

Opening Remarks

Liberia Poverty Reduction Forum

By H.E. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf
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Berlin, Germany
[26-27 June 2008]

**Minister Wieczorek-Zeul, Ms. Loj,
Ms. Fore, Mr. Wormser,
Heads of Delegations, Honored Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen:**

Let me extend a warm welcome to all of you to Liberia's 2008 Poverty Reduction Forum. I thank you for traveling long distances and taking time out of your busy schedules to show your support for Liberia. It means a great deal to us that so many people are willing to join us in our efforts to achieve rapid, inclusive and sustainable development. I thank those who have spent time over the past few months organizing this event. I thank the World Bank and other partners for the preparation support.

A special thanks to the Chancellor, the Ministers and our friends in Germany for hosting us here in Berlin, and for their commitment to Liberia's reconstruction efforts. The German people have supported our clearance of arrears to the World Bank, IMF, and ADB with generous contributions. Later today, Minister Wieczorek-Zeul and Minister Sayeh will sign an agreement that will immediately cancel over \$400 million in bilateral debt to Germany. To date, Germany has announced commitments to Liberia of 20 million Euros, including an important contribution to the Liberian Reconstruction Trust Fund to finance critical infrastructure projects. Thank you, Minister Wieczorek-Zeul, for your leadership and vision.

While it is wonderful to see so many old and new friends and to visit the historic city of Berlin, we are here for the next two days for serious business. We are here to focus our collective energies on the task of continuing to rebuild Liberia from the ashes of war, to create a brighter, more secure and more prosperous future for the Liberian people. I hope that every meeting we hold, every presentation we listen to, and every discussion we have in the next two days will focus on supporting the everyday people of Liberia. They are the reason we are here. They have been through the nightmare of senseless violence and tragedy during 14 long years of civil war. They have seen their towns and villages destroyed. They have lost their homes and their livelihoods. And every one of them lost friends and loved ones that were dear to them.

But they never lost their hope for a better future. They never gave up on their dreams for a return to peace, the opportunity to provide for their families, the ability to give their children a decent education. Their patience and resilience is now beginning to be rewarded. Because of their own hard work and courage, and because of the support of all of you in the international community, we are now on the road to achieving those dreams.

But we know that we are only at the beginning of that road and we are grateful for the strong support we have received along the way. We are especially thankful for the brave UN peacekeepers that have done a tremendous job in helping to provide the foundation for peace and recovery. They deserve our thanks, as does every member of the United Nations family that has supported their efforts.

We have come a long way since our last Partners' Forum in February 2007. With your support we have rebuilt and rehabilitated dozens of schools, hospitals, clinics and markets across the country. We have made life-saving vaccines, medicines and bed nets more readily available throughout the country. We have rehabilitated several roads, and are in the process of rebuilding others. We have begun to rebuild capacity in all sectors from education to health to finance and defense. We have restored electricity and piped water to some sections of Monrovia and to a few other urban cities. A few weeks from now we will further expand electricity connections. We have provided our farmers with seeds and tools to increase food production. We have tripled government revenues in two-and-a-half years, operated with a cash-based balanced budget, and taken strong steps to improve our public financial management.

One of the most important areas of progress since our last Forum is debt relief. In February 2007, we had made little progress and were struggling to obtain the necessary financing assurances. Today, thanks to every single country represented in this room, the situation is very different. We have cleared our arrears with the major multilaterals, reached the HIPC Decision Point, and obtained a generous agreement from the Paris Club. Our total debt today is about \$1 billion less than it was 18 months ago. We still have a ways to go but I want to thank every one of you for helping us move forward with debt relief.

It is tempting at this point to begin to become complacent. After all, we have successfully completed our First 150-Day Action Plan, the interim Poverty Reduction Strategy, and our Staff Monitored Program with the IMF. The economy is expanding rapidly as we attract foreign direct investment needed to reopen our mines and agriculture and forestry operations. People are returning to work. The emergency phase of our recovery is thus drawing to a close as we begin to focus on reconstruction and longer term development. In a few short weeks we will mark the five-year anniversary since the end of the war. We are very proud to have reached that milestone knowing that several countries coming out of conflict have not made it this far without slipping back into violence.

Yet any complacency would be misplaced. We are at a critical juncture in our recovery process. While the shadow of war is receding, it is far from gone. Many young ex-combatants remain unemployed, and the risk of a return to conflict remains real. For the first time in recent history several former senior officials have been arrested and charged with corruption or other violations, making their allies uneasy. The work of our Truth and Reconciliation Commission brings back to the forefront some of the most disturbing memories of the past. At the same time, high oil and food prices make day-to-day life more of a struggle for the very poor. We continue to welcome home tens of thousands of Liberian refugees from abroad, but face challenges in the repatriation and reintegration process. Under these circumstances, it is not difficult for agitators to stir up trouble and make our job more difficult.

The next three years will therefore be critical. I believe that our success or failure in that time will determine Liberia's future. We cannot wait and keep telling people to be patient for a job sometime in the future. We must forge ahead as quickly as possible. We need to see results now and show people that peace, democracy, hard work, accountability, and cooperation pay off with real dividends.

It is in this context that during the past year we came together to develop our vision, set our priorities, and chart our course for the future in our Poverty Reduction Strategy. *How* we developed the PRS was just as important as its ultimate content. We undertook an extensive process of public consultation across the country to hear directly from the Liberian people about their aspirations, expectations, and priorities. We held two-day meetings in each of our 15 counties, which in turn built on earlier district-level consultations. We encouraged each county to develop its own County Development Agenda. We included members of the legislature, traditional leaders, farmers, business people, women, youth, persons with disabilities, NGOs, our partners from the international community, and everyone else who wanted to participate and contribute.

We did this because I wanted to hear, and I wanted our Government officials to hear, what the Liberian people really want us to do. It was not easy, democracy being a very messy process, – but it was deeply satisfying and very helpful in allowing us to gain perspective and formulate our strategies. I believe this sent an important message to our people that we care about their participation and respect their views.

Out of this process came our vision for the future. It is not complicated or farfetched. Liberians want a nation that is peaceful, secure and prosperous. They want democratic and accountable governance based on justice and the rule of law. They

want decent economic opportunities, basic health care, and the opportunity to send their kids to school. That's all they ask. We must all, in this room, commit to giving it to them.

Based on what we heard them say, we designed our strategy around the four pillars of our development strategy: consolidating peace and security, revitalizing the economy, strengthening governance and the rule of law, and rehabilitating infrastructure and delivering basic services.

First, with respect to consolidating peace and security, during the next three years we want to firmly establish a stable and secure environment across Liberia. As the UNMIL forces draw down in the coming years, we must build capable, strong, and accountable security forces behind them. We must not only work to prevent a return to conflict, we must fight against crimes that affect everyday personal security, such as theft, assault, and gender-based violence. So we are working with our partners to train 2,000 new soldiers; 3,500 new police officers; and 2,000 immigration and naturalization officers.

Second, in terms of revitalizing the economy, our goal is to be on an irreversible path towards rapid, inclusive, and sustainable growth and development. We are aiming for economic growth to average over ten percent for the next several years. But we know that rapid growth alone is not enough. It must be widely shared throughout the country and create opportunities for groups that have been marginalized throughout our history. So we want to increase crop yields; make agricultural inputs more widely available; revitalize rubber, palm oil, timber and mining production with better opportunities for small operators; and reduce the costs of business and trade to lay the foundation for a much more diversified, competitive economy in the future. After one hundred and sixty years, we think it is time to add some value to our primary products. And we will continue to take strong steps to strengthen public financial management and try to ensure that every dollar of tax revenue is accounted for and used to further our development strategy.

Third, with respect to strengthening governance and the rule of law, our goal is to promote responsible institutions of justice, human rights, and governance. We are aiming to strengthen our district and county-level authorities to decentralize government and bring it close to the people. We are considering additional steps that need to be taken to enhance the effectiveness and integrity of our legal and judicial institutions. The Cabinet has just endorsed a far-ranging strategy to begin to overhaul

our civil service. And, we are fighting corruption by holding people accountable for their actions, increasing oversight, and establishing an anti-corruption commission.

Just yesterday, the World Bank Institute released its new Governance Indicators for 2007 and it showed a large improvement for Liberia for the second year in a row. In 2004, Liberia ranked 190th of 206 countries in the world on “control of corruption” – one of the worst rankings in the world. In 2006 our ranking jumped to 145th. And in 2007 we moved up to 113th. In three years, we have moved up 73 places. I am not yet satisfied, but I am pleased our efforts are beginning to show results.

Fourth, we want to rebuild the capabilities of, and provide new opportunities for, Liberia’s greatest asset – its people. So we are strengthening the delivery of basic services and rehabilitating our infrastructure. We want to ensure that 70 percent of our health facilities are delivering the basic package of health services by 2010, to reduce the infant mortality rate by ten-to-fifteen percent, and the maternal mortality rate by five-to-ten percent. We want to build approximately 300 new classrooms, repair 300 older ones, train over two thousand new teachers, and increase the net primary enrollment rate to 45 percent.

Rebuilding infrastructure is particularly important to achieving all of our goals, and you will hear us talk a great deal about infrastructure during this forum. Liberians consistently named roads as their number one priority during PRS consultations. Rebuilding Liberia’s road network is critical for almost every goal we wish to achieve, including maintaining security, creating jobs, revitalizing agriculture, increasing mineral and timber production, fighting rural poverty, decentralizing the Government, making schools available for children, and expanding access to health services. I dream of a Liberia in which women do not die in childbirth simply for want of a decent road to get them to a health facility.

Liberia is on the move. We have come a long way in the last few years. But we have a long way to go. Achieving our goals will depend mainly on the efforts, sacrifices, and perseverance of the Liberian people. The main responsibility lies with me, my government, and our people.

But we cannot get there on our own. I’d like to ask you for your endorsement of our PRS, and for your ongoing support as we implement it over the next three years. We need your ideas. We need your advice. We need your moral support. And, of course, we need your financial support.

There are many ways in which you can support our Strategy, but we would like you to particularly consider exceptional, additional funding for infrastructure. Funding for roads and the port remain seriously under-funded, and without additional funding in this area, we would have to scale back on our aspirations for the next three years. We would be constrained in creating an attractive environment for the private sector which we look to as the engine of growth in the medium-to-long term.

I would also like you to consider *how* you can best provide your funding. We would like to see a significant increase in funding for infrastructure and we would like to encourage you to provide that funding through the Liberia Reconstruction Trust Fund, which the World Bank is administering on our behalf. It makes it much easier for us if funding can be channeled into one fund, rather than through many different channels. Our friends at the World Bank and in Germany and Sweden have all contributed, but a tremendous funding gap still exists. This is a critically important way in which you can endorse our overall Strategy and support our highest priority activities.

I would also like to ask you to consider modest amounts of funding to directly support our budget. We do not expect, and are not asking for, huge sums to go through the budget, only modest initial sums to get us started. We know that we have much work to do to further strengthen our public financial management, but we have made strong initial strides. Modest budget support will help us to achieve those standards even more rapidly, and make our task of rebuilding effective Government services that much easier. It would also save on scarce Government capacity and better support reforms that can only be financed through the budget.

Finally, we need a speed up of the process of implementing both Government and partner-led projects. We need to reduce the time from commitment to cash, and from cash to completion. In some cases slow implementation has been due to weak Government capacity. In other cases it has been due to capacity problems and burdensome procedural requirements with partners. So I ask that you take a serious look at your capacities and procedures with a view towards speeding things up, and we will do the same.

As we move forward into this new chapter, we will be doing so without the direct services of two of our ablest and trusted servants: Minister Antoinette Sayeh and Minister Toga McIntosh. Minister Sayeh came to us from the World Bank, demonstrated the required commitment, exceeded our expectations and now goes to the IMF to a high level position that will enable her to continue to serve her country

and Africa in general. Minister McIntosh, who joins the Executive Board of the World Bank, is similarly placed. From a pariah state, snubbed for several years for every position to which it was entitled, we are proud that a Liberian now holds a high level position in each of our three key multilateral institutions.

Minister Sayeh and Minister McIntosh leave behind a strong legacy of achievement. It is no exaggeration to say that we would not be where we are today without their services. But we have a strong team in place, and we will be adding new members to the team very soon. As we move forward, we will continue resolutely on the course that they have helped us set. You can be assured there will be no change in direction, or speed, in where we are going. You can be assured that our commitment and political will to reform remain unwavering.

As I look ahead to the next three years, I want to be able to say our country is at peace. I want to say we are able to ensure that a child born today in Liberia has greater opportunities than the current generation inherited. I want to say that our people can provide for their families. I want to say that we have started to build a just and equitable society.

We are glad that with your support, our nation has been blessed with the chance to move from the crisis of the past, to the opportunity of the present, and to the promise of hope for the future. I am convinced that Liberia can be a success story, a nation capable of moving from dependency to self-sufficiency, from aid to trade in sustained economic performance, from pariah to strong and stable partner with accountable institutions.

We are committed as a people to build a new Liberia from the ruins of war to a future of hope and promise. We thank you for the support you have provided so far, and look forward to working with you over the next two days, the coming months, and into the future.

Thank you very much.