

**KEYNOTE SPEECH BY MR. BERHANEMESKEL NEGA,**  
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**UNITED NATIONS INTEGRATED PEACEBUILDING OFFICE /UNIPSIL**  
**AT THE NATIONAL YOUTH CONFERENCE**  
**HELD IN BO / SOUTHERN REGION**  
**24 NOVEMBER 2011**

**Mr. Chairman,**

**Your Lordship the Bishop of Bo,**

**Your Lordship the Bishop of Makeni and Chairman of NJPC,**

**Chairman, National Commission for Democracy,**

**Representative of the National Human Rights Commission**

**Distinguished participants, Ladies and Gentlemen**

Allow me, Mr. Chairman, at the outset, to thank the National Justice, Peace and Human Rights Commission (NJPC) for the laudable initiative in organizing this timely conference. We also appreciate the opportunity to take part in this opening ceremony. The conference is indeed timely as it comes at an important period, when Sierra Leone prepares for milestone national elections to be held in 2012, and aims at promoting dialogue and greater understanding among the youth on their roles and responsibilities in ensuring an enabling peaceful environment for the elections.

As key stakeholders, most interested in both the present and future of the country, the youth have an indispensable role to play in determining Sierra Leone's progress towards a more peaceful, democratic and prosperous country. Meeting this challenge would demand on the part of youth hard work and an unwavering dedication to duty; discipline and respect for law and order.

With that in mind, the conference brings together key players among the youth, namely the All Political Parties Youth Association (APPYA) and Catholic Youth representatives to share views and exchange experience, as well as acquire additional knowledge and skills needed in addressing political intolerance and in promoting a greater sense of responsibility among youths.

Mr. Chairman, distinguished participants,

You will all agree that the most important political event facing the country at this time is the 2012 elections – the third presidential and parliamentary elections the country will hold since the end of the conflict in 2002. During the past ten years, under two successive Governments, Sierra Leone has made significant strides in the consolidation of peace, in building democratic institutions, and towards addressing the socio-economic problems it is facing. These gains have rightly given Sierra Leone the recognition as a stable and democratic country, which is now contributing to regional and international peace. It has created confidence that has attracted and will continue to attract considerable foreign investment into the country that is critical for the country's development, in particular in the area of job creation, and addressing the challenge of unemployment, especially among the youths. All these gains have to be consolidated and sustained, and

further progress towards a more democratic and prosperous society can only be possible in peaceful environment and through a democratic political process, where all segments of the Sierra Leone society, including the youth play their respective role.

In this context, it is imperative that all Sierra Leoneans work together to ensure that the 2012 elections will be held in a peaceful environment. This would mean, first and foremost, Sierra Leoneans taking the lead and full ownership of their country's future by resisting violence and opting for dialogue and constructive engagement in resolving their differences and all matters affecting the country. With Sierra Leoneans taking the lead and ownership, the international community, including the United Nations, will stand with them and their Government by providing the necessary support and encouragement.

For the youth, such role is even more important and a challenge for a number of reasons: First: as past and most recent experience have shown, the youth have been the primary targets to perpetrate political violence, and second: changing the image of youth as perpetrators of violence would require a break with the past and serving as agents of peace and political tolerance, with unwavering commitment to resist and combat violence.

The 9 September Bo incident should serve as a wakeup call for all concerned. Such violent acts, by whomever they may be perpetrated, should not be tolerated and those responsible must be held responsible. We therefore support the prompt action taken by the Government of Sierra Leone to investigate the incident and to hold those responsible accountable for their actions through a due process

of the law. There are important lessons to be drawn from this unfortunate incident, and the time has now come for the youths of Sierra Leone to say a firm no to violence, and to refuse attempts at drawing them into acts of violence in the 2012 elections.

In addressing political violence and intolerance, I wish in particular to refer to the role the All Political Parties Youth Association has so far played and can play. I am happy to observe that members of the All Political Parties Youth Association will form the majority of youths that will attend this programme. The Association was established at the initiative of the youth wings of the four main political parties - APC, SLPP, PMDC and NDA, after the political disturbances in March 2009. UNIPSIL has worked and will continue to work closely with the Association, including by providing technical and financial support, to promote political tolerance and non-violence as well as constructive engagement among the political parties. .

The Association has since its inception observed a number of local and parliamentary bye- elections and thus proven to be an effective mechanism in preventing political violence. As we approach the 2012 elections, the association has continued its efforts by increasing its outreach and deepening the message of peaceful political discourse among the political parties.

We are confident that APPYA will stay the course and continue to play a pivotal role in galvanizing political party youth and meaningfully participate, along with the Catholic Youth Representatives, in the coming discussions. These deliberations should also stress the important role youths have in promoting wider issues of good governance in Sierra Leone and being forthright citizens who are ready

to assume the mantle of leadership when their times comes, as it surely would. We look forward to the recommendations from this conference, which could form the basis for wider engagement by all concerned, including the United Nations support.

While we at the UN and the broader international community will continue to support the youth and associations such as APPYA, I must emphasize once again the importance of Sierra Leoneans taking the lead and ownership of their destiny and work together in a peaceful and collaborative manner. External support can complement national endeavors, and would succeed only with the commitment and dedicated efforts of Sierra Leoneans themselves.

With these remarks, Mr. Chairman, I would like to conclude by wishing the participants of this conference very successful deliberation, and with assurances of the United Nations continued support for the efforts of the people and Government of Sierra Leone in promoting a peaceful, democratic and prosperous country, as preparations are underway for peaceful, free and fair elections in 2012.

Thank you for your attention.