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**PRESS RELEASE**

**WELCOME SPEECH BY THE RT. HON. DR. ABASS CHERNOR BUNDU, SPEAKER OF SIERRA LEONE PARLIAMENT & PRESIDENT OF THE CPA (AFRICA REGION) TO THE OPENING CEREMONY OF THE 52<sup>ND</sup> ASSEMBLY OF THE COMMONWEALTH PARLIAMENTARY ASSOCIATION (CPA) AFRICA REGION, BINTUMANI CONFERENCE CENTRE, FREETOWN, SIERRA LEONE, 6<sup>TH</sup> JUNE 2023**

Your Excellency the President of the Republic,  
Rt. Hon. Colleague Speakers, CPA Africa Region,  
Deputy Speaker of the Sierra Leone Parliament,  
Chairperson, C/w Women Parliamentarians, Africa Region,  
Acting Chairperson, CPA International,  
Secretary-General, CPA International,  
Hon. Members of Parliament,  
Ministers & Deputy Ministers of Government,  
Excellencies, Members of the Diplomatic and Consular Corps,  
Clerks of various Parliaments,  
Director-General & Members of the CPA Planning Committee,  
The Secretariat of the CPA, Africa Region,  
Members of the Fourth Estate,  
Distinguished Ladies & Gentlemen  
Good morning and welcome to this 52<sup>nd</sup> Commonwealth Parliamentary Association of the Africa Region. We thank you all immensely for

choosing to meet here in Freetown, the capital city of Sierra Leone, the English version of *Sierra Leona*, the Portuguese word for the Lion Mountains. You have all come here today from 19 African countries encompassing 63 national and sub-national legislatures and you have come together as members of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, Africa Region; an international community of Commonwealth Parliaments and Legislatures working together to enlarge and deepen the Commonwealth's commitment to the highest standards of democratic governance, gender equality and equal representation. No time is more auspicious for Commonwealth Africa to meet in Freetown than now when Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the Second of the United Kingdom is celebrating the Platinum Jubilee (70 years) of her reign as Sovereign of her Dominions and as titular Head of the Commonwealth to which we all belong. On behalf of all of us, we extend to Her Majesty the Queen our warmest congratulations. This privilege you afford us today is twice blessed. First, it encompasses the special honour to me personally and the Parliament of Sierra Leone to host you, my Colleague Speakers and Parliamentarians from Commonwealth Africa; and second to choose me to serve as your incoming President of CPA Africa Region. Sierra Leone, and Freetown in particular, has long been an enduring symbol of Africa's history and spirit, its continuity and endurance, its vitality and resilience. Here, in this City of Freetown was founded a settlement that became the inspiration of enslaved peoples everywhere. Here, in this land in 1792, the age of slavery ended and a new age of freedom dawned; not just for Sierra Leone but for the larger part of mankind far beyond its boundaries. And, here, the concept of freedom for all enslaved peoples everywhere first took root.

The African slaves who had fought with the vanquished forces of Britain in the 1791 American War of Independence had initially relocated to

Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada for their own safety but a new permanent home had to be found for them. This brought together Statesmen like Chairman Henry Thornton, William Wilberforce, Granville Sharp, Thomas Clarkson and Thomas Peters to concert their efforts and on 15<sup>th</sup> January 1792, 15 ships with 1,196 liberated slaves, set sail from Nova Scotia. On 11<sup>th</sup> March 1792, they finally landed in this place and they named it FREETOWN.

Ladies and Gentlemen, we are talking about an event that happened some 230 years ago and the Municipality of Freetown has just recently celebrated the 230<sup>th</sup> Birthday of Freetown. And for good measure, all Sierra Leoneans, past and present, have decided in their infinite wisdom to keep and maintain both the name of Freetown as their capital and of Sierra Leone as their country. They do so, no doubt remembering the wisdom embedded in the writings of the celebrated Latin American sage and philosopher, Santa Yana, who penned this simple but adoring adage that “those who forget history are condemned to relive history”. So, Ladies and Gentlemen, we cannot and should never forget our history. Now, in case you are wondering why the name Sierra Leone, let me quickly remind you that it is also another symbol of our illustrious history. There was in the Fifteenth century this young Portuguese explorer called Pedro de Cintra, who, according to legend, was mightily imbued with an insatiable spirit of adventure which eventually drove him to set out on a mission during the age of Dominion to acquire more and more new lands for the Sovereign of Portugal. His exploits landed him at the estuary of Sierra Leone where he found a promontory of hills and mountains stretching all along the coast from the Atlantic Ocean to the interior. Their landscape looked as unique and fascinating then as they do today. But despite his adventurism the young Pedro quickly developed a fright. He started to conjure in his mind images of wild man-eating lions lurking in the forests behind the coastal hills and mountains he had seen, waiting

to devour him and his crew of hapless adventurers. And after so many hours of wonder, torment and discomfort, he hastily advised himself to move down South to less risky and tumorous lands, but not before he had inscribed on a rock protruding above the watermark the words *Sierra Leona*, the Portuguese for the Lion Mountains. However, as it turned out, Pedro was greatly mistaken because the picturesque hills and mountains he had seen in fact harboured no lions.

Thanks to Pedro for suddenly taking fright of what he had conjured in his mind causing him to change course and depart as fast as he had come, otherwise this Conference here today would not have taken place. Apart from the lingua franca of this Conference being Portuguese and not the Queen's language, Sierra Leone would instead have become a member of the Lusophone fraternity and not the Commonwealth.

So, once again, we extend to you our distinguished brothers and sisters a hearty welcome to this historical Portuguese relic but with no Portuguese language and certainly no lions to be frightened of, at any rate not along the coast of Freetown which today is playing host to the Fifty-second Assembly of Parliamentarians of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) Africa Region.

Again, Ladies and Gentlemen, as we heartily welcome you to this land of Freedom, it will not have escaped your attention that after our Head of State was ushered into this Auditorium with the rendition of our national anthem and that of the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians, they were immediately followed by the invocation of the presence of God Almighty to come in and take over control and direct the fate of our Conference. This was done with prayers in both the Muslim and Christian faiths. The meaning of this is again simply to re-echo our welcome to the land where all Sierra Leoneans exalt highly their unbounded love for country and in which almost daily they join in holy worship together in Churches and Mosques without as much as a wink or eyebrow raised in

bewilderment. This, Ladies and Gentlemen, is one of our greatest national virtues – the tolerance of each other’s religious beliefs - of which this country with more than 7.5 million inhabitants stands aloft and above many others and of which it is justly proud. On special occasions like weddings, christening, thanksgiving and funerals, it is commonplace to find Muslims and Christians congregating and cohabiting together in harmony in each other’s place of worship in a manner that lifts our spirit of camaraderie and level of respect and make our tolerance of each other’s religion look like second nature. If you are looking for a country that is a true exemplar of national cohesion through religious tolerance, I say proudly to you look no further and I would heartily present Sierra Leone to you.

Education is another field in which Sierra Leone has always excelled and is also justly proud. Here, we regard education not only as a fundamental human right but also as the catalyst and gateway to human capital and national development. Precisely because of this the Government of President Julius Maada Bio has had no difficulty investing not less than 22 percent of the country’s national budget annually in education since he attained political power in 2018. But there is another cogent reason for this high level of investment. Not too long ago this country’s history was replete with international accolades for being an admirable dispenser of good quality education to the extent that it earned itself the enviable reputation of being the ‘Athens of education’ in all of West Africa. Except for the momentary decline it suffered as a result of ravages from an eleven-year rebel war in the 1990s, today, under the redoubtable leadership of President Julius Maada Bio, our educational system is undergoing a phenomenal revival. From those ravages of the rebel war it is now beginning to rise up again and aspiring to reach the pinnacle it once attained in pre-war years. All of this because of the huge successes currently being registered by the Free Quality Education policy

of President Maada Bio. For example, just last year alone, over 600,000 additional children, especially girls, accessed school; over 5000 additional qualified teachers were recruited and we also recorded the highest success rate in public examinations at all levels. Ladies and Gentlemen, we can once again proudly say that Sierra Leone is comfortably and irreversibly regaining the pristine glory it once had as the Athens of education in West Africa.

Lastly, distinguished brothers and sisters, I want to turn to our own area of utmost interest and familiarity, the Parliament. Not only a beacon of peace, hope, democracy and good governance, Parliament is by definition the embodiment of the majestic and visible summit of the people. And the fact of our meeting here today in Freetown, in the format of the Association of Commonwealth Parliaments, is, in a sense, tantamount to a summit of summits, and an enduring testament of our shared democratic values and experience. It is also an eloquent testimony to the strength of Parliament itself; and it is about the enduring quality of that strength and the obligations it imposes on us all to use it with wisdom, with vision and with courage and kinship. Little wonder that the theme of this Conference has been appropriately crafted to be “The Role of African Parliaments in Building Inclusive Society to Counter Growing Insecurity in Africa.”

Here, in Sierra Leone, our Legislature is unicameral with a total of 132 Members elected by universal suffrage and 14 Paramount Chiefs elected by a limited franchise in the 14 administrative districts into which the country outside the Western Area is divided. Our two major political parties, the APC and SLPP, currently share 58 seats each with one bye-election pending. This means we have in existence here something akin to a “Hung Parliament” with no single party able to muster the necessary two-thirds majority (98 votes) to effect an amendment to any nonentrenched provisions of our national Constitution. For an

entrenched provision, a referendum is additionally mandatorily required. In essence, therefore, all of the provisions of our Grundnorm currently enjoy absolute immunity from change because of a mathematical impossibility. The only option therefore is to manage change in our legislative imperative through consultation or by regular engagement between the leaderships of political parties represented in Parliament. To this extent, therefore, consultation is inevitably incrementally acquiring a special significance and developing into a new term of art. But whatever the challenges posed by our present Hung Parliament in Sierra Leone, the good thing is that they all point ultimately to the broadening of understanding and raising of the quality of dialogue and cooperation as a veritable tool for deepening national cohesion, democracy and good governance. On that belief we can build our respective communities; but without it we labour in vain – or, at least, we labour without that assurance in our endeavours which is the true pre-condition of creativity. But build we must.

With this, we say to our brothers and sisters from Commonwealth Africa, from far and near, as well as to our numerous friends from outside Africa, welcome, and to use also our local languages we say kabor, kushe, senoo, awaana to Sierra Leone, the new land of peace, freedom and infinite opportunities! As a nation, we take great pride in our unrivalled hospitality and in our ambience of peace and serenity, with clear crystal waters and sandy beaches whose softness and variety are second to none and, indeed, a sight to behold. We are also naturally blessed with historic islands that offer a wide range of activities including bird watching, sport fishing and hiking.

Once again, we thank you for coming to Freetown and wish you a most pleasant and memorable stay with us.

