

Address

by H.E. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, President of Liberia

At

Commencement of the Tubman National Institute of

Medical Arts (TNIMA)

On the “Value of Commitment to Service”

Centennial Pavilion

Sunday, March 7, 2010

Members of the JFK Board of Directors;
Faculty and Staff of TNIMA;
The JFK Medical Center Family;
Ministers and Officials of Government;
Development Partners;
Graduates, Family and Friends of TNIMA Graduates;
Members of the Media;
Distinguished Guests;
Fellow Liberians:

Graduations have always been special to me – as a student, many years ago; as a parent, grandparent and an aunt; and, most recently, as the leader of a country that desperately needs the kinds of skills in which you have now gained a degree of

expertise. Education, as we all know is the cornerstone of our development going forward.

It is with pride and honor, therefore, that I join you on this joyous occasion as your Commencement Speaker.

That we are holding this Graduation Ceremony on a glorious Sunday is reason to give thanks to the Almighty. Thanks that today we live in a blessed nation that is recovering from the horrors of civil conflict. And thanks that our country has reached such a level of peace and stability that schools can remain open, and students, like yourselves, can stay in school long enough to complete your studies, uninterrupted, and be able to see this day – your Graduation!

You, the Graduating Class of the Tubman National Institute of Medical Arts (TNIMA), have stayed the course and have reached this milestone. I applaud and congratulate you!

This particular Graduating Class is special to me because we have grown together. In July 2006, you were the young freshman students who held the umbrellas over our special guests, on that rainy day as we switched on the first set of lights at the JFK Memorial Center, which, in turn, lit up areas of Monrovia for the first time since the civil war. Today, you are graduating; today, also, JFK has a continuous supply of electricity to provide specialized care, as do many locations of our Capital.

This Graduating Class also represents the successful implementation of the health sub-pillar of our Poverty Reduction Strategy to “Lift Liberia.” After the war, TNIMA was charging its students tuition to train as healthcare workers.

At a time when the health sector had collapsed, and the country was in dire need of healthcare providers, it made no sense that young people, who had made a commitment to serve, should have to pay in order to render much-needed service to their country.

With the ratios of physicians at 0.03, 0.18 nurses, and 0.12 midwives per 1,000 persons extremely low, we included Human Resources Development among the six strategic objectives in achieving our overall health goals. The Ministry of

Health and Social Welfare committed itself to identify, train, and retrain qualified health personnel and to increase the number of health workers between 6,000 and 8,000 over the period of the PRS (2008-2011), in essence doubling the existing

workforce. To achieve that objective, we took the decision to: suspend tuition and fees; revitalize the three rural health training institutes; strengthen the medical school; provide scholarships for specialized clinical and managerial health workers; train 500 certified midwives and 5,000 traditionally trained midwives in life-saving skills.

We mandated that all training at TNIMA should be free. Towards that end, we provided free para-medical education to 584 students – 515 here at TNIMA, and 69 at the southeastern

Midwifery School in Zwedru, Grand Gedeh, which I visited again just four days ago. Their graduation is in December.

You, the Graduating Class of 2010, are among the first beneficiaries of that mandated policy. As a consequence, we are today graduating the largest class ever - 206 students - since the school's founding in 1945. Your numbers include the first group of 7 post-graduate Nurse Anesthetists, as well as 39 Physician's Assistants, 78 Professional Nurses, 57 Midwives, and 25 Environmental Health Graduates.

You are receiving your diplomas today, secure in the knowledge that you are graduating from an accredited

institution of learning. Thanks are due to your hard-working faculty and the Liberian Board of Nursing and Midwifery.

For the three years of para-medical training, your education was free, thanks to an appropriation of US\$2.1 Million from the Government. Support to the school also came from international donors: from USAID, which renovated the dormitory and will do the same for the classrooms and dining room; from the World Bank, which provided textbooks and other learning materials, and funded the Nurse Anesthetist Program; from Rehabilitating Basic Health Systems (RBHS) program through the Ministry of Health & Social Welfare who worked to improve the curriculum and strengthen clinical

learning areas; and from Ann Gloag, of the Gloag Foundation, who renovated the West Wing of the JFK Hospital which TNIMA students use as clinical sites, with the World Bank donating the elevator.

To get to where you are today required sacrifices. Besides the sacrifices you made to learn, along with your own determination to succeed, you had the nurturing of parents and family, as well as the patience and wisdom of faculty and administrators who have trained and guided you. To all of them, you owe a debt of gratitude!

To whom much is given, much is expected. You, Dear Graduates, have been the recipients of free education, and now it's your turn to give back. That's my special message today, the value of commitment to service.

Just in case it had skipped anyone's mind these past three years, as you labored over your textbooks, let me remind you that when you enrolled in this Institute, you made a commitment to serve your Government wherever it assigned

you. With that, I can say with certainty and assurance that, at the end of today's Graduation program, Government will have 206 newly trained medical personnel who our Ministry of Health can send to wherever healthcare is needed in Liberia.

I returned yesterday from a week-long tour that took me to four southeast counties - Maryland, River Gee, Grand Gedeh, and Nimba Counties. Everywhere I went, I was informed by County Officials of the numbers of health facilities - clinics, health centers, and hospitals - being constructed, renovated, or

rehabilitated. So, the facilities exist. What they need now are people, like yourselves, who are committed to go and work in them to improve the healthcare of the Liberian people. As we toured the clinics and hospitals in the region, I was proud to see

many TNIMA graduates playing significant role and I look forward to seeing some of you when I visit those places again in the future.

What do we mean by commitment to service? To commit is to pledge oneself to a certain purpose. In your case, you made a commitment to become future healthcare workers in your country. For there to be commitment, two fundamental conditions must exist: you must have a sound set of beliefs; and you must faithfully adhere to these beliefs. Your commitment is

to the highest service to your country, and to provide care for patients entrusted to your care.

But before you can make a commitment to serve others, you must first make a commitment to yourself. How, for example, do you conduct yourself as a young professional? That requires a strong sense of personal integrity as well as self-confidence. These will serve as an overarching goal to effectively practice your profession. You must also be willing to share the credit for your career successes, as I stated earlier.

You also must make a commitment to the people you serve, to treat them with dignity and respect. You must endeavor to give

each consumer of healthcare the best care you can provide, in an empathetic manner, always asking yourself how you would want to be treated if the roles were reversed.

Making a commitment to others will also include aligning yourselves to professional organizations that will help to shape your thinking and provide guidance and mentorship. This will help you ascend your career ladder and add significant value to your commitment. Being part of a larger professional group with whom you can communicate and share your vision, will help to shape your future aspirations and destiny.

The world in which we live sometimes makes it difficult to practice and demonstrate true commitment. As you graduate

and take on your new assignments, don't expect that life will be rosy. It's more than likely that you will be dispatched to areas where your skills are sorely needed, yet the living conditions are difficult. Living in the rural areas may test your

commitment to serve. There will be times when you will question that commitment: when the monthly paycheck doesn't stretch far enough; when others cause you to doubt yourself by asking why you are working so hard for minimum pay; when someone asks why you are working for government when you could get paid more at an agency.

It is at these times that one's commitment is tested. Please be resolved!

Hold firm to your values; hold the line against the easy route of compromise. Commitment to service has its payoffs, in the form of a reputation for integrity in the eyes of those you serve and others around you.

Today, after a three-year course of study, Graduates of TNIMA, you are earning a well-deserved diploma in four areas. But will you want to stop there? What if, after some years of service with the Ministry of Health, you want to further your education and earn a full degree; would you not welcome the opportunity to move ahead? In the not too distant future, we envisage an articulation between the University of Liberia and TNIMA to offer a Bachelor of Science (BSc.) degree in Nursing and a Master's in Health Sciences.

In closing, I challenge you to be unwavering in your commitments to your country and service to our people. Thank

you for the service which you are about to render. I want to assure you that we will be there with you, walking side by side,

as we strive to implement the PRS and the Millennium Development Goal to reduce maternal and child mortality for the betterment of our people. You can, and you will make a difference through caring, courage, comforting and competence.

TNIMA Graduates: Well done! We commend you! Now go forward and do good, for the sake of our people.

I thank you.