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PRESS RELEASE



Statement by the Rt. Hon, Dr. Abass Chernor Bundu
Speaker of the Parliament of Sierra Leone
at the 146th IPU Assembly, at the General Debate on
“Promoting Peaceful Coexistence and Inclusive Societies:
Fighting Intolerance”
Manama, Bahrain, Monday, 13th March 2023

Mr. President
Chairperson
Mr. Secretary General
Fellow Delegates

Distinguished Ladies and gentlemen

I bring you greetings from Sierra Leone, the land of the Lion Mountains, and especially from her Parliament and People.

Unmitigated acclaim goes to the Parliament and People of Bahrain, the Land of a Million Date Palms, for hosting this 146th General Assembly of the IPU and for the outstanding facilities that have been placed at our disposal.

Excellencies, Distinguished delegates

Despite the rights and obligations enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, now elevated to the status of rights under customary international law, today, we all still live in a world challenged by growing uncertainty and insecurity with grave underpinnings of rising injustice, discrimination, inequality and intolerance; a world increasingly being pulled apart by abhorrent forces of hate and divisiveness, tension and conflict, and want and poverty. Peaceful co-existence and inclusion, some might even say radical inclusion, must therefore remain at the top of the agenda of the times in which we live because the consequences of the alternatives are just too dire to contemplate. Indeed the evidence is irrefutable that the world today is at its lowest point of peacefulness and has in fact been so for the past 15 or more years.

Nowhere is this more conspicuous than in addressing gender inequality and religious intolerance, to name just two examples. All of this threatens social cohesion and global peace. Parliaments and Parliamentarians must therefore continue to play a crucial role as the representatives of the people, and as the primary channel by which grievances and concerns, but also needs and desires, are expressed.

Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates

Sierra Leone, despite its smallness by geography and population, stands out uniquely and extraordinarily tall in the world today as the brightest emblem of religious tolerance on the firmament. With a population of a little over seven million divided between Muslims and Christians in the ratio of about 3 to 1 respectively, Sierra Leone has successfully and effectively memorialized

intermarriages between people of different religious faiths and beliefs. Such intermarriages today are countless and are as common in occurrence in churches and mosques as people shopping together in the same market malls and market places. Families and friends donning different religions move about freely and joyously in all places of worship without disturbance and in full support and solidarity of one another especially during weddings, child naming and christening ceremonies and funerals. And this has been going on for decades without generating as much as an iota of tension, much less of violence in the country.

Today, so legendary is the intermingling between Muslims and Christians that it is no exaggeration to claim that over the years Sierra Leone has become the brightest beacon of hope, the unsung epitome and the gold standard by which to emulate and judge the profundity of religious tolerance for the rest of the universe. And there is no better exemplar to demonstrate this height of religious tolerance in Sierra Leone than our current Head of State, His Excellency Brigadier (Rtd.) Julius Maada Bio, who is a practicing Catholic married to the First Lady Madam Fatima Bio from The Gambia who is a Muslim. Another example, famously of the reverse order, is President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah, of blessed memory who was a staunch Muslim and occupied the Presidency from 1996 to 2007 whilst married to the First Lady Mrs. Patricia Kabbah, again a Catholic by religion. These two notable examples not only magnify the apogee of religious tolerance in Sierra Leone, they have helped to cascade the culture of religious tolerance reverentially to the middle and lower echelons of Sierra Leonean society to such an extent that it is now generally accepted as a matter of course, and not as much as a brow is raised or a glance of disapproval is turned when such mixed marriages occur anywhere in the country.

The same also can be said of the current Government's flagship of human capital development in the areas of providing free quality education at the basic and secondary school educational and national healthcare institutional levels. For so long has it been trite to observe school children of different religions going in their thousands to educational institutions run by either Christian or Muslim denomination as is equally true of sick patients needing and receiving medical care in hospitals managed by public and private sectors alike throughout the country. There is absolutely no discrimination to speak of based on religion.

Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates

Over and above all this, what has climaxed most our level of resilience, tolerance, cohesion and integration is symbolized by the enactment by Parliament last year of two extant laws under the rubric of the Public Elections Act and the Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Act. Both laws set out legal minimums for the representation and participation of women in the Legislature as well as in the public and private sectors. For example, by the enactment of the Public Elections Act, the aim is to increase women's representation in the Legislature from the present paltry level of just under 13 per cent in the Fifth Parliament to a minimum of 30 per cent in the Sixth Parliament to be ushered into existence after the General Elections due on June 24 this year and applying for that purpose a system of proportional representation. It contains a legal prescription obligating political parties in a general election to ensure that "for every 3 candidates nominated for an electoral area, one of them shall be female", and the Returning Officer is empowered to reject the nomination papers of any political party that is non-compliant. The general expectation is that this minimum representation of 30 per cent for women in Parliament shall be attained after the June elections. Thus, Parliament, for its part, has done its bit; it is now within the remit of the political parties to do the needful. Overall, noble as the intent of the law might be, we must await to see whether the political actors would capitalize on it to lay the solid foundation required for the attainment of gender parity in the not too distant future.

Similarly, at the Executive level, the GEWE Act has introduced a monumental milestone for advancement towards the attainment of gender parity and inclusion in the not too distant future but starting first with a 30 per cent quota for each gender in such appointive positions in the public sector as Ministers, Ambassadors, Boards of parastatals and institutions that are fully or partially funded by Government.

Additionally, there is the new Customary Land Rights Act also enacted in 2022. The watershed has been similarly phenomenal. The right to own, hold, use, inherit, succeed to or deal with land under customary law has been guaranteed to women and men on an equal footing. This law goes further by annulling any customary law that excludes, limits or inhibits women from owning, holding, using transferring, inheriting, succeeding to or dealing with land. And where land is acquired under customary law by married couples or who are in a domestic cohabitation, this law guarantees that the land shall be registered in the joint names of the spouses.

Distinguished Delegates

The public space alone is not however coterminous with the objective of empowering women in Sierra Leone. The private sector is not left behind. The GEWE Act also seeks to put men and women on an equal footing in accessing credit from financial institutions be they public or private by criminalizing and penalizing gender-based acts of discrimination.

Thus seen, Excellencies and Distinguished Delegates, the current Government in Sierra Leone is currently on the right trajectory, and, considering that women account for 51 per cent of the population, the current Executive, with the collaboration of the Legislature, is putting them at the center of its avowed determination to promote and build a comprehensive and resilient national culture of respect for gender equality and women empowerment. Exponentially 2022 will go down in history as the watershed year in which the Government of Sierra Leone moved from the rhetoric to positive legislative action. What remains in the journey ahead is no less timorous, arduous and daunting but if the momentum established in 2022 is sustained there is no doubting the determination of the Bio Government to forge ahead to reach the desired goal. To this end, I will conclude with a quotation taken from a Statement made by President Maada Bio at the General Debate of the 5th UN Conference on Least Developed Countries held in Doha, Qatar on 5th March this year in which he said and I quote:

“We will continue to prioritize interventions that address vulnerabilities and exclusion among women, girls, youth, the aged and the disabled. We will scale up radical inclusion, financial inclusion, skills development and job creation, and continue to pursue our National Social Protection Policy”.

On this note, Ladies and gentlemen, I thank you for your kind attention.