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(Near Verbatim)

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NEWS HIGHLIGHTS

15 UNAMSIL PEACEKEEPERS DIE IN PLANE CRASH IN BENIN REPUBLIC

15 Bangladeshi peacekeepers, 13 of them officers serving with the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone, UNAMSIL, two from United Nations Mission in Liberia, UNMIL have been identified as having been killed in a plane crash on December 25 in the West African country of Benin Republic. The remains of the 15 have been flown to Bangladesh.

The officers were traveling home for the holidays aboard a Boeing 727 belonging to the Union Transport African (UTA) when it crashed off the coast of Cotonou, the country's capital city immediately after takeoff.

Those who died in the crash are, Lt. Col. Shamsul Sayed Arefin, Maj. Abdur Rahim, Maj. Mir Abdul Baten, Maj. Mostafizur Rahman Sudari, Maj. Md Raunak Akhter and Maj. Mosharref Hossain.

Others are, Maj. Intiazuddin Ahmed, Capt. Abdul Mabud, Capt. Zahidul Islam, Capt. Rakibul Hasan, Capt Fariduddin Ahmed and Capt Alauddin Sarder.

Capt Rafiqul Islam, Capt Arifur Rahman Talukder and SWO Sharifqul Islam also died in the crash.

The French Embassy in Benin has provided 15 coffins in which the bodies are to be repatriated to Bangladesh. President Mathew Kerekou of Benin was at the airport where a ceremony to honour the dead peacekeepers took place shortly before their remains were flown to Bangladesh.

UNAMSIL had sent an 11-member coordination team to Cotonou to work out modalities for repatriation of the bodies to their home country and also to identify the victims as soon as possible.

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The Force Commander, General Sajjad on behalf of the Acting SRSG and the entire UNAMSIL staff has conveyed condolences to the families of the victims, the Bangladesh contingent in UNAMSIL and people of Bangladesh.

ANNAN MOURNS THOSE KILLED BENIN AIRCRASH, INCLUDING BANGLADESHI PEACEKEEPERS

Secretary-General of the United Nations Mr. Kofi Annan has offered condolences to the bereaved families of all those killed in an aircrash earlier last week over Benin, where more than a dozen United Nations peacekeepers were among the dead.

Two Bangladeshi soldiers working for the UN Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) and 13 from the UN Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) were on board the Boeing 727, which crashed immediately after take-off near Cotonou on 25 December.

In a statement released by his spokesman, Mr. Annan said he was “deeply saddened” to learn the news of some 130 tragic deaths caused by the doomed flight.

The Secretary-General took the occasion to voice his great appreciation for Bangladesh’s “outstanding” contribution to UN peacekeeping operations.

FORCE COMMANDER PAYS CONDOLENCE VISIT TO BANGLADESHI BATTALION 9 IN BO

The Force Commander of the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone, UNAMSIL, Major General Sajjad Akram, December 30, paid a condolence visit to the Bangladesh Battalion 9 in Bo following the deaths in plane crash of 13 officers from the battalion. The officers died when a Union Transport African (UTA) plane in which they were traveling crashed off the coast of Cotonou, Benin Republic December 25.

Gen. Akram paid tribute to the 13 officers and said they had contributed immensely to the task of consolidating peace in Sierra Leone.

The Commanding Officer of Banbatt 9, Col Fazlul said that the tragedy was a great loss to his unit, Bangladesh Army and the people of Bangladesh. “Those officers who lost their lives have contributed and made sacrifices for the noble cause of peacekeeping in Sierra Leone,” he said and urged prayers for the repose of their souls.

He thanked the FC for his quick response to the tragedy by sending a coordinating team from UNAMSIL to Cotonou for identification of the bodies, autopsy and to facilitate the movement of the remains of the deceased from Cotonou to Bangladesh.

Col. Fazlul also mentioned the efforts of the UNDP, UNICEF and the French Embassy in Benin in coordinating the work in Cotonou. The government of Benin Republic provided a befitting guard of honour for the officers before their remains were flown home December 31, he disclosed.

The Force Commander was accompanied by Sector West Commander, Brig Gen Nuhu Bamalli, Sector

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East Commander, Brig Gen Ahmed Bakhshi, Sector Center Commander, Brig Gen Shafiquzzaman as well as other senior officers from UNAMSIL force Headquarters.

UNAMSIL FORCE COMMANDER DECORATES MILOBS AND STAFF OFFICERS WITH UN MEDAL

The Force Commander and the Chief Military Observer of the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone, UNAMSIL, Major General Sajjad Akram, December 31, 2003 decorated 54 Military Observers (MILOBS) and 14 Staff Officers with UN medals at mission headquarters, Mammy Yoko, Freetown. UN medals are awarded to peacekeepers who spend three months in the Mission without committing any offence.

Speaking at the ceremony, General Akram told the Military Observers and the Staff Officers that: “you are very important in UNAMSIL. I am sure you will do your best to make the Mission a success.”

He congratulated the award recipients and said: “you are excellent ambassadors of your countries”.

The Force Commander stressed that their contributions were “enormous toward the Security Council benchmarks and the Government of Sierra Leone security sectors.” He wished them more success in their stay in Sierra Leone.

Senior UNAMSIL military and civilian personnel attended the short but impressive ceremony.

FORCE COMMANDER WELCOMES NIBATT 17

The Force Commander of the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone, Major General Sajjad Akram December 30 visited the Nigerian Battalion 17 (NIBATT17), to welcome them to the mission area. Nibatt 17, with headquarters located at Spur Road Freetown, recently rotated with Nibatt 14.

General Akram told the officers and soldiers that he was impressed with their “gallantry, military professionalism and commitment to duty since sensitive locations are part of your deployment areas”.

He advised them to be on their guards and to be pro-active at all times. He reiterated the sacrifices that previous Nigerian Battalions made since the time of ECOMOG towards peace and stability of Sierra Leone and enjoined that that tradition must continue.

The deployment of the battalion in Freetown was planned because of the professional commitment and gallantry of the Nigerian soldiers, he said.

The Commanding Officer Nibatt 17, Lieutenant Colonel Steve Ovadje, welcomed the FC and briefed him on the history of the battalion, its operational deployment and the general security situation within its areas of responsibility which he said was calm and peaceful.

Lt. Col. Ovadje mentioned that the battalion was responsible for the security of Freetown including providing security for the Presidential Lodge, Special Court, Vice President’s Lodge and the Parliament

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Building. Its deployments stretch up to Guma Valley in western Freetown and Kalaba town in the east of the capital while it regularly goes on routine joint patrols with the Sierra Leone Police, SLP.

ANNAN APPEALS FOR FUNDS FOR POST-CONFLICT SIERRA LEONE

United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan is appealing for funds to help the Sierra Leonean military and police "quickly improve their overall capability and project a credible deterrence profile" as progress is made in consolidating peace in the West African country.

In his latest report to the UN Security Council on post-conflict rehabilitation by the UN Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL), he urges UN Member States to give generously to meet the country's logistics and infrastructure needs.

He expresses concern about the number of "foreign combatants in Liberia and the Liberian internees who still remain in Sierra Leone," but expects them to be repatriated as the Liberian peace process takes hold.

"The ongoing efforts to stabilize Liberia are already beginning to have a positive impact on the situation in the whole of the Mano River region," he adds.

Noting that Liberia's interim leader, Gyude Bryant, has visited neighbouring countries to improve bilateral relations, Mr. Annan encourages leaders in the subregion to build on this development and revitalize the Mano River Union, whose members are Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea.

UNMIL PEACEKEEPERS DEPLOY TO BUCHANAN AND GBARNGA

United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) expanded its permanent presence to Buchanan and Gbarnga, December 31, when it deployed over 650 Bangladeshi peacekeepers with equipment and logistics.

At Buchanan, 120 kilometers east of Monrovia, 250 Bangladeshi peacekeepers deployed amidst a jubilating crowd with armored vehicles and other logistics to establish a permanent presence.

At the Fair ground, the Co-Chairman and Spokesman of Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL), General Boi Bleaju Boi, officially announced the full support of his group to the deployment. "We have been expecting you and we are happy to witness your presence here and we would show a good example as we intend to work with the peacekeepers for lasting peace in our country", he said.

"We welcome your unhindered access without consultations or approval with immediate effect", the MODEL Spokesman remarked.

Gen. Boi called on the UN to quickly identify cantonment sites to allow for speedy disarmament of all combatants in their controlled areas.

The UNMIL Officer in Charge (OIC), and Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary General, (DSRSG), Mr. Abou Moussa conducted a tour of Buchanan and Gbarnga, spending more time in

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Buchanan to assess the peacekeepers deployment. Mr. Moussa congratulated MODEL and the people of Buchanan on the successful deployment of the peacekeepers.

“As soon as the peacekeepers settle down in all their areas of deployment, humanitarian agencies and Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) will follow to provide relief including food, shelter, seeds and tools to enhance their living conditions”, Mr. Moussa said.

“The war is over. There must not be vengeance against anybody and let bygones be bygones”, Mr. Moussa said.

In his remarks, the Deputy Force Commander, Maj. Gen. Joseph Owonibi, who led the UNMIL peacekeepers into Buchanan, said the deployment is a milestone made possible by the cooperation of MODEL and the people of Buchanan. “I assure you that we are here to do a good job, and that’s exactly what we’ll do in the very near future”, he said.

More than 400 Bangladeshi peacekeepers also deployed to Gbarnga, 175 Kilometers North of Monrovia. The Force Commander, General Daniel Opande led the peacekeepers deployment into the town.

On the way to Gbarnga, the peacekeepers cleared roadblocks and checkpoints along their route as they continued their forward movement. On arrival, the populace and fighters warmly welcomed the peacekeepers.

In his welcome address, Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) Commander, and Chief of Mission, General Abu Keita welcomed the deployment and stressed the full commitment of his group.

“I have passed instruction to all my fighters in the field to cooperate with Bangladeshi peacekeepers and indeed we have been waiting for this day”, Gen. Keita said.

According to Lt. Gen. Opande, “it has been an overwhelming task to further reunite Liberians and strengthen the peace process especially with the cooperation of LURD and MODEL”.

Questions & Answers

Question: *I’m Abu Bakarr Kargbo. I represent the Standard Times newspaper. I want to know whether those Bangladeshi soldiers that died in the plane crash in Benin would be replaced. And also I would like to know what the operation that was carried out at the Special Court was all about because we were not informed about it.*

Maj Yusuf: Thank you. As for those soldiers that died, I think the Bangladesh government would definitely do something to replace them. Be assured if there is any vacuum, such would be filled. For the operation that took place at the Special Court I think there was a “Tea Break” Radio UNAMSIL programme that morning in which I was on air to inform everybody of the operation. Additionally, and subsequently, there was an announcement on Radio UNAMSIL on the exercise that was aired continuously. That was not the first time we are having an exercise like that. It was just a training exercise like those you have been witnessing before - normally a scenario would be created so that the

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troops would be on alert. It's a way of testing their equipment and readiness and to also know how the three forces, namely UNAMSIL, the Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces (RSLAF) and the Sierra Leone Police (SLP) are prepared to work together. So far so good. The exercise was successful and there were no casualties from the security forces deployed at the Special Court.

Question: *I'm Zainab Kanu from SLENA. You only made mention that Operation Blue Vigilance is monitoring the situation along the Sierra Leone-Liberia border. I just want to know why that operation is not monitoring the situation along the Sierra Leone-Guinea border where ugly incidences have been taking place in recent times.*

Maj Yusuf: Sorry the Operation Blue Vigilance 1 is for Liberia-Sierra Leone border and Operation Blue Vigilance 2 extended up to the Sierra Leone-Guinea border. We are monitoring the two borders and we are doing our best with air, river and foot patrols with RSLAF and SLP to ensure relative peace and security for this country. And let me take this opportunity to assure all Sierra Leoneans that we are working hand in hand with RSLAF and SLP to ensure that there is no threat to security in this country.

Question: *I'm Agnes Pratt working with The News. Recently there was a fire incident at Nigeria Contingent headquarters and soldiers' belongings were burnt down. I would like to know what mechanism you have put in place to help those soldiers.*

Maj A.A Yusuf: there was a fire incident actually at Sector West - NICON headquarters. In accordance with our normal official procedure, an enquiry has been set up and at the appropriate time the authorities would see what is to be done. But right now an alternative accommodation has been provided for the victims of the fire incident.

Sherman Brown: This concludes today's briefing. Let me wish you again a happy new year. Thank you Kingsley and Major Yusuf.

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