

"Op Khukri" - The United Nations Operations Fought in Sierra Leone

Lieutenant General V K Jetley, PVSM, UYSM (Retd)

INTRODUCTION

India's participation in UN Peacekeeping Operations has always been exceptional in terms of the quality and quantity of troops and commanders provided to various trouble spots around the world. As on 31 January 2007, India is the third largest contributor to the UN with 8052 troops committed on various UN Missions all over the world.

In the year 1999-2000, we were amongst the largest contributors to the UN with a total commitment of approx 4,000 troops, mostly deployed in Sierra Leone, on the West African coast. I was privileged to be appointed its first Force Commander and was given the unenviable task of raising the mission from scratch. This proved to be an exciting and challenging experience with a fair share of trials and tribulations. Fortunately, long years of experience in the Indian Army, coupled with an earlier tenure with the UN, came handy in the execution of this task as also in handling many tricky situations that occurred.

Because the UN is always strapped for resources, establishment of a mission from scratch is never an easy task. A credible force was created despite various shortcomings. This Force, on being raised, was deployed as per the instructions received from UN Headquarters, New York from time to time, much to the discomfiture of the various rebel groups, led by the Revolutionary United Front, who saw the deployment of United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) troops as a threat to them. This should not have been the case as the rebels themselves were part of the Government of National Unity of Sierra Leone. It was evident that the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) were ill at ease due to the professional conduct of the UNAMSIL and its rapid deployment. It was not surprising, therefore, that, around May 2000,

Lieutenant General V K Jetley was commissioned into Dogra Regiment. He Commanded a corps in the North East. He retired as Master General of Ordnance 4/c

g
 Corporal Foday Sankoh, leader of the RUF, a Minister in the Government and a Vice President equivalent, gave orders to the RUF rebels to renege on their commitment to the Agreement. The rebels under his orders chose to attack the Kenyan positions due to the fact that they had achieved moral domination over the Kenyan troops. They killed a few of them and took many others as hostages including a number of military observers. After attacking the Kenyans at Makeni and Maqburaka, the rebels, using guile, tricked more than half the newly inducted Zambian battalion into captivity. At Kailahun, in the Eastern part of Sierra Leone, 11 Milobs were taken hostage and the Indian position was surrounded by the rebels. However, due to a healthy respect for the professional capabilities of the Indian troops, they refrained from taking any rash action such as attacking them, as they did in the case of the others. g

4/c
 According to Michael Fleshman, writing in *'Africa Recovery*, a United Nations Publication, I quote "the repudiation of the nearly an year-old peace agreement in Sierra Leone by rebel forces reignited the country's long civil conflict and thrust the UN Peacekeeping Mission into a war for which it was neither mandated nor equipped. Some observers, particularly in developed countries, were highly critical of the operations, arguing that the UN was naive to trust the rebels' commitment and negligent in deploying poorly trained and lightly armed troops". He went further to add, "The record, however, shows that senior UN officials and the Security Council were fully aware of the challenges awaiting the organization's peacekeepers in Sierra Leone and that the Secretary-General Mr Kofi Annan, had repeatedly sought but did not obtain the resources required from member States to meet those challenges". I was unaware of all this.

(gaf)
 The attack on UN peacekeepers resulted in steps having to be taken to salvage the situation. The military solution lay in conducting a series of military operations to bring the rebels to their senses. Operation Khukri was one such military operation. Much has been spoken and written about this operation since then by people whose sources of information are probably articles and news reviews picked up from the internet or opinions of so called UN experts. For sure, the sources of information are either second hand or third hand accounts or they are accounts from reporting which is biased to cover up lapses.

Before proceeding further, it is essential to highlight a few important issues pertaining to the geography and terrain of Sierra Leone, as also the background to the problem in this troubled State, for without it, would be difficult to understand the said operation. Sierra Leone is located on the West coast of Africa. It is roughly circular in shape and has an area of approximately 72,000 square kms. It measures 332 Km from North to South and about 328 km East to West. It is bounded on the West and South West by the Atlantic Ocean, on the North East and North West by the Republic of Guinea, and on the East and South East by the Republic of Liberia. 4c

BACKGROUND

The conflict in Sierra Leone dates back to March 1991 when fighters of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) launched a war from the East of the country near the border with Liberia, to overthrow the government. With the support of the Military Observer Group (ECOMOG) of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Sierra Leone's Army tried at first to defend the governments but, the following year, the Army itself overthrew the government. Despite the change of power, the RUF continued its attacks. In February 1995, the United Nations Secretary General appointed a Special Envoy, Mr Berhanu Dinka (Ethiopia). He worked in collaboration with the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) and ECOWAS to try to negotiate a settlement to the conflict and return the country to civilian rule.

Parliamentary and presidential elections were held in February 1996, and the Army relinquished power to the winner Alhaji Dr. Ahmed Tejan Kabbah. The RUF, however, did not participate in the elections and would not recognise the results. The conflict continued. Special Envoy Dinka assisted in negotiating a peace agreement, in November 1996, between the Government and RUF known as the Abidjan Accord. The agreement was derailed by another military coup d'etat in May 1997. This time the Army Joined forces with the RUF and formed a ruling junta. President Kabbah and his government went into exile in neighbouring Guinea.

A new Special Envoy, Mr. Francis G. Okelo (Uganda) and other representatives of the international community tried, but failed to persuade the Junta to step down. The Security Council imposed

(space)

an oil and arms embargo on 8 October 1997, and authorised ECOWAS to ensure its implementation using ECOMOG troops. On 23 October, the ECOWAS Committee of Five on Sierra Leone and a delegation representing the chairman of the junta held talks at Conakry and signed a peace plan which, among other things, called for a ceasefire to be monitored by ECOMOG and if approved by the UN Security Council assisted by the UN military observers. On 5 November, President Kabbah issued a statement indicating his acceptance of the agreement, and stated his government's willingness to cooperate with ECOWAS, ECOMOG, the United Nations and UNHCR in the implementation of their respective roles. Although the junta publicly committed itself to implementing the agreement, it subsequently criticised key provisions and raised a number of issues, with the result that the agreement was never implemented.

In February 1998, ECOMOG, responding to an attack by rebel/Army junta forces, launched a military attack that led to the collapse of the junta and its expulsion from Freetown. On 10 March, President Kabbah was returned to office. The Security Council terminated the oil and arms embargo and strengthened the office of the Special Envoy to include UN military liaison officers and security advisory personnel. On June 1998, the Security Council established the United Nations Observer Mission in Sierra Leone (UNOMSIL) for an initial period of six months. The Secretary-General named Special Envoy Okelo as his Special Representative and Chief of Mission. The mission monitored and advised efforts to disarm combatants and restructure the nation's security forces. Unarmed UNOMSIL teams, under the protection of ECOMOG, documented reports of on-going atrocities and human rights abuses committed against civilians.

Fighting continued with the rebel alliance gaining control of more than half the country. In December 1998 the alliance began an offensive to retake Freetown and in January overran most of the city. All UNOMSIL personnel were evacuated. The Special Representative and the Chief Military Observer continued performing their duties, maintaining close contact with all parties to the conflict and monitoring the situation. Later the same month, ECOMOG troops retook the capital and installed the civilian government, although thousands of rebels were still reportedly hiding out in the

surrounding countryside. In the aftermath of the rebel attack, Special Representative Okelo, in consultation with West African States, initiated a series of diplomatic efforts aimed at opening up dialogue with the rebels. Negotiations between the Government and the rebels began in May 1999 and on 7 July all parties to the conflict signed an agreement in Lome to end hostilities and form a government of national unity. The parties to the conflict also requested an expanded role for UNOMSIL. On 20 August the UN Security Council authorised an increase in the number of military observers to 210.

On 22 October 1999, the Security Council authorised the establishment of UNAMSIL, a new and much larger mission with a maximum of 6,000 military personnel, including 260 military observers, to assist the Government and the parties in carrying out provisions of the Lome Peace Agreement. At the same time, the Council decided to terminate UNOMSIL. On 7 February 2000, the Security Council, by its Resolution 1289, decided to revise the mandate of UNAMSIL to include a number of additional tasks. It decided to expand the military component to a maximum of 11,100 military personnel, including the 260 military observers already deployed. The Council also authorised increases in the civil affairs, civilian police, administrative and technical components of UNAMSIL, as proposed by the Secretary-General.

Coming back to its pre-expansion days, it is pertinent to bring out that by end of April 2000, UNAMSIL was more or less deployed at most of its pre-designated deployment areas in Sierra Leone. We had managed to set up five Disarmament, Demobilization and Re-integration camps (DDR Camps). The sixth one was to be established in the diamond rich areas of Koidu. As mentioned earlier, this caused considerable consternation amongst the rebels, who saw this as the end of the road for them. The situation came to a head on 01 May 2000 with the RUF demanding the handing back to them of ten rebels from their cadre who had themselves surrendered RUF rebels at the DDR camp at Makeni. This camp was under the jurisdiction of the Kenyan troops. RUF attacked the DDR camp and the Kenyan positions at Makeni and Maqburaka. There were a number of casualties including fatal ones and the rebels also succeeded in capturing and taking hostage a number of military observers and some peacekeepers. They also

laid siege to both Makeni and Maqburaka making movement of supplies, casualty evacuation and other similar activities difficult. Needless to say, this action of the RUF was a blatant violation of the Lome Peace Accord and it came as a jolt to UNAMSIL.

To set things right, a three-pronged offensive was planned on the rebels at Makeni and Maqburaka. This was achieved by using a company of the Kenyan troops based at Kabala in the North to attack the rebels deployed around Makeni. The APCs based Quick Reaction Company of the Indians was moved from the South to attack the rebels deployed around Maqburaka. The aim of these two thrusts was to beat back the rebels laying siege to these two places as also to strengthen Makeni and Maqburaka positions. Using these thrusts as anvils, the newly inducted Zambian battalion was launched as the hammer from the East. Unfortunately, while the two thrusts fought their way into the Kenyan positions and bolstered their strength, the Zambian operation went awry as most of them were tricked into captivity and taken hostage.

Simultaneous to the attacks at Makeni and Maqburaka, the rebels also surrounded Indian peacekeepers tactically deployed at Kailahun. However, due to the professional competence of the Indian peacekeepers and their earlier humane attitude, the rebels could not muster courage to attack them. The rebels had, however, taken approximately 500 peacekeepers in the Makeni and Maqburaka areas, as hostages. Spurred by this the UN entered into protracted diplomatic discussions with the rebels through President Charles Taylor of Liberia, who succeeded in getting most of the hostages released through his country viz. Liberia. He could do this because he had a hold over the rebels. In fact, he was touted to be the de facto leader of the RUF rebels, especially after corporal Foday Sankoh of the RUF was captured and put into prison. While hostage negotiation was in progress, the rebels continued with their stand-off at Kailahun as it was the only bargaining chip that they had for extracting concessions. The continued tension of being surrounded impacted on the morale of the beleaguered garrison at Kailahun. As it turned out the stand-off was to last for 75 long days. It was necessary to end the stalemate and the only means at my disposal was to resort to military action at Kailahun. Other reasons for the launching of an operation at Kailahun were denial of supply of food to Kailahun by road and air since the beginning of July 2000, refusal by rebels to permit air

evacuation of casualties, failure of diplomatic means to convince RUF to desist from the stand-off coupled with the unwillingness of President Charles Taylor to secure release of the largely Indian peacekeepers at Kailahun and last, but not least, the impending rainy season. Sierra Leone as it is well known is the second rainiest place on earth after Cherapunji.

Planning for the rescue of the garrison had commenced by mid May 2000 and the plan was constantly reviewed and refined. During the planning utmost coordination was ensured between participating units. We could not, however, put this plan into effect until mid-July due to various constraints under which we were working. Primarily the constraints were lack of resources in terms of troops, attack helicopters and logistics. There was concern and desire to prevent collateral damage as long as possible with the faint hope of resolution of the issue through diplomatic means. There was also the concern for the safety of the hostages including 23 Indian peacekeepers held captive at Kuiva, who had all been divested of their weapons.

The UN headquarters New York did keep up its effort to end the stand-off through diplomatic means but to no avail. Many felt that the UN's efforts lacked the earlier fervour, but that is perhaps just conjecture. Simultaneously, hectic efforts were made by the UN to build up reserves for impending military operations, if the need for the same arose. By resolution 1299 of 19 May 2000, the Security Council increased the authorised strength of UNAMSIL, to 13,000 military personnel, including 260 military observers. This resulted in substantial reserves coming in from Jordan who sent two infantry battalions and Bangladesh who sent one infantry battalion, India sent one infantry battalion viz 18 GRENADIERS, one mechanised company, one engineer company and a flight of attack helicopters. It is pertinent to bring out here that the British troops, already on Sierra Leonean soil, neither joined up as part of UNAMSIL nor participated jointly in any operation against the rebels.

On arrival of the reserves, it became possible for us to put our plan into action, but we held on until 29 June 2000, when the final breakthrough of getting the last of the hostages, the 23 Indian peacekeepers being held at Kuiva, freed by diplomatic means was achieved. The stage was finally set to launch the operation which was code named 'Op Khukri',

TERRAIN IMPERATIVES

It is necessary to have an idea of the type of terrain obtaining in the area of operation, to fully understand the implications of the same. The entire area was densely wooded with primary jungles. It was criss-crossed by a number of swamps and rivers full of water, which made cross country movement extremely difficult. It also meant that such water obstacles could be crossed only at existing crossing places where ambushes could be laid by the RUF. Due to dense undergrowth and overgrowth, the terrain lent itself to sneak attacks by the rebels. To complicate matters further, there was only one unmetalled road connecting Kenema with Daru and Daru with Kailahun. This road had three prominent bridges South of Pendembu after which there were a number log bridges, which were all potential bottlenecks. Road Kenema-Daru was not in use due to being in RUF control. Hence, all move from Kenema to Daru was based on helicopters. Road Daru-Kailahun was also under the domination of the RUF.

The Indian battalion (5/8 GR) was deployed deep inside RUF held territory at Daru which was 70 kms away from the nearest pro-government town of Kenema. Kailahun, where one company of 5/8 GR and one Indian mechanised company were deployed, was a further 70 kms East of Daru on the same road.

PLANNING

Soon after the stand off at Kailahun, I started planning for a military operation to break the same. For this, it was essential for me to know the exact deployment of the RUF between Daru and Kailahun. It was also essential to find out about the weapons available to them. As we were initially on a good understanding with each other, movement of the 21C of 5/8 GR, being held at Kuiva alongwith 22 others, was permitted between Kuiva and Daru on the one hand and sometimes between Kuiva and Kailahun on the other. The company commander and RMO at Kailahun were permitted to move from Kailahun to Kuiva to provide medical relief to the sick at Kuiva and logistics convoys were permitted movement from Daru to Kailahun and back on a regular basis. All this was done on an "honour-code" basis. This permitted me to gather intelligence about RUF deployments along this axis.

Initially, we were also permitted to evacuate casualties by air. This gave us a bird's eye view of the deployments of the rebels. We took aerial pictures not only of the rebel deployments but also of open areas along the axis which would serve as Landing Zones (LZs) during the operation. By the time I was ready to put my plan into action, I had a very clear picture of enemy deployment and the terrain. It was confirmed that the rebels had their Brigade headquarters at Pendembu, which was roughly half way through from Daru to Kailahun. Despite great deal of ground and air reconnaissance and inputs from various other sources, I felt that these inputs were not quite sufficient.

Due to the danger of the plan being leaked out to the rebels by their sympathisers, planning was restricted to a few key personnel on a need to know basis. The British troops stationed in Sierra Leone for the rescue of their one military observer held captive at Kailahun along with the others, exerted considerable pressure on me to divulge the plan to them. Their High Commissioner who was always after me to disclose the plan, finally, acceded to my request for two Chinook helicopters which had the capability to fly at night and during hours of bad visibility. Needless to say, he did so after having obtained approval from his superiors in London. While the plan was more or less finalised well in advance, the operational order was issued only on 12 July 2000 i.e one day before the actual launch.

FORCE LEVELS

Force level – RUF

As per the known dispositions of the RUF in the area of operation they had an approximate cadre strength of 550 to 600. No 1 Brigade headquarters was at Pendembu with a cadre strength 250 to 300 rebels. This brigade had under its command four battalions which included a strike battalion. The cadre strength of these battalions was between 210 to 240 for No 1 Battalion based at Buedu ; between 210 to 250 for No 2 Battalion based at Kuiva; between 230 to 260 for No 3 Battalion based at Koindu and between 230 to 260 for the strike battalion based at Segbewemba. In addition, the RUF maintained part of its GHQ at Kailahun. Including their theatre reserves, the RUF had in this sector an approximate cadre strength of 1700 to 1800 rebels. (See Appendix 'A').

Force Level-Own

Initially, I had conceptualised launching this operation using only Indian troops. This was because of my confidence in their professional capabilities and also due to the fact that their motivational level was the highest. However, due to insistence on the part of Mr Kofi Annan, Secretary General, whom I met at Lome, capital of Togo prior to the launching of the operation, I integrated into the over all plan, two companies each of Nigerian and Ghanaian troops.

I had with me two Indian battalions (5/8 GR and 18 GRENADIERS), two companies each of the Nigerian and Ghanaian troops, one Quick Reaction Company (QRC), one team of 2 PARA (SF), one Mechanised Infantry company, one composite artillery battery, one company of Indian engineers, a mobile surgical team, an Indian aviation unit. This gave me a total strength of 1963 fighting troops with an additional complement of 308 supporting troops. When compared with the RUF in this theatre, it spelt out a combat ratio of 1: 1. Yet I had a definite edge over the rebels having with me attack helicopters, transport helicopters, artillery and mechanised infantry and special forces. The British contribution of two Chinook helicopters for one sortie only and one C 130 Hercules aircraft helped to boost up my combat ratio. In addition, there were chartered UN helicopters flights of MI8/17/26. (See Appendix 'B').

OPERATIONAL PLAN

General

The operation was planned as a multi-national, multi-dimensional and multi directional one. Two companies of Nigerian troops and two platoons of the Indian engineer company relieved 5/8 GR at Daru. I planned to use the Ghanaian battalion less two companies for a diversionary attack along axis Kenema-Daru, in order to keep the RUF reserves in this sector tied down. They were to secure Bendu - Junction by 1200 hours D-Day i.e 15 July 2000.

The attack was to be a three pronged one by ground forces involving air insertion at three places to establish stops along axis Daru-Kailahun to enable the Kailahun garrison to breakout. The concept of establishing an airhead was also planned. This was to be done at Kailahun. However, if this did not materialise, then it

was to be established at Pendembu, where the link up between these two columns was to take place. I planned this operation in five phases as under:-

(a) **Phase-1.** During this phase, it was planned to induct the participating troops and equipment by land and air from Freetown to Kenema and Daru on D minus 2 and D minus 1 Day i.e on 13 and 14 July 2000. On reaching Daru, the Nigerian troops were to relieve 5/8 GR of their responsibilities of defence of Daru by last light D minus 1 Day.

(b) **Phase-2.** It was initially planned that this phase would commence with a pre-emptive strike by attack helicopters at Pendembu and Kailahun. However, due to the reluctance on the part of the British to go in after the surprise was lost, it was planned to start the operation by the insertion of a 2 PARA (SF) stop at Kenewa, using British Chinook helicopters, after which the helicopters were to land at the helipad at Kailahun and pick up unarmed military observers, wounded and sick peacekeepers and warlike stores and return to Daru. Thereafter the operation was to be conducted as under :-

(i) A pre-emptive strike by artillery using smoke at rebels positions along the axis of advance with the express purpose of giving a warning to innocent civilians to evacuate from areas along the line of advance. By this it was ensured that loss of innocent human lives and collateral damage was avoided.

(ii) Simultaneously, attack helicopters were to strike at Pendembu, the rebel Brigade headquarters, prior to the commencement of the advance by 5/8 GR from Daru.

(iii) This was followed by the heli landing by a company each of 18 GRENADIERS and QRC between 0700h and 0900h to establish pivots at Geihun and 3 Bridges Area respectively.

(iv) After the artillery bombardment, columns of 18 GRENADIERS, 5/8 GR and mechanised company were to commence advance along axis Daru-Kailahun with a view to establish pivots at Kotuma, Kuiva and Mobai.

(v) The Kailahun garrison was to breakout from Kailahun and link up with 2 PARA (SF) pivot at Kenewa. Attack helicopters were tasked to saturate the area to assist the garrison in the breakout.

- (vi) The Ghanaian battalion less two companies was to launch a diversionary attack as explained earlier.
- (c) **Phase-3.** In this phase, it was envisaged that the Kailahun column would breakout towards Pendembu and link up with 5/8 GR who were tasked to capture it by noon on D Day. To achieve this, the Kailahun column was to link up with pivots at Kenewa and Geihun. 18 GRENADIERS after securing Kotuma, Kuiva and Mobai, was to secure area upto 10 kms short of Pendembu by 1500h to facilitate launching of 5/8 GR for its capture. Finally, 5/8 GR with the mechanised company was to advance and secure Pendembu, establish a link up with the Kailahun column and create an airhead by 1200h D Day.
- (d) **Phase-4.** In this phase, it was envisaged that a link up between Kailahun column and 5/8 GR would take place at Pendembu by 1200h D Day after which 5/8 GR was to establish an airhead. Thereafter, air extrication of the foot column and non essentials was to take place by air from the airhead.
- (e) **Phase-5.** 5/8 GR was to carry out a tactical withdrawal back to Daru by 1200h D plus 1 day. Thereafter, 18 GRENADIERS was also to carry out a tactical withdrawal to Daru after ensuring safe passage of 5/8 GR through them. Simultaneously, Ghanbatt was also tasked to carry out a tactical withdrawal back to Kenema.

The plan has been diagrammatically laid out as Sketch 'P'

INDEX

HQ East Comd	- Headquarters Eastern Command
Bn	- Battalion
Sect	- Sector
Ghanbatt	- Ghanaian battery.
Mech inf coy	- Mechanised infantry company
Comp Artillery	- Composite artillery battery
SF team	- Special Force team
QRC	- Quick Reaction company
Eff str	- Effective strength
NIBATT	- Nigerian battery
IND ENG COY	- Indian Engineers Company
Mob surg team	- Mobile surgical Team
Comb	- combat

Appx 'A'

FORCE LEVEL : RUF

- HQ EAST COMD - KAILAHUN** (550-600)
- **BRIGADE HQ - PENDEMBU** (250-300)
 - **NO 1 BN - BUEDU**
 - KAILAHUN (80-90)
 - NYANDEHUN (70-80)
 - BEWABU (60-70)
 - **NO 2 BN - KUIVA**
 - GEIHUN (80-90)
 - MANOWA (50-70)
 - KUIVA (80-90)
 - **NO 3 BN - KOINDU**
 - KANGAMA (80-90)
 - BAIAMA (70-80)
 - SANDALU (80-90)
 - **STRIKE BN - SEGBEWEMA** (250-300)
 - **TOTAL IN SECT** 1700-1950

Appx 'B'

FORCE LEVEL : OWN

FIGHTING TROOPS

- 5/8 GR - 821
- 18 GRENADIERS - 53
- GHANBATT - 230
- MECH INF COY - 86
- COMP ARTY BTY - 61
- SF TEAM - 95
- QRC. - 140
- TOTAL EFF STR - 1963

SUPPORTING TROOPS

- NIBATT 3 - 64
- NIBATT 4 - 61
- INDENGOY-2 - 75
- AVIATION UNIT - 98
- MOB SURG TEAM - 10
- TOTAL - 308

COMB RATIO 1:1

OP KHUKRI - SIERRA LEONE

