

**Special Statement by H.E. President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf
at the Closing Ceremony of the Joint Council of Chiefs and Elders Meeting
of Border Communities of Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire
Zwedru, Grand Gedeh County
Saturday, October 19, 2013**

Mr. President, and my Dear Brother, a very warm welcome to you!

A very warm welcome to all our brothers and sisters, from la Côte d'Ivoire, all our special guests, the citizens of Zwedru who serve as our host, and to all our partners. We trust that your time with us will be both fulfilling and resulting, and we thank you for being an integral part of this peace and reconciliation process to benefit our peoples on both sides of our common border.

We thank our chiefs and elders for the tremendous work over the past three days; the officials who granted them the support; the support staff that worked with them in preparing us for this meeting today. The launching of the “Palava Hut Talk” by the Independent National Commission on Human Rights (INCHR), involving chiefs and elders from both countries, will help us to focus and reinforce our efforts in building relationships in our country and across the border on peace, security and reconciliation and development as a means of promoting peace.

As everyone knows, this process of reconciliation, particularly among peoples on the eastern border, has been ongoing for several months; it did not start at this event. Many of the people have been identifying the policies, the measures, the approaches that will return us to the humble days when our people on both sides of the border – with common tradition, common culture – worked together in peace and tranquility in pursuit of common development objectives.

It is not an option for Côte d'Ivoire and Liberia to work together, dear friends; it is a necessity. We must, therefore, find new ways to enhance our cooperation and collaboration, and explore all avenues to make sure that there will never be conflict again between our two countries, among our Mano River Union countries, and throughout West Africa.

As a result of this four-day Joint Council Meeting, we look forward to improved relationships between and amongst inter-regional and trans-border groups, including our chiefs and elders; and to a more inclusive dialogue platform responsive to the peace, security and reconciliation needs of our citizens, particularly those in the trans-border communities.

We applaud the work of all of the officials – central and local – and the many institutions in both countries that have worked and have been involved in managing the tension and conflicts, and promoting peace in our region. As a result, today we no longer hear about cross-border violence. This has led to a reduction in the refugee population which peaked at more than 200,000 in early 2011, but is now down to 58,331 as at the end of September. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees tells us that they expect that 16,000 of our brothers and sisters from the Ivory Coast will return home before the end of this year.

I want to applaud my brother, President Alassane Ouattara, who has said to all of them, “We extend to all of you the continuing hand of friendship and we ask you to come home.” Mr. President, we are going to work with you to help them return home.

The Joint Communiqué our two governments have just signed, addressing issue of border security, youth empowerment, refugee repatriation and reconciliation, reflects what we all agree as the way forward for our mutual stability and development and, beyond that, for our sub- region. The document also calls for us to re-establish mechanisms for cooperation in the economic, education and cultural fields, leading to greater unity among our peoples.

Here, in this peaceful setting, dear friends, one cannot but reflect on how far we have come from the days when we had problems on our border. We also remember that, with the support with our brother leaders in the sub-region in West Africa, we are celebrating our tenth consecutive year of peace. We thank all of those, starting from the 2003 Accra Peace Accord, that have enabled us to achieve this.

Mr. President, a lot is going on to deepen the economic ties between our two countries. Our two countries, in partnership with the European Union, are currently implementing a project that will bring electricity out of la Cote d'Ivoire to 18 towns and communities in Liberia. As many of you are aware, we currently constructing and erecting light poles, transmission and distribution lines here in Zwedru, Toe Town, Ganta, and elsewhere. This project will ultimately bring affordable electricity to over 10,000 families. We are also building a more powerful line from Man, Côte d'Ivoire, to Yekepa, then down to Buchanan. This line ends up in Sierra Leone and Guinea, connecting our four countries to what is called the West Africa Power Pool.

We are also working together to rebuild roads that link our two countries. Last month, we signed an agreement with the African Development Bank to finance a paved road from Fish Town to Harper. As you know, Harper is only a short drive to the Cavalla River, and then into Côte d'Ivoire. We hope, together, we can work to build that bridge across the Cavalla River and pave the roads on both sides so that in five years, seven years, we will be able to drive from Monrovia, Zwedru or Harper all the way to Abidjan.

Mr. President, we thank you, we thank all of you. We applaud our brothers and sisters in the Mano River Union as we work together in helping to achieve the inter-connectivity that will facilitate the movement of goods and services across borders with the minimum of impediment. That is how we develop our sub-region; that is how the economic cooperation we are able to attract, the investment for private capital, the promotion and development of infrastructure will enable our country to become competitive with others in the world.

In closing, let me applaud all of those in this hall, all of those who have been in the vicinity of all the areas of Zwedru over the past week making contribution to peace and development. We thank the humanitarian agencies that have provided support to the refugee population; our host communities in Grand Gedeh County, in Nimba County, in River Gee County, and in Maryland County that have taken their brothers and sisters in and have provided refuge and sustenance to them.

Let us go forth from this place, dear brothers and sisters, with renewed vigor and determination to continue the cooperative spirit of the policies that will enable our peoples to live and exist in peace, harmony and prosperity.

May God bless us all, our countries and our peoples as we work together for peace.

I thank you.