

UNITED NATIONS



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UNITED NATIONS MISSION IN SIERRA LEONE

FRIDAY 2 JUL 04

PRESS STATEMENT BY UNAMSIL CHIEF OF STAFF (FORCE)

1. I am here representing both the SRSG and the Force Commander to answer those questions I can on the UN helicopter crash that occurred on Tue 29 Jun.
2. First, on behalf of the SRSG and all members of UNAMSIL, I would like to offer again our deepest sympathies to those men and women who died in the helicopter crash. Our thoughts and prayers go out to their next of kin and loved ones. Second, it is important to stress how well all of those involved in dealing with the terrible accident have come together. UNAMSIL have always considered themselves as a team, but the manner in which a wide range of individuals came together to ensure that the recovery effort was and is continuing to be undertaken in a professional and compassionate manner was extraordinary. I can tell you personally - it is a great team.
3. Where are we now? The remains of those who were killed in the crash are now being examined by pathologists in Choithram and Connaught hospitals. It is a painstaking and difficult process. I understand that a number of bodies have been formally recognised, but until the experts can complete their work and appropriate death certificates and other formalities completed, we are unable to release bodies for repatriation or directly to the next of kin. Currently we are unsure how long this process will take - all I can tell you is that the team are working as hard as they can to complete this onerous task.
4. With this in mind, UNAMSIL is also not prepared to release the names of those who died on the helicopter until we can guarantee that all of the next of kin have been informed. Again, this is being carried out as quickly as possible, but when you are dealing with peacekeepers who have perished in countries as far away as the Indian Subcontinent, then I am sure you can see the problems we are faced with.
5. Whilst the formal identification of the bodies goes on, crash investigators have already made a preliminary visit to the scene. The UN has flown in an expert to assist a multifaceted team, and I understand that Russian experts are likely to be joining that team soon. The helicopter crashed in very inhospitable jungle and we are all keen that this investigation is carried out as soon as practical.
6. Finally, I ask members of the press to continue to be supportive during this difficult time. I have told you what we know - please do not speculate further. Note also, that whilst we deal with the crash and cope with our loss, the day-to-day business of peacekeeping continues unabated. We cannot drop our guard and we will continue to support the people of Sierra Leone wholeheartedly. I ask, on behalf of the SRSG, that you do the same.