

**REMARKS BY  
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At the 16th Annual Convention of the  
Grand Gedeh Association in the Americas, Inc.

Des Moines, Iowa, USA

May 25-27, 2007

Sons and Daughters of Liberia,  
Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am extremely honored and gratified by your invitation for me to serve as keynote speaker at this unique program which reflects our individual efforts to bring about genuine reconciliation that has so long eluded us as a people. Our country and its people have gone through the trauma of hate and mayhem for the past 14 years which set the basis for mistrust and insecurity. We have dragged our country into disrepute and degradation.

Today, we as a people are faced with the mammoth task of nation-building. But we cannot attain this goal if we remain divided as we are. A nation or people divided are bound to fail. Our national anthem proclaims an alternative loud and clear: "In union strong, success is sure". It can be said with much conviction that those words as expressed in our Country's National Anthem are the motivation behind the holding of this event at which you have asked me to speak on the topic "National Reconciliation: A Cornerstone to Unity, Peace and Development."

My fellow countrymen, the three keywords, Reconciliation, Unity, and Peace, how they are intrinsically linked to national development, and how they can be applied in the Liberian context, will form the basis of my presentation. Reconciliation is not just an invitation to a banquet where people dine and wine and in the end toast each other. A banquet is an event, but reconciliation is a process that requires the collective inputs and commitment of all citizens.

To reconcile groups of individuals, who have been torn apart by war, requires selfless initiatives and a clear understanding of what we stand to lose as a divided people, and what we stand to gain when we are reconciled. Reconciliation is about the search for just relations, mutuality, and the way of overcoming the very cause of conflict with a commitment to non-violence and dialogue. It is a process and a step on the road to peace. Fellow Liberians, do not let us fool ourselves, we are all related—you may not know my Krahn connections, but I am connected! Ask Joseph Johnson, Jr.

If you have been oppressed or wronged, it can be painful to shake the hand of those who killed your family members, tortured you or your friends, and dispossessed you of your possession. Forgiveness seems an unlikely possibility. If you have been the oppressor, it is hard to recognize and take responsibility for your actions or actions of those you supported. Even if your role was silent and passive, to sit by and watch injustice requires you to distance yourself from the other. When you treat people as non-entities,

not as fully human as yourself and those in your group, not as deserving of rights and respect, to reconcile with them means you have to recognize their humanity and give up the benefits you gain by pontificating others as less important.

In doing this, we need to ask ourselves; what is reconciliation? How it is best promoted and achieved? Does it work? What are the limits to the reconciliation process?

Within our context, however, the issue is not whether there is a formal pattern of reconciliation, but rather to better grasp how reconciliation can shape our transition from mayhem and backwardness; undemocratic practices to democracy and development, and the ways in which it can be used to bridge the deep historical divide that has kept us apart as a society.

Reconciliation should now form part of the discourse of our transition to justice and democracy. Our government, civil society, and our international partners are presently engaged with this discourse out of which evolved the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that was officially launched on June 22, 2006, to conduct investigations into the gross human rights violations and violations of international humanitarian laws that took place in Liberia between 1979 and October 14, 2003. The goals of these investigations are to determine whether these violations were part of a systematic pattern of reaction to injustices so as to establish their antecedents and context, and to determine those responsible for the violations.

It is our belief that the TRC will provide the forum to address issues of impunity, conduct a critical review of Liberia's past in order to establish historical truths, adopt specific mechanisms to address the experiences of women, children and other vulnerable groups during this period.

We consider reconciliation a necessary element in the search for lasting peace and unity, which are preconditions for development and progress. Reconciliation, you will agree with me, signals the beginning of the process of consolidating peace within which the human dignity, freedom and equality that lie at the heart of our constitutional order, can be achieved.  
My fellow citizens, ladies and gentlemen:

We find ourselves in a period of our history when the present is determined neither by an inescapable future nor by our tattered past, but by our individual determinations and sacrifices. This interval truly requires our collective commitment demonstrated in our actions and deeds. We need reconciliation more than ever before, if we are to build a future for ourselves and posterity. There can certainly be no unity, peace and meaningful development without reconciling our differences.

The Holy Bible admonishes us in Matthew 18:15-20 that "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where

two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them." Reconciliation, indeed, is tedious, but valuable.

These words as expressed by Jesus Christ thousands of years ago are still relevant to our quest for national reconciliation and peaceful coexistence. Let this admonition appeal to our conscience and strengthen our resolve to reconcile our differences as a people.

We obviously need to graduate from the phenomenon of hate and other vices that tend to divide us as a people to a new phenomenon of love and harmony. Reconciliation should serve as a shift from that old phenomenon to a new phenomenon of peace, unity and development.

My brothers and sisters: Exactly 6 years ago, a son of yours, speaking on the need for Reconciliation had these words to say: "The reality of the Liberian tragedy, therefore, is that all Liberians have been hurt, some more so than others. Together, we must now find means to help heal the wounds. We must appeal to the goodness within each of us to forgive, heal and reconcile. For us Grand Geddeans, we must begin with the healing of wounds that we inflicted on each other.

It is only when we are healed and genuinely reconciled to each other that we can focus on the important task of helping to rebuild our county."

The speaker continued by saying, "...but we would also need to extend the process of reconciliation beyond our borders. We need to be reconciled to our River Gee and Nimba neighbors. For decades we lived in harmony, intermarrying and often supporting each other's causes. Regrettably, the war and the years preceding it did serious damage to the relationship. It is in our interest and in the interest of our country to restore the harmonious relationship that once existed." My friends, in case you don't remember, those were the words of the Former President of this very organization, William G. Nyanue, when he delivered his inaugural address in Providence, Rhode Island, on Labor Day Weekend in 2001. In fact, your current National President, Mr. J. David Gbotoe, was the then National Vice President.

As we look back today on those words, how much progress have we made? Are we ready to unconditionally and unambiguously begin dialogue amongst our people, regardless of past wrongs, real and perceived? What I am telling you is: If we are serious about reconciliation, and if we are going to reconcile, all of us have to be brutally honest in our own self-examination. I'm not talking about some mundane reflection or an act of brushing off the main issues. But instead about the soul searching, honest reflection and penitence called for by every major spiritual and ethical teaching. To reconcile is not merely to say, yes I recognize my fault, my error and I ask for forgiveness while remaining ready to commit new faults and errors. It is not pretending to be repentant of the evil one has done while remaining convinced deep down that it is the others who must be blamed.

Our challenge now as a government in bringing about national reconciliation is, how we can have a stable democracy to pave the way for development and reforms.

To strike a balance between reconciliation and transformation is challenging. This seeming insurmountable challenge can be best expressed in the words of the South African President, Thabo Mbeki, who said that "it is a very

delicate thing to handle the relationship between transformation and reconciliation... It is not a mathematical thing; it's an art..."

We are fully aware that transforming any society with a mindset is a tough challenge. If you handle the transformation process in a way that does not change a good part of the status quo, those who are disadvantaged will rebel and then reconciliation becomes illusive.

In these terms, the future of reconciliation may have much to do with the way we as Liberians are able to fashion the culture of reconciliation into the transformation process so that our reforms are not seen as vengeance related or witch-hunting.

A shift in mindset is important but difficult to achieve. We are aware of this fact, but our citizens must also be willing to change and accept change. We can not reconcile our differences when we are still bent on doing those things that tore us apart as a people. Reconciliation requires a complete rebirth. We need to reconstruct ourselves within ourselves if we are to attain peace, unity, and development in the new political dispensation in our country.

This requires a change of our thought processes; a change of how we interact with each other; and a change of our culture of impunity. You, the sons and daughters of Liberia living in the Diaspora are of no exception! Today, our government is instituting political and economic reforms with a focus on the development of democratic institutions that will ensure the freedom of speech and association and be tolerant of the views that we do not necessarily find supportive. All of these are intended to promote reconciliation and consolidate the gains made so far as a government and people.

Peace, justice, and reconciliation must start in the heart of the individual, the family, the community, and then the nation. But our society is so much saddled with identity crisis that a lot of us do not feel we have a home called Liberia.

This situation is thwarting efforts at reconciliation, because if an individual does not have anything to live for, he will have nothing to die for. We need to develop in us the spirit of nationalism and patriotism that will drive us to fight and die for our country.

If we nurture the spirit of nationalism, we will always strive to protect our country from enemies and build a wall between us and those that want to divide us. A lot of us admire the courage and bravery Americans exhibit in defending their country. This courage and bravery stems from the fact that Americans have been able to develop a national identity. What we hear in America is American-Indian, African-American, British-American, etcetera, etcetera. In all these descriptions what you recognized is the adjective American.

When will we appreciate our Liberian-ness? In order to reconcile, we must ask ourselves the question: Who are we? Are we Liberians first and then Krahn, Kissi, Mano or Mandingo last or are we Kpelle, Vai, and Sarpo, first and Liberian last? Our national identity must provide a historic bridge between the past of a deeply divided society characterized by strife, conflict, untold suffering and injustice, and a future founded on human rights, democracy and peaceful co-existence and opportunities for all, irrespective of tribe, county, status, belief, creed or sex.

The pursuit of national unity and peace is predicated on reconciliation amongst us as a people, which will ultimately lead to reconstruction and the development of our country.

We recognize the injustices of past regimes, and believe that Liberia belongs to all who live in it, so we must be united in our diversity. Let no one suffer unjustly because of ethnic association. I believe that as we discuss the issue of national unity and reconciliation today, we must do a number of things, if we are to make headway:

The first of these is that we should commit ourselves to the pursuit of the peaceful objectives that will bring about development for our country. National reconciliation is the construction of a sense of nationhood which would result from the reconstruction of our past through forgiveness and the elimination of disparities and inequalities we all inherited from the past.

This follows that in spite of the gift of hope delivered to us by the international community through the birth of this new found democracy, we need genuine forgiveness that will ultimately lead to peace and unity, or else the concept of nation building or national development will continue to elude us, or remain a mere mirage.

Secondly, we will have to learn to solve our problems through dialogue and consensus, and resist the temptation of resorting to our old way of using violence to solve national problems.

Thirdly, we will have to answer the question, again as honestly as we can, whether our actions have genuinely sought to promote peace and reconciliation amongst our people or have they brought division and destruction to all of us!

In the light of these prescriptions, let me declare here that the Unity Party-led Government headed by Africa's first elected President; Mrs. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf is committed to the promotion of genuine national reconciliation and subsequently, development to all Liberians. Our government will continue its performance and fight corruption where necessary. We hereby reaffirm and commit publicly to genuine political reformation, internal democracy, transparency, and accountability, and the removal of corrupt figures from our ranks and file. We are determined to recapture people's faith through our actions and commitments.

As a Government and People, we acknowledge with grateful appreciation, the tremendous sacrifices and contributions that Liberians in the Diaspora have made and continue to make to the Liberian economy, and the sustenance of our Country. Your financial remittances back home during the years of crisis made tremendous impact on the peace process. We say thank you and are ever mindful of your many peaceful demonstrations and incessant political pressure you maintained on the leaders of this country to help bring about the peace that we enjoy in Liberia today. We are where we are today, thanks in large part to your positive and deliberate actions. I urge you to continue to be good ambassadors of your motherland. We are people of a great country, regardless of size.

At the same time, we must register our regrets and compunction at the recent shameful wave of deportation of Liberians from this country. We are appalled at the crimes that Liberians are said to have committed.

This is a disturbing trend, as Liberians have long been known to be humble and peaceful people. As a community in a foreign land, you must do all you can to preserve our cultural heritage and uphold the dignity of Liberia. We believe that as a people, we should move as rapidly and as consistently as possible to transform Liberia into a country of hope and economic prosperity. And you, Liberians in the Diaspora, must continue to be an integral part of that initiative.

We will ensure our country lives up to its constitutional commitment to transform itself into a peaceful and harmonious society based on the rule of law. As Liberians, we must adopt the necessary steps to eradicate poverty in our country in all its manifestations, to end bad governance which has in the past led to dehumanization and deprivation of our people;

We are also committed to deal with our political past, honestly, frankly and without equivocation, so that the purposes for which most of us agreed to establish the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, are realized;

We are committed to respond to the rallying call to adopt a new national agenda characterized by patriotism, the will power to fight for eradication of the legacy of the past;

Forge a united front against corruption and crime, and concerted action to advance the interests of the vulnerable, including children, women, the disabled and the elderly;

We should be prepared to protect and advance the interests of all the ethnic groups and tribes that make up our population;

We should also demonstrate a commitment to confront the economic challenges facing our country, in a manner that simultaneously addresses issues of high and sustained growth and raising the living standards of our people;

We should exert an all-embracing effort to build a sense of nationhood with a shared destiny, and be prepared to inculcate into the minds of all our people the understanding that we can only attain our goals as a nation, when we are willing to heal the wounds of the past through reconciliation.

My fellow Liberians, these are some of the basic issues we must address when we speak of reconciliation and nation building. These issues stand at the core of our future as a stable democracy, with respect for human rights, equality, peace, stability and a prosperous nation. Accordingly, all of us, young and old alike, must conduct ourselves in ways that promote the attainment of the aforementioned goals. I would like to reaffirm that ridding ourselves of past legacies will require considerable effort over a considerable period of time.

We are neither impressed nor moved by arguments which seek to suggest that four or six years are long enough to remove from our national life what we have lived with since the founding of our nation 160 years ago.

We certainly are doing our best to transform this decadent and moribund society, but it will take time and sacrifice before we get there. Our job, Liberians, is to preserve for you a home where you are known by name and not a social security number!

WE ALL HAVE A STAKE IN THIS PROCESS!

In many instances, the reality that our past determines the present is to invite protests and ridicule even as it is perfectly clear that no solution to the many current problems can be found unless we understand their historical origins. This is why we must learn to forgive but at the same time remembering the past because there is a lot to learn from the past.

Let us remain true to our cultural value: respect for elders, respect for leadership; constructive engagement with the government; preservation of our cultural heritage and those norms that set us apart as Liberians. By words and deeds, we have to demonstrate our commitment to translate our vision of national unity and reconciliation into reality. Then and only then will we achieve the peace that we have longed so long for, the unity that we craved many years for, and of course the national development we need so badly.

May God always bless us, protect our sovereignty, unify us as a people, preserve our dignity and keep us safe.

I THANK YOU!