

"Op Khukri" – The United Nations Operation Fought in Sierra Leone Part-II

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CONDUCT

Build up on 13 and 14 July 2000 (D Minus 2 - D Minus 1)

Build up was successfully completed on 13-14 July, using UN contracted and Indian aviation unit helicopters. Artillery ammunition was initially dumped at Kenema using the available road as much as possible and was, thereafter, heli-lifted to Daru. In order to maintain secrecy and surprise, troops were moved at the last moment from Freetown to Kenema by air using C-130 Hercules and all available helicopters. Move from Kenema to Daru was also done at the last moment by helicopters. See Sketch P.

Operations on 15 July 2000 (D Day)

The two Chinooks, which had the ability to operate in bad weather, carried out their task of inserting the pivot at Kenewa and, thereafter, evacuating military observers, sick peacekeepers and essential warlike stores, as planned. The strikes planned by attack helicopters were slightly delayed due to bad weather. This was followed by a pre-emptive strike by attack helicopters and artillery at Kailahun, Pendembu, Mobal and Kotuma. After this, the advance was commenced by 5/8 GR and the mechanised company from Daru on schedule.

At around 0800 hrs helicopters of the IAF landed one company sized pivot ex 18 GRENADIERS at Geihun. Simultaneously, another company sized pivot of the quick reaction company (QRC) was landed by them in the 3 Bridges Area. Around this time, the Kailahun column broke out from its location and linked up with the pivot of 2 PARA (SF) at Kenewa. Subsequently, by 1100h they linked up with the 18 GRENADIERS pivot at Geihun. An impromptu air head was established here and 65 personnel were heli lifted out to Daru.

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Further link up was delayed due to cratering of road between Geihun and Pendembu by the RUF and stiff opposition by them enroute to Pendembu and at Pendembu itself. To facilitate the link up, I ordered heli dropping of bridging equipment (FOB) in the affected areas North of Pendembu. This helped the Kailahun column to get their vehicles, laden with warlike stores, across these obstacles. From the south, 18 GRENADIERS cleared Kotuma, Kuiva and Mobai by 1300h. However, 5/8 GR advance did not progress as per schedule due to stiff opposition by the rebels. They could eventually clear Pendembu after heavy fighting only by 1900h D Day. Link up was established with the Kailahun column North of Pendembu, by 1930h. Due to the delay in the establishment of the airhead at Pendembu and due to the fact that the Russian owned MI 26 helicopters returned to their base at Freetown by noon the same day, the planned heli lifting was postponed to 16 July 2000. Due to lack of opposition from the rebels, the Ghanaians were able to advance and secure Bendu Junction by 1300h D day. As planned, it resulted in keeping the RUF theatre reserves tied down.

Operations on 16 July 2000 (D Plus 1)

The major operation conducted on D Plus 1 was the air evacuation of 316 personnel from the airhead at Pendembu. Despite problems of refuelling, this was achieved by the Indian Aviation helicopters in a record time of three hours by resorting to "hot-refuelling", an activity never attempted by them before. Tactical withdrawal was, thereafter, conducted by 5/8 GR from Pendembu to Daru. This was met by stiff opposition from RUF who resorted to road denial and ambushes. One of the RUF ambushes was successful at a place 4 kms North of Kuiva when, at 1330h, the rebels shot at a vehicle of ours using RPG missiles. In this attack one driver and a co-driver were seriously wounded. Although, they were evacuated immediately by air to Daru and treated by the mobile surgical team, one of them, Havildar Krishan Kumar of 14 Mechanised Infantry, succumbed to his injuries.

18 GRENADIERS and 5/8 GR groups including the composite battery and vehicle column ex Kailahun reached Daru by 1900h. At about the same time, the Ghanaian companies also returned to Kenema and the operation was completed successfully.

Fortunately, at that point of time, a TV team from India was visiting Sierra Leone. They captured first hand some of the action during 'Op Khukri' and this has been made into a film called "Operation Khukri". It is a film worth seeing.

PROBLEMS AND CONSTRAINTS

Terrain

The biggest problem in the conduct of operations was the terrain, as the single road axis available between Daru and Kailahun forced extrication along the same axis thereby compromising surprise. Lack of local knowledge of terrain vis a vis the rebels, put us at a disadvantage. Due to dense overgrowth and undergrowth, attack helicopters had problems of target identification. The densely wooded country allowed the rebels to effectively snipe at our road columns.

Intelligence

Lack of real time intelligence was due to organisational constraints of the UN which does not cater to gathering intelligence in a host country. We could obtain hard intelligence of limited value through intercepts during the operation itself. Coupled with this was the fact that ELINT and HUMINT capabilities were non existent. Despite being in Kailahun for 75 days, the satellite imagery of the areas was not made available.

The exact location of their reserves was also not known. Nor, did we have any knowledge of the type and quantity of weapons and ammunition that they possessed. It was subsequently revealed that they had a substantial amount of warlike stores and equipment with them. Another advantage that the rebels had, of which we were not aware, was their good radio communications, which enabled them to use their reserves effectively.

Weather

As the operations were launched in the middle of the rainy season, it impacted adversely on own observation, mobility and added to the logistic difficulties. Further, bad weather seriously hampered strikes by own attack helicopters at first light on D Day. Insertion of troops by helicopters to their locations as pivots was delayed due to bad weather. High humidity during the day led to severe exhaustion of troops due to dehydration.

Paucity of Troops

The operation had to be phased due to paucity of troops and helicopters for establishing pivots along the road. All troops of Daru garrison were launched for the operation at the cost of denuding Daru defences. Elements of Nigerian battalion, untried and untested by me and own Engineers were, thus, employed to man these defences.

Collateral Damage

To avoid collateral damage, artillery was initially tasked to fire smoke shells a little off the target to enable civilians to escape. All efforts were made to target only known confirmed RUF held buildings and huts and to avoid collateral damage.

Artillery.

It was probably for the first time that 105mm Light Field Guns (LFG) were used in any UN mission. The difficulties faced in the employment of artillery were as under :-

- (a) A battery, which is designed to fire as a single entity from one location, was required to be divided into four segments, each firing from a different location. The authorisation of fire control equipment and technical instruments in a battery was a major problem in this regard.
- (b) Prime movers for guns were not available in the operational area and, therefore, 2.5 ton vehicles had to be modified to serve as towers.
- (c) The desired speed of operations necessitated speedy movement of guns by keeping one or two guns within the battery on ground to cover the move of advancing infantry.
- (d) Limited available artillery resources were used to cover a very large number of targets spread in all directions, over large distances, in order to achieve deception and surprise.
- (e) The problem of communication and observation in undertaking shoots in jungle terrain was partially overcome by employing Air OP.

Air

Air effort was a very complicated part of the operation as it entailed coordinating the efforts of the British Chinook helicopters,

the helicopters of the Indian Aviation unit and the helicopters of the Russians who were flying as per their own rules. To highlight this further, the initial plan was to strike at the rebels at Pendembu and Kailahun with the attack helicopters and, thereafter, use the Chinooks to land 2 PARA (SF) as pivots after which they were to land at Kailahun to pick up Military Observers (Milobs), unfit peacekeepers and warlike stores. This plan had to be modified due to the reluctance on the part of the British to fly after the surprise was given away. As Indian attack helicopters did not have night flying capabilities, I had to accede to this change of plan. Further, the Chinooks who were to do additional sorties after the initial insertion of pivots and evacuation of Milobs and others, chose not to do so and flew off to Freetown leaving us in the lurch.

The Russians, on the other hand, did not wait for the link up to take place on D Day but flew back to Freetown around noon. This foreclosed my option of completing the operation in one day. Additionally, the lack of flying in all weather conditions, except for the Chinooks, was a problem for the other helicopters; thus delaying operations. Refuelling of helicopters was also a problem as facilities for the same did not exist at Daru.

Other problems pertaining to air operations were as given below:-

- (a) UN helicopters lack all weather capability, which is so essential for such operations undertaken during the monsoons and bad weather.
- (b) Operational area being covered by thick jungles offered limited landing zones to insert and extricate troops.
- (c) Secure radio communication with the ground forces elements was lacking.
- (d) Due to the non-availability of fuel pumps at Daru and Kenema, fuel bowsers had to be transported between Hastings and Kenema/ Daru by using MI 26 helicopters.
- (e) Lack of armour plating and integral self-defence measures on MI-8 made the helicopters extremely vulnerable to ground fire by the rebels. The terrain which is highly undulating with wide spread hillocks all around posed major problems for Nape of the Earth (NOE) flying. Terrain following radars and ground proximity warning systems would have been of great assistance in these kinds of operations.

(f) At any given time, there were more than eight helicopters operating from a makeshift helipad measuring 300m x 100m at Daru making the helipad space extremely restricted.

(g) Air space management with 12 helicopters operating in a very restricted area in adverse weather conditions was extremely difficult.

(h) Only the Special Forces team possessed gloves for slithering. This restricted the options for troop insertion in the area where no landing sites were available. Under slinging of loads could not be carried due to absence of slings.

(j) The civil contracted MI 26/17/8s restricted their employment to specific areas and specific situations at the discretion of their crew. This aspect severely affected the extrication of foot columns by air from Pendembu.

Logistics

One of the biggest problems was providing logistics support for this operation. To put it mildly, it was a nightmare. This was mainly because of the paucity of resources, made worse by the secrecy which had to be maintained to conceal buildups till the last moment, so that the plan was not compromised. It took dedicated and professional staff work to evolve the logistic plan to support Operation Khukri.

Engineers

Engineer effort was a major problem as the only axis along which the operation was to be conducted was a predictable one and the RUF laid ambushes on it and cratered it, necessitating air dropping of bridging equipment i.e Flexible Duck Boards (FDBs) to assist the Kailahun column in their rearward movement to Pendembu to effect a link up.

Special Forces Operations

In case Special Forces units are inducted into a hazardous UN mission where it is envisaged that they would, in all probability, have to conduct military operations, it is essential that they come well equipped for the same including satellite based Personal Locating Systems (PLS).

Media

The importance of media in the conduct of military operations cannot be over emphasised. In Sierra Leone, the only effective media was the BBC who made much of the so-called assistance provided by the British to the UN forces, which, in fact, was restricted to making two Chinooks available for one sortie. It is well known that the primary aim of the British was evacuation of all the British nationals in Sierra Leone and, during Operation Khukri, the British participated with two Chinooks and a handful of SAS personnel, only because they wanted to ensure the return of a British Officer Major Andy Williams, who was incarcerated along with 233 other peacekeepers at Kailahun. To quote Michael Fleshman "The UK dispatched warships and a battalion of elite paratroops to secure Freetown and the strategic international airport. The UK action, taken to permit the evacuation of UK citizens from Sierra Leone, is widely credited with stabilising the defence of Freetown and buying time for the deployment of more and better-equipped UNAMSIL contingents".

ACHIEVEMENTS

Selection and Maintenance of Aim

The aim of the operation was to safely extricate all the personnel, vehicles and military hardware from Kailahun with minimum collateral damage and without violation of Human Rights. This was achieved successfully.

Maintenance of Momentum

Due to extremely poor conditions of road and its cratering by the rebels, mobility of our troops was enhanced by using bridging equipment such as FDBs, which were dropped at these locations by MI-8 helicopters.

Momentum was maintained by the speed of induction and near simultaneity of contact at Kailahun, Geihun, 3 Bridges Area and by the ground forces at Kotuma, Kuiva and Mobai. Innovative use of air, artillery and speed of movement by 2 PARA (SF) and foot columns threw the RUF out of gear.

Tactical Surprise

At the macro level, one of the major achievements was being able to maintain tactical surprise by resorting to secrecy in planning

and build-up, simultaneity and speed of the operations, bold execution and imaginative use of bad weather. All these factors and more, contributed towards this achievement.

Flexibility

Contingency planning was done in a detailed manner to cater for interruptions due to weather, terrain and lack of intelligence and air resources. Plans were continuously modified with the changing operational scenario.

Planning and Preparation

Planning for extrication of the troops at Kailahun was being done from mid May 2000. The British were involved at the last moment on a need to know basis, due to their interest in the British Milobs. The same was the case for the Ghanaian and Nigerians who participated in this operation. Planning, preparations and rehearsals were carried out secretly, concurrently and in a coordinated manner.

Functioning under Chapter VII of the UN Charter

Traditionally, the UN forces do not conduct bold and audacious military operations. There is, therefore, a marked hesitation to use force under Chapter VII of the UN Charter. This was evident, time and again, since the evolution of UNAMSIL, when rebels got the better of peacekeepers of many nationalities forming part of UNAMSIL. Participation in 'Operation Khukri' resulted in a credible psychological change of the commanders and the troops involved in the operation who switched over from traditional peacekeeping to the more robust peace enforcement role under Chapter VII of the UN Charter.

Use of Mechanised Infantry and Engineers in Infantry Role

Mechanised Infantry and Engineers from the Indian Contingent were utilised in infantry role to make up the shortfall of infantry manpower. They performed this role superbly.

Casualties

Despite constraints of terrain and bad weather, stiff opposition from highly motivated, determined, well equipped and well led rebels, the casualties to own troops in two days of intense operations

were minimal. Only one soldier was killed and seven wounded. As against this, the rebel casualties were 34 killed and 150 wounded.

Recovery of Rebels Arms and Ammunition.

This operation yielded a substantial quantity of arms and ammunition which was a major loss for the rebels. As per records, as many as one SAM-7 launcher, 4 x RPG launchers, 12 x AK 47/56 rifles, 6 x GPMGs, 3 x HMGs and a whole lot of ammunition including anti-personnel mines were recovered from the rebels. This broke their back militarily as all this was acquired by them over a long period of time. The strike in their heartland also had a highly demoralising effect on them.

OTHER ACHIEVEMENTS

Unorthodox Use of Single Guns and Attack Helicopters

Due to paucity of equipment, we resorted to the unorthodox use of single guns and attack helicopters to provide rear and flank protection to our columns. This paid rich dividends.

Heli - landing In Virgin Territory and Hot Refuelling

The heli-landing of pivots in virgin territory in small clearings, without the benefit of any reconnaissance was another major achievement. Also, hot refuelling (refuelling without switching off the engine) by helicopters was resorted to for the first time successfully.

Coordinated Multinational Operations

It is preferable that all offensive operations in the UN environment are conducted jointly by participation of two or more troop contributing countries. Such operations then have greater international acceptance. Dissemination of plans should be done on a need to know basis in order to avoid loss of surprise.

Despite differences in training, equipment, leadership and motivation, good coordination was achieved between troops of different nationalities, and between various arms and services.

Jointmanship

A high standard of jointmanship between ground forces, aviation units, UN helicopter units and the civilian staff at the

mounting bases was one of the major contributing factors towards success of this operation.

Use of Helicopters

In the terrain as obtaining in the Area of Operations (AOR), helicopters are a key asset for achieving speed of operations, contributing to flexibility of plans and medical evacuation. There is a need to maintain one company heli-lift with night capability at all times.

Communications

Fast moving operations involving different contingents require use of a large variety of communication equipment. A pool of radio sets would have greatly assisted in the execution of the operations. It would also have ensured compatibility of equipment. Despite these problems, we succeeded in keeping contact with each other.

Administration and Logistic

The Chief Administrative Officer's Office is required to provide logistics support by way of water and Meals Ready to Eat (MRE) etc. Units operating on wet lease system, however; run into problems in case their equipment is out of action. There is, therefore, a requirement to institute procedures in such special circumstances for the repair and replacement of such equipment. Similarly, the UN aircraft should have an inbuilt clause in the contract for operating in the AOR in case of such operations. In the instant case, the UN hired aircraft having assured me of their arrival back to the area of operation on 16 July at 0800 hrs, failed to report till 1100 hrs pleading that they needed rest on account of the work done on 15 July 2000. Despite these logistic constraints, the operations were conducted smoothly.

CONCLUSION

Operation Khukri established the professional competence of the Indian Army and the Air Force internationally. The other spin offs were, it broke the myth of RUF supremacy and brought them to the negotiating table. It enhanced the prestige of UNAMSIL internationally. It also resulted in improvement in response to orders, brought in cohesiveness in the Force and bolstered the morale of the civil population. Finally, it has also paved the way for further expansion of the UNAMSIL Force.

On successful completion of 'Operation Khukri', accolades poured in from all over the world including from Mr Kofi Annan, Secretary General UN, who in a letter addressed to me on 17 July 2000 stated, "I should like to extend to you my gratitude and admiration for the thoroughly professional manner in which you, your military staff and the troops on the ground have planned and executed the extraction of the surrounded peacekeepers at Kailahun. The fact that there were only a few casualties on our side is a clear indication of the determination of the force, as well as of its robustness in dealing with any threats emanating from the RUF. I am particularly pleased that this was a truly international operation with the participation of troops from a number of countries, which all played an essential and vital role in the operation".

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