



**ADDRESS BY HIS EXCELLENCY, DR. JULIUS MAADA
BIO, PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF SIERRA
LEONE, AND COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF OF THE
REPUBLIC OF SIERRA LEONE ARMED FORCES, ON
THE OCCASION OF THE 14TH ARMED FORCES DAY
CELEBRATION AT THE HOCKEY PITCH,
WILBERFORCE BARRACKS, FREETOWN,
- WEDNESDAY 22ND FEBRUARY 2023**

The Honourable Vice President,
 The Honourable Speaker of Parliament,
 The Lord Chief Justice,
 Madam First Lady,
 The Minister of Defence,
 Ministers of Government Present,
 Honourable Members of Parliament Present,
 Members of the Diplomatic and Consular Corps,
 Chief of Defence Staff,
 The Director General, Ministry of Defence
 Service Chiefs and Inspector General of the Sierra Leone Police,
 Distinguished Retirees, Ex-servicemen and women
 Senior Officers,
 Officers, Women, and Men of the Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces,
 Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,
 Good afternoon.

1. On this Fourteenth Armed Forces Day celebrations, I lead a grateful nation to honour and to say "Thank you" to all our fallen heroes and heroines. In several theatres of war and peace-making, through two World Wars and in peace support operations around the world and in Liberia, you have consistently displayed unusual gallantry and uncommon bravery. We salute your supreme sacrifice and your service.
2. To the brave warriors who defended this great nation through eleven years of civil war and most of whom paid the ultimate price or bear the indelible scars of their valour, we shall forever fondly cherish the higher causes that moved you to fight for the freedom, peace, and democracy we enjoy today.
3. To the families they left behind we pray that the good Lord continues to comfort and suture the pains of their absence in our lives. As we eulogise them, be assured in the words of the Holy Bible, Psalm 34:18, that "The LORD is close to the broken-hearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit."
4. Quran also reminds us in Surah Al-Inshirah - "**Fa inna ma'al usri yusra**" -- that "For indeed, with hardship [will be] ease. Indeed, with hardship [will be] ease." May the Almighty God/*Allah Subhanahu wa ta'ala* continue to heal and console the families, dear loved ones, and all of us who owe them, forever, a great debt of gratitude.

5. John F. Kennedy once said that “as we express our gratitude, we must never forget that the highest appreciation is not to utter words, but to live by them.” We must therefore express our gratitude for the sacrifice of the men and women of our armed forces by upholding the peace and keeping our nation together; by protecting and promoting the rights of our citizens; by supporting the Sierra Leone Police in keeping law and order, when called upon; by creating opportunities for inclusive and sustainable development; and, by consolidating our democracy and bolstering institutions of governance. That, we must do, not because we feel like, but because we are obligated to contribute to the peace, security, stability, and development of this our dear nation.
6. I am who I am because of this army. This army sharpened my core values of public service, discipline, and loyalty. Its enviable tradition of strict regimentation and *esprit d’corps* moulded me nearly forty years ago. Like all of us who served then and serve now, this army taught us that there is no greater service than to serve our country through war and through peace.
7. In the words of US General George S. Patton, “the Soldier is the Army. No army is better than its soldiers. The Soldier is also a citizen. In fact, the highest obligation and privilege of citizenship is that of bearing arms for one's country.”
8. It is in recognition of that obligation that I have, through my first term as President and Commander-in-Chief, worked diligently to strengthen and modernise the Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces (RSLAF) through both hard initiatives, including infrastructure and equipment, and soft initiatives, including welfare, training, and morale.
9. These efforts, I say with all humility, are unprecedented, but not unexpected. In my manifesto, I promised the RSLAF that I would work diligently to transform it into a professional, well-equipped, and highly capable force with motivated men and women who can carry out their constitutional mandate when required. No head of state has paid so much attention to and done so much for the RSLAF in so short a time.
10. I must, at this juncture, commend and appreciate the Government and people of the people’s Republic of China for unconditionally supporting my Government’s vision for transforming the RSLAF. Other global and sub-regional

partners have also fully supported our bid to modernise and restructure our RSLAF. I thank you.

Infrastructure

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen

11. From the site of the old Myohaung Officer's Mess, my Government has constructed a modern state-of-the-art Officers Mess. Towering just behind it is an imposing edifice – 104-bedroom accommodation for Single Officers at Wilberforce Barracks.
12. At Wilberforce still, my Government has also constructed an ultra-modern Warrant Officers' and Sergeant Mess. At Spur Loop, my Government has built six additional accommodation blocks for Junior Officers. At Kingtom, my Government has completed the construction of a Military Guest House- the Boom Defence.
13. Still on the issue of constructions, my Government has completed the Gondama Barracks Accommodation project and also finished the construction of modern accommodation for a minimum of about 360 personnel at six Forward Patrol Bases at Yumkella, Yenga, Sulima, Sinkunia, Sanya and Bomaru. There have been additional construction projects undertaken by my Government right across the force.

Medical Infrastructure

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen

14. Permit me, to register my gratitude for the fortitude in the face of challenges and constraints and her determined drive to make possible the delivery of modern medical services to military personnel at the 34 Military Hospital.
15. She has championed the upgrading and expansion of the 34 Military Hospital. I am informed that construction work is either complete or nearly complete. The following facilities at the 34 Military Hospital will soon be commissioned: a modern administrative block; a total of 500 bed spaces exclusively for paediatric cases, for males, and for females; a fully equipped Defence Nursing school for training healthcare personnel that offers diploma level nursing courses; a Centre of Excellence for supporting survivors of gender violence; and, a fully-equipped modern diagnostic centre with a digital X-ray machine and CT scanner. My

Government has also paved a 2.1 kilometre road around the 34 Military Hospital with asphalt.

16. For her great humanitarian work that has touched and transformed so many lives, especially the lives of girls, throughout our nation, I thank the First Lady on behalf of the RSLAF, their families, and the community.
17. With a focus on the health of servicemen and women and their families and their communities, my Government has also undertaken the rehabilitation of the field hospitals at Daru, Bo, and Makeni. Those projects are nearing completion and will be staffed by highly trained personnel and provided with standardised facilities.

Engineering Equipment

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen

18. Just over a month ago, as a result of my Government's partnership with the People's Republic of China, I commissioned substantial quantities of modern engineering equipment. I had promised those in my manifesto and I have delivered them. Once an Armed Forces Construction Corporation is established, the RSLAF's Corps of Engineers will be highly capacitated; it will generate revenue from bidding for civil works; and, it will contribute to non-traditional military functions including agriculture and disaster relief.

Equipment for Peacekeeping Support Operations

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen

19. Currently, 32 male service personnel and 17 female personnel are serving in eight different international peace support operations around the world including AMISOM, UNSOS, UNISFA, MINUSMA, UNFIL, MINUSCA, MUNUSCO, AND UNMISS. These personnel continue to serve with great distinction in each of those theatres. Every effort will be made, therefore, to procure major and self-sustainment equipment to facilitate the deployment of formed units on peace support operations. This will broaden the experience of our personnel and also bring in the much-coveted financial benefits.

Building the Capacity of the Navy

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

20. In line with my promise to capacitate the naval wing of the RSLAF, my Government has worked with partners to build up naval assets and develop the skills of our seamen and women. My Government has constructed a Slipway at the Murray Town Naval Base. I have already commissioned 4 inshore patrol boats gifted to us by the Government of South Korea. I will also soon commission a 37-metre-long Type C Patrol Boat from the President of the People's Republic of China.
21. Sierra Leone is a participant in the ECOWAS multi-country Support to West Africa Integrated Maritime Security (SWAIMS) programme that will strengthen the operational capacity of our navy. Sierra Leone will also soon receive three Rigid Inflatable Boats that will be used for inshore patrols and operations. Equipment is being installed in operational centres in Forward Operating Naval Bases.
22. With all these developments, our navy is far more equipped now than it was in recent years to carry out monitoring and surveillance of our territorial waters including conducting fisheries inspection and control, interdicting criminal activities inshore and on the high seas, and carrying out maritime search and rescue, among others.

Air Wing

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

23. My Government has been in close multilateral engagements with our friends and international partners to develop the technical capacity of our air wing and to also procure equipment and air assets for building for future air platforms of the air wing of the RSLAF.

The Regimental Brass Band

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

24. The band that has delighted us since the start of this event is a brand-new regimental and dance band that has been procured for the Armed Forces Band. This is in acknowledgement of the pivotal role the band plays both in instilling morale and maintaining a positive relationship between the forces and citizens at large.

Restructuring of the RSLAF

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

25. In 2019, the Defence Council approved reversion to a Tri-Service structure. The rationale was to develop the RSLAF into a more capable, modern, and agile force that will deliver on enhanced military missions and tasks as required. Recent partnerships with foreign partners demonstrate that this is possible. I therefore urge that this critical facet of modernisation be implemented without further delay.

Welfare – Education and Training

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

26. In line with my Government's national commitment to promoting human capital development, my Government provides educational support to the Armed Forces by awarding Grants-in-Aid at tertiary institutions for active service personnel. Other training and education opportunities will be available as a consequence of our partnerships with friendly nations and partners.

Welfare – Loan Schemes

27. My Government sanctioned the establishment of the Armed Forces Endowment and Loan Scheme that provides loans to service personnel to address pressing welfare issues. Additionally, the Scheme will enable the RSLAF to establish revenue-generating business ventures that can further support the welfare of service personnel.

Welfare – Retirement Age and Pay

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

28. My Government has reviewed and approved the retirement of age of service personnel to 60 years; in line with the rest of the Public Service.
29. Significantly, I am aware of the efforts to cushion the effects of disproportionate salary scales. Since 2020, my Government has given effect to a 75% increase in the salaries of soldiers across all ranks.
30. Also, the Defence Council has adopted a novel approach to improving the conditions of service of our Service Personnel by establishing an Armed Forces Pay Board. The Board will start with reviews with the objective of enhancing and

rationalising take-home pay. The basic pay of service personnel is directly correlated to ex-gratia, gratuities, and pensions after retirement. More basic pay; more terminal benefits.

Directorate of Veterans Affairs in the Ministry of Defence

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

31. I am aware that the Ministry of Defence has started consultations across the country to determine the number of ex - servicemen and women and to come out with plan of actions in order to have a formidable veterans organisation that will be charged with the responsibility of managing their affairs. I believe we can go one step further.

32. I urge the creation of a Directorate of Veterans Affairs located within the Ministry of Defence. The directorate will be responsible for all matters relating to veterans of the RSLAF including benefits, post-service training and employment, access to loans, ad other general welfare matters including adequate low-cost healthcare. My Government believes that those who serve or nation with honour, deserve to be treated honourably for the rest of their lives.

Gender Inclusion and Empowerment in the RSLAF

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

33. The recent Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment law that I signed mandates minimum thresholds for including women into public institutions and in leadership. Before then, in 2019, my Government undertook a special recruitment of 300 young women officers and service women to start addressing the seeming gender imbalance in the military. In the last four years, significantly more opportunities have been opened up for women in the RSLAF in training, promotions, and assuming command roles. Gender training has been intensified. I urge the Ministry of Defence to adopt a more affirmative and prominent posture on gender in recruitment, retention, promotion, and the well-being of women in the RSLAF.

Mental Healthcare and Substance Abuse Treatment

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

34. Drug or substance abuse is a national security problem with which we must contend as a nation. Like the rest of society, members of RSLAF are not immune

from the drug problem. Enforcement and punishment must be complemented with prevention education and rehabilitation. I urge the Ministry of Defence and the RSLAF leadership to take proactive and concrete measures to address drug or substance abuse.

35. I also know that soldiers are tough people and they are expected to be physical tough. But mental illness is real. The RSLAF must not simply dismiss it or cast aspersion on personnel and their families struggling with mental illness. I am informed that plans are underway to establish a mental healthcare unit at the Bo Brigade.

36. I urge the Ministry of Defence and the RSLAF to not only map out the extent of the problem but to also forge strategic partnerships with the Ministry of Health and Sanitation, agencies of government, and foreign and local partners to provide comprehensive quality mental healthcare to our personnel and their families.

Public Education about Armed Forces Day

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

37. The Ministry of Defence and the RSLAF leadership must do more to communicate the significance of this public holiday celebration of the men and women who serve and have served proudly and loyally served this nation.

38. The RSLAF should engage the National Council for Civic Education and Democracy (NACCED), civil society organisations, the Ministry of Basic and Senior School Education, the Ministry of Information and Communications, private broadcasters and professional media organisations, traditional and civic leaders, community leaders and more, to organise events around Armed Forces Day and teach the significance of Armed Forces Day as part of civic education. The general public must and should learn about why service in the military matters and what service in the military means.

39. I can also imagine that in this day of technology and social media, the Ministry of Defence and RSLAF can get our brothers and sisters in the Diaspora and other persons with access to social media involved not only in celebrations, but also in celebrating the significance of Armed Forces Day in their own unique ways. Virtual events and celebrations on Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and via online newsletters can guarantee more participation in and knowledge about the significance of Armed Forces Day.

Public Appreciation of Serving and Retired RSLAF Personnel

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

40. Beyond the single-day celebration, I urge the general public to celebrate the great service of our men and women in uniform and to say “thank you” in their own small ways whenever they interact with them. Upon producing a current identification card, private businesses should consider granting serving and retired personnel discounts on goods and services as well as preferential service.
41. For instance, transport operators should consider lower fares; mobile companies should consider special discount plans; retailers, including supermarkets, building supplies, electronics, and houseware or general merchandise stores should consider special discounts; insurance providers and private healthcare providers should consider special rates; banks should consider special concessionary rates; homeowners should consider special discounts on rent, and more. Courtesy preferences could also be accorded service personnel for any services involving queuing. These are not policies or pronouncements. These are simply suggestions to citizens to say “thank you” every day in their own ways, to our men and women in uniform and to those who have served this nation.

The Service Test and Military Creed for Serving and Retired Personnel

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

42. As your Commander-in-Chief, let me remind you of the military creed and the Oath of Allegiance that you took at your official graduation ceremony – your passing-out parade. You are to serve the people of Sierra Leone. The RSLAF is not a political party; the RSLAF is not a political entity. You are not politicians; you are professional soldiers. Let us the politicians be politicians. Always strive to be professional, law abiding, and loyal. You must continuously display your integrity, thereby maintaining your arms, your equipment, and yourself.
43. To the officers, I enjoin you to always lead by example in serving the best interests of our country. In your engagement with the public, you should be mindful of the “Service Test”. Ask yourself the question “Have your actions or behaviour adversely impacted or, are they likely to adversely impact on the efficiency, or operational effectiveness of the Service”? If your answer is YES, based on your action or behaviour, then you should advise yourself and change course. In short, you must display the highest standards of discipline, selfless commitment, loyalty, respect for others, courage (both moral and physical) and

integrity at all times and especially during the forthcoming elections. Politicians will come and go but the RSLAF will forever be the RSLAF. The RSLAF must maintain its national character and its professionalism at all times.

RSLAF Personnel Must Remain Non-Political and Support Secure, Safe, and Peaceful Democratic Elections

44. To the leaders of political parties and supporters, please, let us keep the RSLAF out of politics. Never should these fine men and women in uniform be used for political purposes. Democratic governance is here to stay and unconstitutional changes of government are frowned upon internationally and at home. The RSLAF must and will remain apolitical and focused on its defence missions and military tasks. I also urge the RSLAF to work professionally with the Sierra Leone Police and support them in providing security for every voter to freely and safely cast his or her vote during the forthcoming general elections.

Conclusion

45. Let me conclude with a prayer that the services, labour, and sacrifices of all of you RSLAF personnel and retired shall never be in vain. We salute your bravery; we salute your patriotism; we salute your sacrifices; and, we owe each of you a debt of everlasting gratitude.

Official Launch of the DEFENDER MAGAZINE

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

46. I end by saluting the loyalty, courage, strength, and commitment to service of each of you to our motherland.

God bless the Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces;
 God bless the People of Sierra Leone, and;
 God bless the Republic of Sierra Leone.