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HANDOVER CEREMONY FOR THE REPATRIATION OF MORTAL REMAINS
“OPERATION REST IN PEACE”

On Friday 25th July 2003 the final phase of UNMEE’s Operation “Rest In Peace” took place, at a Handover Ceremony for the fallen soldiers recently found in the areas of Baala and Sabalita in Eritrea. This ceremony was the culmination of a week-long operation involving personnel from the UN Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and representatives of both the Ethiopian and Eritrean military. The Handover Ceremony took place just outside the town of Bure, in Ethiopia.

The Special Representative of the Secretary General, His Excellency Legwaila Joseph Legwaila and the Force Commander, Major-General Robert Gordon were the principal representatives for UNMEE. The Ethiopian Authorities were represented by Colonel Hailesslassie from the Ethiopian Armed Forces. The African Union was represented by Rodney Kiwa and the ICRC by Pierre Gentile from its Addis Ababa Office.

In a simple and dignified military ceremony involving UNMEE soldiers from the Kenyan Battalion and local Ethiopian soldiers, a single coffin with the mortal remains of one of the fallen soldiers was first placed on a platform draped by the United Nations flag and borne by Kenyan pall-bearers. This single coffin of an unknown warrior symbolized all the 220 fallen soldiers. Prayers for the departed souls were then offered by religious representatives from the UNMEE Force and Ethiopia.

Following the prayers, wreaths were laid by the Special Representative of the Secretary General and the Force Commander. Once the wreaths had been laid both His Excellency Legwaila Joseph Legwaila and Major General Gordon read messages of condolence. These statements were followed by a short address from the Senior Ethiopian Representative, Colonel Hailesslassie.

In his statement to mark the solemn occasion, the Force Commander said “to get here today has been a long and complex process, involving many agencies including the military of both Parties.” “Today’s formal ceremony” he continued “is the culmination of this work as we hand over the mortal remains of the fallen for burial. We are doing this because it is the decent and honourable thing to do, as it is a fundamental right of fallen soldiers, enshrined in the Geneva Convention, to be accorded a proper and respectful burial.” He offered condolences to the families and concluded by paying his deepest respects to the 220 fallen soldiers: “they did their duty and they made the soldier’s ultimate sacrifice. May they now, at last, rest in peace.”

Addressing the gathering, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General commended the two Parties for the level of cooperation they have shown in “making today’s occasion possible” and expressed the hope that this ceremony had opened “a window of opportunity, however narrow, through which they may look ahead of them and have a long healthy view of each

other.” “The Ethiopian-Eritrean peace” continued “must now flower so that we need never gather again in a place such as this.” “This repatriation exercise, carried out and supported by UNMEE peacekeepers and staff, is a symbol of our own dedication to restore peace between Ethiopia and Eritrea,” concluded SRS Legwaila.

In his message the Senior Ethiopian representative Colonel Hailesslisse, expressed appreciation for UNMEE’s “endless efforts” to bring lasting peace and stability between Ethiopia and Eritrea. “UNMEE has demonstrated professionalism in handling situations” he said, “and we appreciate it very much and we hope that this will continue.” He then thanked UNMEE “for helping us to recover and honour our fallen ones.”

Following the statements of condolence the coffin was transferred from the United Nations platform to the Ethiopian platform draped in its national flag and handed over to the escorting Ethiopian pall- bearers.

As a final mark of respect an UNMEE firing party fired a 3-volley rifle salute and the Last Post was played, during which all those present paid their final respects to the fallen soldiers. To mark the end of the ceremony the coffin bearing the representative body was then carried off the parade ground by the Ethiopian pall-bearers through an Ethiopian Guard of Honour. Concurrently the remaining mortal remains of the fallen soldiers were handed over from the 5 UN vehicles in which they were transported to the site by members of the UNMEE Force, to the waiting soldiers of the EAF who transferred them to EAF trucks. This marked the official end of the Handover Ceremony.



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