

RESIDENT MINISTER CALLS FOR SANITY AND TOLERANCE IN KENEMA, EASTERN REGION, SIERRA LEONE

Hope-Sierra Leone (H-SL), in conjunction with UNDP, has completed the seventh in a series of eight dialogues for parliamentarians, mayors, chairpersons and traditional leaders

The dialogue took place in Kenema, administrative headquarters of Sierra Leone's Eastern Region, from 28-30 November. H-SL is a Freetown-based NGO affiliated to Initiatives of Change International. 39 people participated in the 3-day dialogue. The six facilitators from the police, armed forces and civil society, were drawn from H-SL's Moral Foundations for Democracy (MFD) programme.



The dialogue was preceded by a Peace March through the main streets of Kenema. Backed by a strong police presence, it attracted supporters of the three major political parties, civil society groups, local cultural dancers and traditional leaders. The energetic, good-natured marchers demonstrated loudly for peace, reconciliation and political tolerance.

The Resident Minister East, William Juana Smith, called for an open dialogue that would bring sanity and tolerance in Kenema.

The procession stopped at the Heroes' Triangle, a burial ground for Kenema heroes and heroines, including the late George Saffa, former Resident Minister. Here a Peace Tree was planted and a libation poured in honour of the dead.

Launching the Dialogue, the Resident Minister East, William Juana Smith, called on the participants to have an open dialogue that would bring sanity and tolerance in Kenema. He maintained that bringing the three major political parties together was indeed a fulfilment of the president's dream for attitudinal and behavioural change. The Minister admonished all to practise absolute love towards each another. He courageously told the gathering that he was Minister for all, irrespective of people's political affiliations. He firmly pronounced that the time for politics was over and called on all to be developmentally focused and to refrain from any act of violence that would undermine the peace process.

His Worship the Mayor of Kenema City, Brima Kargbo, blamed the present government for the indiscriminate sacking of senior civil servants simply because they belonged to the opposition party (SLPP). He said that many affected families whose relatives were sacked because of politics, were still bitter. He described the dialogue as an opportunity to heal these wounds. The Mayor challenged all Kenema people to work for unity and build a lasting peace. He commended Hope-Sierra Leone and UNDP for bringing the MPs and the three political parties together to dialogue for peace.



The Representative of the President, who is also Secretary-General of the APC, Dr Victor Bockarie Foh, disclosed that the President viewed the dialogue as a major step towards the actualization of his quest for attitudinal and behavioural change in the country. Dr Foh admonished the audience to forget about politics and put the interests of the country first.

Women from different political parties jubilate for peace.

The host Paramount Chief, Amara Vangahun, lauded Hope-Sierra Leone for its nationwide peace drive. He said that the planting of the Cocoa Peace Tree was a symbol of peace and unity and marked a new beginning in the history of Kenema. The Paramount Chief stressed that the peace tree had restored hope in the people of Kenema. He advised the youth to disengage themselves from any act of violence that would jeopardize the peace.

The representative of the SLPP leader, Mohamed Sandi, underscored the achievements of SLPP over the years in relation to good governance and democracy. He condemned the rampant dismissal of civil servants, of which he was a victim. He expressed that people should not be fired, intimidated and suppressed because they belonged to the opposition. He attested that SLPP scored a clean sheet in the area of good governance and democracy. He therefore called on the present government to emulate the good works of its predecessors.

(Right): Mohamed Sandi, Regional Chairman, SLPP, with PMDC supporter.

The PMDC representative, Aex Jina, reiterated the need for forgiveness and reconciliation in the interests of national cohesion.



The local unit Police Commander, Joseph Kabia, appealed to the different political parties to be tolerant and law abiding. He assured them of police solidarity with the civil populace through the community policing partnership board. He stated with pride that the police was committed to be a force for good.

The representative of the parliamentarians, Hon. Dr. Brima Kamanda, briefed the participants about the attitude of MPs towards each other, which he said was very cordial despite their diverse political orientation. He encouraged the supporters to do like wise. He said that as parliamentarians they would dialogue on the key moral challenge of healing the wounds inflicted during the war and, more recently, during the 2007 presidential and parliamentary elections. Many other prominent stakeholders also made meaningful contributions.

The Founder of Hope-Sierra Leone, John Bangura, described the planting of the peace tree as remarkable. He reflected on the political trend in the country since colonial days, noting that the SLPP gave birth to the other two major political parties, the APC and PMDC. This justified his conviction that Sierra Leoneans were all one and the same people. The Founder called for tolerance, forgiveness and reconciliation between the political parties and urged everyone present to support the peace initiative for sustainable development.



Hariatu Bangura facilitated the topic ‘Who am I?’ which examined the importance of identity. Most participants took pride in their name, profession, religion and ethnic community as a means of identifying themselves within society. They also realized that their identity determined the way other people looked at them, in both positive and negative ways. Another aspect of this topic was how a person’s identity could be threatened and the possible responses to such a threat.

APC and SLPP supporters embrace in a gesture of forgiveness and tolerance

Captain Francis Aruna introduced the topic of ‘Change’, starting with the individual. Participants singled out Nelson Mandela of South Africa, U.S. President-elect Barack Obama, and the late Martin Luther King of the American Civil Rights Movement as leading examples of initiators of change in the world. The facilitator suggested that change also comes when individuals accept their mistakes. The topic encouraged the MPs to think more deeply on how they could become agents of change in their constituencies.

Lead facilitator Arthur Bosco Kamara introduced the session on ‘Conflict transformation.’ Participants viewed conflict as instability, confusion, confrontation, disagreement, disputes etc. All agreed that conflict was part of life, but the facilitator intimated that conflict could be managed to prevent it from spreading. The session also

looked at possible mechanisms for settling conflict, including mediation and avoidance strategies.

The subject of 'Corruption' was introduced by Asst. Supt. Ambrose Sovula. Corruption, he said, was endemic in Sierra Leone, so participants needed to identify its root causes and find ways of standing against it. Most came to the conclusion that corruption could only be overcome by patriotism and a commitment to nationwide attitudinal change.

'Search for values' was presented by Humu Kargbo. The four core moral values of absolute love, honesty, purity and unselfishness were discussed in depth. The challenge was for all to practise these values in their offices and homes.

The final topic on 'Team work and trust building' was presented by Sgt. Eric Harvey. Public servants such as MPs needed to work as a team if they were ever to fulfil their dreams and aspirations. Participants, working in pairs, took part in a blind-folding exercise aimed at building trust and confidence.

Towards the end of the dialogue there was a special forum for sharing experiences in a spirit of forgiveness and reconciliation, prior to the distribution of certificates.

*Edited from a report by Patrick Jakema
Photographs by John Bangura*