

REMARKS

BY

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PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF LIBERIA

AT THE

2007 AFRICARE BISHOP WALKER DINNER

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**President George Bush and Former President Bill Clinton, National Honorary Patrons;
Mrs. Laura Bush;
Mrs. Maria Walker, Honorary Dinner Chair;
Mr. Robert Johnson, National Chair;
Friends of Africa and Friends of Liberia;**

Thank you to everyone who is here tonight and to AFRICARE for hosting this event and presenting me with such a notable honor. When I look at the list of the past recipients – President Nelson Mandela, Bishop Desmond Tutu, Richard Lugar, Bill and Melinda Gates, President Bill Clinton, Colin Powell, I can't help but feel humbled to be included. Each man and woman so honored was a pioneer in their own way, changing the world with their ideas and their innovations. This, for me, is the definition of true legacy.

Tonight I ask you not to celebrate me or my Presidency, but to celebrate the Liberian people, because they have suffered through so much and granted me the privilege to serve my country, and it is their support and hope for a better future that I need to sustain.

I am often asked what I think my legacy will be, and I reply that this is for historians to decide. But it is my hope that when history passes judgment on me, it will not just remark that I was the first woman to be elected President in Africa.

I would like to be remembered for raising the bar for accountable governance in Liberia and across the continent; for designing institutions that serve the public interest; for turning a failed state into a thriving democracy with a vibrant, diversified private-sector-driven economy; for sending children back to school; for returning basic services to the cities and bringing them to rural areas.

I want Liberia to show the world that in the time of great uncertainty, with sustained support from the United States of America and its partners, a post-conflict country can live in peace

within its own borders and amongst its neighbors and emerge as a nation that embraces constitutionally defined separation of powers, that respects civil rights, and the rule of law.

I want us to use the opportunity of this night to share in the excitement of a continent (Africa) on the move; a region virtually free of war and destruction, a nation after decades of conflict and near total destruction, on the mend, securing the peace, open for business, reclaiming a future of hope and promise.

Thank you AFRICARE for your contribution to this progress, for your work in food security and health services and HIV prevention and water supply and sanitation in over twenty-six countries in Africa.

Your work and commitment to Liberia is long standing. C. Payne Lucas was there with us in the old days and he listened to our prayers and hopes when things turned bad. Julius Coles worked with us in USAID many years before he came to AFRICARE so he knows our trials and tribulations, our strengths and expectations.

Thank you, AFRICARE, for the current support in reviving our rural agriculture, thereby enabling our people to become self sufficient once again; and for the building and staffing of clinics, and the fight against HIV/AIDS.

There are many others, several in this audience, who have helped Liberia on to this path of progress. It would never have started if our African leaders had not taken the bold step to say 'enough is enough' in the suffering of a people, if President Bush, urged on by unsung heroes – Bobby Pittman, Jendayi Frazer, Condoleezza Rice and Colin Powell – did not tell the world that it was time for a dictator to step down. President Bush just recently gave thousands of Liberians another lease on life by extending their stay in the U.S. for another 18 months.

Today as we reclaim the future, we thank you Mrs. Bush for being with us when we took the oath of office and for the continuing support exemplified by the inclusion of Liberia in the special education initiative. Please come back to Africa to see the progress in the fight you have supported against malaria and please come back to Liberia to see what we do in promoting the education of our children, particularly the neglected girls.

Bob Johnson, National Chair, you have provided the means whereby thousands of Liberians now have the opportunity to compete in the business sector. You have gone beyond that in becoming one of our greatest advocates, bringing our potential to the attention of American investors, securing the link between Liberians and African Americans.

Congresswoman Nita Lowey, as Chair of the Foreign Operations Appropriations Subcommittee, and with others of your colleagues, has stood by us in our time of need. You have spearheaded Liberia's inclusion in Supplementals to keep our security sector reform on track. By so doing, you have embraced the vision that the government of Liberia has articulated for its future.

And whether everyone here realizes it or not, you are showing the world that when the politics in Washington is united, across party lines, towards a goal, there is nothing that this great nation of the United States of America can not accomplish.

Many of you may recall when I spoke last year to the Joint Meeting of Congress – I said, *“Liberia is taking its place among the community of peaceful democracies, but we haven’t done it alone. I stood before you then and I stand before you now as an African woman and an African president, thanks to the grace of Almighty God; thanks to the courage of the Liberian people, who chose their future over fear; thanks to the people of West Africa and of Africa generally, who intervened to give hope to my people. And thanks to the government and people of this country, and to the world community, who spurred the international effort that brought blessed peace to our nation”*.

We have come a long way since January 2006. Our vision and development agenda is clearly focused around the four goals of **Peace and Security, Economic Revitalization, Infrastructure and Basic Services, and Governance and the Rule of Law**. Our new army and security forces are under professional training, preparing to assume the responsibility when the UN peacekeeping forces commence a draw down. We have drafted a new National Defense and Security Sector Act and completed plans for the establishment of a Veterans Bureau.

We balanced our budget in four months, and we have more than doubled revenues in one year, increasing budget resources from \$80 million under the transitional government to close to \$200 million. We have formulated sound macroeconomic policy and introduced a wide range of sector policy reforms as the foundation for developing our Poverty Reduction Strategy. We have implemented the Governance and Economic Management Assistance Program (GEMAP) which provides Technical experts for revenue generation in key government institutions. We have commenced the first national census in 20 years, met the conditions for the lifting of sanctions on timber and diamonds.

We have qualified for the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) to facilitate Liberian exports to U.S. markets. We have renegotiated a \$1 billion iron ore concession agreement with Arcelor Mittal Steel. We have resolved financial integration of the Central Bank from deficit to surplus capital deposit. We have concluded arrangements for \$10 million investment in processing of old rubber trees into chips for export to Europe; ensured food security with provision of seeds and tools worth more than \$2 million to more than 14,000 families throughout the country; and supported the rehabilitation for 200 small rubber and cocoa farms.

We are reviewing proposals for investment in other mines and in our forestry sector under a new law that protects the environment and gives benefits to the communities. We have welcomed new investments in exploiting our mineral and oil potential.

We have increased school enrollment by 40 percent with special emphasis on the education of girls and going beyond official resources to tap private funds through the Liberian Education Trust which has raised \$3 million to build or renovate 50 schools, train 500 teachers and give 5000 scholarship to girls. We are keeping our election promise to improve conditions of our market women. We are rebuilding clinics and hospitals, and trying to restore the nation’s number one facility, the John F. Kennedy Memorial, to prewar status.

We have brought electricity to the capital city for the first time in fourteen years and while it is still limited and costly, the children now gather under street lights to study and some can get clean water out of a faucet rather than a bucket.

We are restructuring the civil service, increasing compensation and settling huge inherited arrears. We have instituted measures to fight corruption and qualified as a candidate for membership in the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative. We have reactivated bilateral relations with several European countries and have excellent relationships with all of our neighboring leaders.

Yet, I must tell you that despite the progress, there is a long road ahead.

Perhaps our highest single priority other than maintaining the peace is to rebuild and repair the network of roads throughout Liberia. Our roads were totally destroyed by two decades of neglect, war, and heavy rains. Rebuilding the roads will help us maintain peace and security, connect farmers to markets, create economic opportunities for the rural poor, allow sick people to travel to clinics, enable children to get to school, and stimulate private sector investment.

In addition, we cannot secure the peace without providing both education and jobs for our children and youth who constitute 40 percent of the population. Although there is increased enrollment, there are still thousands of our children who cannot attend because of the lack of schools and the quality of education remains low because of the lack of trained teachers and educational material.

We have brought down the 80 – 85 percent unemployment rate but thousands of our young people still walk the street aimlessly, including the vulnerable ex-combatants and child soldiers.

We know that investors want predictability, consistency and stability and we are trying to establish this kind of environment. But we live in a troubled region in which turmoil in one country means trouble for the others. We must therefore encourage development and investment across borders through open markets and strong private sector initiatives that can create jobs and enhance mobility of goods and services.

Investors like Firestone which have benefited from 80 years of partnership with and profits from our country must now step up to the plate, conclude the ongoing renegotiation and stand fully behind us in our quest for value added to our natural rubber.

Liberia cannot recover under the burden of \$4.5 billion in international debt most of it representing accumulated interest on money that was lent to the unaccountable governments of the past. Unless we resolve the debt issue, Liberia is barred from new sources of finance vital for reconstruction. It is not enough to be close to resolving this problem. We ask the IMF and its shareholders to redouble their efforts to resolve this issue and close the remaining \$90 million or so gap at the IMF in the first step of the debt process.

While we celebrate the fact that Liberia is on the rebound, we know that Liberia faces the daunting task of rebuilding our country from the ashes of war. We recognize that to be successful, we need to implement policies aimed at both political stability and economic recovery that are mutually reinforcing, and that to sustain development over time, we have to rebuild institutions and invest in human capacity.

We are equally aware that, for Liberia to be successful we cannot simply recreate the economic and political structures of the past that led to widespread income disparities, economic and political marginalization, and deep social cleavages. We must create much greater economic and political opportunities for all Liberians, not just for a small elite class, and ensure that the benefits from growth are spread much more equitably throughout the population. We must decentralize political structures, provide more political power to the regions and districts, build transparency and accountability into government decision-making, and create stronger systems of checks and balances across all three branches of government.

Liberians appreciate the generous encouragement and support from the United States and our other major partners – but we need follow up and follow through. Liberia has one chance to consolidate the peace and only a short time to make it happen.

The world needs a post-conflict success story. Liberia is on the way to building a sustainable, equitable, peaceful society that demonstrates the value of democracy and open markets. Liberia aims to show that democracy can thrive under the most challenging conditions. But we cannot do this alone. We need your continued help, support and your prayers – and we are in a race against time.

We pledge to put every development dollar to good use. We need every mechanism of assistance – including a fast-track reestablishment of the Peace Corps and its expansion across Liberia. We need more help to rebuild roads and bridges and schools and clinics and to create jobs.

We have just begun our brief dry season – which runs from October until May. In these next seven months the government needs to show real results on the ground to the Liberian people. Much of last year's dry season was wasted, held hostage to the bureaucratic pace of assistance funds for infrastructure projects. We call on all our partners to remember the temperamental nature of our climate, and help us guarantee that when your generous resources arrive in Liberia, they can be put to immediate good use.

We believe that the new Africa Command of the U.S. military - AFRICOM - can play an important role on the continent, and in Liberia. AFRICOM can help support institution-building by embracing good governance, building security capacity, and helping to develop better civil-military relations in countries where civilian control of the military is a relatively new concept. If AFRICOM plays a positive role in the African security sector, it will help bolster the sense of hope that Liberians have begun to embrace.

Everywhere I travel throughout the country, I meet people who see light ahead. I see the restoration of hope. I see children smiling again. With your help, we can sustain those smiles and that hope; we can continue to build a new Liberia that is a beacon to the world. We could be an example of a country that demonstrates how from the ashes of destruction and despair, a free society can arise, one that puts the interests of its citizens first and makes it possible for each of them to live in the dignity they all deserve.

This is my primary challenge, to create the institutions that will stand the test of time; that will be there for my grandchildren's grandchildren. For too long, those watching Africa have focused on personalities, relying on one person, often one man, to lead the way. But this is

mentality has failed Africa, undermining accountability and constitutionally defined government. I ask that you translate your faith in my administration into institutions that will live beyond my presidency, and serve Liberia far into the future."

This is how I wish to be remembered. This is the legacy I seek – a President of Liberia who turned a post conflict country crippled by twenty-five years of decline and a civil war with more than 200,000 dead and one million displaced, into a beacon of stability and democracy where the free market and private investment can prosper, where an empowered people, free from dependency and violence, can take their destiny into their own hands. Indeed, I want to be remembered for a Liberia where the educated children smile again, knowing that they can remain at home and be whatever they want to be. With your continued support and assistance, I know we can get there.

Thank you.