

Africa: The Mercenary Business - “the growth of large freelance security forces in Africa is liable to strengthen the ruthless rather than the weak”

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The soldiers of fortune who followed the wake of crisis in Africa during the Sixties and Seventies were almost always bound to clandestinity – the public bragging came later. In most cases they were sourly and implacably opposed to national liberation, which they saw as a Communist conspiracy on behalf of an inferior race that had failed to identify its interests with those of its betters. For the mercenaries who fought in Katanga at the time of the Congo disaster or in Angola before independence, anti-Communist ideology had a useful subsuming role: greed, adventurism and some brusque racial views were comfortably rolled up into a defence of the free world.

Executive Outcomes is a mercenary organisation which represents a new incarnation of the army for hire. The cant and truculence of its predecessors are much harder to detect, even though it was put together in the closing stages of apartheid, which most of its personnel served with dedication. Since it was founded in 1989, it has fielded a force of at least five hundred men, under a core of mostly South African white officers, against rebel groups in west and southern Africa, using light armoured vehicles, helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft. Despite higher casualties than it had hoped, it has made a good showing. Above all, it has taken political and military instability in Africa to be a market issue – that of massive unmet demand for security – and positioned itself perfectly in that market. Executive Outcomes thrives on the absence of civility, consensus, law and order; its biggest operations so far have been in countries with valuable mineral resources. Its position in a complicated network of companies, registered anywhere between the Cape and the Isle of Man, makes it more than a military force, and its corporate links tie it to some well-respected figures in Britain. Its greatest friends are probably vulnerable civilians whose environment it has secured against armed conflict – displaced peasant farmers, piece workers, impoverished miners, people who are less concerned with the idea that their nation-state may have become a job-lot than they are with physical safety, food and livelihood, all of which Executive Outcomes has reinstated for tens of thousands of non-combatants in Africa. Yet no one would disagree that it is first and last a mercenary force, however carefully repackaged.

Much of the packaging work is carried out by the company’s general manager, Eben Barlow, who has overseen Executive Outcomes’ biggest contracts and helped it onto a sound financial footing in the Nineties. Barlow is able, a good talker, thoughtful and prepossessing in a bleak sort of way – gaunt face and eyes that droop at their outer edges, a lived-in look and an easy manner. He is a vigilant PR man with the right background for the job. While he was a boy, his family moved from Northern Rhodesia to South Africa, where he finished his education in 1972; two years later, as apartheid’s border wars were about to begin in earnest, he joined the South African Defence Force. By 1980 he was with 32nd Battalion, one of South Africa’s more notorious military outfits, put together by Jan Breytenbach – the writer’s brother – from an assortment of homeboys, Rhodesians and Angolans. ‘Buffalo’ Battalion was essential to South Africa’s strategy of regional destabilisation

north and west of its legitimate borders. Most of its duties were in support and on behalf of Unita, Jonas Savimbi's Angolan rebel movement (and Executive Outcomes now has a lot of Angolan soldiers on its payroll).

Barlow must have done well. After a stint in 32nd Battalion, he moved to Military Intelligence, which handled a good many dirty tricks, including the Renamo insurgency in Mozambique. Sooner or later, he was working for the Civil Co-Operation Bureau, a wholly non-accountable echelon of the South African Defence Force that had its own approach to national security at home and abroad until it was disbanded by de Klerk in a blaze of hostile publicity in 1990. By then, EO was a registered company and many of the people who might have worried about their career prospects in the new South Africa had somewhere to turn. Barlow's duties had been overseas, as part of the CCB's Western European operation. Much of the Bureau's energy abroad was spent on setting up front-companies to circumvent sanctions - and this expertise is clearly paying off today for a lot of ex-security officers.

EO is primarily a boardroom operation, less a model of military than corporate aggression. While Barlow has a way of speaking about the company's benefits to civilians as though he were running a Christian outreach project, the real objective is profit and the strategy is diversification. EO is part of a complicated corporate family in which the nearest thing to a parent company is probably Strategic Resource Corporation. SRC is based in South Africa and EO exists alongside or within it as one of at least a dozen companies - 32 according to one estimate - involved in a range of lesser 'Security' services for private and corporate clients, in air charter and, directly or indirectly, in mining. The SRC family gives EO a wide margin of manoeuvre, both in terms of capital movement and assignation of personnel. SRC may even exist primarily to offer this flexibility, which is particularly important for a mercenary force looking for respectable ways to sidestep political pressure and stay in business.

Since 1993, Companies House in London has carried records of an 'Executive Outcomes Ltd' with offices in Hampshire. Barlow and a British subject, who became his wife after the company filed, are named as the holders of 70 per cent of its capital. The good sense of putting EO on paper in Britain has much to do with the fact that London is an international centre of informal defence and security activity, arms dealing and war-profiteering. At the same time, EO has had a poor press in South Africa and there are people outside the country arguing that an organisation of its kind will do nothing to advance the demilitarisation of Africa. The pressure on the South African Government to restrict its movements or close it down has been growing, but 'Executive Outcomes Pty', with offices in Pretoria, is flourishing.

There is not much that the South African Government could do, even if it wanted to curtail EO's activities - a point on which there is probably disagreement. Aziz Pahad, the Deputy Foreign Affairs Minister, who regards EO as a poor ambassador for the new South Africa, has said that he would like to see an end to it. Barlow, however, likes to argue that relations with the Government are not so bad and that the bulk of South African opposition to EO comes from members of the old guard - Military Intelligence and other elements of the cumbersome security apparatus that flourished in the Eighties. He is not specific about the reasons for this. But EO may well be a cause of envy and resentment in South Africa's old security culture. It could, in theory, constitute a safety cushion for anyone whose name was liable to crop up in connection with apartheid crimes - a situation which can cut off earnings, lead to jail sentences or raise the possibility of private retribution. At rates of anywhere between US\$2000 and \$12,000 a month, the pay of an EO officer is much more than he could expect to earn in the SADF or by setting up in the security sector, already highly competitive in South Africa, and he is well placed for a new start if necessary. His equivalent, soldiering on inside the country, has no such reassurances.

At the same time, EO is a highly selective club for the late 20th-century voortrekker. Its members push up into Africa, away from the constraints of a meddling administration, and continue the Afrikaner quest for solitude, lebensraum, exemption. They rely on skills which are no longer openly desirable at home – rugged self-reliance and bush warfare – and live in accordance with a tribal mythology that other Afrikaners, the real volk who cannot accompany them, are obliged to set aside. Unlike their forbears, the EO trekkers can return every few weeks to the spouse and children they did not take along, regale their friends with tales of adventure and file away their foreign bank statements. Meanwhile, EO is using the SADF – along with the police, and the remains of Koevoet or ‘crowbar’, a former counter-insurgency force in Namibia – as a skilled labour pool. The SADF regards the loss of trained personnel, pilots especially, as crude poaching.

Finally, there is the problem of EO’s first substantial fighting contract, which it won in 1993, working on behalf of the Angolan Government, its former enemies, against Unita, its erstwhile friends. Nothing could have signalled more clearly that old alliances had been abandoned. EO’s work began in the north, where, on unreliable information, they put down by helicopter in the middle of a Unita exercise and fought under extreme pressure for a week or more until the rebels withdrew. By the end of last year, when their contract ended, they had trained an Angolan special battalion, flown MiGs and modified training aircraft in combat over Unita’s bases – Savimbi was said to have been wounded in one of these raids – and nudged the rebels back to the negotiating table. For this, EO is believed to have been paid in the region of \$40 million a year for two years by the Angolan Government. Once again, the company took to the drubbing of Unita less like a treacherous comrade-in-arms than a corporate raider. Angola was strictly business.

Not everybody would have seen it that way. Colonel Jan Breytenbach, for instance, who had built 32nd Battalion into a versatile force behind Savimbi, must have felt the sting of betrayal on the rebels’ behalf. During the Cold War, there were any number of complaints by white officers in Angola about the incompetence of their Unita friends and there was the statutory racism, but in reality allegiances were fierce. For much of his career Breytenbach was a straightforward soldier, whose involvement in ‘dirty tricks’ – including the alleged training of Inkatha contingents up in northern Namibia for the butcher’s war with the ANC – was less than it might have been. When he went public at the end of South Africa’s 13-year excursion in Angola, it was to lambast the running of ivory and hardwoods out of the combat zone by South Africans whom he regarded not as proper soldiers like himself but as civilians in uniform: securocrats subsidising the war improperly and racketeers lining their own pockets. The two were hard to tell apart as the old order crumbled.

In Colonel Breytenbach’s view, there are three or four things you cannot do: you cannot despoil the natural beauty of Africa (elephants and rainforest), you cannot serve in an army and be more or less than a soldier, you cannot easily forget old friends and you cannot make war a means of self-enrichment. He is also critical of EO’s treatment of its personnel. He has argued that they were not always looked after in Angola and that the company might have offered better terms of employment, considering the dangers of the work. EO is thought to have lost as many as 14 men in its first year in Angola. Breytenbach was approached by several next-of-kin in South Africa asking him to press their case with the company: they had received no word of compensation and sketchy information about the circumstances of death or capture. He was not surprised. EO’s managers were precisely that – a bunch of managers on the make.

This is scarcely going to throw EO off course. Nor, perhaps, are protestations by the ANC, whose inclination to act against the company at the time of its contract in Angola, when it first came under international scrutiny, was clearly moderated by residual loyalties to the Angolan Government: the ANC were given bases in Angola for more than a decade, and some of its units saw action on behalf of the Government against Unita. The economic prospects for the new South Africa in a postwar Angola have helped to keep these loyalties alive. There may even be senior members of the ANC

whose links with Angola, and with SRC, offer tangible rewards.

There are implicit indemnities in all of this for the company, however loudly the ANC protests, and these must be weighed against EO's past and its controversial present. Two years ago, the South African Police undertook an inquiry into the company but there was insufficient evidence, in the view of the Attorney General's office in Gauteng, to bring a case against it. On the face of it, EO has little to fear from the clauses in the recent Constitution that could be invoked against it for its activities abroad. It may also be that the company has something to offer the Government by way of intelligence and military assistance. If it can move so swiftly against its old acquaintances in Angola, it is impossible to rule out action on behalf of the South African Government against the lingering political and quasi-political violence that plagues the country: Buthelezi's violence, for example, or the violence of a reorganised extremist Right, or the violence of dissatisfied supporters of the ANC itself. What matters is that the quality of service should be unobtainable elsewhere and that the price should be right. Whatever transactions occur between the Government and the company, they will be underpinned by a familiar market model: public sector deregulation, in which expertise is shed and purchased back on a piecemeal basis - in this case at the instigation of the seller.

Barlow likes to stress that his company undertakes no work for rebel movements: EO's services are available only to 'legitimate' governments; he also says that he will seek to encourage the growth of democracy wherever EO works - a slightly chilling remark from a former CCB operative, but times change and markets with them. By 'legitimate' Barlow simply means sovereign and internationally recognised, but legitimacy is not so straightforward in Africa. Would EO have worked in Algeria, for example, against the various components of the Islamic Salvation Front, kept from democratic victory at the polls in 1992? Would it work in Sudan, where an Islamic government is persecuting non-Islamic groups in the south? What of a strong leadership in Rwanda, orchestrating a genocide? In these countries, millions of citizens regarded, or still regard, their rulers as worse than illegitimate, yet Barlow would be playing by his own rules by taking the government shilling in any of them, just as he has stuck to the book by working for the MPLA in Angola and the military rulers of Sierra Leone, which is currently the company's biggest area of operations.

Last February Sierra Leone held its first multi-party elections since 1977. The transition to democracy was negotiated under the aegis of an unstable military leadership; the election was taking place six weeks after an officers' coup had replaced the president; parts of the country were snagged in civil war. The bloodshed and disarray in Liberia, the country's south-eastern neighbour, had spilled over into parts of Sierra Leone for several years, while its own internal conflict, involving Liberian contingents on loan to the Government, had prompted the departure of roughly quarter of a million refugees, mostly north-east to Guinea. Like a camel sizing up the needle's eye, this extremely fertile country, with enough mineral wealth to develop and enrich it, had been steadily scaling the table of Africa's, then the world's, poorest nations: two-thirds of the population are now estimated to live in absolute poverty. Two years ago, the UN Development Programme put the country among the lowest five in a survey of living and development standards conducted in more than 170 member states.

Underlying the contest of 13 parties and their presidential candidates was a three-cornered stand-off: the mass of voters favoured the election despite fears that it would amount to nothing, the Army was in more minds than one and the rebels of the Revolutionary United Front threatened to disrupt it. In many ways, the rebels and the rebel war - which had drawn in Executive Outcomes - were the key. There was little to suggest that a national election called in the course of hostilities between the Government and the RUF was a sound idea, although its advocates argued that the existing regime was in such disrepute that only a transfer of power would convince the rebels to settle. But the conflict was also a pretext for the Army to annul the vote if it chose.

The RUF was operating mostly in the eastern parts of Sierra Leone, with sporadic activities in the centre. In Bo, inland to the south-east, there were reports of rebel intimidation on the day before the vote, which escalated in the course of the election and its aftermath; by the time it was over, the main hospital contained twenty or thirty victims of gunshot wounds and atrocities. In Freetown, however, there was no threat from the RUF, which was held by its inhabitants in the same contempt as the Army. That disdain was a luxury bestowed by EO, who had deployed in 1995 to stop a rebel push before it reached the city. They had also driven the rebels from the diamond mining district of Kono, in the Eastern Province, and were in the process of securing another key mining area south of the capital, overrun early in the same year. They had managed all this without much difficulty. The notion that a successful election might end the war was not, therefore, the fond illusion one might have imagined so much as a useful misconception - for the rebels had already been confined, they were in negotiations with the Government, and an end to the war, or a prolonged pause, appeared to be in sight. The people of Sierra Leone had EO to thank for that, and many of them did.

The road out east to Wellington, a few miles from the centre of Freetown, was good. I took it with Dr Edward Nahim, a consultant psychologist and lecturer supervising a rehabilitation project for former under-age combatants in rebel militias, government forces and semi-autonomous units. There was room for roughly a hundred young people on the property taken over from the Government by Children Associated with War - part of a sprawling, ill-appointed juvenile reform centre at the end of a dirt track some distance from the main road. Nahim and his colleagues were stretched at the time, because Eben Barlow's men were referring youngsters from the areas they'd secured up country. It was the first tangible evidence of EO activity a visitor to Sierra Leone was likely to encounter and it did the company credit.

The Sierra Leone Army had been drafting in minors for several years, often through a system of patronage in which an officer in a remote posting would take on young, able members of families that could no longer sustain themselves. RUF ranks, too, had their share of minors - in Ivory Coast, I was shown a videotape of a forest base full of them. (It was the occasion of a visit by the rebel leader, Foday Sankoh, a quixotic patriarch in traditional dress who had taken his objections to military rule a step further than most of his compatriots. His review of the base revealed that the youngsters in his rank and file had all adopted complicated haircuts with inscriptions, legends and motifs of the kind found in Freetown, Los Angeles and London, and a good hour of his tour was taken up superintending a mass shearing.) Young combatants were also operating in the plentiful grey areas of the conflict. They might be in the charge of a government officer whose units were actively looting, or masquerading as rebels, or conniving with rebels - 'sobels' (soldier-rebels) was a common term for these impartial predators - in a resource-sharing venture that would leave their target areas almost uninhabitable for civilians. Others would have a semi-detached relationship with their Army or RUF superior, or with youthful commanders in the tattered, dissolute Liberian contingents stranded in the country.

Because EO had contact with the Sierra Leone Army, they took most juvenile combatants from government ranks and flew them by helicopter to Freetown. There were fifty or so on Nahim's project. Most of them looked as though they had been rescued from the edge of an abyss. Safea Komba, an 11-year-old from the diamond area in Eastern Province, had been running ammunition for the Government through RUF positions in some local impasse outside the main town in the area. His father belonged to a civilian militia drawn from a traditional guild of hunters: men with old or homemade firearms, a good knowledge of the forest, good intelligence and little time for the RUF. Komba had been caught in the bush by the rebels; he said he was carrying food to his relatives, but live rounds were discovered in his bags. He was assaulted and cut at the shoulder and head with a machete and left to die. EO picked him up a few months after his recovery. There were many others - a 16-year old girl called Florence who had gone crazy after seeing a rebel mutilated by her

commander; a 15-year-old boy convalescing from a bullet wound in the arm; a private of the same age who went about the centre with a toy revolver tucked into the top of his shorts.

Nahim started incomers to the centre on a detox programme. Marijuana and alcohol-dependency were common; there was some evidence of heroin use and of a stimulant administered in food: Nahim said it was gunpowder. Literacy classes, practical workshops and group therapies of various kinds re-equipped the children for civilian life. Those who had come in with EO were very much better off for its child-soldier shuttle and, as I found out later, it was something Barlow's men liked to crow about. It also enhanced the company's chivalrous image - difficult to begrudge it that. The seductive parallel with the sentimental grunt troubled by the pathos of children in a Vietnamese village rang false in the end: EO, after all, was not involved in operations of massive destruction for a geo-strategic objective. They were in Sierra Leone for the money. Their action was extremely specific. And wherever they went, civilians stopped dying. The trouble was that they only went where the pay-off was high. The children they had brought to Nahim's centre came from Kono. If you did not live in one of Sierra Leone's mineral-rich enclaves, and yet you were beset by rebels and soldiers, EO was not disposed to help you: that was the case in Bo, where the Army, or the rebels, or both, had made their point at election time.

There were people in Sierra Leone who felt strongly about EO's nose for money. They wanted to know what the company was receiving for its work, how the payments were made and how long they were likely to continue. The Sierra Leone exchequer is scarcely overflowing and one report in the international press claimed that when it was stretched to the limit, the possibility of transferring scheduled IMF payments to the company was raised. Journalists at the Standard Times, an independent paper based in Freetown, are convinced that EO also enjoys a good share of the profits from Branch Energy, a mining company which is thought to have one gold concession, at least two concessions on alluvial diamonds and another for a valuable kimberlite formation in Kono. But, under military rule, this was a story they were unable to research beyond hearsay - and one they would have published at their peril. The arrangements between EO, Branch Energy and the Government have been the subject of intense speculation and maximum discretion. Last year, the Standard Times reported a conference in Freetown at which the head of the Teacher's Union called for the withdrawal of EO's men from Sierra Leone. He described them as 'hard-core apartheid attack dogs', a remark which, when quoted in the paper, led to the arrest of the speaker and the editor. At the end of a morning in the office of the Times - a shop-front not much bigger than a bus-shelter - one of the journalists told me that Freetonians would have no difficulty with EO and Branch Energy, provided there was 'transparency' about the terms on which they were operating.

Outside Sierra Leone these terms are no easier to ascertain. EO must surely receive some money from the Sierra Leone Government - Barlow thinks cash payment is a good idea - but there are reasons for thinking that EO is also subsidised by Branch Energy. The connections between the two are very close and they predate the operation in Sierra Leone, where EO is as closely involved as it has been in Angola in protecting Branch Energy's areas of operation. The linking figure is Tony Buckingham, a British entrepreneur - formerly a military man - with business interests in Africa and the Middle East. Wherever EO goes, Buckingham's name goes with it, whether whispered, acclaimed or stridently withheld. He is widely perceived as the éminence grise of the company. A high-ranking official in Sierra Leone has said that Buckingham was directly involved in the negotiations leading to the contract between EO and the military regime last year, as well as the agreement struck with Branch Energy - which was described four years ago in Lloyd's List as his 'brainchild'. Unlike Barlow, Buckingham steers clear of journalists; as a result, the speculative forays of the press - including the suggestion that he contributes to one of the few independent publishing houses in Britain - are as dashing as his own. He is involved in an ambitious offshore development scheme in Namibia and projects in Kenya and Uganda. His experience in the oil industry, most publicly at

Sabre, a small company which he left in 1991, almost certainly led to EO's contract in Angola.

In 1992 Buckingham presided over the creation of Heritage Oil and Gas, an acquisition and development venture in which Branch Energy had a substantial share. Heritage was to take part, under the aegis of its largest stakeholders and in conjunction with Ranger Oil, a Canadian firm with which Buckingham was also involved, in the development of two Angolan offshore oilfields. Within a year of the Heritage start-up, EO had been dropped into a Unita stronghold that threatened to disrupt the logistics of Angola's offshore oil industry. After the fiercest fighting that some of EO's men had ever encountered, several company casualties and a disastrous effort by the Angolan military to reinforce the South Africans by sea, the rebels were driven off. EO was now entrenched in Angola. In July 1994, Unita lost a key diamond trading town in Lunda Norte: the Angolan Army was involved in the recapture and EO 'advised'.

According to several accounts, it was the Angolan Government that recommended EO to the military in Sierra Leone. Others say they rode in on the back of Branch Energy. A third view has it that another company based in the Strand and involved in 'military supply' - in Indonesia among other places - engineered EO's entry. In any case, international pressure was mounting on the Angolans to end their arrangement with EO - the Clinton Administration led the way - and by the end of 1995, the year they left Angola, both EO and Branch Energy were working in Sierra Leone. Winding down in Angola was a setback for EO: it meant the loss of a potential, privatised peace dividend as a supervisor and trainer of the integrated armed forces - remunerative work which now looks destined for a US paramilitary company. The blow was softened not only by the Sierra Leone contract but by EO's ability to shuffle men and resources around the recondite web of companies associated with Strategic Resource Corporation. If EO was no longer in Angola by the start of 1996, there were scores, perhaps hundreds of its personnel left working in the country under other auspices - a security firm called Saracen, for instance, another called Alpha 5, and an air charter company called Ibis. Branch Energy, too, is still in Angola.

Buckingham's men have little resemblance to Cecil Rhodes's corporate army or to the scabrous soldiers of fortune who have wheeled in and out of Africa for the last four decades. EO is a more sophisticated force. It contracts with governments but patrols the operations of an adventurous mining concern in which its own people have interests. If it has a future, it will not depend on the kinds of sporadic upset or seismic shift that occurred in Africa during the superpower era but on the rolling instability that began in the Nineties, coinciding with the decline of Africa's strategic importance to the West, the UN's disgraces in Somalia, Rwanda and Western Sahara, and the reluctance of foreign companies to risk investors' money in insecure circumstances. The regular work that this implies is likely to bring the kind of discipline, and in turn more contracts, that impromptu, hand-to-mouth mercenary activity in the past did not. And where the situation becomes delicate, as it did in Angola, a proportion of men and resources can remain profitably deployed under other names.

The kind of mobility that EO is beginning to master is a huge advantage, but it is not the road to respectability. In PR terms, the paramount chief in a West African village thanking EO on behalf of his people for returning them to normality counts for very little, but a well-known name to put about can be a proper asset and, in this, Heritage has served a purpose. How Sir David Steel came to sit on the board of directors, alongside Buckingham, is not a matter of public record. It is possible that one of his former research assistants, Andrew Gifford, who is also on the board of Heritage, was the link. Gifford has family and other connections at Fleming Mercantile Investment, which eventually took a stake in Heritage, and he is now at GJW, the government consultancy set up in 1980 in partnership with two other former political researchers - Jenny Jeger for James Callaghan, and Wilf Weeks for Edward Heath. The benefits of Steel's familiarity with African affairs were no doubt clear to Buckingham. There was still optimism in the air as Heritage prepared to go into Angola. But on the

eve of elections which looked as though they might bring peace to the country, Steel was a useful backstop in the event of Savimbi, with whom he had some influence, deciding to cut up rough and spoil the oil or, indeed, of a Unita victory at the polls, which would have required a fair amount of renegotiation by foreign companies in Angola.

Steel is aware of the link between Heritage and EO – potentially a source of damage to his reputation – but there is no reason for the subject of EO to be raised at Heritage. Steel's distance from the sharp end of Buckingham's business is probably as good as he can contrive and the latest information on the rumour mill, that Branch Energy is to be acquired by a company in Vancouver, may help to put some clear water, blue or otherwise, between the former president of the Anti-Apartheid Movement and some of apartheid's most committed former defenders. But for several years now, Steel's name has been on hand for anyone in the SRC/Branch Energy/EO brotherhood who wants the operation to look like a charitable venture.

A journalist from the *Standard Times* who wants to establish what EO is doing in his country is unlikely to accompany them in their work: the company imparts and allocates information over the heads of people whose lives are intimately affected by its activities. The foreign press is more fortunate. In Sierra Leone, EO has two Soviet military helicopters. You must squeeze in with men and equipment to get to their areas of operation. On the pad at the Sierra Leone Army headquarters in Freetown, I found myself helping up a large man in his sixties, in civilian dress, carrying a rectangular black briefcase. He didn't speak to anyone and seemed to find the journey frightening. We were wedged together a few feet from a line of soldiers with their feet dangling out of the doorless back of the aircraft. As the sweat soaked through his trousers and then through mine, it was hard not to imagine a far happier man – five, six years back perhaps – in a government building in Pretoria, activating counter-intelligence cells against the liberation movement. When we put down in a burned-off clearing forty minutes from Freetown, he disappeared in a Land Rover and I never saw him again. Some forms of travel make the imagination a little feverish, and this anxious, unsettling figure could simply have been an engineer or an accountant, but it is an interesting, and unanswerable, question how many non-combatant securocrats with a compromised past the company is carrying.

In 1995 the RUF had occupied the area we were now in. They had overrun the property of a large mining company digging for rutile, and another a few miles away which mined bauxite. They had taken hostages, mostly expatriates, and gutted what they could. The Government, with help from Nigerian pilots, who bombed the occupied rutile complex, had failed to dislodge them. Some government units and auxiliaries kept a presence of sorts in the area. Over the next few months, several thousand civilians fled to the coast. EO had come in at the beginning of 1996 and retaken everything. The inventory of damage was under way. Whatever the rebels had not looted – and it was looting of a lightweight kind – they had smashed; the major pillage had been left to the Sierra Leone Army before, or as, the resecuring operation took place, in collusion with the RUF. Truck parts, fridges, generators – all these were removed, along with sections of conveyor belt from the bauxite plant, which were shipped north to Guinea for resale.

EO had set up in the rutile complex, camping out in the ruined blocks daubed with the RUF's slogans – EVERY DAY NO MATTER THAT WE GO WE ARE THE LION OF THIS KINGDOM; WARM THE BARREL; RUF BLACK JESUS IN ACTION. Most of the rank and file were Angolans. The officers spent their days patrolling, talking to civilians, gleaning information, widening the net. Crucially, and confidentially, they were preparing logistics for an international aid agency to manage the return of roughly eight thousand displaced civilians. Without the provision of food, seeds, tools and the rudiments required to restart their communities again after an absence of a year, returning would be almost impossible. But the agency could not mount the operation without the help of EO. Nor could it be seen, any more than a prominent British politician, to have any association with a

South African mercenary force. But anyone who wanted to do anything in this part of Sierra Leone – aid projects, plant recovery, damage assessment, or simple family farming – was dependent on the company for logistics or security.

Scattered around the district there were other soldiers. There was the Sierra Leone Army, ragged and disorderly, moving in small detachments that would be better confined to barracks. There were also the hunters, whose traditional militia EO worked with very closely. Then there were the Liberian soldiers, isolated groups of them, living by checkpoint levies and other kinds of coercion. You had early warning of their presence in the form of sinister dumb sentries placed in the road: one such admonishing figure I passed on several occasions included a phrenological head removed from the bauxite company's medical clinic; the head was decked in bandanas and stuck on a pole draped with a curtain and plastic trinkets. It was on duty for a teenager with an automatic pistol, a wide-brimmed hat and a red and black scarf who spoke with an American lilt and ran a little fiefdom around the perimeter of the bauxite plant. Another bad object, rigged up by the Sierra Leone Army, was part of a road-block proper: it consisted of a frayed shirt-sleeve and two human skulls, one covered in glossy grey enamel paint, set on an oil drum.

These were the tutelary forms under which the remnants of civilian life had been eked out for some time and it was a point of interest that EO didn't demolish them. For the unkempt young men with weapons who tended them, the company's arrival was a relief. The influx of food and the decline of banditry is a respite for bandits, too. Later they would have to worry about the next move – especially the Liberians, for whom there was no future at home. They welcomed and feared EO, who settled disputes pretty sharply and put an end to the parasitical dependency of the militias on unarmed locals. There was no point any longer in trying to live by the gun. Peace and the beginnings of order were now restored and news of the restoration travelled fast, which was why the aid agency had flown in field workers with EO, in anticipation of a mass influx. One of the mining companies looked set to restart.

An anecdotal glimpse like this into EO's work tends only to redress the balance of scepticism in favour of the company. But its role as an autonomous operator is less important than its symptomatic character. Any appraisal of its business has to be weighed against the doings, and non-doings, of the governments, international organisations and capital formations that have contributed to the opening into which it has moved with such alacrity. If there were strong, consensual political and social institutions in Angola or Sierra Leone, EO would have no place in either. If, during the Eighties, there had not been such a slavish construction put upon the virtuous market and the vicious state – and what was the World Bank advocating during that catastrophic period in Africa? – EO and its clients would have been unable to reconceive the role of national security as a super-lucrative tender. If the growing ambiguity between the public and corporate domains were not so advanced, EO could not shuttle so gainfully between the two. If the UN, under two dilatory Secretaries-General and an abdicationist permanent membership, had not failed so badly in Africa since Namibian independence, there would be fewer security vacuums for EO and others to fill – and those others scarcely bear comparison, from a civilian point of view, with EO. Would arrangements be preferable under a Nigerian-led contingent from Ecomog, an underpaid unit of the Sierra Leone Army, or a gang led by a Liberian adolescent with a handgun?

There are problems enough with EO's work to date, if journalists go to jail and others are left wondering what national resources are being traded away in their name. Its open intervention against the RUF was instrumental in the holding of the Sierra Leone elections, but there were covert manoeuvres, too, a week before the pre-election coup, as additional EO men were drafted into the country. Nobody is quite sure what went on. In this instance the shift was towards democracy – and there is now civilian rule – but the model might hold good for any client state heading in an unacceptable direction. The extent of the gratitude felt by many in Freetown and other parts of the

country for EO's presence is shocking to any outsider who suspects that the presence of former apartheid specialist forces freelancing around Africa is an unhealthy state of affairs; EO jeopardises its popularity by failing to disclose its financial and contractual arrangements, and its hidden hand in national affairs, despite the rousing talk about democracy.

Yet the real issues will be raised later. EO wants to diversify out of purely mercenary business wherever it can. It is always on the look-out for post-conflict work: security, military training, reconstruction and the enormously lucrative logistics of rehabilitation; it is cultivating expertise in water projects, road-building, housing, tourism, conservation, clinical care and medical supply, perhaps extensive farming. As these contracts come in, which they seem to be doing in Mozambique and lately Zambia, the company and its strange family relation, Strategic Resource Corporation, can go forth and multiply, if necessary in the guise of little companies with exotic names, many of them registered in the countries concerned. This sort of corporate growth is nothing new, but it is a century or more since an expansionist enterprise in Africa was so explicitly linked to a competent mercenary force, and perhaps just as long since African polities experienced the levels of vulnerability that many states on the continent are facing today.

Not long ago, there was talk at EO of going into Sudan. Its rule of working with 'legitimate' governments would have meant co-operation with one of the worst regimes on the continent. Tony Buckingham was said to be in favour, but more cautious voices prevailed. There is nothing to guarantee that they will in future. EO, moreover, is probably the market leader in Africa for the kind of work it offers; there will be other companies with different ground rules and similar ambitions, following the scent of money in a continent where few states can protect their assets or their citizens and some are run with no intention of doing so. The immediate effects of this proliferation will be diverse and unpredictable, but in the longer term, the growth of large freelance security forces in Africa is liable to strengthen the ruthless rather than the weak - a trend that was obvious long before the rise of Executive Outcomes.

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P.S.

* "The Mercenary Business". London Review of Books. Vol. 18 No. 15 · 1 August 1996 pages 3-9:
<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v18/n15/jeremy-harding/the-mercenary-business>

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