

Remarks by H.E. President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf
At Dedication of Temple of Justice Courts "A" and "B"
Temple of Justice Grounds
Monday, June 21, 2010

Chief Justice Lewis;
Associate Justices of the Supreme Court and Members of the
Judiciary;
Members of the National Legislature;
Madam Chargé d’Affaires Robinson and Staff of the Embassy of
the United States of America;
Representatives of our International Partners;
Members of the Cabinet and other Officials of Government;
The Doyen and Members of the Diplomatic Corps;
Members of the National Bar Association;
Members of the Clergy;
Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen;
Dear Friends:

In February 2009, as the Chief Justice has just reminded us, I
came here to dedicate this courthouse building. A year later, I’m
back, this time to cut the ribbon for the refurbished Criminal
Courts "A" and "B", on the West Wing of the Temple of Justice.

It is a distinct honor for me to perform this task, knowing what it
will mean in terms of expanding access by more of our citizens to

our judicial system and, hopefully, clearing out the hefty dockets of the other Criminal Courts and enhancing the judicial process.

We would not have as quickly reached this point but for the generosity of the United States Government, which, in 2007, as stated by the Chief Justice, signed an Agreement, under its Justice Sector Support, Liberia (JSSL) program, to fund the renovation of the two Courts. Construction commenced last year, and today, the results are before our eyes.

I want to express special thanks to Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield, and to her associates, and through you to the United States Government, for being a true friend of Liberia, and for their manifold kindnesses and support to Liberia as we rebuild our once shattered nation and infrastructure.

These Courts attest to the U. S. Government's continued assurances to partner with Liberia in institutionalizing adherence to the rule of law. American support has helped us to turn Liberia

into a country where justice and the rule of law are again taking hold.

We invite the United States to continue to be our development partner. They have continued to contribute to our social, political and economic development over the years. They've been there with us and for us, and we value our ties – historical or otherwise – to that great country and its people.

However, as I declared, on my recent trip to the United States, it is our goal, our intention, our promise, and our commitment that in 10 years, if we stay on the path of reform, if we collectively have the resolve to reach our nation's potential, follow the roadmap of our national agenda, Liberia should no longer depend on foreign assistance. We should be able to self-finance our own development.

Judicial Reform

A solid judicial system lies at the core of our commitment to justice, the rule of law, the protection of human rights and, ultimately, to peace. Let us admit, in all candor, that the pace of

much-needed judicial reform has not lived up to our expectations. Our Supreme Court requires more teamwork, as well as urgent action on reform of the jury system.

Despite higher levels of compensation and overall better working conditions for judges, county attorneys, defense counsels and magistrates, the court system remains slow in processing and dispensing justice and in the quality of its judgment.

We have worked to speed the pace at which cases are prosecuted. A reorganized and better capacitated Ministry of Justice is showing results in obtaining indictments in a number of high-profile corruption and murder cases. Moreover, a Roving Prosecution Unit operates in making the justice system more accessible to the accused and in providing an opportunity for cases on the court docket to be disposed of at a higher pace. The same is true for the Magisterial Court set up at the Monrovia Central Prison.

Nevertheless, there still remains a serious backlog of cases. A complete reform of our judicial system, coupled with the opening of new courts, is very much in order. Our judicial process is in dire need of modernization, so that stenographers and computers

can replace typists and typewriters, thereby speeding up the paperwork.

It is no secret that our jury system needs an overhaul. We do not need people to line up to serve on jury panels because of the stipends they get from the courts. One way to solve this problem, as we've discussed over and over, is to establish a database of potential jurors from which jurors would be randomly selected. This would eliminate the revolving-door system that currently obtains. Additionally, it should be made mandatory that citizens serve on juries of their peers as is done in other parts of the world. Implementation of these and other measures would go a long way to cleaning the court system of the scourge of tainted jury pools.

Expanding Access to Quality Justice

The JSSL program, under which the renovation of these courts took place, seeks to assist the Liberian judiciary to expand citizens' access to quality justice. On that topic, let me recall what I said in April when I addressed the National Conference on Enhancing Access to Justice.

I underscored the importance of access to justice in Liberia, as well as my belief that all of us – ministers, judges, lawyers, police officers, traditional leaders, civil society members, and citizens – must all work together to ensure that Liberians enjoy access to free, fair, and timely justice in all corners of Liberia, through our formal court system, as well as our traditional system.

What I said on that occasion bears repeating because, sadly, change is slow and the same circumstances continue to prevail. I listed areas where we were working towards rebuilding our justice system after a long period of decay: the opening of new courts; expanding the rule of law throughout the country; educating our police, justice officials, and population; training county attorneys and public defenders who are helping to ensure that all have access to courts; establishing a criminal court in Monrovia devoted to preventing and prosecuting serious cases of domestic violence and rape; and the training of dedicated young lawyers at the University of Liberia who are ready to passionately defend our Constitution and advocate for the rights of all Liberians.

I ask that we continue to work on the prevention of corruption –

one of the primary factors preventing our citizens from accessing affordable, fair, and transparent justice. By forcing victims to pay unauthorized fees, such as witness fees in criminal cases, or, in some cases, outright bribes, officials in our formal justice system can push justice out of reach of ordinary Liberians. Such conduct erodes the public's confidence in Government, and we must address it forcefully, and timely.

I once again make a strong appeal for the establishment of Special Courts – Commercial, Investment and Small Claims – to deal with the cases of corruption. It is unacceptable that in the past four years we've been able to deal with only two major cases. The Executive has to do its part by suspending and dismissing people; by establishing or strengthening the institutional pillars of integrity; by passing laws and formulating policies for improved financial management; and by installing systems for enhanced management of the public resources. All of this is lost in the public opinion if we cannot punish those who violate the public trust.

I know the Supreme Court's opinion is that the Executive does have a greater role to play through our Ministry of Justice and its prosecutorial system, but we also need a Special Court to get

these cases on dockets and trials finalized as quickly as possible.

I know this may not be light, but if we cannot take early action, we will have to consider asking the Legislature to make corruption a non-bailable offense.

At the Conference on Enhancing Access to Justice, I talked also about the need to ensure more accessible and affordable courts in rural areas.

It is my honest hope that the reopening of Criminal Courts “A” and “B” will lead to a marked difference and improvement in the way our judicial system functions. I urge us all to commit to work towards a new era of justice in Liberia, where the rights of all Liberians, and their access to quality justice, will be protected.

I thank all of you for everything you have done to enhance the dispensing of justice in our country – the magistrates and, more importantly, the Supreme Court. But the work is not done. The potential of Liberia, our ability to reach that potential where prosperity to which each Liberian is entitled, lies in your hands today. For one area recognized all over the world as holding Liberia back is to address this whole matter about dishonesty and indiscipline. We look to you to do your part to overcome this

major constraint on our country's reaching its potential.

I thank you.