

MINISTER OF DEFENCE'S STATEMENT AT THE TURNING OF THE SOD CEREMONY FOR THE WILBERFORCE BARRACKS CONSTRUCTION PROJECT

Protocols:

I am highly delighted to attend this event, the Turning of the Sod ceremony for the construction of new accommodation blocks in Wilberforce Barracks. This ceremony today will mark another landmark achievement in the history of the transformation of the Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces (RSLAF).

I could recall in 2008 just after I was appointed Minister of Defence; I took His Excellence the President on a conducted tour of some parts of this barracks. I could still vividly recall His Excellency almost shedding tears at the sight of some of the appalling and deplorable accommodation facilities for his soldiers, particularly, in an area popularly known as 'Afghanistan', and he promised to change that dehumanizing situation.

To me this event is like a dream come true. During my yearly visits to all RSLAF locations country wide, I have always been sickened at the sight of the degrading and appalling makeshift accommodation that the troops lived in. This project which has brought us all here today is therefore a testimony of Government's Commitment to improving the living conditions of our service personnel. This is why just five months ago; we were in BO on a similar ceremony for the construction of new accommodation for Gondama Barracks. I am happy to report that Gondama is near completion. And with the continued support from Government, we would continue to construct proper accommodation for the troops in all military deployments in the country.

Wilberforce Barracks is one of the oldest Barracks in Sierra Leone established during the colonial period. Up to 1991 every soldier was adequately housed in the Barracks. The 11 years war saw a mass increase of the force without a corresponding increase in accommodation which led to soldiers living in appalling makeshift accommodations not only in Wilberforce Barracks, but in all other military locations across the country. Attempts by previous Governments to remedy this situation in the early 2000 failed woefully.

Your Excellency, distinguished Invited guests, ladies and gentlemen, some of us who know Wilberforce Barracks very well can easily identify the colonial structures which extend from the building we are seeing ahead of us up to the market. Since the end of the colonial period, modern structures in the Barracks were constructed during the reigns of the APC Party in the mid-1970s onto the late 1980s. Since then, no further improvement on the Barracks has ever taken place, save the Indian gifted prefabricated structures constructed in 2008.

The Barracks began to suffer structural defects and that situation was further exacerbated during the war when more families moved in and makeshift structures sprung up everywhere. Massive encroachment has also taken most, if not all of the Barracks land. What was one time a beautiful Barracks that housed the 1st Battalion of the Republic of Sierra Leone Military Forces (RSLMF) lost its glory.

Today we will witness the turning of the sod ceremony by His Excellency the President under the APC led Government for the construction of 8 modern blocks of 6 apartments each for soldiers and their families, almost 30 years since the last modern accommodation was constructed in this Barracks.

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, you will all agree with me that the RSLAF has gone through a rapid transformation over the past 6 years. The professionalism and discipline of the force is now matched with others in the sub region, if not better. Our contribution to international peace and security has been tremendous, and is much acclaimed in international circles.

The RSLAF is also making meaningful contribution to the national development drive. Our Joint Venture Engineering Company has been established and will soon begin to take part in competitive bidding for construction works. The Armed Forces Agricultural Unit is going into partnership to establish an Agricultural Farm that would undertake both food production and animal husbandry. Our Industrial Tailoring Unit is near completion of the sewing of ceremonial uniform for every soldier of RSLAF to reduce cost of procuring this item on Government. Construction works are now going on concurrently in 3 different military locations in Daru, Bo and Wilberforce Barracks. We are expanding our Nursing School to accommodate the increasing demand for more nurses. The RSLAF has for the

first time established a website where information about the force can be accessed anytime from anywhere.

The RSLAF has also embarked on a Water and Sanitation (WATSAN) Project to provide clean and safe drinking water for our troops. The construction of bore holes with hand pumps in every military location up country is on going.

In collaboration with our development partners we have provided pipe borne water for Juba Barracks and its immediate community and have constructed a modern market for Wilberforce Barracks. The WATSAN Project to provide pipe borne water in Wilberforce and Murray Town Barracks is also in progress.

We have gone into a contractual agreement with the Chinese Company doing the roads to pave Hockey Pitch and bring it to a modern standard as this is the venue where most of RSLAF ceremonial activities are hosted. We also look forward to the Chinese paving some of the main roads within the Barracks. We will commence the fencing of the whole Barracks to secure what is left and that process would go together with this construction work.

All these developmental efforts are in consonance with Government's priority in infrastructural development, but more so to enhance the welfare of the troops to maintain their cohesiveness as a force. Regrettable though, we have not been seeing some of these positive achievements making headlines in our local media. But as a Government we will continue to make the RSLAF more professional and provide the necessary logistic and infrastructural support to enable the force discharge its constitutional responsibility.

Your Excellency, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, this day will no doubt bring brightness and hope to the soldiers, from the horrific and appalling makeshift accommodation at 'Afghanistan' to the prospect of new modern blocks as their accommodation.

Let me thank the Chief of Defence Staff, the Director General Ministry of Defence, the Commander Joint Force and all senior management of the RSLAF both military and civilians for their transformational leadership and support which

has led to these achievements. There are still some challenges though, but we have come a long way.

Let me also use this opportunity to once again admonish the troops to continue to maintain the highest standard of discipline and professionalism and remain loyal to the democratically elected Government. There is greater hope for a brighter RSLAF.

I thank you all for coming here today to identify with the achievements and good works of our armed force. Finally, my sincere thanks and gratitude to our Commander-in-Chief, His Excellency the President who has always been kind enough to graciously honour our invitation even at short notices, and for his keen interest in the welfare of his troops. Sir, I am grateful.

Once more thank you and I wish you all Ramadan Mubarak.