

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 Second Session of the Third Parliament of the Second
Republic of Sierra Leone*

In the Chamber of Parliament Building

Tower Hill, Freetown

On Friday, 10th October, 2008 at 10:00 a.m.

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

It is for me a great pleasure to be here again in this Honourable House of Parliament to set out the agenda of my Government for the development of our country in the coming years.

About this time last year when I addressed this august body, my government was barely a month old in office but had the courage to chart a bold new path for accelerating the advancement of our country on all fronts. Our vision and strategies were subsequently firmied up in accordance with the manifesto of our party, the All Peoples Congress, in a comprehensive plan called the "Agenda for Change".

Mr. Speaker, our Nation's democratic credentials as well as our level of tolerance continue to stand the test of time and it is a credit to us as a nation that the ties of friendship and kinship that hold us together have triumphed over the divisive efforts of extremists in our political parties and religious faiths. We should be convinced therefore, that if we continue to live in harmony with one another, work hard and honestly and always seek to resolve our differences by peaceful means, we shall certainly make this country a better place for all of us.

Mr. Speaker, this country is on the move; and our efforts at building a democratic and business friendly society are receiving recognition from all over the globe. This year, Sierra Leone was selected to receive the prestigious Africa Peace Award by the Trustees of the African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes (ACCORD) for our good human rights record, the peaceful settlement of disputes and good governance. Also, the World Bank and IFC have rated Sierra Leone as the easiest country in West Africa to start a business.

Mr. Speaker, in my last address I declared that my government's policy was 'Zero Tolerance for Corruption.' In pursuit of this goal, we revised and launched the National Anti-Corruption Strategy (NACS) and passed into law one of the toughest Anti-corruption acts in Africa. The Act made it compulsory for all public servants to declare their assets. In accordance with this provision I became the first public servant to comply, and I have directed all my Ministers and other public servants to follow my example.

Mr. Speaker, we are painfully aware of the battered image of our country and how difficult it has been to attract investors, business people and tourists. But we are a tolerant nation. We have over and over again demonstrated our desire and ability to freely choose the government of our liking. We have a wonderful heritage and a history of achieving many firsts in Africa, from having the first newspapers and radio to having the first university in sub-sharan Africa, Fourah Bay College. However, we now need to re-brand this nation. We should be more robust in articulating these good things about our country and build on our national heritage.

Mr. Speaker, we are constantly working to change negative perceptions of our country. Our efforts have included paying official visits to a number of strategic countries with whom we have signed technical cooperation agreements. We have also succeeded in inviting high profile dignitaries in business and politics to the country. To further enhance our standing in the international community, my Government intends to expand our diplomatic presence to Brazil, India and Senegal as well as to appoint Honorary Consuls in a number of countries.

Mr. Speaker, we will remain committed to consolidating the gains we have made in democratic governance. We have conducted credible local government elections and I personally participated in the inauguration of the newly elected councils all over the country. I made it a point of duty to keep communication lines with the opposition always open and even launched the opposition radio station.

Mr. Speaker, having laid a solid foundation for the advancement of our country, we intend to proceed in the coming year, according to the priorities agreed in our "Agenda for Change" Programme. The agenda concentrates on six priority areas as follows:

- 1) Energy and Water supply;
- 2) Infrastructure and Transportation;
- 3) Youth Unemployment;
- 4) the Growth Sectors;
- 5) Social Services and
- 6) Capacity Building

Mr. Speaker, within these priority areas, my government will place greater emphasis on the tripod of our development, namely energy, agriculture and infrastructure. While my Government remains committed to addressing the basic social needs of our people, we need to concentrate on these three priority areas to sustain the necessary level of development that can lift our people out of poverty. We as a people must therefore mobilize the necessary resources to undertake these Programmes.

Mr. Speaker, let me now turn to the specifics of the Agenda for Change

Energy

Mr. Speaker, when I stood in this honourable house last year, my pledge was to give energy the topmost priority of my government. I declared the poor state of power generation an emergency and put in place an Energy Emergency Programme to speed up the restoration of electricity supply not only to Freetown and its environs, but also to the district headquarter towns. Under this emergency Programme we have increased electricity generation in Freetown from five megawatts to twenty five megawatts.

Mr. Speaker, in October 2007, I convened a meeting to reactivate international support for the Bumbuna Project. Pledges were made by the donors especially DFID, the Italian Government and the African Development Bank and work restarted in February this year. I am proud to inform you that 98% of the Bumbuna Project is now completed. Stringing of the transmission lines from Bumbuna to Kingtom substation is anticipated in December 2008 and completion of the project in April 2009.

Mr. Speaker, my government has re-invigorated international interest in our energy sector. The Government of Japan is supporting the procurement of a 10MW power plant for Kingtom Power station and construction of a primary substation at Regent/Hill Station. The Arab Bank for Economic Development in Africa (BADEA) is providing funds to significantly increase power generation at the Blackhall Road Power Station.

The United Nations Peace Building Fund provided funds for Emergency Support to the Energy Sector, the major components being support to the Freetown and Bo/Kenema Power stations. We have also secured support from the Peoples Republic of China and UNIDO for the construction of a mini hydro dam on the Bankasoka River in Port Loko. The project would be commissioned in November this year. The Global Environment Facility (GEF) is providing funding for the Moyamba Mini Hydro Project. The European Union is funding Electrification of 11 Provincial Towns to facilitate transmission of Bumbuna Power to local communities.

Every district in the country is endowed with hydro electric potential, and government intends to provide a mini hydro for all the district headquarter towns. Feasibility studies have commenced for the Bikongor Hydro electric Project in Kono.

Agriculture

Mr. Speaker, my government has identified the agribusiness sector as a strategic sector for investment because of the possibilities it represents for food security, revenue generation and wealth creation.

To achieve this vision, five objectives have been identified:

- i. Increasing agricultural productivity;
- ii. Promoting diversified Commercial Agriculture through the Private Sector;
- iii. Improving Agricultural Research and Extension Service Delivery;
- iv. Promoting efficient and effective Resource Management Systems;
- v. Improving agricultural output through value addition, post harvest loss reduction, agro-processing, packaging and building rural market infrastructures

Some major achievements in the Agriculture Sector during the period under review include:

- Cultivation of 48000 acres of land which produced 288,000 bags of milled rice through the tractorization scheme;
- 73,000 bushels of seed rice was purchased and distributed in good time to the farmers both in the tractorization scheme and individual cultivation in inland valley and mangrove swamps;
- Government approved the National Agricultural Response Programme (NARP) in support of the cultivation of close to 15,000 acres of rice and almost 10,000 acres of assorted crops and livestock;
- 250,000 cashew nut seedlings were made available to farmers this year;
- Government engaged WFP to purchase and supply 2000mt of local rice to various beneficiaries including school children, lactating mothers and persons with HIV/AIDS;
- Providing access to financial services to farmers through the establishment of Financial Services Associations. Thirty such associations are being established.

Government's vision of commercialization of agriculture is being achieved through a Programme for attracting private sector investment.

Irrigation is part of government's medium to long term strategy for boosting food security and poverty alleviation. In that regard, fourteen irrigable areas totaling two hundred and forty one thousand, six hundred hectares have been identified and basic data on their irrigation potential generated. The topmost five are Torma Bum, Kumrabai Mamilla, Rhombe, Gbundapi and Rolako.

In the next twelve months, Government will be implementing both the 2008 National Agricultural Response Programme (AAP) and the 2009 Annual Agricultural Programme. The 2008 Programme will provide harvesters for the pending rice harvests, ensure the repair of tractors and the purchase of ploughs and harrows so that many more tractors will be deployed as early as February 2009. The 2009 Programme will continue to support farmers under the tractorization scheme, provide seed rice and supply fertilizers, pesticides and herbicides.

Ten thousand hectares each of cocoa and coffee have been targeted for rehabilitation. Government will engage and support farmer-based organizations to become viable economic entities. Moreover, the private sector will be strengthened and encouraged to be fully involved in agriculture with particular focus on irrigation, post-harvest technology and marketing.

Research and extension services will be intensified alongside the formulation of a national agricultural development policy and a strategic plan for this country for the medium to long term under the Comprehensive African Agricultural Development (CAADP) Framework agreed upon by African Governments and development partners.

Our farmers are not getting good returns from agriculture because of the huge percentage of post harvest loss, lack of attention to adding value to agricultural products, poor packaging and marketing strategies. My government has in partnership with the World Bank launched the Private Sector and Rural Development Programme to address these challenges. We are starting a micro financing project with IFAD in Koinadugu; and initiating discussions on the establishment of an Agricultural Bank.

Infrastructure and Transportation

Mr. Speaker, on our assumption of office last year, we were very concerned about the slow pace of implementation of many reconstruction and rehabilitation projects. The dilapidated state in which we found many government offices, housing units, and the roads in our towns and cities was a constant source of despair.

To address these challenges, my government's rehabilitation/ reconstruction plan for 2009 includes the following:

- Rehabilitation of 160 Kilometres of roads in major provincial towns and 2055 Kilometres of feeder roads;
- Rehabilitation of government buildings, civil servant and ministerial quarters and access roads within these government structures;
- Rehabilitation of the Makeni-Matotoka and Bo-Kenema roads;
- Rehabilitation of the Freetown Monrovia Highway, the Kenema-Koindu road, the Port Loko-Lungi road; and
- Reconstruction of Phase 2 of the Freetown-Conakry Highway.
- Construction of the Freetown Hill side and the Tokeh-Lumley roads.

Action on these vital roads has been very slow in the past and we intend to accelerate their construction as this will immensely lessen the burden on our people.

My government is also conducting feasibility studies for a Freetown ring road system, and the Koidu-Matotoka road. A Freetown Ring Road System will transform this city into the marvel of the sub-region, with circles of coastal roads linking up with hillside roads to give Freetown a 21st century Road Network.

Mr. Speaker, although our country boasts of immense possibilities for river transportation, we have not paid sufficient attention to it. Our jetties are derelict, ferries irregular, and many of our boats unsafe. My government will, in the coming year, reconstruct ten jetties, install navigational aids and communication equipment, procure three ferries and pilot search and rescue boats.

Mining and Mineral Resources

Mr. Speaker, mining is currently Sierra Leone's second most important sector after Agriculture in terms of employment opportunities and income generation. My Government will ensure that the state of Sierra Leone and its people significantly increase earnings from our mineral wealth to sustain our development agenda. In this regard government will:

- Regulate more stringently the mineral industry in Sierra Leone especially with respect to the diamond industry;
- Encourage primary processing of minerals and facilitate trading opportunities for mined products;
- Improve the welfare and benefits of individuals and communities participating in and affected by mining;
- Promote improved employment practices and encourage the participation of women in the mineral sector;
- Prevent the employment of children; and
- Minimize and mitigate the harmful effects of mining operations in communities and the environment.

As a first step, Government with support from its international partners has set up a task force to review mineral rights as well as all existing agreements with mining companies operating in our country with a view to:

- i. Raising the standards of transparency and accountability for mining companies and Government;
- ii. Balancing the need for appropriate incentives for investors against the need to ensure fair returns to the country from mining operations;
- iii. Promoting public-private sector partnership for infrastructural development in line with recommendations of the Core Minerals Policy.

With support from the World Bank, Government is completing the preparation of a nationwide system that will considerably improve our licensing procedure.

Gold is mined in Sierra Leone, but Government has never been able to successfully tap this source of revenue. Government will take measures to address this situation. In the coming year, Government proposes to establish a National Minerals Agency and to institute a series of reforms in the sector.

Marine Resources

Mr. Speaker, our country's realization of benefits from the fisheries industry has been impaired in the past by a number of problems including inadequate staff capacity, poor equipment and uncontrollable poaching in our waters. The major thrust of the Government in the fisheries sector is therefore to:

- Protect the territorial waters of the state;
- Commercialize and add value to fisheries products; and
- Promote artisanal fisheries

One of the major concerns of my Government is that fish products from Sierra Leone are currently banned from entry into lucrative European markets. Government is taking measures to address these issues.

Poaching and other illegal activities in our territorial waters are limiting the generation of revenue and jeopardizing the sustainability of our marine resources. It is therefore absolutely important to safeguard the fishing grounds of the nation. Government is committed to stepping up surveillance of our waters and improving our capacity to deter illegal fishing and piracy activities.

Improvement in the capacity of the country to exploit its fishery potential requires that we develop adequate fisheries infrastructure. Government will therefore establish fish landing jetties and fish receiving stations at Goderich, Tombo, Shenge and Bonthe.

Tourism

Mr. Speaker, Sierra Leone is a beautiful country, but we pay little attention to our touristic potential. My government is working assiduously to change this state of affairs. We are, in collaboration with our partners, designing a strategic plan and marketing Programme to revitalize the tourism industry. We are creating a concession policy, designating tourism development sites and promoting investment in the sector. We will also put in place appropriate tourism regulatory and legislative framework, support the development and promotion of sustainable ecotourism resources and enhance the country's image as a middle and up market tourist destination.

Culture

Mr. Speaker, our culture is the mark of our identity, an inheritance from our forefathers that we must enhance for transmission to our children. Let us dedicate ourselves to utilizing our rich cultural heritage; let us make a pledge to enliven our

society with the dazzling traditions of our people. We have seen tentative moves in this direction; people wear Africana on Fridays, Sierra Leonean music is once more popular in most places. But we need to do more than that.

Let us not only wear Africana, but a **Leona**, or a **Sierra**; the **ronkos** of Koinadugu, the **kondee gulay** of Bo and Kailahun, the **gara** of Makeni, the **kabaslot** of the Western Area. This is my call to all Sierra Leoneans, let us put Friday aside for wearing Sierra Leonean attire. My call to our musicians and producers is to get on the **shegureh**, the **balanji**, the **kondi**, the **killi** and the **bata**. Energise the **bubu**, the **goombay** and the **poromende**. Revive the **ambasgeda** and the **alimania**; recall the music of Calendar, Salia and Bassie Kondi. My call to artists is to choreograph the Sierra Leonean dance. My call to our writers is to write the Sierra Leonean stories and bring alive the souls of our people. Let our fashion designers start a process of creating the Sierra Leonean wear for our convocations and parades, for our thanksgivings and anniversaries.

Mr. Speaker, our cultural renaissance will enhance the re-branding of our nation. It will rekindle faith in our abilities, generate revenue for our people and enliven our streets with the colors of our heritage. To support this cultural renaissance, I hereby declare every Friday a day of Sierra Leonean culture when we wear Sierra Leonean attire, eat Sierra Leonean food and dance to Sierra Leonean music.

The Private Sector

Mr. Speaker, the responsibility for delivering national economic growth is not only for the public sector. Indeed, it is very much through the activities of the private sector that real economic growth can be achieved. My government's Agenda for Change is inextricably linked to the pursuit of broad based and inclusive private sector led growth. This is reflected in our commitment to the process of reforms, enhancement of the required infrastructure, and development of entrepreneurial skills. To support our objectives of centering public-private sector partnership to meet our development goals, my government has done the following in the last 12 months:

- Made it easier to start a business in the country
- Completed a financial sector strategy by the Bank of Sierra Leone in collaboration with private sector
- Prepared a private sector development strategy
- Established the Sierra Leone Investment and Export Promotion Agency
- Approved drafts for a new Companies Act, Payment System Act and bankruptcy law that will soon be laid before this house
- Reduced treasury rates down from approximately 22% to 15% in order to facilitate a reduction in commercial lending rates

Our efforts are facilitating significant investments in agriculture and generally increasing the flow of investors, including the Soros Economic development Fund

which is committed to making significant investments in Agriculture. But significantly more contributions by the private sector to our Agenda for Change would be realized when we successfully overcome the following challenges:

- Improving land administration in the Western Area and enhancing unfettered access to land in the rest of the country.
- Improving the capacity of the commercial division of the High Court to settle commercial matters more speedily
- Further development of the financial sector to improve access to financial services, reduce the cost of credit and encourage innovation products and service delivery
- Capacity building opportunities for entrepreneurs through formal and informal channels.

Mr. Speaker, these are challenges that we are determined to overcome. Our central governing principles, economic and financial policies and strategies emphasize the private sector as a catalyst for achieving our development goals. We believe in partnership with the private sector to deliver on the promises we have made to the people of this country.

Gender

Mr. Speaker, sensitivity to gender issues will permeate all our Programmes. As we develop new initiatives, my government will ensure that the needs and interests of women and girls are fully reflected. My government is committed to accelerating the implementation of the provisions of the Gender Acts of 2007 as a fulcrum for ensuring the full and equal participation of women in every sector of this country. With women constituting over 51% of our population we definitely cannot develop without their active participation in the socio-political and economic life of the country.

Youth Unemployment

Mr. Speaker, youths are the pillar of our democracy and development. They have accomplished much to warrant the respect and support of my government. Cassette sellers, bike riders, the disabled and other youths have formed themselves into formidable organizations to earn a living and contribute to societal development. They came in their numbers to vote and by that singular action, announced that the time had come for a change of leadership in the affairs of the country. My government will soon lay before this house the bill for the establishment of a National Youth Commission that will serve as the institutional base for designing, coordinating and leading government's youth Programmes.

Youths need jobs and my government will continue to work very hard to ensure that youths are employed. We are currently engaging the Peace Building Fund for the implementation of an agricultural project that would employ over fifteen thousand youths. The National Commission for Social Action is undertaking a

sustainable youth project to build the entrepreneurial skills of hundreds of young people. My Government will also explore possibilities for self employment for enterprising youths.

Mr. Speaker, employment is linked to availability of skilled persons. It is in this light that my government is seeking partnership with friendly countries and institutions for the construction of technical and vocational institutions.

Education

Mr. Speaker, the future of this country depends on the investment we make in the education of our people and our concern for their well being. For too long, Programmes implemented to enhance our people's education have been inappropriate. Schools have been poorly constructed, educational systems badly implemented, scholarships and bursaries given on the whim of bureaucrats and resources wasted on ghost lecturers, ghost teachers and ghost schools. My government intends to put a stop to this.

Mr. Speaker, my government believes that children are our most sustainable resource, the diamonds of the future. Education is the polishing industry that makes our children glitter with joy and skills. We want our children to sparkle and compete in the world of now and tomorrow, and education is definitely the key to that.

We are scoring successes. Enrolment at primary school is over 64% now. We have been decentralizing basic education to the districts to improve governance of schools. Our 2007-2015 Education Sector Plan has been endorsed by all in-country development partners and a catalytic grant fund agreement for 13.9 million dollars has been committed.

Mr. Speaker, we will definitely meet the Millennium Development Goal in Education by 2015 if we continue this trend but we still face enormous challenges. Illiteracy rates in the country are still very high. 300,000 children of primary school going age are out of school, 40% of teachers are untrained and unqualified and many community teachers are unpaid.

We are meeting these challenges head-on. We have completed a teacher verification exercise to weed out ghost schools and send ghost teachers back to the cemeteries. This will plug the leaks in the sector, establish a corruption-free data base for effective planning, ensure proper governance of the sector and position my government to improve the conditions of service for teachers.

We are launching an aggressive literacy Programme to provide second chance opportunities for education and skills building for our people who could not go to school during the war. Municipal councils are passing bye laws to get children off

the streets and into schools. We are also reviewing the 6-3-3-4 system to improve the efficacy, efficiency and quality of the educational system.

Whilst there are no major gender disparities among pupils at primary education level, child marriage, teenage pregnancy, and cultural biases are resulting in very low transition rates for girls into secondary and tertiary education.

But our country cannot meet its education challenges alone. With greater collaboration between our international partners and us, we will certainly reclaim our reputation for high quality education.

Mr. Speaker, I cannot end my statement on education without calling attention to our disappointment at the poor results registered at the last West African School Certificate Examination. This is a serious indictment on our educational system particularly at the secondary school level. My government is determined to get to the bottom of this problem and will immediately set up a commission of inquiry to investigate the causes of the poor performance, as well as other issues affecting the quality of our educational system, and to make recommendations on how to address the situation.

Health

Mr. Speaker, the health situation of our people is grave. My Government is strongly committed to investing in the health of our people. It is my strong conviction that without such an investment, we will remain at the bottom of the development ladder.

- My government's immediate steps to meet these challenges include:
- development and commencement of the implementation of district reproductive and child health plans by January 2009
- Scaling up and acceleration of a minimum package of essential services, including immunization, utilization of treated bed nets, promotion of early and exclusive breastfeeding, promotion of hygiene practices as well as making available minimum maternal and neonatal health care systems
- Finalizing a human resource policy and strategy
- Improving reproductive and child health
- Investing in the development of a system for procurement and management of drugs, equipment and supplies.

My government is also committed to ensuring that we develop a health insurance scheme that would improve the quality of our health facilities and increase accessibility to them. With assistance from the ILO and NASSIT, studies will be conducted to determine the most suitable approach to instituting a National Health Insurance Scheme in Sierra Leone in 2009.

Prevention of HIV/AIDS and mitigating its effects will remain a top priority of the Government. We will utilize the various levels of leadership to play an active role in combating HIV/AIDS. In the coming years our emphasis is to have an effective decentralized response by engaging all sectors to take action on HIV/AIDS.

Housing

Mr. Speaker, for many years in our nation's history, the majority of our people have had to live in extremely poor conditions. Slums are emerging in major towns and cities everywhere in the country. This mushrooming of shanties is creating unprecedented environmental degradation with disastrous consequences if left unchecked.

Mr. Speaker, my vision for the future is the creation of new cities. In these cities, I see human settlements evolving from well planned land use with provision for adequate supplies of electricity, water, sewage, waste management, telecommunications, roads and transportation services.

To reinforce the determination of my government to see properly developed human settlements in Sierra Leone, Greater Freetown, Kaffu-Bullum and Greater Makeni have been declared Town Planning Areas. We also intend to establish a Land Development Authority to facilitate the planned development of land.

Another major boost to the production of decent, affordable housing is the response of the country's architects to my appeal to help us design houses that are suited to our circumstances. Housing has now been designed that is suitable for the villages, and those for towns and cities are well advanced. The Engineers have also been requested to use more of our local materials for building purposes rather than relying solely on imported materials. We on our part as a Government, will encourage Local Government Councils and other Government institutions to use more of these materials in the construction of their facilities.

Mr. Speaker, housing is one of the areas where I am particularly looking for productive public/private partnerships. Let me take this opportunity now to call upon the private sector to take up the challenge.

At this point, I wish to commend the leadership of NASSIT for blazing the trail in this area. In April this year, I was involved in the official commissioning of a pilot project for delivery of affordable housing initiated by the National Social Security and Insurance Trust. This pilot housing project will commence soon in all the regions. In the meantime, NASSIT has sponsored HFC-Mortgage and Savings Company (SL) to operate as a primary mortgage dealer in the area of home financing. The establishment of this scheme should accelerate the availability of decent and affordable housing to as many members of the society as possible.

Water

Mr. Speaker, water is essential to life. My government is determined to enhance the water supply situation in the country. We have, with support from the British Government completed the Freetown Strategic Water and Sanitation Framework Study. We are currently implementing its short term targets of improving feeder water supply sources; and improving service delivery through the reduction of leakages, equitable distribution and making water available to the previously un-served. However, I must hasten to state that the lasting solution to Freetown's water problem is the construction of a new dam to supplement the Guma Dam. To this end, Orugu has been identified as the most economically feasible.

Mr. Speaker, my government is committed to rehabilitating water supply systems country wide and to extending accessibility to pipe borne water to provincial regions and rural communities including Kabala, Bo, Kenema, Makeni and Lungi.

Lands and Planning

Environmental degradation and the misuse of land pose serious threats to the wellbeing of the population and undermine the prospects for socio-economic development. To address this situation, my government has undertaken the following measures:

- i. The establishment of the Sierra Leone Environmental Protection Agency (SLEPA) by an Act of Parliament. The Agency will coordinate local and international issues on the environment and supervise and monitor environmental activities at local level.
- ii. Establishment of a Land Management Information System (LMIS) to provide for the effective and efficient management of land. This will minimize the misuse of land, reduce confrontations over the ownership of land by rival claimants and ensure proper land registration.

Mr. Speaker, the main focus of My Government for the foreseeable future is in the areas of capacity building, land title registration and the establishment of control points. Control points will help to plan new areas and provide relevant information in the preparation of land use plans and their respective planning schemes.

Deforestation

Mr. Speaker, a look around the peninsular mountains which were once covered by a canopy of thick evergreen forests reveals a land that is fast becoming barren. Uncontrolled wood cutting, the burning of charcoal, and the maddening rush to grab land in these forest areas have caused irreparable damage to these mountains. At this rate, we are destroying the catchments for water supply and increasing the prospects for landslides in the future. This state of affairs is rampant all over the country and cannot be allowed to go unchecked. We

therefore intend to review the licensing of commercial logging to ensure that it does not cause irreparable damage to our forests. Furthermore, stringent measures will be taken to protect the catchment areas around Guma and the Orogu River which remain the only source of large scale water supply to the Western Area.

We have set up a task force coordinated by the Office of National Security to tackle this challenge. Let me use this occasion to warn all those who are cutting down trees and putting up structures in our forest reserves and water catchment areas; we shall do whatever it takes to protect our water sources and biodiversity.

Finance and The Economy

On the economic and financial front, the overall objective of the government is to stimulate economic growth and reduce poverty while restoring the confidence of the international community in our economic and fiscal management.

In the past year, we embarked on a number of consultations with our development partners – the IMF, the World Bank, DFID-UK, the EC and the ADB with a view to re-establishing good relations and securing their support for our development agenda. We introduced structural reforms in all the relevant MDAs, and appointed a new leadership to man the affairs of the National Revenue Authority.

As a result:

- The Executive Board of the IMF approved the completion of the second review of the current Poverty Reduction Growth Facility (PRGF) thus unlocking a number of donor supported Programmes;
- Government was able to meet its target of zero borrowing from the Bank of Sierra Leone, surpassed the poverty spending target and kept non-concessional foreign loans at zero;
- Reverted to commitment budgeting rather than cash-budgeting;
- Kept recurrent expenditures and the wage bill under control without any restraint on expenditures;
- Commenced the payment of arrears totaling Le40.53 billion inherited from the previous government;
- Development partners have renewed their commitments and made additional pledges in support of the budget;
- DFID-UK released outstanding disbursement of US\$26.9 million that was due in December 2007;
- The World Bank released US\$3million in support Government's efforts to meet the cost of rising food prices.

In the immediate term, Government has set itself a number of goals for the realization of our key priorities, which are anchored on:

- i. Preserving macroeconomic stability through fiscal consolidation aimed at enhancing domestic revenue collection and improving the efficiency of expenditures;
- ii. Promoting sustainable economic growth and welfare development through higher investment in basic infrastructure while improving the investment climate;
- iii. Strengthening the capacity of public institutions; and
- iv. Enhancing the quality of service delivery by strengthening efficiency, transparency and accountability in public financial management.

Government will soon finalize a medium term plan as successor to the former PRSP. This plan will emphasize developing our infrastructure in terms of electricity, roads and water supply; the agricultural sector; improving the quality of health and education.

Mr. Speaker, the success of our development agenda will depend on the availability of the required funds to support its Programmes. This in turn, depends ultimately on our ability as a nation to mobilize the necessary resources. We expect the National Revenue Authority to play a leading role in this enterprise. However, there are some officials at the NRA, particularly at Customs, that are resistant to change and are working against our goal of establishing a modern and effective revenue authority. We will not allow them to derail our efforts at generating revenues to meet the high expectations of our people.

Public Sector Reform

Mr. Speaker, the public service is the bedrock of government. We acknowledge our civil servants and other public officers for maintaining state administration.

But let me not mince my words, the civil service has for long been operating below the level that is required for the effective performance of its statutory functions. The key factors responsible for this include the reluctance at the highest echelons to implement necessary reforms, and resistance within the service to adapting to the people's mandate for a change in the direction and objectives of state governance. This must stop.

Mr. Speaker, I will provide the political will and leadership to ensure that the service lives up to the objective of its existence. I have already signed performance contracts with my ministers and this will be replicated in the echelons of the public service. We will implement the recommendations contained in the management and functional reviews of ministries and introduce modern management practices through the newly created Human Resource Management Office.

Local Governance and Decentralization

Mr. Speaker, last year, I merged the Ministries of Local Government, Rural Development and Internal Affairs to ensure a more coherent approach to local governance, decentralization, internal security and the development of rural areas. Most of our people live in rural areas, and their first contact with government is with our traditional leaders. We intend to make this first contact between citizens and the government reflective of my government's belief in democracy, development, accountability, law and order. We will design guidelines to make the election of paramount chiefs, section chiefs and town chiefs more democratic. We will also infuse greater accountability and transparency in the activities of this tier of governance, in line with our desires to create a democratic society that also respects its heritage.

We will continue to support the decentralization process, accelerate not only the devolution of functions to local councils but also the resources to enable councils to do their work. We will continue to work with our partners to build the capacity of the councils, enhance accountability, position the Local Government Service Commission to perform its statutory functions, and support the work of the ACC in ensuring zero tolerance for corruption at this most important tier of governance.

Security, Law Enforcement and Justice Sector Reform

Mr. Speaker, it is the duty of the government to secure the achievement of the people of this country, prevent crimes, and ensure that the rights and liberties of all are protected within the limits of the law. We commend the actions of our armed forces and salute their contributions to securing peace in this country. We commend the actions of the police, the courts, prisons and other sectors in our criminal justice system for working hard in the last year to maintain law and order in the country.

We are however faced with many major challenges in this sector. The most pressing of this is the general perception that the police and courts cannot be trusted. This belief has taken hold because we have for too long used the police and courts not to advance the tenets of law, justice and fairness, but to inflict pain on the poor and the weak. My government will place greater emphasis on rectifying these anomalies. The specifics of this new orientation to delivering justice are set out in my government's Justice Sector Reform Strategy and Investment Plan.

Mr. Speaker, a grave threat is looming over West Africa; it is a threat from drug lords who are shifting their trafficking and other operations to the region. We are in consultations with other governments to prevent that from happening. In August 2008, my government enacted into law tough legislations on drug trafficking; and established the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency to spearhead our fight against this evil.

Mr. Speaker, I will now turn my attention to those sectors which serve as catalysts for our priority areas.

Conclusion

Mr. Speaker, we have, as a people, shown enormous resolve in achieving what we want. With resolve, we asserted our rights to democratic governance in the Bintumani conferences. With resolve, we withstood the onslaught of violent anti-democratic forces. With resolve, we installed a new government in 2007. Our country has a history of rising up to the occasion. But we have often been distracted by less noble interests. We have not been very persistent in pushing forward our democratic and developmental aspirations; the result is that we have often failed to build upon our remarkable achievements; and therefore missed the opportunity to become the great nation we deserve to be.

Mr. Speaker, Honorable Members of Parliament, let us sustain our resolve. Let our hopes for a better country triumph over the pettiness of our divisions. Let us reclaim our image as a land that symbolized freedom; a land that served as a business centre for a great part of West Africa; a land with a people that have achieved distinctions as educators, clergymen, administrators and scientists. Let us be committed to a cultural renaissance; let us reclaim the inheritance of education, wealth and sharing that was bequeathed unto us by our forbearers; let us take our country back from the corrupt and the unjust. Let us live up to the true meaning of our country's motto: Unity! Freedom! Justice!

God bless Sierra Leone.