



**STATEMENT BY HIS EXCELLENCY
DR. JULIUS MAADA BIO
PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF SIERRA LEONE
THE COMMEMORATIVE EVENT OF
THE 4TH OBSERVANCE OF THE INTERNATIONAL DAY
TO PROTECT EDUCATION FROM ATTACK
ECOSOC CHAMBER, UN HEADQUARTERS
WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 13, 2023**

**Your Excellency, President of the General
Assembly, Mr. Denis Francis,
Your Excellency, Secretary-General of the
United Nations, Mr. António Guterres,
Your Highness Sheikha Moza bin Nasser,
Excellencies,
Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,**

1. I am delighted to be here today to highlight the importance of protecting education from attack and the need to achieve **Sustainable Development Goal 4: "Ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all"**.

2. Let me firstly express my gratitude to the **State of Qatar**, the **Education Above All Foundation**, **UNESCO** and **UNICEF** for organising this forum and for the important invitation extended to me to lay out a national leader's perspective, highlighting the important steps we have taken in Sierra Leone and internationally to shield education from attack, and holistically to transform education.

3. The right to education is priceless, so it **MUST** be protected at all cost. Championing the right to an education for every child in Sierra Leone and the world is not mere political rhetoric or something that will go out of style with me. My dear late mother, Yei Amie, gave me the right to an education. Though a widow at an early age and an illiterate, she somehow appreciated the value of education and sacrificed her all to put me through school.

4. Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, I stand here today championing universal access to quality education because I can testify to the power of being given the right to be educated against all odds. Therefore, it is a lifelong commitment to champion causes that ensure every child can unlock their God-given potential through education.

5. I believe in the power of education as a transformative tool that could shape a nation's destiny and fortunes for good. Education transforms minds, provides knowledge, and lays the foundation for a skilled workforce and a vibrant economy. I was, therefore, deliberate and audacious when I launched the “Free Quality School Education” programme in 2018 under my Government's flagship Human Capital Development Agenda during my first five years in office.

6. My Government's annual budgetary allocation to the education sector is 22% — one of the highest in the world. Our Free Quality School Education programme has created greater access, quality and equity for about 2 million children by removing financial barriers to school enrolment and improving teaching and learning outcomes.

7. Our focus on Human Capital Development was to reverse the downward trend of our education system caused by the 11 years of civil war in the nineties. Even though I became

President 16 years after the war was declared over, our education system was still in desperate straits from the destruction of infrastructure, the existing inequities, the depth of misconduct, and the scope of the disruptions to the system.

- 8.** Owing to the civil war, from 1991 to 2002, hundreds of thousands of children were kept out of school. Schools and tertiary institutions were destroyed, teachers were displaced in some parts of the country, and schools did not function for years. The effects were dire, with an adverse impact on human resource

development to service the economy to promote economic growth and national development. It worsened gender inequality and increased sexual and gender-based violence.

9. Our experience reflected some of the devastating consequences of the conflict-related attacks on education, where children are recruited into warring factions and the girls are regrettably sexually abused and exploited, affecting the future of entire generations.

Excellencies, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

10.The urgency to protect education from attack is now. Over the past three years, reports reveal that more than 9,000 learners and teachers were harmed, injured or killed in attacks on educational facilities during armed conflicts. Between 2020 and 2021, more than 5,000 attacks were on educational facilities, students, and teachers. Such attacks continue to rise year after year in different places across the globe.

11.Some of the attacks on education are policy-based, with equal devastating impact, particularly on girl learners. In Sierra Leone, girls suffered the double victimisation of dealing with teenage pregnancy, often due to sexual abuse and a ban on visibly pregnant schoolgirls from attending school.

12.In March 2020, I announced that the Government of Sierra Leone had lifted the ban prohibiting pregnant schoolgirls from attending school and committed my Government to the Policy of Radical Inclusion

to ensure that no child is left out of the education system.

13.My Government also addressed the issue of the comprehensive safety of all children in the educational sector, initiating several interventions to support girls' education, such as the re-entry policy and the multi-sectoral task force to discuss the challenges girls face periodically.

14.Due to our deliberate policy interventions, we have achieved gender parity at the basic education level, registered higher achievement and learning outcomes for girls in secondary schools, and guaranteed tuition-free education from primary school to university for all girls studying STEM disciplines.

15.My Government's interventions were many, guided by data and policy-based research to transform education and address restrictive policies and actions – **these were, in essence, to “PROTECT EDUCATION FROM ATTACK”.**

16.The work on universal access to quality education is continuous, so Human Capital Development is still one of my key priorities for national development. We have made inroads with free access to education. In my next five-year mandate, we will focus on the quality of education our young people receive to equip them for the 21st Century World.

Excellencies, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

17.As we all know, education is a fundamental human right and critical to achieving sustainable development and social progress. Therefore, children everywhere should have access to education, and in the context of protecting education, children should go to school without fear or hindrance. Every child must have access to quality and inclusive education.

18.I commend the **State of Qatar** for its leadership in unanimously adopting the General Assembly resolution proclaiming **September 9** as the **International Day to Protect Education from Attack** on May 28th 2020.

19.In addition to raising awareness of the plight of millions of children faced with the adverse effects of the attacks on education, as leaders and governments, the resolution is clear on what we must do to discharge the primary responsibility to provide protection and ensure inclusive and equitable quality

education at all levels to all learners, especially those in vulnerable situations.

20. We must intensify efforts and increase funding to promote safe and protective school environments, particularly in humanitarian emergencies. One vital instrument to facilitate safe and inclusive learning is the **Safe Schools Declaration**, with its commitments and concrete steps to protect education from attacks.

21.To achieve the objectives of the Transforming Education Summit and invariably SDG 4, we must raise our voices against those perpetrating attacks against school children, educational infrastructure and teaching and learning generally.

22.As a strong advocate of Education and as Co-chair of the SDG4 High-Level Steering Committee, I raise my voice today to make a clarion call for us all to galvanise our actions to ensure that the 244 million children and youths worldwide who are out of school have access to quality education.

23. Today, as we commemorate the International Day to Protect Education from Attack, I call on all Member States of the United Nations who have not yet done so to endorse the **Safe Schools Declaration** and respect its provisions. Parties in conflict situations must also commit to respecting the provisions of the **Safe Schools Declaration**.

24. As the African proverb says, "**If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.**" We are all in this together. Our actions must be universal, inclusive, and equitable.

25.Let us go far together to build a safe world for children worldwide to access quality education and become productive citizens. This is a sure path to alleviating global poverty and building a sustainable future for humanity.

26.Together **“LET’S PROTECT EDUCATION FROM ATTACK”**.

I THANK YOU ALL.