

**Minister of State Gareth Thomas**

**Special Session for DFID and the OIC on Sierra Leone**

**Opening statement for Rt Hon Gareth Thomas MP, Minister of State.**

Your Excellency, President Koroma,

Your Excellency, Ambassador El Manan

Fellow Ministers, Heads of Delegations from the OIC

Distinguished guests

It is a great honour to be part of this unique meeting today. I think this is the first time such a meeting has been held, and I hope and believe it demonstrates the start of a new era of cooperation between the UK and OIC member states.

Our focus today is obviously Sierra Leone although I hope the lessons learnt from our collaboration today can be applied to other countries where we have a strong shared interest.

It is significant that both the UK and the OIC member states recognised Sierra Leone as a country that needed urgent humanitarian assistance at the end of the civil war. Since that time

we have all been working hard to support Sierra Leone as it rebuilds itself into a functioning, peaceful state. We should all take pride in our combined efforts; today we are able to discuss private sector investment opportunities in Sierra Leone when only a few years ago we were dealing with a humanitarian crisis.

The challenge today in Sierra Leone is different, and in many ways just as difficult.

I was in Sierra Leone 8 weeks ago, and saw for myself the challenges and opportunities.

I visited a water and sanitation project we're supporting in Susan's Bay, a slum area where people live in some of the most appalling poverty I have ever seen.

But, I saw hope and huge potential in the people I met and spoke to.

I saw bustling market places with people buying and selling goods, I saw new companies, established with DFID funds, which are employing young Sierra Leoneans.

What I learnt on my trip is that whilst Sierra Leone has put the conflict behind it huge needs remain.

The hopes and aspirations of its young citizens will go unfulfilled, if together we cannot help, so there remains the potential for conflict to return.

Sierra Leone needs significant development financing to help its people and achieve the ambitions as laid out in the Government's 'Agenda for Change'.

It remains a very poor country and so this financing will have to come as highly concessional loans or better still grants in order to ensure Sierra Leone's ongoing economic stability.

Sierra Leone will remain an important partner for the UK in the global fight against poverty and we have adapted our approach to meet the new needs of the country.

We have moved away from emergency reconstruction and rehabilitation work to focus now on two key objectives; the first is Human Development, with a particular focus on reducing maternal and child mortality,

The second is ensuring that Sierra Leone has effective state institutions which are able to manage the financial, human and natural resources of the country as well as provide security and justice to its citizens.

One of the challenges which I know all donors face in Sierra Leone is ensuring that aid is disbursed on time and used effectively. This is a particular challenge in countries which have come out of conflict, like Sierra Leone.

In our recent major policy statement on International Development, the UK has committed to ensuring that we focus our efforts on fragile states and ensure that our offices in these countries are well staffed. .

I am pleased to report that in Sierra Leone we have consistently disbursed our annual targets while ensuring we are achieving the desired impact and value for money.

Perhaps this is an issue we can discuss in more detail during today's session – how we can all work together to ensure that your funds and programmes are disbursed in a timely and effective manner.

I hope that the OIC members will consider strengthening their engagement in Sierra Leone:

- By doing so you will protect your initial investment in Sierra Leone and maximize its investment impact

- The type of support required in infrastructure, transport, water and energy seems to mirror your own areas of focus
- Recognising that by supporting Sierra Leone you can have regional impacts
- Sierra Leone is a role model for inter-faith harmony that should be supported and nurtured

I am delighted to announce that the UK and the OIC are to sign a memorandum of understanding to secure a closer working relationship on Sierra Leone. This will strengthen the OIC office in Freetown and ensure we share analysis, information and mutually support each other on issues of coordination and aid effectiveness. I hope that you will support this process to help us cooperate more closely together and ultimately achieve the goal of securing long term peace, stability and development in the beautiful country that is Sierra Leone.

Thank you