

THEME: HATE SPEECH, A RECIPE
FOR INSTABILITY BEFORE, DURING
AND AFTER ELECTIONS

NATIONAL DIALOGUE FORUM ON HATE SPEECH

UNITED NATIONS
INTEGRATED PEACE
BUILDING OFFICE IN
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National Dialogue Forum on Hate Speech

Theme: Hate Speech - A Recipe for Instability before, during and after Elections.

Mr. Chairman, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen.

I am very pleased for the invitation you have extended to me to speak to you today on this all important theme of hate speech and its implications to derail peace, especially at this crucial period that the country is preparing for the Presidential and Parliamentary elections, November, this year, 2012.

Hate speech or hate propaganda is not beneficial for any modern state at any time, but more in the period of elections when there is already heightened tensions because of high stakes.

Mr. Chairman, Distinguished Guests

There is overwhelming evidence to show that hate speech if not addressed timely has the potential to undermine, peace, stability and development of any country.

It is common knowledge that the primary mandate of the UN as contained in the Charter of 1945 is peace; and we as UNIPSIL in particular have a very clear mandate to contribute towards peace building in Sierra Leonean society. This therefore makes any organization working towards peace, such as Society for Democratic Institute (SDI) and all the others participants of this dialogue as natural partners in this quest.

Mr. Chairman, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Since 2002, the war has formally ended and Sierra Leone has been acknowledged globally as a successful case of post-conflict peace building. It is highly commendable that all governments after the hostilities have endeavoured to consolidate the peace. This, they have done through, among other things, by upholding and protecting human rights of the people in accordance with the constitution of Sierra Leone and regional and international human rights instruments the country has ratified.

What is visible for any cursory observer of Sierra Leonean society is the readiness by which the people and the media to exercise their freedom of expression. In the short time I have been here, I have seen that the freedom of expression is used by the media as a sword and shield.

Mr. Chairman, distinguished ladies and gentlemen,

This right of freedom of expression is buttressed by laws of the land and other international human rights treaties that Sierra Leone is a party to. Permit me to cite the main ones: Part III of Act no 6 of 1991, the Constitution of Sierra Leone, guarantees freedom of expression. In the same light, Article 19 of the ICCPR (International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights) and Article 9 of the ACHPR (African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights) calls upon the state to uphold freedom of expression.

The logical question to be asked at this juncture is: If people have the right to express their views then, Mr. Chairman and Ladies and Gentlemen, what then constitutes hate speech?

Hate speech is generally defined as that which offends, attacks, threatens or insults groups based on religion, national origin, gender, sexual orientation, political party affiliations or disability. Hate speech is, is therefore, a term which refers to a whole spectrum of negative discourse, stretching from hatred and prejudice to incitement and stereotypes. It includes all forms of expressions that spread, incite, promote or justify racial or political hatred, xenophobia, regional or tribal hatred, or other forms of hatred propelled by intolerance.

Often, as we have learnt elsewhere the grand design and main object of those who employ this mode of communication is to degrade, intimidate or incite violence or prejudicial action against a person or group of people. Hate speech represents the worst forms of verbal aggression.

This hate speech, ladies and gentlemen, broadly speaking, includes the print media, radio, television, social media (twitter, Facebook, YouTube) and other new technologies, as well as public speaking. Hate speech covers not only oral or written communication; it also deals other forms of expressions; such as movies, arts and gestures - normally referred to as symbolic speech.

Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen, if this is what constitute hate speech, then this is a luxury, Sierra Leone, as a nation, can ill afford to entertain. This is because the wounds that were inflicted on the people of this country during the war, even if they are partly healed, the scars are still there as a reminder of the dark days no one wants to go down again.

It will interest participants to know that the use of hate speech in the pre-war some parts of Europe (Germany) which resulted in massive violations of human rights in Europe which in turn led to the second world war was the precursor for the creation of the UN system as stated in the Charter of 1945. The UN was therefore created to ensure that such scourge of war never recurs in human history. Sadly, it does not seem that all the lessons were properly learnt that is why 50 years on, in Rwanda, we witnessed yet another genocide as an outcome of hate speech.

The good news is the world learning from the past. Consequently, charges preferred by International Criminal Court prosecutor against one of the four Kenyans accused of perpetrating the violence which erupted after elections in December 2007 is that as a journalist he used hate language against certain communities perceived to belong to a certain political party. Over 1000 people died during that unfortunate election.

Mr. Chairman, ladies and gentlemen, as stated earlier, Salone (humouring the occasion) as a country has done well in a number of governance indicators however, it is a painful fact that a challenge we have to work jointly to address immediately is the media and their exercise of freedom of expression as it is done in accordance of ethical and professional standards. We need to be reminded that under international human rights law, and the African regional human rights system, such as the rights provided for in the Banjul Charter, 1981, and our own national constitution, all also provide for the legitimate limits of freedom of expression. And those justifiable limits include the respect for the rights of other people, such as their reputation, national security and public morals. Freedom of expression is therefore not a license for hate speech.

Media or free speech is the best gift man has, but it could also be the worst, as it has been said.

The power of the media can only be underestimated at the perils of society. For our part as UNIPSIL, we want media and free speech to be best gifts to Sierra Leone and its people. Cognizance of this, we have over the years been working very closely and providing moderate support to key media institutions like the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation, Independent Media Commission, Sierra Leone Association of Journalists, Editor's Guild and Artists for Peace, among others.

In all of these, our main objective has been to support these institutions to promote high-level professional and ethical standards of Freedom of Expression balanced against other considerations of society. Balancing between freedom of expression and the obligation to protect citizens against discrimination is a delicate art. This is a compelling reason for the rules safeguarding against hate speech to be clearly defined.

I have every confidence in the Sierra Leone society that if there are any signs of a creeping practice of hate speech, it will be nipped in the bud. I draw my self-assuredness from a statement on this issued by the National Human Rights Commission on 19th June, and more equally importantly on 18th May 2012, after a national conference of stakeholders for 2012 elections a declaration was adopted and signed by stakeholders pledging to ensure peaceful elections. And, that is why I am hopeful.

Thank you and best wishes.