

Stand with us, Canada: What gives Liberia Hope?

Address to Students and Faculty

Delivered by

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President of the Republic of Liberia

at the

University of Toronto

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Chancellor David Peterson

President David Naylor

The Honorable Dalton McGuinty, Premier, Province of Ontario

The Honorable Belinda Stronach, MP and co-founder of Spread the Net

Members of the Faculty,

Students, Guests,

Friends

For the past two decades, the world has come to know Liberia as a land of political comedy, widespread corruption and unimaginable brutality that have sapped the potential of our people and made a mockery of the efforts of our forefathers to build a nation wherein the people of our race could find refuge from the uncertainties of nature and the humiliation and degradation of bondage. Our country became the strange footage that flickered on television screens with all the terrible images of savagery. Our people became refugees and fled to all corners of the globe for shelter. It was a period of darkness and insanity.

The origins of the Liberian conflict can be traced back to the various forms of exclusion, and marginalization, which have characterized Liberia for most of its existence as a country. Political power was concentrated essentially in Monrovia and primarily at the Presidency. The over concentration of power and a closed political system bred corruption, restricted access to the decision making process, limited the space for civil society participation in the process of governance, and fuelled ethnic and class animosities and rivalries.

The exclusion and marginalization extended to the economy as well. In the early days, land and property rights of the majority of Liberians were severely limited. Later, marginalization was perpetuated by the urban-biased policies of successive administrations. For instance, most of the infrastructure and basic services were concentrated in Monrovia and a few other cities fuelling an uneven development and a dualistic economy with a major dichotomy between urban and rural areas. There was an uneven distribution of the nation's wealth. Marginalization of youth and women, gross mismanagement, and perceived inequalities in the distribution of benefits from national resources were also major problems. These realities and the dependence of the nation on a small range of natural resources complicated the situation and eventually sowed the seeds that fuelled the 14-year violent conflict.

At the start of the civil war in 1990 and up to its ending in 2003, external assistance took the form of emergency relief as the country descended into a scene of humanitarian disaster the full scale and implications of which have yet to be wholly assessed. Commercial and productive activities ceased as various warlords looted and vandalized the resources of the country. Traditional systems of governance broke down; the economy crashed and prices soared; the local currency depreciated significantly from parity with the US dollar to over 60 to one dollar; illicit trade in diamonds and timber flourished; there was massive exodus of skills and talents from the country; the nations' basic and critical infrastructure was systematically destroyed by conflict. In effect, both the economy and the state collapsed.

Fourteen months ago, I became Africa's first elected woman president. That moment was seen around the world as one of hope and possibility for Liberia. Our people, in a free and fair election, gave my government the greatest opportunity that can come to any leader – the chance to rebuild a nation on the ruins of war.

Liberia stood at a critical juncture of its political and socioeconomic development as a nation. We faced some of the most acute economic and social circumstances for any post-conflict country. This resulted from twenty-five years of political instability, including a devastating civil war of some fourteen years, and gross economic mismanagement for much of our national existence. Well over three quarters of our people lived below the poverty line of US\$1 per day; about half lived in abject poverty with less than 50 cents per day. An overwhelming majority of people, mainly the youth, were either unemployed or employed in the informal sector as a result of the shrinkage of the formal sector. Of the small proportion of the population employed in the formal sector, most were in the public sector, requiring rightsizing on efficiency and cost-effectiveness grounds. Physical infrastructure across the country had either been destroyed or seriously dilapidated. The delivery of basic services such as health, education and potable water had essentially been disrupted. National and local institutions had been rendered dysfunctional resulting in very poor governance and widespread corruption.

It is within this fragile political, social and economic context that my Administration took over the management of our country. We knew that we had to quickly consolidate the potential dividends of Liberia's hard won peace; arresting the economic and financial hemorrhaging. We knew that we had to respond to the deep wounds of the civil war, and enhance national governance, while quickly introducing new measures of structural reforms and reconstruction.

We knew that the records show that post-conflict countries often go back to war, especially in Africa; this regression often a consequence of new governments' inability to respond to post-conflict challenges. Our challenges are daunting but our people are resilient and our Government resolute. In response to these challenges, we thus formulated a development strategy with interventions that aim at addressing the structural causes of conflict while at the same time ensuring that development contributes to peace building. We consider poverty reduction strategies to be at the core of this conflict sensitive lens in order to avert a return to conflict.

We also resolved on ensuring that the pre-war Liberia, which led us to conflict, is not recreated. As such, the Government is committed to doing business differently, to move the country from conflict to peace and unto development. To this end, we are determined to build a new economy with equal opportunities for all.

Our strategy is embodied in an Interim Poverty Reduction Strategy anchored on four pillars.

The first of these is enhancing national security, which involves the restructuring, reorganization, training and development of a new national army, police and other security services. While these national security structures are under formation, a thirteen thousand strong United Nations military and police forces are providing the muscle of our national security.

The second is economic revitalization by which we wish to attract domestic and foreign investment to put our country back to work; and to reduce unemployment.

We need to jump start our economy and growth sectors. As the economy gathers momentum, we intend to enhance the potential to see rapid growth in agriculture, both in food and cash crops. We shall also see rapid growth in our forestry, mining, and other natural resource-based industries, based upon policies that aim at creating an investment climate that will encourage investments in activities in which Liberia can compete internationally and activities that will create jobs for our citizens.

There are a few other concrete steps we have taken to achieve our growth objectives. We have initiated a strong start on strengthening the budgetary process and adopting appropriate fiscal regulations.

We are also currently working with our creditors towards addressing the huge external debt that is strangulating our growth efforts; recognizing that an 800 percent debt stock to GDP and 3,000 percent to export earnings is unsustainable. Hence, we have successfully completed a Staff Monitoring Program with the IMF that will lead us to the HIPC intervention.

The third pillar of our strategy is infrastructure development, the catalyzing element in all that we do. We seek to provide electric power and safe drinking water to the majority of our people; we seek to build or rebuild roads, highways, and bridges. We seek to rehabilitate hospitals and clinics and more importantly, schools, universities, and training institutions throughout the country. We want to provide literacy training for our market women and others in the informal sector so that they can read and write.

These are *sin quo non* to our national revival and sustained development.

Education must be central to our objective of renewal and reconciliation if we are to meet all of our development challenges. Our vision of education for all – young and old – demands that we introduce literacy programs in communities through out the country with our resilient market women as key targets, for no nation can develop under conditions of a 70 percent illiteracy rate.

The long years of neglect dealt a lethal blow to our higher institutions of learning. They too need to be revamped to improve the quality and competitiveness of their graduates.

As in the case of education, we must rehabilitate health facilities that have been partially or completely destroyed. Only 10 percent of our population has access to health care. This must increase to at least 50 percent within the medium term.

We must also improve other social infrastructure such as water and sanitation facilities. The same applies to economic infrastructure with our road system requiring major attention.

We are working to provide reliable electricity throughout our major urban areas and in rural areas on the basis of the options that will be provided through the power sector survey that is being undertaken. We expect the private sector to play a key role in this regard.

The fourth is governance and rule of law. Under this strategy, we are rebuilding national governing institutions – the Legislature, Judiciary, and the Executive. We are pressing a regime of probity and accountability, fighting corruption and ensuring that the resources of our country are effectively and efficiently used to change the lives of our people.

The goal of the fourth element of our vision is to improve democratic governance. The over-concentration of power and a closed political system bred corruption, restricted access to the decision making process, limited the space for civil society participation in the process of governance, and fuelled ethnic and class animosities and rivalries over time. We are working through statutory and policy changes to revise these constraints on democracy and development.

Moreover, we are determined to fight corruption, which has eaten away the fabrics of our nationhood and society. Anti-corruption strategy and laws are currently under enactment, while an aggressive civil society watchdog performs watchdog functions.

In another element of our government strategy, decision-making will be decentralized and county and municipal governments allotted resources to support identified projects. A key part of the efforts include empowering communities and engaging them in the reconstruction process, in local governance, and in addressing some of the root causes of the conflict. Emphasis is placed on empowering the people, especially the poor and vulnerable, to become active participants in the development process.

Let me say that our overall mission is to make Government work again; to be more responsive in delivering quality services to the Liberian public. In this regard, there is a critical need for forging and building strong strategic partnerships. That is why we are here in Canada – to seek your influence in working with our partners to extend to Liberia the same debt relief opportunities that have been given to other African countries.

As we engage in enhancing these partnerships, we will continue to improve our capacities and mechanisms to strengthen donor support coordination, harmonization and disbursement of funds; to deepen our work with partners in formulating and adjusting our strategies, programs, and policy priorities.

Ultimately, we hope that as confidence grows in our ability to manage our economy effectively, we will benefit from donor's direct budget support so as to strengthen national ownership and management of the budgetary process.

In summary, the strategic interventions within the four Pillars are guided by the principles of social and political inclusion and participation of all Liberians irrespective of ethnicity, religion, and class.

Nevertheless, the search that informed my participation in the political life of my country has left me convinced that Africa's problems have more to do with the quality of its leadership than the scarcity and under-capacity of its human capital. I am convinced from this search that Africa's backwardness and the continent's decline has been due to a tragic case of asset stripping of its leadership potential through wars, genocide, exile and brutal repression. My persistence in remaining in the political arena over the last thirty years is with the strong desire to serve a people who deserve better than that which they have received in our recent history.

The confidence reposed in me by our people by a decisive margin in the second round of the elections is to help them fulfill their dreams of a stable and prosperous country. The hope and expectations generated by that election is not because I come from the gender that has been marginalized in Africa for a long time, but because we offered a vision that excited the imagination of our people and allowed them to dream and hope again. We won because the Liberian people believe that we can make a difference in their lives.

A lot has been done to start the process. After fourteen months in office, we have redefined Liberia's engagement with the international community. Our country is no more seen as the pestiferous nuisance of the sub-region. International newspapers no more pillory us to a disbelieving world. We have been able to put into place the mechanism for curbing corruption. We have broken from the perfunctory governance of the past by instituting measures to rectify the many lopsided contractual agreements that shortchanged our people and rewarded a handful of those in power and their foreign business associates. We have cancelled many concession agreements of dubious legality. We are re-negotiating other agreements in order to maximize the benefits to our people. We have vowed to uphold the rule of law, which is the fulcrum of our people's freedom.

After fourteen years of darkness in our capital city, we turned on lights recently in some quarters and to some schools and hospitals. After years of war and anarchy, we are trying to establish peace and security with the help of the international community. We are witnessing the return of thousands of our people from refugee camps in the sub-region. We are working hard to re-integrate them. We are taking actions to seek relief for our constraining external debt; to revitalize the economy, establish sound financial and economic paradigms and implement policies that will lead to transparency and accountability. We are redirecting our people to the agricultural sector to feed themselves and strengthen the agricultural base for the transformation of the rural areas. We are encouraging trade and investment. Our first budget, although miniscule considering the task at hand, gave the largest portion to education and health. We hope to increase vastly the resources in these areas in our next budget.

Finally, we recognize that our one world requires in this age of rapid globalization and technological advancement the universality of shared values. We are thus attempting to identify those systems that represent the unifying threads between all of our people, and those ideas and concepts that have united mankind throughout the ages; the variables of liberty, dignity and enlightenment that have remained constant throughout the centuries.

We are glad that our nation has been blessed to pursue these goals, to move from the crisis of the past to the opportunity of the present. We are committed as a people to build a new Liberia from the ashes of an old turbulent and tragic past to a future of hope and promise. We need Canada's support. **Going forward, as the emergency situation has passed, we hope that Canada can become an important supporter in helping us to rebuild our health and education programs. Initially, your support could come through CIDA, through multilateral agencies like UNICEF, or through individual contributions to private foundations like SPREAD THE NET or dozens of other agencies that are doing wonderful work in Liberia.**

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