

**TRANSCRIPT  
OF  
PRESS CONFERENCE BY H.E. PRESIDENT ELLEN JOHNSON SIRLEAF  
C. CECIL DENNIS AUDITORIUM, MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS  
THURSDAY, May 12, 2011**

**President Sirleaf:** This is just an opportunity to meet with you once again. It's been a while since we had one of these sessions, and provide an opportunity for an exchange, to reconnect, look you in the eye, and talk about some of those things that we all know that are topical.

**National Budget (2011/2012)**

We are very glad that we've met the requirement of the Public Financial Management Law in submitting our budget on time to the Legislature. We're pleased that we are, for the first time, I think in many, many years – two decades – we are now in terms of our revenue level, close to the pre-war level. Before the war, the budget was somewhere around US\$500 million; today, with a US\$459 million budget, which is a conservative one, based upon the implementation of our Ministry of Finance to make sure that they do not get too aggressive. That budget is before the Legislature. We are pleased also that we've put emphasis on infrastructure to continue our roads, ports and power emphasis; that we've also put emphasis on education and we will be promoting many of the community colleges, as well as the universities; on health; and, of course, on security, given the fact that this year we are going to have to beef it up; and also agriculture. If you add those four major priority areas, that claims some 35 percent of the budget. As everyone knows, our budgetary process is an open one; it is a transparent one. The budget will be open for public hearings by the Legislature. The Ministry of Finance is obliged, by our Public Financial Management Law, to make that budget available to everybody, to put it out. So as soon as the Legislative Committee has gone through it because, as you know, the Legislature also has authority to change the budget. They will be proposing changes. We will reach consensus on some of the changes, and then the budget will be subject for all of you to scrutinize.

**National Unification Day**

Saturday is National Unification Day. The Ministry of Information has planned a program at Providence Island – I hope it doesn't rain and disturb that program – and I believe they've invited everybody. I hope they've invited everybody, including the opposition leadership, so that we all can go there. The different counties, I think, are going to have their cultural troupes out. We'll be there, in the afternoon on Saturday, and I hope as

many of you as can, will be able to join in those festivities and encourage our cultural performers from our different counties.

### **County Tours**

My County Tours continue; we've been to so many places, we intend to cover all the counties and, quite frankly, this is not the first year that I've done that. It's just because this is an election year, it draws a lot of attention. But the main idea is we are coming to the end of this administration; we want to know the progress we have made in all of those places, in keeping with our Poverty Reduction Goals; and going around also provides me the opportunity just to meet the citizens, to listen to some of their feelings about the progress of the government about some of the issues that need to be tackled. And I'm very pleased that a lot of development is happening in all of the counties: roads, schools, clinics and, more importantly, the self efforts. A lot of our own people are doing things and empowering themselves. People are making farms; people are building their homes and reconstructing their homes; and so that tells us that we may be on the right road.

### **Employment**

We still have other challenges; we have employment programs that are in the making, that we hope will provide some opportunities for students. The internship program is being finalized by the Ministry of Youth and Sports, so that many of our young graduates or young students will be able, during this period, to work with Ministries and Agencies and benefit from that experience and also enable them to earn something to return to school.

Those are the things that come to my mind; let's open it up as I'm sure there are many other issues that you would like to raise, that we can discuss.

## **QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS**

### **National Elections Commission**

**Question:** (Alba M. Wolokollie, *Daily Observer* newspaper): What do you make of the consistent calls or complaints from the opposition bloc, especially the Liberty Party, calling on you to remove the current Chairman of the National Elections Commission, Mr. James Fromayan, before the 2011 elections?

**President Sirleaf:** Frankly, no one has ever provided a very strong basis and reasons for his removal. I have asked our partners to work with the NEC and to strengthen them and to have a major input in it. I think if any of them felt that there was something wrong with the NEC, that they would bring it to my attention. But they have all said to me that the NEC, judging from its performance over the past year, with the by-elections and all that, that they do not see any reason. I just hope that the NEC themselves will do more for inter-party meetings, in trying to make sure that we all understand each other. What we should all be focusing on now is to make sure that the processes of election will lead us to free and fair elections, and every party should have an input into that. Right now, let's look at the process. If there's anything about the process that we feel is deficient or can be improved upon, that's where we ought to put our emphasis.

### **ELENILTO Agreement/Dismissal of Ministers**

**Question** (George Kennedy, business correspondent, *Daily Observer*): I have two concerns. One has to do with the Ministry of Lands and Mines. You recently dismissed the Minister and almost all of his principal Deputies. What's the reason for that? Two, there's a major issue concerning the ELENILTO agreement that is currently under discussion. The Articles of Incorporation of the company show that they were definitely short of the requirements of the bid process, but yet the NIC is engaging them in the discussion for the Western Cluster. Could you please comment on those?

**President Sirleaf:** On the question on the dismissal of people, please read the Constitution. He served at the will and pleasure of the President. It did not meet my pleasure. Let me not get into the ELENILTO issue because the Liberia Anti-Corruption Commission (LACC) is now doing an investigation. So, if I try to make comments to influence them one way or the other, that would not be fair. Let them finish the investigation, let them give me a report with their recommendations, and then we'll deal with it.

### **Concession Agreements**

**Question:** (Alphonso Toweh, Reuters/*New Republic* newspaper): I just want you to clarify this issue as it relates to concession agreements. We read, in recent times, that concession agreements that were concluded need to be reviewed. I don't know how true that is. Some editorial carried it in one or two papers, so I am a bit concerned about that. The second question is with timber (logs): there was an agreement reached with Liberian Government and the European Union that is called the VPA (Voluntary Partnership Agreement). It sounds good, it looks good, Madam, but one thing I am looking at, is that we have this timber and yet we don't even produce plywood in our country. We import these things. Did you take into consideration establishing factories

that would be able to manufacture things here so as to avoid carrying our timber out and having it brought back to us to purchase?

**President Sirleaf:** On concessions agreements, I stand by much of what we have done. When this government started, the first thing we did was to look at two concession agreements that had been concluded in 2005: the agreement with ArcelorMittal and the Firestone agreement. I ask you to look at the matrix we have that shows what were the provisions of the agreements in 2005, what we renegotiated, and see the big difference in terms of protecting the national interest and getting more. We have used those two as models for all the other ones that we have done. Now, there is a process in which, according to our laws, when a proposal is made for an investment, it goes to the National Investment Commission, the Commission then asks me to formulate what is called the Inter-Ministerial Concession Committee (INCC). That Committee is supposed to look at the proposal, look at the vetting, look at the competition because most of the time they go out on bids so it's a competitive process, and then they are supposed to make a decision. We had a few mishaps that bothered me. As you may recall, the first Western Cluster with a bid that we had to cancel. As a result of that, I added a step that is not in our laws: that when the IMCC has concluded, they must bring it to Cabinet, and Cabinet must look at their decision and then decide whether we will go along with their recommendation before any kind of negotiations are concluded and before I've sent it. If you see that some of the ones being talked about are still in the discussion and negotiation stage; they haven't reached me, they haven't reached the Cabinet, they're not going to the Legislature until we're satisfied that they meet those conditions. So with that now, like I say, our process is there; I'm not holding back for anybody, and there are individual decisions on it. But so far, we've got a process that I feel is defensible. Let's also say that those concession agreements are available to the public. They are not secret documents. They are there. When they go to the Legislature, there're open hearings. They on the Internet and anybody can access them. Anyone of you that wants any concession agreement to study, for your own purposes, will be made available to you.

The timber sector has a lot of problems. In each of those agreements, there is something about value-added, about them processing our wood here. But that industry has just started, and the reason is: We negotiated those timber agreements, but we did not take into account the infrastructure deficiency. As a result, just now a few of them are beginning to ship because the ports from which the logs have to be exported, the roads from the timber areas to the ports – most of them are not in the condition to accelerate it. But we have a very strong forestry law. Please take look at it. Like I said, it has three “C’s” in it: conservation, because we don't want to cut all our forests to make sure we represent 43 percent of the biodiversity in the West Africa region, and we don't

want to see our forests destroyed, for reasons beyond even our region, for global purposes; commercialization, that allows us to cut some of them to be able to benefit the country; and community benefits. There is a Community Law in which it is stated that those benefits must go to the communities in which the concessions operate. So, again, we do have the laws. Sometimes the processes take longer than we anticipated; we run into hurdles that we had not anticipated, and it slows the process down. But, definitely, adding value, doing some of the processing of not only plywood and things like that but even furniture, which is another stage, is something that we do aim for.

**Follow up:** Don't you think that it would have been feasible to set a precondition for shipment? For instance, that they should have these factories set up before you go ahead to ship. Like you said, they started shipping already. We visited some of these areas last week and they've already started shipping.

**President Sirleaf:** A big problem with processing raw materials here is power. To run those large industrial plants requires power. Today, Liberia has the highest cost per kilowatt hour of power because we don't have enough generation and because we haven't yet restored our hydro facility, which is the most cost-efficient one. So even when we're talking with the mining sector, we want them. Even scrap, we shouldn't be shipping scrap out of here; we should be able to process those scrap into cutlasses, and wheelbarrows and such things, and we've got people wanting to do it. Power is the issue. That's why this afternoon I have a meeting with the partners on the power sector to see what we can do to bring more energy to that.

### **Nimba Land Dispute**

**Question** (Samukai Konneh, *Public Agenda* newspaper): I've got two concerns. First, I was with you 10 months ago in Sanniquellie, Nimba County, when you announced a possible resolution of the land dispute through the recommendation of compensation. I am concerned as to when the government will begin compensating those whose land cases have been resolved. Secondly, I was in District No. 2 last week when you were launching some community project, and there was a slogan, "If not you, who else?" The Elections Commission has accredited over 23 political parties or candidates. Without you, Madam President, in the race, who do you think will be the better person for this office?

**President Sirleaf:** The Nimba land dispute has taken a while. You are correct about that. Fortunately, we now have an allocation, under the Peacebuilding Fund, through the work of Minister of Planning Amara Konneh, to start those payments within a month. So we will start the payments, and we're very pleased about that. We thank the people for their patience in all this.

You don't want me to come call who will be my competitor, do you? I must tell you who will be strong against me? All of them strong. So, I don't have a particular one; we welcome all of them. That's the spirit of democracy and competition.

### **Corruption/Concession Agreements**

**Question** (Vivian Gartyn, UNMIL Radio): Madam President, there seems to be a feud between the government agencies when it comes to fighting corruption. For example, the LACC is consistently criticizing or blaming the Justice Ministry for not prosecuting even though, according to the LACC, there is evidence. At the same time, the Executive is blaming the Judiciary for the delay in the prosecution. Are you not cooperating with each other in this fight or is this just a blame game? On the concession agreements, you've defended the provisions of the agreement, that they are good. But is there a monitoring mechanism in place to know whether the companies are actually operating in line with the provisions?

**President Sirleaf:** The fight against corruption is on. It's not a blame game. The Justice Ministry has all of the reports from the General Auditing Commission. They have a team that's been working on those. They have to determine that the evidence contained in those reports enable them to successfully prosecute certain people. That's what they are working on. We have taken cases to the court; unfortunately, our law says a person is presumed innocent until proven guilty in a court of law. So they have to go to court, they have to fight those cases. We've gone to court, we've won some cases, we've lost some cases, cases we felt we should not have even lost. The jury system is something that's part of the problem. The Justice Ministry is working with the Supreme Court to try and improve the jury system. The government, for example, will lose a case; our law says government cannot take appeal. So, in one or two cases where that they have ruled against the government, which we feel was not fair, we can't take appeal, as in the case of other countries. I think we follow U.S. law in that regard. They are trying to change that. You know our judges and the judicial system are protected by our Constitution. We cannot interfere with them; we cannot overrule them; we cannot dismiss judges. That's what our laws say. So we are having a lot of problems. LACC can investigate, but according to the LACC legislation, when they investigate, they must turn it over to the Ministry of Justice for prosecution. We are trying to even change that now, to amend the LACC laws to give them the right to go for prosecution, just to be able to strengthen that process. Please try to understand what we have done is to tackle the corruption in all the other ways: reducing people's vulnerability by better compensation; putting in systems. This country did not have any kind of systems before. Today, we have systems that will enable us. We are computerizing, putting in structures, putting in the institutions and strengthening them. Those are the things that will lead to a permanent resolution of the corruption issue. We've worked on all of those.

I'm just as frustrated as you, that we can't move faster. We've asked for fast-track court. They are still looking at that. We have some cases in court for two years before we can get them finally decided. We are on this, and we are not going to relent. The General Auditing Commission's audit reports, as the former Auditing General says, they are there; they are not disappearing, they can be picked up by this administration, any administration, and still carry them forward.

As for monitoring, currently every sector ministry monitors what happens: the Labour Ministry will monitor the employment obligation; Finance will monitor the taxes that are supposed to be paid; etc. But it makes the system so scattered, and that's why we have before the Legislature the National Bureau of Concession. It will be a small, efficient and competent body that will cut across all the sectors, and their only function will be to monitor the compliance and the performance under concession agreements. When the Legislature passes that, we will establish that body and we hope that body will be very effective to be able to have the kinds of reports where everybody will know whether the concessions are performing.

### **Salary/Politics**

**Question** (Jonathan Paylaylee, Associated Press): Just one question and a follow-up to a question asked earlier. I read a portion of an American publication forwarded to me by a Western diplomat, and it is written there that the Maritime Commissioner in Liberia [Binyah Kesselly] earns more salary than the United States Vice President; that the U.S. Vice President makes a little over 17,000 a month. If you do the calculations, you will know how much he earns annually. The paper reported that the Maritime Commissioner in Liberia makes nothing less than between US\$20,000 and US\$22,000 a month. I know you said before that some people are not being paid from the budget that you have, and that you are sourcing resources from elsewhere. But in the interest of transparency, can you say today how much the Commissioner of Maritime of Liberia makes per month, and if it corroborates with what that publication is saying. On the follow-up: Somebody asked you if you saw a competitor and you said you thought that everybody was strong. Conspiracy theorists are saying that what is happening in the CDC of late is something that is created by the government to make George Weah to go second to Winston Tubman, so that a few months to elections, there will be some confusion between him and Tubman, that Weah will break away and so Winston Tubman's position will be weakened. What do you say to that?

**President Sirleaf:** The Maritime Commissioner does not make US\$25,000 a month. My recollection is that he makes US\$15,000, equal to that of what the Auditor General made. I will ask him to address that. It's not the question of it coming from outside sources; he's paid from Maritime revenue; we've established a board now, with the new

Maritime Authority. They have a full board; the board has to approve the budget; that budget comes from Maritime revenue; some goes to fund their operations; some of it goes into our regular Consolidated Revenue Account. But I will ask him. Again, there's no secret to these things. We'll ask them to publish it. John Morlu II is the Chairman of the Board, the former Maritime Commissioner, so please have a discussion with him as Chairman of the Board of the Maritime Authority, and let him disclose to you all the information. There's nothing we've got to hide. Somebody may not like the size of someone's salary. If we feel we can defend it on the basis of the person's performance and their value to us, we will defend it, but there's nothing to hide.

Concerning the CDC, what will I get out of trying to...? As a matter of fact, I thought that that made them more competitive by them coming together. So, why would I want to...? Quite frankly, in this competition, I stand on my record. And the Liberian people will decide. That's it.

### **Media/Gboyo Case**

**Question** (Jallah Grayfield, Sarafina Ventures and Communications Incorporated, and Love FM/Love TV and the *Liberia Journal* newspaper): I have a concern, concerning the media. Of late, media editors and publishers of newspapers have been complaining that, indeed, your government owes them. Based on what I see here in the hall... initially when you call these kinds of meetings and interactions, you see media editors, you see publishers here. Their absence tells me that it's a protest action. So what is the government doing about paying these media editors and publishers to actually make them effective in discharging their duties, because you know they have to pay registration fees and taxes to government, and if you don't pay them, you strangulate them. What is the government doing about that? The second question has to do with the Maryland County *gboyo* case in which your ambassador and special envoy, H. Dan Morias, is being held. I understand that you've asked your Internal Affairs Minister to actually probe into this matter because a witch doctor was used to actually name some people who are now being held in detention and this case is before the court. It is being adjudicated by the court, so can you provide some explanation on that Madam President.

**President Sirleaf:** On the media payments, we have discussed this matter in Cabinet several times, and we have taken the decision that any outstanding obligation to the media must be paid because we want to make sure that your financial viability is secured. Now, some of the ministries have an issue: they have said that there are times when they do not authorize the publication of certain things, whether it's their press releases or something. They may authorize one or two, and that some other papers may go and pick the same thing up and copy it in their papers and then send them a bill,

a bill that they are totally unaware of. I don't know the full story on this; that's why, tomorrow, they are going to meet with the publishers. The Ministry of Finance is going to meet with them, along with some of the other ministries, to sort this out, so that where the legitimate billing and outstanding is, they can be settled. We don't want to owe the media; but at the same time, you know they have these Public Relations Officers who probably do things without the authority and without the budgetary appropriation, and that's what causes some of the problems. So let us let them have the meeting tomorrow and then we will see.

The publishers not here... they sent you, I am satisfied with you.

The Maryland case: Come on, it's preposterous to think that I will tell somebody to deal with witch doctor. What do I know about witch doctor? That's not true! So, somebody is trying to do their own thing. But in the Maryland case, we have asked them to please bring it to a closure quickly because it's been too long. I understand the case is in the court right now, here in Monrovia. The Justice Minister is trying her best to bring that case to a closure. The Internal Affairs Minister was just down in Harper; he gave me a report this morning, and he's bringing some new information to the Minister of Justice. I can't go into the details because the case is in court, but we hope to bring it to close. If people are innocent, that's it; people that are innocent they will go.

### **July 26<sup>th</sup> Celebrations/ Lofa Violence**

**Question** (Othello Garblah, *New Dawn* newspaper): My question comes from Lofa where, two months from now, we will have the Independence Day Celebrations unfolding. But there are concerns coming from there. Currently, they are on three fronts: one has to do with the NEC demarcation of constituencies after voters' registration, and many people feel they will be disenfranchised. The second issue has to do with the Lofa violence, the probe into the case. And the third has to do with the organization of the Independence, and they have vowed to boycott the celebration and even boycott the referendum. As they told me, they are also contemplating on the elections. They had separate meetings on Sunday – one, I think, in Monrovia and the other one in Voinjama. My question: You just came from Lofa, and some of the concerns have to do with level of preparation. Does the Independence Day still stand in Lofa? How far is the preparation? Does this worry you that certain segments of the citizens from Lofa County are planning to boycott these events?

**President Sirleaf:** Well, on the Lofa violence, the Vice President is going to Lofa on Saturday. He has a meeting with the international partners who've been working on this. They're going to make some settlement with the victims, where justified, so we think the Lofa violence issue will be brought to an end of Saturday after the Vice President has

gone there. The “26” celebrations will still be held in Lofa, and it will be successful. We are working on it. We’re not worried; boycott is a democratic right. Any group that wants to boycott it, that’s their right. They can boycott it, but a majority of the people will be there, and they will enjoy the “26” celebration.

### **Social Welfare/Youth Employment**

**Question** (Lilymae Hunter, Liberia Women Democracy Radio): I listened to you speak on the four major issues, but I didn’t hear about social welfare. Our young girls are still loitering in the streets, and those kids who were referred to as Don Bosco boys are yet to be trained by the YES project under LACE. What are you doing about it? What is the problem?

**President Sirleaf:** You know, the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare is combined so the appropriation that’s there is not just for Health, it is also for Social Welfare; it’s a combined Ministry. On the LACE project, I thought it should have started by now. I will have to check. You’re talking about this employment program under LACE, right? Yes, it should have started by now. Let me check with [Ramses] Kumbuyah, the one who’s heading this program. It should start, and there are other kinds of youth employment programs that are in the making. And that should start. We will work on it. I don’t have all the details on it, but I’ll find out.

### **Elections**

**Question** (D. Kaihenneh Sengbe, *Informer* newspaper): My question is a continuation of what was asked by the *Daily Observer* reporter about the National Elections Commission. Madam President, how much, or to what extent, do you trust the National Elections Commission, and how often do you communicate with Chairman Fromayan? Secondly, after 2018, from all indications from what we see, from what we hear, you might likely be the President again, and then after 2018, among all of the 20 candidates trying to seek the presidency, who would you like to see running Liberia?

**President Sirleaf:** Look, I have no reason to say that I don’t have confidence. I have full confidence in the National Elections Commission. It is not headed by one person; it is headed by six of them. All of them come from independent persuasions. They take their decisions collectively. No one person can dominate it. So, from their record, and based on by-election and what not... Unity Party did not win all the by-elections; other parties won. I only meet with them when they ask me to meet with them. And most of the time when they ask me to meet with them, maybe they want me to discuss budgetary matters where they think their budgetary appropriation is inadequate, or something like that. Other than that, I don’t go there, I don’t talk to them. I don’t meet with them except

by their own will. 2018, you see, now, I almost want to do like Senator Williams and say “that you!”

### **Investment**

**Question** (Edward M. Morte, *National Chronicle* newspaper): I want to know what went wrong between your government and the Vale [a Brazilian mining company] after two years of negotiations, and now your government is running behind Vale.

**President Sirleaf:** The Vale transaction was a new one for our country. It’s negotiating something that involves a transport system. Vale was not taking any of our resources; they were not getting a mine in Liberia. Their resource is in Guinea, the Guinea Mines. What they were proposing is merely to transport Guinean ore over our territory, building a railroad and using our ports. What do we get out of it was new to us, so we had to get international experts to work with us on what they call transfer pricing and all those different technical things that we did not have the capacity to do. And so the negotiations have been a bit protracted, but at the same time, Guinea, too, has been taking a different position, where Guinea is saying, “No, we want our ore to be transported over our own territory, not Liberia.” So that involves some diplomatic negotiations at the political level. This is what has delayed the whole thing; we’re still hoping that we can put it off; they’re still negotiating. Vale has not pulled out of the arrangement with us; they hope to conclude by the end of this month. But Vale is also right now in Guinea, negotiating with Guinea, and we have to see what will come out of those negotiations.

### **General Auditing Commission/Star Radio**

**Question** (Philip N. Wesseh, *Inquirer* newspaper): Your government is being praised for an open society. For the sake of public information, why was John Morlu really not re-nominated? The next point has to do with Star Radio. What’s the status of Star Radio?

**President Sirleaf:** Well, quite frankly, I wish that the GAC had used a different approach; not so much on the technical work, because the technical work is there, the audits reports are there, and we will have to deal with them, and we will have to carry out some of the recommendations. I personally recruited John Morlu, so there would be no reason for me to.... But the controversy is too much, too much. I deal with Auditor Generals all around the world. Anyway, my letter to John – if he likes he can make it available to you – praises him for the work he did; it establishes the fact that he has a legacy that will live on; and it gives a recommitment that the fight against corruption will go on unabated, with strength. I put that in the letter to him, and I’m sure he will find other ways to serve his country.

Star Radio, as you know, was being handled by the Vice President, and he has gone a long way. First of all, remember, Star Radio was not a government facility. And for the government to intervene we have to be careful, otherwise you will be the very ones to say we're trying to take this over and influence it. So that's why we've been trying to find an independent group to be able to provide the funding and to be able to re-establish the board; anybody from on the board who's associated with government, to move them from there so it cannot lose its independence. I'm told by the Vice President that the biggest hitch right now is that they were ready to settle the arrears of the staff, but the staff has said they want more. They're asking for more money than what is calculated by the committee that's working on it as due them. That is the hitch right now. If they can reach an understanding on what are the arrears, and those arrears can be paid, Star Radio can open. So, I appeal to the staff to sit down and be reasonable. We want to protect that facility; there's important equipment there. If it is not used pretty soon, who knows who will be tampering with it. So that's where we are.

### **Sea Erosion**

**Question** (Lewis Togba, Radio Monrovia/Snetter Enterprises): My question is not about politics; I'm talking about the environment. Sea erosion, Madam President, is eating up several historic communities in Liberia. You go to Buchanan, in Grand Bassa, the Hotel Africa community, or New Kru Town, where I grew up and played football behind the D. Tweh High School. That whole community on the beach is gone, as a result of sea erosion. Are there concrete initiatives or plans by your government to ensure that sea erosion doesn't eat up the rest of the country?

**President Sirleaf:** we have had a study done by a Dutch company on the sea erosion issue, and that study shows a huge amount of money will be required to resolve this problem all the way. Of course, the resources were not there to be able to do it. So we started to do some emergency work. Part of the problem is that we have asked people to stop doing sand mining. Our people are so difficult to obey instructions and authority. They have designated certain places where you can do this sand mining, and other places don't! In the night, they go all over the place. I'm sure they go to your place in New Kru Town, and they dig the sand and take it out and that causes the erosion. Emergency work is going on in Buchanan. Right now, we have some money to try and do some emergency work there to stop it. You know, I'm glad you say you were not dealing with politics. I hope plenty people will be like you; don't deal with politics, let's sit down and hang head on how to solve soil erosion – different leaders from the different places. Let's concentrate on that, and meet and see what we can all do to solve it. That would help us a whole lot. You know, it's just not enough to criticize it; let's sit down and find the solution to it. I invite you to come to a meeting with Lands and Mines. Your sit

down so you can go show them New Kru Town. You sit down and hang head on what your can do.

### **Water/Referendum**

**Question** (Watson Johnson, Power TV): You recently visited several townships in Montserrado County. In Clayashland, the people complained of poor sanitary conditions. They said they were drinking muddy water from hand-pumps, and you promised to intervene. I want to know from you how far you have gone with that intervention. Secondly, you commended the political leader of the Liberty Party, Charles Brumskine, for openly giving support to the referendum. Some of your opponents have threatened to go to the Supreme Court to ensure the referendum is not held. According to them, the portion that has to do with the reduction in the residency clause from 10 to 5 years is trying to accommodate your political ambition for the presidency. What's your comment on that?

**President Sirleaf:** Well, on the townships, we have people looking into the situation now to see what we can do to address the water issue. We're very concerned about that. I've already gotten somebody going out to see where we can establish hand-pumps in the different communities where we went and where they are lacking. We are going to take care of that one. It's a bigger problem on the sanitation issue and the other things they raised. It will take us some time to solve it. But at least on the establishment of wells, we're going to try and do that right away.

Look, as far as the referendum is concerned, when it comes to the 10-year residency clause, I can win it in the court tomorrow. First of all, let me be clear: that particular bill was not initiated by me at all. It was when it got there that I happened to know about it. My understanding is that it came from a meeting among political parties that agreed on all of these. But the one thing in that referendum that I am concerned about, is the one that has to do with simple majority. The reason I'm concerned and want to see that go through, is that we have many candidates for all 64 positions in the Legislature and all 15 positions in the Senate – several candidates. Which means that vote is going to be split and there will have to be runoffs. And if there are runoffs for over 30, 40, 50 people, at an average of US\$300,000 for by-elections, it will bust our budget, completely bust the budget. We won't be able to do anything else except fund by-elections. That's my concern. The rest of the things, I'm not worried about them.

### **Referendum/Electricity**

**Question** (John Kollie, Liberia Media Initiative, and Radio France International): What could be the point that a 75 year-old man or woman will be on Supreme Court Bench. Can you imagine that? My second question will be: the electricity business that I always

come up with. Where are we on this? You said to us, the last we were here, that something was being done about the hydro. Can you put your hand on the percentage or the level of work, progress if you will? Can you give me a rundown of which of the referendum proposals you will vote for?

**President Sirleaf:** I will vote for all of them. Up to you what you vote for, but I will vote for all of them. I'm just explaining the one that concerns you on a national basis. On a personal basis, I will vote for all of them.

75 year-old? Go to the U.S. Supreme Court and look at some of the people there – 90, 90-something – on the basis that for that particular high body, experience is an important factor. That's it. Look around all the different courts around here, you will see; in those places you can put young judges there. But that particular one requires many years of knowing the law and examining the law.

The hydro was tied up to the Vale issue. Vale had proposed that once they reached an understanding with us on that railroad, they will rehabilitate the original unit which has only 64 megawatts. We have applied to the West Africa Power Pool, because we are part of that, so that we could do upstream storage that will take us up to 1,000 megawatts. The process has been slow; that's why I said that this afternoon, we have a meeting on this power sector to resolve that issue with our partners, to see how we can move ahead to get some kind of cooperation among all of them to restore that. At the same time, two years ago when we assessed the hydro plant, we estimated what it was going to cost us. Since that time, it will cost us much more because people keep going there and taking things and breaking things and taking it for scrap. We've got a big problem here, big problem. I went over the St. Paul River bridge the other day. Normally, when you go there you just go smoothly; this time you go there, you have to bump. So I had to ask, why we have to bump on this thing. They say because people are coming here trying to steal the steel thing that's in the bridge. What is wrong with our people? It's for them! These public services are for them and for their service, and they go behind and destroy it! This is Liberia.

### **Criticism**

**Question:** (Jacob Parlay, Liberia Broadcasting System): You were elected in 2005. Subsequently, you were inaugurated in January 2006. Since then, some of us continue to see rapid development in this country. I travelled along with you in Grand Gedeh, Bong County and Grand Bassa. All along the road, in the bushes, people came out and they spoke about the great job that you are doing. But Your Excellency, despite all this, there are comments suggesting that nothing is going on, and I guess from political

practices, it could be an attempt to discourage you from doing the good job for the Liberian people. As a human being, how do you respond to that, Your Excellency?

**President Sirleaf:** They can't discourage me. I mean, what we're doing is there for people to see. We just do what we have to do. We stay focused; we do the development; we let the Liberian people see it, it's to their service, it's to their benefit. They are satisfied. That's all that bothers me. It doesn't worry me, once the Liberian people are satisfied with what we're doing. That's it.

### **Hotel Africa**

**Question** (Philip N. Wesseh, *Inquirer* newspaper): Madam President, you spoke about the destruction of certain areas. What is your government doing about Hotel Africa?

**President Sirleaf:** We're trying to find an investor for it. Again, just as I was saying about the hydro: At one point, we had an investor. As soon as the people around saw investors on the spot, trying to make assessment, oh....now is the time we got to move everything quick before they come. Go there now; it's just a shell – a complete shell. I don't even know whether it hasn't been structurally compromised, which means they whole thing may have to come down before we can do anything there. But we are talking to some people. There are some trade missions from South Africa, France and other people. A French mission was just here with some business people. They've been looking at the hotel sector to see what we can do. So, we hope that we will be able to get an investor interested. It is not a government project. We've got to interest a private investor.

### **Elections**

**Question** (Sam Dean, publisher, *Independent* newspaper): Are you preparing for a run-off or are you taking a straight shot for 2011?

**President Sirleaf:** Anybody in a race prepares to win that line as quickly as possible. If you don't, that's another story; then you go and re-prepare, but you've got prepare yourself to get the best out of it. So, I'm preparing to get the best out of it.

**Follow up:** So that's a straight shot?

**President Sirleaf:** Of course!

### **Reconciliation**

**Question** (Varney Kamara, The *Diary* newspaper): Reconciliation has been stressed by this government as an important pillar in bringing peace, lasting peace to the Liberian people. Ahead of the October 2011 elections, we've already sensed that the political

climate is getting tense, with the opposition camp sometime ago accusing you, Madam President, of lacking the will to reconcile the Liberian people. Of late, we've also heard from the Ministry of Information, threatening gutter politics if the opposition so desire. Saturday is Unification Day. Interestingly, however, in the midst of all of these confrontations, you have decided to invite the opposition. My concern is, what is your strategy ahead of this Unification Day and where does this lead us to the issue of general reconciliation?

**President Sirleaf:** I've tried with reconciliation from Day One by having an inclusive government. I've tried to meet everybody. I've travelled with opposition people. But this is election year, and you can expect that things will go all kinds of ways. Sometimes some of the same people who stand up and make all the talk, they finish meeting with me the night before, and we talk. When we meet at social events, you see us all laughing, hugging and what not. The next day somebody will say something else. That's part of the political game, that's part of the democratic process. The invitation to the opposition for Unification Day is not just a one-time thing. Every event that we have – Ambassador [Emmett] Kennedy is right back there; we make sure that we invite all opposition leaders. Some come, like Dr. [Togba-Nah] Tipoteh comes to every single one of them, and we applaud him for that. Sometimes Cllr. [Winston] Tubman will come to some, sometimes Cllr. [Charles] Brumskine comes to some. So it's up to them. Our duty as a government is to invite all leaders from all segments of the society, including political parties, and we do that. This one is no exception.

### **Nigerian Oil Deal**

**Question** (Sheriff Adams, *News* newspaper): The General Auditing Commission has released several audit reports. Amongst them is the report on the Liberian oil deal. Mr. [Harry] Greaves, the former Managing Director [of the Liberia Petroleum Refining Company (LPRC)] has been fighting in the media. The report, in a way, accuses Mr. Greaves of a lack of transparency, etc. But, Madam President, what do you know about this Nigerian oil deal, what can you tell the Liberian people?

**President Sirleaf:** All I know is that a request was made to the Nigerian government in 2005 to help Liberia with oil. We endorsed that. It was concluded between the Liberia Petroleum Refining Company and the Nigerian Oil Company. Now, the way this thing works is that the Nigerians handled the transaction because we don't have the money to say we will go and pay for the oil, that they will give it to us, even if they give it to us with a margin, that we have the money to pay. So a Nigerian company has to lift the oil from there, sell it, pay the Nigerian Oil Company, and all that comes to the country is what they call the "Margin" – the amount that represents whatever small discount the Nigerian government allows. That one was handled by LPRC. And I believe that Mr.

Greaves has said that he's made all the documents available. The documents are there on record for anybody to see. We are in a current oil deal right now, following the same basis. Again, LPRC is handling that and I believe the Chairman of the LPRC Board, Professor Wilson Tarpeh, had a meeting, he called the media, he called everybody and he told them how it works. He also told them whatever proceeds come to the government, we have said that the proceeds must be used, this time, not just to go in the general budget, but it will be used for specific infrastructure. We've asked them to be transparent; tell them what the proceeds are, what it's being used for. So, on that one, the records are there. Please go there anytime, whether it's to Mr. T. Nelson Williams. The records are there; the records did not go with Mr. Greaves. The records are part of the institutional accounts which are available for people to see.

### **Poverty Reduction Strategy**

**Question** (Augustus Mawolo, *New Liberia* newspaper/freelance journalist with the West Africa Democracy Radio): Madam President, I am told that by 30<sup>th</sup> June, the Poverty Reduction Strategy is supposed to be coming to an end. Yesterday, fortunately for me while monitoring the radio, I heard the Planning Minister [Amara Konneh] saying the time will be extended to December this year. What I'd like to know is that in terms of percentage, how much success can you say that your government has recorded under the Poverty Reduction Strategy, the guiding principle of your government?

**President Sirleaf:** I'm not going to get into percentages; you go the Ministry of Planning and Economic Affairs on that. I don't want a headline tomorrow that says, "President say X percentage," then you go check all the records and then you say it's not X percentage. Since I don't have that number in my mind, go to him. But I know it was extended for us to be able to achieve some of those goals that, because of unanticipated difficulties, we were not able to reach. But let me him to please give you that information.

### **Unity Party**

**Question** (Edward M. Morte, *National Chronicle* newspaper): According to a report, the Unity Party will be going for a Primary sometime in June, and there are reports that people with no substance in the party are using money to go on the party ticket which, of course, will make the party to lose votes. What is your plan on that?

**President Sirleaf:** I don't know how to carry [inaudible] with no substance. By whose calculation, by whose assessment? Anyway, that's internal party thing. We don't talk it with government press conference. That my internal party business; we will deal with it there.

**Question** (Philip N. Wesseh, *Inquirer* newspaper): Madam President, what is the issue about this ELWA land, between the government and the owner of the land or the station? What's the status now?

**Question** (Jallah Grayfield, Love TV/FM): Madam President, this concerns the Libya Holding Project here, the Ducor Palace Hotel. Sometime back, the government was moving some people, evicting them, and so what's happening? Is the Libyan crisis having a negative impact on that project?

### **ELWA Land Issue**

**President Sirleaf:** Well, on the ELWA land, ELWA was granted, in the seventies, 137 acres of land. From that time until now, they have only developed about 9 acres or so. What we said to them is: We needed to find a large spot of land to be able to build a major government administrative building, so please give us, out of that, 11 acres; that we will work with you and be able to develop it. We are even now going to support your hospital which needs a lot of help. If you want a school, we'll help you to build the school. We can co-exist. But, of course, it became political. They say no and all of that. The agreement with the government is clear: you are supposed to use it for the purpose intended. So far, there are some people renting property on it and paying – that's against the agreement – but that's not our problem. Our problem is to work harmoniously with anyone to be able to reach an understanding where there will be a win-win situation. You can carry on your activity; we can do things that will improve the nation. But all the politics can into it. Anyway, we could, as a government, have exercised the right, under the Constitution, and say eminent domain, but we didn't want to do that. What we wanted to do was to reach an understanding. So, they still talking about it, and I hope that some understanding will be reached and they will see the wisdom to develop that area. That development will also benefit them, and benefit all the people in the King Gray area. The King Gray area people wrote to us, saying, they took our land; Tubman gave ELWA our land, and nothing has happened. We didn't get any benefit. They didn't tell us when they took our land, so we want all our land back. We told the King Gray people, leave it. Anyway, we are trying to resolve it in a very amicable way.

### **Ducor Palace Hotel**

Yes, the Ducor Hotel is affected by the Libyan crisis. And, again, it goes to tell you that sometimes people do not seek the national interest. That project should have started. It was my own church, the Methodist Church, that was claiming that land and fussing with us on it. I go to the First Methodist Church; it belongs to the J.J. Roberts Foundation. They've been claiming the land and we've been talking and talking. And we took so long

to resolve that one until the Libya crisis, which none of us anticipated, has now come. Yes, the project will be affected but, fortunately for us, we want to see how far the Libya thing will go. If it is unable to go with Libyan investment, we already have three other countries or three other investors that have expressed interest in it. So, on the moving of the people, that process is almost complete. They will conclude. It's being delayed, but I'm quite sure we will be able to move ahead with the Ducor project.

### **Closing Remarks**

**Mr. Cyrus Badio (Press Secretary):** Madam President, we've gone well over the one hour allotted. Except there is something else you want to say, we want to bring this to a close.

**President Sirleaf:** Just to say thank you all for the good questions and that you are part of whatever progress this nation makes. What you report to the outside world will influence what they do here, how they invest, how they regard us, how they promote you. So while we respect your watchdog function, and in no way will we interfere with that, we'll continue to promote and support a free press in all ways. Every now and then, there may be some slippage here and there; if there's slippage, we correct it to make sure we stay on course. But we also ask you to be nationalistic and to be able to handle things in such a way that you bring pride to yourself, to your country. Thank you.