

STATEMENT

BY

H.E. ELLEN JOHNSON SIRLEAF
PRESIDENT AND COMMANDER IN CHIEF
OF THE ARMED FORCES OF LIBERIA

AT THE RETIREMENT CEREMONIES
AND HONORING PROGRAM

FOR THE

ARMED FORCES OF LIBERIA

Antoinette Tubman Stadium

July 24, 2006

MR. VICE PRESIDENT,
MR. SPEAKER AND MEMBERS OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVE;
MR. PRESIDENT PRO-TEMPORE & MEMBERS OF THE HOUSE OF SENATE;
THE CHIEF JUSTICE AND ASSOCIATE JUSTICES OF THE SUPREME COURT;
THE SPECIAL REPRESENTATIVE OF THE U.N. SECRETARY GENERAL;
THE DOYEN AND MEMBERS OF THE DIPLOMATIC CORPS;
CABINET MINISTERS AND OTHER OFFICIALS OF GOVERNMENT;
THE U.N. FORCE COMMANDER;
GENERALS AND RETIREES OF THE ARMED FORCES OF LIBERIA;
DISTINGUISHED OFFICIALS, INVITED GUESTS, FELLOW LIBERIANS:

As our nation continues to mark activities in observance of our 159th Independence Day celebrations, it is appropriate that we recognize the contribution of former members of the Armed Forces of Liberia who provided relentless services during this period.

Since its formation nearly 98 years ago in 1908, the Armed Forces of Liberia have seen a transformation in both name and mission. It went from being called the Liberian Frontier Force to the Liberian National Guard, and subsequently the Armed Forces of Liberia, whose earlier mission was to enforce the collection of taxes and safe guarding the territorial integrity of our nation. We have seen a transformation that has become part of our contemporary history providing the opportunity for the changes now taking place.

Many noble men and women have served the Armed Forces Liberia not only in Liberia, but also in missions taking them to the United Nations in 1945, as well as contributing to peace activities in what was then Congo Kinshasa in 1960. It is now a historical fact that despite the dept of the armed conflict in the Congo, the entire contingent of the Liberian National Guard served diligently and returned to Liberia without suffering any casualty.

We have seen the days when the AFL was the pride of our national events with the beauty of its ceremonial drills and sounds of its matching band. The AFL has also participated in our political transformation, and provided a legacy of performances which has become part of our national debate. As a matter of record, the birth of Our Fourth Republic on 16 January this year began nearly 26 years ago, when the Armed Forces of Liberia took the helm of political power. This ascension of the military into politics brought upon a debate for its transformation and return to barracks.

The contemporary restructuring of the Armed Forces of Liberia begun nearly 16 years ago from the Banjul Peace Conference in 1990. Initial efforts were led by the late Dr. Edward Binyah Kesselly, former Minister of National Defense. Dr. Kesselly's vision was for a professionally trained, geographic represented and well disciplined civic-oriented military, whose mission is constitutionally defined and led. Today his dream is being realized.

These efforts were subsequently led by the present Senator of Grand-Kru County, Senator Blamo Nelson, Hon. Nathaniel B. Davis of the LRDC, as well as former Minister of Defense, Lt. Gen. Sande Ware, and the present Minister of National Defense, Hon. Brownie J. Samukai, Jr. The CPA of 2003 finally laid the basis that has made it possible for the actual transformation and comprehensive restructuring of the Armed Forces of Liberia.

It is therefore befitting that official recognition, honoring and retiring is made of these gallant men and women of the Armed Forces of Liberia, as they journey the way into our historical archives.

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, we wish to recall the remarkable financial commitment that made it possible to begin the restructuring process of the Armed Forces of Liberia, and for us to honor these personnel today. The international community, particularly the Governments of South Africa and that of the United States, as well as the Government of Liberia contributed nearly USD\$17,070,024.45 since the beginning of the restructuring process including our administration to facilitate this process.

To date, the disbursement and financial breakdown made are as follows:

1. **AFL severance payment USD\$14,566,119.00**
2. **AFL widow's payment USD\$1,160,342.82**
3. **Demobilized officers - four months salaries USD\$114,295.51 (Sept. - Dec. 2005)**
4. **Demobilized enlisted personnel – Four Months Salaries USD\$452,182.06 (Sept- Dec. '05)**
5. **Regular AFL officers - two months salaries - USD\$26,674.31 (Nov. - Dec. 2005)**
6. **Regular enlisted personnel - two months salaries - USD\$83,386.10 (Nov - Dec. 2005)**

All of these payments were part of the legacy of the CPA process which were inherited by this Government. Since then, we have also received countless number of claims from various groups and units claiming benefits and payments for various reasons. After thorough investigations and reports from our international partners who were handling this process under the Security Sector Reform program, it has been credibly established that the limit to these obligations has been met since the end of the process in 2005. Therefore all those making claims after the conclusion of the process in 2005 have no legal basis, and this government will not be redocumenting any personnel for any reason whatsoever relating to further payments.

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, on humanitarian grounds, and as Commander-In-Chief of the Armed Forces of Liberia, I had earlier ordered the Minister of National Defense to initiate discussions with some 400 former personnel of the Armed Forces of Liberia, as well as nearly 2980 former members of the ATU, and the leadership of the remaining 175 widows of personnel of the AFL.

In this regards, I had earlier ordered the Minister of National Defense to make available from his Ministry's account, an amount of USD\$150,000.00 on humanitarian grounds to former members of the ATU to bring to a close any claims they have made. Let us be clear in this regard. This government is not under any legal obligations to make any payment to any non-constitutional security or military groups for providing services for an individual, outside of the legal government payment structure, as others are demanding. We have, however, made a humanitarian gesture which is the final offer. There shall be no further payment of any amount to the ATU or any other non-constitutional group. Moreover, the legacy of the ATU is well documented, and therefore, this matter should be laid to rest.

Similarly on humanitarian grounds and as Commander-In-Chief, I had earlier directed the Minister of National Defense to provide to those 400 AFL undocumented personnel humanitarian assistance equivalent to six months of their last salary based on their ranks as final assistance of any kind. The total amount disbursed to these 400 personnel is USD\$39,000.00. This matter is also considered closed.

With the assistance of the US Government, an amount of USD\$188,021.75 was disbursed under the Security Sector Reform program to facilitate the severance payment of 389 civilian personnel of the Ministry of National Defense as part of the restructuring process. This process has provided a unique opportunity for the Ministry of Defense to restructure and retrain the requisite personnel needed to provide strategic management oversight of the new Armed Forces of Liberia.

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, the Government considers these matters closed and no further claim nor payment shall be made to any former AFL units, persons, or any group whatsoever for that matter. These humanitarian gestures on the part of the government, which were provided to the ATU and the 400 undocumented AFL personnel, are not a weakness of purpose, but a desire to move away from these issues to a Development Agenda; an agenda that will bring jobs, provide better education and health care facilities for our people, and improve their living conditions.

Notwithstanding all of these, the government has also offered to former personnel of the AFL, opportunities that would employ 500 persons through our Emergency Employment Program at the Ministry of Labor. We have also offered 200 scholarships to former AFL personnel to enable them attend any vocational or technical school of their choice. These initiatives are all part of our overall strategy to empower our people, and remove them away from patriotism and handouts, to that of economic self sufficiency.

It starts the process of starting an institution which will respond to the specific needs of our retired officers. Gallant retired soldiers have already done the work for the establishment of the Bureau of Veterans Affairs. We are in the process of finalizing the drafting of a statute for submission to the Legislature for enactment into law to create the Bureau which shall advocate for opportunities for veterans and all of our retirees and serve as focal point in following up matters relating to retirees and veterans of the AFL. Upon passage into Law, I shall immediately appoint an eight-person management team to work out the modalities for the Bureau's operation. We thank them for this and pledge that we will ensure the operationalization of this Bureau.

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, after spending nearly USD\$**17,070,024.45** under the SSR program as outlined herein, our country must now move on a development agenda without the burden of illegitimate demands for hand outs and payments.

Fellow Liberians, as we celebrate our 159th Independence Anniversary, we shall remain mindful that the safety and security of our various communities is our top most security priority. We shall provide the requisite logistical support to enable the Police respond appropriately and effectively against criminal gangs marauding our neighborhood. We shall strengthen the operational capabilities of our Police Support Unit and provide them with appropriate deterrent weapons to credibly patrol and root out those armed criminal gangs. Once again, our people should feel safe, and live in their communities without fear nor intimidation by criminals.

Distinguished Honorees and Retirees, you have served well. Your names are now part of our national history. We return your salute with this historical recognition. In the words of the late American General Douglas MacArthur, “Old Soldiers never die, they simply fade away into the annals of history”. As Commander-In-Chief, I say to all men and women of the Armed Forces who have been retired and are being recognized and honored today, your legacy shall remain active as we outline the future mission and force composition of our new Armed Forces of Liberia. Today, also marks the official beginning of the training of the new Armed Forces of Liberia. May the Almighty God Bless these efforts as we strive to rebuild our country and lay the foundation for peace, security, and prosperity.

I thank you.