



## **PRESS RELEASE**

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### **FORCE COMMANDER'S INTERVIEW WITH INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP (ICG)**

*Freetown, Sierra Leone* - The Force Commander (FC) of UNAMSIL, Major General Sajjad Akram recently said Sierra Leone was peaceful and stable except for a few cases of robbery, which the Sierra Leone Police (SLP) was effectively handling.

During an interview with Yamina Mokrani and Mike McGovern of the International Crisis Group (ICG), he talked extensively on a number of issues on the country's security situation, her national borders, inter-mission cooperation and performance evaluation of the SLP and Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces (RSLAF), among others.

Major General Akram pointed out that although the situation along the borders with Guinea and Liberia was of concern, UNAMSIL was mindful that any crisis in those areas could spill into Sierra Leone. He reassured that the situation was under firm control with UNAMSIL's "Operation Blue Vigilance" carrying out regular robust and intensive patrols along those borders. Through deterrence and presence flights "Operation Blue Vigilance" has prevented large scale movement of ex-combatants and stalled cross-border mass movement of weapons and ammunition. The Force Commander also expressed hope that with mutual cooperation among the three missions, UNAMSIL, the UN Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) and UN Operation in Côte d'Ivoire (ONUCI), there would be peace and stability in the West African sub-region.

Still on security, Major General Akram disclosed that on 23 September, security primacy for the Western area was scheduled to be handed over to Sierra Leone's security services. Since March 2004, the Northern, Southern and Eastern provinces have been handed over.

"We plan to hand over in a national parade where we will be demonstrating symbolically that they are now responsible for their security and UNAMSIL will transmute from being guarantors of security to insurers of security," However, he emphasized that responsibility for Sierra Leone's national security still rested with UNAMSIL until its final exit.

Providing an evaluation of the SLP and RSLAF, he said while they had come a long way, these security forces still had some obstacles to surmount. The Force Commander noted that though the SLP seemed better funded, and was expanding and deploying its men adequately, it still suffered from logistical and infrastructural problems. Furthermore, the image of the RSLAF was still dented due to its role in the civil war. However, UNAMSIL was restoring confidence in and credibility for the force by sensitizing the Sierra Leonean populace through military observers and the media. With a force of about 10,000 men, the RSLAF's role in the security of the country could not be over-emphasized. Their roles must be very well spelt out if they were to be optimally utilized. He noted that the force could be a good back up for the SLP in times of internal crisis.

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## **UNAMSIL** **United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone**

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On the issue of Sierra Leone's Yenga border problem with Guinea, the President of Sierra Leone had taken steps to resolve the problem. Sierra Leone's Interior Minister was currently in Guinea in an effort to solve the problem. "The Yenga border problem," General Akram stated, "is a political thing which requires political and diplomatic attention."

Concerning humanitarian assistance rendered by UNAMSIL to cushion infrastructural deficiencies and unemployment, the Force Commander pointed out that UNAMSIL troops in each contingent usually contributed one dollar every month for construction and renovation of schools, churches, mosques, police stations and other infrastructure. Through the execution of these projects, youth in the host communities also benefited by being gainfully employed. So far, about 49 schools out of 50 had been renovated.

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