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ACTING SPECIAL REPRESENTATIVE OPENS HUMAN RIGHTS SEMINAR

Freetown - Opening a two-day human rights seminar organized by the Human Rights Section of the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) in Freetown today, the Acting Special Representative of the Secretary-General in Sierra Leone, Mr. Behrooz Sadry, called for positive and constructive criticism geared towards strengthening the human rights capacities of institutions and increasing respect for human rights through education and advocacy.

The Acting Special Representative said that “accurate and impartial monitoring and reporting of the human rights situation” by non-governmental organizations is a prerequisite for developing constructive criticisms and recommendations for corrective action. He told participants that the post-conflict situation that Sierra Leone now finds itself in, calls for human rights non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the broader society to play a vital role.

The seminar, whose theme is “Advocating for Human Rights in Sierra Leone Using International and Regional Mechanisms,” is being attended by members from civil society organizations and UN agencies operating in Sierra Leone. At the end of the seminar, participants are expected to be familiar with international mechanisms and procedures for human rights advocacy, including the UN conventions on human rights and the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights.

The Acting Special Representative recommended that human rights NGOs should be fully familiar with the instruments for protection of human rights at the national, regional and international level. He called for what he termed “the professionalization of human rights NGOs,” pointing out that a good understanding of international and regional human rights instruments is essential to such professionalization.

Mr. Sadry stressed that the international mechanisms and procedures for the protection of human rights within the UN and African systems are both of direct relevance in the current post-conflict situation in Sierra Leone.

He urged the seminar to explore in detail the mechanisms that have been established both regionally and universally for the protection of women, children, refugees, internally displaced persons and other vulnerable groups. The Acting SRSG expressed the hope that the seminar would go some way towards ensuring that the civil society in Sierra Leone is

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well equipped to confront the challenges and responsibilities it faces in seeking to improve respect for human rights.

Also present at the opening ceremony was the UNAMSIL Chief of Human Rights Section, Mr. Rodolfo Mattarollo and the Chairman of the Human Rights Committee in Sierra Leone, Mr. Patrice Vahard.