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PRESS RELEASE

UNAMSIL LAUNCHES OPERATION BLUE VIGILANCE

The United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) on Monday, 20 October 2003 started the first phase of a military exercise named "Operation Blue Vigilance". Conducted in collaboration with the Sierra Leone Police (SLP) and the Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces (RSLAF), Operation Vigilance Blue will increase UNAMSIL forces and the national security agencies' presence along the border with Liberia, thereby preventing potential infiltrations of Liberian combatants into Sierra Leone.

For the first phase of Operation Blue Vigilance, which should be completed by 2 November 2003, the objective is to gather detailed information of the Sierra Leone-Liberia border through air and ground patrols and observation of border crossing points and routes. The exercise will involve UNAMSIL troops, the RSLAF 3rd and 5th Brigades and SLP officers deployed along the Sierra Leone-Liberia border. During this exercise, UNAMSIL's Russian Aviation Unit will be operating MI-24 attack helicopters for patrols while the Ukrainian Aviation Unit would fly MI-8 armed helicopters for patrols and specific crossing points along the border.

At present, while the RSLAF and SLP have static posts along the borders with Guinea and Liberia they also carry out foot, road and river patrols. UNAMSIL performs regular deterrence air patrols with MI-24 helicopters along the border with Liberia, in particular in the areas of Kailahun and Gendema River Bridge. UN Military Observers (MILOBS) also patrol the area and UNAMSIL Sector East organises specific road and foot patrols to Gendema River Bridge.

Information gathered at the end of the first phase of Operation Blue Vigilance will be handed over to UNAMSIL Sector East and to Sierra Leonean security agencies for further operations designed to enhance the capability the Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces along the border. On 3 November, Operation Blue Vigilance will enter, for an undetermined period, in its second phase under the sole control of UNAMSIL Sector East.

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