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**SPECIAL REPRESENTATIVE SAYS UNAMSIL DRAWDOWN WILL TAKE
SECURITY SITUATION INTO ACCOUNT**

Freetown – The Special Representative of the Secretary-General in Sierra Leone, Ambassador Oluyemi Adeniji, on Friday, 13 September, said the latest report to the UN Security Council by Secretary-General Kofi Annan on the UN Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) is “one of the most crucial” reports on the involvement of the UN in the country.

Briefing the press at UNAMSIL Headquarters in Freetown on his forthcoming presentation of the report to the Security Council, Ambassador Adeniji said while the report notes that considerable progress has been made in Sierra Leone since the end of the war, including the completion of disarmament and the holding of free and fair elections, it nevertheless recognizes that a number of challenges lie ahead.

In the report, which was released in New York on 11 September, Mr. Annan proposes an extension of UNAMSIL’s mandate by six months and a phased downsizing of the Mission’s strength as the first step towards a gradual handover of security and other responsibilities to the Government of Sierra Leone. The report recommends to the Council the reduction of UNAMSIL’s current strength of some 17,000 UN peacekeepers to about 5,000 by late 2004.

In his briefing to the press, Ambassador Adeniji outlined the progress that the Government of Sierra Leone and UNAMSIL had made thus far, while noting that “there is still a big gap in ensuring that the security apparatus in the country is fully up to the task when UNAMSIL finally leaves.” He explained that as a result of experience from other peacekeeping missions, the UN Secretary-General felt that “it was necessary to give Sierra Leone time to consolidate its peace.”

Ambassador Adeniji expressed the hope that the current training of the army under the International Military Assistance Training Team (IMATT) will continue for some time, but observed that army deployment was “still thin in many places and problems of infrastructure and equipment still remain.”

The Special Representative also noted that the current police strength was still well below pre-war levels and that the police needed an additional 3,000 new recruits. The Secretary-General’s report, while proposing the downsizing of troops and other civilian components,

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is recommending an increase to 185 of UN Civilian Police (CIVPOL) who are currently advising and training the Sierra Leone Police.

Ambassador Adeniji said the big challenge was “the external threat from Liberia,” and spoke of the need to address the situation in “a more pro-active manner than in the past.” He said that if not addressed, the conflict could spill over, as evidenced by the recent influx of refugees into Sierra Leone fleeing fighting in Liberia. “It is difficult to determine genuine refugees from those who are troublemakers,” he said. He also disclosed that the Government of Sierra Leone has started building a special camp for combatants who are fleeing Liberia and surrendering to the Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces and UNAMSIL peacekeepers.

Saying that the timing of UNAMSIL’s exit needed to be carefully monitored to take into account the security situation prevailing at each stage of the gradual withdrawal, Ambassador Adeniji said the Government would need to speed up the extension of its authority throughout the country. He also emphasized the need to sensitize Sierra Leoneans on UNAMSIL’s withdrawal plans and to inform them that the Mission would not leave a security vacuum.