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**STATEMENT BY THE HON. DR ABASS CHERNOR BUNDU, SPEAKER OF
PARLIAMENT, AT A PRESS CONFERENCE ON TWO PERCEPTION REPORTS
ALLEGING THAT PARLIAMENT IS THE SECOND MOST CORRUPT INSTITUTION
IN SIERRA LEONE**

PARLIAMENT BUILDING, 30TH SEPTEMBER 2020

The Leadership of Political Parties in Parliament,
Hon. Members of Parliament,
Development Partners,
Civil Society Organisations,
Members of the Media,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I extend a warm welcome to you all to this first Press Conference since I assumed the office of Speaker of Parliament. Let me say, at the very outset, that the Parliament of Sierra Leone is not a corrupt institution, still less the second most corrupt institution in Sierra Leone. For this Fifth Parliament, of which I am the current Head as Speaker, I can state here categorically that this Fifth Parliament is not corrupt and I challenge the veracity of all publications that assert to the contrary. In this regard, I refer particularly to the allegations contained in the 2019 Corruption Perception Report published by the Centre for Accountability and the Rule of Law (CARL), a civil society organisation reportedly funded by various international development agencies including DFID. I refer also to the allegation contained in a 2020 Report by the Institute of Governance Reform (IGR) funded by the Afro Barometer Institute and the Ghana Centre for Democratic Development.

The Parliament of Sierra Leone is the supreme legislative body in Sierra Leone that is vested with authority by the 1991 Constitution of Sierra Leone (Act No. 6 of 1991) to hold the Executive accountable. Quite apart from this, Parliament is also the national nerve centre for public accountability and transparency in Sierra Leone in addition to the power vested in it to make laws for peace, security, order and good government of the country.

Thus empowered, whatever its imperfections, Parliament is designed by the framers of our Constitution to be the central nervous system and oxygen of our democracy, be it parliamentary or presidential. It is imperative therefore that it works, or made to work efficiently and effectively, above all, in the overarching interest of our country at all times. This means it must be enabled to work in a corruption-free environment and must itself be

incorruptible and seen by the people as such. This is so because Parliament is the main organ of Government that carries the trust of our Sovereign, the people of Sierra Leone. Therefore, for Parliament to be accused of corruption, it must of necessity be viewed as committing a crime analogous to Treason, the crime of betraying one's country. It strikes at the very heart of our central nervous system and that must never be taken lightly. In such circumstances Parliament must either emerge triumphant or atrophy.

In essence, therefore, the charge Parliament is facing today is a charge that can be likened to Treason; betraying the public trust. From time immemorial no charge can be greater. And we stand accused before the highest court of politics; as it were before the Supreme Court of Public Opinion. We also know that our accusers are all men made of sterner stuff and occupy a special place in society. Precisely because of this, we the accused must hold them, and them alone, to bear an undivided onus of proof. And the evidence they must adduce must be of unimpeachable quality and the standard of proof cannot be anything less than the highest possible standard, that is to say, proof beyond all reasonable doubt; indeed the standard of proof must be commensurate with the crime charged.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We shall settle for nothing less because it's time we made it pellucidly clear to all our citizenry that in our present dispensation, there is no more free licence to defame and slander; to curse and abuse; no more room for careless talk; no more room to exploit the public at will; indeed no more room to talk and act with impunity. Enough is enough! On the contrary, we have just arrived on the shores of a new Sierra Leone, the land that we love and call our very own; the land that is poised to rise to even higher heights of achievement in human capital development; of responsible leadership and freedom and of progressive and inclusive national development.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Second, Third, Fourth and this current Fifth Parliaments have all passed substantive legislations as well as made significant amendments to existing laws, all aimed at combating the scourge and menace of corruption. And all these Parliaments have done so by way of strengthening, revitalising and reinvigorating the Anti-Corruption Commission. The latest in this series is the Anti-Corruption (Amendment) Act 2019 passed by this current Fifth Parliament. Thus the Commission now has enough strong muscle of its own to stand and fight to rid our country of graft through the law. And if the law is found to be inadequate, this Parliament stands ready to give the Commission more strength.

Whereas the Executive will always be held to account by this Parliament, so this Parliament is in turn answerable to the people of this country. This is an obligation we as a Parliament fully recognise and respect as enjoined by paragraph (a) of Subsection 2 of Section 5 of the Constitution of Sierra Leone. That provision is like no other in our Constitution; it recognises the basic tenet that the people are the Sovereign of this country and it is from them through the Constitution that power, authority and legitimacy flow. No more and no less.

...bearing that tenet in mind and guided by it at all times, this Fifth Parliament wishes it to be known that it registers its utmost objections to the allegations of corruption levelled at it by CARL and IGR for the following reasons:

First, both the so-called surveys lack substance. They are based on public perception and not reality. And we say clearly and loudly that public perception is not enough basis for an indictment.

Second, the perception is that of the very few, some might even say infinitesimal, number of people who mostly reside in the urban areas of our country; not of the multitudes who reside and toil in the rural areas. Are CARL and IGR telling this nation that the lives of the people who dwell in the rural areas do not matter?

Third, even of those few in the urban centres, they engaged only 2, 619 persons in the case of CARL and only 1,200 persons in the case of IGR. In other words, in a country of over seven million presently divided into 132 Constituencies, they engaged an average of approximately 20 persons per constituency out of a population of 55,000 in the case of CARL and only 9 persons per constituency in the case of IGR. Is this sample really large enough or reliable enough to deduce a national perception? Their Pay Masters must ask themselves whether they really got value for their moneys or whether this is best way to spend the precious moneys of their taxpayers? Moreover, what really do they stand to gain from such inconsequential surveys?

Fourth, it bears repeating again and again until those who refuse or seem impervious agree to understand. Members of Parliament are neither Vote Controllers nor responsible for the development of their constituencies. Their function is to scrutinise and pass the National Budget each year from which funds are appropriated to Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs) of Government and the Local Councils who are then required to undertake development programmes in their various constituencies. This is precisely why I purposely changed the nomenclature of the meagre amounts given to MPs to Constituency Facilitation Allowance (i.e. to facilitate interaction between MPs and their constituents) from the previous Constituency Development Fund, which was a complete misnomer. Let truth be told, it was this misnomer that most the present crop of MPs capitalised upon to vanquish their erstwhile incumbents which also largely accounts for the over 80 per cent rate of attrition in the composition of this current Fifth Parliament compared to the Fourth Parliament.

Fifth, it must again be emphasised that our Parliamentary Rules and Practice do not permit canvassing of MPs by Presidential Nominees when they come for confirmation hearings and subsequent approval by the Plenary of Parliament. The Committee on Appointments and the Public Service solicits information from the general public who are often encouraged to come up with evidence about the suitability or otherwise of Presidential Nominees during scrutiny.

We must also remind the public that not too long ago this Parliament wanted to table proposals for improved conditions of service for MPs in line with conditions of service enjoyed by their counterparts in neighbouring African countries. However, this was immediately abandoned when there was a public outcry. That wasn't all. Again, when there was public dissent last year,

Parliament agreed to expunge from the Finance Act it had already passed into law a provision giving a non-accountable overseas travel imprest to the President, Vice-President and the Speaker of Parliament. How more responsible and responsive can this Parliament get?

What all of this shows is that this Parliament is a listening Parliament. It listens to the opinion of the public and always endeavours to resonate accordingly even though the Constitution of Sierra Leone gives it the plenitude of power under Section 74(4) to determine its conditions of service as well as the power of the purse. Parliament will in due course exercise this power but will do so responsibly and responsively.

Parliament regularly and openly now conducts its business both at Committee and Plenary in the full visibility of the public as most of its proceedings are streamlined live on radio, television and other social media platforms. How more open can a Parliament get?

Last year, for the first time in its history, Parliament organised an Open Day ceremony lasting several days in the City of Freetown. It opened its portals to the full view of the citizenry and the donor community alike. This was deliberately and consciously designed to demystify Parliament and open its inner sanctum, so to speak, to the full view of the public, to promote public awareness and understanding of how Parliaments work. I want to assure the public that this is not a one off stance; we plan to repeat this as often as practicable and to also take the Open Day of Parliament to the Provincial Headquarter Cities in the near future.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This Parliament operates as a democratic institution. Most certainly it cannot and will not do otherwise. It is under a constitutional injunction to do so. Of course, as the supreme law maker it must act under the Rule of Law. This obligation has received reaffirmation in the Bo Declaration. This is why it has openly settled its differences, wherever and whenever they exist, through open instead of secret ballot under Standing Order 46. Members of Parliament are required to stand up and be counted in the full view of the public. This has happened almost half a dozen times in this Fifth Parliament. Notably it happened when Parliament approved the State of Emergency to address the rising spate of rape and sexual offences in 2019; for the approval of Justices of the Court of Appeal in 2020 and more recently for the approval of the Chairman and Chief Electoral Commissioner.

One of our own, Hon. Moiwo Hindolo Gevao, erstwhile Chairman of the Parliamentary Legislative Committee, confirmed over the popular BBC Focus on Africa Programme broadcast on 9 September 2020 that there were corrupt practices in this Fifth Parliament as alleged by Mr. Ibrahim Tommy of CARL. However, when questioned by the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) to adduce evidence to substantiate his claims beyond the mere statement of generalities, he failed woefully. Now the ACC is inviting the general public to come forward with evidence, if any, that could substantiate Gevao's puerile claims.

This singular incident is not only a grave affront to the image and dignity of Parliament, it has placed the Honourable Member in a situation that is prima facie in gross violation of his

responsibilities to Parliament under the provisions of Section 97 of the Constitution of Sierra Leone for which appropriate disciplinary action is currently under contemplation. Upon the resumption of Parliament after its recess this matter will be duly committed to the Parliamentary Committee on Ethics and Privileges for investigation.

To the Civil Society Organisations similarly involved in making frivolous and unsubstantiated allegations against Parliament, I would advise that they take notice now, together with their financial backers, that appropriate steps will soon be taken by Parliament to redeem its good image and reputation.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This Parliament is a Parliament that respects the doctrine of Separation of Powers and the Rule of Law. It is also obligated to respect the cardinal principles of openness, transparency and accountability. More importantly, it is a Parliament that respects fully its duty to always remain answerable to its Sovereign, the People of the Republic of Sierra Leone and, under my watch, it will never compromise these obligations.

Immediately following the publication of the allegations of corruption by CARL, I spared no effort to grant an interview to Mr. Umaro Fofanah of the BBC in which I expressed utter shock and consternation over the allegations of CARL. I made it abundantly clear that the people of Sierra Leone do not expect their Parliament to be corrupt by any stretch of the imagination, let alone the second most corrupt institution in the country as alleged by CARL. However, I promised that if ever such practices as alleged are taking place, then I do consider it as an opportunity for self-introspection and for full investigation. Already the Leadership of Parliament has unanimously resolved to establish an ad hoc Committee to undertake such investigation without prejudice to the matters being committed to the Committee on Ethics and Privileges.

In the meantime, Parliaments unreservedly condemns the outcome of the so-called perception surveys to the extent that they constitute an unmitigated affront to the dignity and image of Parliament. We also cannot conceal our displeasure at what appears to be a deliberately orchestrated and calibrated conspiracy to damage the good name and reputation of Parliament and Parliamentarians. We therefore challenge both CARL and Afro Barometer and all their financiers to bring forth evidence to substantiate their allegations or else run the risk of being found guilty of contempt of Parliament with all its attendant consequences.

On behalf of Parliament, I thank you all for your kind attention.