



**RESPONSE BY HIS EXCELLENCY, DR. JULIUS MAADA
BIO, PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF SIERRA LEONE,
AT THE PRESENTATION OF THE REPORT ON THE STATE
OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN SIERRA LEONE. FREETOWN,
STATE HOUSE - 1ST DECEMBER 2021**

Ministers of Government,
Chairman and Commissioners of the Human Rights Commission,
Distinguished ladies and Gentlemen,
Good morning:

1. I want to join you, Madam Chairperson, to express collective condolences as a nation. When tragedy struck, neighbours comforted neighbours. Our religious leaders prayed with communities. We collectively wiped away our tears and affirmed our faith that this too shall pass. May the souls of the faithful departed continue to rest in peace.

2. Our response to the tragedy is a testament to our nation's will to persevere and keep on keeping on. This tragedy is a teachable moment and we should not lose the best lessons on our civic responsibilities, on public safety, and, on how to perceive, plan for, and respond to future tragedies. We thank our first responders, healthcare workers, psycho-social workers, the security forces, and the National Disaster Management Agency for their sacrifices.

3. Thank you for your very fluent presentation of the Commission's 14th annual State of Human Rights report. I believe that I speak on behalf of every Sierra Leonean when I say that we are pleased that your Commission has reported improvements each year. Each year, international bodies like the MCC have recognised my Government's achievements in ruling justly.

4. We acknowledge our constitutional, regional, and international commitments to protecting and promoting human rights and we are satisfied that your report is complimentary on our progress and efforts.

5. Even as the threat of the Omicron variant of COVID-19 looms, we will continue our Government's fight against COVID and implement economic, and other interventions to save lives, protect livelihoods, and cushion the impact on vulnerable populations.

6. Equally so, I urge the Human Rights Commission – Sierra Leone – to add its voice to global calls to end vaccine inequities that continue to undermine economic recovery and inclusive development in our worst-hit economies in sub-Saharan Africa. I dare say that vaccine inequities and disparities constitute human rights concerns that must be addressed.

7. As President, I have fulfilled a commitment to abolish the death penalty. We will do everything necessary beyond this initial domestic first-step to irreversibly end judicial executions and preserve and protect lives through our human capital development investments.

8. Your attestation to my Government's efforts to peacefully resolve issues relating to the acquisition and retention of land is encouraging. I want to thank you for your service and your continued participation in the work of the land committee. Clearly, you bring that much-welcome rights perspective to their work. Thank you.

9. Last week I formally signed the Global Pledge on Media Freedom following our monumental step of abolishing the seditious and criminal libel laws and thus unfettering free speech in our democracy. Today, Sierra Leone has applied to accede to the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance. Membership affirms my Government's commitment to do everything to protect and promote freedom of thought, conscience, religion in our country.

10. Our Government's policy of radical inclusion now means that pregnant girls, persons living with disabilities, people who are in remote rural areas, people from poor backgrounds, adult learners now have an indivisible, equal, and inclusive right to education. Our support for students who write transition exams, distribution of free teaching and learning materials, new construction and rehabilitation of school infrastructure; and our unprecedented budgetary allocation all continue apace.

11. We have registered great progress in improving public services. You have indeed recorded that with our improvements at Guma Valley Water Company and SALWACO among others, my Government is providing more access to potable water and there have been fewer incidents of water-borne diseases in the last three years.

12. There is also expanded telephone and internet coverage throughout Sierra Leone. I have also signed into law the Cybercrime act that brings us in line with the rest of the world and provides for the secure use of cyberspace for private and other communications, commercial transactions, and other uses.

13. Although the healthcare budget has yet to hit the Abuja Declaration threshold, we have increased the allocations each year and our partners have provided unprecedented support in the healthcare sector.

14. As you report, we have spared no expense in protecting against and curtailing the spread of COVID-19. But equally, even at the height of

COVID, we have respected and expanded labour rights and access to health insurance for our healthcare workers; provided cash transfers to vulnerable populations; supported women and persons with disabilities with low-interest loans; and, given income support to workers in the hospitality sector who were sent on what you call "garden leave."

15. With respect to the rights of persons with disabilities, we are pleased that you report my Government's fulfillment of its international reporting obligations and completion of the Universal Periodic Review Report. My Government will work on submitting outstanding international treaty reports.

16. You mention my Government's successes in the fight against sexual and gender-based violence and the significant legal and policy reforms that we have instituted to further that fight. The protection of and empowerment of women is central to our work to have a more just and more inclusive society. We have also laid a Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment bill in parliament, and we look forward to the enactment of a law that resolves the thorny issue of gender discrimination.

17. We have made significant improvements to policing and the safe custody of detainees and prisoners. The Central Correctional and other detention facilities across Sierra Leone are safer and better now than they were four years ago. As you note, we have reduced prison populations and we are working with the judiciary to expedite the processing of more cases.

18. You note that youth resort to violent protests as a first option. This is exacerbated by partisan politics, no doubt, and I continue to urge bad politicians to debate policies and concrete achievements rather than practice the bad politics of inciting violence. My Government has introduced civic education in schools for the first time in over two decades, instituted a national civic education directorate, and greatly expanded vocational skills training and the national youth scheme.

19. Government also wishes to draw attention to the international acknowledgment of our successes in curtailing trafficking in persons that affects mainly young persons.

20. Thank you also for acknowledging that my Government has expanded access to justice very significantly with the setting up of more

specialised and magistrate courts, the employment of more judges, and the introduction of more reforms in the justice sector. We will continue to engage with the judiciary on making even more progress in processing caseloads.

21. Government notes the specific requests by the commission. Given the current budgetary constraints, Government will favourably review those requests especially as they underwrite the work of the commission especially in developing the National Action Plan on Human Rights.

22. Government recognises the rationale behind individual Police accountability for violations of human rights. More training of Police in de-escalation techniques when dealing with citizens, more scrutiny by the press and by citizens of Police work, and ongoing reforms and restructuring have reduced the number of fatal incidents. But Government acknowledges that more can be done.

23. As President, I made a clear and specific pledge to permanently improve the governance space in Sierra Leone and to assure citizens of their rights. I also made a manifesto commitment to review the recommendations of the Constitutional Review Committee and boldly accept recommendations. I have an unbroken record for keeping my promises and this too shall be kept in short order.

I thank you for your attention