

Address by His Excellency Julius Maada Bio, President of the Republic of Sierra Leone on New Year's Day – 1 January 2019

Fellow citizens, across our country we gather as family members, friends and neighbours to celebrate the end of one year and the beginning of another. As Sierra Leoneans, this moment gives us an opportunity not only to look back but also look ahead into a new year of hope and boundless opportunities.

As a Nation, we are thankful to God that we have closed the year with no catastrophic natural disasters and no calamitous disease epidemics. Let us also congratulate ourselves for a peaceful transition of political power from one democratic government to another in 2018. We have shown the world that our faith and commitment to democracy is unshakable.

Despite the fact that my Government inherited a near bankrupt state and the worse economic situation since independence, 2018 was a remarkable year not only for what we achieved as a Government but also for the international community to recognise us as a Champion for human capital development.

Fellow citizens, since coming to power, we have launched the Free Quality Education programme which will forever change the future of our children and the fortunes of our nation. This is why my New Direction Government has committed an historic 21% of our national budget to the education sector.

We have established a Directorate of Science, Technology, and Innovation to leverage the benefits of technology for education delivery, research, business, and governance.

In the past 8 months, we have pursued a disciplined management of our economy by sealing leakages and streamlining domestic revenue mobilization. Our multilateral partners have resumed engagement with and support for our nation because they recognize that what we are doing for our economy is good for our country. In November 2018, the International Monetary Fund approved a new arrangement under the Extended Credit Facility to support our country's economic and financial reforms.

Our robust and relentless fight against corruption has led to the recovery of Le8.4 Billion of stolen public money in just the last six months. We will invest that money in facilities such as a well-equipped Medical Diagnostic Hospital that will serve the needs of every Sierra Leonean.

Fellow citizens, I am also pleased to note that the Millennium Corporation Challenge has acknowledged our success in fighting corruption with an unprecedented passing grade of 71% from the abysmal 49%.

For the first time in recent years, we organised the Islamic Pilgrimage to Mecca without any scandal.

So to anyone starting this New Year with questions about where we are heading and what the future holds, I want to assure you of this: this New Direction is heading in the Right Direction.

In the New Year, we will continue with our efficient economic management of the state and create the enabling environment for economic investment in order to create jobs for our youth.

We will continue to expand investments in the energy sector, WASH initiatives, and purposeful infrastructural projects including rural roads and bridges. We have completed policy and implementation frameworks for expanding investments in the agriculture, fisheries, and tourism sectors.

We will continue to invest in Human Capital Development to make our citizens competitive and fit for purpose in the 21st century. Hence, we will invest in improving the Free Quality Education programme because human capital development is crucial for our national development.

We have also committed our nation to the protection of the Girl Child from rape, early marriage, exploitation, gender-based discrimination and other forms of gender-based violence. To this end, we will review and implement the Sexual Offences Act; strengthen legislations for women's empowerment, children and persons with disability and strengthen child protection services. Let me reiterate that men who rape girls deserve to be jailed for life.

Fellow citizens, we will continue to open up democratic spaces in order to strengthen our democracy. We will repeal the Criminal Libel Law and continue to assure the Freedom of the Press.

We will promote access to justice and respect the Constitutional Rights and the sanctity of the lives of all our citizens. This also means that, we cannot abandon the work of the Constitutional Review Commission. We will examine the recommendations of the Constitutional Review Commission and the accompanying White Paper with a view to move the process forward.

We will scale up investments in Healthcare and Healthcare Infrastructure and Services in 2019 by constructing well-equipped Peripheral Health Units, expanding Free Ambulance Services to all districts of the country, rehabilitating healthcare facilities, providing equipment and drugs and investing in the training of healthcare personnel.

We will continue promoting credible private investments in agriculture and commercial agricultural production not only to provide gainful employment but also save our nation hundreds of millions of dollars in food imports. Therefore, we will launch the Torma Bum & Gbondapie Rice & Irrigation Project in early 2019.

Fellow citizens, we also recognise in tough economic times, Government must support ordinary people who make an outstanding contribution in the public sector. Therefore, effective January 2019, the salary of Civil Servants, Teachers, Police and the Military

in Grades 1 to 6 is also increasing by 10 percent and those in Grades 7 to 14 by 5 percent. This is in addition to the 10 percent increase announced in the 2018 Revised Budget. Also, for workers in both public and private sectors effective January 2019, Government is reducing the top marginal personal tax rate from 35 percent to 30 percent to break this vicious cycle of low disposable income, low spending and low savings. To also address the disparities in pay and remuneration among the various public sector payroll categories, work has already started for the establishment of a Wages and Compensation Commission in 2019.

Our pensioners cannot also be left behind. So effective January 2019, Government is increasing the minimum pension to Le250,000 per month consistent with the NASSIT Act 2002 to improve the living conditions of our pensioners.

As we look ahead into the New Year, we also have a collective responsibility to maintain the peace and stability of our great Nation. In 2019, my Government will establish the Independent Commission for Peace and National Cohesion to enhance national cohesion, strengthen peace consolidation and promote inclusive governance.

Fellow citizens, as you may all be aware the Commission of Inquiry is expected to commence in January 2019. We have an opportunity as Sierra Leoneans to demand accountability from those we once entrusted to hold public offices on our behalf. The Commission of Inquiry is not about a political party, a tribe or a region. Let us collectively reject those who seek to divide us and support the Commission of Inquiry to send a clear message to the world that Sierra Leoneans are all united in the fight against corruption and to restore democratic accountability.

As we look into the New Year, we can be optimistic because we are making tangible progress. We are doing what is right for our country and best for our children's future. In this New Year, let us commit ourselves to putting Sierra Leone above all else.

My family and I pray that 2019 be a great year of transformation and happiness for every Sierra Leonean. I thank you, and wish you all a happy and prosperous New Year.

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