



GOVERNMENT OF SIERRA LEONE

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

DELIVERED BY

HIS EXCELLENCY THE PRESIDENT

DR. JULIUS MAADA BIO *G.C.R.S.L.*

*President of The Republic and Commander-In-Chief of the
Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces*

**On the Occasion of the State Opening of the
Fifth Session of the Fifth Parliament of the Second
Republic of Sierra Leone**

In the Chamber of Parliament Building

Tower Hill, Freetown

On Tuesday, 10th May 2022 At 10:00am

HONOURABLE SPEAKER OF PARLIAMENT,
HONOURABLE VICE PRESIDENT,
MADAM FIRST LADY,
HONOURABLE CHIEF JUSTICE,
MINISTERS OF GOVERNMENT,
HONOURABLE MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT,
YOUR WORSHIP, THE MAYOR OF THE MUNICIPALITY OF FREETOWN,
OUR REVERED TRADITIONAL AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT LEADERS,
MEMBERS OF THE DIPLOMATIC AND CONSULAR CORPS,
DISTINGUISHED LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

Mr. Speaker, Honourable Members,

1. When I first addressed this Honourable House, four years ago, the world was in a vastly different place. I brought to this House, plans to translate campaign promises into policy actions, to tackle troubling inflation and low revenue mobilisation, to introduce disciplined leadership and efficiency even in the face of the dire economic situation we inherited as a government.

2. No one could have predicted then that we would also be tackling a global pandemic that would cause unprecedented disruptions, irrational spikes, and uncertainties within the global economy. In the words of Martin Luther King, "the ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort, but where he stands at times of challenge". I dare say that the ultimate measure of a leader and a nation lies in the ability, not just to weather a storm, but to emerge hopeful and resilient.

3. It is my great honour to lead this nation during these challenging times. But I am here today, not to dwell on these challenges. I want to show just how far we have come, and how resilient we have been; to show my Government's continued commitment to political stability and economic prosperity in spite of the times we are living in; to show our investment in educating our future generations, building robust healthcare systems, prioritising food security, empowering women and youth, protecting and promoting rights and access to justice, addressing poverty and unemployment, governing justly and accountably, protecting our environment, mitigating public safety risks, opening up the investment ecosystem, and underwriting purposeful infrastructure.

4. These development gains are a product of the deliberate choices we have made together in the last 4 years. As we continue to face such choices, I would like to highlight a few of the significant initiatives that my government has instituted and will continue to institute, to respond to the challenges facing us today and in the future.

DEVELOPMENT PLANNING AND THE ECONOMY

Development Planning

Mr Speaker, Honourable members,

5. We have transitioned from the UN Peacebuilding Fund framework and we are now transforming our nation into a just, peaceful, cohesive, and productive one. Accordingly, we have significantly improved our capacity for national planning, resource mobilisation, and coordination of development interventions.

6. Throughout COVID-19, our development partners have continued working with us to address our development challenges in such areas as human capital development, health, infrastructure, energy, the environment, human security, and natural resource management. On behalf of citizens of this country, I want to thank all of our partners for their support.

7. With the conduct of the first ever digital national census - the 2021 Mid-Term Population and Housing Census - my Government will henceforth base national development planning on credible data. We have also popularised and amplified our National Population Policy to ensure that our development interventions are aligned with the aspirations of our citizens.

The Economy

Mr. Speaker, Honourable Members,

8. Like many countries around the world, Sierra Leone continues to grapple with the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and other global crises. However, our economic and inclusive growth agenda remains focused on building this country and improving human capital development outcomes for all. Thus, in addition to the COVID-19 Health Preparedness and Response Plan and the Quick Action Economic Response Programme (QAERP) that have guided our COVID-19 response, my Government, continues to implement sound economic policies and public financial management reforms. These policies and programmatic interventions have added stability to our economy, provided solid response to the pandemic's socio-economic shocks, and paved the way for economic recovery.

9. Critical public financial management reforms have kept us on track to recover from the pandemic within the context of the Medium Term National Development Plan. These include: (i) the automation of revenue collection and management processes by the NRA, (ii) strengthening of the legal framework for domestic revenue mobilisation, (iii) enhancing public debt management, (iv) strengthening payroll management, (v) upgrading and expanding the coverage of the Integrated Financial Management Information System (IFMIS), (vi) strengthening commitment controls for goods and services expenditures and cash

management, (vii) enhancing the fiduciary oversight of State-Owned Enterprises, (viii) strengthening the internal audit function at central and local government levels, (ix) regular production of price norms by the National Public Procurement Authority (NPPA) to guide procuring entities, and (x) enhancing the transparency and accountability of COVID-19 spending.

10. Over the course of 2021, the Le500 billion Special Credit Facility provided by the Bank of Sierra Leone to support the production, importation, and distribution of essential commodities and the deferral of taxes due to the importation of essential commodities by the National Revenue Authority helped maintain the availability of essential commodities in the country, especially rice, fuel, and health supplies.

11. Government expenditures continued to focus on the priority areas identified in our medium-term National Development Plan (2019-2023). Building on this, my Government's investments in human capital development, especially in the education and agriculture sectors, continue to be complemented by investments in infrastructure. To facilitate the movement of agricultural produce, other goods, and persons, part payment was made for the rehabilitation of 1,835 km of trunk roads nationwide and the completion of 109 km of township streets. Funds were also disbursed to enhance electricity generation, transmission and distribution; and to expedite the restoration of electricity supply to the district headquarter towns and cities, thus stimulating economic activities.

12. Reforms to facilitate investment and improve the doing business climate have continued. To drive inclusivity, my Government continues to implement the National Micro-Finance Programme (MUNAFU FUND), through which 5,328 SMEs (of which 70% are female-owned), have successfully accessed much-needed finance.

13. Through its Business Development Pillar, the Local Content Agency has improved the capacity of local suppliers in procurement procedures and quality standards for those linked to the supply chains of six (6) large companies. Local suppliers showcased their products in the Made - In - Sierra Leone Trade Fair and Exhibition. The agency further commenced a nationwide Local Content Audit of Large Companies across growth sectors to increase compliance with Local Content Laws. The agency will soon review the Local Content Act 2016 to address grey areas and take advantage of opportunities embedded in the African Continental Free Trade (AfCFTA) for the local private sector. Legislation will be brought forward to this House.

14. I am pleased to announce that in spite of a sharp contraction in 2020, our economy is in recovery and projected to grow by 5.0 percent this year, higher than the Sub-Saharan African projected growth rate of 3.8 percent for 2022. Our economic management and inclusive growth strategy will therefore continue to focus on enhancing domestic revenue mobilisation, rationalising expenditures, working towards single digit inflation, maintaining a stable exchange rate,

safeguarding financial stability, striking a careful balance between reducing fiscal and debt sustainability risks whilst improving spending efficiency, and addressing external vulnerabilities. Furthermore, supporting post-COVID-19 recovery in key productive sectors, especially in mining, agriculture, construction, manufacturing, and tourism, will continue with efforts to improve business environment activities.

National Revenue Collection

Mr. Speaker, Honourable Members,

15. The National Revenue Authority (NRA) has made sustained efforts at taxpayer engagements, enforcement of tax laws, compliance enhancement, and close monitoring of revenue performance challenges. Among other ongoing reforms, the Authority introduced the Integrated Tax Administration System; the Electronic Cash Register (ECR) system to capture sales data from GST-registered businesses; and the Customs Electronic Single Window to automate and make easy the clearance of goods through Customs, among other reforms. In the coming year, the Authority will introduce additional reforms to help ensure compliance, track, enforce, educate, introduce ICT solutions, and enhance border infrastructure. Measures will be introduced in respect of these reforms.

HUMAN CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

Education

Mr. Speaker, Honourable Members,

16. I am before you today, the son of a mother who had no formal education, occupying the second highest office of our country. I say the second because the office of the citizen is in fact the highest position of our nation and democracy - citizens who you all so ably represent. My commitment to the citizens of our country drives me and my government to give citizens the strongest tool to occupy that office: education. It is because of education I stand before you all. It is education that will liberate our citizens and empower them with the skills and tools for a healthy, productive, and fulfilling life.

17. I remember being moved upon hearing about the achievements of a student of Murialdo Catholic Secondary School in Lunsar, Marampa Chiefdom, Momoh Sankoh, who emerged not just as the best from the school but in the country, for the 2021 West African Senior School Certificate Examination, WASSCE. Behind the decision I subsequently made to offer this outstanding student a 5-year university scholarship is my belief that education can change the fortunes of our kids and provide a future of unbounded hope. The gains of education may not seem immediately apparent to some, but the future is stolen from those who do not prepare for it today. Beneath every great nation and people lies a foundation that was laid yesterday. This is the foundation we seek to lay by making investments in education, mobilising additional funding to improve

learning outcomes, expanding school feeding, improving school governance, building more school infrastructure, accelerating the use of technology and innovation in education delivery and governance, publishing developmentally-appropriate learning resources and materials, and implementing a new school curriculum. And what a reward this policy direction has already started giving us. In 2021, over 600,000 additional children, especially girls, accessed schools; over 5,000 additional qualified teachers were recruited and received PIN codes; and we recorded a higher success rate in public examinations at all levels.

18. My Government also introduced the best teacher award and new national policies on Radical Inclusion, School Feeding, Integrated Early Childhood Education, School Catchment Areas, and Guidelines on the approval and use of school subsidies.

19. It is often said that to educate a woman is to educate a nation. No nation that takes its future seriously can afford to ignore the education of its girls and women. For my government, this is non-negotiable. Record numbers of girls are now enrolled at all levels of education in this country. Ground-breaking numbers of girls are now opting to study STEM disciplines as our policy assures free STEM education for girls from Class 1 to the completion of university. Parents no longer resist sending their daughters to school. All across the country, they now believe that with tuition paid by my Government; teaching and learning materials provided by my Government; school feeding in most parts of the country provided by my Government; health care and good school infrastructure provided by my Government; Parents now ask: "WHY NOT?"

20. Other national initiatives by our First Lady: "Hands Off Our Girls" that assures comprehensive safety for girls in school and in their communities; "Campaign against Early and Child Marriage" that ensures that our girls persist in, succeed in, and complete school; "Free Sanitary Pads" that removes the stigma of menstruation - now mean that little girls in villages as far adrift as Kurubonla, Koindu, Kamakwie, Sulima can now dream of being and will be doctors, nurses, engineers, lawyers, entrepreneurs and be all they want to be in a new Sierra Leone. That has always been my vision and that has always been my biggest bet - the future of Sierra Leone is female.

Mr. Speaker, Honourable Members of Parliament,

21. My Government has also expanded access to technical and vocational education and training by establishing and operationalising ten Government Technical Institutes in nine districts. Through the Skills Development Fund, we are working with the World Bank to train over 6,000 young persons for demanded skills in various productive sectors. Through Direct Aid by the State of Kuwait, we have secured 24 million USD for the construction of six additional TVET Institutes in Makeni, Lungi, Gbinti, Mongo, Koindu and Mattru Jong. Our plan to establish "Centres of Excellence" in automobile engineering and maintenance of Japanese-made vehicles has been boosted by a grant of 3.8 million USD from the

Government of Japan (through UNIDO). This project will be implemented in the existing facilities of the Kissy Dockyard Campus of Freetown Polytechnic, and three other Government Technical Institutes across the country. Mining companies and agro-based industries across Sierra Leone are upskilling thousands of their workers with industry-specific skills.

22. The Milton Margai Technical University, the Eastern Technical University, and the new Kono University of Science and Technology will also offer a rich curriculum of industry-focused skills from hospitality, fishing, mining, artisanal works, to entrepreneurship. The Local Contents Agency has also commenced developing a Critical Skills Database of Sierra Leoneans home and abroad, to increase critical job opportunities. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is operating a fully equipped centre of excellence to train Refrigeration and Air Conditioning technicians at the Government Technical Institute, Kissy Dockyard. EPA has trained forty (40) refrigeration and Air Conditioning technicians in the North and North-West regions of the country.

23. With funding from the African Development Bank, the National Youth Commission (NAYCOM) has implemented the Youth Entrepreneurship and Employment Project for training and certifying young persons in sustainable construction, hotel management and tourism, and sustainable agriculture including aquaculture and fisheries management. The commission has also invested in alternative livelihood opportunities including training in digital skills for young women, enhancing skills in the media industry including photography, and providing training in stone-crusher plant and other construction-related jobs. NAYCOM has also trained TVET instructors and equipped TVET institutions across the country.

24. My Government has completed a National Qualifications Framework that will ensure parity of esteem in the competencies acquired by graduates of TVET and Higher Education institutions. The framework will guarantee quality assurance in learning outcomes, equity, and inclusiveness.

25. The belief of my Government that technical and higher education institutions can only get better and serve the development needs of this nation, has led us to deliver governance and financial reforms, improved salary and other conditions of service, support for professional faculty and staff development at other African Universities, and expanded recruitment opportunities.

26. Let me express my profound thanks to you, Mr. Speaker and Honourable Members of Parliament for passing legislation that supported these reforms, including the Universities Act 2021, and the Sierra Leone Students' Loan Scheme Act 2021 that have opened up more access to technical and higher education. As an important step in granting our tertiary institutions more autonomy, I ceased being the Chancellor of all Public Universities in Sierra Leone. It is my belief that public universities need to be given a free hand in running the institutions that provide us with much needed skills, research and knowledge for

the development of our dear nation. We have upgraded two Polytechnics to the Milton Margai Technical University and Eastern Technical University, and also turned sod for the long-awaited construction of Kono University of Science and Technology.

27. While education is generally deemed to be a mid-to-long term investment in development, we are already seeing the dividends of our work in tertiary and higher education. This year alone, we produced 54 Doctors, 34 Pharmacists, 32 Pharmacy Technicians, 366 Diploma in Nursing and 207 BSc (Hons) in Nursing Nurses from just the College of Medicine and Applied Health Sciences. This is in addition to record numbers of nurses, midwives, and community health workers who have graduated from various other accredited institutions around the country.

28. Our investment in postgraduate medical education has also seen early results. Only two weeks ago, our first two surgeon specialists from the University of Sierra Leone Teaching Hospitals Complex passed their membership examinations and became members of the West African College of Surgeons. Our government inaugurated that complex less than two years ago. Three more young doctors are already undergoing postgraduate psychiatry residency training. It fills me with great pride that we are training our own surgeons and specialists; and that for the first time in our nation's history, we are training our own psychiatrists!

29. While we rightly celebrate this, we do not rest on our laurels. Our government is only inspired by these successes to do even more. In the coming year, my Government will lay measures and legislation to consolidate and expand these and other gains in the sector.

Health

Mr Speaker, Honourable Members,

30. It is my firm belief, that every person in Sierra Leone is owed access to quality and affordable health services, and this without undue financial hardship. This is a responsibility our government takes very seriously

31. In line with our Universal Health Coverage goals, we have developed a new national Health Sector Strategic Plan and a Health Financing Strategy (2021-2025) that increases budgetary allocation for health and sanitation to 12%, and realigned the leadership and structure of the health sector in order to maximise efficiency. We have restructured and are working towards making the Sierra Leone Social Health Insurance Scheme (SLeSHI) operational. We have also promoted social dialogue with stakeholders in the health sector, provided health insurance for all healthcare workers, regularised and strengthened the national drug distribution system, and expanded free healthcare services to school-going children, the elderly, and persons with disabilities.

32. Around the world, technology is being used to drive health service delivery, improve healthcare outcomes and empower patients and we are not being left behind in this regard. My Government is actively taking advantage of technology and innovation to deliver inclusive health services and health information. With the support of the People's Republic of China, my Government launched the "Health on Wheels" Initiative that will provide the full spectrum of health services to underserved communities. Government has strengthened Health Management and Information Systems (HMIS), data from which will be used to support informed strategic decision-making, programme development, and case evaluation and management. We have also adopted a hub and spokes approach to restructuring healthcare service delivery so that there is a healthcare facility within a five-mile radius of every Sierra Leonean. My Government has also strengthened disease surveillance and emergency systems. The Surveillance Directorate has been embedded in NaCOVERC throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. We have also operationalised an effective network of ambulances right across all district hospitals in the country.

33. We have not just constructed health facilities across the country, we are equipping them with diagnostic laboratories, sufficient beds, and other equipment. We have secured oxygen generator plants in Bo and Kenema. In addition, my Government has allocated over 75 billion Leones to refurbishing, improving, or rebuilding healthcare infrastructure across the country. For the first time in fifteen years, Makeni Government Hospital, Magburaka Government Hospital, Port Loko Government Hospital, Kabala Government Hospital and other regional hospitals in the country will be renovated and made fitter for providing critical health services.

34. Several Peripheral Health Units (PHUs) have been constructed and opened to the public. Partners have also completed a number of health facilities across the country. The private sector and non-governmental organisations have also invested in the health sector. Their interventions have or will increase bed capacity and provide advanced diagnostic services.

35. With the expansion and upgrading of health infrastructure, we have trained and hired more nurses, doctors, midwives, pharmacists, laboratory technicians, and community healthcare workers than ever before. We have also reviewed compensation packages for all classes of health staff.

36. It is heartening to see that as a consequence of these far-reaching investments, maternal and child mortality rates have been considerably lowered. We have also reduced malaria-related deaths by over 47%; lowered the disease burden for other common illnesses; and the number of people living with HIV who receive lifesaving treatment has doubled.

37. I am particularly pleased that our COVID-19 vaccination rates are higher than the average for African countries. I thank the workers, healthcare personnel, and citizens who have volunteered themselves to receive these life-saving vaccines. It is my hope that citizens who have not yet done so will avail themselves of the opportunity to access these vaccines and join the world in fighting this disease.

38. Our partners, including The Global Fund, The World Bank, the FCDO, and USAID have significantly increased funding to the health sector to hundreds of millions of dollars due to their confidence in our management of funds and the focus and clarity of our strategy to achieve Universal Health Coverage goals.

39. Looking ahead, my Government is focused on strengthening primary health care services, disease diagnostics, and also establishing pharmaceutical production in this country. My Minister will bring to this house measures and legislation to achieve these outcomes.

Food Security

Mr. Speaker, Honourable Members,

40. Food security is not merely about filling people's stomachs or guaranteeing that people can buy food in markets. Affordable, safe and sufficient food supply is also a matter of national security, alongside other essentials like water, energy, and the environment. This is why the third component of my flagship human capital development priorities, and a key factor in building national resilience is food security.

41. In March, I met with President Nguyen Xuan Phuc of Vietnam - a country that has comparable arable land, learned some of its best lessons on rice cultivation from Sierra Leone, but is now one of the world's leading rice producers. We held talks and witnessed the signing of three bilateral cooperation documents in diplomacy, agriculture, and fisheries between ministries and sectors. Our government is firm in its resolve to pursue food security and to establish and develop cooperation ties with Asia-Pacific nations, including Vietnam, to achieve this goal.

Agricultural Production

42. One of the well-known ways of improving Food Security is through climate and nutrition-smart agriculture. We cannot continue in the old ways of agricultural production in the light of all that we know about the earth and climate. Agricultural systems must become more productive, and less wasteful. But above all it must be more sustainable.

43. In the light of this, my government has, over the last four years, extended the area of land under cultivation, supported farmers in a variety of ways and increased production across the country. There has been a major policy shift that protects such fragile ecosystems as mangroves and upland; extends mechanisation services (machine rings) in all 16 districts to put more new lowland areas under cultivation and attract the private sector in providing mechanisation services; establishes an Agriculture Credit Facility for distributing agricultural inputs like seed and fertiliser; introduces a transparent e-wallet system; and creates a complement extension staff to reach millions of farmers with information to help in decision making, and boost production and incomes

44. The Ministry of Youth has also partnered with the Ministry of Agriculture to establish youth farms and cultivate 19,200 acres of farmland for rice production. They have also developed a new agrobusiness model that will create Chiefdom Youth Agro-Enterprises and provide for each chiefdom including a Mini Rice Mill, Mini Rice Cutter, Thresher, Winnower, and an electronic scale for rice production. In partnership with International Organization for Migration (IOM), 200 young people have also been trained across the country in tractor operation, basic repairs, and maintenance.

45. My Government has also distributed 3,000kg of cashew polyclonal seeds nationwide to seed new farms, provided locally-manufactured rotary weeders procured for farming business organisations in Karene, Bombali, Port Loko, and Kambia to support post-harvest activities; worked with partners to train 39 Youth Contractors on Inland Valley Swamp (IVS) development/rehabilitation and water control in Kambia, Tonkolili, Koinadugu, Kenema, Pujehun and Moyamba; and, established five demonstration farm sites in five districts (Bo, Pujehun, Kailahun, Koinadugu, and Tonkolili) for Women in Agriculture and Nutrition. My Government has also started onion production in Moyamba, Lungi, Karene, and Falaba. My Government is working on additional actions to enhance food security. Bills and measures will be laid before this Honourable House in the year ahead.

Fisheries and Aquaculture

Mr. Speaker, Honourable Members,

46. My Government's focus on the fisheries and aquaculture sector has been both about food supply and economics. We believe that sufficient fish should be available in the market and that the sector should create jobs, higher incomes for people engaged in and can invest in the sector, and foreign exchange revenues. Revenues from the sector are unprecedented. My Government has kept its commitment to promote efficient governance of the fisheries sector and the sustainable management of fisheries resources. We have maintained the scientific assessment of fish stock over the last two years and will analyse and archive data as well as develop a web-based database for artisanal boats.

47. My Government has created thousands of jobs for youth and women in the sector. A business start-up finance kit has been provided for Women in Fisheries Group in Tombo, for instance. My Government has collaborated with the UNDP to procure and commission artisanal fishing boats for youth groups involved in sand mining at Lakka, Hamilton, Goderich and Konakridee. An initial set of 70 boats equipped with their ultra-modern accessories were handed over to 1,400 youth in the coastal communities. Government has also procured and distributed life-saving and data collection equipment. Working with partners, Government has constructed solar-powered fish-processing buildings, solar powered freezers and fish processing equipment, and provided improved smoke ovens in various locations around the country.

48. The construction of a new fisheries outstation in Sulima, and the purchase of eight inshore patrol craft by the Government of Sierra Leone and the World Bank, have empowered the coastal fisheries outstations to engage in both extension services and to conduct community fisheries surveillance patrols. Additionally, fishers have been trained in sustainable small-scale fisheries guidelines; net mending; fish handling, processing, and packaging; and identification and tagging of seabirds and sea turtles in order to enumerate bycatch of these species in the fisheries and marine sector. Furthermore, Competent Authority (CA) offices have been established for certifying fish and fishery products based on sanitary and hygiene condition set up at the Fisheries and Marine Training Institute, Kissy Dock yard and other key parts of the country. A fish feed machine received from the FAO has been installed in Bo and the production of fish feed has commenced to boost aquaculture production. A fish hatchery to produce fingerlings is under construction in Bo. The Ministry of Youth has piloted 4 Innovative Polytene Fish farms and 100 youth have been trained and certified in aquaculture techniques.

49. It has been the position of my Government that Sierra Leone stands to gain revenues from constructing a fish harbour. Following the ratification of the agreement and the survey plan by this august House, I signed the warrant for the acquisition of 252 acres of land at Black Johnson. Compensation of landowners will commence as soon as all verification of land ownerships is completed. Environmental, Social, Health Impact Assessment (ESHIA) studies at Black Johnson are ongoing. Additional measures, as deemed necessary, will be put in place for the success of this project.

LANDS AND THE ENVIRONMENT

50. My Government's focus has been on improving efficiency in land management and administration in the dual land tenure system, and provide affordable housing in the country. In the coming year, my Government will work to strengthen the legislative and institutional frameworks for effective land governance that will improve gender-sensitive access to land resources and streamline access to land for foreign investors. A National Land Commission Bill and a Customary Land Rights Bill have been brought before this Parliament.

51. My Government has also secured a commitment of a \$40 USD million grant from the World Bank to finance the development of an integrated GIS-based Land Management Information System (LMIS) that will allow the transition from registration of Instruments to Land Title Registration System. The new Biometric Land Title Registration System will enhance tenure security, provide more protection of land and property rights, stimulate the investment markets, boost domestic tax revenue generation, and reduce land conflicts.

52. In anticipation of developments in the housing sector, my Government has set aside a National Land Bank of Ten Thousand (10,000) acres of land for allocation to national development projects. Already, seven (7) Joint Venture Agreements have been negotiated with potential Real Estate Developers and are awaiting Cabinet approval. These investments will see the development of affordable housing units and administrative buildings. My Government has established a fair raffle-system for the distribution of land among citizens for residential housing developments. My Government has secured funding under the Sierra Leone Economic Diversification Project (SLEDP) to develop a National Building Code (NBC). An implementation and enforcement of a national building code will ensure nationwide uniformity in the control of building development. Measures and legislation will be brought to Parliament.

53. My Government's vision for our cities and towns is to have a coherent policy that guides sustainable urban planning and management. The Limkokwing to Regent Road already indicates what can be achieved with well-lit and tree-planted roads. We could improve and regenerate urban spaces, make our cities greener with trees, plan for more open public spaces, and encourage greater use of renewable solar technologies to light up our public spaces. Spatial maps are being developed for eight cities and land is being acquired in Lungi to facilitate sustainable urban planning and the development of a financial city for international trade and investment. A National Urban Policy is being developed and measures will be brought to parliament in the coming year.

Environment

Mr. Speaker, Honourable Members,

54. Now more than ever before, our country and planet need us to step up and change the way we treat the environment. The protection of our environment is not just for aesthetics or even economic reasons. Our survival as humans depends on this.

55. While protecting the environment is our collective responsibility, it is certainly the duty of governments and nations to lead the charge. My Government remains committed to the sustainable management of forest resources and promoting sustainable environment protection. We will plant in excess of 5 million trees in the next five years in order to change the "brown-neck" image of our country as the third most vulnerable country to climate change. We have

strengthened our mitigation and adaptation strategies, and through grants from partners like the Global Environmental Facility, we are strengthening our institutional and technical capacities to implement the Paris Climate Agreement.

56. We have installed four marine weather stations that are saving the lives of fishermen, sea transport workers, and coastal settlers. Nationally Appropriate Mitigation Actions (NAMA) have been developed; protected area management procedures have been enhanced; and Ecosystem Conservation systems and procedures have been put in place. Further measures will be brought to Parliament as necessary.

INFRASTRUCTURE

Mr. Speaker, Honourable Members of this House,

57. My Government's vision of infrastructure is situated within a bigger strategic framework of creating a more resilient, inclusive, and sustainable future for Sierra Leone. It is about creating opportunities and generating new or improving existing centres of productivity; supporting new economic investments; improving agriculture; opening up trade and the flow of products to markets; creating jobs; making people, places, and services more accessible; prioritising public safety; and making the lives of Sierra Leoneans better. It is within this strategic vision that my Government has completed or is constructing the most number of infrastructural projects within a four year period in this country's history.

Roads and Bridges Infrastructure

58. Accordingly, my Government, working with partners, has completed the following major projects: a dual carriage highway (four lanes) with tree-lined medians from Freetown to Masiaka; the highway between Bo and Bandajuma (46km) and the Bandajuma-MRU Road (105km) and 3 major bridges; a highway from Moyamba Junction to Moyamba and 4 modern bridges (36km); the Pendembu- Kailahun Road (28km); and the Hill Station to Regent Road completed with modern lighting. There is significant progress on the Lumley-Tokeh road and the Hillside Bypass road. My Government is working to commission those major arterial roads before the end of this year. My Government has also undertaken expansion and re-gravelling works and culvert bridges on 1,800km of roads across the country making them more motorable and making erstwhile remote communities more accessible than before now.

59. My Government has also completed more bridges in four years than any Government has in the history of this country - Sengbeh Pieh Bridge, Savage Street Bridge, and Gondama Bridges are completed and have eased up traffic; the collapsed Mabang Bridge over the Ribbi River is nearly ready for commissioning and it will open up a major corridor running from Moyamba through Songo; two 50M bridges on the Pendemdu-Kailahun road; and in a few days, I will commission the brand new, 163M long, two-lane Magbele Bridge over the Rokel River. My

Government will commence reinforced concrete bridge construction works at four ferry crossings: Tomparie (Karene District), Mattru (Bonthe District), Gendema (Kenema District) and Manowa (Kailahun District).

60. My Government has also rehabilitated and reconstructed major township roads in Freetown, Kono, Kabala, Bo, Kenema, Bonthe, Makeni, Magburaka, and Mattru. Construction works will soon begin on township Roads in Kamakwei (Karene District), Falaba and Mongor (Falaba District), Blama, Segwbema, Daru, Zimmi, Potoru, Bandajuma, and Njaima Sewafe. We are resurfacing roads within military facilities. In addition to 34 Military Hospital, construction works will soon commence on additional roads within Wilberforce Barracks, Juba Barracks, Murray Town Barracks and Benguema military facilities.

61. Construction works on the Mattru - Kpetema Road, funded by BADEA and the Government of Sierra Leone, have commenced and Government is finalising funding arrangements for the Kpetema - Tikonko Junction section. The Sefadu- Kamiendor - Guinea Border road (78km) and the Kailahun - Koindu - Guinea / Liberia Border roads and Yenga Bridge are also key priorities on which my Government is working for the coming year and measures and instruments will be laid before this august body.

TRANSPORTATION INFRASTRUCTURE: AIRPORT, MARITIME, PORTS

62. Within the coherent framework of opening up Sierra Leone, promoting investment, opening up economic centres, and facilitating the safe movement of people, goods, and services, my Government has invested significantly in transportation infrastructure.

Airport

63. The need for an ultra-modern airport with enhanced facilities cannot be overstated. Even in the midst of COVID-19 in 2020, the SUMMA Group, based on independent assessments of our credibility and viability made its largest investment in the Africa sub-region of \$270M USD for building a brand new, ultra-modern international air terminal at Lungi. The investment model is simple: build, operate, and transfer. Sierra Leone pays nothing but will receive all the benefits of a new air terminal that will ultimately be transferred to the country. In late March, I visited and inspected ongoing works. We are well on schedule to commission an air terminal that will be one of the best in the subregion.

64. Until my Government commissions the new air terminal, we have worked to improve the security and safety at the airport from an ICAO rating of 63.4% to 71.6. This current rating is far above the African/ Indian regional average of 55%. We have improved detection and surveillance devices and procedures and signed 26 bilateral agreements to improve security at the airport. Just two weeks ago, I commissioned two more fire engines that will enhance the fire-fighting capabilities at the airport.

Maritime and Ports

65. My Government has also focused attention on maritime transportation infrastructure. The rehabilitation of the Lungi/Tagrin jetty is at an advanced stage. The new Tagrin and Kissy Ferry Terminals waiting halls have been constructed to meet international standards. The Ministry of Transport and Aviation has also concluded a public-private-partnership (PPP) agreement with a Turkish company to provide four additional ferries to Sierra Leone.

66. To improve maritime safety, my Government has domesticated nine mandatory instruments of the International Maritime Organization (IMO). I would like, at this point, to thank this august body for passing the Merchant Shipping (Standards of training, Certification, and Watch keeping for Seafarers) Regulations 2021. This will not only enhance Sierra Leone's Maritime Standard rating, it will also lead to increased revenues in the sector and create employment for Sierra Leoneans.

67. Within the broader framework of My Government's Sierra Leone Ports Authority Master Plan, we have dredged the port entrance, rehabilitated Berths, and concluded a contract to expand a new terminal eastward. ICT developments will also enhance coordination in the workflow among departments in order to facilitate trade at the Port. In order to assure the efficiency of pilotage services at the Port of Freetown, towage and shuttle services will be privatised. I am pleased to inform this House that the Port of Freetown has been fully certified to have passed the International Ship and Port Facility Security audit by the International Maritime Organization (IMO) and US Coast Guard. The net impact of all of these improvements are improved services on doing business at the Port by reducing the turnaround time of vessels, 24-hour pilotage services, decreased cargo dwelling time, and improved cargo handling capacity. Further actions to increase port productivity are being considered. My Government will bring measures and also lay in this House a new Ports and Harbours Bill Legislation that reflects the SLPA Landlord port status and replace the old Port Act of 1964.

Electricity Infrastructure

Mr. Speaker, Honourable Members of Parliament,

68. In developing the compact for the Millennium Challenge Corporation after being declared compact eligible, my Government identified the lack of adequate energy as a binding constraint on development. We believe that electricity accelerates development and enhances other facets of social life and human capital development. It powers economic activities and helps create jobs, among other impacts. A key focus of my Government has been to double energy access from 16% in 2017 to 32% by 2023. To that end, we have planned deliberately, engaged development actors and the private sector, and taken into account a good energy mix across board. My Government has opted for sustainable and long term solutions rather than procure and install temporary generation plants.

69. Permit me to share some data to illustrate my next point. 16% of Sierra Leoneans had access to electricity in 2018; 31% now have access to electricity. In 2018, there were 184,997 registered EDSA customers; there were 255,993 at the end of 2021, an increase of over 70,000 new customers. Peak load electricity consumption for Western Area in 2018 was 51 megawatts; it is now 85 megawatts, an increase of 34 megawatts. Megawatt Hours (MW/h) generated in 2018 was 365,302 MW/h; it was 569,650 MW/h at the end of 2021.

70. What does this data tell us? For one thing, the demand for electricity has increased as has the financial cost of generating electricity. EDSA tariffs have not kept pace with generation costs. World oil prices have increased and with that an increase in fuel costs. The average buying price of 1 kilowatt hour from the Karpowership is higher than the average selling price by EDSA to the public. Government has been paying subsidies to take away the real cost of electricity from customers. This has caused severe cash flow problems. To complicate matters, we have witnessed the unconscionable vandalization of transformers and other electricity distribution assets, as well as the deliberate theft of electricity by some businesses and private citizens. This has prompted us to establish a Presidential Task Force that will work to put an end to these unpatriotic acts.

71. In the area of electricity generation, my Government has commissioned the 225kV CLSG Transmission Line from Liberia to Kenema/Telorma substation. We have executed and commissioned the power purchase agreement (PPA) for the CLSG-WAPP and the once dark cities of Bo and Kenema, once shrouded in darkness, have been receiving regular electricity supply since December 2021. We have completed the construction of substations at Telorma, Bekongor, and Yiben; nearly completed the construction of substations at Fadugu and Kamakwie; and completed the stringing of transmission lines from Mano-Junction to Bumbuna. We have also completed installing electricity infrastructure in 15 out of the 39 communities along the CLSG/WAPP 225kV Transmission network including Hangha, Panderu, Ngelehun, Mano Junction, Largoh, Ngiehun, Tongo, Telorma, Kangama Gorahun, Njaiama Nimikoro, Bumpeh, Njaiama Sewafe, Ngo Town, and Mapaki. We have also negotiated a contract for the recruitment of the consultant for grid extension from Telorma to Segbwema and then to Kailahun. With regard to additional generation capacity, my Government has completed the construction of and tested the 6MW Solar Park at Newton. That solar park will soon be commissioned.

72. My Government has worked with partners and the private sector to extend solar mini-grids and thus provide electricity right across the country to places that have never had electricity. Foredugu, Mange, Madina, Masiaka and Rokupr in the North; Mobai, Jojoima, Manowa, Nyandehun-Mendekelema, Gorahun Tunkia, Gegbema Tunkia, Boajibu and Baoma Koya in the East; San Malen, Koribondo, Jimmi Bagbo, Sumbuya, and Moyamba Junction in the South. These places can now all boast of regular supply of electricity.

73. My Government has also completed the construction of six (6) Solar PV systems at Government Hospitals in Port Loko, Kabala, Moyamba, Pujehun, and Kailahun. The implications for health care and for the well-being of those communities are evident.

74. My Government has received grant funding from the Government of Japan to construct 6 mini-grids in Naiagolehun, Kpetewoma, Serabu, Grima, Tikonko, Upper Saama, and Lower Saama in Bo District. We have also completed feasibility Studies for 45 additional solar mini-grids for approximately 8,800 households across the country. My Government has also developed a framework agreement with the European Union for the construction of 57 additional solar mini-grids across the country. My Government believes that additional generation facilities from renewable and other sources will support our strategic goal of increasing secure electricity generation.

75. My Government has planned transmission corridors that can serve population centres and economic centres including mining areas and possible special economic zones. The upgrade of the 33kV transmission lines on the Bo-Kenema distribution network to 66kV is already in progress. Grid extensions from Fadugu to Kabala, poturu to Pujehun, and Bumpeh to Koidu are already planned. Government has also executed a contract for the rehabilitation and expansion of the low and medium voltage distribution network for the Western Area that will include Wilberforce, Blackhall Road, Wellington, Waterloo, Jui, Cline Town, Falconbridge, Aberdeen, Newton, Waterloo, Tombo, Regent, Grafton, Devil Hole, and Deep Eye Water. Additional actions are being considered and my minister will bring forward measures and legislation to this end.

Water Infrastructure

76. Safe drinking water is vital not only for our health but also for our communities and economy. Increasing access of the Sierra Leonean population to safe drinking water and sanitation is central to the human capital development agenda of my Government. In April 2018, 65% of the population (973,988) in the Western Area had access to safe drinking water. This has increased to 71% (1,094,218) in March 2022 representing a 6% increase with 120,230 more people in the Western Area getting access to safe drinking water. Also, in April 2018, 28% of the population (434,828) in the provinces had access to safe drinking water. In March 2022, this percentage has increased to 52% (909,974) representing a 24% increase with 475,146 more people having access to safe drinking water.

77. Water infrastructure has been beset by a number of challenges. Citizens vandalise water supply pipes and mains and deliberately build houses around the watershed areas. A few weeks ago, I visited the Guma Valley Dam and observed these challenges to the proper functioning of water infrastructure. I have therefore set up an inter-ministerial body to immediately assess those problems and recommend concrete actions. It is our firm resolve to protect all water sources.

78. My Government is rehabilitating the Guma Dam and upgrading the Guma Main Treatment Works, replacing 3.2km of the transmission pipeline from Mile 13 to Hamilton, and also extending the distribution network to other unserved communities in the Western Area. The project will make the existing water supply infrastructure more resilient and help push more water supply to the East of Freetown.

79. Water meters are being installed in several parts of the city of Freetown. The treatment facility at Barbadorie in Regent is being rehabilitated and the water distribution network has been extended by 4.2km into nearby communities. As a result of this project, this year, communities in Regent, Gloucester, and parts of Hill Station and Kamayama are being served with pipe-borne water. In other parts, my Government has constructed new gravity water systems in Waterloo and Hamilton.

80. In the provinces, the reconstruction of water supply systems in six (6) district headquarter towns is underway in Moyamba, Pujehun, Kailahun, Kabala, Kambia and Magburaka. Works are at an advanced stage for three (3) lots in Kabala, Kambia and Magburaka, while contracts have been awarded and sites handed over to contractors to commence works for seven (7) other lots. Government has completed the reconstruction of the distribution network and the old water supply facility in Bonthe.

81. My Government has completed the installation of 12km transmission mains and now working on the treatment plant and staff quarters of the Blama, Bandawor, and Six Villages Water Supply Project. We have also completed the sinking of 100 Solar Powered Boreholes across all districts in the country. I have also approved funding for another set of 200 boreholes under the Quick win Presidential Initiative. Another 10 industrial boreholes are being constructed in eight (8) towns across the country. Gravity water supply systems are being rehabilitated at Daru and Mabonto, and new ones are being constructed in Tongo and Bendu Yawei.

82. The National Water Resources Management Agency has developed regulations on Pollution Control Regulations, Groundwater Development Regulations, Water Use and Catchment Protection Regulations, and Dam Safety Regulations. These Regulations will create the enabling environment for the efficient management of the country's water resources. My Minister will soon bring these measures and other legislation to Parliament.

Petroleum Infrastructure

83. Recent sudden hikes in global petroleum prices exposed how weak storage and distribution structures can hit a country's economy hardest. Sierra Leone now consumes about 1.3million litres of fuel (mainly petrol and diesel) daily compared to 900,000 litres just a few years ago. The downstream petroleum sector has a connected and complex value chain, and each value chain segment contributes to GDP, job creation, capital investments, and increased revenues in different ways. Hence, resilience in the downstream sector is critical for the economy of Sierra Leone.

84. Three weeks ago, I commissioned the \$22M USD All Petroleum Products (APP-SL) storage facility at the old Kissy refinery that had laid moribund for decades. The reconstructed 60,000 metric tonnes storage facility includes a dedicated modern petroleum jetty that will help improve the current replenishment periods. Other industry players are investing millions of dollars in storage infrastructure.

85. In the upstream sector, there is a rejuvenation of interest in the Sierra Leone basin. The Petroleum Directorate is maintaining a functional geoscience data management system, developing new policy measures for an improved operational environment, and reviewing lacunae in the Petroleum Exploration and Production Act 2011. Relevant measures and legislation will be brought to Parliament in the coming year.

PUBLIC INFRASTRUCTURE

Sports Infrastructure

86. In mid 2021, Sierra Leone faced the national embarrassment of near-disqualification from the African Nation's Cup for the lack of proper sports infrastructure to host international sports competitions. Mr. Speaker, Honourable Members, I am pleased to inform this House that thanks to the Government of the People's Republic of China, work is underway for a \$40 Million USD remodelling of the national stadium to modern international standards. A new revenue-generating model will also be implemented.

Public Office Infrastructure

Foreign Service Academy

Mr. Speaker, Honourable Members,

87. With support from the People's Republic of China, construction work on the Sierra Leone Foreign Service Academy (SLFSA) is ongoing and we look forward to commissioning a state-of-the-art, purpose-built Foreign Service Academy facility as early as September. This will be the 13th Diplomatic Academy

in Africa for the training of foreign service practitioners in Sierra Leone and across the region and will serve as a centre of excellence for training of foreign service practitioners in diplomacy and related disciplines in Sierra Leone and across the region.

Public Office Buildings

88. The incentive for owning or remodelling public office space as against renting private buildings is an economic one, especially in view of the huge amounts of money spent by Government on renting office space. My Government has taken up unfinished and virtually abandoned multi-million dollar projects to completion and also constructed new ones. The Anti-Corruption Commission headquarter building will be commissioned soon. The headquarter building of the National Telecommunications Commission will be commissioned soon. The Newly Constructed Cargo Inspection Building at the Queen Elizabeth II Quay has been commissioned. Construction of the custom built North-West headquarter office of the National Social Security and Insurance Trust (NASSIT) is ongoing and plans are underway for several other district headquarter offices. The multi-storey Petroleum House construction project that was about 65% complete by 2018 is now 100% complete leading to cost savings of US \$ 600,000 over a four-year period. The Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education will soon turn sod for a multi-million dollar, multi-storey administrative building. These are just some of the public-building projects completed within the last four years.

Public Safety and Security Buildings

89. My Government believes that investments in defence, public safety, and border infrastructure are critical for attaining resilience and safeguarding citizens against insecurity, disaster, crime, and potential dangers. Three weeks ago, I commissioned a state-of-the-art Myohaung Officers' Mess and a 104-Bedroom Single Officers complex at the Wilberforce Barracks. The new edifice provides a vastly improved environment for the officer cadre. At the same time, I also turned sod for the reconstruction of the Forces Warrant Officers' and Sergeant's Mess and the Other Ranks' Canteen at the Wilberforce Barracks. Earlier this year, I also commissioned six (6) Forward Patrol Bases for RSLAF forces on border patrol duties. The Immigration Department has set up new offices in Karene and Falaba districts and also constructing three new border posts in Kono District.

90. Four years ago, I made a promise that I would enhance public safety by building four fire stations in Western Rural, Pujehun, Kailahun, and Kabala. The Kailahun and Western Rural Fire Stations have been completed and commissioned. The Pujehun and Kabala Fire Stations have been completed and awaiting commissioning this year. Contracts for the construction of fire stations in Port Loko, Bonthe, and Tonkolili have been signed. Contracts for the procurement of additional fire engines, spare parts, and firefighting equipment have been signed.

91. For justice-related facilities, my Government is constructing correctional facilities in Karene and Falaba Districts and also building a hospital for inmates at the Freetown Male Correctional Centre. New door and identification security protocols have also been introduced at the Freetown Male Correctional Centre.

92. With the establishment of the National Disaster Management Agency, my Government has responded faster to national emergencies, investigated and reported on specific incidents, and recommended actions to mitigate such disasters. With an expansion of its operations and the introduction of new components on public education and communication, the agency will ramp up its work on the prevention and mitigation of disasters.

Information and Communications Technology (ICT) Infrastructure

Mr. Speaker, Honourable Members,

93. ICT enables national development and citizens can make productive use of technology to create opportunities. My Government has therefore expanded internet penetration by completing the implementation of National Fibre Optic Backbone Project Phase II. This covers 20 towns in Sierra Leone and also extends fibre infrastructure to all district capitals and important locations.

94. The National Telecommunications Commission has started issuing metro licenses to operators to further enhance a wider penetration of the Terrestrial Fibre Cable in major cities and towns. This will lead to an expanded uptake of high-speed internet service to internet service providers including Mobile Network Operators, Metro Fibre Cable Infrastructure Providers, Health and Educational Institutions, ICT Innovators, and Private Citizens. With the expansion of the digital space, there is greater financial inclusion for instance with more people using mobile money services and online banking services.

95. After a successful implementation of the Abidjan Free roaming protocol that eased communications between Sierra Leone and French West African Countries, Sierra Leone will again fully implement the ECOWAS Roaming Protocol which will enable our citizens to make calls while roaming in the other fifteen (15) ECOWAS Countries at the local rate without having to change or buy new SIM cards or pay roaming charges for the first one month. This will boost regional integration and open up the ECOWAS market; create an integrated ICT market among member states; promote borderless communications; and, strengthen cohabitation and the promotion of a common field of telecommunications and ICT services, in line with the vision of the SMART Africa initiative.

96. Improvements in ICT infrastructure and enabling legislation such as the Radio Frequency Regulations 2020 have seen an upsurge in the establishment of Community Frequency Modulation (FM) and Education Radios in underserved and unserved communities from Banana Island to Madina, Koindu, Tongo, Bonthe Island, Yele, John Obey, Makeni, Pujehun town, Zimmi, and Rutile. The number of FM Radio stations has increased from 138 in 2019 to 155 in 2021. Mobile voice coverage has increased from 79% in 2018 to 93.1% in 2021. NATCOM's regulatory successes have continued to enhance accessibility, availability, and affordability.

97. NATCOM issued short codes (numbering resources) to academic institutions, health services, financial institutions, the Maritime Administration and the Road Safety Authority among others. Citizen will use these numbers to access facilities and other forms of services by voice calls and text messages without having to pay for communicating.

98. The recently enacted Cyber Security and Crime Act 2021 addresses cybercrimes, protects critical national information infrastructure, and provides for the timely and effective collection of electronic evidence for the purpose of investigation and prosecution of cybercrime. The National Cyber Security Coordinating Centre has been established and the Ministry will soon start implementing the \$50m USD World Bank funded Digital Transformation Project. Additional measures and legislation on national digital development, data protection and privacy, and electronic communications will soon be laid in this House.

CIVIL REGISTRATION, ROAD AND TRANSPORTATION SAFETY

National Civil Registration

Mr. Speaker, Honourable Members

99. My Government, for the first time in the history of this country, is using a citizen-first and technology-enabled approach to civil registration. Working with KIVA (a non-profit technology company) and the Bank of Sierra Leone, my Government is close to launching an Electronic Know Your Customer (eKYC) blockchain, a digital ID platform to be used by banks, microfinance institutions, and community banks. The eKYC will facilitate financial inclusion for millions of Sierra Leoneans through access to credit and therefore boost the private sector. It can be used by the telecommunications sector to solve the problem of SIM registration data integrity and provide the basis for a national data infrastructure that can be used to cross-reference or validate immigration and Sierra Leone Roads Safety Authority data.

100. In line with international best practices, The National Civil Registration Authority (NCRA) is working to develop a Permanent Civil Register of Sierra Leoneans that will lead to the production of the long-awaited ICAO/ECOWAS compliant Biometric National Identification Cards. I therefore wish to urge residents in Sierra Leone to cooperate. NCRA is also supporting the work of NASSIT, the Local Government Ministry, the Anti-Corruption Commission, and the Teaching Service Commission, among others.

101. For the first time in its history, my Government has started establishing legal identity using singular, securitised, and serially-numbered births and deaths certificates. With the support of partners, especially the European Union, Embassy of Ireland, and the UNDP, the NCRA has commenced the digitization of past records of vital events dating back to the 1800s. When completed, this exercise will enable comprehensive electronic archiving, search, and access of vital events records for the first time in this country's history.

102. The Office of the Administrator and Registrar General (OARG) is digitising its Lands, Business, Marriage, Intellectual Property, Estates, Gratuity and Legal records. It is also taking measures to authenticate records, serialising receipts, and using technology to expand the scope of its operations.

Road Safety

103. For far too long, Sierra Leone's roads have been sites of fatal car accidents that have cut short promising young lives and left hundreds with horrific injuries. For the first time in the history of this country, my Government has developed and implemented a road user policy that seeks to minimise the number of fatalities, injuries, and damage to property on the road.

104. For the first time in the history of Sierra Leone, the Roads Safety Authority has rolled out a biometric drivers' license and a digital vehicle fitness card or life card. To curb the illegal printing of vehicle number plates, the Authority has also, for the first time in the history of this country, installed an electronic Vehicle Number Plate Ordering System.

105. The Roads Safety Authority will, this year, roll out Motor Vehicle Testing and Fitness Centres that will determine and verify the roadworthiness of vehicles plying the roads of this country and produce advanced RFID vehicle license stickers. The Authority has taken additional measures to provide access to safer drivers' training and testing facilities nationwide. It has also signed MOUs with twenty (20) community radio stations on road safety education; urged a partnership with the insurance industry on road safety; and, trained Road Safety Corps on ethics and the use of breathalysers.

Urban Public Transportation and Safety

106. My Government is working with the World Bank through the Integrated and Resilient Urban Mobility Project to provide an improved and modernised urban public transport system. So far, the Ministry of Transport and Aviation has completed the construction of transit terminals at Wilberforce; awarded the contract for the rehabilitation of the Central Bus Stop; and, installed pedestrian guard rails and street lights at Congo Cross, Lumley and other project locations in the East of Freetown. Legislation will be brought forward regarding the transformation of the current public bus operator (SLRTC) to the Sierra Leone Public Transport Authority (SLPTA) with a mandate to regulate private sector bus operators.

MINING

Mr. Speaker, Honourable Members of Parliament,

107. Through effective management and oversight of the mining sector, we are now witnessing an expansion in mining activities and an increase in the contribution of the mining sector to national development. The Ministry granted three large-scale mineral rights in 2021. Revenue from all mining revenue streams is increasing. We continue to pay surface rent to local communities and additional funds for the implementation of development projects in local communities under the Community Development Agreement (CDA).

108. Throughout the global crises, COVID-19, and disruptions in the mining sector, my Government has supported the sector in Sierra Leone. Last week, I commissioned the expansion of operations at Marampa Mines. I identified closely with the forward-looking initiatives including the allocation of 1% of the free-on-board value of exports to community development, gender parity in the workforce, more technology and a mix of renewable energy, more support for vocational training and the upskilling of workers, and the location of sustainable farms next to mining site.

Mr. Speaker, Honourable Members,

109. My Government completed the Nationwide Airborne Geophysical Survey and the datasets and images are now available. The Ministry of Mines and Mineral Resources and the National Minerals Agency (NMA) have developed (in-house) an improved, integrated, and interoperable Enterprise Geo-Scientific Information Management System (eGIMS) and a Block-based Mining Cadastre Administration System (MCAS) to provide transparent, accessible, and timely access to geo-scientific data and information on exploration and mining licences, including fiscal and community development information in the management and administration of mineral rights.

110. The Ministry has ensured compliance with environmental, health, safety, production, and auditing regulations for artisanal and small-scale mining operations. Various auditable transparency mechanisms and processes have been implemented to ensure transparency in the sector. My Government has initiated a study on systematic disclosure, data, and socio-economic benefit to mining communities. Measures and legislation will be brought forward to this house.

TOURISM

111. My Government recognises the great potential of tourism for job creation, revenue mobilisation, and national development. Accordingly, the Ministry of Tourism and Cultural Affairs and the National Tourist Board have aggressively marketed the country's tourism potentials and favourable business environment at international tourism fairs in Paris, Berlin, Spain, London, Finland, and Abidjan. Historical sites and monuments are being restored. Heritage returns by African Americans, sports tourism, domestic tourism and leisure tours, the rehabilitation of monuments and relics, and eco-tourism are all part of the bigger and more diversified portfolio being offered in the sector. The Ministry has worked with the Office of the Entertainment and Investment Ambassador to organise a Home Coming festival, a film festival, and a beach fiesta. More women are being trained and provided with start-up funds to operate in the sector. Additional measures and legislation will be brought to Parliament.

SOCIAL PROTECTION

112. The National Commission for Social Action (NaCSA) continues to deliver social protection, reduce poverty, and fast track community development for sustainable peace. It continues to provide multi-sector services for improving the well-being of extremely poor and vulnerable Sierra Leoneans. With funding from the Government of Sierra Leone, World Bank, and the European Union, NaCSA made cash transfers to vulnerable communities and persons with specific needs.

113. NaCSA continued its socio-economic and infrastructure investments around the country through constructing grain stores, community centres, community markets, community schools, VIP latrines, market stands, single solar kiosks, and recreational facilities. They also provided cash support of Euro 70,000 each to four (4) district councils to routinely maintain 400km of feeder roads in Kono, Kailahun, Koinadugu and Falaba. NaCSA also rehabilitated 176km of feeder roads including bridges in Kono, Kailahun, Koinadugu and Falaba districts. 4,256 youths gained short term employment during the road rehabilitation or maintenance work.

114. NaCSA's interventions in the area of agriculture, livelihood support, and water and sanitation have been invaluable. 188 hectares of inland valley swamps and 1,390 hectares of boliland were rehabilitated in Moyamba, Tonkolili, Bombali, Karene, and Kenema districts. NaCSA also helped supply cassava and sweet potato cuttings, oil palm seedlings, and 6,280 litres of agrochemicals to various Micro Enterprise Groups (MEGs) and Self-Help Affinity Groups (SAGs).

SOCIAL WELFARE

Mr. Speaker, Honourable Members,

115. We can judge the depth of equity in a nation by how it treats its most vulnerable citizens. My Government remains committed to catering for the social welfare of all persons, especially the most vulnerable. The Ministry of Social Welfare, as the Psychosocial Support Services (PSS) Pillar Lead at the National COVID-19 Emergency Centre (NACOVERC), continues to coordinate referrals for COVID-19-related psychosocial needs. Frontline social workers have also captured and reported the protection needs of children and their families during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. Working with social mobilisers drawn from all categories of persons with disabilities (PWDs), the Ministry is also addressing the apparent disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on PWDs in eight (8) pilot districts. My Government has also accessed Post Ebola Recovery Social Investment Fund (PERSIF) supported by the African Development Bank, restore basic services, and provide micro-business start-ups in beneficiary communities.

116. My Government continues to create an inclusive society. We recently submitted to the Global Disability Summit Secretariat the Nation's Accountability Report on progress made in the six commitment areas on addressing stigma and discrimination, inclusive education, socio-economic empowerment, innovation and technology, disaggregated data and women with disabilities. My Government is also reviewing the Persons with Disability Act 2011 to bring it in line with international best practices. Legislation will be brought forward soon.

117. My Government continues to provide grants for the care and upkeep of the aged in the only residential care facility for elderly persons in this country, the King George VI Memorial Home. We urge partners to work with us to expand residential care facilities of older persons who constitute a large proportion of the destitute and vulnerable population. Working with partners, my Government is conducting a pilot survey on destitute street beggars including persons with disabilities in the Western Area Urban and Rural with a view to designing a strategy to take on this important social issue. Measures will be brought forward.

LABOUR, TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS, AND NASSIT

Mr. Speaker, Honourable members,

118. My Government has developed and popularised a Labour Migration Policy for the first time in the history of this nation. The Ministry of Labour and Social Security has laid out clear requirements for the issuance of overseas recruitments licenses to Private Employment Agencies. Fraudulent labour recruiters will now be held accountable. In addition, my Government has also signed memorandums of understanding with key destination countries on labour and manpower. As a consequence, our migrant workers are now being placed with reputable companies and their welfare is better protected.

119. My Government also has received, investigated, and resolved industrial cases, industrial disputes, and strike actions by local workers. In collaboration with the Sierra Leone Labour Congress and the Sierra Leone Employers Federation, my Government has developed legislation on employment, wages and industrial relations, and workers compensation. My Government has also held national consultation and validation workshops with key stakeholders on the Draft National Action on the Elimination of the Worst Forms of child Labour. Measures and legislation will be brought forward.

120. My Government has also escalated efforts to educate, investigate, interdict, prosecute, and convict traffickers. We are working with partners to provide services for victims and their families. Our National Action Plan against Trafficking in Persons especially Women and Children is being implemented. Most significantly, I would like to register my sincere appreciation to this Parliament for recently enacting the Anti-Human Trafficking and Migrant Smuggling Act 2022 that provides for one of the stiffest sentencing regimes in Africa for the offence of trafficking in persons. Human trafficking is odious, unacceptable, and completely incongruent with the human capital development priority of my Government. We will continue to work with other countries, development partners, and agencies to fight trafficking in persons in Sierra Leone.

121. NASSIT's benefit social insurance scheme now covers 5,375 establishments, 267,419 active contributors and 28,039 pensioners. It is an active player in the financial market in Sierra Leone and has participated in various sectors of the economy in support of national development. Appellate benefit tribunals have been set up. To address delays in the processing of benefits, NASSIT has established a specialised unit to facilitate the update of the records of members before they apply for their social security benefits. Mobile customer clinics are now available to beneficiaries and payments are made by the 25th of every month. NASSIT is also working with the International Labour Organisation (ILO) to establish an appropriate scheme for workers in the informal sector who comprise the bulk of workforce in Sierra Leone. Measures and legislation will be brought forward soon.

WOMEN, CHILDREN, SEXUAL AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Mr. Speaker, Honourable Members,

122. My Government has strengthened child protection systems and Mechanisms to address gaps and ensure a more holistic approach in conjunction with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. We have finalized a National Strategy for Street Children by adopting a family tracing and reunification approach. This, we think, focuses on building back families and strengthening communities. My Government is also reviewing the Child Rights Act 2007 with a view to strengthening protection mechanisms for children and other gaps. Legislation will be brought forward soon

123. My Government has further strengthened the prevention and response strategies and structures for Sexual and Gender-Based Violence. We have operationalised a free Rape Help Line and also established two more One Stop Centres in Karene and Bonthe to provide free comprehensive survivor-centred services for victims of sexual and domestic violence. A national Sexual and Gender-Based Violence Response Strategy has also been launched to provide national referral pathways and formalise the response structures. We have also established four (4) Sexual Reproductive Health (SRH) hubs in Koinadugu District to provide adolescent-friendly family planning and other SRH services in a drive to reduce teenage pregnancies.

124. I have spoken earlier about my government's commitment to providing equal access to education for girls and women. For us, gender equality and women's empowerment are not merely stated goals. We understand gender equality to be tied to the future and fortunes of our nation. There can be no true development if our women are not free and equal. Our goal of promoting development, tackling poverty, and entrenching good governance cannot be met without the full and free participation of the great women of our dear nation.

125. With gender firmly on the agenda, we have commenced gender mainstreaming in MDAs to facilitate the integration of gender issues within sectoral policies, plans, and programmes and to ensure intentional gender beneficiary targeting. Most significantly, my Government has developed the Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Bill to improve women's political and economic empowerment. Legislation has been laid in this Parliament and I appeal to all of us who believe in an inclusive and equal future for every Sierra Leonean to make the best decision for the future of this nation and pass the gender empowerment bill.

YOUTH AFFAIRS

Mr. Speaker, Honourable Members of Parliament,

126. I adopted human capital development as my flagship because I believe that young persons right across this nation can and will transform the future of our beloved nation. By investing in young people, I believe Sierra Leone can make significant economic, social, and governance gains. My Government has therefore invested in training and creating opportunities and facilities for youth entrepreneurship. We have established a National Youth Empowerment Fund that provides seed money for youth entrepreneurs. Working with the UNDP, my Government has piloted Youth Connect Hubs in Mongor, Falaba District; Mattru Jong, Bonthe District; and Daru, Kailahun District. Government has completed ten (10) car wash centres with 349 direct jobs for young people in the western area. My Government is also at an advanced stage of completing twenty six (26) additional car wash centres nationwide, that will provide 980 direct jobs for young

people nationwide. The National Youth Service has recruited, trained, and deployed over 1,523 young people to various institutions across the country. Consultations have been held on the review of the National Youth Commission Act 2009 and National Youth Service Act 2016 and legislation will be brought to this House.

127. My Government has also intensified anti-drug education, trained and equipped staff and community advocates, and developed and validated a five-year strategic Master Plan (2022-2026) for the fight against substance abuse and illicit drug trafficking in Sierra Leone. I thank honourable members for passing the National Drugs Control (arrest and seizure) Regulations 2021. Other measures will be tabled as necessary.

SPORTS

Mr. Speaker, Honourable members,

128. For us, sports is not mere play. We recognise its role in improving social and community health and productivity, in enhancing social cohesion, and in engendering such useful qualities like teamwork, unity, discipline, and determination. This is in addition to sports development as an integral part of national economic strategic planning.

129. With our return to the African Cup of Nations in Cameroon after a 25-year hiatus; our increasingly popular and profitable Sierra Leone Premier League that is showcasing exceptional home-based footballing talents; and, our regional successes in boxing, golf, and swimming, my Government can safely claim that we have restored an era of sporting excellence once more in Sierra Leone. Over 1500 direct jobs and several thousand football-related jobs have been created by the Premier League. More football infrastructure has been built by my Government and the private sector. Kenema City can now boast of an all-weather playing surface.

130. My Government also fulfilled its pledge to create a National Sports Fund that will be administered for the benefit of sports development in this country. For many of our youngsters, sports has been the difference between a life of despair and crime, and one filled with purpose and productivity. For many, it has been the difference between giving in to peer pressure and drug use and living a healthy, and vibrant life. An economy with a healthy and productive young population is surely one that is on its way to prosperity. I thus, humbly encourage you all, every Sierra Leonean, Honourable Members of Parliament and friends of this great nation to support this fund however you can.

JUSTICE SECTOR REFORMS

Mr Speaker, Honourable Members,

131. A prosperous nation cannot exist without the freedom of its citizens. And yet without justice, there cannot be freedom. The popular maxim "justice delayed is justice denied" is one we keep close to our hearts. Consequently, we have worked to ensure that more people have access to timeous justice.

132. My Government has taken concrete action to expand access to justice throughout Sierra Leone. The Judiciary has deployed resident judges to Moyamba, Port Loko, Kailahun, and Koinadugu Districts for the first time in the history of this country. The Judiciary also deployed resident magistrates for the first time to Mongor, Falaba District; Kamakwie, Karene District; and Segbwema and Daru in the Kailahun District. Special High Court Criminal Sessions in Pujehun, Bonthe, Falaba, Tonkolili and Karene Districts have provided over 823,000 persons with access to justice. A Special High Court Criminal Session was held in Koindu Town to handle cases around the Guinea and Liberia borders for the first time ever. With the deployment of Magistrates Courts to Mongo in the Falaba District, Kamakwie in the Karene District, Segbwema and Daru in the Kailahun District for the first time, regular Magistrates Courts sittings are being held daily in these localities. Concomitantly, the Office of the Attorney General has also recruited and deployed state counsel to expedite the delivery of justice. These actions have reduced the financial burden on people who hitherto had difficulties travelling out of their localities to seek for justice.

133. The Legal Aid Board has established offices and dozens of community advice bureaus in dozens of towns and cities across the country. These offices have become the first port of call for those with justice needs and those facing challenges when accessing justice. The services include representation in court, legal advice and assistance through mediation of civil matters and community level disputes, legal education through community outreach, school and phone-in outreach, and the monitoring of traditional courts. The Board has provided legal aid services to over half a million indigents and vulnerable persons including foreign nationals since its inception. The Board has also secured a better life for hundreds of women and children who make up 83% of the 39,292 beneficiaries of Legal Advice and Assistance through Alternative Dispute Resolution/Mediation (ADR) in 2021. The ADR services include child maintenance, spousal maintenance, debts, marital and family disputes, and inheritance and property matters. The Board has expanded access to justice for juveniles by monitoring juvenile detention facilities, providing legal assistance to suspects, delivering legal advice and representation to those standing trial.

134. On the general issue of decongestion, for the first time ever, my Government, working through the Judiciary and the Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Justice, has decongested prison populations using the novel idea of Judicial Week during which the case files of inmates were reviewed. 374 remand prisoners were admitted to bail and 234 inmates were discharged nationwide.

135. My Government has matched these institutional reforms with increased staffing in the Judiciary of Sierra Leone. More university graduates have been recruited and a Communications and Public Affairs Department set up. For the first time, 28 Judges and one magistrate have been trained on the investigation and prosecution of trafficking in persons and money laundering offences. New judges, magistrates, court registrars, and bailiffs nationwide have been trained. The Judiciary has trained 31 drivers on road safety and traffic regulations and also trained court reporters for the first time on ethics and professional court reporting. The court records management system has also been much improved.

136. My Government's establishment of the specialised Anti-Corruption Court, Sexual Offences Model Court and the Social Security Court has recorded huge successes in the last one year. Conviction rates in the Sexual Offences Model Court jumped from below 3% to 22%. Cases are now completed expeditiously as preliminary investigations are now bypassed. The Anti-Corruption Court has recovered over Four Billion Leones. Social Security cases are now drastically reduced because people prefer to pay up.

137. For the first time, the work of our Judiciary is now more visible on national and global platforms. We have established the first Virtual Court to expedite cases before the Court. The new Commercial Court Rules 2020 allow for evidence to be given, on application to the Judge, from abroad through WhatsApp and Instagram. The court has a functional web site and court records are now better kept and accessed.

138. The Small Commercial Claims Act and accession to New York Convention have improved the business ecosystem. Investors can now rest assured that their investments are better protected by law. For the first time, five (5) persons have been convicted for trafficking in persons and money laundering offences under the Trafficking, Anti-Money Laundering and Combating of Financing of Terrorism laws. My Government has also amicably arbitrated commercial disputes.

HUMAN AND PEOPLE'S RIGHTS

Mr. Speaker, Honourable Members,

139. Closely tied to our belief in access to justice for all is our unshakeable conviction that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. As a signatory to multiple Human Rights treaties, we take our obligations seriously. In January of this year, I launched The White Paper of the Constitutional Review Committee Report that seeks to address gaps, discrepancies, and inconsistencies in our 1991 Constitution. As promised, no entrenched provisions will be rushed through a referendum ahead of the forthcoming general and Presidential elections. My Government will take practical steps to address the non-entrenched clauses.

140. In fulfilment of our human rights treaty obligations, a multisectoral group has put together the Report on Sierra Leone Human Rights Record that highlights efforts and steps taken by Sierra Leone to improve human rights. This was presented at the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) Mechanism of the Human Rights Council in Geneva, Switzerland. Government is fully committed to addressing issues raised in the annual State of Human Rights Reports presented by the Human Rights Commission of Sierra Leone.

141. At several points today, I have already made mention of the great progress we have made as a nation in respect to people's rights. We are combating human trafficking and child marriage, the judiciary and state institutions are independent and undertaking reforms, access to justice has been expanded and correctional facilities are being decongested, there is an effective national civil registration programme, and laws have been introduced to address discrimination against and promote and protect women, girls, persons with disabilities and other vulnerable groups. My Government worked with Parliament to permanently abolish the death penalty in Sierra Leone. As I argued then, the death penalty is cruel, inhumane, and degrading. We are a civilised nation. We should not; we shall not; and we will never again execute any persons in this sovereign republic.

142. We have repealed seditious libel laws, supported the unfettered practice of journalism, supported more professionalism in journalism, and held the first ever media investment conference. I am proud to say that no journalist is in prison in this country for the practice of journalism. As a result of those reforms, I am pleased to note that Sierra Leone has progressed impressively on the World Press Freedom Index moving 29 places from its 75th place in 2021 to 46th in 2022. The 2022 report published by Reporters Without Borders (RSF) recognises that Sierra Leone's media sector is pluralist and generally independent and Freedom of the press is guaranteed by law. We remain committed to deepening on-going reforms in the media for long-term viability and sustainability.

143. I am also pleased to share with you the good news that following the bold media reforms that my government has initiated, culminating in the media viability and sustainability conference held on the 21st and 22nd April, the International Fund for Public Interest Media has listed Sierra Leone as one of 17 countries eligible to submit proposals for their maiden round of funding. The funds will enable the development, sustainability, and independence of public interest media especially in developing countries like Sierra Leone. I would like to encourage the media to take full advantage of this opportunity which will support trustworthy, ethical, and fact-based journalism. This supports good governance and further entrenches and protects our democracy.

144. Government has also continued its open dialogue and engagement with Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in the areas of the promotion and protection of rights, governance, and measures to shockproof, refine, and consolidate our democracy.

GOOD GOVERNANCE

Mr. speaker, Honourable Members,

145. My Government has continued to deepen democratic governance and administrative reforms over the last year. There is greater automation and transparency around government operations. Various MDAs have reviewed inefficiencies and undertaken requisite institutional reforms. Local government reforms and decentralisation continue apace and Government has sustained its funding of local councils at unprecedented levels. The National Electoral Commission, the Political Parties Registration Commission, and the National Commission for Democracy continue to take concrete actions, measures, and programmes to foster an informed, open, and inclusive democracy.

146. The Human Resource Management Office has rationalised the payroll for the Ministry of Health and Sanitation, migrated or upgraded 1,253 staff to assume functional titles through the migration policy, and is working to institutionalise a performance management culture in the Sierra Leone Civil Service. It has granted approvals for a total of four hundred and ninety-seven (497) civil servants to pursue different courses of study locally and internationally. Legislation on the Civil Service Code and the Public Service Regulation shall be brought forward soon. The Public Sector Reform Unit (PSRU) undertook institutional effectiveness and reforms, and audits of MDAs with a view to identifying gaps in capacity, systems, processes, and challenges affecting the performance of those MDAs.

The Fight against Corruption

147. My Government's fight against corruption is unabated because it is linked to the future of our nation. Corruption stifles economic growth and destroys national reputations; it diverts crucial funds from healthcare, public infrastructure, security and food security; it undermines political stability and entrenches injustice and inequality; and it widens the gap between the rich and the poor. This fight is dear to my heart. Our Anti-Corruption Commission has recruited more prosecutors; formalised the creation of various new units such as the Appeals Unit and the Civil Asset Recovery Unit; broadened the mandate of the Anti-Corruption Act, No. 12 of 2008 (as amended), to include the investigation and prosecution of offences committed under the Anti-Money Laundering and Combating of Financing of Terrorism Act; increased the number of prosecutions; and, won a higher number of convictions for corruption offences. The Commission also extended its mandate to the prosecution of examinations malpractices and other acts of corruption relating to the education sector; undertook extensive random reviews of compliance practices as well as practices and procedures in various MDAs; received an 87.5% response to asset form enquiries; partnered with MDAs and civil society organisations to promote public education about corruption; and, successfully monitored and reported on the implementation of the National Anti-Corruption Strategy.

148. As a consequence of my Government's actions, Sierra Leone again consistently increased its score in the 'Control of Corruption' Indicator of the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) Scorecard to an unprecedented 83 percent from 81 percent in 2020. The country's score in 2017 was a woeful 49 percent. In the 2021 Transparency International's Global Corruption Perception Index (CPI) and Country Rankings, Sierra Leone progressed upwards from 117 in 2020 to 115 out of 180 countries surveyed. The country also increased its 2020 score of thirty-three (33) to thirty-four (34) in 2021; this is above the sub-saharan average, and the highest the country has ever recorded since the CPI rankings began.

FOREIGN RELATIONS

Mr. Speaker, Honourable Members,

149. In pursuit of our nation's interests, Sierra Leone as a member of the comity of nations recognises the importance of multilateralism as the fairest way for countries to engage with one another and solve global problems. Recognising also an increased need for multilateral cooperation to resolve conflicts, and to address the pressing issues of our time, we continue to shape and advance our Foreign Policy priorities in line with current and emerging regional, sub-regional and global realities and developments.

150. Much to the chagrin of the opposition, I flew a few too many times to various destinations to undo the stigma and the reputational damage to our nation that my Government inherited. Our national narrative is not merely for our private vanity. It is directly linked to our economy and our standing in the world. We flew to tell our new story - the story of the new direction - a statement of our intent to transform our nation. Those engagements continue to pay off in hundreds of millions of United States dollars in grants and technical assistance from our development partners and friends. Yes, there is reward for a good reputation. There is also the future possibility of hundreds of millions of dollars from direct foreign investments and more from our compact eligibility as a result of passing the MCC scorecard for three consecutive years.

151. We retain high leadership responsibilities at the United Nations (UN), African Union (AU), and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). We are responsible for coordinating the advancement of the Common African Position on the reform of the United Nations Security Council in the ongoing intergovernmental negotiations at the UN General Assembly. I was also unanimously selected to serve as the Chairperson of the African Peer Review Forum of Heads of State and Government. I have also been nominated as co-Chair of the UNESCO High-Level Steering Committee for SDG 4 - Education 2030.

152. But Sierra Leone as a nation has received even more respect and greater standing in the last four years. Sierra Leone successfully concluded its tenure as President of the Seventh Conference of State Parties (CSP7) to the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT). Currently, Sierra Leone is co-chairing the Working Group on Treaty Universalization of the ATT. Dr. Lansana Gberie, Permanent Representative of Sierra Leone in Switzerland, is the chair of the Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) Council of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) for 2022. That is the second most important Council of the WTO. Sierra Leone serves as the vice-chair of International Organization for Migration's governing bureau. Sierra Leone is chair of the 4th intersessional meeting on Human Rights and Agenda 2030 titled: "Investing in sustainable recovery, advancing gender equality and strengthening partnerships - Towards a renewed social contract anchored in human rights". Sierra Leone's Permanent Representative to the UN, Alhaji Fanday Turay, has been elected as Vice President representing the African Group in the Bureau of the 27th Session of the Council of the International Seabed Authority (ISA). With overwhelming endorsements from ECOWAS, African Union, CEN-SAD, Sierra Leone is poised to return to the UN Security Council in the non-Permanent category in 2024/25, for the second time, after over 50 years of absence and non-selection.

153. Through our active participation in multilateral organisations, my Government continues to project Sierra Leone's visibility as well as our foreign policy footprints. We have also participated at the highest levels in the Global Education Summit for the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) and the 26th United Nations Climate Change Conference (CoP26) - both highly impactful for this nation's future.

154. My Government undertook high Impact State and Official Visits to the United Arab Emirates, Turkey, and Vietnam focusing mainly on the strengthening of South-South Cooperation and partnerships and reached a series of far-reaching bilateral cooperation Agreements and Memoranda of Understanding. Mr. Speaker, Honourable Members, thank you for being magnanimous in ratifying many of those agreements emanating from those partnerships. I anticipate your continued support in ratifying more. Our bilateral cooperation engagements with the Federal Republic of Germany, the Arab Republic of Egypt, Kenya, and Hungary have been elevated to a new level. We have also signed and operationalised a number of Visa-free Entry Agreements with a view to paving the way for the development of tourism and trade. Our newly established Embassy in Rabat, Kingdom of Morocco is fully operational. The re-opening of a resident Embassy in France is at an advanced stage and we are planning the opening of two High Commissions in India and South Africa.

CONCLUSION

Mr. Speaker, Honourable Members,

155. You have heard a lot about my Government's accomplishments, but the job is far from over. Our challenges will never disappear, but together we can create new dreams and new hopes; instead of new fears and new crises. We can step out of our past and become architects of the future; together we can elevate our national consciousness, improve the economic and physical health of our nation and affirm the greatness of our people.

156. One of the reasons I am fascinated by bridges is that it always reminds me of the task at hand. Every time I commission a bridge that my Government has built to connect communities, towns and cities, I am reminded that the secret to a cohesive, resilient and strong nation lies in our ability to reach across the spaces that appear to separate us, to build connections between our various groups, realising that we all succeed if we work together.

157. We are a tolerant and optimistic nation. We must resist the rhetoric and divisions which drive a wedge between us. We must embrace those with whom we have shared destinies. Let us work together to develop this nation. Let us build on the gains of being the fourth most peaceful country in Africa, a member of the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance, and one of few sub-saharan countries with an Independent Commission for Peace and National Cohesion (ICPNC). It is my desire to continue to work with you all over the coming year to do the very best we can for our beloved country, Sierra Leone.

I thank you for your kind attention.

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