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(UNAMSIL)

**PRESS RELEASE**

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**FORCE COMMANDER ASSESSES REFUGEE SITUATION  
IN THE EASTERN REGION**

*Freetown* – The Force Commander of the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL), Lt. Gen. Daniel I. Opande, yesterday toured the eastern towns of Sumbuya and Zimmi and the border towns of Dar-es-Salaam and Gendema to assess the impact of the current influx of Liberian refugees on security along the Sierra Leonean border.

In Zimmi and Dar-es-Salaam in Pujehun District, the Force Commander visited a refugee transit camp where he spoke to a number of Liberian refugees. The refugees told the Force Commander that they fled their homes when the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL) warned them that the rebels were coming to attack them. They also said that Liberian troops were demanding money from them before they could be allowed to go through the Dar-es-Salaam border crossing point into Sierra Leone, which the Force Commander later visited. Refugees at Dar-es-Salaam corroborated the allegations of extortion and harassment by Liberian troops.

Mr. Alex Mundt, a protection officer with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Zimmi, said an average of slightly more than 100 refugees were crossing the border into Sierra Leone daily. The Commanding Officer of the “B” Company of Ghanaian Battalion (GHANBATT) 5 in Zimmi, Capt. Eric Quashie, said more than 1,100 refugees had passed through the Zimmi Transit Camp since 17 May 2002.

From Dar-es-Salaam, the Force Commander flew to Gendema where he crossed the Mano River Bridge to the Liberian side of the border at Bo Waterside for a meeting with the Liberian Minister of Defence, Maj. Gen. Daniel Chea. During the meeting, Lt. Gen. Opande appealed to the Liberian Government to monitor its side of the border to prevent cross-border attacks against Sierra Leonean villages by some elements of the AFL. There have been a number of attacks and looting of food and properties against border villages in Pujehun District by armed men from Liberia.

The Force Commander stressed that UNAMSIL was doing everything in its power, in collaboration with the Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces (RSLAF), to police the Sierra Leonean side of the border and requested the same from Liberian authorities,

emphasizing that “peace in one of the Mano River Union [MRU] countries without peace in the others is no peace at all.”

In his response, Minister Chea congratulated Sierra Leone for holding successful elections, adding that his Government’s policy was to help Sierra Leone consolidate its peace. On the issue of cross-border attacks, the minister stressed that this was “totally unacceptable to the Government of Liberia” and assured the Force Commander that his Government would not allow unscrupulous elements to destabilize the prevailing peace in Sierra Leone.

The minister also confirmed that defence chiefs from Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia were working closely to maintain peace. He said Liberia was interested in pursuing dialogue with other MRU states through the Rabat mechanism, a reference to the February summit of MRU leaders in Rabat, Morocco.

Earlier during the day, the Force Commander visited the town of Sumbuya, where he was informed by the Commanding Officer of Guinean Battalion (GUINBATT) 2, Col. Mamadu S. Camara, that the situation in the area was calm. Col. Camara, however, expressed concern over the activities of some ex-combatants who had been threatening to disturb the peace because they had not been paid benefits promised by Government, a situation which he said was being closely monitored.