

## **REPORT ON THE ONS REGIONAL TOUR FROM 11-20 NOVEMBER 2024**

The Office of National Security (ONS) concluded a nation-wide sensitization tour from 11-20 November 2024 during which it met with various stakeholders including Deputy Governors, Chiefs and Alkalos, Ward Councillors, Youth and Women's Representatives, and members of the community of the physically challenged and discussed matters bordering on the ongoing security Sector Reform efforts undertaken by The Gambia Government. This first ever country-wide public outreach campaign by the Office of National Security was intended to improve the visibility of the ONS and establish it as the recognized lead in the SSR process and at the same time inform participants of the reforms that have been undertaken so far while calling on them to partner with the security services and take an effective part in their own security.

The Townhall meetings were both productive and engaging and the positive reactions from stakeholders is a testament that the dialogue around SSR is resonating with people, and their call for more of such activities indicates a real interest in further engagement. These Townhall meetings in all the seven (7) Administrative Regions are no doubt playing a key role in building trust and fostering cooperation between citizens and members of the security services. They usually begin by an introductory briefing by the ONS Regional Security Coordinator Assan Jaiteh briefing participants about the establishment of the ONS, its mandate, past and current reforms undertaken by The Gambia Government, as well as the various strategy and policy documents that have been developed as part of the ongoing SSR. This was then followed by presentations from the Gambia Armed Forces, The Gambia Police Force, the West Africa Network for Peace building (WANEP) and the National Council for Civic Education (NCCE).

The GAF Deputy Spokesperson Major Bassady Gassama, noted the tremendous changes that have and are still taking place within the GAF, which he said are now enabling GAF reach out and collaborate in joint endeavours with the civilian population in activities such as tree planting and cleansing exercises. Major Gassama also informed participants that GAF will no longer be involved in human rights abuses and will now only concentrate on executing its constitutional mandate of protecting the territorial integrity of the state. This shift, he said is as a result of capacity building training especially on human rights.

Major Gassama finally implored participants to always engage and dialogue with GAF directly or use other appropriate channels to seek clarity on all their security and safety concerns instead of posting unverified content on social media platforms which he noted can sometimes lead to more confusion.

ASP Malang Keita from the GPF Planning Unit emphasized the need for collaboration between the civil population and the police for collective security while encouraging all to seek the police as their servants. Police he said are empowered by law to safeguard the lives and properties of citizens and in so doing, have powers of arrest and detention. However, these acts must be carried out according to law and that if anyone feels aggrieved by police conduct, they can take their case to the Police Complaints Unit for redress.

Fanta Darboe from WANEP and Abubakarr Fadera from the Association of Non-Governmental Organisations (TANGO), both spoke on the role civil society plays in educating and raising the levels of public awareness on matters of governance, thus enabling them to not only hold public officials accountable but also to make informed choices. Both Fanta Darboe and Abubakarr Fadera noted the importance of social cohesion and tolerance of divergent views in a democracy.

Ansumana Yarbo, Project Officer at the NCCE told participants that information is power, and called for unity of purpose, noting how politics has divided families and the nation. He went on to stress the need therefore to take a break and refocus our priorities as a country. Security he said is the business of all and every well meaning citizen should take the opportunities created by the ongoing SSR and contribute meaningfully to its success.

Following these presentations, lively general discussions were then initiated whereby participants asked questions, express concerns or make suggestions on how to improve both their safety and security and civil-military relations in their respective areas. Overall, the sensitization campaign achieved its intended objectives in that the targeted audience attended and participated fully in the discussions and suggested solutions to some of the challenges both they and members of the security services face in their respective areas. Below is a breakdown of Observations/Challenges/ Concerns raised by participants per region.

### **1. North Bank Region (Kerewan)**

In the Townhall held at Kerewan NBR on 11 November 2024, several speakers lauded the initiative taken by the ONS to reach out to them and discuss the SSR efforts by government. Participants however raise the issue of

poor remuneration and a lack of mobility for security personnel in the area to enable them perform their duties as expected. The issue of community policing was also raised by the Alkalos present who believe a robust community policing will be an added asset to the traditional security forces in the area. They seek the authority to arrest and detain suspects for eventual transfer to the police.

## **2. Upper River Region (Basse)**

In the Townhall held at Basse URR 12 November 2024, Community leaders while thanking ONS for reaching out to them, were quick to highlight police corruption and intimidation tactics used to extort money from people, most especially the motor bikers. They also alleged that anti narcotic officials are in the habit of implanting drugs on people and in their premises during search sessions.

The Police Intervention Unit ( PIU) officers in Wuli West are also being accused of mounting random check points to harass, intimidate and extort money from travelers in the area.

A number of speakers heaped praises on GAF for being proactive which has led to a very strong civic-military relation in the area. This sentiment was reechoed by a representative of the disability community who went further to laud the police and the Immigration officers in the area for the support and respect accorded to Persons With Disability.

## **3. Central River Region (Janjanbureh)**

In the Townhall held at Janjanbureh CRR 13 November 2024, the Chief of Lower Fulladou Mamadou Lamin Bah, made an appeal for protection for the security personnel in his area as in his words, “the protectors should first of all be protected before they can protect anyone.” He sought to know if it will please the government to kindly consider arming the police.

Another participant to the meeting, Hully Colley, appealed for increased security personnel to secure our borders and for mobility to be provided for security personnel to conduct regular patrols.

Saiba Darboe, a member of the Janjanbureh Village Development Committee(VDC), highlighted the importance of strengthening community policing.

Malick Jammeh the VDC Chairman of Sankulay Kunda, underscored the importance of security, further stating that there is a need to empower

District Chiefs with vehicles to enable them effectively carry out their functions for the areas they cover are vast. The Prison Commissioner for Janjanbureh, Bubacarr Jatta, while welcoming participants to the Townhall, took time to thank the ONS for the sensitization tour which he said is timely. He reminded participants that crime is very expensive and a burden onto the state. He therefore made a plea to all to assist the state in giving evidence when they are witnesses to a crime, otherwise many culprits he said are set free for lack of witnesses.

#### **4. Lower River Region (Mansakonko)**

In the Townhall held at Mansakonko LRR 14 November 2024, participants expressed their appreciation of the ONS for taking the initiative of going all the way out to meet and hold discussions with stakeholders on matters concerning their security.

The Chief of Kiang East Ansumana Sanneh made a request for the ONS to endeavor and pay visits to villages in the next outreach activity it undertakes in order to have first hand knowledge of the security situations in them.

The Chief of Kiang West, Lamin Drammeh, spoke on the spate of armed robberies in the area and made a plea for the deployment of more police to the his district for better security. He further stressed the necessity of constructing a road linking the settlements of Misra and Bintang which he said will cut down on the time currently taken to travel between the two places. Chief Drammeh also deplored the activities of illegal fishermen in his district, especially in Tankular. Most of these fishermen are foreigners who are usually armed, thereby making it difficult to confront them.

The Chiefs of Kiang Central and Jarra East, Lang Sanyang and Ansumana Kanagie respectively, made pleas to the government to provide vehicles for the police in their respective districts to enable them perform better.

The Chief of Jarra Central, Lamin Dampha, emphasized the need to reestablish and strengthen community policing in view of the inadequacies associated with the lack of enough police personnel to cover the entire region. Chief Dampha also made a request for the chiefs be empowered to settle some minor disputes by themselves without the intervention of the police for the current state of affairs gives them no powers at all. Chief Dampha finally decried the eroding authority of the office of District Chief and expressed his wish that government restores the former clout and prestige chiefs enjoyed in the past.

The Regional Police Commissioner, Ken Mendy, suggested that river police patrols be introduced in order to curb illegal fishing and other clandestine activities within our waters.

## **5. West Coast Region (Foni)**

In the Townhall held at Bwaim, WCR, 15 November 2024, the Chief of Kansala Ali Nyassi, warmly welcomed participants and extended his appreciation of the gesture taken by ONS to reach out to all stakeholders and sensitize them on the ongoing SSR. Chief Nyassi noted the need for capacity building for security personnel to enable them serve the citizens well. The whole of Foni and especially his district borders the restive Cassamance region, the area is prone to a lot of insecurity. Chief Nyassi therefore plead with government to assist the security personnel in the area with mobility as they face a lot of challenges in patrolling the borderline. Chief Nyassi finally called for more support for the Fire and Rescue Services in the area while admonishing his people to fully take part in the SSR process as this is a win-win situation for everyone.

The chief of Foni Jarrol, Ebrima Sanyang, noted the importance of the ongoing SSR and suggested public sensitization be conducted every three months. Chief Sanyang encouraged people to always notify security personnel whenever they have a foreigners or strangers residing amongst them and to also ensure that such foreigners or strangers abide by Gambian laws.

The Chief of Foni Berefet complained of over speeding by motorists and wants road barriers to be erected on the highway in Somita to mitigate against the over speeding which he said is a security concern to both the civilians and the police. This concern was reechoed by the Alkalo of Jarrol, Boye Sambou who suggested installing speed bumps to improve road safety and cut down on the number of fatal road accidents.

The Chief of Foni Bintang Karanai, Lamin Jobarteh, said given the high rate of serious crimes in the country such as armed robberies, the Government should consider arming the police to enable them face up to the challenge.

Lieutenant Yaya Darboe, Commander of 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion of GAF stationed in Kanilai, reminded participants that security personnel are first and foremost members of our families who are paid from the taxes that citizens pay to government. In that light, he went on, there is need to build a strong relationship so that there is mutual trust and confidence between the citizens

and members of the security services. Lieutenant Darboe encouraged all to meaningfully play their part to ensure that The Gambia's SSR becomes a success.

## **6. West Coast Region (Brikama)**

In the Townhall held at Brikama, WCR, 16 November 2024, the Chief of Brikama South Dembo Bojang welcome participants and the team from the ONS to the meeting saying the convergence of all the various stakeholders shows the importance that everyone attaches to issues of national security. Chief Bojang encouraged participants to take the ongoing SSR seriously for the good of the nation. He had special praise for The Gambia Prison Service for introducing vocational training for prisoners.

Mustapha Saidy, the Alkalo of Bafuloto expressed his annoyance with the police whom he accuse of allowing drivers to bribe them in broad daylight. Alkalo Saidy said that because of such corrupt practices, drugs and other illicit substance and even weapons can be smuggled into the country, potentially posing a security threat to the country.

Adama Sanyang, Assistant Chief Fire Officer in Brikama made a fervent plea to Gambians for attitudinal change especially in their relationship with members of the security services as they exist for the sole purpose of serving the people.. He encouraged participants to make an effort to know the toll-free numbers to contact the relevant security outfits in emergencies and suggested that Alkalos and Chiefs take the lead in sensitizing their people.

## **7. Kanifing Municipality (Fajara)**

In the Townhall held at Kanifing, 17 November 2024, the Executive Coordinator of Kanifing Municipality Bakary Singhateh said said the importance and relevance of the ongoing SSR cannot be overstated. Honourable Singhateh informed participants that The Gambia Government puts a lot of priority on the SSR and through the support of its international development partners, is committed to fully carrying out the necessary reforms of the security sector to ensure that the sector is better placed to deliver quality services to Gambians.

The Deputy Executive Coordinator of the Kanifing Municipality, Musa Amul Nyassi expressed his delight in hosting the ONS team and thanked participants for responding to the invitation. Mr. Nyassi spoke on the

importance of the SSR and how vital it is for all stakeholders to work for its success.

The Alkalo of Bakau Dodou Bojang noted the importance and relevance of the SSR which he said if well implemented will be of immense benefit to the country adding that the people of Bakau as host of a military barracks, have always had a very good relationship with army. Alkalo Bojang however called for more recognition and respect for community leaders by the police. Alkalo Bojang also opined that the SSR is not working as expected.

The Alkalo of Serrekunda, Serigne Bubacar Jobe, made a request for important community initiatives such as community policing to be sustained for better security service delivery. He also said Alkalos should be empowered to engage in Alternative Dispute Resolution within their jurisdictions. He stressed the need for Police Station Officers to have a cordial relation with Alkalos in their catchment area. He also suggested displaying the photographs of Alkalos in Police stations so that people are familiar with their faces. These sentiments were also reechoed by Abdoulie Joof, Alkalo of Kololi.

Mariama Drammeh, the Councillor of Dippakunda, complained about corruption within the security sector especially The Gambia Navy at the Banjul/Barra Ferry crossing points. He cited an instance where Navy personnel allegedly charged Senegalese nationals inflated prices to ferry them across without even checking to find out what their bags contained.

Maria Jarjue, a representative of Persons With Disabilities (PWDs), decried the inaccessibility of public building for PWDs. This was the main reason why the Fajara Townhall was held outside instead of the conference room. Mrs. Jarjue said the dignity of PWDs should be respected as they usually want to do things on their own and not to be given unsolicited assistance. She finally thanked the police for being very helpful to PWDs.

Father Moses Drammeh of The Gambia Christian Council called for more support for the Alkalos as they are the first point of call in any community in terms of hosting strangers and also settling disputes.

Demba Jallow of The Gambia Supreme Islamic Council recommended that religious leaders be capacitated and empowered to play a key role in the sensitizing people about the SSR given their moral standings in society.

Mariam Colley the Councillor for Tallinding Constituency accused the Traffic Police of corruption which is endangering the safety of passengers and other road users.

## **8. Banjul**

In the Townhall held at Banjul, 18 November 2024, The Executive Coordinator of Banjul Ebrima Jawo, thanked the ONS and citizens of Banjul for attending the Townhall which he said is an important gathering to discuss ways and means of ensuring the collective security of all. Honorable Jawo observed that young children are being used as street hawkers and are therefore exposed to all types of abuses including sexual harassment. He warned parents to desist from such practices. Honorable Jawo also suggested that the Mile II Central Prison should have an Open Day, where the facility is open to the public. He believes by seeing the facility and meeting inmates, this could serve as an eye opener for people and help in some way to keep their behaviour within the confines of the law. Honourable Jawo finally suggested that the Prison Service have a digital recording system to enable them track re-offenders.

Aji Haddy Joof, Women's Mobilizer, decried corruption within the Police force alleging that she experienced a scenario where police in her area sold confiscated drugs using the young people of the area. This level of police collusion makes the fight against drug abuse and trafficking difficult.

Lamin S. Jadama, Station Officer Gambia Fire and Rescue Services, expressed concern over Banjul not having a functioning hydrant. In the event of a fire outbreak, he said, the only place close enough to get water is Serrekunda.

Several other speakers included religious leaders from both the Christian and Muslim faiths, Imam Foday K. Dumbuya and Reverend Rodney Louis Prom respectively. Both spoke on the need to fully support Government's effort in making the SSR a success and the important roles religious leaders can play in getting public support and buy-in into the current reform efforts undertaken by Government.