



**STATEMENT BY HIS EXCELLENCY, DR. JULIUS MAADA
BIO, PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF SIERRA LEONE
ON OCCASION OF THE FORMAL PRESENTATION OF THE
STATE OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN SIERRA LEONE 2019
ANNUAL REPORT. STATE HOUSE, FREETOWN - 17
DECEMBER 2020**

Ministers of Government, Honourable Members of Parliament,
Madam Chairperson, Commissioners of the Human Rights
Commission,
Staff, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,
Good Morning,

1. Let me, from the outset, thank you profusely for the yeoman's work in executing your mandate and relentlessly and painstakingly monitoring the state of human rights in Sierra Leone. You have made very valuable and forward-looking suggestions about how we can continue getting even better.
2. We are encouraged by the great progress you have recorded in your report especially in the areas of expanding the right to education and the right to health, increasing access to clean water and WASH facilities, supporting and including persons with disabilities and other vulnerable demographic groups, ensuring safe spaces for women, and the vigorous campaign against sexual and gender based violence.
3. The judiciary, law enforcement, and correctional services agencies have developed policies that will lead to specific actions and activities that will address some of the areas of improvement you have identified in your detailed report.
4. May I also humbly draw your kind attention to updates to some of the issues you have highlighted in the report and others that could have been pointed out?
5. Our nation is less fragile because of concrete actions we have taken as a Government. In her report at the UN Peacebuilding Commission meeting on Sierra Leone on the 11th of December, UN Deputy Secretary General, Amina Mohamed, reported that she "sensed pride in the country's steady path towards sustainable peace and development and in aspirations of the Government to become a middle income country."
6. She also indicated that she was "encouraged by the political will to promote sustainable development, enhance inclusive governance, further improve access to justice and better protect human rights including to fight against all forms of gender violence."

7. I am also pleased to share with you that our control of corruption and democratic rights scores with the MCCU were at unprecedented highs. On that account, on 15th December, Sierra Leone received a unanimous vote by the MCC Board for compact eligibility for the first time in our nation's history.
8. On 3rd December, I also formally launched the Gender Empowerment and Women's Equality policy – a comprehensive national policy that provides a progressive roadmap for achieving gender parity, inclusiveness, and overall empowerment and access. My Government is determined to implement that policy fully.
9. In July 2020 also, US Secretary of State announced Sierra Leone's steady progress to Tier 2 and he especially foreground my Government's dedication to fighting against Trafficking in Persons.
10. Also, beyond the fulfilment of a manifesto pledge and for reasons of consolidating democratic and fundamental human rights, I signed into law a permanent repeal of Part V of The Public Order act that finally expunged criminal libel from our laws.
11. Parliament is also considering the land commission legislation my Government has forwarded. It is hoped that in short course, we will address questions around land rights raised in the report and kindred issues nationwide.
12. We are not where we were seven years ago. We are not where we were last year -- which was way better than seven years ago. We are committed to ensuring that the progress we have made is irreversible because we believe it is best for peace, security, governance, and inclusive national development. Be assured that our Sierra Leone will be in an even better place next year.
13. Dealing with human rights questions is a delicate balancing act. In protecting life, liberty, and security of the person, the state could be faced with a choice between heavy or intrusive policing and protecting life and

property from cliques, gangs, and armed robbers. In that respect, it is easy to argue that the fundamental rights of citizens trump the rights of violent criminals to privacy and liberty. My Government will continue to improve on law enforcement and crime interdiction activities that are respectful of fundamental human rights and norms.

14. As part of my Government's holistic criminal justice reform agenda (which includes decluttering and upgrading detention facilities), we hold the view that mandatory custodial sentences especially for petty offences will only backload the criminal justice system again. Government is open to discussing imposing fines or structured community service regimes rather than mandatory custodial sentences for petty offences.
15. That brings me to the question of the death penalty. My Government believes in the sanctity of life of every citizen. We have maintained the moratorium on the death penalty for that reason. Although the recommendation by the Justice Cowan-led Constitutional Review Committee (CRC) was rejected by the last Government, a committee set up by my administration to revisit the issue has recommended accepting the Justice Cowan recommendation. So my Government has moved significantly on this question and we will continue making progress.
16. The Commission also raises questions around land rights especially in the Western area albeit with no clear and specific examples. Government is fully committed to respecting and protecting rightful and legal land ownership and encourages citizens to use formal redress mechanisms to assert their rightful and legal ownership of land. Also, in view of the Government's proactive disaster risk management and climate mitigation policies, we will continue the practice of assessing the dangers posed by illegal and informal settlements to the lives of citizens and to the environment.

17. I should also mention that my Government made a public commitment to look at the constitutional review process. I have approved the setting up of a Technical Committee to review the recommendations of the Justice Cowan-led CRC and advise cabinet on its full slate of recommendations. The committee is chaired by the Attorney General and it comprises cabinet ministers, governance advisers, and legal practitioners. I am informed that they met in September 2020 and they have produced a report for the consideration of cabinet. So productive conversations will continue on this critical issue.
18. My Government also believes that on questions of human rights, we should go beyond just monitoring and reporting. We should norm human rights principles in institutional policies, practices, actions, and activities. Accurate statistical systems and databases should account for and support this. Value-neutral public and civic education can also complement the work of the commission by educating citizens on human rights norms and principles. Civil society groups can, in their various interventions, strengthen this ecosystem of human rights actors. The more human rights actors and stakeholders we create in institutions and communities, the better for the state of human rights in Sierra Leone.
19. Friendly countries, institutions, and development partners also have a stake in ensuring that human rights norms and principles take a firm foothold in Sierra Leone because that strengthens our democracy, our national institutions, our communities, and our investment landscape.
20. In respect of the foregoing, Government is ready to commit all levels of support for developing a National Action Plan for Human Rights. It will support the HRCSL to fulfil its mandate and better advise the Government on

compliance with obligations under international instruments.

21. To conclude, Government looks forward to enriching the feedback loops and continuing the progressive engagements on human rights in Sierra Leone. We believe that a whole lot of good can come of working together on doing our very best for Sierra Leone.

I thank you.