



Republic of Sierra Leone

**OPENING STATEMENT ON THE PRESENTATION OF SECOND CYCLE
UNIVERSAL PERIODIC REVIEW REPORT OF SIERRA LEONE TO THE
UNITED NATIONS HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL**

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GENEVA, SWITZERLAND.

27TH JANUARY 2016

Mr President, members of the Human Rights Council and Distinguished Delegates, Participants and Observers, thank you for the opportunity to address this august body. It would interest you to note that having been appointed only two weeks ago as Attorney General and Minister of Justice, this is my first major engagement outside the shores of Sierra Leone. It is with humility that the opportunity is taken to showcase the strides our government has made in the promotion and protection of human rights. Having been formerly a Deputy Prosecutor for the Special Court for Sierra Leone, and my most recent job as head of the Anti-Corruption Commission in Sierra Leone, I feel belonged to a natural territory for the defence of human rights.

I bring you greetings and good wishes from His Excellency Dr Ernest Bai Koroma, the Government and people of Sierra Leone for your dedication and commitment to the cause of human rights the world over. Let me also thank, the Government and people of Switzerland for the generosity in hosting the Human Right Council. Additionally, I wish to express the appreciation of my delegation for the unique and excellent Swiss hospitality that we have received since our arrival in this beautiful and progressive country.

Mr President, distinguished delegates, the report tabled for discussion this morning is Sierra Leone's second cycle report. It contains actions to 126 specific recommendations accepted in 2011 in addition to wider improvements in the promotion and protection of human rights.

I am happy to report that Sierra Leone, as a full-fledged member of the African Commission on Human and People's Right recently undertook its review of its report under the African Charter on Human and Peoples Right in November 2015 in Banjul, The Gambia. We have also complied with our reporting obligations under the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Convention Against Torture (CAT) and continued engagement with other global treaty bodies and mechanisms. The GOSL has also reported to the Human Rights Council on the Convention on Civil and Political Rights in 2014. We are committed to completing all outstanding reporting obligations.

My delegation would like, by way of context, to draw attention to the more than difficult and troubled recent past of Sierra Leone. The country endured an eleven years civil war, during which the most egregious violations of human rights and international humanitarian law occurred. The war ended in 2002 and with the collaboration of the international community, two transitional justice bodies were created; the Special Court for Sierra Leone and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). The former aimed at punishing persons who bore "greatest responsibility" for the violations of human rights and international humanitarian law. The latter was tasked with collating a historical record of the conflict and to make recommendations with a view to avoiding the recurrence. Both institutions demonstrated Sierra Leone's resolve to ending impunity at any and at all levels.

Our Government continues to implement the recommendations of the TRC including reparations. Furthermore, Sierra Leone has, since the end of the war,

conducted some five democratic local and national government elections and democracy continues to take firm root in governance. The recruitment of children in armed conflicts has been eradicated by the CRC; this action has been further enhanced by the Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces regulation also allows recruits only at 18 in conformity with the CRC.

Our President, H.E. Dr. Ernest Bai Koroma, since coming to office in 2007 initiated two inclusive and rights-based development programmes: the Agenda for Change and the Agenda for Prosperity. Both programmes are informed and fully embrace the political, economic, social and cultural rights guaranteed under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Implementation was moving apace until the Ebola Virus Disease (EVD) disastrously struck the country in the early part of 2014. Double GDP growth and increased investment in infrastructure and social sectors like health, education and roads put Sierra Leone on a path to economic development. In addition, improvements in governance for instance the Corruption Perception Index ranking of 175 out of 177 countries in 2010 to that of 119 out of 177 countries in 2014, portending opportunities and availability of resources for the improvements of lives and dignity of the people of Sierra Leone.

The unexpected calamity of the Ebola Virus Disease that occurred in the three affected countries of the Mano River Union (MRU), wreaked total havoc on the lives of our people and our economy. National life was brought to a standstill as fear and uncertainty became the norm. There was indeed a clear threat to the national cohesion and security of our nation.

As a consequence, our President, in early July, 2014, as empowered by the Constitution declared a national *State of Emergency*. This step entailed the curtailment of certain rights and civil liberties, particularly the right to free movement, assembly and the enjoyment of social and cultural rights and practices.

However, as to the extent of enforcement, the *State of Emergency* was at all times limited to what was strictly necessary for the achievement of an early end to EVD. I am to also inform this august body that the emergency regulations were progressively relaxed proportionately to the waning of the EVD and now completely. We note the reporting obligations to the Human Rights Committee, we further note that the emergency regulations have elapsed and as I speak his Excellency has given directives for its complete repeal by parliament.

Nevertheless, Sierra Leone continues to enjoy high level of political stability, increased space for political participation, expanded opportunities for civil and political rights, empowerment of women and high levels of political and religious tolerance.

The report submitted by Sierra Leone catalogues steps the country has taken and continues to take to ensure the full enjoyment by citizens of their human rights. By

way of emphasis, I wish to take the liberty of highlighting some of these achievements as follows:

Mr President, Sierra Leone is undertaking a review of its constitution. The Constitutional Review Committee enjoys the full support of Government of Sierra Leone. Government and its partners continue to provide the necessary resources to allow the CRC to complete its work. However, the constitutional review process stalled during the period that the EVD struck Sierra Leone in 2014. Fortunately, the Review Committee resumed work last year and is scheduled to submit its report in March 2016 with a referendum to be held subsequently. The review will provide significant opportunities for the advancement of human rights and to bring Sierra Leone's basic law in line with international human rights standard. That is why the Constitutional Review Committee is presently considering among other things, the abolition of the death penalty, citizenship, libel laws, press freedom, gender discrimination, equal opportunities, separation of the office of Attorney General and Minister of Justice etc.

Sierra Leone continues to give the highest consideration to international human rights standards. In this regard, Sierra Leone has signed all nine major international treaties and ratified five.

I am pleased to report that Sierra Leone domesticated the International Humanitarian Law into the Geneva Conventions Act, 2012. Upon my assumption of office we note the challenges in facilitation of our treaty commitments. As a result, this is one area I have prioritised as a key focus of my Ministry's work for which I have already instructed the compilation of all outstanding treaties and protocols for immediate submission to Cabinet.

Our Government maintains a robust access to justice, legal reform and human rights promotion and protection agenda. During the period under review, Sierra Leone has undertaken a number of policy initiatives aimed at improving access to justice and human rights. Foremost amongst these are:

- Increased support and autonomy of the Human Rights Commission that enjoys a 'class A' status accreditation according to the Paris Principles. The GOSL has also there is increased budgetary support in the 2015-2016 Fiscal Year;
- We continue to strengthen the Office of the Ombudsman and the Anti-Corruption Commission. Both institutions are now operational nationwide with GOSL is responsible for 90 percent of the budgetary allocation;
- We established the Justice Sector Coordination Office with a mandate to improve strategic coordination for enhanced justice delivery to our citizens;
- We have established and operationalized the Legal Aid Board and within six months of coming into operations has delivered legal aid services to over half a million citizens with over 100 discharged from remand;
- To improve accountability and civilian oversight, Sierra Leone established and operationalized the Independent Police Complaints Board that already augments the Complaints Discipline and Internal Investigations Department

(CDIID). Approximately, since its inception, the CDIID has investigated over 2000 cases resulting in suspensions, dismissals, warnings, corrective trainings and rank reduction;

- To improve police capacity in handling domestic and Sexual and Gender Based Violence related matters, Sierra Leone established Family Support Units in all Police Stations in the country;
- The establishment of a Children's Commission to enhance the implementation of the Child Rights Act 2007 which further domesticates the Convention on the Rights of the Child;
- To set the stage for improving our detention facilities, Sierra Leone promulgated the Correctional Services Act, 2013 with a strategic aim of transforming our prison system from punitive to rehabilitation; separation of the male and female population has been successfully achieved whilst the juvenile population has also been relocated.
- The GOSL legislated the Local Courts Act of 2011 with the view to meeting local justice needs for the wider population. The Local Court proceedings are being recorded and enjoys oversight from the Chief Justice and legal representation;
- To improve Judicial independence, I am pleased to also note that Sierra Leone has not only increased funding to our Judiciary and Law Officers Department, but has in the last two weeks approved a new improved salary scheme as part of wider measures to further enhance the conditions of service of our Judicial and Law Officers. We believe this is the first step in improving responsiveness, accountability, transparency but most importantly in dealing with the perennial problems of backlog that have historically contributed to eroding public confidence in our justice delivery system.
- We are also reviewing our Criminal Procedure Act of 1965 to inject a dose of speed, efficiency, transparency and accountability in our criminal justice system. This offers opportunities to transform our sentencing regime; introduce alternative forms of sentencing that could contribute to decongesting our detention facilities. The Criminal Procedure Bill, which was submitted to Parliament in late 2015, is now featured in the current legislative calendar of Parliament for due consideration and passage. However, it is our strong desire to get it enacted as soon as possible.

Mr President, Sierra Leone takes its human rights obligations seriously and is determined to expand the boundaries of freedom, justice and human rights in an orderly and constitutional fashion with the aim of further strengthening its democracy. It is in this regard that Sierra Leone enacted the Right to Access Information, 2013 and subsequently established the Right to Access Information Commission. This is germane and consistent with Sierra Leone's continued commitment to uphold and enhance freedom of expression by allowing increased autonomy of the Independent Media Commission and create an enabling environment for the increased growth of the media. At present there are over 40 newspapers in the country and at least a radio station in every district.

Mr President, Sierra Leone continues to work harder in improving the status and rights of women and children in our society. In this regard, Sierra Leone enacted the Sexual Violence Act 2012 and together with the promulgation and implementation of the three Gender Acts (the Registration of Customary Marriage and Divorce Act, the Devolution of Estates Act and the Domestic Violence Act) all of these have significantly helped in the protection of women's rights.

The Ministry of Justice has recorded over 350 cases referred to the courts and the Family Support Units in the last quarter of 2015. We note that challenges in the area of witness and evidence management and cultural impediment still exist. We would continue to work with key development partners to improve Cases of domestic violence and rape. The GOSL is aware, in particular, of the challenges in the area of witness and evidence management and cultural impediments. We will continue to work with key development partners to improve the quality of investigations and prosecutions. Further, GOSL is now poised to increase the number of Magistrates and Judges; two weeks ago His Excellency appointed two female judges to the Highest Court of the Land, the Supreme Court. Female judges therefore make up 45 percent of the Supreme Court of Sierra Leone.

Mr President, the wider economic and social position of women in Sierra Leone continues to be a key policy priority of our Government. In this regard, Sierra Leone is pleased to report that this is the sixth year of implementation of its Free Health Care initiative for children, under-fives, pregnant and lactating mothers. Evidently, this policy has reduced the rate of child and maternal mortality rates as well as reduction in case fatality rates from other common diseases like malaria, diarrhea and pneumonia. This is complemented with improved health funding and recruitment of over 2000 health workers since 2013. Consequently, 97% of pregnant women now receive antenatal care. Infant mortality rate has been reduced by 6%.

Mr. President, we have received a number of questions regarding the issue of Female Genital Mutilation which is a cultural practice in Sierra Leone. It is pleasing to note that since the last review, significant steps were undertaken to address the concerns. Sierra Leone worked closely with traditional leaders in the area of sensitization on the ills of the practice and provided alternative sources of income in the form of micro finance. The GOSL has adopted a policy banning initiation of girls below the age of 18. This policy is premised on a human right pedestal of freedom of association that people are free to associate and partake in cultural activities in so far as they are competent to make that decision. The practice is under advisement and our Government is in active dialogue with relevant stakeholders in ensuring a manageable outcome.

Mr. President, in addition, Sierra Leone takes its obligation to protect the child; an area that some member states have also requested further clarification. Sierra Leone is currently pursuing a robust child protection regime with the establishment of a Children's Commission, which is vigorously pursuing the elimination of child abuse, corporal punishment and child trafficking among others. In addition, the GOSL is implementing a National Child Welfare Policy to bring the protection of

children in line with international minimum standards. To complement and ensure similar standards in rural areas for children, Child Protection Departments have been established in all Local Councils. A Child Justice Strategy is currently being implemented with steps taken to separate juveniles from adults in detention centers.

Mr President, Sierra Leone believes that investment in education is critical to empowering citizens in enjoying their rights. That is why the GOSL has implemented a free and compulsory primary education with increased funding to encourage girl child education in junior and senior secondary schools in line with the UDHR. Thus, gender parity in enrolment is rapidly increasing at all levels. A new Education Sector Plan has been developed to cover 'system strengthening' and strategies in improving education management.

Under the education policy, the GOSL now takes responsibility in providing School fees and in kind assistance, such as uniforms and school materials for Girls. The program has now led to a significant number of girls attending Junior secondary school.

Furthermore, the decentralization of education has ensured that approximately 160 primary and 30 Junior Secondary Schools were constructed since 2012 . As reported by the School Census Report and the 2013 Country Status Report on Education, gender parity has been achieved at the pre-primary level, and almost achieved at the primary level. Gender parity is increasing rapidly at the junior and secondary school levels with enrolment at a remarkable rate.

Mr President, Sierra Leone notes the interest of member states in its policy on visibly pregnant girls attending school. However, the policy regarding visibly pregnant school girls remains unchanged, as the Government is cautious in not opening a floodgate of school going children being visibly pregnant whilst in school. The GOSL has provided learning centers around the country for visibly pregnant girls to receive special classes and at the same time have access to medical attention from trained and qualified medical personnel. There are also provisions for these girls to continue with their education in normal schools upon giving birth. In addition, a National Teenage Pregnancy Secretariat is implementing a strategy to reduce teenage pregnancy.

Mr President, Sierra Leone has taken major steps in the promotion and protection of the rights of people with HIV/Aids, Ebola survivors and people with disability. The 2011 HIV/AIDS Commission Act made it an offence to deny a person access to any employment or educational institution because of his or her HIV status. In particular, section 39-48 prohibits discrimination of any form against people living with HIV/AIDS, including their families and communities.

Government has adopted similar steps in protecting EVD survivors and their family members from marginalisation. Under the National Ebola Recovery Plan, the Government is providing free education for the orphans and young people, free

health care for survivors, entrepreneurial training for widows and other welfare packages.

The GOSL has followed through by further domesticating the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability by establishing the Commission and allocating budget that will ensure its proper implementation.

Mr President, let me reiterate the full commitment of Sierra Leone to the Universal Periodic Review mechanism and to assure the Council that Sierra Leone will at all times endeavour to uphold its obligations under the Charter.

With your leave, I will stop at this point and look forward to the ensuing dialogue on the report and the responses submitted to your questions.

I thank you for your kind attention.