



Government Response to the
Intelligence and Security
Committee's
Report on Sierra Leone

Presented to Parliament by the Prime Minister
by Command of Her Majesty

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GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO THE INTELLIGENCE AND SECURITY COMMITTEE'S REPORT ON SIERRA LEONE

1. The Government welcomes the Intelligence and Security Committee's report on the intelligence aspects of the claims that have been made in respect of the events which led to the restoration of President Kabbah's government in Sierra Leone. Inevitably some of the material referred to in their report, particularly that on intelligence reporting and assessment of intelligence, covers areas where security concerns prevent full publication.

SIS involvement?

2. The Committee investigated allegations made in the media and elsewhere that there was some Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) involvement in the counter-coup. The Government notes that no evidence whatsoever has been found to support these allegations and endorses the assurances given by the Chief of SIS to the Committee that there was no such involvement of British intelligence in the counter-coup in Sierra Leone or with the activities of the private military company, Sandline International in that country.

3. The Committee enquired into SIS's relationships with private military companies. The Government notes the Committee's view that while such companies may in certain circumstances be able to provide valuable information, contact with them should be handled with considerable care. The Government takes the view however that in almost all cases the advantages for SIS in such contacts are outweighed by the disadvantages. For this reason SIS's internal guidelines, on which the ISC were briefed, closely circumscribe all such contacts. The existence of the guidelines in SIS pre-dates the events in Sierra Leone on which the ISC have reported.

Intelligence reporting

4. Sierra Leone did not figure prominently in intelligence reporting priorities prior to the coup in 1997. However as the Committee notes, the intelligence collection agencies were able to react flexibly to maximise reporting so that they were able to make a valuable contribution to Government understanding of developments in Sierra Leone.

The assessments process

5. The Committee also looked beyond the role of the intelligence agencies themselves to consider other issues, including that of the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC). The JIC is the main instrument for assessing information on key issues of concern to the UK in the foreign affairs and defence field, using both secret intelligence and open source material, and advising Ministers accordingly.

6. The enquiry by Sir Thomas Legg and that by the Foreign Affairs Committee referred to a note of a meeting in the FCO on 3 December 1997, when a Defence Intelligence Staff (DIS) officer reported that “the Nigerians and Executive Outcomes were arming and supplying the Kamajors”, apparently indicating thereby that the Government had knowledge at that time that the arms embargo was being broken. Intelligence material was made available to the Committee to enable them to assure themselves that the record had inaccurately compressed what had been said at the meeting, namely that the Nigerians were supplying weapons and Executive Outcomes were providing training and technical support to the Kamajors. The Government agrees with the ISC’s analysis of this particular issue and welcomes the clarification provided by the Committee.

7. The Committee reports on a JIC assessment of 28 January 1998, which proved “badly wrong” in one respect. The Committee suggests that a reason for what transpired to be an inaccurate judgement was the failure to consult the High Commissioner, Mr Penfold. Whenever security considerations permit, Heads of Mission are indeed normally consulted on JIC material before it is finalised. The Government agrees with the Committee on the need to maximise the information available for the assessment process. But (as paragraph 10 below makes clear), Mr Penfold was in unique circumstances in Conakry. He was consulted on JIC material when he was in London earlier. As the ISC recognised, in taking evidence from Mr Penfold, his absence on leave in Europe and North America for the previous month would have made it difficult for him to offer information which could have affected the particular assessment of 28 January discussed earlier in this paragraph.

Communications

8. The Government agrees with the Committee that it should be able to provide secure communications equipment promptly when overseas Posts’ circumstances change. But provision of secure communications creates a need to protect sensitive equipment and documents. Generally speaking, the higher the sensitivity, the more elaborate the protection needed. The necessary levels of protection will often be difficult to provide when staff are based in an hotel.

9. Following a meeting with Mr Penfold in London in June 1997 to discuss his communications equipment requirements in Conakry, the FCO provided a fax machine for low security classification material and a satellite telephone. As the Committee notes in the report, this equipment was not in the event used. Mr Penfold was however able to send frequent and detailed reports on the situation in Sierra Leone to London from Conakry by non-secure fax and was regularly back in London.

10. Mr Penfold was in a unique position in Conakry in that he was accredited to a state whose government had gone into exile into a country in which there is no permanent UK mission. The Government considers that in future it may be unwise to repeat this precedent.

11. The Government does not accept that increasing numbers of overseas Posts are unable to receive sensitive intelligence material. There has been no reduction in the number of posts with secure communications able to receive such material. All Posts with an operational need to receive this material can do so. Others can be added when circumstances change.