



**NEW YEAR'S STATEMENT BY HIS EXCELLENCY,
JULIUS MAADA BIO, PRESIDENT OF THE
REPUBLIC OF SIERRA LEONE**

Fellow citizens, welcome to a new year – a time to bid farewell to 2019 and a time to look forward to 2020.

As we look back into 2019, we were shackled with high domestic and foreign debt repayments, unfavourable mining lease agreements, low domestic productivity, high youth unemployment, high inflation and currency depreciation.

Throughout the year, our confidence and optimism as a nation were shaken by mild economic turbulence and unavoidable shocks we inherited.

Typically, Sierra Leoneans have made light of the situation with the usual humorous jibe, "the gron dry". But in 2019, we also made huge progress. We launched the medium term national development plan; increased domestic revenue mobilisation by streamlining and automating revenue collection and deposit processes; clarified and reduced the tax and duty burden on businesses; made it easier to establish and run a business including providing aftercare at the highest levels and provided more support for small to medium enterprises. We do this with the firm belief that private enterprise is the engine for economic expansion.

As we look forward into 2020, our Country is at peace with falling crime rates, lower prison populations and no security threat. At Bintumani 3, Sierra Leoneans suggested ways to further lower tensions and establish a permanent infrastructure for peace. We have moved to repeal criminal libel laws that successive governments had used to suppress free speech. We continue to open up civic spaces and we encourage our citizens to speak up and make our democracy stronger and better.

In spite of the cynicism about foreign travel, we have, through those travels transformed the reputation and image of Sierra Leone abroad by comprehensively telling our friends and partners who we really are and where we are taking our nation. And they have watched our unrelenting and determined fight against corruption. We passed the MCC's "Control of Corruption" indicator with very high scores. They watched us crack down on fraud and waste and reform public institutions and practices. And you know what, the IMF, EU, DFID, World Bank and our international partners have all expressed confidence in what we are doing and they have re-engaged fully. We have actively

promoted business in Sierra Leone through various investment conferences and foreign delegations have visited our country to explore investment opportunities.

The fisheries, tourism, and agricultural sectors are set for significant foreign private sector investments in the near future. We are focused on rice-sufficiency, cash crop production and agricultural value-chain addition.

As we go into 2020, more than two million children, especially girls, have access to free quality education, free teaching and learning materials, expanded healthcare services, school buses and free school feeding in some areas. We have intensified our national campaign against early child marriage, introduced robust enforcement and tougher sentencing guidelines for sexual and gender-based violence. Teenage pregnancy, menstrual health and hygiene are no longer taboo topics. Our women are at the centre of our country's future development and security and we have recruited more women into our armed forces than at any time in our country's history.

We are investing heavily in STEM disciplines especially for girls and through the Directorate of Science, Technology, and Innovation, we are harnessing the power of data and technology to support governance, business, healthcare, education, and agriculture. We recently launched the first drone corridor in West Africa and the first block-chain-based national digital identity platform that will improve financial inclusion among other benefits.

Soon, we will convene a national forum on the future of education. We do so mindful of our national development priorities and goals and knowing that for our children to lead

and participate in the Fourth Industrial Revolution and the global economy, they must be equipped with a 21st century education.

We enter 2020 in a Sierra Leone where mothers in labour and critically ill-cases can now be rushed into a nearby hospital or community health centre by an ambulance they can call toll-free from the comfort of their homes. We will continue work on lowering maternal mortality rates, expanding primary healthcare, training and recruiting more healthcare workers, and refurbishing or building new health centres all over the country. In 2020, we will turn the sod for the construction of an ultramodern diagnostic health Centre using funds recovered from corrupt officials as seed money. Our public sanitation and waste disposal investments have yielded public health benefits.

We enter 2020 with a renewed commitment to fighting climate change while improving clean energy access in off-grid rural areas and tackling energy poverty through the nearly-complete regional grid and other new initiatives.

We enter 2020 with extensive judicial reforms that have led to more access to justice. Our social protection programmes continue to support vulnerable families and we have launched a \$50 million urban-mobility project. We are also rehabilitating key trunk roads from Kailahun to Freetown and building new bridges nationwide. Big impact and high-value infrastructural projects will commence in 2020.

Our youth empowerment projects and our support for sports development, especially the Sierra Leone Premier League, have been very significant.

Fellow citizens, together we have started an inspiring journey. The challenges are huge but they are not insurmountable. Your expectations are high but they can be met. Your aspirations are boundless but they can be fulfilled. Nothing is impossible, even the miracles you expect us to perform.

Therefore, I call for your relentless optimism and hard work to develop our nation. If you share my belief that we can make Sierra Leone a better place, I urge you to share the responsibility with me for doing so with a firm commitment to make, act and be the change you want to see.

My family and I wish you all a happy and prosperous New Year. I thank you.