

SIERRA LEONE: THE FORGOTTEN CRISIS

INTRODUCTION

In a controversial essay that appeared five years ago in *The Atlantic Monthly*, American writer Robert D. Kaplan wrote about nations breaking up under a tidal flow of refugees, borders crumbling and war becoming a continuation of crime on a massive scale. This, he wrote, was a preview of the first decades of the twenty-first century. One of the many areas Kaplan focussed on was Sierra Leone. He wrote that: "*Tyranny is nothing new in Sierra Leone or in the rest of West Africa. But it is now part and parcel of an increasing lawlessness that is far more significant than any coup, rebel incursion, or episodic experiment in democracy.*"

In a remarkably prescient concluding paragraph to this 1994 essay, Kaplan noted that: "*We ignore this dying region (West Africa) at our own risk. When the Berlin Wall was falling, in November of 1989, I happened to be in Kosovo, covering a riot between Serbs and Albanians. The future was in Kosovo, I told myself that night, not in Berlin. The same day that Yitzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat clasped hands on the White House lawn, my Air Afrique plane was approaching Bamako, Mali, revealing corrugated-zinc shacks at the edge of an expanding desert. The real news wasn't at the White House, I realized. It was right below.*"

In many respects, Kosovo and Sierra Leone are two sides of the same coin which is intra-state conflict in the late 1990's. The conventional "Rules for Armed Combat" have essentially disappeared. With both the Serbs and the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), the rebel group in Sierra Leone, civilian populations, rather than being afforded protection, have become both targets and tools of war. In Sierra Leone and Kosovo, war has taken on the appearance of crime on a massive scale as Kaplan predicted. In Sierra Leone, it has resulted in human rights violations on a staggering scale. Murder, rape, mutilation, looting, abductions, human shields, child soldiers, land mines, property destruction; Sierra Leone is rife with human security issues. Interestingly, the number of refugees that have been generated by both conflicts is roughly the same.

My personal interest in Sierra Leone goes back to 1990 when I made my first visit to the country as part of a municipal development program administered by the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM) and funded by CIDA. At the time, I was a local councillor with the City of Nepean. Our municipality was linked with Bo, the second largest city in Sierra Leone. With the assistance of a local NGO called Nepean Outreach to the World (NOW), we were able to build a new marketplace, buy much needed equipment for the town hall and conduct various types of training for the municipal staff, among other things. Under this program, I made a total of three trips to Sierra Leone, the last being in 1993. In 1995, with the security situation worsening, it became necessary to suspend activities under the program. However, with each trip I made to Sierra Leone, my fascination for the country, its people and its rich culture grew.

Knowing of my interest and previous involvement in Sierra Leone, in late February, the Honourable Lloyd Axworthy, Minister of Foreign Affairs, asked me to take on the role of