A High-Powered Delegation led by ONS visits Morifindugu Chiefdom, Falaba District to address the impasse between cattle herders and crop farmers.

Freetown – 31st May 2025

Headed by the Director of Provincial and Border Security, Office of National Security (ONS), the delegation comprises representatives from the Sierra Leone Police (SLP), the Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces (RSLAF), the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security (MAFS) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) to address the ugly incident that resulted to the killing of Five (5) cows from gunshot wounds by angry youths from Serekolia community. The Team was to also understand the nuances of the conflict and proffer sustainable and long-term solutions to the impasse.

The high-powered delegation met with key stakeholders and residents of Serekolia community including the Paramount Chief, Town Chief, Youth Leader and Women's Leader-on 28th May 2025, to deliberate on the issues that hinder the peaceful co-existence of residents of the village and the chiefdom as a whole.

The conflict erupted in the chiefdom when in January 2025, frustrated crop farmers from Serekolia community protested and marched to Mongo Bendugu, voicing their grievances over the alleged destruction of their farms and crops by cattle owned by Herders from Mali. They alleged that the Malian cows roamed freely, trampling on their plants, thereby obstructing their livelihoods. The farmers formally complained to the District Security Committee (DISEC) Falaba, seeking immediate redress, urging the expulsion of the foreign herders from their community.

DISEC is a sub-committee of the National Security Council that provides early warning to the Government of the existence or likelihood of any security threat to the District, and also provide appropriate response to localized threats as they emerge. Its membership includes the Chief Administrator, District Council, the senior Police Commander in the District, the most senior Military Commander in the District, the District Fire Officer and Council of Paramount Chiefs for the District, among others.

In response, a delegation from DISEC visited Serekolia to assess the situation and cautioned the farmers against resorting to violence or taking the law into their own hands, emphasizing the importance of adhering to legal channels.

The Malian cattle herders arrived in the village of Serekolia in April 2024, following a formal meeting with the local authorities of the Chiefdom and careful negotiations, with the condition that they adhered to specific conditions laid out by the chiefdom authorities and the crop farmers.

Demonstrating their commitment to peaceful coexistence, the herders assured the Serekolia community that they would limit their rearing to just two herds of cattle during their stay in the community. That arrangement fostered an atmosphere of harmony, with no reported conflicts throughout 2024.

However, as discussions progressed, DISEC concluded with a resolution that the Malian herders vacate the village within two weeks, marking the end of their agreed date of February 7, 2025 staying in the community. Throughout that period, DISEC maintained oversight to ensure compliance and keep all stakeholders informed, but the Malian herders failed to leave Serekolia by the established deadline date.

A cross-section of DISEC representatives, including the ONS, SLP, and the Legal Aid Board (LAB), further held discussions with the Malian herders reiterating the importance of their timely departure from Serekolia and warned them that their failure to comply could exacerbate tensions, potentially resulting in public disorder or violent confrontations with local crop farmers. In response, the herders disclosed that they had relocated some of their cattle to neighboring communities and requested additional time to move all their animals out of the community.

In the midst of that, the Security Committee received alarming reports on May 18, 2025, that a group of crop farmers had taken the law into their own hands by shooting and killing five cows belonging to the Malian herders and injuring several others.

Discussions at the high-level meeting on Thursday 28th May 2025 highlighted that the Malians are primarily pastoral herders who rely on the mobility of their livestock rather than establishing permanent ranching operations. It was also cited that their nomadic approach involves shifting their cattle from one grazing area to another in search of adequate food and water; but in Serekolia, the Malian herders have largely ignored the local farming community's former request for them to establish dedicated ranches to better manage their cattle.

It also came out in the discussion that, the Chiefdom authorities in Morifindugu, especially those governing Serekolia village, have been largely ineffective in communicating relevant information to the community regarding the arrival of the Malian herders. That left farmers and landholding families feeling marginalized and uninvolved in decisions that directly affect their agricultural practices and economic stability.

The meeting also revealed that a critical lack of infrastructure in Morifindugu Chiefdom, particularly in Serekolia, hinders harmonious co-existence between local crop farmers and cattle herders, highlighting the absence of designated cattle settlement structures which highlighted the pressing need to implement the cattle settlement policy.

It was also clear that, in light of the growing frustration and disputes, some local youths regrettably turned to violence as a means of retaliating against the persistent presence of the Malian cattle herders in Serekolia. That did not only exacerbate tensions, but also threatens the safety and security of the community. That was compounded with the uncertainty surrounding the exact number of cattle the Malian herders own, as they struggled to effectively account for their livestock, thereby creating mistrust between the herders and the local population.

The high-level meeting ended in joy and celebration as all stakeholders saw the gathering as a platform for open dialogue, where concerns have been addressed and collaborative solutions developed to ensure a united and peaceful Morifindugu community.

Stakeholders in Serekolia Community and Morifindugu Chiefdom as a whole, pledged their commitment to fostering peaceful coexistence, harmony, and mutual understanding, marking the beginning of a transformative era in the Chiefdom, where the collaborative efforts of all stakeholders are essential for solidified and sustained peace.

The end of the meeting recommended that the people of Serekolia cultivate a deep-rooted respect for the Paramount Chief and actively support him in the administration of the chiefdom; the Paramount Chief was encouraged to adopt a more inclusive approach to the governance of the chiefdom, avoiding involvement in minor chiefdom disputes; all stakeholders of Morifindugu Chiefdom, including community leaders, local government officials, civil society organizations, and residents, to collaborate effectively and restore good governance in the Chiefdom as a united front will be crucial in addressing the underlying challenges and fostering a more conducive environment for sustainable development.

As the Malians continue to live in Serekolia village for the foreseeable future, the Paramount Chief was also tasked to reach out to the chairman of the Malian cattle herders to encourage them to invest in building proper ranches for their livestock and establish and chair a cattle settlement committee, in collaboration with the District Crop and Livestock Officers to regulate livestock management and mitigate conflicts between herders and farmers.

Crop farmers in Serekolia village were also encouraged to articulate their grievances constructively and place their trust in the established conflict resolution mechanisms, such as DISEC, to address land disputes and other agricultural challenges mutually and amicably.

It was also resolved that all firearms must be registered with the appropriate authorities or be surrendered to the Mongo Police Division, in order to ensure public safety and upholding the rule of law within the community.

Most importantly, the Paramount Chief was entrusted with the responsibility of convening a peace meeting involving all stakeholders within the Morifindugu Chiefdom to foster an environment of understanding and cooperation among the various community members, including local leaders, youth representatives, and elders.

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