

SIERRA LEONE

Statement to the UN Security Council

Michael von der Schulenburg
Executive Representative of the Secretary-General
United Nations, New York, 22 March 2012

Mr. President,
Honorable Members of the Security Council,

I am grateful for the opportunity to introduce the Secretary-General's report and to brief the Security Council before the end of my assignment to Sierra Leone. Let me therefore start by making some personal remarks.

Sierra Leone is a beautiful country and Sierra Leoneans are lovely and kind people. Wherever I went during the almost four years in Sierra Leone, I felt welcomed and was often struck by the openness and directness of its people irrespective of whether they were subsistence farmers or traditional leaders in so-called "up-country", whether politicians or intellectuals in the cities. It was also gratifying to see how strong the role of women in Sierra Leonean society is.

In the past, I have often spoken about the exceptional successes Sierra Leone has made over the last ten years and the contributions that its three post-conflict governments have made; first by the two previous governments led by former President Kabah in bringing peace back to the country, in re-building state institutions and in uniting its deeply traumatized people and now the government led by President Koroma that is transforming the country economically. But as I leave Sierra Leone, I would like to pay tribute to its people for their resilience and their extraordinary ability to forgive and reconcile. Today, victims and perpetrators live side by side in communities all over the country. For anyone who travels through Sierra Leone these days, it will be difficult to imagine the horrors of the civil war that occurred only ten years ago.

We must recognize that Sierra Leone would not be where it is today without the contributions of its paramount chiefs and other traditional leaders, of its Muslim and Christian religious leaders, of its diverse and active civil society, of its women

organizations, of its often courageous journalists and of the country's artists, especially of its musicians. Sierra Leone benefited from one of the best Truth and Reconciliation processes and from a series of independent democratic institutions such as its Human Rights Commission, its National Election Commission, its Political Party Registration Commission, the Independent Media Commission, the Youth Commission - to mention only a few. Let me here express my deepest respect for all their important work.

But one has not to search very deep to discover the tremendous traumas that 17 years of one-party rule, 13 military coups and finally eleven years of civil war have left behind. I remember the void in Steven's voice, now a young electrician, when he spoke of his longing to find his father who disappeared when his mother and his three siblings fled the rebel onslaught; I remember Aisha, now in her 20's, whose eyes still fill with tears when she speaks in pain of how her family handed her over to rebels in order to save the rest of the family from attack, she had barely been 14 years old; I remember Jusu, my personal security guard, who chose to defend his daughter from being taken by rebel forces and was penalized for this by having both his hands hacked off with a machete. And there are the amputee footballers who are playing on the beaches of Freetown every Saturday and who will always receive you with their happy songs despite being terribly poor and remaining socially marginalized; most had their limbs cut off when they were small children. There is no bitterness but a lot of human dignity. I will always remember them all with the greatest admiration and a deep sense of humility.

Mr. President,

The forthcoming elections in November will be the major challenge for the country's nascent democracy. Sierra Leone must pass this crucial test in its history without allowing the demons of the past to re-emerge. Sierra Leonean's political elites carry here a heavy responsibility to not let these elections derail Sierra Leone's future; and no doubt, most of this responsibility rests on the shoulders of President Koroma and his main challenger for the presidency, Mr. Maada Bio. What they will decide and do over the coming months will determine much of the direction this country will take. And there will be times when they must put national interest over that of their political parties and over their own political ambitions.

Against this background, reports that the Government has imported assault weapons worth millions of dollars in January of this year to equip a recently enlarged para-military wing of its police, the Operational Services Division (OSD), are of great concern. Sierra Leone is under no arms embargo. However, given

Sierra Leone's progress in establishing peace and security throughout the country and its relatively low crime rate, it is not clear why the police would need such weapons – especially as this shipment, according to a leaked Bill of Lading, appears to include heavy machine guns and even grenade launchers. I would urge the Government to fully clarify these reports and, if true, explain the intended use of these weapons.

An enlarged, heavily-armed and allegedly also ethnically imbalanced OSD risks undermining the good work that has been done by the Sierra Leonean Police in creating a modern and operationally independent police force serving the people of Sierra Leone – a people-oriented police was one of the important pillars of the successful Security Sector Reforms after the civil war. Because of the country's painful experience, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission had suggested that Sierra Leone abandons all forms of para-military police force. Such lessons from the past should be taken seriously.

There are other worrying signs such as the attack on the presidential candidate of the opposition in September of last year followed by an attack of members of the opposition against property of the governing party, the questionable imposition of a three months ban of all political party rallies, the violence surrounding a win by the opposition in bye-elections for the Freetown City Council or the recent break-in into a newspaper critical of the Government.

In all of this, the main opposition must be aware that it too is entering into these elections with considerable historical baggage. They should therefore help to dissuade existing mistrust and allay any fears that may linger about any perceived ill-intention. I call on the opposition to be more forthcoming in engaging the Government and refrain from a politics of boycotting the Parliament and other meetings.

Further the hardening tone of the political rhetoric is of concern and all side must refrain from extreme and unsubstantiated accusations. Given Sierra Leone's past, such allegations that either side mobilizes ex-combatants or traditional warriors such as the Kamajors are serious matters and should not be taken lightly. True or not, politics is based on perceptions and such allegations must be laid to rest to prevent that they create a sense of insecurity. Both sides may consider organizing a multi-party investigation, similar to the approach that was taken in tackling alleged illegal cross-border voter registration along the Liberian border.

Mr. President,

The all important elections will take place in only eight months and the country would greatly benefit from a number of confidence-building measures:

First:

The Government and opposition parties must continue to dialogue and in the interest of the country as a whole, openly discuss controversial issues that could derail the elections. This must also include face-to-face meetings between President Koroma and his main challenger, Maada Bio. Senior politicians simply do not have the luxury to stall such dialogue because of personal clashes in the past while expecting ordinary Sierra Leoneans to reconcile.

The discussions must be designed to reassure the general public that both the Government and the opposition are working together in creating an atmosphere for the elections that is free from any intimidation and in which each citizen can make his or her own choice without fear of retribution. In this context, the Government should seek to clarify several reports that criticize the role of the Minister of Internal Affairs has allegedly played in various violent clashes. As the Ministry for Internal Affairs is responsible for internal security during the elections, it needs to have the trust of the general public.

Second:

All parties should revert to the spirit and letter of the Joint Communiqué that had been signed on 2 April 2009 between the two main political parties and that was wholeheartedly embraced by the President. This would essentially include three aspects:

- The Shears-Moses report that had investigated the events that led to the most serious outbreak of political violence since the end of the civil war in March 2009 must be issued without any further delay. It is now two years since the report had been submitted to the President and despite repeated pledges to publish it - most recently in a meeting the President had with the entire diplomatic group in October 2011 - this has not yet been done.
- The formation of an independent Police Complaints Commission agreed to in the Joint Communiqué has now been delayed for three years. I welcome recent indications that the Police Council has taken initial steps. However, if

this is to have a calming impact for the November elections, there is no further time to lose.

- As part of the Joint Communiqué, President Koroma took the bold decision to transfer the Government radio station into a fully independent public national broadcaster, the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC). In exchange all political party radio stations were closed. This was a move that drew much international praise and the UN Secretary General, Ban Ki-Moon came to join the President in inaugurating the SLBC in June 2010. Unfortunately, the SLBC has not fulfilled expectations and bad management practices have begun impacting negatively on the quality and impartiality of its programmes. Recent personnel decisions further raise questions about its political neutrality so shortly before the elections. I hope that the Government will stick to its courageous decision and help bring about the necessary adjustments in the board and management of the SLBC that would make this a truly national and independent voice of Sierra Leone.

Third:

All political parties should work together in supporting the country's electoral management bodies, above all the National Election Commission and the Political Party Registration Commission and prevent any negative actions that could undermine their credibility in the eyes of the general public.

The revised Election Law must be approved by Parliament without further delay. I call on all political parties to join hands in the Parliament and approve the revised law by consensus. The revised law has taken into consideration concerns that had been raised regarding the old election law and a joint parliamentary approval would send a positive sign to the public that the elections can be held in a calm atmosphere.

Finally:

All political leaders should continue supporting various cross-party initiatives, especially now in the heat of the election. I commend here in particular the work of the All-Political Party Youth Association and the All-Political Party Women Association. The first has made inroads in uniting party youth wings in preventing the misuse of youth in fomenting violence; and the second has greatly contributed to the political awareness for a stronger role of women in politics.

Mr. President,

Sierra Leone is not only a lovely country; it is potentially also a very rich country. It is well endowed with natural resources, it is rich in mineral resources, it has large stretches of unused fertile land, one of the highest rain falls, a large natural deep-sea harbor and a rich sea front. But all these riches are also the country's potential curse. The huge investments in the mining industry have raised expectations but so far have not benefited the wider population. In fact, as a result of high inflation rates, the purchasing power of fixed income earners and the poor appears to have dropped considerably over the last years and no real difference has been made in getting the youth engaged in the development of the country. Sierra Leone's persistent poverty levels are factors that breed malcontent and that could undo all the successes of the last years.

In the 1960's, South Korea had a lower per capita income than most West African countries; today it is the tenth largest industrial country in the world. Korean President Kim recently explained the secret behind such success is simply education, education and again education. And my final advice to Sierra Leone would therefore be: invest in your education, invest in universal primary and secondary education, invest in your technical colleges and invest in your universities.

Education would help turn Sierra Leone's natural and mineral wealth into sustainable development, it would help lift people out of poverty, it would help create new opportunities, it would help reduce unfair income distribution and it could help maintaining a democratic and peaceful society. Freetown was once called the Athens of Africa - why not again.

Mr. President,

UN Member States have invested heavily in Sierra Leone's peaceful future, both in blood and treasure. On a per capita basis, Sierra Leone probably received more funding for peacekeeping and peacebuilding than any other country in the world. This is your investment and we all have to make sure that this investment pays a rich dividend. Sierra Leone has the potential to become a success story but it will need the continued support and the vigilance of the Security Council - especially at this time of these elections. For the benefit of Sierra Leone but also in our own interests we have to see this through.

Mr. President,

Let me end here by thanking the Secretary General for his confidence in me and the Under-Secretary General for Political Affairs, Mr. Lynn Pascoe, for all his support. I would like to thank the chair of Sierra Leone's PBC configuration, Ambassador Rishchynski, for his interest in this country and his support. I have enjoyed working with my colleagues from the diplomatic corps and the development group in Freetown and thank them for all their confidence. My very special thanks go of course to all my colleagues in UNIPSIL and the UN country team who have been so supportive to me and for their commitment to the future of Sierra Leone and to UN principles. Here I wanted to mention especially my national colleagues who have remained loyal to the organization even at difficult times. But above all let me thank all Sierra Leoneans for having welcomed me in their midst and for having given me three and a half lovely years in their country.

I miss the smiles and warmth of Sierra Leoneans, I miss the regular breakfasts with the country's politicians, I miss the discussions at the round table of the Palaver hut and I also miss the regular tete-a-tete meetings that I had with President Koroma. And I would not be truthful if I do not admit that I also miss the spicy cassava leaves, the beautiful beaches and a good game of tennis at Hill Station with the primary school next door and the children's laughter in the background. And I miss Kpaka, Stevens, Jusu and Obama.

Let me wish Mama Salone the very best for its future and hope that the Almighty protects and guides this country and its people. After so many difficult years, Sierra Leoneans deserve a bright, prosperous and peaceful future.

Thank you for your attention,