

Welcome Remarks

By

Her Excellency Mrs. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf

President of the Republic of Liberia

At the

Ethical Leadership Interactive Forum for Members of the Cabinet

And Other Senior Government of Liberia Officials

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RLJ Kendeja Resort, Paynesville

Members of the Cabinet and other Senior Government Officials;

Our Development Partners;

Fellow Liberians:

All of you know that I just returned from visits to the United States, Switzerland and France, where our Government received many commendations for the progress we are making in various areas.

These commendations, however, are eclipsed by the allegations of corruption, real and perceived, that are splashed across the front pages of our local newspapers and are the staple of early morning radio talk shows.

As I said, at last Friday's Cabinet meeting, our success in the IFC Doing Business survey, in LEITI and elsewhere, are all drowned out by the negative reports of the GAC Audits. While we had good meetings in the United States, the issue of corruption is haunting us. We must deal with this quickly and effectively for if this bad reputation and image continues, potential budgetary support to Liberia will be threatened.

The perception on the street is that it's the Cabinet Ministers that are corrupt. This may be true of some of you. But corruption which became a way of life over the past two decades is to be found in ministries and

agencies alike. It is your responsibility, as Cabinet Ministers, to fire and take legal action against those among your staff who engage in corrupt practices, whether they are civil servants or appointees.

Just yesterday with the help of one Minister we were able to undertake a successful sting operation that we hope will lead to a key officer of the Ministry of Finance going to jail. When we take several such punitive measures, the practice will stop. I call upon all of you in this room to do your part to address this most serious problem. Fire entire departments, if necessary; drag a whole unit to court if necessary. Do you recall that infamous phrase “move or be removed”?

The convening of this Interactive Forum on Ethical Leadership is therefore very timely and useful as we, as a people, grapple with the challenges of how to make the connection between excellent leadership and ethical leadership.

It is also befitting that this first-in-its-kind Forum is targeted at Members of the Cabinet and Other Senior Government Officials who are primarily responsible for implementing Government’s commitment to integrity, accountability, fairness, and good governance.

I am particularly pleased that this Forum brings together both leaders in the public service and those who are expected to be the watchdogs of those who lead. The question then becomes, who will watch the watchdogs? I hope that by the end of this interaction today, you will not only resolve the ethical issues surrounding the Executive Agencies of Government, but that you will also spend some time looking critically at the responsibilities of the watchdog agencies and their obligation to also lead by example.

I also hope that another phase of this Interactive Forum will be organized soon, targeted at directors and other middle managers in the public service. It’s important to target this group of middle personnel in government because while it’s true that most of the publicized reports of ethical transgression have been about higher-ups in government, it is equally true that civil servants at the lower level of government are many times co-conspirators in acts of corruption that cumulatively are more damaging to

the public interest than the high-profile cases we read about in the papers and hear about on the airwaves.

As leaders at the higher echelon of Government, it's imperative that you start taking swift and decisive action against your subordinates who commit ethical transgressions. But in order to do this with a good conscience, you must be prepared to hold your own professional conduct up to public scrutiny.

When challenged about their professional behavior, some public officials become defensive, sometimes offering unconvincing excuses or poorly expressed reasons for what they believe is good professional conduct and decision. It is understandable that public officials who are falsely maligned can justifiably become frustrated as they try to reconcile and resolve the conflict they feel when their professional conduct is called into question by watchdog agencies, particularly if such officials feel that watchdog agencies are not upholding the same principles of fairness that should set the standard for all professional conduct.

Ethics is a tricky word. I am sure that Dr. Rick Barlay will deal adequately with the various gray areas one is confronted with when evaluating ethical behavior. But I share the belief that good ethical leadership is a craft and a skill comparable to any other professional skill; in other words, it is possible to teach ethical leadership.

Ethical leadership is about individual responsibility.

Ethical leadership is about excellent leadership.

Ethical leadership is about the critical contribution excellent leadership makes to society and to the timely and effective delivery of service to our citizens.

Ethical leadership is about character and integrity; and integrity is what you do when no one is watching.

Ethical leadership is oftentimes equally about what we don't do as it is about what we do. Some refer to this dichotomy as the sins of omission versus the sins of commission.

This Interactive Forum will not resolve all our ethical challenges and dilemmas, but it's the start of a conversation that hopefully will make our top leaders in the public service think twice when they are about to make decisions that seem questionable. Most of the time, when a person gets a gut feeling that something is wrong, it usually is! The nature of human values and moral conscience of choosing between "right" rather than "wrong" are concepts that are common to all social groupings, government included. What makes such decision-making more critical for those of us in public life is that we are custodians of the public trust.

When we betray the very public we have taken an oath to serve, we betray ourselves, and by our action or inaction we dilute or dissolve the hopes and optimism of our people. Each of us here today has an obligation to uphold the public trust by always weighing the consequences and ethical dimensions of our decisions as leaders in the public service.

I could spend a lot of time talking about ethics in a philosophical context, but let me segue a bit and situate our ethical leadership challenges in a more practical and realistic context.

Our Constitution provides, under Article 90 (a), that the Legislature shall prescribe a Code of Conduct for all public officials and employees, stipulating the acts which constitute conflict of interest or are against public policy and the penalties for violation thereof.

Almost three years ago, the Cabinet submitted a draft "Code of Conduct for Public Officials" to the National Legislature in an effort to assist in fulfilling this key provision of the Constitution. This is important because we need a common yardstick by which to measure ethical behavior in all sectors of the public service – the Executive, as well as the Legislature and Judiciary. I know that the Honorable Members of the Legislature are busy with issues such as the Threshold Bill and scrutinizing the 2010-2011 Budget, but I

take this opportunity to call on them to find time to pass the Code of Conduct for Public Officials this calendar year.

Even though the Legislature has not yet prescribed a Code of Conduct for Public Officials, I've directed all members of the Cabinet and other appointed officials in the Executive Branch to declare their assets and conform to the guidelines issued by the Liberia Anti-Corruption Commission (LACC) governing the conduct of those in public office. It is critical for comprehensive ethical leadership that all three interlocking branches of our Government begin to operate under a common Code of Conduct as a demonstration of our collective commitment to good governance. I have also asked the Cabinet to implement the "Common Internal Control Priorities: a checklist of fundamental internal controls for all Government Ministries and Agencies" formulated by the General Auditing Commission.

Fellow Liberians, corruption still remains Public Enemy Number One. Most of the time, news of corruption is a serious distraction from the positive things most of you in this room are doing to promote the public good. By committing yourselves to being more ethical leaders, you would be doing yourselves and the country a great service. A simple formula I wish to leave with you is that you can be ethical leaders by embracing good and shunning evil; by pledging rigorously and striving to eliminate all behavior that even has the propensity to be perceived as corrupt or unethical behavior. In our Liberian lingo, I say, "Don't even let somebody lie on you!"

Let us also be mindful that ethical behavior doesn't end at your office door. As public officials, our lives outside the office are also open to public scrutiny. Oftentimes, our actions outside the office have just as many ethical consequences as our behavior at work. It's therefore important that we conduct ourselves in a manner that protects us from conflicts of interest, real and perceived. Be prepared to decline gifts or favors that would influence or appear to influence your judgment.

Looking at today's agenda, I see that it is rich in content. Rick Barlay is an experienced professional and I trust that he will deliver the goods. I ask that you give him your undivided attention. I also hope that beyond the theory,

you will take the knowledge from this Interactive Forum and implement them in your various offices, and that we will see immediate positive changes in the quality of leadership of all who are beneficiaries of this Forum.

I will be here to listen for a while, but will have to get back to the office for other appointments.

My final words to you: Make the most of this day, and good luck.