



**STATEMENT BY HIS EXCELLENCY, DR. JULIUS MAADA
BIO, PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF SIERRA LEONE,
AT THE FORMAL COMMISSIONING OF COVID-19 CARE
AND TREATMENT FACILITIES AND THE PILOT
DISTRIBUTION OF EQUIPMENT AND UNIFORMS TO
HEALTHCARE STAFF, BO DISTRICT – 2 JULY 2020**

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Honourable Ministers of Government
Honourable Members of Parliament
Our revered Paramount Chiefs
Local Government Leaders
Development partners
Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen

Good afternoon.

I would like us to start these proceedings with a moment of silence in remembrance of healthcare workers and compatriots we have lost to the **COVID-19** virus.

We extend our deepest condolences to family members, loved ones, and colleagues. We pray that their souls find eternal forgiveness, rest, and grace through the mercy of God/Allah SWT.

The New Direction laid out a clear strategic objective to transform an under-resourced, ill-equipped, dysfunctional, and inadequate health infrastructure and healthcare delivery system. Within a cost-effective and sustainable model, and with partnerships, we believe as a Government that it is possible to provide efficient, reliable, patient-centred healthcare services to citizens in all parts of Sierra Leone and this is why it is central to our Human Capital Development priority.

So as part of my Government's commitment to achieving equitable and affordable access for all Sierra Leoneans regardless of social and economic status, ability, gender, we have diligently pursued a series of key imperatives.

We have launched a National Health Action Plan that provides a holistic blueprint for developing healthcare. We have increased budget allocation to healthcare and invested in healthcare infrastructure across all regions of Sierra Leone. The National

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Emergency Medical Services (NEMS) is operational in all districts of the country with over 4,000 referrals to date. We have kept more Sierra Leoneans alive because of that singular decision to introduce a coordinated national ambulance service system. We have maintained the supply of essential drugs even through this pandemic. We have spared no expense in procuring life-saving equipment, including ventilators, to equip our COVID 19 treatment centres.

We have increased our healthcare capacity by recruiting more than 3,000 nurses and assigning more PIN codes than ever before, training nurses to the highest standards, and ensuring professional and regulatory oversight that guarantees standards. We have done all of this to bolster our public health systems to handle everyday ailments and disease conditions. A significant part of our strategy, as laid out in our New Direction manifesto, involves working with development and institutional partners, private organisations, and other professional bodies whose objectives align with ours for transforming the healthcare sector.

Let me acknowledge the work of World Vision International in Sierra Leone for their community-based primary health care interventions. Your focus on maternal, new-born, and child health (MNCH) using the Community Health model has kept thousands of our mothers and children alive. Thank you for your service.

I will speak to the contributions of the Open Society Initiative for West Africa (OSIWA) to our health sector soon. But to our mind, enhancing the capacity of healthcare personnel goes beyond simply recruiting and training nurses and other healthcare professionals. It is about making them more efficient in speedily and accurately diagnosing and treating disease conditions presented to them. We also believe that in the absence of accurate diagnosis, the health, and

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possibly, lives of patients are at grave risk. Healthcare personnel may identify the wrong disease condition and prescribe medicine that may be inefficient in treating that condition and that may lead to further worsening the condition of the patients. More importantly, with correct and timely diagnosis, healthcare personnel can provide the right treatment, consult with the right personnel, do the right referrals, or direct patients to the right facilities that can provide the right treatment for their disease conditions. Also, with limited healthcare resources and bed capacity, we cannot afford waste and inefficiencies within our healthcare services.

But most significantly, diagnostic testing is central to disease surveillance and it could be the basis for reliable data on disease prevalence or disease burdens in specific geographical locations. This data could help us as a Government in making evidence-based decisions on allocating resources, distributing medical supplies, training staff, locating healthcare infrastructure, providing health education, and making high quality treatment available to citizens.

I am therefore pleased to announce that my Government will be expanding access to diagnostic testing at all regional and district hospitals and eventually to all PHUs by providing laboratory equipment.

Beyond this, my Government will work to expand training for diagnostic medical staff and provide adequate equipment and other supplies for them to continue doing their work efficiently. I also call on the Ministry and policy makers to develop a more integrated diagnostic system that makes innovative use of telephone based applications for ordering tests, transmitting results, archiving data, and retrieving data. Those applications or platforms can be developed in collaboration with the Directorate of Science, technology and Innovation. I also hold the view that diagnostic facilities are only as good as their

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regulatory oversight. I therefore expect the ministry to develop a coherent and standardised oversight policy for all diagnostic testing facilities that are receiving this equipment.

We are grateful to our partners and we are confident that we will intensify cooperation and engagement on maintaining these diagnostic facilities, upgrading equipment, training staff, and supporting regulatory oversight.

My Government has also stressed the importance of professionalism in the healthcare professions. I come from a profession in which the wearing of uniforms fosters strong *esprit d'corps*, pride and confidence in the profession, and confidence to live up to the highest standards and expectations.

My Government believes that wearing uniforms in the healthcare professions will foster that professional identity and thus lead to greater pride in the profession and greater confidence in performing duties. The professional outlook of healthcare staff in identical uniforms will enhance the trust and confidence that patients and their family members have in the healthcare staff.

My Government therefore believes that to promote professionalism, we should reintroduce and strengthen a uniform wearing policy for healthcare practitioners especially nurses. Under the resilient health systems strengthening and sustainability programme concluded by the Ministries of Finance and Health, my Government will henceforth provide two sets of cadre-specific uniforms for every nurse. I repeat, my Government will provide nurses (CHOs, CHAs, Midwives etc.) with two sets of uniforms free of charge. This will be sustained and replicated throughout the country.

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So what we are doing with each of what I have highlighted above is strengthening capacity and building resilience in the healthcare sector as we work toward our goal of achieving Universal Health Coverage Outcomes.

In spite of minor lapses, that enhanced capacity has served us well in curtailing and battling COVID-19. The consequences of early action, well-considered healthcare protocols, and a structured and coordinated NaCoVERC response that has now been decentralised to the districts, is evident in the relatively low levels of infection, high survival and low death rates from the highly infectious and deadly COVID-19 virus.

We have been very attentive to international standards of care and support for people affected directly and indirectly by COVID-19. We have mobilised resources quickly, intensified risk communications with all stakeholders, provided social safety nets for vulnerable populations, and mitigated financial and physical barriers to care for the most vulnerable. Throughout, we have worked hard to minimise the impact of COVID-19 on livelihoods but more so its impact on the health and lives of Sierra Leoneans.

Most of our healthcare workers have been retrained and deployed to care for COVID 19 cases. We recognise that in doing their professional work, they may interact with asymptomatic and pre-symptomatic patients. By the very nature of their work, they are first contacts and they are at primary risk of COVID-19 community infections. We should protect them against COVID-19 and other infections. In addition to the fully-equipped COVID-19 isolation unit that I formally open today, my Government is also providing Infection Prevention and Control equipment and training for all healthcare workers across board.

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Throughout COVID-19, we have steadily increased our treatment bed capacity in various parts of the country. We have done so with the support of great partnerships. Let me, at this juncture, acknowledge the support of OSIWA that has fully funded the refurbishment and repurposing of The Bo Children's Hospital, which I inspected earlier this morning, as a dedicated COVID-19 treatment facility. Some of the nurses will be re-trained accordingly and the Ministry of Health and Sanitation will support with essential equipment and other consumables.

In order to treat healthcare workers who may succumb to COVID-19, OSIWA has also fully financed the repurposing of the Infectious Diseases Centre into a treatment centre for health workers. I must acknowledge that the container was first provided by the WHO.

Let me therefore thank OSIWA again for its proactive and speedy support in rehabilitating both the Bo Children's Hospital and the Infectious Disease Centre. They have considerably strengthened our capacity to respond to the ravaging menace of COVID-19. These facilities are concrete and enduring interventions that will outlive Corona and boost our healthcare infrastructure.

As a Government and country, we deeply appreciate OSIWA's work in promoting human rights; eradicating Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV); supporting community-based justice mechanisms implemented by the legal aid board and civil society partners; promoting accountability; and facilitating the active participation of citizens in governance processes. My Government looks forward to deepening its partnership with OSIWA as we strive to establish the Peace and National Cohesion Commission. Thank you, OSIWA.

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My Government is also working on finalising a Life Insurance Scheme for all Health Workers. To our minds, this is a significant part of health systems strengthening and a recognition that the lives of our healthcare workers and their survivors matter.

So let me conclude this short address by encouraging our healthcare professionals to continue delivering quality, patient-centred care with compassion and diligence. Regulatory bodies must maintain strict oversight of standards of care and testing. Hospital management must ensure high quality maintenance of all these facilities and equipment. To community members, hospital is the best place for diagnosing and treating all medical conditions. COVID-19 patients are treated in a different and dedicated hospital that is located far away from Government referral hospitals. As always, follow all healthcare protocols announced by the experts.

I thank you and God bless Sierra Leone.