



**KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY HIS EXCELLENCY
PRESIDENT DR JULIUS MAADA BIO AT THE
PRESIDENTIAL MEDIA COCKTAIL ON FRIDAY,
STATE HOUSE, FREETOWN - 18 DECEMBER
2020**

Madam First Lady
The Chief Minister
Ministers and Deputy Ministers present
The Chairman of the Independent Media Commission
The President of the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists
Members of the fourth estate
Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen
| Good evening,

The year 2020 has been truly remarkable and exciting not only for the media in Sierra Leone but also our great country. Just this week, the Board of the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) unanimously approved Sierra Leone for a Compact. We have achieved this because of the tremendous gains we have made in controlling corruption, investing in people, protecting democratic rights and enabling economic freedoms. This year for the first time in the history of Sierra Leone's engagement with the MCC, we have passed the MCC scorecard for two years in a row, attained the highest score on the MCC scorecard, while passing | 13 indicators out of 20. Let us give ourselves a round of applause.

We will continue to improve on these gains and strengthen our partnership with the Government and People of the United States of America. Thank you Honourable Vice President for your leadership and the entire team at the MCC Unit in Sierra Leone for your relentless hard work. Even with this latest achievement the Nationalist Newspaper would still have the screaming banner headline "Paopa has failed; Sierra Leoneans are trapped". And with our impressive MCC score on democratic rights, our friends at Sierra Express Media Newspaper roared in with this catchy headline: "Sierra Leone Democracy in Flames". I expected to see the image of a burning flame, but I am told the printers charged | more for the colored image so they dropped the idea.

Ladies and gentlemen, if you are here tonight and still reflecting on that MTV Lebanon news report in August this year that "Sierra Leone President will arrive in Lebanon at midnight and the Lebanese Red Cross awaits him to transfer him to American University Beirut Medical Centre to receive coronavirus treatment", reflect no more for our dearest Global Times newspaper has always assured you that "President Bio is hale and hearty". From a COVID-19 infected President in Lebanon, I was later shocked on my return from Lebanon by the frontpage publication of Salone Times Newspaper on 21st September: "Amidst COVID-19...Bio returns from Honeymoon". Well, I was told that was courtesy of my wife!

On that note let me thank the media for your immeasurable contribution in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. However, not everyone in the media had the confidence in us. On the 2nd of June the Standard Times Newspaper carried this shocking headliner: "COVID 19 operations to collapse...embezzlement, corruption and poor administration". So, thank you to the interim National Coordinator and the entire NaCOVERC team because the COVID-19 operations did not collapse.

Even the appointment of Hon. Dr. Alpha Kanu as the Strategic Adviser on Social Mobilization and Food Security in the Office of the Interim National Coordinator was not spared by the media.

On 11th May, Salone Times Newspaper published this banner headline on its front page: "Red Apprentice turns driver in Green Car". Well, I am sure even the former red apprentice now knows that Sierra Leone has one destination and that is the NEW DIRECTION. So, let us have faith in ourselves as Sierra Leoneans

and the structures we create. The last decade may have shaken that faith but the fight against COVID-19 has given us an opportunity to restore that faith and show the world that Sierra Leone can succeed where other countries fail.

Tonight, I am proud to say that the repeal of Part V of the Public Order Act of 1965 is no longer in the pipeline. We are celebrating the end of an era that criminalized libel and sedition after 55 years of its existence. The New Age Newspaper described the repeal of Part V on its front page as: "An epoch of media emancipation of Sierra Leone". I cannot agree more. The repeal of Part V of the Public Order Act of 1965 and the enactment of the Independent Media Commission (IMC) Act 2020 will enhance professionalism in the media with several key benefits that will make the journalism profession an enviable career. Particularly, if the Independent Media Commission Act 2020 is carefully implemented, backed by a clear media code of practice, it will attract investment opportunities, enhance social security scheme for media practitioners amongst others.

Following the signing of the repeal, on 28th October, I promised that my Government would review the cases of all persons facing charges of criminal and seditious libel under the old law. On the 16th November, the Attorney General and Minister of Justice, pursuant to section 44 subsection 1 of the Criminal Procedure Act of 1965, entered a nolle prosequi in the matter titled "the State versus Dr. Sylvia O. Blyden and Hussain Muckson Sesay" thereby discontinuing the case.

Interestingly on the 17th November, Global Times Newspaper published on its front page: "Government of talk and do.....Amnesty for Sylvia Blyden and Co-Accused". The intervention of Honourable Dr Kandeh Yumkella of NGC in this matter did not go unnoticed in this case. Appealing to the former

Attorney General and Minister of Justice not to oppose bail application of Dr Sylvia O. Blyden, the Calabash Newspaper on Tuesday 26th May published on its front page: "Yumkella Calls on Bio to be a good Political Samaritan". For me, it was never about being a Political Samaritan because as I argued at the signing of the repeal, civilised and democratic countries cannot be seen as jailers of journalists when journalists exercise their professional responsibility to report objectively and ethically.

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, the year 2020 has also been exciting in many ways and the reporting of the newspapers on some of those events has not just been informative and educative but also very interesting. Following my address to the nation on the State of Law and Order after a spate of violence earlier in the year, on 11th May the News 24 newspaper published on its front page "Soja don wake" whilst Calabash Newspapers carried on its front page "As he responds to violent upheaval...Bio spits fire". Well, whether "soja don wake" or "Bio spitting fire", I am sure those who the message was meant for got the message very clearly.

Friends in the media, during the course of 2020, I have also observed that the silence of "Di gron dry" slogan was sponsored by the many COVID-19 interventions facilitated by NaCSA. That triggered this Salone Times Newspaper banner headline of 14th August: "With Le4.8 billion Leones....President Bio soak di gron for over 2,000 workers in Tourism Sector". This intervention was the COVID-19 Emergency Cash Transfer which is targeting about 36,000 households with vulnerable people in the informal sector such as petty traders and low paid workers in hotel and tourism sector.

Additionally, in July, the COVID-19 Ep Fet Po or Social safety net initiative also targeted 35,000 extremely poor households across the country including persons with disability. In fact, "Di gron finally portoporto" when the final end of service payment of over Le31 billion Leones was paid to former President, Vice President, Ministers, Deputy Ministers and other political appointees of the APC administration.

Whilst the "Di gron dry" slogan was silent in 2020, a new slogan emerged, "Coconut head", which was introduced from the album of the venerable Emmerson Bockarie. As you could expect, certain newspapers went on the rampage with it, trying hard to give it a partisan tailspin.

On the 13th August, my friends at Sierra Express Media newspaper gave it this twist: "The Economy is still messy...Emmerson undresses the SLPP Government". It was also the headliner for the Provincial Times newspaper of 12th August: "Emmerson Bockarie Blasts New Direction Government". In fact, the Fritong Post newspaper on the 11th August, took it further: "Emmerson's Kokonat head may trigger cabinet reshuffle". Even the Guardian newspaper could not be outdone on this, as evidenced in its 11th August headline: "In President Bio's coconut head: criminal libel law repealed; first sexual offences model court established; free quality education introduced; Le21 billion retrieved from corrupt officials; the fight against corruption strengthened; ensured payment of debts left by the last government." With all of these and more in the "coconut head", it shows "dis na strong coconut".

However, despite the popularity of the "Coconut head" song, certain opposition papers were still not satisfied as they thought Emmerson should have done more to criticize the Government on

everything real or imaginary. So the indomitable and irretrievable Awareness Times Newspaper roared in: "Adebayo Strips Emmerson So Naked". Really? But as usual, there was no evidence.

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, as also expected the commissioning of the 50 Garbage trucks on Tuesday 1st December was upsetting for certain newspapers. For instance, on Thursday 3rd December the Nationalist newspaper couldn't conceal its revulsion in this questioning headline: "Is SLPP a Government of dorti box?" But that voice was not unanimous, as even our known Awareness Times newspaper showed in this headline: "As 50 Garbage Trucks Roll through....Massive snub of calls to protest against regime". That reference was to a supposedly planned demonstration to coincide with this event. But why should anyone really protest against development!

Some of the publications in response to certain policy initiatives have also been intriguing. Imagine this publication on our new decentralization policy which seeks to increase political participation at local level in the Sierra Express Express Media of 9th December: "New Decentralisation Policy....Opposition parties reject SLPP's dictatorship". As if that was not bad enough, the Chief Minister was in Parliament for the enactment of the Independent Commission for Peace and National Cohesion Act 2020; and after exerting so much time and efforts, the Nightwatch newspaper on Wednesday 9th December recognised that effort with this banner: "In Parliament, Opposition abandons Chief Minister". I am sure the main opposition has never forgiven the Chief Minister for the 2018 GTT Report.

Sometimes, even when government is so determined to build the governance infrastructure at district level, certain newspapers are

only interested in the politics. For instance, after the first fire station was commissioned in Kailahun on 23rd November, Awareness Times had this to say: "As Port Loko Burns...Maada Bio gives new fire station to Kailahun town". Well, Port Loko don't worry because there is going to be a new fire station in Port Loko, PAOPA!

Ladies and gentlemen, away from home, the recent elections in Guinea have also had an impact in Sierra Leone. Imagine the Nightwatch newspaper carrying a front page headline on 8th October: "Vice President Juldeh Jalloh recruits mercenaries....says Guinea President". On reading it, the first question that came to my mind was "how Juldeh in connect?"

For the past years, my wife, the first lady has also done so many amazing things on the fight against rape and sexual and gender based violence in Sierra Leone. She has led the "Hands Off our Girls movement", mobilized stakeholders and invested so much time and resources travelling on a national campaign. Despite all of these wonderful things she has done and continues to do, in March this year, Sierra Express Media newspaper published this commendation: "First Lady milks Sierra Leone dry". Well I know my wife loves farming but she has not yet started "dairy farming" for the production of milk.

Let me now put the shoe on the other foot and ask you this question: Who are we missing tonight that have always been with us for the past two media cocktail events? (Pause for a while and ask the audience again) Indded we lost some colleagues to eternity (we pray for their repose). But thankfully also, our information attachés are not here tonight. Isn't it strange that I will not be getting that usual question: "When is the final Information Attachés' list going to be announced sir?"_Twenty-

two information Attachés were recruited, trained and deployed in various Sierra Leone missions abroad. The main objective of the recruitment and training was to enhance the capacity of the attachés and support their transitions into their new roles as budding diplomats.

Just on the issue of travel, I also note that the Times newspaper has not been happy with my recent travels following the resumption of flights. Hence, following my recent trips abroad, on Monday 14th December the Times newspaper had this on its front page: "More per diem!! Fat Pocket!! Rotten Economy!!...flying President resumes flying mission". Well, over the last two years the flying mission has brought millions and millions of dollars to Sierra Leone and substantially rebranded our country internationally. Are we not all proud of that?

Distinguished guests, Government was greatly concerned about the absence of a designated government print media outlet for the dissemination of government information following the induced collapse of SLENA and its associated publications; the Sierra Leone Daily Mail and Sierra News. We are pleased to note that the Minister of Information and Communications was able to mobilise and leverage private sector resources to rehabilitate the collapsed building and revitalize Sierra News.

It is also important to note that through my engagement with the United Kingdom Government, the Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office has committed to support the development of the Sierra Leone media especially in areas of institutional capacity building of professional bodies like SLAJ, its affiliate bodies and the Independent Media Commission.

I have also been reliably informed by the Minister that the Ministry of Information and Communications in collaboration with SLAJ has put the requisite tools together to host an investment conference on the Media that will attract investment in the media to alleviate media poverty and poverty in the media. The investment conference is expected to hold early next year in commemorating the 50th anniversary of SLAJ and the 60th Anniversary of Independence respectively.

I also want to commend the Minister and his team for the successful inaugural media retreat on our manifesto commitments held in Bo this week. The Media have always been with us on this journey since the launch of the Manifesto and we must continue to take them along as critical partners to provide an independent assessment of the many great things we have done and continue to do as a NEW DIRECTION GOVERNMENT.

Ladies and gentlemen, let me conclude by revealing that this year my relationship with the media has been so great that certain newspapers even now offer me spiritual advice. For instance, on the 21st August, the Nightwatch newspaper published on its front page: "President Bio: Beware of the Devil". I have since gone in search of this devil to no avail. But I have just been reminded that the devil is in the details.

On that note I wish you all a merry Christmas and prosperous 2021.