

**Commencement Address by H.E. President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf  
At the 3rd Graduation Exercise  
Of the Firestone Liberia Senior High School  
Saturday, July 16, 2011**

President Charles Stuart;  
The Faculty and Staff of the Firestone Liberia Senior High School;  
The Graduating Class of 2011;  
Families and Friends;  
Guests;  
Ladies and Gentlemen:

Let us, Dear Friends, give praise and thanks to Almighty God, by whose Providence we are guided, and from whom all blessings flow.

I am always happy to address our future leaders at graduation time, most especially this Class of 2011, which has already proven its significance by producing top-level students capable of passing the West African Examinations Council (WAEC) Exams, including the only Division 1 student this year, 19-year-old Saidu Konneh, who I had the pleasure to meet last month, and commended him for his achievement.

I congratulate you, Class of 2011. With smart young people like you in this Graduating Class, full of aspirations and dreams and ambition, I have no doubt that the future of this great nation – our Liberia – will be in safe and excellent hands. And with you staying the course, and making the most of your educational opportunities, the day will come when Liberia will no longer need a Poverty Reduction Strategy because educated people like you will have lifted our country out of poverty.

Our thanks and deep appreciation to the Firestone Liberia family, and to the President, faculty, administrators and staff for transforming this high school into an

institution that is turning out 173 graduates, all of them determined, we trust, to further their education. For education, as we know only too well, is the cornerstone of the development of any nation, most especially one emerging from decades of upheaval and self-destruction.

Let me seize this opportunity to commend Firestone Liberia, which has been in our country for some 80 years, for bringing new life and vitality and social development responsibility to its plantations, including providing quality education to the children of its employees, as evidenced by the occasion we celebrate today, namely, the graduation of the third senior class in recent years.

You, Graduates of the Class of 2011, are beneficiaries of the social responsibility being met by Firestone through the provision of education, as well as other social services, in the communities where the company operates.

Thank you, also, to the parents, guardians, family and other sponsors of this Graduating Class, for providing the financial, emotional and moral support that has gotten them this far. Your job is not yet done. We must get them to college and prepare them for professional jobs and for leadership.

Future Leaders of Liberia:

The value of education is something that nobody can ever take away from you. You've worked hard to earn a high school diploma, recognizing that in order to be whatever you want to be, you must acquire the necessary knowledge and skills.

Looking around at these bright, young faces, I am reminded of my own graduation from high school and the path I took. Not long after I graduated from CWA in 1956, I got married. I was 17 years old – the same age as some of you here today. Were I a member of this Class of 2011, I would not be headed for the altar but going off to college, which is where I want all of you to go, to learn and grow and expand your vistas and succeed.

Your prospects are so much better today because of the opportunities that our Government has made possible since taking office in 2006. One of our key goals has

been to provide access to quality education at all levels, in support of our country's social and economic development. Our Poverty Reduction Strategy underscored the need to improve the quality of tertiary education while implementing a phased expansion and decentralization of our higher education system. More specifically, we called for the establishment of new institutions of higher learning outside the capital and in all 15 counties.

In furthering your education, you no longer have to go to Monrovia for school. Close to Firestone is the Grand Bassa Community College in Buchanan, which last October broke ground for a four-year college. For those interested in teaching – and we definitely need many more good teachers – there's the Kakata Rural Teacher Training Institute (KRTTI). And if you're more skilled with your hands, there's the Booker Washington Institute (BWI) where you can gain vocational training and specialize in a trade. I name these institutions because all of them are within easy reach of where you now live.

But, of course, there are other State-run institutions: the University of Liberia, with its renovated and expanded campus at Fendall, in Montserrado County; the W.V.S. Tubman University in Harper, Maryland County; a regional college in Nimba County, with others soon to follow in Grand Gedeh, in Lofa for this year's Independence Day celebrations, one in Gbarnga that will specialize in Information Technology, and the David Straz Polytechnic, in Sinje, Grand Cape Mount, to serve surrounding counties.

And when you do get to university or college, let me suggest a few professions to pursue. Our country desperately needs engineers (civil, electrical, mechanical and petroleum; scientists (agronomists and geologists, for example), doctors, nurses, and teachers to push forward our development agenda. The numbers of students graduating in these disciplines fall far short of what the country requires. We also need entrepreneurs, managers, organizers, and inventors, as well as highly trained lab technologists, masons, electricians, carpenters, welders, and other craftsmen.

Education, I repeat, is the cornerstone for development. For that reason, last year's WAEC scores were both a shock and a disappointment, when not a single student among the thousands who sat the exam, ranked in the first category. Thankfully, the

situation has improved slightly this year, and over half of the 23,000 students who sat the exams passed.

We are proud that not only did Firestone Senior High produce the only Division 1 student to sit the exam, but also that all 167 seniors who sat the WAEC passed, giving the school a 100 percent pass rate. That deserves and “E,” for Excellent.

We know that the root cause of the high failure rate in our school system is the lack of qualified teachers. Last year, when we checked the number of students enrolled in teaching programs at our public universities, we were alarmed at the very low numbers, that of the over 21,000 students at the University of Liberia, for example, only about 800 were enrolled in its Teachers College. We cannot afford, as an emerging nation, to produce so few teachers. Who would teach our students?

We therefore introduced an incentive to encourage more students to enter the teaching profession. We established a Financial Aid Program, in which we offer free tuition and fees, and a monthly stipend to all students, not already on government payroll, enrolled in the Teachers College of the University of Liberia and the College of Education at Tubman University in Harper. Should some of you decide to become teachers, you, too, will receive this financial aid package, which in essence, means that you’ll get your college education free! In exchange, the Government requires you to teach in our public school system for two years – not a long time, relatively speaking. I hope some of you will consider and take advantage of this compelling opportunity.

Under another program, the Government also offers free education for students pursuing a degree in medicine, as well as free paramedical education. You can attend the Tubman National Institute of Medical Arts (TNIMA) and the Government will pay your tuition for the three years. In return, you must fulfill a commitment to serve wherever the Government assigns you in the health sector. In this way, we hope to attract more of our clever students to this indispensable healing profession.

And when you’ve acquired a solid and prized education, there will be job opportunities for you in our mining, energy, agriculture, forestry, construction, or community development sectors. Four years from now, when you graduate from

college, the many concessionaires we've attracted to Liberia, and the agreements we've signed, in every possible field of industry and trade, amounting to more than US\$16 billion, will be fully operational and moving full speed ahead.

Investors will be creating jobs and improving infrastructure across the country, as well as hiring and training qualified Liberians with the skills that will transform our nation into an agro-industrial State, where we manufacture finished goods and add value to our products instead of simply exporting raw materials. Our plan also calls for transferring the bulk of employment to the private sector, moving away from our present condition where government is the largest employer.

This Government is definitely keeping the promise on education, Ladies and Gentlemen. We have come a long way since 2006, but we're not done yet. We are laying the foundation for quality education in Liberia, and that work must continue onward.

Remember that graduation from high school is but a stepping stone to the rest of your life. My message to you is simple: Continue your education, and expand your horizons. In that way you will be preparing to do your part for our New Vision that will see Liberia move from dependency to self-sufficiency, from poverty to prosperity, from a low-income country to a middle-income country by the year 2030.

Our continent, Africa, is very young, and that includes you, the youth of Liberia. The future belongs to you. The responsibility of my generation is to help to prepare you for the future. You must have the skills to enable you to grasp that opportunity and move with it, so that what we leave in your hands, you'll be able to build upon, and expand, and make it even more than what it is today.

Once again, we congratulate and applaud you, Class of 2011. Give yourselves a hand! May God richly bless and guide each and every one of you, today, tomorrow, and as you progress to the next stage in your life's journey.

And may God continue to protect and bless our Republic of Liberia!

I thank you.