

Fair and friendly matches during Youth Soccer Gala on the International Day of Peace in Freetown, Sierra Leone

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It was a colourful picture after the rains in the morning of 21 September 2006 when about 1000 students from Sierra Leone secondary schools surrounded the tartan track of the National Stadium in Freetown in a march past which was led by the Government Rokel School Band. Among the students were young football talents and their enthusiastic fans alike. They came to celebrate a Youth Soccer Gala on the occasion of the International Day of Peace which brought together 10 combined teams from 20 secondary schools on a non-competitive basis.



The Youth Soccer Gala was opened at the National Stadium to commemorate the International Day of Peace with a march past by students from participating schools in Freetown. The march past was led by the Government Rokel School Band.

The Gala was organized by the United Nations Integrated Office in Sierra Leone (UNIOSIL) and the United Nations Country team in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology. Its main intention was to convey the United Nations' ideal of sport as catalyst for peace and development to young people and eventually to the general population.

At a close look at the fixture of matches one could find teams of boys and girls, Muslims and Christians meeting each other to do their sport in a fair and peaceful manner guided by dignity, recognition for each other and tolerance. That made the friendly soccer festival symbolic for the UN's work to relieve suffering from war, and to build bridges between people of different faiths or cultures.

In his address before kicking off the matches the UNICEF Country Representative, Mr. Geert Cappelaere, highlighted the collective efforts of the United Nations in carrying out its mandate in Sierra Leone to consolidate peace and security and to evoke individual and community actions in the quest for peace, justice, democracy, human rights and development.



The match between Ahmadiyyah Muslim Girls School and the Government Municipal Girls, a Christian dominated school, became symbolic for the Youth Soccer Gala at the National Stadium to commemorate the 2006 UN International Day of Peace on 21 September.

Quoting from the Secretary-General's message on the International Day of Peace Mr. Cappelaere emphasized that the Day was "meant to get people not just thinking of peace, but doing something about it."

The Guest of Honour, Deputy Minister of Education Science and Technology, Martin Sama Banya recalled the eleven years of carnage and destruction the country went through during the war period, pointing out that Sierra Leone is very much ap-

preciative of the peace the nation is now enjoying as he put it "the value of peace is never known until peace is disturbed."

He commended the United Nations for their initiative in organizing the Soccer gala, which will serve as a platform to use youths as advocates to promote peace for development in the country.

Youth and Sports Minister, Dr. Dennis Bright, remarked during the opening of the Soccer Gala that Sierra Leone has every reason to be enthusiastic about peace considering the bitter experience the nation went through. "Linking football to peace is a laudable gesture by the United Nations, as it fosters unity."

Though the soccer gala was played on a non competitive basis, the respective teams displayed their talents in a friendly atmosphere. Among the highlights was the match between a Muslim and a Christian dominated girls' team from two Freetown schools who not only met in a peaceful, fair and tolerant manner but also demonstrated excellent soccer skills and technical perfection.

During the Peace Soccer Gala interactive postcards including a special version for children - produced by United Nations staff in Freetown, in collaboration with the United Nations' Department of Public Information - were distributed to highlight the UN's collective role in peace and motivating individuals to express their own views and contribution to maintain peace. Out of 500 postcards distributed in the Stadium members of the Sierra Leone United Nations Communications Group (UNCG) re-collected 435 with amazing personal views on how to maintain peace.



About 1000 spectators and participants from Government, Secondary Schools, NGOs and UN Agencies attended the Soccer Gala during the International Day of Peace at the National Stadium in Freetown.

NGO activists and a cross section of the public.



UNICEF Country Representative to Sierra Leone, Mr. Geert Cappelaere, opened the Peace Soccer Gala on behalf of the United Nations Country Team and also introduced the interactive post cards that were distributed among participants and guests.

For 19 years old Bai Conteh, for example, to strengthen peace also means, "bringing people together like schools, churches and mosques to have friendly matches like football and volleyball."

Whilst the Gala was in progress on the pitch, plastic balls bearing UNIOSIL's logo were being kicked into the stands by some players and spectators were rushing to have a pick. This was part of the celebration to bring people together regardless of religion or culture.

The ceremony was graced by about 1000 government officials, school children,