

STATEMENT BY HIS EXCELLENCY THE PRESIDENT, DR ERNEST BAI KOROMA DURING THE TURNING OF THE SOD CEREMONY IN WATERLOO AND GRAFTON

Mr Chairman, Honorable Ministers of Government, Honorable Members of Parliament, members of the Diplomatic Corps, Distinguished ladies and Gentlemen;

We re gathered here today to mark the beginning of an important epoch in the lives of many Sierra Leoneans, as we witness and participate in the official commissioning of what has been called a Pilot project in the establishment of an Affordable Housing Scheme in this country. This occasion is a key milestone in our nation's drive towards achieving my vision for proper planning and development of cities, towns and villages.

For many years in our nation's history, the majority of our people have had to endure the realities of living in extremely adverse housing conditions. The pressures of urbanization, brought about by intense and sustained migration during the conflict further exacerbated the housing conditions in the urban areas. The results are evident; slums are emerging in almost every nook and corner of all major towns and cities in the country. The once scenic horizons of the hills and valleys of Freetown are now littered with unplanned developments. The structures and buildings, that, many refer to as 'home' lack basic amenities like water, roads and energy. The housing developments, which should be considered as communities, are in fact clusters of sub human habitat that none of us may wish to live in. It is factors like these and many others that have kept Sierra Leone at the bottom of the Human Development ladder.

For many years, we have witnessed the unplanned mushrooming of communities around our cities and have seen the environmental degradation created by these uncoordinated developments. The continuation of such unplanned development is bound to have disastrous consequences for the future. It is as result of this concern that my Government is supporting a better alternative to the current housing development. Our people deserve something better and Government owes to them.

Ladies and gentlemen, my reason for coming here today is therefore not to look for past deficiencies, but rather to bring the good news that something positive is about to be done to address one of the most pressing problems facing our country. My vision for the future is for the construction of new cities.

Ladies and gentlemen, let me use this opportunity to announce my vision for a **NEW CITY** in the Western Area as well as other parts of Sierra Leone. In this and other cities, I see a city evolving from a well developed land use plan with adequate provision for residential, industrial, recreational and civic areas as well as forest reserves. I see developed communities with adequate supplies of electricity and water, sewage, waste management, telecommunications and transportation services for the residents of these communities. I see a city with well defined commercial districts with modern architectural buildings and infrastructure that support business activities for all types of corporate utilities. I see recreational centres completely integrated with retail shopping malls, public parks and other forms of recreational facilities targeting a wide range of interests. Above all, I see the development of financial markets to levels that will allow people to access finance not only to rent, but also to buy and own their homes. I see income levels rising to levels that will enable the majority of the middle class of this country to secure and maintain mortgages that will enable them live in properly developed communities. Ladies and gentlemen, this is my vision for housing and real estate development in this country and I want to commit myself this day to do all within my powers to translate this vision into a reality for the people of this country.

As a symbolic demonstration of the realization of this vision of mine, I declare that the boundaries of this new city of which I speak, to begin from this land on which we all stand today and to expand from this location towards the west end of what we know today as Freetown. We shall plan the development of this new city from Waterloo to Hamilton village. This plan will indicate which areas will be developed as homes, residential areas, industrial areas, commercial and recreational areas, public and civic areas as well as green areas.

Fellow Sierra Leoneans, what we see here today is a practical step by NASSIT for the realisation of my vision. The project involves the construction of 125 housing units and the development of 250 serviced plots nationwide. This is a significant first step,

in spite of the huge current need for housing. Based on studies conducted by various experts in the country and without even taking into account future population growth, Sierra Leone requires approximately 250,000 housing units nationwide to address the existing shortage.

Therefore in furtherance of actions needed to make this vision a reality, I will use this moment to make very important announcements that will set in motion, the development of policies, programmes and activities aimed at achieving key objectives.

1. The Ministry of Lands is directed to conduct a comprehensive survey of all lands located between this point and Hamilton village, west of Freetown. This survey will include geotechnical surveys and the use of modern Geographic Information System (GIS) tools.

The goals of this directive are as follows:

- a) Establish and verify true ownership of all lands within this perimeter. Let it be known that all land for which proper evidence of ownership is not available will automatically revert to the state. My Government does not intend to take lands that genuinely belong to private owners; we want to stem the flagrant grabbing of lands and sanitise the land market in this country;
- b) Develop a cadastral register of all lands in this region, to enable the implementation of a comprehensive and accurate land database and the title system for this area. We want to ensure that land titles are unique and that the process of transfer of titles could be done in a transparent manner;
- c) Develop a Master Plan of this region, broadly indicating land uses for different uses for different areas in this plan; and
- d) Ultimately ensure an organised evolution of community development in this new city.

I am aware that the Ministry of Lands has conceptualised this survey and database development project and is sourcing funds from various areas to implement this project. I am also aware that NASSIT has pledged to invest modest funds in support of this project, given the potential benefits it stands to gain in its future real estate investments. I however call on other interested development partners to provide

support for this project, as it will make property and other land-related investments simpler and more reliable for everyone.

2. The National Social Security and Insurance Trust was established in 2001 by an Act of Parliament, to provide Old Age, Invalidity and Survivors benefits to workers. For this reason, housing is not regarded as a core mandate of this organisation. However, given the importance of establishing and sustaining an Affordable Housing Scheme in this country for another decade, and the proven competence of this institution to handle such a function, I hereby direct that all necessary studies be conducted to determine the options for NASSIT to institutionalize and Affordable Housing scheme, which is separate from the old age, invalidity and survivors benefit scheme it is presently administering. Government will commit funds in trust, to develop the institutional and operational framework for this scheme and my office will follow up on progress in this regard on a quarterly basis.

3. In a recent meeting I held with the professional Sierra Leone Institute of Architects, I requested that they develop innovative concepts of constructing housing units and developing communities using affordable materials, technologies and methods, while ensuring that the basic human living conditions are maintained.

I am pleased to announce that this group has submitted a report, with accompanying recommendations. The Ministry of Housing is therefore directed to take necessary action to standardize prototype housing units and community structures to form the blueprint for public sector initiatives in affordable housing delivery in Sierra Leone.

In conclusion Ladies and gentlemen, I want us to consider this moment as the beginning of a long period of hard work, commitment and dedication to this course of making our people live in better conditions and of making our cities look better. I urge all persons and parties concerned in housing development issues in this country to participate in making more and more of our compatriots to have access to better living conditions. NASSIT is playing a role that is certainly non-exhaustive; we all need to work harder.

I now officially commission this pilot project in the Proposed Affordable Housing Scheme that will be established.