

SIERRA LEONE
Statement to the UN Security Council

Michael von der Schulenburg
Executive Representative of the Secretary-General
United Nations, New York, 12 September 2011

Mr. President,
Honorable Members of the Security Council,

Thank you for this opportunity to introduce the Seventh Report of the Secretary-General on Sierra Leone since the establishment of an integrated UN peacebuilding mission in 2008.

As the country celebrated the 50th anniversary of its independence last April, Sierra Leone is continuing its progress towards developing into a stable, peaceful and an economically more viable democracy. I feel that is an occasion to commend in this Council the people of Sierra Leone for what has been achieved during the last nine years in consolidating peace and building a democratic society. These are achievements made by two peace-time democratically elected presidents, by successive democratically elected governments but also by political party leaders, independent commissioners, local district officials, by civil society, traditional and religious leaders, by professionals, journalists and artists, by tradesmen, doctors and nurses, teachers, and police officers, in fact by many ordinary Sierra Leonean men and women.

However, recent clashes and skirmishes that occurred not only between followers of the two main political parties but also among followers of different groups within the two political parties remind us that there is still a considerable potential for conflict and violence. Particularly serious was an attack three days ago on the presidential candidate of the main opposition, the SLPP, and a subsequent rampage that left him with head injuries, one person dead and a number of properties belonging to followers of governing party, the APC, devastated. It is yet not clear of who was responsible for this attack and we must not jump to quick conclusions; the President has acted immediately by setting up a public investigation and the police has stepped up security for the opposition leader. However, this brings into the open that there remains a persistent social undercurrent potential that can turn into violence if provoked – despite all the progress that has been made,

I call therefore on all Sierra Leonean politicians not to forget what they have achieved, to continue building on these achievements and to act responsibly. Elections are still one and a half years away and this must not start to embitter the social and political climate in Sierra Leone.

Mr. President, I believe that the recent incidents do not reflect the real nature of ordinary peace-loving Sierra Leoneans. In fact, the recently held National Delegates Conference of Sierra Leone's Peoples Party, the SLPP, the country's main political opposition is probably a good example of political maturity in how the Government, the governing party and main opposition party can work together in settling controversial issues and in making democracy work.

At this Conference, the SLPP elected a new party chairman and the party's executive. But more importantly, the SLPP elected also as its presidential candidate, Mr. Julius Maada Bio who had once been a senior member and later head of state of a former military government, the National Provisional Revolutionary Council. Mr. Maada Bio will now be the main contestant to face President Ernest Bai Koroma for the Presidency in the 2012 elections.

The SLPP Conference was remarkable for the fact that it was conducted in such a peaceful and democratic atmosphere. Although the Conference took place in Freetown, a stronghold of the governing political party, the All-Peoples Congress (APC), there were no provocations or incidents whatsoever. Quite to the contrary, the APC leadership had called its followers in Freetown not to wear the party colors and to stay away from the location of the Conference. As a precaution, also the APC party headquarters that is located just across the SLPP Conference hall was closed. Police protection to the Conference was professional. In fact, prior to the Conference, the President had met with the then interim leader of the SLPP to ensure personally that the Conference would take place without any violence or outside interference.

The media coverage of the SLPP Conference was generally lauded as having been fair, balanced and informative. This was a major test for Sierra Leone's Broadcasting Cooperation, the SLBC that had been newly created following the agreed closing of all political party and government controlled radio stations after the 2009 political disturbances.

The SLPP Conference was further a positive example for intra-party democracy. Prior to the Conference, the SLPP had faced a major legal challenge in the Supreme Court from one of its followers. After initial hesitations the party chose to solve this challenge within the law and its own party constitution by holding new elections for its party delegates.

At the Conference a total number of nineteen aspirants had tried to obtain the SLPP's endorsement as its presidential candidate for the 2012 elections. In the run-up of the party Conference this had caused considerable intra-party controversies that, at times had spilled over into violent clashes between supporters of the leading aspirants. However, at the Conference all these differences were managed and respective aspirants made sure that their supporters did not disrupt the democratic

intra-party election process. In the end, all aspirants considered the intra-party elections as free, fair and acceptable.

However, the re-election of the party chairman and the election of the presidential candidate of the SLPP have raised concerns as both elected party leaders had played prominent roles in previous military coups. I trust that both recognize the need to dispel such concerns. I therefore welcome Mr. Maada Bio's recent public statement expressing his regrets and issuing an apology for the wrongs that were committed during military government in which he held high office.

We all must not forget that military coups and the horrors of the civil war are part of a very recent history. It is therefore inevitable and even necessary and welcomed that some of those who have been involved in previously undemocratic governments are now taking active part in today's democratic political life. Against this background, it is important that all political leaders with links to past regimes, irrespective of their present political party affiliations, make it clear that the right lessons have been learned from the country's violent past. In this context, I applaud the clear and unambiguous words by President Koroma in his 50th anniversary speech that Sierra Leone has learned a bitter lesson and will not repeat past mistakes. I feel these words could guide the political discourse in the country.

The 2012 elections must not become hostage of the past. Instead we all have the responsibility to give Sierra Leoneans in 2012 the possibility of looking forward, of deciding on the future direction of their country and of selecting their future leaders accordingly. All political parties, but above all the two main political parties that have helped shape post-conflict Sierra Leone and that were instrumental in building today's democratic society must share a common interest in protecting these national achievements in 2012 and beyond.

I also hope that in the same spirit the outstanding issues for the 2012 elections can be solved among political parties. These include reaching agreements on the legal framework for the next elections, on a new code of conduct that will govern election campaigning and on building trust in the national electoral management bodies. I am looking here in particular to the very able and trusted new chair of the Political Party Registration Commission to take a lead in holding these crucial multi-party consultations.

Mr. President, in his speech at the 50th independence anniversary, President Koroma launched the idea of an all-inclusive and non-partisan National Conference to discuss in a public debate the future direction of Sierra Leone. I very much welcome such a proposal as this would come when Sierra Leone's post-conflict reconstruction era is coming to an end and the country is heading towards a new era of economic and social development. This would allow to consult not only experts but above all ordinary Sierra Leoneans throughout the country at a time of profound economic and social changes in the country.

Such a national debate could be an opportunity for all political parties to listen to the problems and aspirations of ordinary Sierra Leoneans before launching themselves into the 2012 election campaign. It could be an exercise of consultative democracy that could help prevent problems in the future. Careful consultations and preparations would be needed for such a Conference to be all-inclusive. It is a sign of constructive political leadership that also the presidential candidate of the opposition party has indicated his willingness to participate in such a national debate.

Mr. President, let me finally turn to some economic and social issues:

The Government has been successful in expanding the national, inner-city and rural feeder road networks, in bringing electricity to a wider range of the population and in reviving agricultural production. It has pursued a policy of privatization that includes the Freetown seaport and national telecommunication, and it is mobilizing international private investments, especially in extractive industries and agro-businesses. The new iron ore projects are likely to start exporting this year, and this could lead to a significant increase in economic growth and revenue collections - with some projections showing a possible three-fold increase in domestic revenues by 2015. Sierra Leone's financial fortunes could therefore change dramatically within a relatively short timeframe.

This opens up much needed resources for addressing the significant deficits in human development and infrastructure availability. However, this also raises challenges of transparency and proper management of those new resources for the benefits of all Sierra Leoneans while maintaining macroeconomic stability. I welcome the generous international assistance to Sierra Leone aimed at helping avoid the so-called resource-curse that has affected so many other resource-rich countries.

The Achilles heel for Sierra Leone's future development will remain persistent poverty, youth unemployment and problems in delivering of social services.

Although Sierra Leone continues to enjoy relatively high economic growth rates, it remains however, one of the poorest countries in the world. In particular, persistently high inflation rates for basic commodities have eroded the purchasing power of low fixed-income earners such as public servants, teachers, policemen and nurses as well as of occasional laborers. This appears to affect more city dwellers and many of the youth that have gone to cities in search for a better life. As we have seen in other countries, such decline in living conditions could turn easily into social unrest and it may therefore be time for a more comprehensive review of the impact of all development programmes on poverty reduction.

Much has been achieved in improving social services; the Free Health Care Programme that the President launched last year is a good example. Not surprising, there remain persistent problems of delivering such services to reach the target

population. Corruption, bureaucracy, low capacity and lack of technical and logistical facilities are probably at the core of such problems. There is also need for a comprehensive development of the safety nets in the country to protect the poor from any global shocks. Also here I feel that these problems require greater Government – development partner cooperation, with more attention being paid to making the public sector more effective and efficient.

A thorny issue remains high unemployment rates among Sierra Leone's youth – a difficult problem not only for countries across Africa but also the developed world. Notwithstanding the creation of the Youth Commission and concerted efforts by development partners no substantive success has been made in fighting Sierra Leone's rampant youth unemployment. High population increases and increased migration to the cities may even have made this problem worse. In the short-term, better coordination within government so that youth are better targeted to benefit from specific programmes. It would also require better cooperation between government, development partners and the private sector.

Mr. President, at the end, I would like to recognize the enormous contribution that Ambassador McNee has made to peacebuilding in Sierra Leone. As a chair of the country specific configuration of the PBC for Sierra Leone for almost three years he has visited the country repeatedly and reached out not only to the Government and the political opposition but also to the wider Sierra Leonean society. For me personally, he has been a great support and a reliable partner in New York to discuss various policy issues that helped shape the peacebuilding agenda not only for Sierra Leone but the UN in general. I would like to thank him profoundly and I wish him all the best for his future.

I would also like to thank the Government of Sierra Leone, leaders of political parties, leaders of independent commissions and local governments, religious as well as traditional leaders, leaders of civil societies, NGOs and the media for their continued trust in the work of the United Nations. But I would like especially to thank President Koroma for his leadership, for his exceptional openness and his welcoming to UN family.

Finally, I would like to thank Sierra Leone's Foreign Minister, H.E. Mr. Joseph B. Dauda for having come all the way to New York to represent his country. He is probably one of the best witnesses for the achievements made in Sierra Leone as he has played a prominent role in successive governments. It is a pleasure working with him.

Thank you for your attention,