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Transcript

A Vision for Sierra Leone

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SLPP Presidential Nominee for the 2012 Elections

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Rtd. Brig. Julius Maada Bio:

Please permit me on behalf of my Party, the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP), to first and foremost thank the United Kingdom (UK) Government for its continued support to Sierra Leone and for helping my country through our numerous difficulties, including support to re-establish peace after a devastating war and for our post-war reconstruction.

I would also like to say that there I am very aware many of you would like to ask questions. Due to time constraints I will not be able to cover everything in specific detail. There is much to discuss about my policies on education, health and the mining sector. Or, indeed, the upcoming elections this November. I will be very happy to engage with you further on these issues after this speech.

Let me first thank the Director of the Royal Institute of International Affairs for inviting me to this forum. Since I am speaking to you for the first time, I want to share with you my party's philosophy.

Before I start, I would like to outline the very real threats that we, as a campaigning opposition in an election year, face in Sierra Leone. In September last year, I was stoned and hospitalised by government supporters while attending a rally that was intended to launch my candidacy for the elections. Rallies were then banned by the police in a serious blow against freedom of speech.

Early this year, it was discovered that the government had purchased 4.5 million dollars of heavy arms – Rocket Propelled Grenade Launchers, Machine Guns, Sub-Machine, AK47s – through a known arms dealer. Weapons, that I am sure you all agree, are completely necessary to control a busy crowd at a polling station!

Don't worry - I know that this isn't an election rally – but I hope you will allow me to go some way to explaining just why Sierra Leone is crying out for a new democratic direction.

Philosophy and Ideology of the SLPP

The Sierra Leone People's Party's overriding philosophy of a unified Sierra Leone is enshrined in its motto of 'One Country, One People' supported by the Party's ideological brand of 'Social Democracy'. This seeks to combine the efficiency and effectiveness of the market economy with the innate compassion of state intervention to protect the vulnerable and the

marginalised in society. It also assures optimal production, wealth creation and social justice. It is this orientation that will inform the economic and social programmes of a future SLPP Government.

It is my hope that, after the elections in November, Sierra Leone will come under 'A New Direction' with the SLPP working assiduously towards the attainment of 'A Better Sierra Leone'. The New Direction will be guided by the following principles:

- Unity in diversity;
- Primacy of the national interest;
- Accountability and transparency in public affairs;
- An end to impunity;
- Zero tolerance for corruption;
- The respect for human rights, upholding the rule of law and promoting justice.

Priorities for the New Direction

In a country which has such needs as my own it is the case that every sector has claims to be a priority especially where there is fierce competition for limited national resources. My belief is that the following foundations need to be laid first to allow the country to be rebuilt in a sustainable way:

- Youth training and employment;
- Effective management of natural resources and the economy;
- Quality education and improved health care;
- Respecting human rights and upholding the rule of law;
- Eliminating hunger;
- Fighting corruption and improving accountability;
- Empowerment of women; and
- Building and maintaining a sound infrastructure.

The time at my disposal this afternoon compels me to focus on only a few of the above. Of course, we can look at some of these issues in more detail in questions afterwards.

Youth Training and Employment

My country is a young country. 15 to 35 year olds account for about a third of the total population. Our youth voting population is at least 60% of the total voting public. This means that the November elections are about putting the youth at the centre of development and in the driving seat. Across the country, dynamic young people are striving to make an impact on national development. They play a crucial role in the on-going democratisation and peace-building processes. They are our greatest national asset, which we can ill-afford to squander because today's young people are the next generation of workers, entrepreneurs and leaders.

Investment in education, training and youth development has been unacceptably low. This has resulted in weak opportunities for youth employment. Consequently, the proportion of under-utilised and unemployable youth is increasing in alarming proportions and could easily become fodder for future conflict.

In the New Direction, we view the Sierra Leone youth problem as a human development and security challenge. We must give it the utmost attention if the country is to drive further the consolidation of peace and capacity building for a prosperous nation. Specifically I will look to making significant changes including:

- Providing technical skills in areas relevant for the Sierra Leonean Job market;
- Investing in tertiary education to train our youth in employable skills;
- Establishing a National Youth Service Scheme;
- Establishing a Special Youth Empowerment Fund to provide for youth capacity building and supporting their entrepreneurial efforts;
- Promoting youth engagement in agriculture, and
- Developing and encouraging job creation in the private sector.

Economic Management

Our country is resource-rich but policy-poor. We have a vast sore running through the population. If our President is to be believed, then Sierra Leone is booming. Supported by Tony Blair and international lobbyists, he has taken this message around the world. But good PR is no substitute for the truth. Nearly six million people are stuck in desperate conditions of grinding poverty amidst the growing affluence of a few. Lifting them from those conditions is the struggle we must fight, and it is a struggle we must win. Thus far, the management of our economy has been less than impressive. Economic growth will never materialise while Mr. Koroma presides over at best incompetent and at worst corrupt stewardship of our economy.

The expansionary fiscal policy as a result of unplanned spending on urban roads and electricity, coupled with falling domestic revenue, has considerably widened the fiscal gap and is a major source of inflation which stood at about 21% in July 2011. Public spending is expected to rise even further as desperation within the ruling Party for the re-election of the incumbent President reaches fever pitch.

The global financial crisis created immunity for no country. And in Sierra Leone, the poor received no protection from the ravages of the global financial meltdown. As a result, living standards dropped drastically. Compounding this problem, the Government completely failed to put in place any strategy that would have increased domestic production and reduce food prices. The effect of all this is that today the conditions in Sierra Leone are so terrible that many a poor family cannot even afford a meal a day.

Under responsible leadership, working closely with our development partners, we can seize this opportunity. A modern market economy can exist, our reliance on foreign aid is not permanent and when the world emerges from these dark economic times, our nation will be ready to grasp every opportunity that comes its way. Overall, the objectives of my economic management shall be:

- To have a stable and competitive national currency that will promote exports;
- To reduce public sector deficits through increased revenue as a consequence of enhanced revenue administration and expansion of revenue base as well as better management of public finances;

- To reduce inflation and create conditions for essential goods to be available and affordable;
- To create jobs, particularly for our youth through boom in private sector activities;
- To increase domestic production of essential goods, particularly food;
- To expand and improve efficiency in public spending on social services;
- And to develop public infrastructure with high economic and social benefits.

Private Sector Investment

We see our future as one of collaboration with our development partners. We shall design, well co-ordinated and coherent policies and programmes that make our own development commitments more credible to investors and to our own people. This way we hope to increase private sector investment in our economy.

Development is about people and by the people. Development needs to start by focusing on our people: our human capital. This will require investing in education, training and health care.

Minerals

Ladies and gentleman, any mention of Sierra Leone is often followed by a discussion over our natural resources.

Now, mining is second only to agriculture for both employment and income generation. The prospects for additional discoveries of mineral deposits in the country are looking bright. Mineral exploration is being intensified throughout the country. It is estimated that within the next decade, we could well see the establishment of four new large-scale mines in the country. Direct and indirect employment in the mining sector could thus grow exponentially.

The present Government has been demanding advance taxation from mining companies to finance its infrastructure projects. This is money that should be due in future and could be used for other developmental purposes. To collect these monies and use them under dubious circumstances with suspicions of kickbacks is illicit and grossly unfair to any future government.

A recent report by civil society called 'Not sharing the loot states that in 2010, the mining industry accounted for 60% of the country's exports and 8%, some 24 million dollars, of government revenue'.

Yet companies paid the government a mere 2.2% of the export value of minerals as tax. I will say that again. Mining Companies paid the government a mere 2.2% of the export value of minerals as tax.

As a result, the government raised only \$2.4 million from the mining sector. Companies pay considerably lower than the stipulated 37.5% corporation tax or the general company tax rate of 30%.

Many mining companies are also using our natural resources as collateral to raise huge amounts of investments without having the country to share in the financial windfall. Even worse, the Government recently auctioned for pittance the country's shares in Sierra Rutile, the only mining company that paid its corporate tax, without recourse to our Parliament and in breach of the country's procurement laws.

Confidence in the government by mining companies is waning. The sector is plagued by poor community participation in agreements, bad employment practices for Sierra Leoneans and poor local empowerment.

Petroleum Resources

Petroleum resources are another national asset the management of which is another source of concern. International competitive bidding and international best practice are concepts that appear still alien to our present governance system in Sierra Leone. Whereas other African countries make acquisitions of such assets subject to these fundamentals, they are yet to come into the corpus of law and practice in Sierra Leone. So far, the government has failed to disclose details of negotiations and licenses for public scrutiny and this non-disclosure is raising concern in the public.

Against this backdrop, my administration will work with partners to have:

- Case-by-case review and possibly re-negotiation of all Mining and Petroleum Agreements based on international best practice and existing mining and fiscal legislation;
- A fiscal regime that creates stability and credibility in the mining and petroleum sectors;

- Conduct a natural resource audit to determine what we have, where they are and in what quantity and establish and sustain a natural resource database.
- Set up and operate the new National Minerals Agency in line with the new Act; and
- Train high level professionals and develop capacities in mineral negotiation and management.

Education

Investing in quality education - primary, secondary, technical colleges and universities - will help turn Sierra Leone's natural and mineral resources into sustainable development. It will help lift people out of poverty. It will also help to reduce unfair income distribution and sustain democracy.

Only two out of every five Sierra Leoneans can read or write. Primary school enrolments are low, the quality of education at all levels has dropped and there are few qualified teachers at all levels. Access to technical education is restricted. This lack of opportunity for our young has to change if Sierra Leone has any chance. Any chance not just to grow but to survive.

Respecting Human Rights and Upholding the Rule of Law

Since 2007, respect for human rights in Sierra Leone has disappeared. Intimidation and vote buying are just two of the tactics deployed by the ruling Party against the Opposition. As all this is happening, the other branches of government have been noticeably mute. They are rapidly losing the confidence of the public who increasingly perceive them as tools of a corrupt government.

I am not afraid of justice. But I am afraid of partial justice.

Abuse of citizens' rights has also been widespread. Severe forms of abuse are unfair dismissals, unequal access to opportunities, brutal actions by State Police, and unfair trials in the Courts. Bail conditions, especially for accused Opposition members, often demanded by the Prosecution, have grown stiffer and stiffer and are seldom compatible with the tenets of democratic governance. Judging by the torrent of concerns from the public about the performance of the Police and the Judiciary, I know a mountain of pressing reforms awaits my administration to bring those institutions in line with international standards.

On April 26, 2007, the Special Court for Sierra Leone (SCSL) delivered an historic verdict. The Court found Charles Ghankay Taylor, former President of Liberia, guilty on all counts in an 11-count indictment with aiding and abetting the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) and the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) in Sierra Leone for various war crimes, crimes against humanity and serious violations of international humanitarian law against our people during the 11- year long internecine civil war.

This verdict by the Special Court for Sierra Leone has great significance for all countries in the world. It tells all serving Heads of State who commit international crimes against their subjects or their neighbours that there is no hiding place for them anywhere anymore. Impunity in all its manifestations in state governance has been outlawed by international criminal law and shall no longer be tolerated no matter how high or low a government official may be.

This news is greatly welcomed. Quite apart from this, the Court's judgment has other far-reaching implications. The decision offers a new window of opportunity to pursue a claim for reparations in the International Court of Justice at The Hague on behalf not only of Sierra Leone as a State, but of all the victims of the war. These victims, mostly poor and destitute, number hundreds of thousands. They are found in every corner of the country and are still languishing to this day with no food or shelter and no-one to care for them.

The new Government I will lead, shall make a claim of reparations on behalf of these families against the delinquent states that assisted the rebellion of the RUF a matter of high priority.

I pledge this to the people of Sierra Leone.

Challenges to Democratisation and Peace Consolidation

There are very many challenges to our nascent democracy and peace consolidation. If these challenges are not faced down and beaten the positive steps I have already outlined can never be realized.

Sierra Leone will fail.

Political Violence and Security

Despite the huge investments in peace consolidation, peace in the country remains fragile as it is being systematically undermined by the current Government of President Ernest Bai Koroma in his desperate bid to get re-elected at all cost. I refer in particular to his party's perpetuation of a long

series of violent attacks on supporters and the infrastructure of our Party – myself included - beginning right from the day that he was sworn into office.

I was physically attacked by stone-throwing APC supporters in Bo, our second largest city, on September 9, 2011 while I was on a tour of the provinces to thank my supporters for electing me as the presidential candidate of the SLPP. An investigation supported by the Government confirmed that the stoning and wounding of my person was done by supporters of the ruling Party, generally believed to be organised by the Minister of Internal Affairs. At the same incident, the Sierra Leone Police indiscriminately fired at peaceful and jubilant SLPP supporters who had assembled to welcome me. This resulted in one death and 20 seriously wounded. These were all confirmed by an Investigative Panel set up by the President. Despite this confirmation, the perpetrators were only charged with the minor offence of riotous conduct.

The role of the Police

The Police are the key instrument the ruling Party is using to intimidate and brutalise the Opposition. The ruling Party has not only influenced the recruitment, promotion and transfer of police officers, its interference with the management of the Police is most times undisguised.

Following the assumption of power by the APC, ex-combatants who had been involved in gross human rights abuses during the 11-year rebel war have been recruited into the Police and are now part of the President's Close Protection Bodyguard. These bodyguards of the President continue to violate human rights with impunity and bring shame on our country.

Additionally, thousands of youths hailing from the President's home District are being recruited secretly into the Sierra Leone Police and the Military for the purpose of seeking the interests of the ruling Party in the forthcoming elections.

As regards the policing of the November elections, the demand is they should carry out that role unarmed, or they should be combined with United Nations Police from neighbouring Liberia to inspire public confidence in the credibility of the process.

The Media

The media equally has an important role to play. During his visit to Sierra Leone in 2010, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon and President Koroma jointly opened the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC), which had been transformed from the UN radio to an independent public broadcaster.

Our Party radio station (Unity Radio) and the ruling APC radio (We Yone) had by then been banned by the Independent Media Commission (IMC). Now, however, what was expected to be an independent national broadcaster has become the mouthpiece of the ruling Party.

There is no level playing field.

Most of its programmes are biased in favour of the President and his Government with very little airtime provided to the Opposition.

Exclusion and Unequal Opportunities

The APC administration has deliberately overturned the efforts of the SLPP at galvanizing national unity and cohesion after the war. It has been applying a cruel and crude brand of tribalism, patronage and nepotism in many state institutions. The discriminatory pattern of dismissals, appointments, promotions and transfers within the public service are not only unacceptable, they threaten the very fabric of our nationhood, reconciliation and national cohesion. Most of the victims are competent Sierra Leoneans whose only crime is their perceived support for the Opposition or for having been born outside the Northern Province.

Over 80% of the appointments and promotions in the last 4 years within the Public Service are of members of selected ethnic groups from Northern Sierra Leone, the presumed stronghold of the ruling Party.

Ladies and Gentleman, it is clear that a process of ethnicisation is well underway in key institutions of the Sierra Leonean State. Institutions of whose impartiality is crucial for transparent elections this November.

Even student scholarships for overseas and in-country studies, which currently offer the greatest opportunity for human capital development, have not been spared from abuse. The vast majority of beneficiaries have been family members and political activists of the APC. Despite the relentless efforts of our donors to improve public procurement and financial management, government contracts are still largely awarded to supporters, financiers and relatives of those in leadership positions in the ruling Party.

Conclusion

Let me conclude by emphasizing that I have not come to Chatham House just to complain against the APC Government. I have not even come here to complain about President Ernest Bai Koroma. I am sure, in this age of the

World Wide Web, to a knowledgeable audience, nothing I have said here today is entirely new.

The peace in our country is still very much fragile and still donor-dependent. It therefore needs to be managed with great care and discretion. If change is ripe for Sierra Leone, as I am sure it is, want it to come peacefully. That is why I have attempted to tell you my positive vision for a new Sierra Leone. That youth empowerment shall receive the utmost attention of the Government I hope to lead. That attracting foreign direct investment to become our engine for economic growth will be – must be – central to our work.

And, alongside ample provision shall also be made for skills training, especially for the youth, to empower and equip them to meet the challenges of a modern economy. Businesses, especially mining and petroleum companies will be encouraged to partner with Government to provide specialised training programmes where these are not available in the public sector.

It is a vision that is achievable. It is a new direction. Our country has been through tough times - through dictatorship, through civil war and then economic collapse. I am determined that we shall not return to those dark days.

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Brigadier (Ret.) Julius Maada Bio is the presidential candidate for the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP). Brigadier Bio was involved in the overthrow of the All People's Congress government of Joseph Saidu Momoh, marking the beginning of the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC) regime in 1992. Under the NPRC, he was appointed Minister of Information and Broadcasting. He became the military Head of State from January 1996 to March 1996 before handing over power to former President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah.