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(Near Verbatim)

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NEWS HIGHLIGHTS

SRSG MEETS VICE PRESIDENT BEREWA

UNAMSIL – The Special Representative of the Secretary General (SRSG) in Sierra Leone, Ambassador Daudi Mwakawago January 20 paid a courtesy call on Vice President Solomon Berewa at the VP’s lodge, Spur Road, Freetown.

Vice President Berewa thanked Ambassador Mwakawago for accepting to serve in the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) and said he was delighted to meet him.

Mr. Berewa said government was determined to live up to the expectations of the international community by ensuring that the benchmarks and criteria are met as UNAMSIL draws down. He however cautioned that, “we should be mindful that this is a human situation; it is not a mathematical thing.” He said, “We are determined not to slip back again,” adding that he just came back from Britain where he delivered the same statement. “My message to them was clear and that is for Sierra Leone not to be caught napping again.”

Earlier Ambassador Mwakawago said he was here to help consolidate the achievements made so far. “The Secretary General is keen that the achievements are consolidated. He asked me to consult with government so as to ensure that as UNAMSIL draws down, the government draws in. There should be no disruptions.”

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The SRSR who was accompanied by Deputy SRSR, Mr. Alan Doss, further discussed a wide range of other issues with the Vice President.

Last week, the SRSR met with President Tejan Kabbah.

SRSR VISITS SECTOR CENTRE IN MAGBURAKA, INAUGURATES SCHOOL

The Special Representative of the UN Secretary General (SRSR) in Sierra Leone, Ambassador Daudi Ngelautwa Mwa-kawago January 21 visited the Sector Centre contingents in Magburaka and inaugurated the Bangla Sierra RC Primary School at Malong, Northern Sierra Leone.

In his address to soldiers of the Bangladeshi battalion in Magburaka, Mr. Mwakawago expressed appreciation for the warm reception accorded him, - and used the opportunity to congratulate the Nepalese battalion in Moyamba, in the South, who had also been contributing to peace and stability in Sierra Leone.

He noted that, “although I have been associated with peacekeeping efforts of the United Nations, I am very happy that I am now heading a peacekeeping mission, which affords me the opportunity of joining hands with you in contributing to peace and stability in Sierra Leone and in the West African sub-region”.

The SRSR expressed condolences to the Bangladeshi contingent for the deaths of their colleagues last December in a plane crash in Benin Republic. He added that he was quite satisfied with the way they had been handling the draw down plan but cautioned against complacency.

“During the course of your duties you have not only accomplished what is demanded of you by the mandate of UNAMSIL, but you have gone beyond it by providing humanitarian assistance to the people in your sector,” he said, adding, “you have thus established yourselves as men and women who have won the hearts and minds of Sierra Leoneans. I congratulate you on this achievement and urge you to keep it up.”

Sector Centre Commander, Brigadier General Shafiquzza-Man, in his briefing said he was delighted to be the Commander of the first sector to formally welcome Ambassador. Mwakawago. He disclosed that the Sierra Leone Police (SLP) and the Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces (RSLAF) were making steady progress in their deployment throughout the country.

The SRSR later inspected the “BANMED Level II hospital.”

In a another engagement on the same day, Ambassador Mwakawago also inaugurated and handed over to the Malong local community keys to the six-classroom Bangla Sierra R. C. Primary School at Malong. “I’m so happy to be here. I thank the

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commanders for making it possible for me to be here,” he stated and also thanked the teachers and local authorities for their cooperation in making the day memorable.

He told them about the importance of peace. “If you were fighting, the UN will not be here. There can never be development without peace. Even in the home. So peace is fundamental. That’s the message we bring you today,” he said and asked them not to be onlookers, witnesses, but partners in the reconstruction of the country.

The Contingent Commander, Col Nazrul Islam, said he was grateful to the SRSG for his presence and that contributions toward reconstructing the school came from the pockets of Bangladeshi soldiers. He thanked the local community for providing free labour and wood during the reconstruction.

Bishop Biguzzi, the bishop of the Makeni diocese in northern Sierra Leone, lauded UNAMSIL for restoring peace to the country and congratulated the Bangladeshi contingents for their “friendly approach and determination to help the locals” in their areas of deployment.

Highlights of the occasion were traditional dancing and welcome songs by school kids. Acting Force Commander, Brig Gen Adrian Foster, Chiefs of Civil Affairs and Public Information sections, Mr. Ismael Diallo and Mr. Kemal Saiki respectively, as well as Special Advisers to the SRSG, Ambassador Jaiyeola Lewu and Ms. Cherrie-Anne Vincent, accompanied the SRSG.

CIVPOL ENDS THREE-DAY INDUCTION COURSE

The Civilian Police (CIVPOL) of the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) January 19 began a three-day induction course for 31 police officers from 14 Commonwealth countries. The course ended January 21

Speaking at the opening ceremony which took place at the UNAMIL press briefing room, the Director Of Administration (DOA), Steinar Bjornsson said he was privileged to open the first induction course for this year and urged the officers to keep in mind that the military came in to bring peace while the police was expected to maintain that peace.

The DOA hoped the officers realized how important their role was in keeping the peace. “You should always try to be heard so that you will get the support needed. Help us to help you,” he noted. “The purpose of this course is to brief you on the operations of UNAMSIL,” adding that as this was the final year of the Mission, “this means you should be able to double the efforts of the Sierra Leone Police so that they will be able to maintain peace when UNAMSIL leaves.”

Earlier CIVPOL’s Commissioner Hudson Benu, in his address, said he was glad the DOA accepted to open the course for officers from Commonwealth countries of which

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Sierra Leone was a member. "When you receive conflicting reports, you are to cross check with headquarters," he told them. "Your coming is very critical as you are expected to improve on what your predecessors have done," he said and stressed that they were expected to show professionalism in training personnel from the Sierra Leone Police.

Induction courses are organized by the CIVPOL section for newly arrived police officers to enable them to settle down quickly, to give them the tools for the job and to make them understand the structures of UNAMSIL. The courses also offer them the opportunity to clear any misconceptions they may have about Sierra Leone.

Côte d'Ivoire: UN official calls for measures to end deadly inter-communal violence

With inter-communal clashes in western Côte d'Ivoire claiming nearly three dozen lives and forcing hundreds to flee their homes recently, a senior United Nations relief official January 22 appealed to the parties to stop the violence directed against civilians.

Since 29 December, forces sent by France to Côte d'Ivoire have found 35 bodies in villages surrounding Bangolo, some 600 kilometres northwest of the country's economic hub in Abidjan, according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). The town has recently been a flashpoint for violence against people perceived to be non-native to the region. Early this month, six persons, including three children, were killed in one incident alone.

Citing this "alarming" spike in bloodshed, Carolyn McAskie, the UN Deputy Emergency Relief Coordinator said, "The Government must do more to stop the violence. I call on all parties to actively bring an end to violence directed against civilians," she added.

Hundreds of people of Burkinabé origin have been displaced from villages in Gagnoa District, OCHA reported. More than 180 persons have arrived at a camp for internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Guiglo, 550 kilometres from Abidjan, since the beginning of the month.

Many have reported that they had been forced to flee a nearby village, Troya 2, by armed persons from neighbouring villages, OCHA said. According to the IDPs at Guiglo, there have been no ethnic conflicts within their community, but "armed young people from surrounding villages" have harassed and driven them out.

They also reported that there were scores of displaced persons who had not yet reached the IDP site at Guiglo. The great majority of the displaced are long-term residents of Côte d'Ivoire, 300 of whom had been living in Troya 2 for years. There are now only 22 persons of Burkinabé origin in Troya 2.

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The local administration, including the police and judiciary, has not been able to resume the full range of their activities in this crime-prone area since services lapsed at the peak of fighting between government forces and rebels roughly a year ago, OCHA said. Complicated property issues in cocoa-producing regions and the proliferation of small arms contribute to the tension in western Côte d'Ivoire. The Office warned the harvest season might give rise to increased tensions and insecurity over the next three months.

Plight of children in armed conflict reaches watershed stage – UN official

The battle to uphold the rights and well-being of children exposed to armed conflict “has reached a watershed moment,” the Secretary-General's Special Representative on the issue told the Security Council January 20.

During the annual Council debate on children and armed conflict, Under-Secretary-General Olara Otunnu said that while there has been significant progress on many fronts for children, too many parties go unpunished despite continuing to violate their rights.

“The general situation for children remains grave and unacceptable,” Mr. Otunnu said, citing the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), the Indonesian province of Aceh, Iraq, Liberia, the occupied Palestinian territories and Uganda as areas where children have particularly suffered over the past year.

Mr. Otunnu's recommendations to redress the situation include setting up a monitoring and reporting mechanism to track violations of children's rights during conflicts.

But he said there has been some progress in recent years, including greater advocacy for children, the development of international norms for their treatment, and the increasing integration of child protection into UN peacekeeping operations.

Carol Bellamy, Executive Director of the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), told the Council debate that many children suffer more because humanitarian access is often restricted or banned outright during wars.

Ms. Bellamy said child soldiers were not the only victims of wars, adding that girls were especially vulnerable to sexual violence and exploitation.

“Another devastating consequence of today's wars is that they create and exacerbate conditions that lead to HIV/AIDS,” she said. “The impoverishment that accompanies conflict often leaves women and girls so destitute that trading sex for survival becomes the only option for many.”

A number of the more than 40 delegates who spoke at the meeting said the most effective way to help children affected by armed conflict was to strike at the root of the problem by preventing war from breaking out in the first place.

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QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Question: *I'm Abubakarr Kargbo from the Standard Times. Chief, I would like to know what the Bangladeshi government is doing or has done to replace those peacekeepers that lost their lives in a plane crash last December.*

Kemal Saiki: I'm afraid I do not have any details on that and the Military Spokesman is not with us today. It is however standard procedure in military units to ensure that force strength remains at, or is close to, nominal levels.

Question: *I'm Arthur Caulker I represent the Exclusive. What is the advice given by UNAMSIL to the Government in relation to domestic produce that are rising everyday. And my second question is, what is your comment on the Ivorian soldier that was sentenced to 15 years imprisonment for killing a French journalist.*

Kemal Saiki: Let me start with the tail end of your question concerning what recently happened in Cote d'Ivoire. A criminal case was brought to the courts of that country, a trial took place and a judicial decision was arrived at, which I do not wish to comment other than saying that due process seem to have taken its course and carried out by the competent authorities of Cote d'Ivoire.

Kingsley Ighobor: *To answer the first question it's true that UNAMSIL has been assisting the Sierra Leone government in some developmental projects like the Quick Impact Projects that we are doing all over the country. Don't forget that this is a country just coming out of war. UNAMSIL is collaborating with the Government of Sierra Leone to ensure that the economy improves. For example a meeting has just been concluded at the Mamba Point in Freetown where the Government of Sierra Leone was represented by the Vice President Solomon Berewa and UNAMSIL and other stakeholders were there – they were trying to fashion out a blueprint to assist the people of Sierra Leone improve the economy of this country and bring about development.*

Question: *I'm Paul Kamara of the New Citizen. Can you tell me the present strength of UNAMSIL.*

Kemal Saiki: As of today, UNAMSIL Force strength stands at 11,530 women and men.

Question: *I'm Agnes Pratt of The News. I would like to know why UNAMSIL is not taking in interns studying peace studies at the university.*

Kemal Saiki: The United Nations do not, for obvious reasons, take interns in Peacekeeping missions as there are more appropriate environments for providing hands-on experience to students. We do however, assist in some ways, those pursuing research.

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This, ladies and gentlemen of the press concludes our weekly briefing. I wish you a good week, particularly in light of the fact that today is the start of Sierra Leone Press Week.

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