
Statement To The 63rd Session of the United Nations General Assembly

By H. E. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf President of the Republic of Liberia

United Nations Headquarters, New York September 23, 2008

Mr. President,

Mr. Secretary General,

Excellencies, Heads of State and Government, and Heads of Delegations,

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am honored to address the United Nations General Assembly on behalf of the Government and people of Liberia, the second time I am doing so since I assumed office in 2006. I congratulate you, Mr. Miguel d'Escoto Broadman, and your country, Nicaragua, on your election as President of this historic 63rd Regular Session. There is no doubt that you will bring your vast experience and tested diplomatic skills to guide this Session to a successful conclusion. You can rest assured of the full cooperation and support of the Liberian delegation.

Let me also seize this opportunity to pay tribute to your predecessor, Mr. Srgjan Kerim of the Republic of Macedonia for the exemplary leadership he provided this august body in the year past.

By the same token, I would like to commend our distinguished Secretary-General, Mr. Ban Ki-moon, for his farsightedness and wisdom in carrying out his mandate. The Liberian people still recall with fondness his visit to Monrovia earlier this year when they shared with him, their respect and appreciation of the United Nations which has provided exceptional support and a guarantor of the peace we now enjoy in our country after 14 years of war.

Mr. President:

In our 161 years as the first independent Republic in Africa, we navigated for nearly a century among sharks of racism, colonialism, prejudice, human degradation and underdevelopment. We have experienced a war that killed nearly 8%, and displaced nearly 40% of our population, a war that destroyed our underdeveloped economy and inadequate infrastructure. Through it all, Liberia has come to appreciate the United Nations as truly a fundamental, relevant and important forum and instrument for world peace.

In its sixty-three years of existence, the United Nations Organization has expanded in scope, form and content. It is correctly still predominated by the promotion of international peace and security.

From our experience as a founding member, Liberia is committed to contributing to the re-definition of that international peace and security that it is very strongly linked to, and demands the promotion of Economic Growth and Sustainable Development, particularly food security, relief from the debt burden, globalization and fair trade. We believe in a peace and security environment that combats HIV/Aids, Malaria and other diseases; that promotes poverty eradication and human rights especially the rights of women and children; the fight against international terrorism, drug and other international crimes; in disarmament, especially the elimination of nuclear weapons and the control of small arms and light weapons.

Mr. President:

The history and experience of Liberia has taught us to have faith in the UN which is maintaining nearly 11,000 men and women from all over the world to help our country consolidate its newly won peace. We wish to thank the Security Council which has correctly seen the necessity to renew the mandate of the UN Mission in Liberia. We particularly thank the resource contributing countries without whom the Mission could never be there saving lives and promoting development.

Our history and experience have taught us to believe in regional peace and security and cooperation. Liberians still say, with passion, the slogan: "THANK GOD FOR ECOMOG", referring to the period of our war when young men and women from countries of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) led by Nigeria and including Ghana, Guinea, Sierra Leone, Mali and Benin laid down their lives to save the country. Subsequently, a Nigerian led military mission, the ECOWAS Mission in Liberia (ECOMIL) provided the beachhead for the establishment of UNMIL. We shall always be grateful to ECOWAS which is now dedicating itself to its prime objective of economic integration and development.

We also believe in our sub-regional entity, the Mano River Union which comprises the countries of Liberia, Guinea and Sierra Leone and Cote d'Ivoire which joined us earlier this year. The Mano River basin, as is well known, was the epicenter of the conflict system in West Africa since 1990. As the current Chair of the MRU, I can say on behalf of my colleagues that the countries of that basin have declared "never again to war and all forms of armed violence". The MRU will henceforth be the net exporter of peace and all the dividends that come with peace in West Africa.

Mr. President:

I am proud to say that Liberian history and experience have taught us never to shirk in our opposition to wars and the causes thereof, to man's inhumanity to man, to oppression, racism, human rights abuses, especially those against women and children, and abuses inflicted against race, creed, and religion.

In doing so, we know that we may at times not be seen as following established line, the "party line", be it in Africa or on African issues, or the positions of some close allies. We continue to ask our friends to realize that we will be guided by our principles, history and experience to act in the best interest of our people and the greater world community.

It is in this connection that we took a stand on the situation in Zimbabwe because we had faith that the leaders of that wonderful and great country needed to know that fairness in elections and justice in political participation were the best way to durable peace. My government wishes to thank the Zimbabwe leaders and their people for choosing the path of negotiation for the Global Agreement that has been reached. We thank the Leaders of SADCC, especially South African President Thabo Mbeki for his role in facilitating the peace deal. May all Zimbabweans work to ensure the full implementation of the Agreement.

Africa has, over the last year, registered unprecedented economic growth and experienced relative peace in many hitherto turbulent regions and countries. Unfortunately, the people in Somalia and parts of Sudan – especially the Darfur Region – Chad, Niger, DR Congo and others are yet to breathe an air of relief and peace. They need the concerted effort of this United Nations and strong support to the African Union and the sub-regional bodies to take the necessary actions for peace. Where there is evidence of non-cooperation and even aggression against the peace forces, the world must move into the Chapter seven gear of the UN Charter.

Armed conflicts as we have seen in Liberia and the world over are exacerbated by easy access to small arms and light weapons. Thus, as part of the efforts for durable peace in conflict zones, we must put into place rigid measures to ensure effective controls of these weapons. My government, in the same vein, supports the Arms Trade Treaty. We continue to champion the call for total and complete nuclear disarmament in order to prevent the world from self-annihilation.

These fears are not unfounded if one imagine such weapons in the hands of a terrorist. But the threat of terrorism - the senseless destruction of innocent lives and property, often times including oneself beats every imagination. The world must unite to fight this scourge. No nation or person is protected against it. Those who feel so angry to carry out these dastardly acts defeat their own purposes because they end up killing those who may be ready to let the world hear their cases. They actually end up losing every thing. We grieve with those who lost their loved ones during the terror attacks in Pakistan while the world is meeting here.

Mr. President:

While some plot evil deeds, there are those who are committed to work with Liberia and Africa fight poverty, promote positive all round international cooperation. Among many avenues for cooperation, we thank the United States for it Africa Growth and Opportunity Act which aims to promote trade rather than aid; The European Union for its facility, Anything But Arms; the Forum for China Africa Cooperation; the Japanese Government and its partners in driving the Tokyo International Conference for African Development; and others through which the continent looks forward to new avenues for sustained development. We are pleased to note that our cooperation efforts have included intra Africa and South-South endeavors with great success so far.

Beyond Africa, yet with great interest, my government believes that a durable solution can be found to the Israeli-Palestinian / Arab-Israeli conflict. Late last year, I visited and held talks with both Israeli and Palestinian leaders in Tel-A-Viv and Ramallah. I gathered from the conversations and reports from other sustained efforts in search for peace that the two state with secured recognizable borders – with mutual recognition of each other is the way forward. We must never give up working for the formal end of the conflict for a durable peace for all in the region.

Mr. President:

Please permit me to now report on Liberia, the country in which the United Nations is most likely to receive its best ever performance record.

On September 19, 2006, about eight months after I assumed the Presidency of Liberia as the first woman to be so elected in Africa, I addressed this august body laying out my vision for a country that had suffered near total devastation, a country that was next to the best example of a collapsed state. Then, I said that Liberia was “back” and moving on an irreversible path of peace and development.

Today I come to renew that pledge. I come to report how much progress has been made in the light of what we inherited. Remember that we inherited a situation where almost two thirds of Liberians lived below the poverty line, with an even higher share in rural areas. The economy collapsed with GDP falling 90% from 1987 to 1995, one of the largest economic freefalls ever recorded in the world. Indicators on health, education, water and sanitation, food security and infrastructure were very poor, sometimes beyond measure.

My government, with the support of international partners, began to take steps to move the whole country in gear. First, there was the need for a clear direction – something in the form of a national vision or agenda; formulated and contributed by the people as their own; Second to restore the International reputation and credit worthiness of the country and thirdly, to demonstrate the necessary leadership – strong, committed and focused – for the people.

The Government in collaboration with civil society undertook broad consultations with the people in all parts of the country. This resulted in the framework to reduce poverty and to make progress toward the Millennium Development Goals (MDG). The Poverty Reduction Strategy (2008-2011) is anchored on four pillars:

1. Consolidating peace and security;
2. revitalizing the economy;
3. strengthening governance and the rule of law; and,
4. building/rebuilding infrastructure and delivering basic services.

Clearly, these three years are not enough for the daunting tasks as laid out in the PRS. They are part of a process towards long-term development that will continue far beyond 2011. They are part of a process that must identify effective responses to the food and energy crisis and the as yet underdetermined effect of climate change.

However, the Liberian people are gaining confidence in this strategy for they are seeing the once despised Armed Forces of Liberia, Liberian National Police and other security services resurrecting into well-trained modern bodies guided by a National Security Policy which promotes people’s security instead of regime security. The people are seeing that the economy has started expanding rapidly, with growth accelerating to over 9% in 2007, roads and buildings sprouting in

many places, health clinics and schools reopening or being established where they did not exist before, agricultural production increasing, and a huge external debt well on the way to being cancelled with the exceptional support from our partners. There is growing confidence when there are concrete efforts at decentralization to encourage popular participation in the governing process and when corruption is being fought relentlessly, especially where a new Anti-Corruption Commission is, just last week, established with a very strong mandate.

Mr. President:

This is truly a success story for a country coming out of so much destruction in so short a time. But we owe this phenomenal achievement, first to our people, the Liberian people, and very strategically and importantly, the international community led by the United Nations.

The presence of the UN Mission in Liberia has given hope to the people not to surrender to the threat to peace and development that are represented by the large percentage of unemployed youth who can not be absorbed by an economy still too weak in spite of the recorded growth; the large number of ex-combatants who were not properly re-integrated into society; and the resultant armed robberies and drug and arms related crimes. In addition, UNMIL's presence is contributing to the economic growth because it signals the guaranteeing of the peace.

Mr. President, I am here making a strong case for UNMIL to be supported at appropriate levels to continue its mandate in Liberia until the peace is properly consolidated, thereby removing the threat of the country relapsing into conflict again as some others before Liberia have experienced.

Mr. President:

Speaking of threat to peace and development, I can not but join those before me to call for increased action to combat HIV/Aids and curable diseases such as malaria, tuberculosis and others that are ravaging parts of Africa and have established formidable foothold in Liberia. Already, it is reported that over 6% of Liberia's relatively small population is infected by HIV/Aids. Working with the government to combat malaria and this pandemic are the President Bush Malaria Control Program and the William J. Clinton Foundation's HIV/Aids Initiative, as well as the special program by the Government of the People's Republic of China. We wish to thank them all and others not mentioned herein.

Since education is the single most barrier to women leadership, we have put in place special programs to support girls' education throughout Liberia. These have resulted in the high rise in girl enrollment in our schools and higher educational institutions. I truly believe that when you educate the girl child you educate the whole nation and progress will become manifest and even.

This brings me to the issue of Aid Effectiveness which has been a subject of many meetings around the world. Vulnerable communities and countries in crises need aid to bring short term relief. But aid must soon move on to trade and then transform long term development initiative. Aid must be

accounted for by both the donor and the recipient. And aid must come when it is needed. There must be a short road between pledges or commitment and delivery or cash.

Mr. President:

I come from a continent where women leadership – particularly a woman Head of State and Government – is still unthinkable in some quarters. At the global level, there are only a handful of colleagues. To help sensitize and energize the world to the reality of women leadership, my friend and colleague, Ms. Tarja Halonen, the President of Finland and I are organizing an International Colloquium on Women’s Empowerment, Leadership Development, International Peace and Security around the event of International Women’s Day in March, 2009 in Monrovia. I believe that to correct the inequalities in leadership and denials that women have suffered as a result of untenable and unacceptable practices, special efforts must be applied in support of women desirous of elective public offices or to encourage women to seek such offices.

Mr. President:

As I conclude, I wish to once again thank you for the great work you and colleagues are doing for a world meant for succeeding generations. You can count on Liberia for the success of your work.
May God, Almighty bless us all.