

As call for Freedom of Information Act gains momentum... 1M Signatures to lobby Sierra Leone MPs

*Sayoh Kamara, Awareness Times Newspaper in Freetown
6 December 2006*

A coalition of over fifty civil society groups across the country spearheaded by the Freedom for Information Coalition-Sierra Leone (FoIC-SL) will on Friday, 8th December 2006 launch the collection of 1 Million signatures and thumbprints of citizens, in support of the Freedom of Information Bill being made into an Act of Parliament.

The ceremony which would be held at the Victoria Park is expected to meet the said target, which the organizers say would be presented to the current Parliament for ratification before the 2007 general elections.

The Freedom of Information Act, according to the Secretary General of the Coalition, Oswald Hanciles, "will give citizens, and foreign residents, legal access to information held by all public sector institutions, and businesses whose activities touch on the public welfare." He says, the Act will also make it mandatory for public sector institutions to employ Information Officers, and to make information held by these institutions easily accessible.

Mr. Hanciles explained that the Coalition is in the process of educating the citizenry and other residents, the vital role the Act will play in stimulating accelerated economic growth, peace, and stability in the country.

"Indeed, countries like Sweden and South Africa that have Freedom of Information laws are known to be about the most prosperous, sociologically and politically stable countries on their continents," Mr. Hanciles noted, adding that Freedom of Information law is now acknowledged by most powerful international world bodies like the World Bank, IMF, UNDP, the European Union etc. as "one of the best methods to fight corruption, which is like a cancer in societies such as Sierra Leone," Mr. Hanciles further noted.

The Coalition Scribe went on to point out that the Act will help Sierra Leoneans to "kill corruption and will help stimulate rapid economic growth, build up confidence for foreign investment and to help create jobs for the millions of potentially volatile youths in the country."

"This is the first time in the history of Sierra Leone, for a civil society group to use the "people's power" to have laws promulgated by Parliament in the interest of the people with the aim of cutting off the umbilical cord of corruption, a phenomenon that has permeated the Sierra Leone society to the extent of bringing it to her knees," Mr. Hanciles observed.

He therefore called on the entire citizenry to make their presence felt at the Victoria Park to append their signatures and thumbprints to a document, which according to him, "will emancipate them from decades of being kept in perpetual darkness as to how things are run in their country.