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Over the river and through the woods, to Africa he goes.

Whispering Pines resident Brig. Gen. Hugh C. Van Roosen has been appointed the force chief of staff for the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL). This is the first time in 16 years that a U.S. general officer will be in such a powerful position in the United Nations.

"It's a great opportunity," said Van Roosen, 55, whose Army career has stretched more than 30 years. He will be in Liberia for one to two years.

Van Roosen is commander of an Africa-oriented unit, the 353rd Civil Affairs Command, but will turn over the command on June 24.

His new job will be overseeing UNMIL's work with elections, instituting democracy, protecting civilians and deterring sexual- and gender-based violence in Liberia.

"I'm doing some reading on the history of Liberia and United Nations' protocol," said Van Roosen on how he is preparing for the transition.

He is the first U.S. general officer to serve in a senior blue-helmet position since 1996. He will be the third-highest-ranking officer in the mission. UNMIL has 9,000 troops and police from 53 nations.

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"I look forward to bringing back skills to share with the civil affairs community," Van Roosen said, "and I am delighted to show the Liberian people that a U.S. flag officer is proud to serve the United Nations in their country."

UNMIL's mission is to continue the decade of peace in Liberia. With the war in Iraq drawing to a close, there are more troops available to help with United Nations' missions.

"For me, just personally, the concept of the United Nations is a great one," Van Roosen said. "There have been challenges and difficulties from time to time but it is truly the future for our planet."

Contact Kirsten Ballard at (910) 693-2473 or kirsten@thepilot.com.

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