

**Presidential Address Delivered by His Excellency Dr. Ernest Bai Koroma
President of the Republic and Commander-in-Chief of the Republic of Sierra
Leone Armed Forces On the occasion of the State Opening of the Third
Session of the Third Parliament of the Second Republic of Sierra Leone In the
Chamber of Parliament Building Tower Hill, Freetown On Friday 9th
October 2009 at 10:00 a.m.**

MR. SPEAKER,

MR. VICE PRESIDENT,
MY LORD CHIEF JUSTICE,
MINISTERS OF GOVERNMENT,
HONOURABLE MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT,
EXCELLENCIES, MEMBERS OF THE DIPLOMATIC CORPS,
HIS WORSHIP THE MAYOR OF FREETOWN,
DISTINGUISHED GUESTS,
LADIES AND GENTLEMEN:

It is a great pleasure for me to be here again in this Honourable House of Parliament. When I addressed this august body last year, I set out my government's Agenda for Change. Today, I will lay before you the progress we have made so far against the goals outlined in our Agenda and also set out our programme of action for the coming year.

Mr. Speaker, Honourable Members of Parliament, we faced many challenges in implementing our Agenda, but with perseverance and commitment to transform this country, we were able to deliver on many of the promises. With continued dedication and zeal, and in partnership with parliament, the private sector, our international partners, and with the support of our people, we will deliver on the remaining issues.

Mr. Speaker, the last year has been very difficult for the global economy. Greed and recklessness amongst some bankers in a few developed countries pushed the world into economic crisis. Whilst many developed countries have pumped billions of dollars into their economies to get themselves out of the recession, the impact on developing countries has been profound.

In our country, remittances slowed down, revenues from our exports slumped, donor resources for our programmes decreased. These external shocks threatened many of the gains we were making, and created great difficulties for our country. Thanks to the resilience of our people and the sound economic management of my government, Sierra Leone has so far managed to weather the storm.

Our economic reform programme with the International Monetary Fund remains on track and successive reviews of our performance under the Poverty Reduction Growth Facility reflect Government's commitment to prudent economic policies. The economy continues to grow, while inflation remained in single digits during the first half of 2009. Domestic credit has become more affordable and the Bank of Sierra Leone has increased the amount of foreign exchange at its weekly auction.

Mr. Speaker, at the recent UN General Assembly, I told the whole world how climate change, which is itself a result of the actions of unsustainable policies in the richer countries, is affecting the African continent; how floods are threatening our agricultural productivity, and the success of our endeavours. I also re-emphasised my government's commitment to work with other nations of the world to tackle this crisis. We are a small nation, it may be beyond our means to solve these problems alone, but it is surely not beyond our means to seek the partnerships through which we can solve them.

Mr. Speaker, we also faced many challenges from within the country that threatened to reverse our gains. There are some amongst us, who would prefer to widen our differences, than to work towards strengthening our common bonds. Since my address to you last year, these forces of disunity have sought to raise political tensions, discredit this country, and denigrate our collective achievements. But together with the leaders of the other main political parties, we stood firm, and reaffirmed our commitment to the authentic Sierra Leonean values of tolerance, friendship and good-neighbourliness.

Mr. Speaker, my government is guided by the cherished values of Action, Progress and Commitment. We are a government of all the people, dedicated to ensuring that our programmes benefit the common man and woman in every region, every district, every chiefdom and every village. We are a government that responds to the needs of the many; we do not feed the greed of the few. In partnership with our people, and with you as representatives of the people, we will prevail over those who act in bad faith and malice towards our people's aspiration for change. This is my pledge to you: We shall surely achieve the goals set out in our Agenda for Change.

Mr. Speaker, Honourable Members of Parliament, let me now turn to the specifics of our achievements, the challenges we face, and how we intend to proceed with our Agenda for Change.

Agriculture

Mr. Speaker, agriculture employs more than three-quarters of the population. As a government that puts the priorities of the common people above all else, we will ensure that the sector improves the lives of our people, enhances food security, and takes its rightful place as a primary engine of our socio-economic transformation.

Mr. Speaker, since my address to this august body last year my government ensured that over 62,000 acres of rice fields have been ploughed, a 35% increase since the previous year. We have secured funding for the construction of rice mills, stores and drying floors countrywide. Following the highest ever recovery of seed rice last year, more than 90,000 bushels have again been distributed to farmers. The Rokupr Agricultural Laboratory has been upgraded to one of the best in Africa. We have procured 265 tractors and 30 motor bikes through a line of credit from the Indian Government.

In addition, 58 power tillers and 23 new combined harvesters have been procured and pre-positioned in strategic areas of the country. The reform of farmer-based organizations has moved forward, with the establishment of the National Federation of Farmers. In recognition of our efforts, we have been named champion of agriculture in the continent, with a mandate to advocate for the prioritization of Agriculture. In the coming year, we must repay the trust that has been placed in us by being a role model for the continent in increasing production and productivity.

To do this, we will offer farmers an increased package of support: subsidized inputs including improved seeds, fertilizers and pesticides; access to machinery in each chiefdom; improved storage and processing infrastructure to reduce post-harvest losses; new feeder roads to get produce to market; and better access to research on appropriate methods and practices. Effective policy-making is difficult without a robust evidence base.

That is why early next year, we will publish the results of the first genuinely world-class agricultural survey to be carried out in Sierra Leone, giving us for the first time a detailed picture of the state of the sector. My government continues to encourage the private sector to engage boldly in the commercialisation of agriculture. While the increasing expression of interest by foreign investors for large scale farming is welcome, we are also examining the long and short term implications in order to adopt an appropriate policy that will protect the interests of the investor and our future generations.

My government is also interested in ensuring that each chiefdom has a chiefdom farm, communally supported, with proceeds utilized for projects within the chiefdom. My government will support these ventures, and we will also encourage large investors, just as in the case of the mining sector, to manifest corporate social responsibility in support of these farms. As a result of my government's prudent management of forestry, revenues from the subsector have increased to Le.3billion, more than twenty-one times what they were when we took office. Next year, 100 acres of afforestation will be undertaken in each district.

Energy

Mr. Speaker, during the last year, we formulated an energy policy with a detailed implementation plan. Along with this policy is an institutional framework that ensures a new professional planning unit, an environmental unit, and a project-management unit are

established. These units will ensure that the energy roadmap for the country is clearly defined. The goal is a new regulatory framework that will enhance performance, improve efficiency and promote the participation of the private sector.

Mr. Speaker, on assumption of office, I made a commitment to radically transform the energy sector and improve the supply of power in this country. Honourable Members of Parliament, we are well on course. It gives me great pleasure to announce that my government has completed the Bumbuna Hydro Electric Project. And preparations are under way for its full commissioning later this month. Plans are far advanced to ensure that towns situated along the Bumbuna line benefit from its supply. In addition to Bumbuna, we are securing availability of electricity supply to Freetown through the installation of two thermal plants at Kingtom Power Station with total generating capacity of 10 Mega watts. Work on this is now at an advanced stage. Also, my government has signed a contract for the supply, installation and commissioning of a 16 Mega Watts thermal plant at Blackhall Road.

The start of the 161KV line which commences the establishment of the National Grid connecting our country to other West African States as part of the West African Power Pool will begin this month as well. Mr. Speaker, to ensure adequate electricity supply with even a surplus for export, we look forward to starting phase two of Bumbuna, which will be seven times bigger than the current phase one. We will ensure that once we commence work on phase two, it should be completed within six years.

Mr. Speaker, we will soon embark on an intensive development of mini-hydro-electric plants between one to ten megawatts in Bankasoka and Makali in the Northern Province, Charlotte in the Western Area and Moyamba in the Southern Province. We are also strengthening the Dodo project to double its supply of electricity to Bo and Kenema. In order to increase the availability of renewable energy in the country, we have embarked on pilot solar street lighting in various places. We will also increase our production and use of bio-fuel through a proposed ethanol factory in Makeni. This is expected to supply another 30 megawatts of electricity.

Mr. Speaker, continuous supply of electricity also depends on the suppliers having the resources to sustain the supply. Consumers must pay their bills to ensure this. We are making it easy for consumers to do this by installing thousands of prepaid meters. Honourable Members, we must be vigilant to bring to book those who sabotage electricity supplies by stealing cables, or avoiding to pay for the service. My call for attitudinal change is a call for all of us to adopt habits that will sustain our transformation.

Infrastructure and transportation

Mr. Speaker, no country can transform itself without infrastructure. My government will be a government of infrastructures – roads, bridges, jetties and dams - that make a visible difference to people's lives. From Kabala to Pujehun, Kailahun to Freetown, we will unite this country through infrastructural projects that link up the towns, cities, villages and all the ethnic groups of

this country. We have embarked on one of the most ambitious road-building programmes in our country's history. The Masiaka-Bo highway, 122 kilometres out of 164 completed; the Bo-Kenema highway, 43 kilometres out of 69 completed; the Makeni-Matotoka highway, 40 kilometres fully completed. But the work goes on. Detailed engineering designs are being completed and funds are being secured for the construction of the Matotoka-Koidu Highway.

We have re-awarded the contract for the Lumley–Tokeh highway to a reputable company; work is starting, and the road will be completed in 2011. This project will include the reconstruction of access roads to Goderich, Milton Margai College and Lumley to Malamah. The construction of the Freetown–Conakry Highway is gathering pace. Evaluation of bids for the construction of the Hillside Road in Freetown is in its final stage, and construction of the first segment should commence before the close of this year. We will also be reconstructing the Hill Station-Leicester to Berry Street Road, and the Lumley Beach Road.

The paving of streets in Freetown and other cities is ongoing. We are presently requesting consultancy services for feasibility studies and detailed engineering design for a Freetown Ring Road. Contracts have been awarded for the construction of the Kenema-Koindu highway, and will soon be awarded for the Lungi–Port Loko Road. Work will commence on these two highways before the end of the year. Following the completion of the detailed engineering design, government is actively engaging the EU for funds to construct the Bandajuma–Mano River Road. We will soon commence feasibility studies and get detailed engineering design for the construction of the Kenema-Zimmi Road and the Makeni -Kamakwie Road. We have also secured funds for the resurfacing of the Makeni-Kabala Road and the Bo-Bandajuma Road with an extension to Pujehun.

Mr. Speaker, Honourable Members, because highways will not help our rural communities if they cannot reach them, government has secured funding for the construction of over 2000km of feeder roads nationwide. Work has already begun in Kenema, Port Loko, Pujehun, and Kambia. Additionally, over fifty bridges have been constructed. Rural infrastructure development projects have commenced and are nearing completion in Bombali, Kailahun, Tonkolili and Kono. Work on the remaining districts will start soon. We are also establishing modern transport terminals and shopping centres in the provincial headquarter towns of the country. The Kenema project is near completion and those for Bo and Makeni are due to start this month.

Mr. Speaker, to ensure our country benefits from its ocean and waterways we have given approval for the privatization of the ports, and secured funds for the construction of jetties at Rokupr, Mambolo, Kychom, Kasirie, Gbondapi, Sulima, Gbangbatoke, Port Loko, Tormabum and Mattru Jong. We will fight very hard to ensure that this country will not witness again the type of sea disaster that occurred off Shengein September 2009.

We have made regulations stipulating that no boat should have more than 60 passengers and the

Sierra Leone Maritime Administration's standard manifests are now being used. Additional monitors have been recruited and deployed in accident prone areas and punitive measures have been incorporated in the Merchant Shipping Act for those in breach of regulations. We have procured communication equipment with repeater stations for installation on jetties for timely reporting of sea accidents. A Search and Rescue Boat has also been procured and will be delivered by the end of this month. Re-registration of boats has commenced, starting with the Southern Province, and specifications as to size and types of boats to interface with the Atlantic Ocean are now in place.

Mr. Speaker, to improve our air links to the rest of the world we are improving the Lungi transfer, rehabilitating the runway and facilities, and strengthening regulation by transforming the Civil Aviation Department into an Authority. The National Commission for Privatization is also undertaking a study that will forge a clear path towards privatizing the airport.

Mr. Speaker, in relation to housing, we intend to promote the supply of quality affordable housing for our people. In this direction, we have passed the Mortgage Act to regulate home financing. We are also encouraging the Government owned Home Finance Mortgage and Savings Limited to provide liquidity for the housing market through provision of loans to companies and individuals interested in developing affordable housing schemes. A major challenge in the housing sector is the high cost of building materials, the majority of which are imported. To meet this challenge we will create incentives for estate developers who utilize local materials. In this regard, I am again calling on our architects and engineers to develop affordable local building components and appropriate designs for houses.

Mr. Speaker, there are too many uncompleted structures in and around Freetown and other major cities. We intend to create schemes through which these houses would be completed. We are also devising modalities to encourage employer guaranteed housing loans for persons in formal employment. Furthermore, we will be introducing micro-mortgage schemes to mobilize resources so that persons engaged in the informal sector could own houses. NASSIT is also implementing pilot housing projects in Waterloo, Bo, Kenema and Makeni. These will demonstrate and test the feasibility of undertaking mass housing investment based on market principles.

Mr. Speaker, to improve the water infrastructure, my government is moving towards an Integrated Water Resources Management System for the country. We have also reviewed The National Water Supply and Sanitation Policy which will soon be discussed in cabinet. With support from our international partners we are implementing pipe borne-water projects in Rokupr. This will be replicated in 40 other locations spread across every district in the country. In relation to water supply in Freetown, we have provided a loan of 2.1 billion Leones to the Guma Valley Water Company for the purchase of chemicals, construction of 150 additional stand pipes and the laying of sub-mains to replace the numerous unsightly spaghetti pipes and reduce leakages. The second phase of this programme will involve rehabilitation of small gravity

systems which will significantly increase access to water in Freetown and its environs.

Various improvements have been made including the restoration of water supply to Connaught Hospital. Guma has also increased its bowser capacity; this will ensure that it services more localities. The British Department for International Development is also supporting the improvement of the distribution network of Guma.

Education

Mr. Speaker, we will not develop our economy and our country without education. Knowledge improves the content of our character, enhances the quality of our production, and ensures the advance of our democracy. However, our country's once proud reputation as a beacon of quality education is under serious threat. As I stated in my address to teachers, the reasons for this are many: from dwindling resources, to the effects of a war that decimated an older generation of experienced and disciplined teachers and prevented them from passing on practical skills to new recruits in the teaching field. Our children are also saddled with too many distractions: foreign football games, foreign films, and a belief amongst many that they could get good certificates, good jobs and good wages without working very hard for them. Tackling these challenges will require a concerted partnership between government, teachers, parents and other stakeholders. Together, we must rebuild the schooling infrastructure, improve the quality of teaching and learning, and strengthen the links between education and employment.

Mr. Speaker, to rebuild the schooling infrastructure my government has secured funding to construct over 70 schools. Construction of schools through the Sababu project has also been accelerated. To improve the quality of teaching and learning, we have established a commission of inquiry to examine and recommend actions to address the poor performance of our primary and secondary school children. We have identified and deleted hundreds of ghost teachers from salary vouchers. This has freed resources and we have been able to pay the arrears of school subsidy and teachers' salaries. To ensure greater adherence to the tenets of the teaching profession, my government has also developed a code of conduct for teachers.

We have also supplied teaching and learning materials to all 19 councils for distribution to schools. To strengthen the links between education and employment we are implementing a number of programmes to improve tertiary education in the country. A National Policy on Technical, Vocational Education and Training (TVET) has been developed. My government has signed an MOU with George Mason University, USA for the creation of four community colleges in Sierra Leone. Additionally, the Islamic Development Bank is supporting the construction of 46 Technical/Vocational institutions, while Swedish Development Agency (SIDA) pledged a grant of 17.5 million dollars to support basic and vocational education. A policy has been introduced through which all disabled persons automatically qualify for grants-in-aid on admission to any of our tertiary institutions.

Health

Mr. Speaker, we still face numerous challenges in the health sector. Presently our healthcare system is caught between the strictures of a government with limited resources, a people in extreme poverty, and a global recession that is limiting international support for improving access to services. We have made some progress. Over a thousand health facilities are now functional, a 22% increase in three years. Maternity wards have been built in Kabala, Kono, Bo and Kenema. A CAT scanner has been installed in Connaught Hospital to increase our diagnostic capabilities. A Public Health Laboratory is being established at Lakka to improve diagnoses and respond to epidemics. We have established blood banks in each region. A midwifery school is under construction in Makeni; and modern medical storage and management facilities are under construction in Freetown and the 12 districts. We have also established a telemedicine centre at Connaught Hospital that will connect us with 54 countries including India in a single loop.

To address the shortage of doctors we have recruited over 820 health workers and secured support from the government of Nigeria to deploy sixty Nigerian Doctors nationwide. The Chinese government is supporting the construction of a 100 bed Teaching Hospital at Kossoh Town. Cuba has agreed to send 30 medical personnel to Sierra Leone to be funded by the South African government. We are also building the capacity and improving the skill-set of medical workers. Twenty nurses are being trained in Ghana on hospital management and planning in the health sector, we are giving scholarships to train more nutritionists, laboratory technicians, professional hospital managers and engineers who specialize in the operation and maintenance of hospital buildings and equipment.

We are also stepping up the fight against HIV/AIDS. We have established 337 Prevention of Mother to Child Transmission sites, 103 treatment centres for people living with HIV, and 384 volunteering confidential and counselling centres. To address cases of malnutrition we have developed an acute malnutrition programme, established more outpatient therapeutic feeding centres and treated thousands of malnourished children. We also conducted a yellow fever campaign covering 1.8 million people in Bo, Moyamba, Pujehun, Kono, Kenema and Kailahun. A national immunization programme for eradication of polio among 1.2 million children under five achieved success rates of over 95%. Our policies and interventions are beginning to yield results.

Infant and under-five mortality rates are going down and many more Sierra Leoneans are now sleeping under insecticide treated nets than ever before. Maternal mortality rates have fallen by a third in the last three years. But we need to further decrease maternal and child mortality rates and reduce the high incidence of malaria, anaemia and stunted growth amongst children. We are initiating and implementing innovative policies and actions to address the challenges. Our first priority is ensuring free access to health care for pregnant women and children under 5 years of age. In order for the health system to stand up to the challenge, mechanisms to put the policy into practice are being worked on by Ministry of Health and other relevant actors.

A national consultation on this issue is on-going and will be discussed at the Consultative Group

meeting in November. We are also developing a National Health Sector Strategic Plan that will serve as a road map for the implementation of our priorities. An inter-ministerial committee is working on modalities for the establishment of a national health insurance scheme. This scheme will be geared towards a total abolition of user fees. They will be replaced by new financing mechanisms through contributions, taxes and subsidies. Contribution waivers will be introduced for pregnant women, children and the very poor.

As well as improving affordability, we must improve quality by ensuring that a basic package of essential health services is available in every facility, in every district. This basic package will focus on cost-effective interventions that will have the biggest impact on improving child and maternal health, including treated bed nets to tackle malaria, essential and emergency obstetric care, and preventive services including immunization.

Mr. Speaker, another area of particular concern is the relatively poor regulation of the health sector and the poor conditions of service for medical health workers. To effectively deal with this challenge, my government is establishing a National Health Commission, separate from the civil service to institute rules and codes of conduct as well as generally regulate and improve the conditions of service of health workers and the quality of health care delivery.

Mr. Speaker, earlier this week the United Nations published the Human Development Index for the period up to 2007, naming Sierra Leone one of the least developed countries in the world. These findings underscore the immense challenge my government faced when it entered office. But with the commitment we have shown and the policies we have introduced since 2007, I am confident that future updates of the Index, based on more recent data, will reflect the progress our people are already seeing on the ground.

Youths

Mr. Speaker, youths are the pillars of this country and the strength of the nation. We cannot achieve our Agenda for Change without them. We are establishing the National Youth Commission as the primary mechanism for this partnership with youth. The bill establishing the commission is already with this honourable house and we call upon you to give it topmost priority in your legislative agenda. We cannot afford to wait.

Mr. Speaker, the Youth Employment Scheme has been rolled out to over 17,000 youths, and many young students are receiving scholarships for study abroad. NACSA created employment for 12,320 youths through the cash for work project, supported youth organizations with entrepreneurial capacity development and ensured placement of youths with the Local Councils and NGOs through the Peace and Development Corps initiative. Our numerous infrastructural projects are also increasing employment opportunities for youths. In the next twelve months, we will make the National Youth Commission operational, ensuring that it becomes the hub for designing, implementing and coordinating programmes that promote skills acquisition, employment, and political inclusion of youths.

Gender

Mr. Speaker, my government is committed to increasing women's participation in economic and political life. Our commitment to ensuring that women are in powerful positions is evidenced by my appointment of a woman as Chief Justice, the first ever appointment of a woman to head one of the three branches of government. Also, in addition to sustaining programmes to promote enrolment of girls in primary and secondary schools, we are increasing the number of women with degrees and other tertiary education certificates by giving automatic grants-in-aid to female students studying mathematics and science in our tertiary institutions.

Productive sectors

Mr. Speaker, let me now turn to the other productive sectors that will power our development: mining, petroleum, fisheries, and tourism. First, mining. Our country is blessed with some of the finest mineral resources. But all of us here know that ordinary Sierra Leoneans have benefited too little from this inheritance. That is why last year I launched the exercise for restructuring the mining sector. I am pleased to announce that the Task Force I set up has submitted its report and many of the recommendations have already been incorporated into the new draft bill on the minerals sector that will be placed before this house shortly.

One of the recommendations of the Task Force is for a comprehensive geological survey of the country to be done urgently. Once we know what we have, we will be in a better bargaining position and can plan the exploitation better. A new minerals agency is also envisaged as well as the setting up of a diamond cutting industry in Sierra Leone. We have re-negotiated the agreement with Koidu Holdings and we are at the final stages of drafting the contract. The next agreement to be renegotiated is that of Sierra Rutile.

These efforts will improve the contribution of this sector to the economy and give a greater role and benefit to the communities from which the minerals are mined. Most importantly, it will allow greater transparency to operations in the sector and provide a level playing field for investors. Second, petroleum. Mr. Speaker, I know members of this house will have rejoiced at the news last month that the consortium drilling the Venus B-1 prospect had discovered oil in Sierra Leone's deepwater offshore area. Samples have been sent for laboratory analyses while another exploratory well is planned for 2010 to determine the commercial status of the discovery.

Exploration activity is increasing in the other blocks, and we will soon know the full extent of our offshore resources. In the mean time, we must put in place the institutional arrangements for managing whatever petroleum resources that exist and ensure that they are managed appropriately and in the long-term interests of our people. I have, in this direction, established a Task Force to devise modalities for the transformation of the Petroleum Resources Unit in the

Office of the President to a full-fledged oil company.

Third, fisheries. Mr. Speaker, the potential of our marine resources to generate wealth has never been realised. In the past year, we boosted fisheries production and exports, increasing revenues by one third to Le.6 billion. But this is still well short of our potential. We are taking steps to redress this situation through maintenance of jetties, better management of the coordination of agencies involved in the sector, and robust response to the reckless operations of illegal trawlers. It is painful that we cannot export directly to the EU market yet our resources are illegally fished here, repacked in neighbouring countries and then sold to the EU. Our priority for this coming year is to systematically deal with this anomaly and the other constraints preventing us from realising the full socio-economic contribution of this sector. In addition, under the West Africa Regional Fisheries project, the World Bank is providing funds to construct Fisheries Management Centres at Bailor, Conakry-Dee, Targrin, Goderich, Tombo, Shenge, Bonthe and Sulima.

This project will also fund the 9 kilometre road from Conakry-Dee to Lungi Airport and a cold storage facility at the Airport. These activities will facilitate fish exports to Western Markets. We are developing landing sites at Goderich, Tombo, Shenge and Bonthe. We are also securing support for the transformation of the Bo experimental fish farming station into an aquaculture training centre. We have already trained over 3000 artisanal fish processors in improved fish processing technology with a view to reduce post harvest losses. We have also embarked on a nationwide elimination of illegal fishing gears; and increased surveillance to arrest vessels engaged in illegal activities. We have reached an agreement with the United States for cooperation in combating illicit maritime activities through the provision of American Patrol Ships.

Fourth, tourism. Mr. Speaker, our country has the potential to become a major hub for tourists in West Africa. My government is committed to marketing the country as a prime tourist destination. In this direction we have secured funding for an integrated tourism framework project that will develop a tourism strategic plan, design a marketing programme and enhance the capacity of tour guides. We have also reached an agreement with the Libyan Government for the construction of a five star hotel in Freetown. Also, NASSIT is seeking partners for the redevelopment of Cape Sierra Hotel; and the Mammy Yoko Hotel is being refurbished. This will improve the stock of first class hotel accommodation in this country.

Trade and Private Sector Development

Mr. Speaker, across the productive sectors my government is committed to promoting trade and the participation of the private sector in our country's economic development. To this end we have launched a private sector development strategy; removed many administrative barriers to investment; streamlined tax administration; passed the Companies, Bankruptcy and Payment

Systems Acts; and established a one stop shop for the registration of business at the Administrator and Registrar General's Office. As a result, for the third successive year Sierra Leone moved up in the World Bank's Doing Business rankings.

In the coming year, we will continue to make Sierra Leone a more attractive place to do business. We will soon be bringing before the House a revised schedule of investment tax incentives. We also plan to establish a credit bureau and collateral registry, introduce a new securities law, and create a new framework for public-private partnerships. To unleash the creative energies of indigenous businesses we launched, in collaboration with the SOROS Economic Development Fund, the 'Bomba' business plan competition. In this same direction we have developed the Partial Loan Guarantee Scheme to encourage commercial banks to reduce the cost and accessibility to finance. With support from UNIDO, three growth centres were rehabilitated in Binkolo, Pujehun and Kpandebu to encourage skills development.

Mr. Speaker, to grow our economy we must improve our exports. To ensure this, my government is developing a national export strategy that will be finalized in 2010. Furthermore, we will set up the Sierra Leone Produce Marketing Company to improve the quality of export commodities. We have also strengthened the capacity of SLIEPA to facilitate and assist investors in the establishment of their business enterprises. Finally, we have signed an MOU with World Hope International for the establishment of the First Step Export Processing Zone.

Mr. Speaker, this House would agree with me that viable and lucrative opportunities abound in Sierra Leone. In order to increase our ability to realize them quickly and efficiently, we are hosting a Trade and Investment Forum in London on November 18th, where we hope to attract quality international investors. We are optimistic that this will help accelerate the rate of investment and development in the country.

The Environment

Mr. Speaker, the world is presently reeling from the effects of bad environmental management and climate change. The number of environmental disasters has increased, and weather patterns are becoming less predictable. We are committed to play our part as responsible members of the international community to preserve the natural heritage and protect our environment.

Mr. Speaker, since my address to this august body last year, we have launched the trans-boundary Peace Park for Sierra Leone and Liberia encompassing the remaining Gola Forest on both sides of the boundary. We have accelerated the reformulation of land policies and procedures, speeded up the identification of state lands, and embarked on sensitization geared towards promoting environmental protection. An electronic database is also being established that will graphically display and record land ownership in the Western Area. My government is collaborating with donor agencies with a view to developing strategies for the protection of 17,800 hectares of land along the peninsula forest reserve.

Recent events during the rainy season are warning shots of pending disasters if we do not act speedily on many fronts. The Western Area Peninsula hills may become death traps with mudslides and rolling boulders, threatening the lives of people in the city. The continued illegal logging of trees, poaching of our fauna, and destruction of our ecosystems must be stopped. I am challenging our researchers and scientists to propose alternatives for low-cost cooking that would reduce dependence on firewood and charcoal. Also, I am calling upon our partners in the international community to join us in formulating a special sustainability programme to alleviate poverty while leaving our natural environment intact. I intend to throw this challenge to our partners at the Consultative Group Meeting in November.

Resource mobilisation and governance

Mr. Speaker, Honourable Members of Parliament, let me now turn to our efforts to secure the resources to finance the Agenda for Change and manage them responsibly. My government is very committed to reducing our dependence on foreign aid by increasing internally generated revenue. The National Revenue Authority is vital to this mobilization effort. Total Revenue collected by the Authority in the first half of 2009 exceeded Le.300 billion an increase of over Le.27 billion compared to the same period last year.

There is no room for complacency. The Goods and Services Tax Unit has been strengthened, and the GST will be implemented in January 2010. The project to transform the Customs and Excise department into a modern department is in its final stage. Once completed, it is expected to minimize human influence and discretion.

My Government continues to pursue public financial management reforms to ensure transparency and accountability. Procurement plans and competitive bidding have been established in 43 MDAs in conformity with the National Procurement Act of 2004. We are also strengthening expenditure control and the required time for processing payment vouchers and approval of withdrawal forms has been reduced to a maximum of 5 days. We have strengthened internal audit capacity with additional staff from various MDAs pursuing relevant courses at the University of Sierra Leone.

Twenty five internal audit units have been established in MDAs. The Human Resource Management Office has completed a national payroll verification exercise which has reduced the actual payroll from 15,950 to 13,681, saving Le609 million per month for government. A total of 1,781 civil servants have been given retirement letters and their names removed from the payroll as their terminal leave comes to an end.

Mr. Speaker, we need a strong, lean, efficient and productive public service to lead our development efforts as laid out in the PRSP II and the Agenda for Change. I launched quite recently, the Public Sector Reform Programme which has recommended the implementation of a

comprehensive pay package that will attract and retain quality staff in the various services. Government is committed to pursuing this path. Henceforth however, public servants will be expected to deliver. They will be appraised periodically as we now do with ministers of government, and rewards will be linked to performance. Retirement regulations will be enforced, and those who do not add value to the service will be retrenched.

Mr. Speaker, my government has also prioritized the fight against corruption. We are implementing the National Anti-corruption Strategy. The Anti-corruption Act (2000) was replaced with the tougher Anti-corruption Act of 2008. This now includes offences on illicit enrichment, abuse and misuse of office, adequate protection for whistleblowers and informers, and making it compulsory for all public officers to declare their assets. Close to 17,000 public officers have now declared their assets to the Anti-Corruption Commission.

Six MDAs have been reviewed by the ACC for the purpose of improving their systems and processes, with more to follow. A prosecution unit has been set up. Since the commencement of the year, 15 convictions have been obtained and a number of cases are still ongoing. In my two years in office the commission has recovered over Le.3 billion mostly monies which were misappropriated between 2006-2007. The Global Corruption Barometer conducted by Transparency International indicated that 64% of Sierra Leoneans believed that the fight against corruption is effective.

Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation

Mr. Speaker, we cannot achieve the transformation of our country without the support of the international community. Our partnerships and alliances grew stronger in 2009. High-level engagements with Heads of States and Governments in Africa, Europe, Asia, the Middle East and South America have yielded substantial support for our country's transformation.

Today, I can tell the house that Sierra Leone truly has friends on every continent. In the sub-region we have revived the Mano River Union Secretariat, and resuscitated the technical committee for the resolution of the Yenga Issue. The Federal Republic of Nigeria vigorously supported our efforts at providing electricity for Freetown through funds to Income Electrix; and massively aided our health and education programs through provision of lecturers and doctors. Great Britain remains the biggest contributor to our country's development strides. We also applaud the governments of China, the United States, Germany, Ireland, Italy, India, Kuwait, Japan, and Libya for their support in areas as varied as education, agriculture, health and infrastructure. Our relationships with multi-lateral institutions—the European Commission, the ADB, the World Bank, BADEA and the Islamic Development Bank—are yielding great support for the Agenda for Change.

As I have already mentioned, next month in London, we are hosting a Consultative Group meeting to showcase the progress we have made, reassert our commitment to the Agenda for Change, and mobilize support from international donors and investors for achieving it. UNIPSIL,

the Peace-Building Commission, and the whole UN family of agencies and institutions have been supportive of the Government in every area of our endeavours and we look forward to strengthening our cooperation with them in the coming year.

Security Forces

Mr. Speaker, our military and police are building this country's image abroad through participation in peace-keeping missions. Preparations for the deployment of a sector reconnaissance company of our military to the UN/AU peacekeeping Mission in Darfur, Sudan are at an advanced stage. Sierra Leone police officers are currently in Darfur and 97 officers will be going to Somalia to contribute to the rule of law in that troubled country.

The United Nations has also requested for the deployment of Sierra Leonean female police officers in its units dealing with family and domestic violence in Darfur. Whilst we are heartened by this international recognition of the police, here at home we are acting to ensure that the force gears up its response to the recent spate of armed robbery in the country. Earlier this week, I invoked Military Aid to Civil Power to ensure a more robust response to this malaise. My government will leave no stone unturned to secure the lives and property of our people. While the police and the army take the lead in combating these criminal elements, we call on all citizens to give them their full support and cooperation.

Justice Sector

Mr. Speaker, my government is fully committed to an independent judiciary that is accessible and fully able to perform its constitutional functions. In this direction we are building state of the art magistrates' courts in central Freetown and Cline Town. We have also built magistrate courts at Masiaka, Mile 91 and York. In line with our commitment to improving the investment climate in the country, we are setting up a fast track commercial court. We have also ensured increased training of judicial officers, and we are setting up a National Judicial and Legal Training Institute to provide continuous training for all legal and judicial staff. We have drafted a new local court bill, which, when passed by this honourable house, will provide a framework for local courts to ensure due process for our people.

Mr. Speaker, my government is determined to address the rightful claims of the ordinary citizen for access to Justice. In this direction we are training local courts personnel and chiefdom police, ensuring that they have the skills and mind set to ensure due process at the local level. To assist poor defendants, we are piloting a national legal aid scheme in Freetown which we hope to roll out to every district. We have also launched a Bail Policy to guide magistrates and prevent the abuse of the rights of our people to bail. Furthermore, we are restructuring our prison system, ensuring that it also pays great attention to the rehabilitation of prisoners, giving them livelihood and civic skills beneficial to themselves, their communities and the entire country.

Culture

Mr. Speaker, last year, I called for a cultural renaissance in this country. To foster this, we have drafted a national cultural policy, revived cultural organizations in the South and East, organized the Wara Wara Festival, introduced monthly beach cultural awareness programmes and supported the formation of the coalition of arts and cultural associations. The almost moribund Sierra Leone Broadcasting Service is being transformed into a modern public broadcasting corporation with increased nationwide television coverage. To promote a culture of independent and informed debate, we have enacted the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation Act.

Conclusion

Mr. Speaker, Honourable Members of Parliament, my government will serve all of the people, we will unite this country through equitable service to all people, across all regions, districts, cities, towns and villages.

Mr. Speaker, our vision of national unity is not about giving jobs to a few elites posturing as the only authentic representatives of their towns and villages. Our vision of national unity is rooted in the ideals of service to the common man and woman of every region. We have been equitable in our provision of tens of billions of leones to local councils, regardless of which party controls them. We are building roads everywhere, regardless for which party the people in those localities voted. We are providing electricity to homes in Freetown, regardless of which party supporters live there. We have increased the allowances of all MPs, regardless of the party to which they belong. The Councillors, Mayors, MPs, and Chiefs are those who the people elected into office, and we have not marginalized these authentic representatives of the people, regardless of the region they come from. We have on board those who the people want in the halls of governance.

Mr. Speaker, we shall not be afraid to weed out those who pay more attention to the perks of office than to the welfare of the people.

We are creating immense opportunities for those who want to work hard to help the various communities in this country. We are opening up the private sector and making it easy for everyone to set up a business or other socio-economic initiatives. We are devolving power to local councils, ensuring that people and their elected leaders in every locality fully participate in meaningful public ventures. Through the Open Government Initiative we are bringing government to the people, listening and responding to their concerns. We are putting the National Electoral Commission at the fore of the organization of paramount chieftaincy elections to get local traditional authorities that would honour the aspirations of our people. To conclude, let me reiterate my pledge: I was elected president of the whole of Sierra Leone; I will serve the whole of Sierra Leone; I will unite this country by fulfilling the promise of the Agenda for Change to the common man and woman, regardless of their sex, ethnic group, region or political party.

Mr. Speaker, eighteen months from now, we will commemorate 50 years of independence as a country. When we take stock of our nation during those celebrations let it be said that this

country, despite its periods of tragedy, has men and women who stood firm for its greater glory. Let it be said that these men and women, from every region, from every district, town and village, asserted the greater values of service, justice, unity and respect for the common man and woman. Let it be said that those of us who have been given the duty to lead signed up to the better meaning of representation - service to the people who elected us. Our people want roads, electricity, food, wellbeing, and respect. We owe it to them to use our talents, our strength and powers to fulfill their aspirations.

God Bless the common man and woman

God Bless Sierra Leone

I thank you for your attention