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By Louis Proyect

Philippe Diaz's documentary "The Empire in Africa" opens in NYC, Los Angeles and Madison, Wisconsin theaters this Friday. It is not to be missed. Focused on the bloody civil war in Sierra Leone, it is the perfect rejoinder to those who believe that the West has some kind of obligation to provide law and order through a "humanitarian" military intervention of the sort that NY Timesman Nicholas Kristof contributor calls for in Darfur or that Harvard professor Samantha Powers called for in Rwanda. Using interviews with the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), a rebel group widely portrayed as the Sierra Leone equivalent of the Janjaweed in Darfur, as well as supporters of military intervention against it, Diaz uncovers a rescue mission much more about rescuing diamond mining profits than lives.

"The Empire in Africa" makes no attempt to prettify the RUF, opening with a ghastly display of Sierra Leoneans who have had hands or legs chopped off by the rebels. We eventually learn that these acts were carried out as a reprisal against villagers who were implicated in government-sponsored murders against the group. Although the film does not make the specific connection with Iraq, the violence in Sierra Leone seems to have had the same kind of spiraling, out-of-control, vendetta-like quality seen in Iraq today but without the religious sectarian split. The RUF appears to be like many armed African resistance groups that begin with progressive goals but somehow get derailed in the process. While by no means as retrograde as the Khmer Rouge, the RUF gives the overall impression of a force that has allowed the gun and the machete to prevail over politics. That being said, interviews with at least one militant in the film reveals them to be bent on ridding Sierra Leone of imperialist predators and making the country's riches, diamonds in particular, a basis for a more just economic development path.

As the violence deepened in Sierra Leone, the UN "came to the rescue", just as the expensive full-page savedarfur.org ads in the NY Times call for now. Using Western funding from aboveground and clandestine sources, Ahmad Tejan Kabbah was elected President with a clear mandate to stop the killing. A long-time employee of the UN, he had the enthusiastic support of the US, Great Britain and France who understand how to manipulate the international body to their own devices. He also had support from ECOMOG, an armed force made up of contingents from a number of African nations, with Nigeria supplying most of the muscle. In other words, Sierra Leone was a model for what is called for in Darfur. As those who urge "humanitarian" intervention in Darfur keep telling us, an effective fighting force made up UN and or African nations is all that is needed to save innocent lives. Nobody should have any such illusions after watching "The Empire in Africa".

As Diaz's footage makes clear, ECOMOG soldiers were as brutal as the RUF that they had been called into save the Sierra Leoneans from, if not more so. The camera reveals them to be total thugs, shooting people on the spot and mercilessly beating those that they do not kill. Why anybody would expect anything different from Nigerian soldiers is the mystery of all times. With its bloody suppression of the Ogoni people, they had plenty of experience in terrorizing a civilian population before coming into Sierra Leone. As for the British and their other "civilized" partners, their record in Africa going back to the late 1800s has been undiminished cruelty in the pursuit of profits. Asking Western Europeans, Americans and Nigerians to act selflessly on behalf of some kind of rescue mission is like asking Al Capone to look after your life savings.

With the support of the UN and the West, Kabbah was able to suppress the RUF and guarantee continued access to the country's diamonds by outside interests.

Philippe Diaz came to Sierra Leone in 1991 with a commitment to getting beneath the official version of what was happening there. On the film's website, he states:

*The government had made it clear to us that we should not interview the rebels because our safety couldn't be assured and as one minister put it, "they are so illiterate anyway, they wouldn't be able to talk to you." It took us a long time to establish a connection to the rebels, not because we didn't know where to find them – they were officially in town – but because they had decided to not give any interviews to foreign journalists that "had manipulated the truth" for many years. It took us almost a month to convince them that we were not here to demonize them but to tell the truth. Once they believed us, they were all willing to tell their side of the story... and were perfectly able to do so. For "illiterate" people, I must say some of them were the most knowledgeable people I had met in the country with an analysis of world politics that was much more developed than that of some of the current ministers we had met. Our safety was never in jeopardy in their campground, even if we didn't feel too at ease being surrounded by young soldiers, some teenagers, armed with AK-47.*

It took a tremendous amount of courage for Diaz to make such a film. Not only does he deserve credit for debunking myths that have circulated about the “humanitarian rescue” in Sierra Leone, he has made a compelling film that ranks with some of the finest I have seen about the problems of war in Third World countries.

This is a film that will stick with you long after you have seen it. It is not only must viewing for political activists, but for anybody trying to understand the problems of war and peace in a continent that has become an obsession for liberals with a missionary complex. Africans indeed deserve better and Philippe Diaz has made a powerful contribution toward that end with “The Empire in Africa”.

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