



STATEMENT ON THE PLANNED 'SESS NEN' PROTEST SCHEDULED FOR APRIL 21, 2024

April 20, 2024.

The Executive of Niumi Hands, National Youth Parliament - The Gambia, and Gambia Participates extend its warmest greetings to all Gambians and well-wishers of our beloved country.

We are gathered here today to hold this Press Conference to speak to the Gambian people, the Government, the Gambia Ports Authority, the Gambia Ferry Services, the Ministry of Trade, Ministry of Transportation, Works and Infrastructure, and all other relevant stakeholders about the concern, frustration, suffering and pain of citizens, associated with the poor ferry service between Banjul- Barra Ferry Crossing Point.

The Banjul-Barra ferry crossing point is the most frequently used river crossing route in The Gambia being the only route that connects Banjul and Barra. As we speak, this is the only route that the people from both ends use to conduct their daily socio-economic activities. It is a deep-sea distance measuring 7.1km, which requires quality, reliable and safe ferries to transport lives and properties to both banks.

In the most recent times, crisis and safety concerns surrounding the poor ferry services heightened, and this got worse by each day. This includes the ferries having mechanical breakdowns in the middle of the ocean, resulting it to lose control and direction, leaving lives and properties in the mercy of God; the spoiled ramp preventing ferries from accurately docking; patients dying due to lack of sea ambulance to transport them after referrals; corruption in the issuance of ferry tickets by claiming the lack of 'change' only to pocket the remains of people fares; inequality and corruption in the vehicle

queue management, discrimination in the treatment of passengers onboard the ferries; and a host of crisis that the citizens and non-citizens of the Gambia are subjected to.

Most recently, on Friday, 12th April, 2024, the Kanilai Ferry suffered a sudden mechanical failure and left passengers stranded at sea leaving them hopeless and at the mercy of the waters. Worryingly, the ferry took an unknown direction leaving everyone worried for their lives. Some passengers spent the night on board the ferry which was at risk of sinking. They were not provided with any food or water, neither were they communicated on the evacuation plan. Vehicles and trading goods of passengers worth millions of Dalasis spent a whole week on the lost ferry, only for the authorities to evacuate them yesterday, after a constant pressure on them.

This incident is as a result of negligence and poor management of the ferry service. The ferries have been overused, lack proper care, and the frequent procurement of engines from taxpayers' money makes us suspicious that the authorities procured engines that are used and in a bad state, a terrible mismanagement and negligence! The stakes were high, and the authorities were not oblivious to it, but they sat and did nothing to mitigate the risks and as a result we are now in a **NATIONAL EMERGENCY!**

We are in a **National Emergency** because the ferry, which is the ambulance of ambulances, is not available to transport patients from the North Bank that require urgent medical attention at the country's main referral hospital in Banjul.

We are in a **National Emergency** because we have lost two women in labor that couldn't be transported in Banjul for medical attention.

We are in a **National Emergency** because students from the North Bank who commute between Barra and Banjul from Monday to Friday are at risk of drowning using the vulnerable canoes.

We are in a **National Emergency** because women and petty traders whose source of income depends on the ferry have been cut short.

We are in a **National Emergency** because we are at risk of experiencing inflation of goods due to the distance vehicles now have to cover to reach the market in the Greater Banjul.

We are in a **National Emergency** because passengers using the canoe are offloaded with the minimum level of dignity. Men and women, boys and girls, are carried on the shoulders of porters to be offloaded.

We are in a **National Emergency** because households in Barra can no longer pay for the transportation of students using the canoes. The onboarding and offboarding of passengers using the canoe is 614% more than the usual ferry fees.

The consequences that the recent incident has created have struck the entire country, but more so the people of Niimi whose lives, livelihood and everything surrounding their sustenance, health, education, and general well-being depend on the ferry. Thus, the lack of ferries to transport people from Banjul to Barra and Barra to Banjul, has caused significant and irreparable damages to the people of this country.

Just two days ago, we received news of the death of two people who lost their lives in the process of labor because it took significant time to reach the Farafenni Hospital where they were referred to. One of them sadly died in Kerewan. On the same day, a passenger onboard a boat was **severely injured** due to the poor quality of the boat, thereby exposing him to injuries. In the same vein, our hard-working mothers who are primarily gardeners, petty traders and market vendors and who depend highly on the ferry for transportation have experienced significant financial loss, thereby affecting their ability to take care of their families. The same applies to our fathers, uncles and aunties.

Moreover, students who are among the demographic considered to be the future of this country cannot go to school across the ocean, which will have a significant effect on their knowledge acquisition and exam results. As we convey these messages, there are families in the North Bank Region that have not taken breakfast because of the effect of the ferry crisis, there are some that would not take lunch and others will be starved and malnourished. Their families are asking themselves, are we going to survive this hunger? These and many heartbreaking realities have placed the people of the North Bank Region and its surrounding in a very painful, hurting and desperate situation, leaving them helpless, hopeless and frustrated. Cumulatively, this is a grave breach of the fundamental human rights of the people and a failure of the government in providing the basic socio economic rights of the people.

The Gambia Ferry Service, the Gambia Ports Authority and their line ministry owe a duty of care to the public. They have failed the test of public responsibility and the duty of care they owe to Gambians affected by this crisis. As a result of this gross negligence, they must be held accountable for failing to discharge their public law function.

The current ferry crisis is the worst Gambians have ever endured since 1972. The authorities could have avoided the current crisis by doing their job so people can move on with their daily business without interruption.

Owing to the above sequence of events and consequences, the Niimi Hands, the National Youth Parliament - The Gambia and Gambia Participates have collaborated to address this emergency issue of great national concern. As youths, we grew up experiencing insecurity, inefficiency, inequality, unreliability, and corruption in the operation of the ferries. Today, the condition of the ferries and the administration of the ferry service have reached a concerning level. Thus, in response to this, we had written to the police to request a permit to hold a peaceful procession to share our concerns over the poor ferry services and demand immediate actions. This followed a series of press releases, media interviews and social media updates.

To our dismay, the police denied Niumi Hands permit to hold the protest in Niumi on the pretext of security concern ahead of the OIC Summit in Banjul, and as we speak, they have not provided Gambia Participates and NYP any response to their permit request to hold a peaceful protest in Banjul. We have had two lengthy conversations with the leadership of the Gambia Police Force regarding the '**Sess Nen**' protest in Banjul and Barra.

The police engaged us to let go of the protest due to security concerns ahead of the OIC. We made it clear to the police that this is a peaceful protest to show our dissatisfaction to the management of Gambia Ferry Service. There are no security concerns higher than the security crisis in Banjul.

In fact, we subsequently proposed to the police for us to have the protest in the gated ferry terminal in Banjul and Barra with the protection of their service men and women for just two hours, to no success.

The OIC Summit is important, and we take pride in it, but the lives and livelihood of the people is more important to us than the OIC. Unfortunately, the police traded OIC with the lives of police that they ought to protect. As concerned citizens, we consider this a grave betrayal of the welfare of the people, a blatant disregard of their lives, mindless abuse of power and glaring violation of fundamental human rights.

First of all, there is no security concern associated with our peaceful protest. All we want to do is to gather peacefully and send a message on behalf of the people, as explicitly stated in our letter to the police. It is our belief that the new Gambia we fought for, owes us the citizens, the right to enjoy adequate democratic space to voice out concerns, hold the government accountable and call out any authority that is negligently putting the lives of the people at risk.

Secondly, it is our belief that the OIC Summit is an important activity that every Gambian is proud to host, and the success of which most of us are already contributing towards. However, placing the importance of the OIC over that of the lives of the people is the worst form of disappointment we

would expect from the police. While we appreciate the police' cooperation during our engagement with them, we vehemently condemn its willful denial of such permit without any plausible reason. As a Police, its primary mandate is to protect lives and properties and should instead take the lead in collaborating with us, grant us the permit and work with us to have a successful and peaceful protest. The Police must not be an institution that will condone, support, or defend institutions that continue to perpetuate corruption, continuously demonstrate incompetence, or demonstrate total disregard for the lives of the people. We had expected that such an era would come to an end after putting an end to 22 years of dictatorship.

We equally want to condemn unequivocally the actions and omissions of the Government of The Gambia, the Gambia Ports Authority, and the Gambia Ferry Services, which led to this undesired, scary, and worrying disaster. We wish to clearly communicate that these and the many other incompetence we have experienced with our ferry services must come to an end.

Owing to the above, we the executive of Niumi Hands, National Youth Parliament - The Gambia and Gambia Participates, who are united by our common interests of national development, good governance and quality services to the people hereby on behalf of the people of the Gambia, especially the people of Niumi whose voices we represent here today, make the following demands from the Government of the Gambia, the Gambia Ports Authority and the Gambia Ferry Services, with immediate action:

1. That the mechanical problems affecting the ferries be adequately fixed and the immediate restoration of reliable ferry service not beyond the six weeks communicated to the public.
2. That two sea ambulances be purchased to transport patients who are referred to the EFSTH and beyond, to ensure safe and timely arrival and treatment, thereby reducing the chances of death from lack of transportation facilities.
3. That two new ferries be bought to ensure safe and effective transportation of people, and ultimately withdraw the Kanilai Ferry from service to ensure safety.

4. That proper monitoring of cashiers is done to ensure their kidnapping of the remnants of people's fares is brought to a stop, in the short term, while instituting digitized and more transparent means of ticket sales to avoid leakages in the medium and long term.
5. That the police accelerate investigation into this crisis and ensure transparency in the publication of results to ensure adequate public accountability on the implementation of its gains.
6. That the President suspends and by extension dismisses all negligent officials that were connected to this crisis.
7. That ramps be constructed both in Banjul and at Barra for the safe and convenient docking of the boats to ensure the dignity of the users, particularly old women.
8. That adequate lifejackets be provided for boat owners and users, with appropriate sizes for children and infants.
9. That there is adequate security presence at the boat landing sites to ensure that regulations such as wearing of lifejackets and non-overloading of boats are adhered to by boat owners and users
10. That the Banjul - Barra Bridge be constructed immediately as a sustainable solution.
11. The responsible authorities must not enjoy blanket immunity for their negligence, we demand for their immediate dismissal for contributing to the loss of lives during the ferry crisis, the injuries sustained and the socio-economic hardship in affected families.

We hope that the authorities concerned will do the needful to ensure these demands are met in the quest to provide a sustainable solution to the problems facing the populace, with respect to the poor ferry services.

The Media, ladies, and gentlemen, following the denial of the police permit, as law abiding citizens, we have agreed to no longer hold the peaceful protest in accordance with Section five of the Public Order Act. Thus, there will be no procession. We understand the level of frustration of everyone, but indeed despite our rights being infringed upon and despite our constitutional right to a permit being denied, we cannot afford to take the law into our own hands but we **will take action.**

Whosoever is concerned about the crisis, join us in taking accountability actions because '**Sess Nen**'.

We thank you all for your kind attention and cooperation.

Signed

Niumi Hands

National Youth Parliament The Gambia (NYP)

Gambia Participates