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230 CHILDREN GRADUATED FROM UNAMSIL VOICE OF CHILDREN (VOC) RADIO PROJECT

Freetown, Sierra Leone, 11 December 2005 ----- Two hundred and thirty children yesterday graduated from UNAMSIL Voice of Children (VOC) radio project yesterday. The graduation ceremony took place at the Press Briefing Hall, UNAMSIL headquarters in Freetown.

Speaking during the ceremony, the Special Representative of the Secretary General for Sierra Leone, Ambassador Daudi Mwakawago, called on the people of Sierra Leone to provide better opportunities for children to develop their talents in order to contribute more meaningfully to the development of the country.

According to the SRSG, "if we recognize that children have a voice then, it should not be expressed through only one medium, rather columns and pages in newspapers and air time on the radio and television should be dedicated to them to articulate their views and aspirations.

The SRSG, who commended the graduating children for been much disciplined and highly focused, admonished them to stay clear of reckless acts that will jeopardize or truncate their dreams of realizing their career aspirations. Particularly, he warned them against the dangers of HIV/AIDS which he referred to as a 'disease of choice.'

Ambassador Mwakawago used the opportunity to announce that UNAMSIL was going to leave the country by the end of December 2005 after successfully completing its assignment in the country. "Look at what you can do for your country to make it better…develop your country and be proud of it…stop begging as it is demeaning." He said.

Earlier, the Chairman of the Board for the Voice of Children project, Mrs. Allison-Parker congratulated the children for having acquired training skills like respect, teamwork and objectivity which are not only very essential, but a necessary prerequisite for success in any profession. He advised them to leave a legacy for the next set of children after them.

The Child Protection Adviser, Mr. Kwame Anno-Kumi admonished them to be development oriented in their practice of journalism, noting that Sierra Leone needs journalists who can promote development. He cautioned them to not only identify with children but also the less privileged, and to be humble even while criticizing as that is the hallmark of good journalism.

The Officer in Charge of Public Information, Ms. Sheila Dallas, congratulated and advised them not to quickly discard the discipline and hard work they have acquired during their stay with the Voice of Children

The Voice of Children project was born out of the initiative of the Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict (O/CAAC), against the backdrop of rejuvenating the lost childhood of the Sierra Leonean Children after the ten years war.
It was officially launched in February 2003 in Sierra Leone by his Excellency, Ambassador Olara Otunu. This project is also a part of the office of the National Commission for War Affected Children (NACWAC).

Its membership comprises of all children within the ages of **9-18 years** and the main aim of the project is to give a **Voice** to all children of Sierra Leone in a positive way. In this vein, the VOC advocates for the rights of children and addresses issues that affect the general welfare of children

After two years of existence, the programme has its branches across the country: (Bo, kenema, Moyamba, Port Loko and Kono) and it produces 12 Radio programmes on three Radio Stations, namely Radio Unamsil FM 103/, Believers Broadcasting Network FM 93.0/ and the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Service FM 99.9/. These programmes are being researched, produced and presented by the members of the project.