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Press Release

SRSG JOINS VOICE OF CHILDREN IN CELEBRATING FIRST ANNIVERSARY

Freetown - The Special Representative of the Secretary-General, Ambassador Daudi Ngelautwa Mwakawago on Saturday 28 February led members of the Voice of Children (VoC) in marking the first anniversary of the official launch of the project. The anniversary was celebrated with a “Soup Kitchen activity” which saw 1,000 children from different child rights organisations fed, with the first girl being served by Ambassador Mwakawago. Jordanian medical doctors serving in UNAMSIL rendered free medical treatment for common ailments to the kids, while counseling on HIV/AIDS was offered for voluntary testing.



Speaking at the ceremony at Victoria Park in Freetown, Ambassador Mwakawago expressed joy at being part of “a watershed in the advocacy for children by children and the first such initiative of its kind anywhere in the world,” that gave voice to children. He said the ten-year civil war in Sierra Leone affected children greatly both as victims and perpetrators, adding that no amount of

SRSG serving a child at the VoC Anniversary celebrations

attention paid to children would be enough for them. He said the essence of the VoC was to “restore to Sierra Leone’s children their humanity and confidence; to rebuild in them a sense of trust and belonging, after the nightmarish experience of widespread distrust and

wanton but deliberate violence” through the use of radio as “a mass medium for education, information, social mobilization and communication, to address the realities of war for the children of Sierra Leone”

The SRSG condemned the use of children by adults “to fight their [adults’] war for them, saying “This has got to stop”. He called on adults to show “pride and a sense of real responsibility” in promoting and protecting children, something he said the VoC sought to do. He urged children to “demand from their parents and society at large: protection, quality education and space to be children.”

While saying that the formative period of childhood once lost could never be regained, the SRSG said the withdrawal of UNAMSIL should not mean the end of the Voice of Children. “Sierra Leoneans will increasingly be in the driver’s seat, taking the destiny of their country in their own hands; and what better way to go about it than to prepare the younger generations to fully play their rightful role in this endeavor. UNAMSIL eventual withdrawal will not mean the demise of the Voice of Children. The Voice of Children will continue. It should continue to live for as long as children continue to live in Sierra Leone and it should serve as an example to emulate and disseminate in those countries where other children continue to be the victims of senseless conflicts and exploitation.”

In his statement read on his behalf by a teenage boy, Robert Konuwa, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children And Armed Conflict, Ambassador Olara Otunnu said he was “delighted to hear that...the members of [the Voice of Children] project, despite the limited time, space, and resources, have managed to...learn the basics of broadcasting by attending highly intensive training sessions”

Ambassador Otunnu thanked the VoC for giving a voice to the children of Sierra Leone “by expressing yours and your peers’ views on different issues affecting you. You have been able to teach young people about children’s rights, about the UN, about their country and other countries.” He went on to say that the work of the children had not only helped their contemporaries but also “helped in the healing and reconstruction of Sierra Leone and in rebuilding peace.” He said the success of the project had attracted requests for similar projects “from Colombia and from a group of Liberian children”.

In her keynote, the Executive Secretary of The National Commission for War Affected Children (NACWAC), Mrs Bintu Magona, who is also a member of the VoC’s Advisory Board said the VoC had given the children of Sierra Leone “the opportunity to articulate their views on issues that affect their lives and at the same time encouraged them to participate in nation building.” She expressed the hope that “before long the VoC will serve as an instrument for reviving school broadcasting programmes by producing more educational programmes in line with the school curriculum”

Deputising her Minister, the Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Social Welfare and Children’s Affairs, Ms Sarrah Lewis acknowledged the role of the VoC “towards ensuring that then rights of the child and welfare of children are protected and promoted”. She reaffirmed her Ministry’s commitment “to make the Voice of Children grow from

strength to strength”, pledging that the children’s efforts do not go in vain. Ms Lewis highlighted the plight of the country’s street children, saying “today’s feeding programme is yet another symbolic way of highlighting the situation of children in our country”.

Voice of Children, a project of the Public Information Section which started off with 5 programmes on Radio UNAMSIL, now puts out 12 programmes including on two additional radio stations – the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Service (SLBS) and Believers Broadcasting Network (BBN) which is a religious broadcaster.

Side attractions were provided by local performing artists including “Sisters with Attitude”, the Young Professionals comedy group, Milton Margai School for the Blind and the Voice of Children comedy and drama group.