



PRESS RELEASE

Ref No UNAMSIL/PIO/PR/ 199/2004

Date: 11 November 2004

SRSR ADDRESSES MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT

Freetown, Sierra Leone – The Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Sierra Leone (SRSG), Ambassador Daudi Ngelautwa Mwakawago yesterday addressed an informal session of the national Parliament on the drawdown plan of UNAMSIL (the United Nations Mission in the country).

The SRSG said since the Members of Parliament were part of and solution to the problem in the country, they had to be involved in future efforts, hence his decision to address them. Ambassador Mwakawago further stated that the Mission was not drawing down without due attention being paid to the security systems of the country and other sectors. There were ongoing training programmes for the Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces (RSLAF) which was being reduced from 14,500 to 10,500 and the Sierra Leone Police (SLP) being increased from its current 8,000 strength to its pre-war level of 9,500.

UNAMSIL's troop strength currently stood at 6,400 which would be further reduced to 5,000 by December and down to 3,250 by February up until the end of the current mandate of June 2005. The residual number of peacekeepers would be strategically deployed in the Western Area, the eastern Kenema district and a Rapid Reaction Force in the southern Bo district. He said they would possess the necessary firepower should the need arise for such use.

Unlike other UN follow-on peace building missions which had their names changed, UNAMSIL would retain its name and live up to its present status as "insurers" of security as it had been an effective "guarantor". In that light, he appealed to the parliamentarians to help assuage fears of their constituents regarding the eventual withdrawal of the Mission.

On the capacity of the RSLAF, Ambassador Mwakawago said while the security forces had received adequate training, the same could not be said of equipment, training gear and barracks. In this regard, the Government of the United Kingdom was providing 5.1 million pounds sterling within a three-year period, the first portion of which would be paid this year. The Swiss Government had agreed to provide 260 vehicles with half the number being 3-ton trucks and the others, light vehicles. Furthermore, he was negotiating with some donors to provide the US\$ 400,000 needed to freight them and had already made contacts with the Indian, Italian and US Governments to elicit assistance for the provision of equipment for the national armed forces.

Furthermore, the SRSG said the conflicts in the sub-region were inter-related, therefore regional cooperation was necessary to find a solution. "We at UNAMSIL are at your disposal," he assured.

Acting Speaker of Parliament, Mrs Elizabeth Alpha-Lavallie said the SRSG had alleviated concerns that members had about UNAMSIL's departure. She requested UN assistance to facilitate related inter-parliamentary networking sessions.

Questions and observations from parliamentarians ranged from the need to fill middle and top levels of the security forces, and problems of small arms in the region, economic development, and leadership.

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