise as a good officer, according to those who had met him, the Secretary-General said that a good commander should be a good team-builder too. According to reports reaching Mr Annan, there is tension inside UNAMSIL. The humiliation of the UNAMSIL has already provoked speculation in the international media on whether this is going to be another peacekeeping disaster for the UN in Africa, comparable to Somalia and Rwanda.

UN insistence

The UN is insisting, till now, that it will not abandon its mission in Sierra Leone. Mr Annan says: "Given some of the lessons we have learnt, we should try to see this one through." He agrees that if the international community fails in Sierra Leone, whatever credibility the UN still has will be very badly dented. There is one more point. Britain sent in a sizeable force including an aircraft carrier and a troop-landing ship to Sierra Leone to evacuate foreign nationals there, secure the airport of Freetown and provide logistical and communications support to UNAMSIL.

The British are not going to be combat troops for the UN. Why? Mr Annan has been asking for a rapid reaction force the UN can rely upon in dealing with a situation as in Sierra Leone today. Some countries in a position to make such a force possible seem willing to make their contributions when the theory is discussed at the UN and start backpedalling whenever the time for action comes.