



**KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY HIS EXCELLENCY, DR.
JULIUS MAADA BIO, PRESIDENT OF THE
REPUBLIC OF SIERRA LEONE, ON WORLD
ENVIRONMENT DAY AND THE LAUNCH OF THE
NATIONAL TREE PLANTING, AFFORESTATION,
AND REFORESTATION PROJECT AT MORTOMEH.
BATHURST - 5 JUNE 2020**

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Ministers of Government,

Honourable Members of Parliament,

Members of the Diplomatic and Consular Corps,

Development Partners,

Our revered Paramount Chiefs and community elders,

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen

Good morning.

In the early morning hours of August 14, 2017, an indescribable tragedy happened here. We lost hundreds of our compatriots and billions of Leones worth of property and more. The prominent gash on the green hillside scars our collective memory forever. As one nation, let us observe a minute of silence in their memory and honour.

May God/Allah (SWT) grant them mercies and eternal rest. Amen.

We are reminded every day by that catastrophe that climate change is real and the resulting global warming and unpredictable weather patterns, land degradation, erosion, habitat loss, are all real. This has unsettled ecosystems and altered weather patterns, with an impact for foliage loss and biodiversity, water security, agriculture and food security, and economic development.

Our slash and burn farming techniques, unregulated mining activities, indiscriminate pole and timber harvest, unplanned urbanisation and infrastructural development, bush fires, have all increased the risk of environmental disasters in recent times. Satellite imagery of the Western

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Area alone shows stunning tree cover loss just over the last two decades. Over time, all of our environmentally-unfriendly practices and impacts have increased the vulnerability of our people with women and children most at risk.

In my inaugural speech to parliament, I mentioned that Sierra Leone was ranked the 3rd most vulnerable country to climate change in the world or the 3rd country in the world with the least capacity to respond or adapt to environmental change. The same Verisk Maplecroft Index states that 13 percent of the country's area and more than 35 percent of the population are at risk of disasters. Therefore, I reiterated my campaign pledge that my administration will focus on the protection of the environment and the prevention of natural disasters in the country.

We have taken proactive measures toward effective environmental governance, ecosystem conservation, the management of forest resources, and environmental education. We have established a stand-alone Ministry of the Environment and we are passing progressive legislation and policies to mitigate and manage environmental risks.

My Government, through the newly established Ministry of the Environment, aims to intensify reforesting the country through the development of Community Forests in a bid to increase tree cover, and consequently minimize the environmental disasters plaguing the country. Thus, the Ministry has developed a National Tree Planting, Reforestation, and Afforestation of degraded lands and coastal areas project. The project aims to develop Community Forests in all the fifteen districts of Sierra Leone.

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We are therefore gathered here at Mortomeh this morning to observe the commencement of the National Tree Planting exercise and to launch the National Tree Planting Project.

This National Reforestation and Afforestation Project, which was included in the 2020 budget, will benefit the whole country. It will be pursued along with the Government's commitment to creating jobs in rural communities. It will initially target 10,000 youths comprising at least 50 percent women.

This project is critical for various reasons:

- i. It will increase forest cover, enhance the capacity of carbon sequestration and biodiversity, and help reduce the adverse impact of climate change on the country;
- ii. It will prevent the displacement of populations caused by flooding, as the trees will curtail water from heavy downpours;
- iii. It will reduce early and erratic rainfall patterns leading to reduced flooding and windthrow hazards;
- iv. The national tree planting exercise will provide other ecosystems support functions such as water conservation;
- v. It will help to combat soil erosion along hills and slopes and aid soil conservation in agricultural areas; and finally,
- vi. the project will contribute to addressing several UN SDGs, the AU Agenda 2063, and Cluster 7 of our country's Medium Term National Development Plan.

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The co-benefits from health, agriculture, employment, water conservation, to economic development, are too numerous to name in this brief statement.

In general, the project is aimed at planting 5 million trees in approximately 14,706 hectares of degraded lands and coastal areas in the entire country. The project is expected to last for four years and the planting of trees will be done in 5 Phases. Phase 1, which commences this year, will end in June 2021 with 1.2 million trees planted.

Phases 2 to 5 will start in May 2021 and end in June 2024 and 3.8 Million trees will be planted.

In order to foster transparency, accountability, and national spread during the implementation of the programme, I have instructed the Minister of Environment to ensure that the Ministry strictly adhere to the following:

- i. No one organisation should apply for segments of this project in more than 2 chiefdoms of the same district;
- ii. No one organization should be awarded contracts to provide or plant more than 10,000 seedlings;
- iii. CBOs/NGOs should only be awarded contracts for areas in which they have worked before or have personnel who have abundant knowledge of the local area;
- iv. Only persons ordinarily resident in their respective chiefdoms shall be employed for the tree planting activity.

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, these clear guidelines are to ensure fairness and equity during the implementation of this project. I

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have directed the Honourable Minister to monitor the administration of this project very closely to ensure that this tree planting project benefits unemployed community youths, pupils/students, women, and to widows, the disabled, and other vulnerable populations across the entire nation.

My government also acknowledges that environmental disasters constitute national security threats and we therefore owe it to our people to provide solutions to these perennial problems. As a Government, we are finalising the establishment of the National Disaster Management Agency within the framework of the National Disaster Management Act. But I expect an intensification of engagements to go beyond disaster risk management to proactive risk prevention. Hence, I strongly urge cross-Ministry and cross-sectoral collaboration for this national tree-planting and associated green-development initiatives.

On this day that is set aside and celebrated annually as World Environment Day, we are using the National Tree Planting project to raise nationwide awareness at all levels of the significant role trees play in forestalling the environmental consequences of deforestation.

Beyond turning the tide on deforestation and land degradation, my Government fully supports other green initiatives and green economic growth from green energy solutions to conservation-friendly food production methods.

To our development partners, know that our initiative is not merely a symbolic gesture. It is the beginning of a drive towards greening our forests and our living spaces. It sits within a well-considered adaptation strategy that will make our nation more resilient to the adverse effects

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of climate change. We will continue to associate strongly with multilateral agencies and development partners on achieving green-growth and economic development.

Let me conclude by saying that, to us, a tree is a symbol of peace, life, and hope. But as we formally launch the National Tree Planting, Reforestation, and Afforestation of degraded lands and coastal areas Project, these trees are a symbol of our nation's commitment to conservation and to green growth and development.

I thank you all.