



**KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY HIS
EXCELLENCY, DR. JULIUS MAADA BIO,
PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF
SIERRA LEONE, AT THE OPENING OF
THE NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON
TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS,
FREETOWN, 28TH FEBRUARY 2022**

TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS 2

The Honourable Vice President;
Madam First Lady;
Speaker of Parliament;
Your Lordship, the Chief Justice;
Ministers of Government;
Honourable Members of Parliament;
Development Partners and Members of the Diplomatic and Consular Corps;
Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen;
Good morning.

1. Let me start by thanking the Honourable Vice President for his leadership in combatting Trafficking in Persons in Sierra Leone. You have led from the front and kept me fully briefed on progress, constraints, and what we can do better. Thank you.

2. Madam First Lady, you have not sat back in the comfort of our home and ignored the burning social issues of the protection and enhancement of the girl child. You have been consistent and you have remained passionate about every Sierra Leonean girl receiving a fair and equal chance to be all they can be. Thank you.

3. The Minister of Social Welfare, you have done no less and I continue to expect even more as we work towards protecting every Sierra Leonean child. So that each of them can say, when we shall have passed on to the land of our ancestors, that our Government cared; our Government worked; and our Government transformed their lives for the better, forever.

4. To our eminent speakers, our friends, development partners, you all continue to inspire, instil, and support our New Direction's "can-do" and a "will-do-more" attitude. You do what you do not because you must, but you do what you do for our people because you care. We thank you as a nation.

5. I also wish to thank civil society, our communities, social workers, investigators and law-enforcement officials, prosecutors, judges, and everyone who continues to make every effort towards interdicting this horrible treatment of our fellow human beings.

TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS 3

6. For all of us here present today and beyond, I am reminded of the words of the great abolitionist, William Wilberforce, when he said about slavery in the House of Commons in 1791, that: "You may choose to look the other way; but you can never say again that you did not know." Today, we are here because we know about the evils of trafficking in persons and we have chosen to not look the other way.

7. Human trafficking, as with slavery in the past, sees and treats human beings as mere commodities for making a profit. Its forms are hideous, cruel, degrading, and inhumane. Its impact is indelible for victims, for their communities, for our nation, and for the world. It poses a clear and present danger to lives and futures.

8. Ours is now the duty to tackle this scourge head-on. We have a responsibility to rid our nation of what has blighted lives and held back promising lives that could have blossomed to enrich our nation. Ours is a task to educate, to mobilise, to collaborate in order to prevent and protect our children and our citizens from this inhumane and criminal act.

9. We thank the United States Government, in particular, for evaluating and monitoring the progress we have made as Government in just under four years. We acknowledge their commendation for our progress to Tier 2 and our significant efforts to do even better. In spite of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on global economies and especially on Sierra Leone, we have not relented in investing in and working with partners to improve our capacity to fight trafficking in persons.

10. We do so because we have set our national priority as human capital development. We believe that development is driven by people – healthy, food-secure, and well-educated – who can then harness their diverse abilities and talents to transform our nation. We believe that with our investments in human capital development, we can reduce long-term vulnerabilities and thus tackle some of the root causes of trafficking in persons.

11. But we have also prioritised the protection of all persons especially girls from all forms of sexual and gender-based violence. We have abolished the death penalty; we have unfettered free speech. We are working on progressive laws that protect, empower, and promote women, youth, the

TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS 4

disabled, children, and other vulnerable populations. We have opened up more democratic spaces with the establishment of a permanent commission for peace and national cohesion. We have introduced civic education in schools; and we have established more dialogue with civil society actors and community leaders. We believe these are critical for building a safer, nurturing, and resilient Sierra Leone.

12. Previous speakers have alluded to some of our efforts and I am pleased to add that as President, I today make a firm public commitment to work with stakeholders and development partners to redouble our efforts.

13. Within the policy and regulatory space, we have worked across government and with partners to launch a comprehensive national migration policy for Sierra Leone. We are making efforts to structure and monitor labour migration through the Ministry of Labour and Social Security in ways that make migrants less susceptible to exploitation and trafficking. There are more possibilities for inter-agency and partner collaboration to get labour migration right.

14. Domestically, we are reviewing and improving on the Anti-Human Trafficking Act of 2007, Act No. 7. The Anti-Human Trafficking and Migrant Smuggling Bill 2021 is more expansive, in accord with international best practices, and addresses a wider variety of crimes including debt bondage, sexual servitude, illegal removal of organs, and all forms of migrant smuggling. As with the Sexual Offences Act, it will provide for faster but fair criminal justice procedures, dedicated courts, and stiffer sentencing guidelines. It is also but fair that victims are able to claim significant financial restitution from traffickers. The international community should significantly increase the risk of trafficking in persons and Sierra Leone stands ready to cooperate with Governments and organisations that are or will work towards those steps.

15. The Lord Chief Justice has already implemented actions that have increased prosecution and conviction rates and I challenge him and the judiciary to do more to change perceptions of the quality and immediacy of justice meted out.

TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS 5

16. Working with partners, the Office of the Vice President and the Ministry of Social Welfare have also established immediate strategic priorities for reducing human trafficking in Sierra Leone from 2022-2023. These strategic actions include training investigators, law enforcement officials, first responders including social workers, and judges. It will also involve stakeholder and community engagements on identifying, reporting, and cooperating on prosecuting human trafficking cases in all its forms.

17. I am also informed of grave and substantiated concerns that officials whose task it is to protect and support victims are subjecting them to even more inhumane and undignified treatment. I expect heads of those agencies and departments to strictly ensure that all responders act within the framework of national priorities and actions we have established as a government.

18. We should and we will also redouble our efforts to educate the public on the forms and impact of trafficking in persons. Although seemingly acceptable, the "men-pikin" phenomenon is often abusive, inhumane, and exploitative. The notion that "pass you do temple-run bifo you able fen am" is fraught with great danger. An informed public is a more vigilant public. The more we educate citizens, the more citizens will know, and the more citizens will report trafficking in persons.

19. To enhance national reporting, Government has worked with partners to develop a national reporting system. I am pleased to announce the establishment of the national toll-free 134 FREEDOM HOTLINE established on all three telephone carriers. Once fully functional, we believe this 134 toll-free line will be a significant tool in our fight against human trafficking.

20. I have also asked the Trafficking in Persons taskforce to develop a broader anti-trafficking architecture for victim identification, victim tracking, and victim support within an integrated national referral system. The ministry must ensure strict compliance with all standard operating procedures for all stakeholders within the national referral system.

21. But we also believe that we can and we should harness the power of data to augment our fight against trafficking in persons. I am pleased to hear, for instance, about the work of the IOM, Irish Embassy, the EU,

APRIES, the EU, and the US Government. I am also pleased to hear about the work of Professor David Okech that supports training Sierra Leoneans to use data to inform counter-trafficking programmes and policies.

22. At the national level, the Directorate of Science, Technology, and Innovation, that I established in 2018 in the Office of the President, is also supporting our national efforts to use data and technology to tackle trafficking in persons. They have been tasked to create a national data platform that will automate all Trafficking in Persons data. Obviously, I expect that guidelines on access, use, and privacy will be comprehensive and the automated data will support more coordinated and effective inter-agency action on trafficking in persons.

23. We will work with our neighbours, the ECOWAS sub-region, and international partners to harmonise our national actions and our referral systems. Sierra Leone has also been at the centre of international advocacy and other efforts to fight trafficking in persons from co-sponsoring events at the United Nations General Assembly to working with various international agencies. More collaboration and more joint action across our immediate borders and globally will ensure swift and effective responses to this global crime.

24. But our fight is significantly constrained by the lack of financial and other resources for tackling national and transnational networks. Within our limited national budget, we have supported training and tried our best to fund victim support operations and infrastructure. We need more public education; more training and equipment for first responders, law enforcement officers, prosecutorial staff, and social workers; more shelters to support victims; and more money to support anti-trafficking operations across the country. We also desire more support for removing, repatriating, and reintegrating our nationals who are victims of human trafficking. We currently work with partners and non-governmental networks and we thank them for their commendable work and tremendous support. Partner governments can help us do more.

25. Let me conclude by also adding that we need access to shared international intelligence networks, shared data, and coordinated action on trafficking in persons. Partner governments can do more and should do more

TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS 7

to help us achieve the strategic outcomes of our efforts. We share the problem; we should support one another to create sustainable solutions.

I thank you all for your kind attention.