



February 2025

Operation Khukri: A Landmark in UN Peacekeeping

Case Study on Multinational Cooperation and
Military Excellence in Sierra Leone

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IB250203



Fig. 1: Map of Sierra Leone highlighting the concerned locations¹

Introduction

On the 22nd of October 1999, the United Nations Security Council collectively passed resolution 1270, which is also known as the mandate for the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL)². The final greater global push to establish peace and security in a region torn apart by radical groups such as the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), taking into consideration the observations of the United Nations Observer Mission in Sierra Leone (UNOMSIL) for an initial period of six months.³ Since UNOMSIL could not provide the required results in the region, there was a request to expand its roles and capabilities, leading to the establishment of UNAMSIL. A joint effort from approximately 30 states worldwide, including the Indian Army.⁴ Despite such immense support in every way, this mission was very close to being a huge military and strategic failure. This is when the landmark rescue operation, Op Khukri, began. It was launched under the

¹ UN Geospatial. (2014, Sep 1). Sierra Leone. United Nations Geospatial, location data for a better world. Retrieved 12 11, 2024, from <https://www.un.org/geospatial/content/sierra-leone>

² Peace and Security Section of the Department of Public Information in cooperation with the Department of Peacekeeping Operations. (2009). UNAMSIL: United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone. United Nations Peacekeeping. Retrieved December 11, 2024, from <https://peacekeeping.un.org/mission/past/unamsil/>

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid

leadership of the Indian Army in July 2000.⁵ The epitome of multinational cooperation, robust operational planning, and effective military execution was responsible for turning this mission into the success that it is known for. This issue brief will set a backdrop for the requirements of this operation, followed by an analysis of its execution and implications for future peacekeeping operations, with special emphasis on the Indian forces.

Background

A landmass of 71,620 sq km, slightly bigger than the state of Chhattisgarh, located in Western Africa, bordering the North Atlantic Ocean, between Guinea and Liberia.⁶ Sierra Leone has forever been covered in thick forests that were its natural defences against foreign invaders. Eventually, traders introduced the natives to Islam, which has moulded the current demographics of the region. The next major point of change in their history occurred after British colonial rule ended in 1961 and a “legitimate democracy” was established.⁷ The second prime minister of this regime was responsible for the democratic collapse, establishing an authoritarian regime that caused a series of violent events.⁸ The Civil War that followed was a culmination of various socio-political-economic factors. The initial government failed to strengthen their foothold, allowing the All People’s Congress (APC) to marginalise all opposition by consolidating power and establishing an authoritarian regime.⁹ The resulting corruption took a heavy toll on Sierra Leone’s economy, which was heavily reliant on its diamond mines. The political elites redirected the cash flow from these mining projects into their own pockets instead of societal welfare.¹⁰ Consequently, basic infrastructure collapsed sooner, leading to widespread poverty, starvation, and unemployment, especially in the eastern regions.¹¹ Similar to the French Revolution or any other failing government.

⁵ Ibid

⁶ CIA. (2024, November 25). Sierra Leone - The World Factbook. CIA. Retrieved December 6, 2024, from <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/sierra-leone/>

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Peace and Security Section of the Department of Public Information in cooperation with the Department of Peacekeeping Operations. (2009). *UNAMSIL: United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone*. United Nations Peacekeeping. Retrieved December 11, 2024, from <https://peacekeeping.un.org/mission/past/unamsil/>

¹¹ Ibid

Throughout history, highly motivated groups have envisioned overthrowing such a corrupt government for the greater good. In Sierra Leone, Muammar Gaddafi's Libyan military trained the motivated Revolutionary United Front. However, the RUF soon lost its original vision and stooped down to barbaric violence, including mass killings, forced recruitment of child soldiers, and sexual violence¹². They exploited the poorly maintained borders along with discontent and disenfranchised youth to gain possession of arms and financial support, often through 'blood diamonds,' allowing them to be responsible for widespread suffering, with approximately 50,000 deaths and over a million displaced individuals during the war years.¹³ This group had further external support from leaders like Charles Taylor, who saw them as his means of expanding control in the region. The bloody Civil War in Sierra Leone officially started with the RUF's first organised attack on an already impoverished eastern district called Kailahun.¹⁴ The existing environment in Sierra Leone was ignored by the global community, which took a series of aggravating steps to deal with such violence.

The initially established observer mission was required to understand the regional dynamics and the severity of the situation.¹⁵ Under the protection of the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the unarmed UNOMSIL attempted to broker disarmament and diplomacy but only witnessed more volatility.¹⁶ This led to the introduction of a Chapter Six mission under the UN Charter. The first iteration of the mandate was focused on collaborating with the native government to assist in establishing UN footholds and the distribution of humanitarian aid and monitoring the adherence to the cease-fire contracts.¹⁷ This mandate was enforced by 6,000 military personnel and 260 military observers, including two infantry battalion groups, two engineering companies, a Quick Reaction Company, an attack helicopter unit, and a medical unit from India.¹⁸

¹² Ibid

¹³ Punia, M. G. R., & Punia, D. (2021). Operation Khukri: The True Story Behind the Indian Army's Most Successful Mission as Part of the United Nations. Penguin Random House India Private Limited. Foreword

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Permanent Mission of India to the UN. (n.d.). INDIA AND UNITED NATIONS PEACEKEEPING AND PEACEBUILDING. Retrieved 12/11/2024, from https://pminewyork.gov.in/pdf/menu/submenu_1260383365.pdf

Genesis of the Hostage Crisis

The 5/8 Gorkha Rifles (GR) was one of these infantry battalions (INDBATT), with a company of 14 mechanised infantry attached. This battalion was entrusted with the aforementioned eastern district of Kailahun.¹⁹ At their first sight of the land, they estimated the state of their area of responsibility, in the words of Col. Rajpal Punia (now Major General).

“The first glance at Kailahun was sufficient to give you an impression of a town lacerated by the most brutal war the country bore witness to. It was a town that was once the jewel in the crown for Sierra Leone, due to the enormous number of diamond mines surrounding it. But the diamonds turned into blood-stained weapons and became a symbol of barbarism and vandalism, causing the slaughter of innumerable innocent people.”²⁰

Despite such conditions, Col. Punia’s battalion did not waste any time in winning the hearts of the locals and attempted to get basic infrastructure functions such as clean water. These acts were being performed with knowledge of how widespread and strong the RUF’s control was in the region.²¹ The posted Indian battalion continued to carry out their mandated operations in the area. This naturally came off as an obstructing factor in the eyes of the RUF’s leadership, requiring immediate action to prove their capabilities as an indigenous resistance force suitable to take over as a potential legitimate authority. These emotions were present throughout the country as there was a rising RUF discontent against the Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Rehabilitation Programme (DDR). This narrative materialised into an aggressive demand for the release of their previously detained combatants.²² This request, which went against the mandate, was denied by the Kenyan battalion in Makeni responsible for the DDR camp in the district. The 1st of May 2000 saw a resultant, severely escalated attack on the battalion, eventually overrunning the UN forces.

¹⁹ Punia, M. G. R., & Punia, D. (2021). Operation Khukri: The True Story Behind the Indian Army's Most Successful Mission as Part of the United Nations. Penguin Random House India Private Limited. p. 53

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Ibid

²² Diehl, P. F., Druckman, D., & Mueller, G. B. (2023). When Peacekeeping Missions Collide: Balancing Multiple Roles in Peace Operations. Oxford University Press. p. 193.

Though this attack was a segment of their larger agenda of UN disarmament,²³ the Makenian incident involved a gunship shooting down “innocent” RUF personnel and allegedly civilians too.²⁴ The use of gunships in such situations led to multiple incidents of civilian killings, leading to investigations into their use.²⁵

These incidents of killing had further provoked the RUF leadership into taking bold steps at Kailahun on the morning of May 2, 2000. Col. Punia and his subordinates, oblivious of the attack on the Kenyan camp due to a communication gap, were captured during a disarmament meeting with a local RUF leader.²⁶ They were transported to an RUF camp along with a multinational group of military observers; all the while, the INDBATT was completely cordoned off by RUF forces aiming for an unconditional surrender. This tactic of separating leadership from their battalions was used extensively against UN troops throughout Sierra Leone. The 5/8 GR maintained a defensive stature while denying the demands for a surrender.²⁷ The already critical situation worsened when the battalion’s 2nd In Command (2IC) was mobilised with a team to pursue negotiations with RUF at Kailahun from the headquarters in Daru. This patrol was also captured by a drugged group of rebels at Kuiva and was held there, though with basic humanitarian privileges such as food and communication, for 2 months.²⁸

OP Khukri

Prerequisites and Planning

²³ Raman, M. A. (n.d.). Operation Khukri: Joint Excellence. UNITED SERVICE INSTITUTION OF INDIA. Retrieved 12/11/2024, from <https://www.usiofindia.org/publication-journal/operation-khukri-joint-excellence.html>

²⁴ Punia, M. G. R., & Punia, D. (2021). Operation Khukri: The True Story Behind the Indian Army's Most Successful Mission as Part of the United Nations. Penguin Random House India Private Limited. p. 75

²⁵ Adeniji, O. (2000, Sep 4). *Draft Minutes of UN Coordination Meeting 25 August 2000*. United Nations Archives and Records Management Section. p. 7. Retrieved 12/11/2024, from <https://search.archives.un.org/uploads/r/united-nations-archives/0/1/5/015f2fb81445456aa7449f8cd9afea73fedbb1f086b617838803feb08b9d63a2/S-1116-0005-0005-00001.PDF>

²⁶ Raman, M. A. (n.d.). Operation Khukri : Joint Excellence. UNITED SERVICE INSTITUTION OF INDIA. Retrieved 12/11/2024, from <https://www.usiofindia.org/publication-journal/operation-khukri-joint-excellence.html>

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ Ibid

Despite many diplomatic efforts from the Indian government, the Indian forces were prepared to carry out a rescue operation for the battalion at Kuiva using disproportionate force as “unit pride” was at stake.²⁹ Such ambitions were backed by a fresh reinforcement, but the diplomatic path broke through by early June 2000 as the patrol held at Kuiva was released through Liberia. The overall operation was to be performed in multiple phases through joint efforts from the forces outside and the hostages.³⁰ This is where Col. Punia showed unrelenting determination and negotiation skills, as he brokered a deal with RUF through the local leadership and their influence over the region to return to his camp along with all MILOBS.³¹

Outside Kailahun, planning for the main operation was in full steam, considering the newly arrived reinforcements and the military capabilities of their adversaries. The RUF then had 4 battalions and strike battalions deployed in regions such as Mobai, Kuiva, Neama, Koindu, and Segbwema. All these battalions included approximately 1000 men, women, and children armed with AK-47s, RPG-7s, Armoured Personnel Carriers (APCs), and Surface to Air Missiles (SAMs). The headquarters for this whole brigade were established in a region called Pendembu, which lay between Daru and Kailahun. With this information, adequate equipment and personnel were airlifted from Freetown to Daru and Kenema to carry out this mission. This buildup was carried out covertly by Indian MI-26, MI-8 helicopters, RAF Chinooks, and fixed-wing aircraft through comms. coded in native languages such as Hindi, Gorkhali, and Malayalam. Apart from logistics, intelligence is a cornerstone of any military operation. Human Intelligence (HUMINT) and Signal Intelligence (SIGINT) shined through here. Supply runs were covertly revamped to gather geological data, along with heavy surveillance of RUF radio communications, which empowered the plan. The final plan was designed to withstand maximum contingencies, as the great Prussian field marshal said, “No plan of operations reaches with any certainty beyond the first encounter with the enemy's main force.”³²

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ Ibid

³² Helmuth von Moltke. In Ratcliffe, S. (Ed.), Oxford Essential Quotations. : Oxford University Press. Retrieved 11 Dec. 2024, from <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780191826719.001.0001/q-oro-ed4-00007547>.

The operation had engineers ready to deal with issues such as roadblocks and repairs while providing on-ground commanders the room for improvisation depending on the adversity.³³ Seconding this was the strong air-land coordination, which opened up many options for offensives, logistics, and reconnaissance. After such extensive preparation and planning, the aim to rescue their besieged brethren and the international MILOBS was to be achieved through a 5-phase operation.³⁴ The first phase was a prerequisite of firepower buildup already accomplished, while the second phase was a preemptive strike with artillery barrages and attack helicopters at the dawn of 15 July, allowing the 18 Grenadiers to secure a forward base at Geihun for the following companies of 5/8 GR from Daru.³⁵ Furthermore, the besieged battalion was to be an airhead for the air extraction of non-essential personnel, equipment, and the MILOBS.³⁶ During this period, multiple IAF and IND MECH Quick Reaction Companies secured essential positions, such as Kenewa and Pendembu. Some battalions from Ghana and Nigeria were to replace the displaced Indian forces to keep those regions secure or even act as reserve forces if the need arose.³⁷ The last sub-step was an SF company being airdropped in Kenema, followed by the evacuation of MILOBS by the RAF and SAS. Phase 3 involved securing and holding an airhead at Pendembu while the rest of the 5/8 GR from Kailahun linked up with the SF units.³⁸ The 5/8 GR was to be reunited at Pendembu and extracted through the pre-established airhead under Phase 4. The last phase was the complete withdrawal of all forces behind the 5/8 GR. A plan involved numerous elements from various nations and utilising precise timing to keep the RUF completely disoriented throughout.³⁹

Challenges and Reasons for Success

The plan above and the actual mission weren't mirror images due to some uncontrollable and some 'seen *unseen*' circumstances, which only required tactical or logistical adjustment along with some

³³ Raman, M. A. (n.d.). Operation Khukri : Joint Excellence. UNITED SERVICE INSTITUTION OF INDIA. Retrieved 12/11/2024, from <https://www.usiofindia.org/publication-journal/operation-khukri-joint-excellence.html>

³⁴ Ibid

³⁵ Ibid

³⁶ Ibid

³⁷ Ibid

³⁸ Ibid

³⁹ Ibid

extra firepower.⁴⁰ At the very start, the weather did not favour the mission, reducing the capabilities of the air assets pivotal to its success. This forced the ground troops to overcompensate by holding down defence zones while the air support caught up.⁴¹ Even with advanced anticipation of ambushes by the RUF, some proved to be tougher shells to crack as some Indian companies came across heavily fortified bunker-like blockades that required extra force and affected regrouping objectives.⁴² As the operation revolved around multiple factors, playing with immaculate timing, the aforementioned challenges left the INDBATT breaking out in longer firefights, putting them in harm's way of adversities such as sniper and mortar fire without air support.⁴³ In such a situation, a disciplined army perseveres, as their training allows them to avoid casualties completely. Unfortunately, the RUF offered more resistance than expected from a rebel group through planned counter-attacks, but nothing held up against the crushing air power.⁴⁴ Another natural challenge faced by all elements was efficient coordination and communication, which is difficult given the variation in the chain of command across a multinational force.⁴⁵ Irrespective of the bumps along this road, it was safe to say, "All went to plan." The simultaneity of synergy among different assets combined with accurate intelligence to act upon was responsible to a greater extent for this feat.⁴⁶ Additionally, junior leadership in this operation shined through as it involved multiple companies operating independently with different targets.⁴⁷ According to the MECH INDBATTs, the biggest challenge was the very nature of the operation in the given situation of conducting such a kinetic offensive strike under Chapter 7 of the UN charter and the mandate of UNAMSIL. Being peacekeepers, an operation like this could lead to various legal implications or tar the image of the militaries involved and the UN itself. They also believe that the presence of aerial elements and

⁴⁰ Anonymous Interviewee of 14 Mech. Inf., Personal Communication, conducted on 10/12/2024, Interview done as part of research on Nuances of Operation Khukri

⁴¹ Ibid

⁴² Raman, M. A. (n.d.). Operation Khukri : Joint Excellence. UNITED SERVICE INSTITUTION OF INDIA. Retrieved 12/11/2024, from <https://www.usiofindia.org/publication-journal/operation-khukri-joint-excellence.html>

⁴³ Ibid

⁴⁴ Ibid

⁴⁵ Anonymous Interviewee of 14 Mech. Inf., Personal Communication, conducted on 10/12/2024, Interview done as part of research on Nuances of Operation Khukri

⁴⁶ Ibid

⁴⁷ Raman, M. A. (n.d.). Operation Khukri : Joint Excellence. UNITED SERVICE INSTITUTION OF INDIA. Retrieved 12/11/2024, from <https://www.usiofindia.org/publication-journal/operation-khukri-joint-excellence.html>

armoured vehicles simultaneously at multiple locations had a greater psychological impact on the RUF than is often considered.⁴⁸

Implications and Conclusion

The implication of Op Khukri is not limited to Kailahun, Daru, or eastern Sierra Leone.⁴⁹ Apart from the primary goal of rescuing 233 UN peacekeepers with 0 casualties, the operation was the biggest defeat in RUF history. It broke down their UN disarmament program in totality everywhere, while the locals began to withdraw their support given the amount of welfare Col. Punia's battalion carried out alone. The UN had regained its lost image of an esteemed organisation responsible for maintaining global order and peace. The Indian army had proven its commitment to the cause, its capabilities, and the weight of its pride as a military. This epitome of a UN-mandated kinetic strike, named after the revered weapon of Gorkhalis—the Khukri—is still celebrated in Sierra Leone at the Khukri War Memorial on the bank of the River Moa.⁵⁰ A personal letter of appreciation from the then Force Commander, Gen. Jaitley, who also held a notorious image among the RUF, accompanied by a gallantry award presented to Col. Punia by the then President of India.⁵¹ He went on to become a Major General in the Indian Army after proving his leadership skills both in war and peace.

⁴⁸ Anonymous Interviewee of 14 Mech. Inf., Personal Communication, 10/12/2024, Interview done as part of research on Nuances of Operation Khukri

⁴⁹ Sharma, R. (2024, May 30). 233 Gurkha Soldiers Held Hostage -- How Indian Army Launched Operation Khukri & Stunned The Opponents. EurAsian Times. <https://www.eurasiantimes.com/233-how-india-army/>

⁵⁰ Ibid

⁵¹ Punia, M. G. R., & Punia, D. (2021). Operation Khukri: The True Story Behind the Indian Army's Most Successful Mission as Part of the United Nations. Penguin Random House India Private Limited.

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