

COMMUNIQUE ON THE SECOND REGIONAL CIVIL SOCIETY FORUM ON CIVIL SOCIETY AND CRISIS PREVENTION IN WEST AFRICA (Embargoed until 7:00PM, 18 December 2008)

Freetown, Sierra Leone - The second regional civil society forum on Civil Society and Crisis Prevention in West Africa ended in Freetown, Sierra Leone today, 18th December 2008.

The two-day conference was held at the Bintumani Hotel in Freetown. It was attended by over 100 delegates from all 15 ECOWAS member states and partners including OXFAM GB, International Action Network on Small Arms (IANSA), UNDP, ECOSAP, the ECOWAS Commission, NATCOM, UNREC, etc.

The conference was officially opened by the Minister for Defence, Major (rtd) Paulo Conteh, who delivered the keynote address on behalf of His Excellency Ernest Bai Kofroma, the President of the Republic of Sierra Leone. His Excellency President Koroma highlighted the need to tackle the proliferation of small arms and light weapons head on because of the devastating effects they have on security and development in the West African sub-region. President Koroma stated that the experience of Sierra Leone in the recent past has deepened the resolve of the government and people of Sierra Leone to work in partnership with local, regional and international agencies to create the conditions for peace and stability to foster.

The Chairman for the occasion, the Minister for Trade and Industry, Honourable Almamy Koroma expressed his delight to be chairing the conference since he was instrumental in the setting up of the Sierra Leone Action Network on Small Arms (SLANSA). He also said that the fact that the conference was being held in Freetown was itself instructive in view of the recent history of civil war. He welcomed the formation of national chapters of WAANSA, which he said was a strategy in the right direction, and impressed upon civil society organizations to keep governments on their toes to ensure that they deliver on their commitment to the ECOWAS Convention. He asked participants to consider alternative ways of livelihood programmes to small arms and light weapons.

In a statement read on his behalf by the Director for Peace Keeping, General Charles Okae, the President of the ECOWAS Commission, His Excellency Dr Mohammed Ibn Chambas, thanked the government of Sierra Leone for hosting the conference. He expressed the hope that the Forum would provide an opportunity to share experiences and best practice. Dr Ibn Chambas lamented the sad experiences the West African sub-region had gone through because of the proliferation of small arms and light weapons. He stressed the importance of promoting existing partnership arrangements, good governance and democratic principles in West Africa.

Partners gave solidarity messages and expressed their desire to work with WAANSA as a strategic partner incorporating national chapters. Each of the partners identified their strategic priorities for the year 2009 and the extent to which they intend to assist and support national chapters to meet the strategic priorities.

West African Civil Society supported the adoption by UN member states at the UN General Assembly meeting in October 2008 of the follow up steps and actions to be taken for the examination of the feasibility of an arms trade treaty. **END**