

October 14, 2004 – 2:00 p.m.

GOVERNMENTAL PERSPECTIVES

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Sierra Leone

Your excellencies, distinguished ladies and gentlemen. My delegation is particularly delighted to be here to participate in this symposium in which in part it is honoring the achievement of a compatriot, Dr. Monty Jones, and his fight against global hunger, especially hunger in Africa. Also, as a nation, we are very much delighted that this has come in at this time. Sierra Leone is just coming out of an eleven-year war, which left very terrible memories on the minds of all the viewers in the world on CNN. The atrocities which were committed, unheard of at this time for something as good as we have see today in Sierra Leone is a big relief, and we are all very much relieved and feel very proud of Dr. Monty Jones.

Sierra Leone as a small description there, we call it "Sweet Sierra Leone." When I grew up, I went to primary school, secondary school and university which myself and Monty Jones attended. It was a land grant university established by people from the University of Illinois Champagne, with USAID funding.

Sierra Leone is a country with a population of five million, area of seven million hectares, three-fourths of the population are subsistence farmers, with rice being the staple food. The recent history of Sierra Leone is that we are just emerging from an eleven-year war, and we're busy with reconstruction, which is gathering momentum.

Farming production is increasing rapidly, especially rice. Rice has been part of our culture. Rice is a socio-political crop. It is grown by most farmers, and it is part of the politics of the country. Sierra Leone ranks 13th in West Africa and 27th in Sub-Saharan Africa, a level of consumption of rice which is 104 kg per capita, so about 50% of any intake, and this is a typical Asian country.

Where does this rice come from? In 1970 Sierra Leone exported rice to neighboring countries, and exported a lot of rice in the years of the war, World War II, to feed our soldiers. But now Sierra Leone imports about 120,000 tons of rice, which is almost \$45 million per year.

Two years ago when our government came back to power after the second general elections, our president declared a basic right, principal policy of a basic right, the right to food, which is enshrined in the U.N. Charter, that the president declared a pledge that within five years

he would do everything in his power to ensure that no Sierra Leoneans should go to bed hungry. That was the pledge the president made on the 19th of May, 2002.

This really is in line with the Millennium Development Goals that by 2015 world hunger will be reduced, the number of people going hungry will be reduced by half, also to reduce by half the number of people living in poverty. The government is working towards these goals, ardently.

The broad policy framework of government that puts together the policy framework is to increase food production, especially rice production, which is our staple food, to decrease the imports of rice, to encourage exports of cash crops – like we used to be major exporters of cocoa, coffee, ginger, those years – and encourage healthy a economy society.

Rice is a very, very important crop. So we continue to put a lot of emphasis to halt or revise the deficits in domestic rice production to address market discussions, increase affordability and availability.

This sector was poor during the past 20 years and that is because of increasing reliance on imports. Farmers do not produce sufficiently to be self-sustaining. They don't really produce any surpluses at all. There is a heavy, severe economic market distortions and inability to obtain profitable prices. And in the rural communities you have about 80% of rice is produced by farmers with no surpluses at all. Most farmers do not set aside seed for future planting, and they buy extra costly rice to feed themselves during the hungry season. Critical seasons of July, August and September.

And who are these farmers? These farmers comprise three-quarters of the population, and they do not have savings, they don't have access to credit, they don't really have machines, and seed rice is not set aside. We have the upland, the lowland swamps, the mangroves, to grow rice. For rice, development in Sierra Leone, we have this rice gestation which was established by a British colonial power in 1934. And during the war it was destroyed, but before the war and for the time it existed, a lot of good work was done.

I also want to be able to address the predominant three problems, low soil fertility, high incidence of pests and diseases, heavy weed infestation, poor management and shortage of labor. The ROC varieties – ROC is a short abbreviation for ROKUPRO. It is spelled ROKUPRO. It is the name of a station. We have grown many varieties in that station, up to about 43 as I speak. They are developed for all ecologies. That stands out clearly as a top performer. It responds well to fertilizers, matures in 90 days, about 30-50 days earlier than others, and it's a dwarf varieties more or less that can stand higher fertilizer treatment.

These days we are working together with NGOs, WADRA at ROKUPRO to be able to provide more good quality seeds for the farmers. Because after the war seed has been very, very scarce. The government has spent a little money to acquire seed, but that seed is not really much because of poor quality. But its nutrition is improving rapidly, and we are targeting support that follows. We are trying to promote access to credit.

In our efforts we are collaborating, making giant efforts with the private sector, the millers, and the merchants. We're getting some support, some grants from ADB, especially to develop the NERICA rices. The government is progressively helping to increase farm productivity, increase access to markets and fair prices. Right now we are at the end of, almost concluding our investment code, which has gone through the cabinet and is now going through parliament to be enacted. It is taking care of all these measures.

In conclusion, must say that Sierra Leone is really just two and a half years old. The war ended in January 2002, and in May went into elections, and we are just starting over again more or less. Many things have been re-established, the economy is weak, many people in abject poverty. But the future is bright. We'll see a better future, no doubt. The farm production is increasing. The rural infrastructure has been restored. Seed banks are being formed. Donors are helping, and people all right helping themselves. So Sierra Leone's proud history, history of the road to recovery is long, no doubt, but the ingredients are being put together to restore our country. And with that we pledge in eliminating hunger by the year 2007.

I thank you for your forbearance.