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UNAMSIL CONVERGES SIERRA LEONE POLITICAL PARTIES IN A HISTORIC MOVE

Freetown, Sierra Leone, 20 September 2005 - For the first time in the history of Sierra Leone, three leading political parties in this tiny West African country today sat down under one table during the first ever session on inter-party dialogue organized by the United Nations Assistance Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL).

The session, presided by the Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary General (SRSG) for Sierra Leone, Ambassador Daudi Mwakawago, converged the ruling Sierra Leone Peoples Party (SLPP), All Peoples Party (APP) and Peoples Liberation Party (PLP).

The SLPP was represented by its Chairman Alhaji U.N.S. Jah, the APP by its Secretary General Mr. Victor Foh and the PLP by its two members of parliament Honorable Mohammed Idriss and Honorable Dr. Kandeh Konteh.

Opening the session at UNAMSIL's Welfare Club in Freetown, the SRSG urged political parties in Sierra Leone to build a solid non-partisan national platform for an open and free flow of communication and consultations between the government and the opposition on issues of national interest.

"I would like to...urge you all to seize the moment and build a solid non-partisan national platform for an open and free flow of communication and unimpeded consultations between the government of the day and opposition parties on issues of wider collective interest to the nation," he said.

He clarified that the challenges facing the country are enormous and thus calls for collaborative efforts to leverage the energies and intellectual resources of all Sierra Leoneans without regard to their party labels, allegiances, affiliations and ideologies.

Ambassador Mwakawago mentioned some of the challenges as those pertaining to proper use of internal and external human resources, management of foreign resources and maximum utilization of natural resources like mineral, marine and forest resources. He emphasized that

with appropriate use of the resources, Sierra Leone should be a donor instead of a recipient; adding:” Sierra Leone is in a wrong place.”

He also called on the parties to forge a formidable all-party national alliance that would act as the driving force for identifying key areas of inter-party collaboration and partnership, especially in public policy formulation and programme implementation.

“Such an alliance will also serve as a catalyst for evolving a broad-based national vision and entrenching the values of democratic pluralism that will significantly benefit social and political stability and sustainable economic development,” he said, insisting that the parties need to cultivate a culture of tolerance, two-way traffic style of leadership, bi-partisan approach to problems and strive towards peace and stability.

On their part, the representative of the parties agreed to work together for the benefit of all Sierra Leoneans on several issues of national interest, for instance; political tolerance, eradication of poverty, sustainable development and focusing their strength on building peace and stability and fighting against corruption.

On his side, Alhaji Jah emphasized the need to work together to combat national problems saying it would be incorrect to blame the ruling party or any other single stakeholder for issues such as eradication of poverty, fight against corruption, provision of education and security. He said these are moral responsibilities of all political parties.

Mr. Victor Foh, concurred that his party will work in partnership with other parties in all those issues of national interest. He urged, however, the international community to help the National Electoral Commission (NEC) in capacity building to ensure the 2007 general elections are conducted fairly and freely.

On UNAMSIL’s departure at the end of the year, Deputy Representative of the Secretary General (DSRSG) Mr. Victor Angelo told the participants that though UNAMSIL will go, but there will be a Follow-On Mission and the UN country Team that will engage strongly in building peace and stability, security issues, help electoral process and public information to promote peace, development and tolerance.

The programme on inter-party dialogue is part of the overall mandate of UNAMSIL and has been divided into three parts including a live radio “question and answer” programme to engage the parties in discussions of vital importance to the consolidation of peace, security and stability in the country.