

**Goodwill Message by H.E. President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf
Commander-In-Chief of the Armed Forces of Liberia
At 55th Armed Forces Day Celebrations
Saturday, February 11, 2012**

Fellow Liberians;
Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen;
Protocol has already been observed.

Let me first of all welcome all of you, especially our foreign guests and dignitaries who are visiting with us on this auspicious occasion, marking the 55th Anniversary Celebrations of Armed Forces Day. A special welcome to you, the Chief of Defense Staff of La Côte d'Ivoire. This day also marks the 104th year of the existence of our military.

We are also very glad to see families and friends of our military personnel who are also here to grace this occasion. These families are the supporting pillars of our military. Please accept our thanks and appreciation for your support and for giving these young men and women of the AFL the necessary boost to perform their professional duties.

The historical path of our Armed Forces is covered with nobility and challenges in rendering service to our nation. On this day every year, we honor our gallant men and women of the AFL for their service to the nation, in protecting the territorial integrity of our beloved Liberia. We honor and salute them for their commitment and discipline in carrying out their duties. Today, we look forward towards the future with optimism that our new Army and Coast Guard will continue their professional development within the context of the overall Defense Sector Reform.

Let me congratulate our friend, Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield, and all of those who have worked with her, for her leadership and outstanding services rendered to the people of Liberia. Her splendid remarks demonstrate the level of commitment the United States Government has outlined in helping to build the AFL. Thanks to all the mentors and the trainers for their tireless efforts in helping to shape our military.

Similar thanks to the UNMIL Force Commander, Major General Muhammad Khalid, for his timely insight during the recently held AFL Symposium on the theme: "Enhancing Military Capabilities and Professionalism, Prospects and Challenges Facing the Armed Forces of Liberia in a Democratic

Liberia.” His presentation generated further momentum and has spurred a challenging dialogue in light of UNMIL’s transition.

As I recall, we began building our military with the full support and collaboration with our major partner, the United States Government, UNMIL and ECOWAS countries. These new soldiers and sailors went through a rigorous vetting process, based on integrity, Order of Merit and discipline, among other criteria. We included, for the first time in our nation’s history, the issue of human rights vetting for each and every new recruit. Our communities became involved. The communities in which potential recruits lived had a voice in the process. This was and continues to be a critical piece in restoring public confidence in the security sector.

From the humble beginning of 106 new Army graduates in 2006, we have restructured and trained a military of nearly 2,000 persons who are today serving under the 23rd Infantry Brigade and our Coast Guard. Our new military is a vivid reflection of our geographic and social representation – truly a national mosaic.

To date, nearly 300 military personnel, officers and Non-Commissioned Officers have traveled outside of Liberia to attend training courses in Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone, Rwanda, the People’s Republic of China, and the United States of America. We extend our gratitude to all of our partners who have and continue to provide training opportunities for personnel of our Armed Forces. It is our hope that these training opportunities will continue and remain strategic in the professional development of the men and women of our Armed Forces.

As the transformation of our new Armed Forces is on track, we shall continue to improve and expand existing facilities for our military personnel and their families. When I attended the Armed Forces Affiliation Day, a little over a month ago, I was very happy to see families of our soldiers, side by side at the EBK Barracks. Their children are attending the elementary school within the EBK Barracks. The intent is to provide quality education to children of our military personnel.

I am also pleased to note the expansion of the Health Clinic at the EBK Barracks. This expansion, made possible by their own work, will provide better and timely health services to our soldiers and their families. We will need to further equip this clinic and construct additional health facilities to meet the needs of our soldiers and sailors.

As we look ahead, we can say that the foundation has been laid for future benefits to personnel in our Armed Forces. Upon my approval, the Minister of Defense has opened a non-withdrawal pension account at one of our local banks. Contributions are being deposited to provide a reasonable lump sum in order to benefit personnel of our Armed Forces who meet the requisite time in service of not less than fifteen years.

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen:

Within the past six years, the gross salaries of all of our soldiers have risen by over 100 percent, including Non-Commissioned Officers and Officers alike. As our revenue base expands within the context of general salary improvements, the future looks bright for further salary increases for our military personnel.

While we reflect on the advances made over the last six years, we make note of some areas still in need of additional improvement. The attrition rate in the AFL has been a matter of concern. It has been written and discussed about for some time. Let me present the facts:

As indicated earlier by the Minister of Defense, during the past three to six years, up to and including today, the combined attrition rate in the AFL out of 2,169 personnel is calculated at 10.42 percent. This is broken down as follows: Deaths amounted to less than 1 percent; various discharges (honorable, dishonorable, and medical) amounted to 1 percent; and absent without leave (AWOL) and drop from roll (DFR) a majority 8.67 percent. This represents only 226 persons during the first several years, not the exaggerated rate that is being rumored.

The overwhelming reasons for the high percentage of AWOL have been due to lack of adequate facilities, accommodations, and social constraint of long separation from their families. This is not an insurmountable problem, and one which we much find a solution to.

I am aware that our military barracks are overcrowded due to limited accommodation space. We are treating this as a matter of priority. Greater emphasis will continue to be placed on the welfare of our military personnel and their families.

It is our intention to renovate the various military barracks across the country in the coming years, for additional living quarters, including educational and recreational facilities. Our soldiers need to live in decent

housing environments. Their dependents need to attend school and have recreational facilities to socialize.

I assure you of our commitment to improve this situation. We will support the budgetary request from the Minister of Defense to renovate and refurbish additional housing units at Camp Todee Military Barracks, as well as the Coast Guard Base, and other military barracks. In the coming months, you will see some improvements towards these areas for our military personnel and families. This is a matter of priority, and it shall be reflected in requested budgetary appropriation to be submitted to the Honorable Legislature, many of whom are here and are hearing this appeal.

To our soldiers and Coast Guard personnel, I want to make something very clear to you: Soldiers and Coast Guard personnel are not politicians. You are governed by provisions under the UCMJ as well as Army Regulations and other military regulations. You shall be held accountable for your actions and statements within the framework of the UCMJ.

As AFL personnel, you all swore to uphold loyalty and allegiance to the Liberian State. Loyalty is one of the key core values of the AFL, and its importance is stressed by the new National Defense Act (NDA) of 2008, Chapter 8:1 which states: "All members of the AFL shall owe their full and undivided allegiance to the Republic of Liberia. They shall take no action or permit any activity that is contrary or injurious to the Constitution, the laws and people of Liberia."

As can be seen, the National Defense Act is unequivocal about the demand of the State for loyalty from its men and women in arms. There is therefore no two ways about it. Your loyalty must be without doubt and unequivocal. Personnel of the AFL must also learn to respect and be subject to the principle of the civilian control of the military. This is paramount for sustaining our democracy and supporting our development agenda.

Once again, you are not politicians. You are required to remain politically neutral. According to Chapter 8.3 of the New Defense Act: "As citizens, all members of the AFL shall have the right to a secret vote, but in all other ways they shall be politically neutral and shall not join, support or participate in the activities of any political party or similar organizations."

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, in order to meet the challenges of the transition process as UNMIL draws down, the size of the AFL will have to be increased and the attrition rate replaced. The AFL strength must be

augmented to reach its minimum operational strength to enable it become reasonably operational by 2014. This is something that must begin within the shortest time frame. I am informed that the AFL is prepared to begin the recruitment process as soon as the funds are made available. I shall again be asking the National Legislature for the necessary appropriations to begin the next recruitment into the AFL within the next few months.

Men and women recruited during the upcoming recruitment cycle are expected to replenish the attrition rate, and to augment the strength of the Engineering Company to a Battalion, the Coast Guard to a Company Size, among other units as required.

The Minister of National Defense has assured me that the AFL is ready to begin the first full recruitment drive and training of our new recruits solely by personnel of our new Armed Forces. This is commendable for the progress that they have achieved.

We call upon our partners once more to support our efforts in making the AFL self-proficient. It has been through these collaborative efforts that we have reached this far. Let us maintain this partnership and relationship as the AFL strives to develop professionally.

Our forthcoming National Defense Strategy is in its final stages of completion. This National Defense Strategy will outline the policy direction for carrying out the missions of the AFL and its constitutional mandate. It will build upon our National Security Strategy, and the policy and legal transformation which are taking place today.

Fellow Liberians;
Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen:

As we prepare for the eventual transition of UNMIL, I am pleased to announce forthwith the Government's transitional team, to work alongside UNMIL in preparation for this process. I have appointed the Minister of National Defense as the lead coordinator, along with the Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Justice, Finance, Internal Affairs, and the Director of Police, the Director of NSA, and the Commissioner of Immigration. They will serve as Members of the Joint Transitional Core Group along with UNMIL for the transitional process.

We are mindful that during the upcoming budgetary preparation, we must seek the necessary budgetary allotments to absorb the additional capital

and recurrent costs needed to improve and strengthen the operational capacities of our military, security and intelligence agencies. This is a national security priority.

I call upon the Armed Forces of Liberia and all our security agencies and paramilitary organizations to promote collective regional security. We must strengthen our partnership and improve dialogue with our neighboring sisterly States in the Mano River Union. Such initiative will enhance cross-border confidence and improve security within our sub-region.

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen:

I ask you to join me in extending congratulations to our Distinguished Service Order Recipients: Her Excellency Linda Thomas-Greenfield, United States Ambassador to Liberia, for her steadfast commitment to Liberia's Security Sector Reform and Defense Sector Reform process.

Congratulations to Colonel Sue Ann Sandusky, Defense Attaché at the United States Embassy in Monrovia, for her guidance in coordinating and advocating for sustained support under the United States-Liberia security cooperation programs.

And also congratulations to Commander Jennifer Ketchum, Maritime Advisor at the United States Embassy in Monrovia, for her instrumental role in the restructuring and training of the reactivated Liberia Coast Guard.

Similar congratulations to Counsellor David Jallah, Dean of the Lewis Arthur Grimes School of Law, for his commitment and professional representation of Civil Society on the Joint Personnel Board.

Although Senior Colonel Liu Shengli, former Military Naval and Air Attaché at the Chinese Embassy in Monrovia, has already departed for home, we want to say congratulations to him, through the Ambassador that is here, for his dedication and support of our Defense Sector Reform, and the very encouraging support we have received from the Chinese People's Liberation Army.

Dear Friends, we want to commend Minister Samukai for his leadership, dedication and service, and call on him to work harder to build upon the foundation that has already been laid for the AFL. He must ensure that the

AFL develops into a credible Force for Good and a contributor to Liberia's security and its economic development. He must ensure that the welfare of the AFL remains his highest priority. Thank you, Members of the Legislature, for confirming him.

My personal thanks and appreciation goes to Major General Abdurrahman, Command Officer-In-Charge of the AFL, and his Corps of Officers, and Non-Commissioned Officers for their leadership, loyalty and discipline. Let us continue to uplift the men and women of the AFL as we grow and move ahead. Let me assure you that one of the commitments, one of the tasks of General Abdurrahman is to ensure that we train someone to become the Liberian Chief of Staff.

To you, the gallant men and women of the Armed Forces of Liberia, whose discipline, commitment and loyalty to the nation makes us all feel proud, I say thank for the service to the nation. It is my honor, and I am humbled, to serve as the Commander-In-Chief.

And to all those Old Soldiers and Officers who have served this country diligently, many of them in this audience, we salute you for your service, and we honor you for your sacrifice.

Fellow Liberians, the face of our new AFL is full of hope for the future. Today in our midst, one of our new AFL Officers has become the first Officer of the new Armed Forces of Liberia to obtain a Master's Degree in Military Arts and Sciences. He recently completed his studies at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth in Kansas, U.S.A. This Officer, who is now standing to be able to receive your applause, serves as the Deputy J-3. He is also Airborne Qualified, which means he can jump from a moving aircraft at an altitude of 10,000 feet. Congratulations to Officer Daniel Ziankhan of the AFL.

I am told that within the next year, at least three other Officers of our new AFL will have obtained their Master's Degree after completing their Command and General Staff Training abroad. My congratulations to the leadership of the Ministry of Defense and the Armed Forces of Liberia.

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen;
Fellow Citizens:

Six years ago, our focus was on restoration and reform. Today, our focus is on long-term security and economic development. Let us proceed with greater vigor and determination to develop Liberia. My strong

commendation, my salute, to the gallant men and women of the Armed Forces of Liberia.

HAPPY ARMED FORCES DAY! GOD BLESS LIBERIA!