

## **PRESIDENT KOROMA TURNS THE SOD AGAIN FOR THE CONSTRUCTION OF ACCOMMODATION BLOCKS FOR THE RSLAF AT WILBERFORCE BARRACKS**

In furtherance of his government's 4-year action plan to boost the state of housing accommodation in the RSLAF country-wide, President Ernest Bai Koroma has once again turned the sod for a second construction project at Wilberforce Barracks on Friday 18<sup>th</sup> July 2014. This project is intended as a first step in the planned transformation of this age-old Wilberforce Barracks into a modern barracks, and is aimed at constructing 8 blocks of 6 apartments each to accommodate a total of 48 junior soldiers and their families. The first project of this kind was launched 5 months ago by the President and C-in-C of the RSLAF at Gondama Barracks, which is already close to completion.

This is indeed another great step in the President's strive to ensure that the perennial housing challenges of the RSLAF are surmounted within the shortest possible time. The importance of this occasion in the heart of the government was glaringly evident with the presence of Cabinet Ministers, Deputy Speaker and Member of Parliament of Wilberforce area, other Members of Parliament, the Mayor of Freetown Municipality, Members of the Diplomatic and Consular Corp and members of the fourth estate, notwithstanding the bad weather condition.

In his keynote address before officially turning the sod, President Koroma reiterated his government's commitment to implement major development projects aimed at improving the welfare of RSLAF troops. The Commander-in-Chief recalled his statement during the last passing-out ceremony at the Armed Forces Training Centre on 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2014, where he assured members of the RSLAF that he will spare no effort in ensuring his security forces live a better life. To demonstrate this, he said he has therefore directed the allocation of a reasonable portion of the country's resources to enhance the well-being and operational effectiveness of the RSLAF. He further emphasized his government's 4-year plan to construct modern battalion-sized barracks in 4 different locations starting with 11 Infantry Battalion in Kambia District, for which the required procurement processes have commenced. The other 3 locations are Kabala, Pujehun and Kono. This, he said, does not preclude on-going rehabilitation projects on other existing barracks like Gondama, Daru and Wilberforce. He however concluded by reminding all members of the RSLAF of their obligation to remain disciplined and loyal, in consistence with military professionalism.

Making a brief statement at the ceremony, the Minister of Defence, Major (Rtd) Alfred Palo Conteh described the ceremony as not only a landmark achievement in the history of the transformation of the RSLAF but also a testimony of government's commitment to improving the living conditions of service personnel. The Minister recalled that since the end of the colonial period modern barracks construction for the RSLAF has always been undertaken only during the tenure of APC Governments in the mid 1970s, late 1980s

and now in 2014. He gave a brief background of activities that have negatively impacted on Wilberforce Barracks leading to the loss of its past glory as a one-time beautiful barracks that housed the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Republic of Sierra Leone Military Forces (RSLMF); which ranged from indiscriminate springing up of makeshift structures everywhere to massive encroachment on barracks land space. He further gave a run-down of several activities marking the unprecedented rapid transformation of the RSLAF over the past 6 years into a professional and well disciplined force matching others in the sub region; concluding that relocating soldiers from horrific and appalling makeshift accommodations like 'Afghanistan' to new modern housing blocks will no doubt bring a ray of hope for a brighter RSLAF. He therefore admonished troops to continue to maintain the highest standard of discipline and professionalism, and remain loyal to the democratically elected government.

Also making earlier statements at the ceremony were the Deputy Speaker of Parliament - Hon Chernor Bah, Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) - Major General Samuel Omar Williams and the Commander Joint Force (CJF) - Brigadier General Brima Sesay. The Deputy Speaker, in his remarks, underscored the importance of Wilberforce Barracks within the Wilberforce community; adding that the military, especially at Wilberforce, has a special place in his heart. He expressed satisfaction over the vastly improving loyalty and discipline in the RSLAF under the dynamic leadership of President Koroma, and encouraged all soldiers to continue to be patriotic.

In the same vein, the CDS lamented over previous attempts to provide housing for troops including the failed 'Operation Pebu' and observed that Wilberforce Barracks had to bear the brunt of the overpopulation due to its location and proximity to the city. He asserted that a military that is hugely deficient in barracks accommodation is prone to inculcating non-regimental ideas and habits within the civilian society thereby undermining commitment to military duty. Lastly, the CJF who delivered the welcome statement appealed for a sustained effort in giving Wilberforce Barracks a new look in order to restore its lost glory. He ended by also admonishing troops to show appreciation to the government by remaining loyal, disciplined and committed to their constitutional role with all vigour under rain or shine.

The occasion was climaxed by the pouring of libation by the Mayor and the turning of the sod by HE the President; followed by the Minister of Defence, the Mayor, the Deputy Speaker and the CDS. The programme finally ended with a vote of thanks delivered by the Wilberforce Barracks 'Mammy Queen' - Mamie Koroma.

Date: 23 Jul 14