

H.E. THE PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS ON THE OCCASION OF
THE STATE OPENING OF THE 3RD SESSION OF THE FIRST PARLIAMENT
OF THE SECOND REPUBLIC OF SIERRA LEONE

FRIDAY 11TH JUNE 1999

INTRODUCTION

Mr. Speaker, Honourable Members of Parliament:

Every State Opening of Parliament is an historic occasion. A year ago when I addressed this Legislature, we were observing with joy and satisfaction the restoration of Constitutional Order, which had been violently interrupted for almost nine months by a military/rebel Junta against the will of the people.

Today's ceremonial opening is also a joyous occasion because we are, a year later, standing at the threshold of lasting peace in our country. As I speak, Sierra Leoneans, representatives of the Government, the RUF, Civil Society, the Inter-religious Council of Sierra Leone are meeting under the auspices of the current Chairman of ECOWAS, President Eyadema of Togo. They are approaching consensus which should bring to an end, once and for all, the conflict that has brought death and destruction to thousands of our people during the past nine years. I consider all the participants or delegates in the dialogue in Togo, including members of the RUF, not as adversaries but as our ambassadors of peace. The prospects for lasting peace are now greater than they have ever been since 1996.

Mr. Speaker, Honourable Members:

I crave your indulgence to deviate from the traditional mode of a Presidential address to Parliament and to concentrate on the theme of peace, security and development. I submit to you that now more than ever before the issues of Peace, Security and Development should occupy a pre-eminent position on our national priority list. In Prime Minister Tony Blair's message to the Government, the people of Sierra Leone and to the rebels, he noted that "your security must come first. We understand the need to restore and sustain it. We are doing all we can to help."

On the basis of this identified theme, the priority for the allocation of public funds will be in that order. Any remaining funds will then be allocated towards emergency relief, rehabilitation and reconstruction of our limited infrastructure.

In my address to this august body last year, I identified several projects that were determined to be of value to this country. I want to assure you that with the availability of funds these projects will continue to be implemented.

In reviewing the strides made by the developed countries of the world today, it is obvious that Peace and Security have provided the foundation for their progress. The emphasis should be no different for us. Let me assure you that the kind of Peace we have been pursuing, one which is now at our doorstep, is solidly based on Security. It is one that will also offer us better opportunities for economic and social development. This is the real meaning of Peace. It is no surprise that the first major achievement of the dialogue in Lome, since the cease-fire declared on May 18 1999, has been the agreement between the Government and the RUF concerning the release of prisoners of war and non-combatants. Equally important is the joint declaration concerning safety and security for the delivery of humanitarian relief throughout Sierra Leone. We consider both declarations as integral parts of the final peace agreement.

The importance which we attach to human security is also reflected in the agreements so far reached on guarantees for the security and safety of refugees and displaced persons; the established of a Human Rights Commission; a Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and the creation of a special fund for war victims. These, Mr. Speaker, Honourable Members are also the pillars of the Peace which we have been pursuing and which we shall soon achieve in Lome. The bitter experience including the gross human atrocities, which have been committed in the course of this conflict, behooves on us the necessity of ensuring the highest level of physical security of all our people in every district, town and village of this country. The security shield provided by ECOMOG, albeit temporarily, will not be prematurely removed. While its mandate and concept of operations will be reviewed, ECOMOG will remain in Sierra Leone for sometime, and in one form or the other, to assist in the protection of our citizens, humanitarian aid workers, and United Nations military observers.

The United Nations Security Council has indicated that it will respond positively to the peace agreement by increasing the number of United Nations military observers on the ground under a revised mandate and concept of operations. The training of the restructured Sierra Leonean Army is also expected to continue.

Once a permanent cease-fire is in place, an effective mechanism including a joint monitoring commission will be set up to verify cease-fire violations and supervise and monitor the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of ex-combatants. The disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of the ex-combatants are critical activities on the road to sustainable peace, security and development. With the support and understanding of the international community, we should spare no effort to sustain the programme.

Mr. Speaker, Honourable Members:

The political dimension of the proposed peace agreement as one would expect is complicated. Let me preface my remarks on this issue by stating that one of the principles upon which the final document will be based is the recognition by the parties, of the importance of democratic governance, as essential to socio-economic development. We entered the dialogue on the principle and conviction that Government derives all its powers, and authority from the people, and that this is the cornerstone of our constitution. I would like to assure you that in our search for the peace which we all desire, we shall not mortgage that fundamental principle of democratic governance. To do otherwise would be tantamount to the abdication of our responsibility as a constitutional government. In his message to the government, people and the rebels in Sierra Leone, Prime Minister Tony Blair observed that "We recognize the importance of defending and rebuilding your democratic institutions. We are supporting you in this also."

As representatives of the people, you will agree with me that democratic governance not only implies but also demands guarantees for the full and free participation of all our citizens in the process of governance. This is why in our search for peaceful settlement of the conflict, and during the course of the dialogue in Lome, we have been guided by the imperatives of political inclusion and the enhancement of political participation. The idea is to increase opportunities for participation without destroying the very foundations of our democratic institutions. It is our hope that the comprehensive agreement, which will emerge from Lome, will among other things create such opportunities and facilitate processes for political participation and representation. Let me assure you that Parliament will also have an opportunity to exercise where appropriate its constitutional duties and responsibilities in those processes. Meanwhile, it is my sincere hope that the remaining issues on the political dimensions of the peace agreement will soon be resolved.

Mr. Speaker, Honourable Members:

The signing of a peace agreement to end the war will be an important milestone in the history of this nation. But it will certainly not be an end in itself. It will in fact accelerate the task of national reconstruction. Since my last address in this chamber, that task has become even more formidable as a result of the events of January 1999. However, the prospects for gradual economic recovery based on our own effort and determination as well as the support of the International Community are quite promising. In this connection, I should add that my recent visits to China and Libya, for instance, were fruitful in the sense that we have received firm assurances, and in certain areas, even commitment of assistance in rehabilitation and reconstruction. I will from time to time keep Parliament fully informed of Government's plans and programmes in the various sectors of the economy.

Mr. Speaker, Honourable Members:

The signing of a peace agreement will also accelerate the process of healing and national reconciliation. I have often said that Peace and Security can only be attained in our country if everyone of us cultivates a spirit of forgiveness and reconciliation. The various programmes to sensitize the population are being intensified to ensure that we all move forward as one nation and one people. I consider that now is the real moment of historic opportunity to promote peace, liberty, and prosperity, through reconciliation. It is also the time for creativity in the sense that we all have to use our individual and collective initiatives to plot a peaceful path for this country. This is also the time to mobilise our people in order to speed up the process of change that is required. In order to withstand the setbacks, disagreements and reversals, we must lay a foundation of openness and freedom for which this country was well known in the past. The time for commitment is now. To wait is to risk future gains. It is important to have peace. We should do everything to have it. At this point, it is necessary to stop emphasising on people's fears but to create the environment that will give our compatriots hopeful aspirations. Against the background of the devastation of the past nine years, and the determination to establish sustainable peace and security, I should like to inform you that perhaps the most profound principle of the proposed peace agreement is a pledge that forthwith all our past, present and future differences and grievances will be settled by peaceful means. A further pledge- that all sierra Leoneans will henceforth refrain from the threat and use of armed force to bring about any change in Sierra Leone.

Mr. Speaker, Honourable Members:

In my government's efforts to promote reconciliation, the Vice-President is scheduled to visit European and American cities where there are large concentrations of Sierra Leoneans to explain government policies leading to the road to peace and to invite them to come home to participate in a national conference that will address the ills of our society. They will be given an opportunity to voice their past grievances against past government and clear their names in connection with any negative reports and allegations. Fugitives from justice will be allowed a two week period during which they will be allowed to take steps to clear their names. We want total peace with all Sierra Leoneans.

Finally, I am assured by many Sierra Leoneans that there can exist a political goodwill to construct a new Sierra Leone where the primacy of human development is the guiding principle. The preparation of a peaceful and orderly transition to the new millennium is compelling. Our time calls for clear thinking to diagnose the ills of our country, to ascertain the root causes of our country's growing problems and to formulate a set of guiding principles and a programme of action. Concepts like democracy, human rights, etc., need to be examined fully in form as well as in content. Democracy is a vital ingredient of development. It must be consultative and participatory. Our people, including our women must be fully empowered. The goal of our democracy must be the right to live without fear for our lives, without hunger and without extreme poverty. Human rights must be embraced, and this includes civil and political as well as economic, social and cultural rights. Human

needs and human security must be the basis of our development. We need to change, but change will not come unless there is a coalition of interests. We need more determination, more understanding and more efforts to halt the conflict that has ravaged our country through out the past eight years. Unless we do so, the next millennium would be marked by continuing deterioration and a drift to disaster. To avoid this, closed minds must be opened to some of the major social and moral issues dividing our country, and closed eyes, opened to tomorrow's problems, which must be managed. Now is the time to re-dedicate and re-commit ourselves to a new Sierra Leone.

We Sierra Leoneans will forever be grateful to the Republic of Nigeria for their support, encouragement and assistance during our difficulties. We shall have an opportunity to express our gratefulness and appreciation on the 25th of June 1999, when we expect the Head of State in that country to visit us. He will be here for only two hours. I would like to take this opportunity to invite as many Sierra Leoneans as possible to welcome him. Details of the programme for his visit will be announced later.

Thank you and may the Almighty Allah help and guide you in your endeavours on behalf of the people you represent.