

The Peace Process

Since the events in January, all the allies of the legitimate government, with the exception of a few hawks around President Kabbah, recognize that a military victory is impossible and acknowledge the necessity of opening a dialogue, if not negotiation, with the rebel forces. President Kabbah has clearly been under strong pressure to do this from Nigeria, Ghana and Guinea. While they are resolved not to let the rebels win, these countries do not want to get bogged down in Sierra Leone in perpetuity. They want a negotiated regional solution which will put an end once and for all to the pillaging of rebel troops in the sub-region.

Everyone also considers that the first stage in the peace process is a meeting between Foday Sankoh, in jail since 1997, and his men. This meeting is scheduled to take place in Togo in late April. It is expected to last about a week.

In addition to allowing the rebels to develop a common platform with a view to negotiations, the Togo meeting will also serve other purposes. It will serve to identify the different leaders of the rebellion, particularly the ones who matter. Apart from Sam Bockarie ("Maskita") and Omrie Golley, little is known of the other protagonists, since Sankoh's principal commanders were sentenced to death and executed last November.

This meeting will also be a means of gauging Sankoh's hold over his troops. Some believe that Sankoh no longer has the control over the rebels that he did in 1996. This is disturbing, as Sankoh is regarded as a lesser evil. There even appears to be an effort by the GOSL to reinforce his legitimacy as spokesman for the rebels.

Finally, this meeting will help establish whether Sankoh is truly sincere in his desire to make peace. Thus far he has said from prison everything that had to be said, but there are questions as to his sincerity. Some feel that, in jail and with a death sentence (against which he is appealing) hanging over his head, Sankoh had no other option than to cooperate with the GOSL. This uncertainty explains Kabbah's insistence that Sankoh return to prison after the Togo talks. Kabbah wants to see what will happen in Togo and how Sankoh will behave before deciding, if the appeal fails, to pardon and release him.

The Negotiators

The representative of the UN Secretary-General, Francis Okelo, and the Inter-Religious Council of Sierra Leone (IRCSL) are the two stakeholders at the origin of the Togo meeting. Both have met with Kabbah and Sankoh and apparently established relations of trust with the two leaders. It is their intervention that has allowed Sankoh radio contact with Bockarie. The IRCSL will also be attending the Togo meeting at Sankoh's request. Both Okelo and the IRCSL should be supported.