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PRESS BRIEFING HIGHLIGHTS

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Near Verbatim

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NEWS HIGHLIGHTS

Press Release

**SRSG, FC and Sector West Commander Decorate GHANBATT 8
Peacekeepers With UN Medals**

Freetown – The Special Representative of the UN Secretary General (SRSG) in Sierra Leone, Ambassador Daudi Ngeluatwa Mwakawago, together with the UNAMSIL Force Commander (FC) Maj. Gen. Sajjad Akram, Sector West Commander Brig. Gen. Alhaji Nuhu Bamalli, the Ghanaian High Commissioner to Sierra Leone Kabral Blay-Amehere and Ghana Air Vice Marshal Edward Apau Mantey on Saturday 14 February decorated with UN medals about 775 peacekeepers of GHANBATT 8 at Lungi, northern Sierra Leone.

Speaking at the ceremony, Mr. Mwakawago noted, “I would like to take this opportunity to formally welcome the Ghana government delegation to Sierra Leone and to Lungi in particular. The presence of the delegation here today to grace this occasion attests to the importance the government of Ghana attaches to global peace, and more especially to the United Nations quest to restore lasting peace and stability to the Republic of Sierra Leone.” He pointed out that Ghana’s role in the search for a lasting peace in Sierra Leone both at the political level, as member of ECOWAS and the military front by providing troops was without doubt a mark of great accomplishment.

The SRSG stated that he felt “proud to decorate a contingent that has meritorious service” and that “the peace medal is a symbol of what United Nations is about”, adding, “it is my hope this medal I will decorate you with, will spur you to greater service not only in Africa but the world as well.” He also commended GHANBATT 8 for the Quick Impact Projects (QIPs) it had executed for the local community and was gratified “to note that GHANBATT 8 has continued to operate jointly with members of the Sierra Leone Police and the Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces including air patrols to most parts of the country.”

Ambassador Mwakawago reminded the recipients that UN medals are awarded to peacekeepers “after 90 days continuous service without blemish in any UN mission,” and that GHANBATT 8 should be proud for making an important contribution to the success of UNAMSIL which “is held in very high esteem both at the United Nations and increasingly in all peace circles.”

Highlights of the ceremony were splendid military parade; inspection of the peacekeepers by the SRSG and FC, and cultural display by both school children of Lungi and GHANBATT 8 soldiers.

Among the dignitaries that graced the occasion were the Deputy Force Commander Brig. Adrian Foster; Col. Michael Amuzu who is the Ghanaian Contingent Commander; senior UNAMSIL officials, members of the diplomatic corps and local authorities.

SRSG Participates in Joint National District recovery Committee Meeting Fro Western Area Urban

Freetown – The Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG), the UN Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL), Mr. Daudi Mwakawago, together with the Deputy SRSG, Mr. Alan Doss, on Tuesday, 17 February joined the Vice-President, Honorable Solomon Berewa at the 13th joint National/District Recovery Committee meeting, which this time took place in Freetown, Western Area Urban.

The meeting included NRC members from Ministries of Development, Health, Works, Local Government, Fisheries and Tourism, NaCSA as well as DFID and the District Recovery Committee (DRC) included civil society, Members of the Parliament and the City Council.

In his introductory remarks, the Vice-President Berewa, outlined that “the National Recovery Strategy was created to ensure that the whole country benefit from recovery” and noted that “a year later, recovery has taken place everywhere”, but that “much still remains to be done”. While building on the gains of national recovery, the VP indicated that “the Government is now moving ahead with development through the creation of a longer-term poverty reduction strategy”. He also informed the meeting that the price of palm oil has gone down in the markets during the last days due to measures taken by the Government to stop smuggling. He stressed that “we have to make good use of what we have and try to build up our own economy”.

The Alternate DRC Chairman/Acting Chairman of the City Council, Mr. Davis indicated that the main challenges that require urgent attention include lack of housing, child prostitution, unsanitary situation, water and electricity supply and bad road infrastructure. The VP encouraged

the Ministries of Health and Youth and Sports to join hands to ensure that people make Freetown a cleaner place.

In the area of civil authority, the Representative of Freetown West, Mr. J.T. Ayodele-Manley Zonal congratulated the Sierra Leone Police for its efforts against armed robbery and praised the police for really becoming the “the force for good”. He also thanked UNAMSIL sector 2 for the cordial relationship developed and appreciated UNAMSIL’s efforts to increase the capacity of youth. The VP added that “we can never thank UNAMSIL enough”.

Mr. Ian Stuart, DFID indicated that his organization has developed a good partnership with SLP during the last 2 years, that it has provided £14 million to SLP and that it is currently looking at further assistance to the security sector. In the area of justice, DFID had rehabilitated the High Court and informed the meeting that “in 2004, DFID will start a project in the justice sector, looking at issues such as juvenile justice and prisons”.

As regards the restoration of the economy, the Vice-President stated that there are plans for an interim arrangement to supply electricity to Freetown until Bumbuna is completed. In addition, the Minister of Marine Resources, Mr. O. Adams indicated that thanks to the assistance from Egypt, three integrated fish markets will be created in Freetown.

The SRSG, Mr. Mwakawago was pleased by the way the NRC and the DRC interface on recovery progress and challenges. He stressed that “UNAMSIL will always put security as the most important priority and will ensure that the drawdown is handled in a manner to ensure that the hard won peace is not put at risk”. He also called on the Government and the people to ensure that both old and rehabilitated structures are properly maintained.

The Deputy SRSG, Alan Doss encouraged participants to register in the wards for the upcoming local government elections and urged them to make use of “an opportunity that you have not had in many years” and make these elections a success. Mr. Stuart also indicated that while UNAMSIL draws down, there are other development partners that will stay in Sierra Leone for many years and that “the relationship between the Government and its partners has changed as the Government now sets its own agenda”. Finally, Mr. Doss also encouraged the participants to pay their property taxes to help pay for the improved services that Freetown residents are demanding.

Questions and Answers

Kemal Saiki: Before we open the floor for questions let me say a few words on the visit of the UN Assessment team. As you know, for the last 15 days we had a UN delegation that came from New York, from the Department of Peacekeeping Operations and other departments, to conduct an assessment on the situation in the mission area. This assessment team has finished its work and has gone back to New York where it will prepare its report and submit it to the Secretary General. The SG will, in turn, submit his recommendations to the Security Council. When we do have specific, official information regarding that issue, we will pass this on to you... Before we start our Q & A session, I will request our new Military Spokesman to update you on the security situation in the country as of today.

Maj. Nwachukwu: Ladies and Gentlemen of the press, you will agree with me that the major campaign of UNAMSIL is to provide peace and security for not only Sierra Leoneans but also foreigners, the protection for other agencies and their civilians. To this extent I want you to know that UNAMSIL has done a lot...If you take a look at our Operation Blue Vigilance, which is still taking place in the eastern part of the country...on the borders with Liberia and Guinea...each day we have air patrols...ground patrols with vehicles, foot patrols, boat patrols... to ensure that combatants from neighboring countries do not gain access to Sierra Leone. The security situation in Sierra Leone is stable.

Kemal Saiki: Thank you Major, I will now open the floor for questions.

Question: I'm Edward Renner of the Christian Monitor. Chief, will UNAMSIL monitor the local government election as they did for the last general election. And secondly does UNAMSIL have any plan for their stay beyond 2004. Finally this question is for the Major. As a security officer working for UNAMSIL, do you think it was right for the Inspector General of police to stop the planned demonstration of the Methodist women?

Kemal Saiki: Thank you. On the issue of local elections I believe you had the opportunity to listen to the SRSG. He has said that it was time for Sierra Leoneans to be in the driver's seat and take responsibility for their own country's destiny. Elections are an essential part of the democratic process, you can't have a functioning democracy if you do not have an electoral process, particularly when it comes to local government which gives the people the opportunity to have a say on how they are going to be administered. Without going into details, because I do not wish to comment on the politics of the country, I will just emphasize the necessity and importance of the local government elections and for the Sierra Leonean electorate to participate in the electoral process...to go out, register and vote... This is the prerogative and the right of the citizens to have the ability to cast a ballot and therefore decide on how they are going to be governed...how the issues affecting them are going to be addressed...and the best way to determine how you are going to be administered is by choosing those who are going to be given the responsibility of acting on your behalf. We, as UNAMSIL, are acting in a technical capacity by assisting the electoral commission in sensitizing the people of Sierra Leone about the importance of the local government elections. On the issue of monitoring, no, we do not monitor these elections...It is not the same situation we had in the previous elections where there were members of the international community doing the monitoring to ensure that they were fair and conducted in an appropriate manner. Concerning the coming elections, we have said that the Sierra Leoneans should be in the driver's seat...These are Sierra Leonean elections, organized and conducted by the appropriate authorities... We are not going to be sitting in polling stations and determine who is doing what. That is the responsibility of the Sierra Leone electoral commission. Nor are we going to certify the elections. The only thing we do is to facilitate their effective conduct, ensuring that logistical issues will not impact the elections negatively. We are, for example, assisting through Radio UNAMSIL which is engaged in sensitizing, voter education programs and whenever there is a need to provide practical

information... I will give you an example of the kind of assistance we are providing...I did mention sensitization and it has been widely reported in the press that various quarters have asked for civic education to be undertaken. You know that we have, in the Public Information section, in UNAMSIL, a very important tool which is Radio UNAMSIL. Ours is a truly national radio, covering almost all national territory. We are transmitting 24-7 and we do have programs that are carefully listened to by the audience. Radio UNAMSIL has built a reputation for credibility, for delivering objective, balanced reporting and therefore commands a high level of respect among its listeners.

Radio UNAMSIL is going to participate in the efforts on sensitizing the Sierra Leonean electorate. Whenever there is the need to provide information... practical information such as “Why do I have to register? Where do I register?...What do I need...what kind of documents do I need to register?” There are some people who still do have such questions. On civic education there are also questions on what is a local government election...how is it different from parliamentary election or even the presidential election...

Beside information we are also providing transportation...You have to make sure that election material reach polling stations....So this is where UNAMSIL is assisting the NEC, making sure that election material reach the necessary areas. We are also helping in the areas of communications, and Information Technologies. Finally we are ensuring, in conjunction with the appropriate Sierra Leoneans agencies, that the elections will take place in a peaceful and secure environment.

Answering the question of what UNAMSIL would do after 2004 would be speculative and I don't want to speculate. But as I mentioned at the beginning that we received an assessment team from New York whose members have done their work and will report to the Secretary General on what they saw here. They are going to come out with recommendations for a decision as to what will happen post-UNAMSIL. As the SRSG, DSRSG and other UNAMSIL officials have said, the drawdown is not going to be as automatic as throwing a switch...There are certain benchmarks that need to be fulfilled before there is a final withdrawal.

Maj. Nwachukwu: Well I wouldn't like to comment on the refusal of the Inspector General of Police to grant Methodist women permission to demonstrate because I'm not a member of that force, so I can't comment. But as at this morning brief I was aware that...actually there was an attempt by the police to stop them but I believe that'd been called off.

Question: Paul Kamara of the New Citizen. I would like to know whether UNAMSIL would be recruiting journalists for the local government elections as you did during the last presidential and parliamentary elections

Kemal Saiki: I said we are involved in the sensitization process for the elections. And we will also provide coverage. This may prove difficult with the number of staff we now have but there is definitely a possibility that we are going to cover the elections...We are

preparing a work plan to that effect, that will look at the possible temporary use of additional staff to do so...for the time being the issue is on our mind...Next question.

Question: Chief I want to know whether you can invite candidates of political parties to come to the radio to explain more about the local government elections.

Kemal Saiki: Thank you. I'm glad you are showing a keen interest in the local government elections. We are working closely with the electoral commission...we are discussing with them so that what we do is in consonance with the Sierra Leonean needs...Now on the issue of providing a platform for the various candidates vying for votes... You will remember that this was exactly what we did in the last elections in which we were involved ...We provided access to all those involved on an equal basis...But there is one thing we are already doing and that's interviewing officials involved, opening the airwaves to them... You have to bear in mind that these are not presidential and parliamentary elections...How many candidates are going to run for these elections?...You have to bear in mind that you are going to have hundreds if not thousands of candidates. How could you possibly, in a fair and unbiased way, give access to the airwaves to all candidates? That's not possible. As I said we are looking at how we are going to make it possible for political entities to present their views and address the electorate.

This, Ladies and Gentlemen from the Pres, concludes our weekly briefing. Thanks for coming and see you next week and Godspeed.
