

FROM MERCENARIES TO MARKET

The Rise and Regulation of Private Military Companies

Edited by Simon Chesterman and Chia Lehnardt

Foreword

The publication of this book represents a breath of fresh air on a topic that hitherto has generated more heat than light. The emergence and proliferation of private military companies (PMCs) have been the result of three major developments: the end of the Cold War and the consequential dismantling of the Warsaw Pact; the end of the Apartheid system in South Africa; and the war against terrorism, particularly the war in Iraq. When the Warsaw Pact was disbanded some of its members were left with huge inventories of weapons systems. Most of the small arms used by PMCs in Africa in the 1990s came from these countries — weak arms export control systems made it easier to purchase arms to be used in civil conflicts. With the end of the Apartheid system in South Africa, it was necessary to downsize a military capability aimed at opposing opponents of the Apartheid system, particularly the threat of Cuban troops in Angola. One result was the ready availability of well-trained military personnel who were looking for new missions. The early PMCs benefited from this development. The war in Iraq presented a different opportunity for the expansion and growth of the PMCs: with the reluctance to deploy a large force in Iraq during and after the combat phase of the operation, out-sourcing of some military activities went to PMCs.

Although political scientists often announce the withering of the state and the prominent role of non-state actors, there is still a residue of belief that only sovereign states should possess a monopoly over the legitimate use of force. This may be one reason why the use of private military companies is so abhorrent to many. There has been a tendency to label most if not all PMCs as “mercenaries”. Even though some types of PMCs share some attributes with mercenary groups, they are not your typical mercenaries. More often than not PMCs have contracts with legal governments and they are not collaborating with rebel forces to topple established governments. In one instance in Sierra Leone a PMC made a valuable contribution to the democratic process. Furthermore not all PMCs are involved in combat operations. Many are engaged in

training of police personnel, and other forms of training along with the provision of logistic support.

Even though the use of private military companies goes back decades, it was the involvement of Executive Outcomes (EO) in Sierra Leone in the early 1990s that generated much debate. When, upon closer examination, the background of Executive Outcomes became clear and the fact that EO personnel were mainly recruited from the former South African military and police special forces, the criticism intensified. Many commentators at the time were too quick to consider EO as a group of hired killers. The fact that the government of the day invited Executive Outcomes to help defend the country against a group of mercenaries on the rebel side was ignored. The confusion over the nature and activities of private military companies became further embroiled in a major foreign policy debate in the British House of Commons when it was erroneously alleged that Sandline — another part of the hydra-headed Executive Outcomes — was primarily responsible for restoring the ousted, democratically elected President Kabbah of Sierra Leone to power in March 1998. Those who were uncomfortable with the declared “ethical” foreign policy of the New Labour Government of Tony Blair made much about nothing of the Sandline Affair. The truth of the matter was that the Sandline weapons that had been purchased reached the Lungi airport in Sierra Leone after the armed Monitoring Group of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOMOG) — mainly Nigerian troops — had defeated the rebel group. In any case, this type of PMC has been declared out of bounds.

The well-written and argued presentations in this volume provide a comprehensive panorama of the whole array of positions regarding private military companies. They range from the argument that PMCs are morally indefensible with no need to regulate them to a forceful defence of the necessity of PMCs in the current environment. Even those who defend the use of PMCs do not always agree on the desirability of regulation. Many of the authors make persuasive presentations in favour of some form of regulations although some are inclined to establish a threshold for regulations.

It would be foolhardy to deny that the international community has an obligation to craft some form of regulation of PMCs. This is not to ignore the fact that some failed or weak states will seek assistance from PMCs if they believe that collective security measures under the Charter of the United Nations have failed. These were the circumstances faced by Sierra Leone when the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC) invited Executive Outcomes on the advice of a weapons merchant. There are other compelling reasons for some form of regulation when one takes into account that the democratic process in some industrialized countries is being circumvented by the employment of PMCs. The conduct of the war in Iraq would seem to be a clear example.

The pioneer editors of this book should be highly commended for undertaking this important venture of exploring all aspects of the debate about PMCs. Whatever viewpoint one may hold, PMCs are here to stay: governments find them useful and are prepared to pay for their services. This is a most informative book with exceedingly important analyses to enhance a better understanding of PMCs. A careful reading of these presentations should greatly benefit the general discourse on the subject.

James O.C. Jonah

Finance Minister of Sierra Leone, 1998-2001