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## **PRESS RELEASE**

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### **SIERRA LEONE CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS ADVISED TO PLAY MAJOR ROLE IN SHAPING THE COUNTRY'S FUTURE**

*Freetown, Sierra Leone, 20 September 2005* - Sierra Leone Civil society Organizations have been advised to play more active role in the search for a brighter future for the country so that a strong message will be sent not just to West Africa, but to the entire world that it is possible to experience a serious, damaging conflict and yet overcome it and tread the path of reconciliation and national development.

This appeal was made by the Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary General for Sierra Leone and UNDP Resident representative, Mr. Victor Angelo, at a Civil Society Forum organized by UNAMSIL as part of the activities marking this year's international Day of Peace.

Victor Angelo cautioned them that as UNAMSIL prepares to leave the country, they should embark on conscious efforts to promote a culture of dialogue and tolerance especially as the country approaches the 2007 elections. He said that for the country to be able to do better after the departure of UNAMSIL, the people have to have a clear understanding of what were the root causes of the conflict as well as a clear understanding of how to address them.

The DSRSG informed the people of Sierra Leone that a follow on Mission (United Nations Integrated Mission in Sierra Leone "UNIOSIL") is established by the UN Security Council which will bring together the different dimensions of UN systems in a very integrated manner that will continue to bring peace and promote development process in Sierra Leone.

The mission, he said, will stand on four pillars; peace and development, human rights with strong emphasis on taking forward the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Security and development. He said there will also be a very strong emphasis on public information to ensure that there is communication to promote a culture of tolerance, peace and inclusiveness.....only this can keep you moving the country from conflict where you were several years back to prosperity.

Mr. Victor called on the people to address the issue of leadership adding "there is no change if

there is no good leadership...if we do not address the leadership issue; we are not addressing the political issue.” He said.

On the issue of commitment and national ownership, the DSRSG advised the people to promote a culture of commitment and full engagement at all levels and put public service and public interest on the forefront, without which the expected change will remain an illusion. “It is time to put corruption behind, it is time to see a much more committed, a much more engaged society at all levels in the different sectors...we have to move away from the culture of dependency, he said adding if you don’t take national ownership seriously, the donor community will dictate to you what you should do.” “There is no development when development is led from outside...there is no prosperity if it is determined from somewhere else,” he said.

Mr. Victor Angelo averred that as UN, “our role is to be frank and tell you what we think or feel about you...we will not be telling you what to do, we will not be telling you what should be the agenda, we will not lecture you...we are here to tell you that in the world of today, things have to be looked at from various perspectives and that you might wish to consider it as well as far as your own country is concerned.” “You either do it right so that you children will applaud you as heroes or do it the other way and receive their condemnation...you have a choice and the United Nations would like, as friends to help you make the right choice,” he said.

In his opening remarks, the chairman for the forum and head of Political Science, University of Sierra Leone, Professor Osman Gbla, called for judicial reforms in the country and more respect for the rule of law which is the hallmark of a democratic society. He decried the spate of poverty in the country and advised on the need for a youth development policy in order to channel the creative energies of the youth towards something more positive. Professor Gbla stated that the forum was timely as it provided the opportunity to assert more emphatically the role the civil society has to play for sustainable peace and development in the country.

Also speaking, the Co-chair and Director of Peace and Conflict Studies, Fourah Bay College, Mrs. Memunatu Pratt, expresses concern at the rate of illiteracy in the country adding that it is a human rights issue which needed to be addressed urgently. She also stated that moving the country from conflict to prosperity is a collective responsibility which should be taken seriously by all Sierra Leonans.

In his contribution, the President, Sierra Leone Association of Journalists, Alhaji Ibrahim Kargbo stated that come 2006 Sierra Leone will for the first time in thirty years be running a government without foreign troops. The situation, he said, calls for sober reflections and the civil society has a stake in it. He called for improved utilities like electricity without which the foundation for industrial base can not be laid.

The forum was attended by different civil society organizations, the academia, local and international NGO’s and a representative of the regional UNESCO office in West Africa.

Other activities organized to mark the International year of peace include an inter-party dialogue and cultural activities.