



## CHOZEN GENERATION SIERRA LEONE

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### CGSL INTERNATIONAL YOUTH DAY MESSAGE

#### **BEYOND THE SYMPTOMS: ADDRESSING THE UNDERLYING CAUSES OF YOUTH VIOLENCE IN SIERRA LEONE**

Fellow Sierra Leoneans,

Today is International Youth Day (IYD) and Chozen Generation Sierra Leone (CGSL) joins the rest of the world to draw attention to the myriad of issues that continue to prevent young people from reaching their full potential.

Sierra Leone is in the spotlight again following the August 10 violent demonstrations in Freetown and other parts of the country which resulted in several needless loss of lives, including those of youths and security personnel.

Chozen Generation Sierra Leone (CGSL) as a youth leadership organization is in great distress over this tragedy and wish to use this day to mourn our compatriots.

We condemn violence in every form and believe it is by no means an option for a solution to anything.

This year's IYD theme: **"Intergenerational Solidarity; Creating A World for All Ages"** is apt with Sierra Leone's current situation. We believe the protest and consequences thereof are symptoms of many underlying issues affecting young people in the country.

The dynamics of what unfolded on August 10 are complex and diverse, and even though we leave all investigations to the relevant authorities (and hope they are impartial and independent), we know for sure that in the midst of hardship and loss of hope, youths were caught up between expressing their genuine concerns and being used as pawns by selfish politicians.

We are concerned that operatives of the ruling Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) and the main opposition All People's Congress (APC) party have routinely whipped up tribal and regional sentiments to widen the divide and promote violence with a usually catastrophic outcome, especially for young people.

*"We need to support young people with massive investments in education and skills-building...It's not enough to listen to young people — we need to integrate them into decision-making mechanisms at the local, national and international levels,"* **Antonio Guterres, UN Secretary-General.**

Youths can become more and contribute more if they are given the platform to learn and express themselves.

While it is convenient to describe the August 10 demonstrations as the result of political machinations only, we think such a univariate analysis of events is lazy and unhelpful. We believe the underlying causes

of the August 10 tragedy are complex and multifaceted and many well-meaning Sierra Leoneans have been sounding the alarm for some time now.

We believe that, given Sierra Leone's high youth population, the high levels of unemployment and the harsh economic climate have always created a potentially fertile opportunity for chaos. We also think the question of why this happened now is naive. As a matter of fact, we believe it has been a matter of sheer luck that we had not witnessed this much earlier. To the careful observer, the signs had been obvious and persistent. The cost of living is at an all-time high, pushing many Sierra Leoneans, especially young people further into poverty. Fuelled by rabid, politically inspired tribal slurs and hate speeches mostly on social media, the ethno-regional divide had been widening. Even when shreds of evidence abound, complaints of police high-handedness and corruption have often not received the sort of response that would engender trust in that vital state institution.

To exacerbate an already tense and volatile situation, the government has often been slow, unable or unwilling to provide timely and adequate information to its citizens creating a communication asymmetry that has been exploited by rogue elements.

We, therefore, conclude by submitting that the blame for Sierra Leone's current fragility should be shared by all of us, not just those desperate, drug-induced, politically manipulated youths.

The blood of all the innocent lives lost are in our hands – every government official or civil servant who steals state resources and deprives millions of Sierra Leoneans of a decent life; every business owner who hoards goods and services, creating unbearable hardship for the most vulnerable citizens; every Sierra Leonean who creates and/or share dangerously false, inciteful and divisive content on social media and indeed every citizen who keeps a deafening silence in the face of these. We must all collectively accept responsibility and take steps to prevent a recurrence to relive the words of the late former President, Ahmad Tejan Kabbah, who declared that ***"never again shall we resort to violence to settle our differences"***.

On this day, therefore, we call on duty bearers to accord youths the space to learn, express themselves and be contributors to their future and nation-building. We urge them to speed up the investigations, take all necessary steps to bring to account those who bear the greatest responsibility, and make public the findings.

We call on every youth to be law-abiding and peaceful. We believe there is still space to express our concerns within the confines of the law. No retribution or mourning is enough to compensate for a lost life.

**Happy International Youth Day!**