

Speech given by Mrs. **Tellervo Ala-Lehtimäki**, Desk Officer, Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, at the Sierra Leone –event, 13 November, 2015, Helsinki, Finland, organized by the Sierra Leone Organization of Finland SLOF

Dear ladies and gentlemen,

May I start by recognizing the presence of His Excellency Edward Turay, High Commissioner of Sierra Leone for United Kingdom and Northern Ireland. I also want to thank the Sierra Leone Organization of Finland for inviting the Ministry for Foreign Affairs to this event.

The Ebola virus disease (EVD) outbreak started more than one and a half years ago and, by the date, it has claimed over 11300 reported deaths and there have been more than 28 000 reported cases in the three most affected countries, Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia. In Sierra Leone alone, the death toll was almost 4000 when over 14000 were infected.

Over a year ago, we saw the death toll raise and the Ebola virus disease situation worsen in Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea. We regretted the rapidly growing outbreak of Ebola understanding, that it will have an enormous economic and social impact especially in these three countries. Their health care systems have been overloaded, health professionals, authorities and the civilian society have done their best in working with the international community in putting on place treatment facilities and trying to detect, identify and shut down any new transmission chains. Many families have lost their loved-ones. The children have lost their parents, sisters and brothers. The burden has been especially heavy on the women who carry out most of the care and livelihood responsibilities. The schools had to be closed for months. Many children became orphans. They are suffering of stigmatization as well as many people who have recovered from Ebola. The experiences have been traumatic.

Our compassion has been with the people of the Ebola affected countries. They have fought bravely and fearlessly to overcome the devastating epidemic, but not alone.

Finland has contributed to the fight against Ebola with over 11 million euros supporting, with 7,1 MEUR the United Nation's Ebola Response Fund and, with 4,25 MEUR, the work of international humanitarian actors (World Health Organization (WHO), World Food Programme (WFP), the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies). Based on WHO's request, Finland donated a considerable amount of respiratory masks to the health care workers. Finland has also supported the United Nations' Special Envoy on Ebola David Navarro's office in Genova with a staff secondment.

Finnish civil society organizations, especially to mention the Finnish Red Cross, Finn Church Aid and the Finnish Refugee Council, played an active role in the field, in the most affected areas. These and other Finnish civil society organizations working in the area revised their activity plans together with the Ministry for Foreign Affairs and allocated funds to the Ebola emergency, awareness-raising and community mobilization.

Here I would like to emphasize the crucial role of Sierra Leoneans themselves. They worked together with the Finnish civil society organizations giving them helping hand wherever they could. The goal was common, to defeat Ebola, and that was attained by working together

with Sierra Leoneans. We acknowledge the valuable role of Sierra Leoneans who worked devotedly and without counting hours and thus contributed to the success achieved by our civil society organizations.

When the Ebola situation worsened, the Finnish civil society organizations, civil society volunteers and the Sierra Leonean diaspora started actively organizing help in Finland. Their efforts were successful and medication and educational materials were sent to orphanage homes and physically challenged centers in the Ebola affected areas in Sierra Leone.

When thinking about Ebola, we can clearly see how important it was to unite our strength. The global community fought together with the Ebola affected countries. The people of these countries did their part. Sierra Leone played a significant role in this fight. I would like to commend the efforts of the Government, the people of Sierra Leone, communities, villages, civil society organizations, individuals and the Sierra Leonean diaspora abroad. They all committed themselves to the fearless fight against Ebola. The situation was demanding. There was a lot of sorrow, but the Sierra Leoneans did not abandon the fight. Together with partners from all over the world Sierra Leone has achieved the recent status and stopped the Ebola virus transmission in Sierra Leone. The country now enters a 90-day period of enhanced surveillance guided by WHO, which will end on 5 February 2016. Congratulations for this achievement.

The international community is providing support to the post-Ebola recovery of the Ebola affected countries. A strong and resilient public health system is not the only key. The crisis is not only a health crisis. The long term recovery after the epidemic also needs strengthening of the food security, water and sanitation, maintaining of wider basic services, particularly education, and macroeconomic stability.

Ebola has shown us that we all have to remain vigilant, be ready to detect and respond when there is a new outbreak of Ebola or of any other epidemic. The Ebola will remain a threat and it will challenge the health systems as do many other diseases like malaria, tuberculosis, HIV, Lassa fever, yellow fever, typhoid fever, dengue and cholera.

Prevention is needed in order to avoid outbreaks of similar epidemics in the future. This year, Finland is the Chair of Global Health Security Agenda (GHSA). Finland is working together with 40 United Nations' member countries aiming to improve the prevention and detection of outbreaks of epidemics and creating a rapid multi-sectorial response to the outbreaks of epidemics. This requires globally enhanced coordination, communication, cooperation, better preparedness, strengthening of health systems, capacity building and promoting of biosafety and biosecurity. During the Ebola outbreak, the Ebola affected countries and the global community have worked side by side to defeat Ebola. One of the lessons-learned from this fight might be expressed in three words "together we can".

Your Excellency, I commend your Government and the people of Sierra Leone for your diligence to fight the virus.

I thank you all for your attention.