

*Open Meeting of the Security Council on Sierra Leone*

*Statement by Mr. Kamallesh Sharma, PR on May 11, 2000*

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Mr. President,

Thank you for calling this open meeting on the crisis in Sierra Leone.

UNAMSIL was set up on the assumption that all parties to the conflict in Sierra Leone had at last decided to resolve their differences peacefully, through the Lome Peace Agreement which they had all freely accepted. UNAMSIL was despatched to help implement the Agreement, through its impartial and reassuring presence, and by taking charge of the process of voluntary demobilisation and disarmament which was absolutely essential to pave the way for a lasting peace.

It now appears from recent events that the leadership of the RUF had no intentions of honouring their commitments under the Agreement. The tensions which, from the actions of their cadres, started to build up from late last month have now erupted into a full-scale crisis, whose immediate brunt is being borne by the people of Sierra Leone and UNAMSIL's peace-keepers, but which will have far wider repercussions.

The leaders of the region have individually and collectively denounced these actions of the RUF and of their leader, Mr. Foday Sankoh. Unfortunately, that has had no visible effect so far. There are unconfirmed reports that Mr. Sankoh may have received sanctuary. If so, we trust that those to whom he is beholden, or who have influence upon him, will also persuade him to call off immediately the military action that he has started, to release the UNAMSIL personnel he has taken hostage, and commit himself again to the Lome Agreement. We expect the Security Council to pronounce itself forcefully on this matter, making it clear to the leadership of the RUF that the international community is united in its condemnation of their actions.

What then? There are two options which seem to be the obvious ones, which have been spoken about in the corridors and mooted in the media, but which we would strongly advise against. The first is to wind down and withdraw. UNAMSIL was sent to Sierra Leone to keep a peace that has unravelled, and it could be argued that if the people of Sierra Leone do not want peace, the UN can hardly impose it upon them. That, of course, would be terribly unfair on the people of Sierra Leone, who are the victims of this violence, not its cause. In Rwanda in 1994, in a comparable crisis, when peace-keepers came under threat, the UN decided to abandon the operation, with consequences that no one would wish to see repeated.

Certainly, even though India has troops on the ground, we have no intentions of pulling out, and very strongly urge the Council not to consider this as an option. We are in fact sending a second battalion urgently, together with other reinforcements, to bolster UNAMSIL's strength.

The second option, which might seem logical if the first is rejected, is to change UNAMSIL's mandate immediately into peace enforcement, under a Chapter VII operation. However, we would like the Council to bear in mind that UNAMSIL presently does not have the troops, the equipment or the logistics needed to mount a peace enforcement operation. Giving UNAMSIL a mandate which it cannot implement will not help it; it might even compound its difficulties in two ways. On the ground, if the RUF goes on an all-out offensive in retaliation, UNAMSIL, and particularly the hostages, might suffer heavy and needless casualties. Politically, critics of the UN will argue that, even with a Chapter VII mandate, the UN has been able to do nothing. Therefore, we would say that the question of a change in UNAMSIL's mandate is one that the Council may wish to keep under review, in the light of developments. In this event, we expect that troop contributors will be associated in the Council's decision-making process, in the spirit of Article 44 of the Charter.

There are some who believe that the UN cannot do what needs to be done now in Sierra Leone, and that force should be deployed and used by others, with the blessings of the Security Council. As long as UNAMSIL is in place, we cannot warn too strongly against this. Somalia showed us the dangers inherent in forces outside UN command taking military action in a theatre where peace-keepers are deployed. The backlash and the blame for failure both fell on the UN and its blue helmets.

In the current crisis, it is essential to preserve the unity of command of UNAMSIL, and it must function as a cohesive force. Undermining the leadership of UNAMSIL is fraught with dangerous consequences for the mission as a whole, and of the troops under its command.

In our opinion, UNAMSIL needs to consolidate. In present circumstances, it clearly cannot implement many of the tasks given to it. There is little in the way of humanitarian assistance that is being provided; the providers have left. Nor can UNAMSIL keep thoroughfares open when it is itself under siege. It is spread out all over the country, showing the UN flag, but this also means that its soldiers are dispersed in penny packets, trying to do a job that presently cannot be done. With the professional and well-equipped reinforcements that are coming in, UNAMSIL must concentrate on measures that would make it impossible for power, or the institutions of government in Freetown, to be seized by force. It already has a Chapter VII mandate to provide security at key locations and Government buildings, and to use force in self-defence. The rules of engagement are clear. If all units in UNAMSIL act with discipline and courage on the mandate which they already have, they will be able to serve the UN and the people of Sierra Leone well.

In conclusion, Mr. President, I wish to reiterate, that, as we have always done in other difficult peace-keeping operations in which we have participated, India will stay the course. I will share with members of the Council the fact that this decision has not been easy to take. It is not an easy matter to answer the question why the lives of Indian soldiers should be put at risk in an operation which currently has some serious weaknesses and imponderables. To the question, what interests we are defending in Sierra Leone, we have said that we are there, and must stay there, for two reasons. First, because to leave now would be to abandon the people of Sierra Leone to a terrible fate, and second, because the credibility of the UN is at stake. We believe those are also the two considerations uppermost on the Council's mind.

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