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LOCAL NEWS

Parliament lauds Freedom of Information Bill in Sierra Leone

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The House of Parliament, through the Deputy Speaker of the SLPP dominated parliament, Honourable Elisabeth Lavalie, on Thursday 6th April 2006 pledged her total support for the Freedom of Information (FOI) Bill. The Deputy Speaker registered her support for the Bill when members of the Freedom of Information coalition met with her in Parliament. Welcoming members of the coalition, Hon. Lavalie said "The FOI is a noble venture which is on the right track of national development". She urged civil society groups like the FOI coalition to help Parliamentarians to do their job better. She welcomed the initiative, noting that the Bill has her support. She also went ahead and heaped praises on the FOI coalition, stating that their initiative is worth commending. Also addressing members of the coalition was another respected SLPP Parliamentarian in the person of Hon. A.O.D. George. In his words, Hon. A.O.D. George expressed his unreserved support for the FOI, and advised members of the FOI coalition to furnish Parliamentarians with exhaustive and relevant information on the proposed FOI Bill, pointing out that Parliamentarians don't argue on issues based on hypothetical scenarios. Hon. A.O.D. George further stated that "This Parliament is taking positions across partisan lines where national interest is concerned". He also pointed out that FOI would receive the necessary support from Parliament if those who are championing it are perceived to be matured people who would efficiently coordinate the free flow of information which the passage of the proposed Bill into law will bring about. He gave a word of caution that in handing information, one should take into cognizance the need for national stability and cohesion. Hon. George stated categorically that "Whoever prevents the coalition from getting the Bill passed into law would be exposing him/herself to an intensive crossfire". In a related development, the APC Minority Leader in Parliament, Honourable Ernest Bai Koroma, has pledged his personal and party's unflinching support for the FOI Bill. Speaking to a delegation from the FOI coalition that recently paid a courtesy call on him for the purpose of canvassing his support, Hon. Ernest Bai Koroma assured members of the coalition that they already have his total support. He described the move as a laudable one, adding that "Access to Information Act would make it more obligatory for public officials to give relevant information to the public on demand. "You are canvassing the converted already", Hon Koroma said to the coalition members, adding that "A lot of what government and public officials do are shrouded in secrecy, and because of this secrecy, too many people in government are getting away with daylight robbery with hardly anyone lifting a finger to stop them". Hon. Koroma went on to congratulate members of the coalition for having done what was expected of the Anti Corruption Commission (ACC). According to the Minority Leader, the FOI, when passed into law, will help the ACC in no small way to not only checkmate the spate of corrupt that has characterized the nation for far too long, but will also serve as a deterrent to corrupt individuals. Hon Koroma implored civil society activists to go beyond what is expected of them and be persistent, and indefatigable in following up on issues, even if it takes decades to achieve the desired objectives. "There is a complete absence of the ability to follow up on issues in the country", Hon. Koroma pointed out, adding that "It is this negative habit often displayed by Sierra Leoneans that has contributed to the level of corruption in the country". He therefore called for a change of attitude, stressing that it is only by so doing that the society will regain its lost glory. He also called on the media to be proactive in exposing acts of corruption and those odd attributes which are militating against the development and recovery drive of the country. Hon. Koroma concluded by educating members of the coalition as to what procedures they should follow in order to get the FOI Bill through Parliament.