

Nation-wide Address

By

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President of the Republic of Liberia

The Executive Mansion

Monrovia, Liberia

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My Fellow Liberians,

I wish to inform you formally on that which you already know - former President Charles Taylor is in the custody of the United Nations and has been taken to Sierra Leone. We still expect a resolution from the Security Council that will allow for a change of venue to a more conducive environment such as the International Court at the Hague. We have said and will continue to stress that in any proceedings, the United Nations must ensure that Mr. Taylor is allowed to maintain his dignity and the right to a vigorous self defence. This is consistent with principle that a person is deemed innocent until proven guilty. We would also like to reiterate what has already been announced by the Prosecutor - that no other Liberian has been indicted by the Special Court of Sierra Leone, and no one needs to fear for his safety or freedom.

I also want to tell all of those who accompanied or lived in Nigeria with Mr. Taylor that, as citizens of Liberia against whom there is no charge, they are free to return home and will be given the same protection and opportunities as any other citizen so long as they remain law abiding.

Nevertheless, the Government wishes to make it abundantly clear that those who try to use these circumstances as an excuse for insurrection to undermine the stability of the nation will be dealt with harshly and without mercy, as prescribed by law. While the Government will respect their rights as provided for in Articles 15 and 17 of the Constitution, they should be mindful of the provision of Article 76 of the Constitution.

Fellow Citizens, as you know this Government inherited the matter relating to Mr. Taylor and try as we did to avoid it, in the end I had no option but to accept the responsibility of leadership, by taking the hard decision which ensures the long term safety of the Liberian people and the security of the state. This is what I pledged to do when I took the oath of office on January 16.

Today, we can just thank God that with his blessings, this saga for Liberia has come to an end and the government can now pursue what it was elected to do – bring development and prosperity to the Liberian people.

Fellow Citizens, we have reported to you before on the constrictive financial situation which this Government inherited.

Government revenue, estimated in this fiscal year at US\$ 80 million, represents less than one-fifth of what it was in previous years, due in large measure to fiscal indiscipline and corruption.

Outstanding obligations and arrears are monumental - US\$ 3.5 billion in external debt; US\$ 66 million in domestic debt; US \$24 million arrears to civil servants, including successive Legislatures; approximately US\$9.3 million arrears to security forces; US\$37, 389, 500.00 estimated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as outstanding to our diplomatic missions abroad including \$3.2 million to the African Union.

Institutions have become dysfunctional and infrastructure in a state of total disrepair.

Fellow Citizens:

As you know, it is less than three since our government was inaugurated. Despite the mountain of challenges we inherited a new political dispensation, we have moved as rapidly as we possibly could, to put in place the mechanisms designed to lay the basis for our economic reconstruction and national renewal.

A first step in this direction was the formation of the cabinet which is now complete. We tried as much as is possible to put a cabinet together that largely reflects an all-inclusive government but one that meets our core appointment criteria—namely: Competence, Integrity and Respect for Human Rights and Dignity. We are pleased that twelve of the fifteen counties are represented in the cabinet; five women hold strategic economic and security portfolios. Beyond the cabinet, all counties, ethnic groups and religions are represented.

We may not have met everyone's expectations and aspirations, but we have tried and will continue to try to do more as other positions in the Government are filled.

Let me take this time to thank the Ministers for accepting their respective nominations, and congratulate them on their confirmation by the Senate.

It is my expectation that all cabinet Ministers and Government officials in general, will conduct themselves in ways that will bring respect and credibility to our country.

I also hope that, for as long as they serve under my leadership, all concerned will reflect the principles of transparency and accountability in all their activities.

Let me use this opportunity to also thank the honorable members of the Legislature for the cooperation which we have received in this regard. We thank the Senate, in particular, for their cooperation and understanding during the ongoing confirmation process, thus making it possible for the Executive branch to timely assume its responsibilities under the constitution in a timely manner.

We are also pleased to note that the Judicial Branch of government is now in place and gearing up to dispense the kind of transparent justice long yearned for by our people.

Thus, it is gratified to report that all three branches of government are now in place—thanks to the collaborative efforts involving all three branches.

This shows how much can be achieved in a relatively short period, when the national interest is placed above parochial considerations, and where the three branches of government manifest their constitutional separation of powers without unnecessary and undesirable flexing of muscles as to who is in charge.

As regards our security forces, particularly those who have willingly demobilized to allow restructuring and training, we express once again our thanks and appreciation for the honorable service to our nation. We commit and have advanced plans to establish the Veterans Office to which we committed. A few of you will be recruited soon to start the process. We also propose that the honoring program that has been discussed take place in July during the events of our Independence Day. By that time, we should, within the context of the new fiscal year budget, be in a position to start the payment of pensions to which you are entitled.

Arrears to civil servants other groups will be handled similarly, although it may take us several years to settle with everyone.

Nevertheless, we are proud to note that with the appropriate mechanisms being put in place at the Ministry of Finance, and with prudent fiscal management, revenue collection in these three months has increased by some 30 percent.

Even though more needs to be done, graft is being minimized and corrupt customs officials are being identified and weeded out of the system. Individuals and businesses accustomed to avoiding or evading tax obligations are now responding to our no-nonsense approach in resource management, realizing that the allocation of resources to economic reconstruction and to investment opportunities will result in economic upturn that means more business and profits for them.

Several other areas show positive trends. We have formulated a 150 day deliverable program in four major thematic areas – Enhancing Security, Revitalizing the Economy, Rebuilding Infrastructure and provisions of Social Services; Strengthening Governance and the Rule of Law. We expect that by the end of June this will result in the completion or start up of a wide range of activities under these areas, the details of which will be published for your information.

Toward the achievement of this objective, the Government will allocate from the recast budget an amount of US\$ 2.5 million to supplement the aggregate US\$ 70 million which our partners have committed to the these programs. More importantly, I wish to announce that the Government will allocate, in recognition of our good revenue performance, a total amount of US\$1 million so that \$10,000.00 can be made available to 100 Districts around the country to support the development priority of their own choosing.

We extend to the National Legislature our gratitude for their understanding and efficiency in endorsing the recast budget before they recess today for the Easter holidays. This will enable us to embark upon these activities before the rains begin.

Fellow citizens, as you know the Government has reactivated or reconstituted those public corporations or state enterprises deemed to be still viable and/or significant in terms of the social service they provide to the public. In some cases, we have established a provisional body to undertake an assessment that would inform the action which Government should take. In doing so, we have complied with the laws and statutes upon which these entities were established and we have ensured conformity with international policies and practices. We will thus resist any attempt, on the part of those not sufficiently enlightened, to introduce legislation which undermines the principle of the operation of state enterprises or the constitutional authority of the Executive Branch of Government. While fully committed to the principle of private sector efficiency in the management of these enterprises, we will resist equally the pressure from our partners to transfer the assets of these enterprises, without proper evaluation and in an untimely manner thereby limiting the potential benefit to the people.

Recounting progress, we also believe that it is noteworthy that under the Ministry of Public Work's Emergency Road Repair program, our road network is undergoing some limited facelift.

Community access roads are being opened and graded throughout Monrovia and its environs. Indeed, the Ministry of Work is doing a good job of it on the Caldwell road, which is now 90% complete, as well as on the Old road and Smythe road, Gaye town and Matadi estate roads.

Pot road patching is also ongoing on a limited basis, so too is the nation wide side brushing which has been launched using the Monrovia to Gbarnga highway as the pilot project. Labour for this project is drawn from the communities living along this highway.

As promised by my government, repair work on electricity facilities is ongoing in various parts of Monrovia. Although not as visible as work being done on the roads, substations and related infrastructure are being gradually repaired as resources become available.

I also want to reassure the nation that we remain committed and plans are well advanced to ensure that by the time we celebrate our next July 26, a good portion of Monrovia will enjoy a level of electricity supply.

There are plans also for repairs to be carried out on Public Buildings—as part of our program of infrastructural rehabilitation and development. We intend to rehabilitate all existing unfinished public buildings, which_would certainly cut down on our expenditure on private structures being used for government offices.

Fellow Citizens, as you are aware, three weeks ago, I led a government delegation to Europe, where we visited and held pertinent discussions with the Governments and officials of Belgium, Switzerland, and France.

A high point of this visit was a meeting with the President of the European Commission aimed at soliciting support for the country within the framework of the Government's 150 days deliverables.

In particular, we sought confirmation of support for our Electricity Project, infrastructure rehabilitation and support for small and medium sized industries.

In Switzerland, we held series of discussions with officials of Government, including the Foreign Minister, who is soon to assume the rotational presidency of the European Union.

Already the results of that visit are evident. Technicians from Switzerland have already visited and the Director General of Development Cooperation, Ambassador Fust, is scheduled to visit Liberia shortly to identify programs that can be supported by the Swiss Government.

Meanwhile, the Swiss Government has promised to assist Liberia in tracing any Liberian accounts holding illegal wealth stashed away in Swiss banks.

We continued our European visit by responding to the invitation of the President of France. Confidence in our Government was affirmed by the French Government's commitment to reactivate its diplomatic mission at the highest level by the end of this year. We were also promised technical assistance for training of our nurses and doctors, teacher training assistance and the reopening of Alliance Francais to provide opportunities for learning the French language. Moreover, we look forward to positive responses on our request for a few ambulances and fire trucks.

Following our European tour, we returned home and almost immediately thereafter embarked on the United States visit – where we were accorded the singular honor of addressing a Joint Meeting of the United States Congress.

That occasion afforded us the much needed platform to enhance the American people's understanding of the historical bonds between our two countries and peoples, while at the same time promoting global awareness about the huge post-conflict reconstruction agenda facing our country.

The high-spirited response to our address generated among the Congress men and women left no doubt in our mind of the tremendous goodwill our government now enjoys in that great country.

We subsequently met and held fruitful discussions with President George W. Bush and senior members of his administration. Paramount among the issues discussed was the ongoing security sector reform in the country.

We discussed concrete means by which the U.S. and the rest of the international community could help to consolidate the peace in Liberia and explored potential US assistance in the area of HIV AIDS, a national teacher training program, and a lunch program for elementary schools.

Our discussions with several ranking senators, congressmen and women yielded tangible dividends. A supplemental appropriation of between \$50 -100 Million US Dollars is now being actively considered for our country to support programs dealing with Infrastructure Development, Security Sector Reform and the training and reintegration of ex-combatants.

We should note that this appropriation is in addition to support already approved by the U.S. Congress for Fiscal Year 2006, which total approximately \$120 Million US Dollars. We also look forward to a continuation of the same level of funding in 2007 which is now being proposed. The challenge in this regard is to get these funds disbursed for the purposes included.

Other areas of additional US assistance to Liberia include:

- Collaboration between the US Congress and our National Legislature aimed at training and the establishment of a Legislative library.
- Support through a bilateral facility for settlement of our external debts under an IMF supported regime.
- US Treasury Department sponsored technical assistance to the Ministry of Finance and Central Bank to enhance resource management.
- Eligibility for the General System of Preferences and for OPIC investment guarantee, and opening of an EXIM Bank window.
- Commitment of the African Development Foundation of US\$ 1 million facility to support small enterprises development.

The U.S. trip also provided opportunity for a visit to the World Bank, where we held very productive discussions with World Bank President, Paul Wolfowitz and senior Bank officials. We were assured of accelerated disbursement of a grant commitment of US\$25 Million for infrastructure development which brings World Bank assistance to a total grant of US\$60 million.

Meanwhile, the World Bank has also promised full Country Representation within a few months, a clear demonstration of confidence in our government.

Moreover, we expect World Bank cohosting along with the US Government and the United Nations of a partnership conference later this year to review Liberia's development agenda and strategy.

While in the U.S. I also addressed the United Nations Security Council, during which all 15 members of the Security Council responded with positive statements to our expression of appreciation for the continuation of service of the UN peace keeping force.

I reviewed progress of the Government in meeting the requirements for the lifting of timber and diamond sanctions with emphasis on the bold step taken by Government to terminate all forestry concessions deemed in noncompliance with their concession agreements.

Fellow Citizens, let me point out that foreign trips of the kind that we have just concluded are not luxury or pleasure excursions. They constitute a fundamental part of our foreign policy strategy designed to cultivate and harness the cooperation and support of our partners in our post-conflict reconstruction and peace building efforts.

Thus, while we will strive to keep such official foreign visits as cost effective as possible, we will continue to avail ourselves of the opportunities they afford us to make a case for assistance in tackling the compelling needs of our people and country.

Nonetheless, be assured that in keeping with the new travel ordinance, report on expenses for their visits will be filed with the Ministry of Finance for publication in regular expenditure reports of the Ministry.

That said, we remain forever convinced that no amount of foreign largesse and support can sustainably substitute for the principle of self reliance as a long-term development strategy of any country.

That is why our Government will continue to invest as much time and energy into the mobilization of our domestic resources and capacities with a view to timely achieving our national development objectives.

An important domestic resource is vested in the thousand of our citizens who reside in the US and other countries. We met with them and appealed to them to come home, as many as can do so. We also appealed to the US Congress to grant those who cannot do so right away, continuing protective status. I want you to know that our compatriots abroad are responding positively to our appeal in this regard.

Fellow citizens, as we pursue the path of national healing and renewal, the launching of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission must be seen as a big stride in this regard. For now we, as Liberians, have chosen to use the TRC to help address the complex issues of injustice and human rights violations that characterized our conflict period.

I am confident that the TRC will help us to reconcile with our past with ourselves, and therefore make our forward march into the future easier. We thank the members of the Commission for accepting this responsibility and challenge.

Fellow Citizens, in the midst of all these challenges and obstacles, let us close ranks in the spirit of national unity. Let us work toward rebuilding a Liberia that is respected throughout the world; a Liberia that is poised to become a success story in a sub region that has had its share of grief and retrogression; a Liberia in which we all can live peacefully and happily as we each pursue our individual and collective desires and aspirations in an atmosphere of harmony and tranquillity. Your Government stands ready to lead and to support your efforts as we march into the future of change and promise.

I thank you and may God bless us all.