

UNAMSIL: A Success Story in Peacekeeping

December 2005 - As the UN Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) comes to a close at the end of this year, it may serve as a model for successful peacekeeping, as well as a prototype for the UN's new emphasis on peacebuilding.

Six years ago UN peacekeepers moved into Sierra Leone to oversee a feeble peace process which included monitoring a shaky ceasefire and supporting a transition to democratic governance. Since then, the UN helped the war-ravaged country to make impressive gains towards peace, demonstrating how the world body can respond to the needs and demands of countries in conflict in a rapidly changing global environment.

Over the course of its mandate, the UN disarmed tens of thousands of ex-fighters, assisted in holding national elections, helped to rebuild the country's police force, and contributed towards rehabilitating the infrastructure and bringing government services to local communities.

The UN also helped the Government stop illicit trading in diamonds and regulate the industry. During the war, rebels had used money from "blood" or "conflict" diamonds to buy weapons which had fuelled the conflict.

UNAMSIL was not always foreseen to succeed: at one point, in May 2000, the mission nearly collapsed when the rebel Revolutionary United Front (RUF) kidnapped hundreds of peacekeepers and renounced the ceasefire in a move that endangered the credibility of UN peacekeeping. Outraged by the chaos that followed, the international community put pressure on the rebels to obey the ceasefire and slapped sanctions against RUF sponsors. Subsequently, UNAMSIL launched new mediation efforts and brought the two adversaries back to the negotiation table. It brought in more troops to monitor the ceasefire and began disarming fighters from both sides. The United Kingdom, which had sent a force to restore peace following RUF's breach of the ceasefire, later started restructuring the army while UNAMSIL and other international partners concentrated on training the local police force.

By early 2002, UNAMSIL had disarmed and demobilized more than 75,000 ex-fighters, including child soldiers. The Government declared the war officially ended. With the political situation stable, the Mission helped organize Sierra Leone's first ever free and fair presidential and parliamentary elections by providing logistics and public information support. Two years later, the mission gave similar support for the local government elections.

UNAMSIL completed most of the tasks assigned it by the Security Council: It assisted the voluntary return of more than half a million refugees and internally displaced persons. It helped the Government restore its authority and social services in areas previously controlled by rebels, trained thousands of police personnel, and constructed or reconstructed dozens of police stations. Meanwhile, the UK continues to assist the Government restructure the army.

UNAMSIL monitored and trained Sierra Leoneans in human rights and was instrumental in setting up the Special Court for Sierra Leone to try those most responsible for war crimes. The Mission also assisted the Government in setting up a Truth and Reconciliation Commission, tasked with healing the wounds of war by bringing together perpetrators and victims of atrocities.

Working together with UN agencies, the Mission launched quick-impact and income-generating projects to provide jobs to thousands of unemployed youths and ex-fighters and basic services to local communities. UNAMSIL troops reconstructed schools and clinics, launched and funded agricultural projects, and sponsored free medical clinics in far-flung areas.

While UNAMSIL has done much, Sierra Leone still faces many challenges: the country remains fragile and needs to take concrete steps to address the root causes of the conflict and cultivate a culture of human rights. The economy is heavily dependent on donor funds. A disproportionate share of income from diamond mining still finds its way into private hands, rather than Government coffers. Despite ongoing reintegration programmes, thousands of ex-combatants and youths – many of whom never went to school – are unemployed. In short, the peace has yet to produce tangible economic dividends and social benefits for the majority of the population.



To help meet these challenges, the newly created UN Integrated Office for Sierra Leone (UNIOSIL) will take over from UNAMSIL beginning January 2006 . Its mandate would be to cement UNAMSIL's gains. The new office will help the Government strengthen human rights, realize the Millennium Development Goals, improve transparency and hold free and fair elections in 2007. It will also work together with other UN missions in the sub-region and provide security for the Special Court.

For further information

UNAMSIL (Freetown, Sierra Leone):

Sheila Dallas, Officer-in-Charge, Public Information Section, Tel: +1 212 963 9588, ext. 6583, E-mail: dallas@un.org;

Daniel Adekera, Spokesman, Tel: +1 212 963 6588, ext. 6817, E-mail: adekera@un.org

United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations (New York):

Nick Birnback, External Relations/Media Affairs Officer, Phone: 1-917-367-5044, E-mail: birnbackn@un.org

United Nations Department of Public Information (New York): Susan Manuel, Chief, Peace and Security Section, Phone: 1-212-963-1262, E-mail: manuels@un.org

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