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SIERRA LEONE

Statement by H.E. Mr. Mike Lamin, Minister of Trade and Industry

I bring you greetings from His Excellency Alhaji Dr. Ahmed Tejan Kabbah, the Government and the People of Sierra Leone. I also take this opportunity to extend our gratitude to the Government and the People of the United States, for the hospitality extended to me and my delegation. Let me also express my unreserved thanks to the WTO, UNCTAD, the OAU/AEC and other international agencies for the hard work and time spent in preparing us for this meeting. My special thanks go to those donor countries who have facilitated the participation of my delegation by providing financial support.

On the 29th of November, my delegation attended a technical symposium on current and proposed initiatives organized by the United States at which we discussed a number of issues relating to trade facilitation and support for Africa. We particularly congratulate President Clinton's effort to see through Congress measures to promote trade with Africa. These initiatives demonstrate the seriousness with which the business of trade links is being taken. It is a recognition of Africa's growing importance in world trade.

My delegation was among other Member country delegations invited to participate in the Geneva Week for non-Geneva based WTO Members and observers. At that meeting, we had the opportunity to listen to a number of key speakers. We also received briefings from Ambassador Ali Mchumo, Chairman of the General Council of the WTO, on progress and priorities in the preparatory process.

For us the meeting was of great importance. It enabled us to be adequately informed and to air our views on issues of importance. This is necessary, if we are to commit ourselves to the outcome of present and future negotiations. These ongoing processes to bring on board smaller and vulnerable least developing countries should continue. It gives us comfort in the notion that our organization is a member driven organization, based on rules and that consensus is of prime importance. Permit me to express my country's appreciation to Mr. Mike Moore, the Director-General, for his initiative. I want to believe that we have all come here more prepared than before to participate in the deliberations.

One of the important aftermaths of the Geneva Week was the need for countries to have physical presence in Geneva, recognizing that often repeated seminars will not serve as real substitutes. Besides, they could be very costly. Consequently, we register our thanks and look forward to an early conclusion of arrangements for the Swiss Government's International House Project.

I personally feel honoured and delighted to participate in this meeting. Following eight years of war, the Government of President Dr. Ahmed Tejan Kabbah concluded a peace accord in July this

year will all the contending forces. The implementation process has been slow mainly due to lack of adequate funds and full understanding or appreciation of the various issues. Notwithstanding this, significant strides have been made by all the parties to abide by the Agreement and support its implementation. Let me therefore use this forum once more to thank all those who have contributed to the achievement of peace and security in Sierra Leone. As a People and as a Nation, we plan to set aside this ugly episode in our history and to move forward in a spirit of reconciliation, towards the path of democracy, transparency and good governance. The Government is demonstrating evidence of commitment to inclusive governance through various efforts and programmes such as public service reform, the empowerment of civil society, institutionalization of the fight against corruption and decentralisation of the authority and responsibility of local administration, amongst others.

The conclusion of the Uruguay Round is seen as a major achievement towards the expansion of a rules-based international trading system and the creation of a more secured trade environment. Since the WTO came into effect, there have been differences about its benefits. There are many areas of imperfections. Some of the Agreements need to be revised, in particular, countries to which I belong have raised a number of concerns which need to be considered and resolved. We realize that having participated in the preparatory process, some of our concerns have already been registered. I only wish to underscore a few, from a national perspective.

The Uruguay Round Agreements provide for special and differential treatment for the developing countries, and in particular for the least developed. Most of us, however, have not yet been able to take advantage of the provisions. This is so because some of them are vaguely defined and subject to different interpretations. For example, the provisions of Article 15 for constructive remedies. Equally so is the case of Articles XII and XVIII(b) of GATT 1994 which makes reference to quantitative restrictions for reasons of balance-of-payment. Consequently, we request the strengthening of special and differential provisions and sharp definitions and guidelines relating to their manner of implementation. Similar action applies to the Trade-Related Intellectual Property Agreement under which we seek for the extension of the transitional periods and for measures to ensure transfer of technology, including the addition of new provisions relating to the protection of traditional and indigenous knowledge.

Over the years, policy failures in agriculture have weakened our productive base and affected our capability for food self sufficiency. This has been made worse by eight years of war. As an agricultural economy in which seventy per cent of the population is engaged, we have been seriously affected by the impact of the Agreement on Agriculture. In the first place, we are expected to reduce our domestic support for the agricultural sector. As a net food-importing country, we have been affected by higher prices for food imports, resulting in a high import bill. Furthermore, the Agreement is predicated on the rule of comparative advantage in agricultural production. But the lack of foreign exchange is bound to affect our import capability. Therefore, unless agricultural production is increased locally with the necessary farm support measures, we would be faced with acute food shortages which could well have serious social implications. Thus agricultural liberalization should not be achieved at the expense of food security and the need to protect the incomes of our rural poor. We look forward to the provision of technical assistance in line with the Marrakesh Ministerial Declaration.

One of the major problems arising from the Uruguay Round is the Notification and Review Requirements. There are about 175 notification requirements, some of which imply enactment of new laws and legislations. Undoubtedly, the notifications and reviews will improve the transparency of the system and facilitate the task of monitoring the complex process of implementation, but they impose a burden on us.

The introduction of new issues at a time when we have not come to terms with the existing Agreements including those under the built-in agenda of the WTO, will pose serious difficulties to the legal and regulatory authorities and slow down our integration into the system. Most of our countries

have not yet enacted legislation necessary to meet current commitments for notification requirements and the other obligations under the Uruguay Round. We need assistance to develop our capacity to meet WTO requirements.

The gradual disappearance of trade preferences and the special treatment accorded to our countries is now inevitable, however harsh the circumstances may be. The erosion of our preferences have led to the reduction of export incomes, loss of investment opportunities and balance-of-payment problems. Tariff peaks and tariff escalation have increased in such a way as to affect products in which we have a comparative advantage. Developed countries have not opened their markets to us in competitive products and sectors, at the same time we have been pressurized to open our markets. Moreover, as competition increases, stringent international norms and standards are being set in areas where advanced countries want to maintain their lead, without our involvement.

My delegation urges for a better coherence among multilateral institutions on general trade-related matters, including finance and debt issues. With respect to TRIPS, we support more and meaningful technical cooperation and assistance that take into consideration the principle of empowerment and ownership. We also support the removal of Article 27(3)(b) which provides for compulsory patenting of micro organisms and micro biological processes. This provision contravenes the basic tenets and laws of most of our countries. The exclusion of patent rights of essentially biological processes should be extended to micro-biological processes.

We recognize that in signing the Singapore Declaration of 1996, we were committing ourselves to the issue of core labour standards which is now a debate as to whether it should be taken up or not. We note the many apprehensions pronounced as to the real intention. We see the issue as important to all of us. Our concern, however, is that at the end of the day, the rules should secure our mutual interest. In particular, it should ensure cohesion that will promote better conditions.

The twin forces of globalization and liberalization while holding promises of prosperity, have marginalized many of our countries which continue to be overburdened with a complex mix of political, ethnic and divisive elements. Every conceivable effort is being made by the Government of Sierra Leone to overcome some of the inequities of the liberalized system and to undertake measures to foster peace and security, economic growth and improved quality of life for our people. The development of human and institutional capacity for enhancing and promoting investment has been embarked upon with the objective of increasing the flow of investment finance and providing training in areas of industrial development and services.

We are focusing on the reconstruction of the infrastructure such as roads, transport, communications and services – all badly damaged during the war years. Effort is being made to rationalize our educational system and health delivery services for the benefit of our people. We expect that measures already embarked upon will facilitate development.
