

Foreign &
Commonwealth
State
London SW1A 2AH
The Minister of Office
26 January 1996

Sir Dudley Smith DL MP
House of Commons
London SW1A 0AA

Thank you for your letter of 18 January enclosing one from your constituent, Mrs Jane Knight of 2 Gaveston Road, Leamington Spa, CV32 6EU about Sierra Leone.

I have indeed recently visited Sierra Leone. While there I had discussions with all the main players, including Chairman Strasser, his then deputy Brigadier Bio, representatives of the main opposition parties and Dr James Jonah, Chairman of the Interim National Electoral Commission (INEC). I also met a wide range of NGOs working in the provinces, including Bo. I was struck during my visit by the widespread support for the elections, notwithstanding the difficulties of registering all of the population and even if there was little prospect of a successful accommodation beforehand with the rebel Revolutionary United Front.

Brigadier Bio, who ousted Captain Strasser as Chairman of the National Provisional Ruling Council. on 16 January, has publicly restated his commitment to the elections on 26 February. Since then the RUF have responded positively to his appeal to begin talks. We welcome this.

It will be vitally important for donor confidence that the elections are seen to be free and fair. We will provide independent election observers and are encouraging others to do so too. INEC have already registered 1.2 million voters and expect to register some 2 million before the elections (the total population is 4.7 million).

Since April 1995 we have provided £1.3 million in emergency aid to Sierra Leone. We are funding a basic medical care project in the Bo region, run by the Medical Research Centre in Bo. Humanitarian supplies continue to get through, although the roads to Bo are sometimes cut off by rebel activity.

I remain convinced that the best guarantee

I remain convinced that the best guarantee of security and stability for the people of Sierra Leone lies with the early establishment of a representative civilian government that enjoys the loyalty and support of the armed forces. We shall continue to support that objective and to encourage the international donor community to do so too.

BARONESS CHALKER OF WALLASEY