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Mercenaries and Private Military Companies: How They Destabilize and Undermine African States A Case Study of Sierra Leone

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Introduction

The growing relevance of private military companies (PMCs) is alarming in the context of African states. PMCs are privately owned and operated corporations, commonly referred to as modern mercenaries, which provide military and security services for hire. This is not a new phenomenon, as military civilian contractors of various sorts have been providing non-combat services to the military since Roman times (Adams, 2002). However, the present proliferation of these ‘soldiers of fortune’ fosters serious consequences on a global scale, not least of which pertain to the continent of Africa specifically, with dire consequences. The recent exponential growth in securitization of African regimes, by way of private military companies, serves to artificially upset the balance of power, heighten uncertainty and perpetuate destabilization domestically and intercontinentally, in the long run. The blossoming ‘market for force’ is detrimentally two-fold in its implications for African states. In the realm of politics, PMCs are destructive to the state apparatus’ monopoly over the use of power serving to undermine state-society relations. Economically, the increasing employment of PMCs accentuates international exploitation, indirectly, and represents the new face of neocolonialism, operating under the guise of neoliberal market policies (Francis, 1999).

The implications of private military companies for the many fragile actors in Africa are destabilizing in nature and extensive in results, provoking many internal state conflicts. Although many of these Machiavellian ‘whores of war’ claim to collaborate with local governments to engender stability in weak states, marred by war, the real appeal of mercenary intervention lies in its immediate and short term strategic impact on a conflict situation (Francis, 1999). Conversely, the market for force created by increased reliance on PMCs weakens the foundations of public security and undermines the consolidation of public security structures. Consequentially insecurity and violence are likely to increase even further (Leander, 2005). Looking to the western African state of Sierra Leone, as a framework, serves to encapsulate many of the issues discussed and is in many ways a textbook example of the numerous challenges faced by African countries in dealing with mercenary groups. While PMCs may seem to have short-term advantages on the surface, such as their effectiveness in breaking vicious circles of violence, the hindrances are not always apparent and vastly outweigh the benefits. The uncovering of these drawbacks functions as the drive of this paper.

What are PMCs and what role do they play?

In history, mercenaries have represented an individualistic and short-term phenomenon which habitually operated without legal contracts or formal ties to their employers, and sometimes, with complete disregard for commitment to the needs of their employers. PMC experts purport that private military firms in the modern day expand on this conception of historical mercenaries. Private military companies, in the words of Singer, are the “corporate evolution of the age-old profession of mercenaries” (Singer, 2005). As is the case with most social phenomena, PMCs originally arose in response to a change in conditions. After the resolution of the Cold War the rationale for most of the century’s military activity was gone. Without that threat to galvanize public opinion, the great powers became much more sensitive to the domestic political consequences of military casualties, especially for causes not directly tied to national interests (Adams, 2002). As a result, Western powers who are reluctant to intervene unilaterally in civil conflicts in the post-cold war era are able to circumvent public and social considerations by using PMCs as indirect tools of influence.

The growing prevalence of private military company involvement in weak African states is undeniable. In spite of the difficulties in documenting PMC pervasiveness, specialists working on African conflicts have been able to compile information denoting an increase in mercenary activity in African cases. Between the years of 1950 and 1989, fifteen armed conflicts included mercenaries, the 10 ensuing years saw that number jump to sixty-five (for the period of 1990-1998) (Musah & Fayemi, 2000). The impression is corroborated by the increase in annual revenue reported by private military industry, which has increased from \$55.6 billion in 1990 to \$100 billion in 2000 (Leander, 2005). It is noteworthy that “every major U.S. military operation in the post–Cold War era (whether in the Persian Gulf, Somalia, Haiti, Zaire, Bosnia, or Kosovo) has involved significant and growing levels of PMF support” (Singer 2002). Suffice to say that private military companies are becoming gradually more prominent.

Active mercenary interventions in African conflicts can be traced back to the Congo crisis of 1964. The side of the Katangese secessionist movement against UN peacekeeping force enjoyed PMC involvement which later aligned itself with the Mouise Tshombe government. Moreover, mercenaries intervened in the Nigerian civil war of 1967-1970 when mercenaries assembled from France and Germany were recruited by exiled Guinean dissidents, with the alleged support of some Western governments, to overthrow the Socialist government of President Sekou Toure in 1970. Mercenaries in Africa assumed mythical proportions in the 60's and 70's (Francis, 1999). In Sierra Leone, quite a small state in the context of African countries, garnered much attention due to its intractable civil war, which created the market opportunity for mercenary intervention. Sierra Leone has some of the world's best diamond fields, which constitutes its status as an attractive nation for PMC encroachment (Francis, 1999).

There are many operational PMCs in the world game presently, with varying degrees of involvement and importance. Blackwater USA, Executive Outcomes Ltd, Sandline International Ltd, MPRI and Dyn Corp are examples of companies that are relatively well known and crop up in the media on occasion. Their superficial benefits seem natural and obvious; as their respective PR teams would have the general public believe. Defenders of private military companies are quick to point out its relative gains for clients involved: by working as ‘force multipliers’ mercenary groups can provide troops or bolster standing forces against outside interventions. The cost-effectiveness, in the immediate future, is undeniable. These companies are able to come and do a job at a significantly reduced cost than that associated with maintaining the upkeep of a standing army. Finally it is thought that PMCs stand out as far more professional and efficient and even contribute to improving African forces (Leander, 2005). Adams concedes that the serious problems facing African states today leads to the proliferation of PMCs as they are an accommodation to reality, a response to changes in the world. He explains that PMCs can provide important and necessary services, regardless of how unpalatable that fact may be in some quarters (Adams, 2002). However the fact remains that this is not a justifiable excuse for the political or economic dominance of a weak, war-ridden state by opportunistic Western institutions and thus serious implications play out by way of increased conflict.

Sierra Leone and the involvement of PMCs: A historical outlook

The Republic of Sierra Leone is a coastal West African country bordered by Guinea and Liberia. The country is extremely poor, having been ranked by the UN Development Programme in the lowest five nations in a survey of living and development standards conducted in more than 170 member states (Harding, 1997). Sierra Leone is a legacy of British colonial rule. Its state-society relations in modern times are heavily dependent on the system of neo-patrimonialism whereby the extensive resources (being a mineral rich state) are recklessly appropriated by a ruling cabal to political elites, bureaucrats etc. (Francis, 1999).

Since 1991 Sierra Leone has been shrouded in civil power and political unrest. The nature of the country's colonial legacy produced a recipe for unstable governments and the brutal civil war laid bare the degree of terminal economic decline and collapse of state apparatus. The Sierra Leone situation is symptomatic of the extended crisis of the patrimonial state in postcolonial Africa (Harding, 1997). The initial outbreak of hostilities was sparked by the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in the early 1990s. By 1995 the RUF had overrun the three crucial mining cities and was poised to take Freetown (the capital city) as well; state collapse was imminent. The RUF attack on these strategic assets was a major blow to the government's primary foreign exchange earner (Hooper, 1996). These developments gave way to the privatization of security in Sierra Leone due to their inability to repel RUF advances.

Sierra Leone first sought external assistance by enlisting the services of Gurkha Security Guards Ltd to train their domestic army: The Republic of Sierra Leone Military Forces (RSLMF). The GSG was committed to their role of training troops and was unwilling to engage in any offensive operations against the RUF. However, regardless of training, the RSLMF was unable to affect any military success against the RUF. Freetown was in grave danger of being overrun by the rebel forces and freed no longer. This paved the way for the involvement of a second PMC: the South African based Executive Outcomes (EO). In March 1995 EO endeavored to go on the offensive and provide solutions to the ever escalating political unrest.

Executive Outcomes Ltd was contracted due to its reputation for proactive military operations, evidenced by successful operations in Angola against the UNITA rebels (Francis, 1999). With the support of trained RSLMF and local militia, EO was able to evict the RUF from the peripheral districts of Freetown, stabilize the diamond area and destroy RUF headquarters. The coercive stability restored to the country by EO gave way to democratic elections in 1996 and forced the rebels to the negotiating table (as it had in Angola) with the Abidjan Peace Accord being signed on 30 November 1996. EO's involvement lasted nearly 2 years and cost Sierra Leone approximately \$35 million, about one third of the country's defense budget (Shearer, 1998). EO withdrew from Sierra Leone and disappeared upon 'resolution' of the conflict, as PMCs do, once the job is completed. However, signs of instability still persisted with governmental reconnaissance understanding that a renewed RUF attack may be imminent.

On 25 May 1997 the 15-month old civilian government was overthrown by the military, as the newly formed/trained military junta (AFRC) aligned itself with the RUF to form a coalition government and 'People's Army' (Francis, 1999). The ousted government, which was internationally recognized as legitimate, was in exile in neighboring Guinea. The interlude of the third private military company in the span of 3 years was then sought to reinstate the democratically elected President Ahmed Tejan Kabbah. Sandline International Ltd entered the

picture later that year, with covert approval of the British Office, to help restore civilian government by any means necessary. The deal promised huge diamond concessions and mining rights to British businessman-sponsor Rakesh Saxena who financed the operation (Francis, 1999). Sandline's overthrow of the insurgents was relatively quick, reinstating the ousted government in a matter of months.

Destabilizing nature of PMCs: an attack on Sovereignty

We can glean a great amount of insight from the lasting effects of privatized military intervention from the Sierra Leonean case upon close inspection. The contracting of mercenary groups by weak African states with the express intent of stabilization is foolhardy. Private military companies see situations in terms of dollar signs and impersonally affect change in a utilitarian fashion. The 'resolution' of conflict, as in Sierra Leone, has negative effects and serves only to weaken state authority and further prolong violence.

The market for force, created and perpetuated by privatized armies, increases the number of available actors that are able to wield significant force as it is available for purchase. This necessarily entails a weakening of the state monopoly on the use of force and undermines state-power as well as the state role in guaranteeing sovereignty. The trend is veering towards private corporations actively reaching out and 'establishing' governments that will then make their decision with an eye first on corporate interests so that foreign shareholders become the real basis of sovereignty, rather than the countries electorate (Francis, 1999). As we saw within Sierra Leone, following the establishment of a democratically elected government, merely 15 months later a renewed uprising occurred. Long term stability was neither achieved nor actively pursued by including PMCs into the fold. Francis explains how these companies thrive on conflict and are, in fact, necessarily self-perpetuating as that provides market opportunities for them. Without this stipulation they amount to little more than failed business ventures (Harding, 1996).

In the Weberian definition of a state, the right to employ force is exclusive to the government and is a crucial characteristic of the modern state, any undermining of this privilege has negative consequences for long term stability. PMCs act in a detracted fashion from commitment to political agendas and military victory is their sole concern. The immediate strategic impact on a conflict situation, i.e. resolving the issue with the RUF in Sierra Leone, ended the crisis and coerced a negotiated settlement (Francis, 1999). However, EO's interlude also had a strategic impact on the political and security environment. Their intervention translated to an unstable post-conflict environment which failed to foster any kind of lasting interdependencies between the state and the insurgent group (RFC). Hence there was no incentive to cooperate in the future between the warring factions and a renewed attack resulted promptly after the withdrawal of EO forces composed by the People's Army, referenced earlier. The lasting strategic impact of EO is often exaggerated, as its supposed stability and coercive security is often fragile and does not address the fundamental political and socioeconomic issues that led to conflict in the first place (Francis, 1999).

To further belabor the point from a different angle, we may consider the diversion of human and financial resources away from the government and public sector and towards the private market. The investment, to the tune of approximately \$35 million, made by the Sierra

Leonean government has opportunity costs. These resources may have otherwise been spent constructing public security institutions instead of propping up an unstable situation in a makeshift manner. The diversion of human resources erodes the status of public forces by draining these forces of personnel and weakening the public security order. The strain on public security orders, as in Sierra Leone and other African countries, is accentuated because the market for force usurps able human bodies from public security establishments and undermines their legitimacy, hence making contestation both from the inside and the outside more likely (Leander, 2005). This phenomenon was epitomized in the Sierra Leone case, by the coalition of AFRC and RUF in forming the 'People's Army' and seeking to overthrow the democratically elected government and occupy the state militarily. The quality and extension of security provision, as well as the legitimacy of security providers (i.e. African Regimes) is devalued and debased by the privatization of security.

PMCs: Agency of the strong over the weak and its neocolonialist underpinnings

The 21st century practice of using "more subtle methods and manoeuvres so as to propagate and consolidate capitalism [...] extract the largest possible profits and strengthen the economic, political, ideological and military- strategic footholds of imperialism"(Athreya, 1989) characterizes neocolonialism. Private military companies have evolved as a newfound instrument that allow privileged and opportunistic external actors, namely Western political regimes, to prey upon and profit from weaker nations in the face of a new globalized world. Operating under a semblance of capitalistic free-markets crusaders Western governments, especially the British and American, are able to influence and exploit African countries indirectly by making use of their strong covert links to private military companies.

The corporate mercenarism that feeds on low-intensity conflict all over the third-world, but especially Africa, is representative of exploitative neocolonialism and wreaks debilitating effects on the state system. Therefore, hiring mercenaries not only engenders considerable erosion of political sovereignty but also serves to mortgage mineral resources and national security to private corporations (Francis, 1999). When we consider that these PMCs, who are so firmly entrenched in African internal affairs, are also linked to Western interests and foreign policy objectives, the implications are significant. When Rakesh Saxena committed to financing Sandline's intervention and repelling of the People's Army following their insurrection after the democratic elections, he did not do so in the name of democracy or even because of dying Sierra Leoneans, but rather to protect his huge mining interests and further secure new production rights (Francis, 1999). This, in and of itself, is worrying and cold. Heaped on top of that is the understanding that: "Although publicly depicted as a private security firm guarding 'mining and construction interests', Sandline told the press that it was asked by the British High Commissioner in Sierra Leone to help train and equip a local force capable of removing the [mutinous generals]. The American State Department was also apparently kept fully informed, and the US government lent at least its tacit support" (Graves, 1999).

Private military companies make sure to operate within the explicit confines outlined by the domestic government in which they operate, but also are wary and privy to the state where the PMC is headquartered. Contracts are 'brokered' (formally or informally) by the national government within whose domain the PMC is based, and it is not uncommon for firms to even turn down contracts that are not in accord with the policies of their host government (Adams,

2002). The underlying justification for using these private armies as tools is rather simple. The implementation of PMCs on African scenes provides a convenient lens through which to operate should the occurrence of misconduct arise. Due to this key stipulation, US and UK governments are able to pursue their geopolitical interests and foreign policy objects through 'un-linked' and 'neutral' private third parties in countries with poor human rights records and undemocratic policies, effectively distancing themselves from unsavory situations. The reluctance to act unilaterally in questionable or dubious domestic situations can be avoided, making PMCs an attractive option. Shearer exposes how Military Professional Resources Inc. involvement in Angola allowed the government to achieve its foreign policy goals free from the need to secure congressional approval and safe in the knowledge that should a situation deteriorate, official US participation can be denied (Shearer, 1998). This aligns itself similarly to the situation in Sierra Leone where the involvement of Sandline in the restoration of the ousted civilian government was a foreign policy proxy for the British government which was unwilling to play a direct and open role (Francis, 1999). In relying on PMCs foreign actors with invested interests are able to avoid the serious risks associated with financing military intervention in African regimes that have oppressive tendencies and track records.

Methodology, Suggestions and Conclusions

The PMC problem is not new, it has been on the international radar since the late 20th century, but remarkably little has been done to resolve this rapidly multiplying issue. A large part of the inaction is due to the difficulty in successfully halting or controlling the rise of PMCs. The enactment of international measures to drive PMCs out of existence is doubtful and hobbling their activity may also be unlikely. Curbing PMC influence and working in tandem with mercenary groups to bring about significant, positive change is the only viable answer.

Thus far international legal efforts to deal with the market for force have focused almost exclusively on the elimination of private armies. The fact of the matter is that Western powers have embraced PMCs as their new way of conflict resolution; in America "the military has dropped over 40 percent in manpower and budget since the late 1980's. The US government is increasingly shifting over to outsourcing" (Robberson, 2001). As long as private military companies serve the purposes of the major powers and support their policies and objectives, none will seek to actively create legal restraints (Adams, 2002). 'Additional Protocols' to the Geneva convention in 1977 constitutes the most accepted definition of a mercenary and yet has not been signed by the United States or France. Additionally the UN's 1989 International Convention against the Recruitment, Use, Financing and Training of Mercenaries includes the signatures of only 12 nations (Shearer, 1998). There is a lack of commitment to banning, or even curtailing, the intervention of PMCs in security situations, therefore working with them is the only solution.

In reality, natural restraints and influences are already in effect and play into the undertakings of private military groups. The considerations of a PMCs home government, as well as the government employing them and their business nature restrains them by way of ensuring maintenance of good public relations in order to secure new contracts in the future. International institutions must stack additional policies on top of these assurances already in existence. If UN field personnel are permitted to contact military companies and plan strategies

for conflict resolution and implement post-conflict programs they could bring about more smooth transitions into peace and democracy, by tapering off the influence of these PMCs positive results could follow.

The Sierra Leonean case shows how mercenary intervention did not provide security; it only accentuated the international exploitation of the country. A more viable alternative framework is the phenomenon of regional intergovernmental collective security organizations which understand the intricacies of individual conflicts better, such as the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) (Francis, 1999). In Sierra Leone, had the transition between EO's departure been structured to allow UN Peacekeepers to deploy during the demobilization process, a renewed RUF attack after the democratic elections may have been avoided as political intervention and post-conflict peace building in necessary to resolution in the long term (Shearer, 1998).

It is unhelpful to call for the banning of mercenary groups altogether, military companies are unlikely to repair conflicts in the long term but they can be used in combination with other institutions and security strategies to bring about collectively desirable outcomes for African states. By implementing policies and establishing structures that would make political and socioeconomic inclusiveness possible, we can address the problems of entitlement and social justice and promote democratic governance and fundamental freedoms (Francis, 1999). The market for force may currently be a new form of neocolonialism that weak, impoverished states, like Sierra Leone have to contend with; but regulating these companies is possible. The industry of force is not so different from other sectors in the global economy and can be required to conform to universal codes and practices, the only difference lies in the consequences should we fail to achieve solidarity: social mayhem.

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