

Keynote Address by H.E. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf

President of the Republic of Liberia

On “Reconciliation as the Path to Unity”

At the National Muslim Council of Liberia

Samuel K. Doe Stadium, Paynesville

Friday, September 17, 2010

Chairman Konneh;
Officers and Members of the National Muslim Council of Liberia;
Members of the Legislature and of the Judiciary;
Members of the Cabinet and Other Officials of Government;
United Nations Special Representative Løj;
The Doyen and Members of the Diplomatic Corps;
Representatives of International, Non-Governmental and Civil
Society Organizations;
Religious Leaders;
Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen;
Fellow Liberians:

Exactly a week ago, Muslims – constituting one-fifth of the world’s population – marked the end of the Holy Fast Month of Ramadan. On that occasion, we joined in wishing all in the Muslim community a happy *Eid al-Fitr* celebration. We commended Muslims for their commitment to the principles of Islam by remaining steadfast in 30 days of fast and prayer for peace and national unity throughout the country, and we renewed our Government’s commitment to the peaceful coexistence of all religions.

I am pleased to join you, especially since the leadership postponed this all-important Induction Ceremony until I could, indeed, participate. Thank you for your faith in me and the honor you have bestowed upon me.

The unity which has been achieved in our Islamic community is due, in large measure, to the wise leadership of several of you in this room. Let me congratulate you, Chairman Konneh, and the Executive Committee of the National Muslim Council of Liberia, for this and for the invaluable and beneficial services you render within your religious community and the wider Liberian family.

It is most appropriate for the NMCL to call itself “national” as it represents the interest of Islamic organizations and Muslims across the country. This new and improved National Council has an expanded membership, and the officers just inducted represent all 15 political subdivisions of Liberia. Such a united front says a whole lot about the progress we have made towards reconciliation, not only as a nation but among and within communities and groups.

Brothers and Sisters, as I reflect on how far your organization has come, I can say, in confidence, that you have chosen “Reconciliation as the Path to Unity.”

Reconciliation is a fundamental part of humanity itself. We live with the inevitable reality of human complexity and difference. The harmonious co-existence of people in the face of differences is the basis for our unity. The injury that is continually inflicted on human unity, by the misunderstanding of our differences, compels us to fully embrace the virtue of reconciliation.

Liberians have learned, the hard way, the futility of discord and divisiveness, and that such tendencies destroy rather than develop a country and its people. The NMCL’s story mirrors Liberia’s own recent history – of a disunited and divided Council which opted, ultimately, for a different path – that of a united body where mutual consultation, brainstorming, cross-fertilization of ideas and transparency are the hallmarks. These are attributes

that bridge the gaps and elicit the best contributions from all members to your faith, community and nation.

With the induction of new Council officers – selected through free, fair and transparent elections by the Muslim community – we are witnesses to the commitment of this community to the tenets of democracy. This is proof that the ideals of democracy transcend all barriers, and can be embraced in overcoming differences and resolving disputes among faith-based communities.

Muslims everywhere are satisfied with the NMCL's decentralization and empowerment policy, which grants them the freedom to install their leadership and have unrestricted access to policy-makers and implementers. This is why this new NMCL is a unifying force in Liberia.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Religion is a pillar of society. It fulfills a human yearning that we all share. Religion and culture are key elements best suited to make a divided community whole again as well as turn a fractured people into a solid and unified society. So it was with our nation, where people of all faiths, including the NMCL, united to say: "No to War, and Yes to Peace." Your organization's role during the civil war earned it high marks and enduring respect as one of the leading architects of the Liberian peace process.

Our country is a multi-religious and multicultural society where the balanced socialization of its diverse people is crucial. Our Government looks to the religious and traditional leaders, and their institutions, to play a pivotal role in the process of national healing and renewal.

Article 14 of the 1986 Liberian Constitution entitles all persons "to uphold freedom of thought, conscience and religion," and that no person shall be hindered in the enjoyment thereof. "No religious denomination or sect shall have any exclusive privilege or preference over any other but all shall be treated alike," the

document continues, adding that, consistent with the principle of separation of religion and the state, “the Republic shall establish no state religion.”

Founded as a Christian nation, Liberia is today a multi-religious nation, with 1 in every 5 Liberians a Muslim. Our country is stronger for its religious diversity and tolerance.

Religious tolerance is critical to Liberia’s healing and social cohesion. However, in a society where 80 percent of the population are practitioners of a particular set of beliefs, the tendency exists for the remaining 20 percent to feel marginalized, in spite of what the Constitution says, and which can lead to strained relations, even to violence.

As February’s tragic events in Lofa County demonstrated, religious division can rear its ugly head at any time. When brutality and violence temporarily pierced the fragile peace we have built, we were reminded how easily religious mistrust can escalate to violence.

It is therefore imperative to continue improving relations between the various religions. I refer, in that regard, to the efforts of the Inter-Religious Council and the Inter-Faith Movement to break down religious boundaries. Muslim unity is fundamental to relations with other groups, and this Council can play its part in Liberia’s healing and social cohesion through the Interfaith Movement.

I am most grateful for the dispatch of an Interfaith Group which helped to calm the turmoil, and promoted understanding and peace in Voinjama. This stands as inspiring proof of our people’s capacity to reach across old barriers and overcome differences. The outcome there was a triumph for Liberia.

However, we cannot rest on our laurels. All Liberians must remain resolute in the drive to overcome the remaining obstacles. Some of the problems we face are linked to the very nature of our

country; others are connected to the legacy we inherited from our history.

Our Government is in the process of reactivating traditional friendly relations with Muslim nations, evidenced by the opening of two embassies in Kuwait and Qatar, respectively. I had the honor to visit Kuwait, in June, for the opening of our Embassy there, and was warmly welcomed by His Highness the Amir and other high-ranking officials and business people, who are eager to strengthen bilateral ties with, and to invest in, Liberia.

It is also significant to note that measures are being implemented to avoid the problems we experienced previously in that part of the world which marred the image of our country and its people.

At the same time, my attention has been drawn to a letter which one of your members wrote in April to a Mr. Mohammed Hamdam of Dubai, to solicit funds. In it, he referred to Christians in the Lofa incident as "pagans"; claimed that the elders who were investigating the case of a missing woman were "anti-Islam and anti-Muslim"; and wrote that after he and others met with me and with other officials in February about the incident, the Government "sat down and never reacted." This is patently untrue.

At a time when the Government is promoting peace and harmony among people of all religions in Liberia, it is both disheartening and unacceptable that one of your members is spreading untruths and hatred. Religious leaders have a responsibility to foster peace, and not discord and friction in the land.

I therefore appeal to the Muslim Council to look into this matter, and to advise your members against engaging in such disruptive and negative actions which can only lead to violence in the society. And that we cannot allow!

Mr. Chairman;

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen:

We are here today to recognize, and extend our support to, the individuals chosen by Liberia's Muslim community as their representatives in the National Muslim Council of Liberia. I call upon all of you to support democracy through regular consultations and through the resolution of conflicts through dialogue, mutual respect and understanding.

As we join in celebrating your victory in unity over division, let me say that we will be watching you keenly through the prism of your own religious values and principles as enshrined in the Quran. We know that Islam teaches fair play, sincerity, transparency and justice in leading a people. Islam also calls for mutual respect between the governed and the governor. We are confident that you will live up to this standard.

I wish to reaffirm my confidence in the Council and reiterate my hope that it will continue to be a just and effective instrument for the good conduct of relations between all religions and denominations. Our Government and the Liberian people expect your continued proactive role and unwavering commitment to nurturing and sustaining durable peace in Liberia.

Wa Salaam Alaikum. I thank you.