

**Minister of State, Gareth Thomas**

**Opening Statement for the Sierra Leone Consultative Group  
meeting: 19 November 2009, QEII Centre London**

Your Excellency the President, Mr Vice President, Ministers and Officials of the Government of Sierra Leone, distinguished members of the diplomatic and development community, Ladies and Gentlemen.....Welcome to this second day of the Sierra Leone Conference.

Sierra Leone is very much at a cross roads.

This country has come a long way since the tragic years of civil war which ended in 2002,

A series of free and fair elections,

a peaceful transition of power in 2007,

a dramatic increase in the number of children attending primary school,

The rebuilding of government across the country, retraining and re establishment of the police and army and importantly **the stabilization of the economy.**

I believe that Sierra Leone is now ready to open a new chapter in its history

The challenges remain significant though and the need to deliver better services to Sierra Leoneans, especially the poor and marginalised is becoming ever more urgent.

In particular the vast number of young people need jobs to see a future for themselves as part of a free and fair society.

Parents need to be able to send their children to school knowing they will get a good education without having to pay all sorts of ad hoc fees.

In any country where poverty is rampant there are always those in key roles who want to look after themselves rather than those they should be helping.

Corruption holds millions of people in poverty, undermining the efforts to improve the lives of the people of Sierra Leone.

I welcome the President's continuing commitment to tackle corruption.

We have seen real progress in the work and impact of Anti Corruption Commission .

We hope that recent actions are the start of proactive policy that gives the country a reputation for zero tolerance on corruption.

Tackling corruption is just one of a range of issues that concern potential investors. If the interest of the private sector is to be sustained then the government will need to consider what investors will find when they arrive in the country

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The particular challenge today is how we donors can get behind the President's vision for Sierra Leone set out in the **agenda for change**. We should align ourselves behind this plan and ensure we deliver effective and timely assistance.

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Sierra Leone is vibrant country which has now replaced conflict with democracy. Over the next 10 years it could lift its people out of poverty, ensure conflict does not return and emerge as a strong economic base in the region.

We believe a crucial outcome from this two day event will be Sierra Leone changing its image, challenging those who still view it through the 'blood diamonds, child soldier' lens.

I have no doubt that the commitments we make and the messages we send out from this meeting today will shape the future direction of the country.

Thank you