



Remarks by Michael S. Owen

Ambassador of the United States of America

to the Republic of Sierra Leone

World AIDS Day 2010 Program

Wednesday, 01 December 2010

- Good morning and thank you for inviting me here today. World AIDS Day is an important opportunity for all of us to stop and think about the challenges presented by this terrible disease. It is a time to take stock of the progress we have made so far, and the work that remains to be done.
- The people of the United States are proud to support the people of Sierra Leone in the struggle against HIV/AIDS. Since 2002, the U.S. Department of Defense has worked closely with the Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces to reduce the incidence of HIV/AIDS in the military.
- We have refurbished a military hospital, established a treatment center, and provided drugs for those suffering from AIDS. Since the inception of these programs, our cooperation with RSLAF has almost doubled in scope, representing an investment of 700,000 dollars in 2010.
- We have focused on the treatment of HIV infected mothers, allowing them to deliver healthy, HIV-negative babies. The number of pregnant women taking advantage of these services has grown from just 57 in 2005 to more than 600 today.
- In addition, the United States President's Emergency Fund for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), working through the Centers for Disease Control

(CDC), USAID, and the Department of Defense, is helping Sierra Leone's laboratories build their capacity to diagnose and report HIV infections. Sierra Leone has received PEPFAR funds annually since late 2008. The Office of the Global Aids Coordinator has allocated an annual amount of \$500,000 to implement PEPFAR work in Sierra Leone.

- The first year, funds were used to strengthen public health systems and monitoring techniques. This year, Sierra Leone's PEPFAR program will expand to include a pediatric care and treatment component by working with the National Aids Secretariat and UNICEF to lay the foundation for an early infant diagnosis program.
- The U.S. is proud to support Sierra Leone's progress toward the Millennium Development Goals of combating HIV and reducing child mortality with this new program --- and we congratulate the Government of Sierra Leone for winning a UN award for its progress in reaching the Millennium Development Goal on HIV/AIDS.
- I would like to emphasize the importance of this campaign to improve our knowledge of HIV infection rates. Testing is a critical weapon in the battle against AIDS. Testing should not be stigmatized --- it should be encouraged. We are locked in battle with a deadly enemy, and we must KNOW that enemy in order to defeat it.
- There are now 564 voluntary testing centers throughout Sierra Leone, and I encourage anyone in need of this service to seek testing. For our part, we must continue to support testing centers that treat their clients with the care and dignity they deserve.
- Finally, I want to recognize all the health care and NGO workers present today, as well as those living with HIV/AIDS. If this is a war, you are the true heroes. Your presence reminds us that AIDS is not something we only recognize on this day, but a reality we must face --- together--- every day.
- Let us move forward, confident in the hope that each day will be better than the last.

Thank you.