

Address by

H.E. President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf

**At the 17th Convocation of the University
of Agriculture at Abeokuta**

Thursday, February 18, 2010

Abeokuta, Ogun State, Nigeria

His Excellency Otunba Gbenga Daniel, Governor of Ogun State;

His Excellency Olusegun Obasanjo, former President, Federal Republic of Nigeria;

Mr. Chancellor, Board of Trustees and members of the University of Abeokuta Faculty;

Honorable Members of the National Assembly here present;

Officials of Ogun State;

Liberian Officials and Liberian citizens here present;

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen:

I thank you Governor Daniel, Deputy Governor Sarah Sasan of Lagos State, and officials of Ogun State for the warm welcome we have received. I thank you President Obasanjo for the opportunity to visit your productive farm on yesterday.

I am pleased to join you as you mark the 17th Convocation of the University of Agriculture at Abeokuta, both as a guest and a recipient of an Honorary Doctorate Degree. I accept the honor you have bestowed on me with humility and pride, not necessarily as an individual achievement, but for, and on behalf of, the Republic of Liberia and the resilient Liberian people.

By this token today, I have been listed as an alumnus of UNAAB. Thank you, Mr. Vice Chancellor, Faculty, and staff of this noble institution for recognizing my humble efforts. I pledge to uphold your trust, confidence, and respect.

I have been the recipient of several honorary degrees and other honors worldwide, including one from the University of Jos here in Nigeria. I have tried to resist academic titles because of the suspicion of flattery associated with them. For that reason, I refuse to be called “doctor.” Yet, the recognition, the honor, and the doctorate degrees keep coming, and I keep accepting them because I believe the motives of the givers are genuine and sincere. I believe it is a recognition of the progress of women, of the symbol of African women aspirations and expectations. This honor you bestow upon me is special for a special reason: It comes from an African University of Agriculture conferred on a female African leader.

Africa remains basically an agrarian society. The harsh realities of fully and satisfactorily enjoying life have been challenged by extreme poverty, poor health and famine. Social injustice, economic inequity, and political crises have plagued the continent. Low agricultural productivity and famine have always been the foundation upon which social miseries afflict Africa.

Women have always been in the forefront of agricultural activities in Africa, in fact, dominating this sector. They have grown the food, stored the food, marketed the food, served the food. The conferral of this Honorary Doctorate Degree on me, an African woman and farmer, is in itself recognition of the vital role women have and continue to play in agricultural productivity. I dedicate this honor to the hard-working people of Liberia, in particular, and the women of Africa, in general, who have labored tirelessly to combat food insecurity, malnutrition and poor health.

I applaud the progress of your University. Founded in January 1988, the University of Agriculture at Abeokuta has expanded rapidly from its original small site to a sprawling layout we now see. Your dedication and good work earned for you, consecutively in 2002 and 2003, the enviable award of the best University in the country by the Nigeria Universities Commission. Congratulations.

Your mission to promote agricultural education and services for agricultural development, and attainment of self-sufficiency in food production and fiber, is at the core of the policy of our Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) that aims to make agriculture and food security an achievable priority. There is no doubt in my mind that the 179 academic programs of this University will be of significant value especially to our sub-region. My Government will seek to foster cooperation between UNAAB and the Agriculture College of the University of Liberia for the purpose of faculty and technology exchange, staff development, and research. More so, a closer and cooperative working relationship between UNAAB and the Ministry of Agriculture will be encouraged.

One of the critical challenges in ensuring agricultural development and food security in sub-Saharan Africa in general, and Liberia in particular, is the low level of human capital. The majority of staff at almost all levels lacks the appropriate knowledge and skills to work effectively in a rapidly changing and complex agricultural environment. Usually, the training they acquired at university/college does not match with the world of work. This challenge is

compounded by other related ones, including ongoing globalization, knowledge and information explosion, privatization, dwindling national budgets for tertiary education, and general marginalization of agriculture careers, lack of recognition and access to factors of production by women farmers.

African universities and colleges such as yours have a critical role to play in the revitalization of the agriculture sector by reforming their curricula to become more relevant and responsive to the changing needs of farmers, the agribusiness community, and other stakeholders. They need to make their training programs more responsive to adequately prepare graduates – whether as researchers, teachers, extension workers, policy makers or administrators – to deal with the complex agricultural development situation in the 21st century.

As a post-conflict country emerging from a 14-year civil war, Liberia, by all accounts, has made tremendous progress. As was mentioned in the citation, we have formulated a national vision and development agenda within the context of a poverty reduction strategy comprising four pillars – Peace and Security, Economic Revitalization, Governance and the Rule of Law and Infrastructure, and Basic Services. We have undertaken the first Census in twenty years, build a new army, earned the lifting of UN sanctions, advanced toward settlement of our massive external debt of US\$4.9 billion under the HIPC relief program, made significant progress in the restructure of economic and social infrastructure lacking in the country for two decades, attracted billions of dollars of Foreign Direct Investment in our mining and agriculture sectors, revitalized or installed institutions including pillars of integrity,

reactivated multilateral and bilateral partnerships, upheld fundamental rights and enabled our people to reclaim a future of hope.

Yet, we have no illusion about the challenges we face. We have no illusions that sustaining the country's socio-economic growth and development is dependent on the agriculture sector. Educated and skilled men and women can generate the agriculture knowledge and skills for building the institutional capabilities of moving the sector. Since my Administration took office in 2006, we have made progress in reforming higher education in general and higher agricultural education in particular. However, partnerships with other African universities and colleges are critical in fast-tracking the process of reforming Liberian universities to enable them to produce graduates that can cope with the changing demands of the 21st century.

Let me just mention a few potential short- and medium-term areas for collaboration in higher agricultural education include:

- Seconding more experienced professors (deans, lecturers) from more developed and stronger universities/colleges to weaker universities/colleges to provide leadership in setting up more robust and sustainable training programs based on well-defined standards.
- Faculty and student exchange programs between institutions of agricultural higher education in strategic fields. This will foster cross-

fertilization of ideas and experiences between faculty (and students) from different universities/colleges across Africa for program improvement.

- Joint degree/twinning programs between universities/colleges in Africa, especially at the post-graduate (master's and doctoral degree levels).
- Development and implementation of joint research projects/programs between professors and graduate students of various universities/colleges in different countries in Africa.
- Joint regional policies on higher education in agriculture to ensure a common framework for securing donor support for universities/colleges across the African region.
- Regional harmonization of secondary and post-secondary agriculture curricula – within the context of unifying various strategies and approaches from different countries with well-defined links to other sectors, especially the private sector.
- Regionalization of training, especially at the post-graduate level (for the training of trainers) – particularly within the context of regional centers of excellence for capacity building/training of young men and women in important fields of study that are strategic to the region in agricultural

engineering, forestry, agribusiness and value chains, post-harvest technology, gender issues in agriculture, animal and plant breeding, soil science, fisheries, veterinary medicine, biotechnology, etc.

Mr. Vice Chancellor, and esteemed friends:

Liberia-Nigeria cooperation and friendship has been tried and tested, and has proved resilient. In line with South-South cooperation, Liberia has benefited from the transfer of knowledge and technology from Nigeria. Trade and commerce between our two countries are booming and flourishing. So, too, is our cultural bond. These positive developments point to a stronger, peaceful and stable regional integration which Liberia and Nigeria have labored tirelessly to achieve through ECOWAS. We are committed to keeping the bond of friendship and solidarity between Liberia and Nigeria growing.

Liberia's future, as a nation, is intertwined with African opportunity. Much of our future, and, indeed, Africa's, depends on the leaders – the men and women at the helm of authority. Learning from our past, we now strive to give our country, and our continent, a better and brighter future.

An American author, William H. Heard, in his book, "The Bright Side of African Life," endeavored to present a true picture of Liberia and Africa. He was full of hope, and had an abiding faith in the future greatness of both Liberia and Africa. We share that faith and hope for a continent finally emerging from the despair of the past, finally moving from dependency to self-sufficiency, finally making effort to turn poverty into prosperity, finally taking its destiny into its

own hands. I am proud to be a part of this leadership, to have the opportunity to shape the course of Liberia's and Africa's future. To the women of Liberia, of Africa and, I dare say, the world, I say, we are no longer bystanders and beneficiaries; we are now full participants in the evolution of our world. Let us go forth and make it a better world.

I thank you.