

PARLIAMENT ENGAGES MEDIA & PUBLIC SECTOR

By Cyril Juxon-Smith

Freetown, 16th September, 2014

Parliament has on Tuesday engaged key public sector players, in an exclusive briefing on the implementation of the state of public emergency. Held at its Committee Room One at Parliament Building, Tower Hill, the meeting heard the Attorney-General & Minister of Justice; Internal Affairs, Defence and Information and Communication Ministers. At the core of the discussions was the role of the media, for which the Chairman, Independent Media Commission, Rod Mac-Johnson and the President of SLAJ, Kelvin Lewis were also present.

Tuesday's engagement follows a motion by the Leader of the House, Hon. Ibrahim Bundu, summoning the above persons to discuss the monitoring and implementation of the state of emergency. The motion arose against a backdrop of what was seen by many MPs as unfair media bashing and a negative perspective by media houses across the country, in the wake of the disbursement of Le62M to MPs as part of the Government's strategy to resist the Ebola onslaught.

The House Leader, who chaired the session, observed that MPs have been variously busy making frantic efforts and taking leadership across constituencies around the country. However, he said, people have moved outside the provisions and the constitutional instruments and the media have been putting out inciting and hate messages on radio stations with uninvestigated claims against MPs.

In like vein, Minority Leader, Hon. Dr. Bernadette Lahai read out various constitutional provisions, noting that this is a critical time in the history of Sierra Leone when citizens should demonstrate nationalism and a sense of patriotism and every Sierra Leonean should show love for country as this is not a situation to be used to settle scores. "Instead of ameliorating, they are aggravating the situation," she emphasized, citing Starline Radio 98.4 in Kenema that has launched personal attacks using invectives on her person. She called on the IMC to use their independent means to investigate these claims. The Deputy Minority Whip, Hon. Jusufu Mansaray also complained about unfair bashing of MPs in Bo as Star Radio Bo is being used as hate radio, making it appear as if MPs were enemies of the state when in fact Parliament is a guardian of democracy and good governance.

Earlier, the Deputy Speaker, Hon. Chernor Bah assured that KPMG will audit all funds, including those disbursed to MPs, but according to SLAJ President Kelvin Lewis, most of the talk was not coming from the media, but ordinary people, some of whom transformed themselves into citizen journalists. He urged caution so as not to overshadow the Ebola fight by diverting attention to the media. However, the Chairman, IMC, Rod Mac-Johnson, promised to investigate the complaints. Eventually, the Deputy Minister Information & Communication proposed a

meeting of the Ministry, SLAJ and Parliament to address those concerns, stressing that it is the legitimate right of MPs to be aggrieved in such a situation.

Whilst Internal Affairs Minister, J B Dauda described the meeting as timely, noting his delight in the universal commendation of the police, Defence Minister Pallo Conteh lamented that he has more than any other, suffered at the hands of the press with misrepresentation of the actions of his Ministry. He also called for balanced reporting based on investigated facts, and regrettably described the IMC as a paper tiger, devoid of power.

Both the IGP and the CDS addressed the gathering on their respective roles in providing security to the Ebola operations around the country.

Rounding up, the House Leader declared that he had benefitted immensely from the briefing, and announced that while there was hullabaloo over a comparatively small sum rightly used by MPs; \$26M in the hands of non governmental agencies goes unnoticed. He also called for robust law enforcement of the state of emergency, including the Public Emergency Regulations, which he affirmed, are not subject to debate.



Hon. Bundu Chairing the Engagement