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PRESS BRIEFING

Near Verbatim

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LIVE AND LET LIVE — WORLD AIDS DAY COMMEMORATION 2003

The United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) HIV/AIDS Unit today will celebrate World Aids Day, in collaboration with the United Nations of Youth Sierra Leone Network, the Ghanaian Battalion (GHANBATT) Band, 4th Dimension. A “Sustainable Peace & HIV/AIDS Sensitization Band Concert”, will bring together Sierra Leone famous Djs. and performing artists at the National Stadium from 4 pm to 2 am.

LIBERIA: UN CONDEMNS WALKOUT AT DISARMAMENT MEETING

The United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) yesterday, 27 November, strongly condemned a walkout staged by various factional leaders at the first meeting of the country's National Commission for Disarmament, Demobilization, Rehabilitation and Reintegration.

The event was disrupted by people "claiming to represent" Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD), the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL) and former members of the Liberian Government who collectively, the Mission said, "have put in jeopardy the future peace and stability of Liberia."

According to UNMIL, at the start of the meeting these representatives demanded "dozens of positions for themselves" in certain ministries as well as public corporations as a

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precondition for participating in the Commission's work. The participants then walked out of the meeting, failing to adopt the disarmament scheme aimed at providing their combatants with monetary incentives, food, medical treatment, vocational training, educational opportunities and a "chance for a better future," UNMIL said. "Their actions demonstrate their total disregard for the welfare and well-being not only of their combatants, but of the 3.3 million citizens of Liberia whose interests they claim to represent and who have suffered 14 long years in purgatory hoping for a better future." The Mission charged these representatives with "mortgaging the future of Liberia" for the sake of personal gain and self-aggrandizement.

At the same time, the UN said if those representatives wished to play a future role in Liberian politics, they should demonstrate their commitment to the peace process by unconditionally and immediately supporting the disarmament programme.

ASSESSMENT MISSION WILL GO TO CÔTE D'IVOIRE, ANNAN SAYS

United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan, saying that Côte d'Ivoire could slip back into conflict, told the Security Council on 24 November that he would soon send an assessment mission to that country so that he can prepare recommendations for improving the work of the UN's peacekeeping mission (MINUCI) there.

The Council had asked him to report "on how MINUCI's efforts to facilitate peace and stability in Côte d'Ivoire might be improved, including possibly by reinforcement of the UN presence in the country," he said at a meeting to consider a request from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to strengthen the mission.

MINUCI currently comprises 34 UN military liaison officers to monitor security and build confidence between the government's Forces Armees de Côte d'Ivoire (FANCI) and the northern opposition Forces Nouvelles, following the signing of a peace agreement in Linas-Marcoussis, France, that ended fierce fighting early this year.

Mr. Annan called on the Ivorian signatories to the Linas-Marcoussis peace agreement to implement its provisions without delay. The Forces Nouvelles, which withdrew from the government of National Reconciliation in September, should rejoin it without delay and all parties should accept the government as constituted after the appointment of the Defence and Security Ministers on 12 September, he said. Militias should disband and hand over their weapons, while the security forces should be restructured, the de facto partition of the country should end at once and the National Assembly should adopt the reforms proposed in the Government's work programme, Mr. Annan said.

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Council resolution 1479 establishing MINUCI provides for deployment of 42 more military officers and a civilian component focusing on human rights, the media and preparations for elections in 2005.

UNAMSIL FORCE COMMANDER VISITS SECTOR EAST

The Force Commander of the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL), Major General Sajjad Akram, on 21 November, visited Sector East Headquarters, in Koidu, Kono District.

Addressing the audience, Maj General Sajjad Akram praised the “dedicated and spirited” Pakistani peacekeepers for their “remarkable contributions” to restoring peace in Sierra Leone and for their humanitarian activities.

In his welcome address, UNAMSIL Sector East Commander, Brigadier Sajjad Ahmed Bakhshi highlighted the rehabilitation initiatives undertaken by peacekeepers under his command. “We are not just renovating places of worships and educational institutions, our efforts are also aiming at creating a peaceful environment for the communities”, he said.

During his visit, the FC formally inaugurated a mosque at Pakistan-Sierra Leone Friendship School in Yengema, some 50 miles west of Koidu. The Quick Reaction Unit of Pakistan Army Contingent built the mosque. Maj-Gen. Akram also inspected the site of a library currently under construction by Pakistani Engineer (PAKENGR).

UNAMSIL HUMAN RIGHTS SECTION COMMISSIONS LIBRARY AT MASIKA

The Officer-in-Charge of the Human Rights section of the UN Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL), Ahowanou Agbessi yesterday, 27 November, commissioned a human rights reference library at Masiaka in the Koya chiefdom, Port Loko district.

Mr Agbessi told the people about the need for human rights education and awareness-raising saying “without human rights, there is no development, no sustainable peace, no reconciliation or harmony”. He entreated his audience to use the library regularly and, particularly, to disseminate the human rights principles to illiterate members of the community.

UNAMSIL’s Human Rights Officer in Port Loko, Boubacar Dieng said the library was a befitting legacy of the UN in Masiaka that could be used for the benefit of the Koya chiefdom and the rest of the country. He said ignorance of one’s human rights, was itself

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a violation of such rights. Concurring, a representative of the Paramount Chief, Huthman Yassir Mansaray thanked UNAMSIL for the library, saying, “there can hardly be a better way of liberating a community”.

A member of the Koya Chiefdom Human Rights Committee, Samuel Chernor Kanu called for assistance in employing a caretaker of the library, as it would be difficult to get a trained librarian to run it. Mr Kanu also called on Muslim scholars in the chiefdom, particularly imams, to visit the library, as there are Arabic versions of human rights conventions and documents.

The library, stocked with several human rights conventions, statutes and materials of human rights education, is the fourth to be set up by UNAMSIL Human Rights Section in the Port Loko and Kambia districts, northern Sierra Leone.

Ms. Hirut Befecadu (UNAMSIL HIV/AIDS Coordinator): Every year, we have World Aids Day on 1 December, celebrated internationally but most activities in many countries start a few days earlier and a few days later because the question of HIV/AIDS has no plans, no limits, no dates, no time boundaries. For this year’s programme would be starting activities at the stadium. We are very proud to say that UNAMSIL peacekeepers from Ghanaian Battalion (GHANBATT) have actually initiated this. They join hands with the UN, Sierra Leone Network, who in on their turn have actually linked up with a lot of youth groups that have been registered with UNICEF and are having this programme just to show the world that they are serious about HIV/AIDS. As indicated lots and lots of time, it is the youth between the ages of 15 and 34 that are more affected and are showing sign of increase in the number of people affected rather than a decrease. There are a lot of reasons for this and we will be showing at this function today that inputs from youth groups, inputs from concerned parents, inputs from UN agencies, NGOs, will be reflected. The messages will be short, brief and in-between music and what the musical world and the artist world have to contribute towards the commemoration of this day.

Many people use the world celebration. I don’t think we are celebrating. We are commemorating the date and we are reflecting on the dangers of HIV/AIDS and how much it is affecting us especially in sub-Saharan Africa. I would like to take two minutes to read what the Secretary-General actually said in a speech given at Xen-Yiang University in China in October when he was given a honorary doctorate. He said:

“Young people are the key in the fight against AIDS. By giving them the support they need, we can empower them to protect themselves against the virus by giving them honest and straightforward information, we can break the circle of silence across all society. By creating effective campaigns for education and prevention we can turn young

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people's enthusiasm, drive and dreams for the future into powerful tools for tackling the epidemic.”

These words were said by the UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan. He thinks of HIV/AIDS as his own problem and he feels that it's a global problem that needs a global solution. And it is everybody's business. He wishes to reflect this in all gatherings of the kind that we will be having this afternoon. The second programme that we will be having is another special programme. We are targeting the handicapped, mainly the deaf and the dumb. We're going there on World AIDS Day. We wish to sensitise them because in most places the handicapped are left behind. We in UNAMSIL, especially in the HIV/AIDS unit, in close collaboration with the Public Information Section, especially the Voice of Children, are putting up this programme on Monday. I would like to cordially invite, not only yourselves but through you, all members of the press who could join us Monday afternoon, around 4:30pm. Also show your solidarity with the handicapped people that they are not forgotten in Sierra Leone, that the AIDS pandemic is real and it catches everybody. So I depend on you to reach out to your other friends to participate in this programme.

In addition, we shall be having the message of the UN Secretary-General. I think it's distributed to all of you, and through you, emphasize that the SG is very serious about the campaign against HIV/AIDS, and all the peacekeeping missions are being equipped with policy advisers who are to focus attention on the importance of HIV/AIDS prevention amongst peacekeepers. There is a saying that is going around which is that peacekeepers are actually the one passing on HIV. But here in UNAMSIL, I would like to emphasize to all of you, and I would like to see this reflected in the papers, that the peacekeepers are being trained by the HIV/AIDS office, together with other departments, in collaboration with UN Population Fund (UNFPA), UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), the UN Department of peacekeeping operations (DPKO) in New York. They're being trained as trainers to be our focal point to reach out to the communities where they are deployed. They are passing the information on HIV/AIDS to the communities.

As was indicated, the slogan this year is 'live and let live'. This was also the slogan last year. If you remember, we had a candlelight vigil here in UNAMSIL. 'Live and let live' is to fight against stigma and discrimination. People who know will stop discrimination. People who do not know, the minute you tell them about HIV/AIDS they feel they can contact this disease just by shaking hands. The thing is, we should care for people with HIV/AIDS. There is national association now for people living with HIV/AIDS. Our papers and all information media should be open to include what they have to say about living with HIV/AIDS, and we should be able to take care of our people. If proper care can be given to them, they will also contribute to the development of the country. Stigma and discrimination is what we are against: 'live and let live' is the slogan that came up to express that we are against stigma and discrimination.

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Mr. Idrissa Conteh (UNHCR): I'm the assistant external affairs officer. I work in the refugee camps. I just came from Liberia and Nigeria. Briefly, I would like to inform you that some of the Liberian refugees we have here in the camps in Sierra Leone have been asking us to facilitate their return to Liberia, but we have not moved to that phase because of the prevailing security situation in Liberia. They have been going back to Liberia on their own, passing through the Mano River Bridge. Last week, 33 individuals with 7 families returned to Liberia by their own means.

For Guinea, we stopped repatriating Sierra Leone refugees from Guinea in the height of the rainy season because we were bringing them in by road, and the roads were too muddy. Some roads in Kailahun were almost impassable, but we will resume that activity on 1 December. We'll bring in about 250 Sierra Leoneans.

For Liberia, what we have been doing for Sierra Leoneans living in Liberia, there is an arrangement with WFP. We're shuttling them to Sierra Leone twice weekly, Monday and Thursday, but unfortunately most of the refugees are not willing to come back home. I was there. I did a mass information campaign showing them all the developments, what we have achieved in Sierra Leone in terms of peace, reintegration and reconstruction activities. I screened some films, footages showing the developments in Sierra Leone, but they put up a lot of arguments. They prefer to stay in Liberia because they argue that the cost of living in Sierra Leone is high, that there's no housing, no water, no electricity in the areas of return even if they saw that these things are being provided in the communities. It is difficult to understand that there's war in Liberia, there's peace in Sierra Leone, but they're still scared to come here.

The helicopter services are still available. We are supposed to bring 22 people twice weekly. On 17 November, only three families (9 individuals) opted to return. For air operations, since January up to now, we have airlifted 951 Sierra Leoneans refugees from Liberia. Then we have small countries, countries beyond the Mano River Union—Mali, Senegal, the Gambia, Guinea-Bissau. We have Sierra Leonean refugees in these countries. We began repatriating them beginning the second week of December 2003. we'll be bringing them by air since this is not a very large caseload. By next year, in January, we'll begin repatriating refugees by ship for those living in the Gambia. Those who are registered with us, they're about 6,000. We have put in place a mechanism around the Mano River Bridge to check the number of Liberian refugees in Sierra Leone who are going back to Liberia by their own means so we will know exactly what is happening.

In terms of assistance, the refugees who are living in all these camps. We have eight refugee camps and a total of 55,742. This report is dated 16-22 December 2003. We deduct every time people leave a particular camp.

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QUESTIONS & ANSWERS:

(New People): There's now a national HIV/AIDS Reporters' Association, a group of journalists who champions the cause of HIV/AIDS. We'll be participating fully on World AIDS Day. Are you targeting only the handicapped?

Ms. Befecadu: I know of the association. In fact, I would like to be a member. The question of having a sensitisation programme for the handicapped actually came up with the producers of Voice of Children programme called 'Access'. The programme deals primarily with the needs of handicapped. This year, they said they would like to do a sensitisation programme for the handicapped, and I welcomed that. Every year, for World AIDS Day we want to get new ideas. Last year, we had a candle-lighting programme where a few person who lighted a candle threw in a few coins, which we have passed on to people who are living with HIV/AIDS. This year for the handicapped, we are starting with the deaf and dumb. It's not going to be easy. They have organized skits, they have put together posters. They even have video clips. When I say they, it's the members of the Voice of Children. Remember that the deaf and dumb can see you, and as long as you have somebody who knows sign language, the deaf and dumb will know what you're sensitising them about. They will be able to grasp. At the same time, if you have posters and films, they will understand more. We'll be trying in the coming weeks to see if we can get those who are blind. With the blind, you have to use different tactics, different styles. You have to be able to talk to them, but while talking to them there are methods you can use to try to make them understand the whole issue of HIV/AIDS is. This is our plan. But it's only a first step...

(Exclusive): According to what I saw in Liberia, the majority of Kamajors are there in Liberia. What will the UN do as far as these people are concerned? These people have been disarmed in Sierra Leone and are taking a different venture there. How will the UN get them back to Sierra Leone to continue the DDR programme? From my observations, most of the refugees in these camps purport to be Sierra Leoneans. What is the UNHCR doing to screen the refugees properly?

Mr. Saiki: I cannot elaborate about who is who in Liberia. But what I can tell you is that, on 14 November, we had a high level meeting of all the Special Representatives for the West African region, and cross-border issues were among the most important they discussed. The movements of persons, of ex-combatants between the various countries, disarmament, are some of the topics they've touched upon. In due time there will be a number of decisions taken as to how to address cross-border issues. I can't give you anything specific as of now. It's a process that started with the 14 November meeting. It's definitely an important issue and we'll keep an eye on it.

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Mr. Conteh: Some of the Sierra Leoneans in the biggest refugee camp, their reluctance to leave is probably due to the fact that they're not Sierra Leoneans; they are Liberians. In the course of the civil war in Liberia, there was a big displaced camp situated near the UNHCR camp. So maybe more assistance was given to the refugees—more food, more schools, more water, so a lot of people wanted to take advantage of the situation. So most of these Liberian internally displaced persons (IDPs) became Sierra Leonean refugees. The office is making an effort to sort them out so we can have the actual number of Sierra Leoneans living in Liberia.

In the meantime, we have different phases of repatriation. Now we are reaching a phase called the cessation clause. By June next year, we'll stop giving assistance to refugees. If you want to stay, we'll not force you to be repatriated but we will stop giving you assistance and we stop recognizing you as a refugee. You will go to your own house, the camp is closed, and you begin to find your own way, find your own food, find your own education. It's because of this assistance that they are refusing to come. If you come to Kailahun, they have to pay their own school fees and find things for themselves. Over a period of 10 years, they've been living in the camps so you have this dependency syndrome now.

Q: Why don't you concentrate more on IDPs rather than refugees?

Mr. Conteh: Unfortunately, we cannot do that. The name of the agency is UN High Commission for Refugees, not UN High Commission for IDPs. We don't deal directly with IDPs. We only provide assistance to IDPs when the IDP camp is near the refugee camp. So we have to give them the same assistance. Otherwise, you have tension of fighting. They will attack UNHCR. You are feeding the refugees and the IDPs are starving. That can be the whole commotion. The IDPs can make life difficult for refugees who are seen as foreigners, people who are only there to milk their own resources. When the cessation clause is applied, people have to decide whether they can live on their own in Liberia or whether they will chose to come back home.

Mr. Saiki: This concludes today's session. See you same time next week.

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