

Special Statement by H.E. President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf
At Program Celebrating International Anti-Corruption Day

Monrovia City Hall

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Let me say how pleased I am to be here and wish that so many others of our government would have been here to participate. My apologies to the hard-working staff of my Communications Department for the 15-page speech they wrote which I will not use. But this is something that I'd like to speak about from the heart.

Thank you, our Keynote Speaker, for all you've said. I assure you that there's no tourism proposal before us. Our approach to tourism is to first get the infrastructure right, and then we think the private sector will follow and take up the challenge in developing that sector because it is an important one.

Many people have referred to the fact that we've said corruption is Public Enemy Number One, as expressed in our Inaugural Address. It was then, and it is now. So how do we assess it? How do we define it? One may use two words to describe it: systemic and societal. That means we have found it very pervasive all over the place – at high levels, external and internal; whether we're dealing with the sale of government properties, the sale of government passports, the sale of honorary consuls. We have cases in court in the

world right now to address that. Whether we're dealing with high-level officials, in the form of bribery and kick-backs, non-conformant to our procurement laws, yes. We also have it at the low levels: collusion among people at the financial management institutions, such as the Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Commerce, Central Bank, yes; at that level where we're not supposed to touch them because we'd be downsizing and what not, it's there too.

It goes beyond government, whether we're dealing in the private sector, whether it's the NGOs, the private construction firms whom we contract and what they do, it's there.

So, what have we done about it? Because it's systemic and societal, it's just not easy to say that what we're going to do is grab a bunch of people and put them in jail. So, let's talk about it.

We've identified five components to fight corruption in such a way that we address it so that it can be sustained.

First, compensation to reduce vulnerabilities. Better compensation to civil servants so we're not where we found them making \$15 a month, and where they are getting enough to afford a living wage. We haven't done everything there, but we've come a long way in raising the levels so that when they violate the public trust, we can say that it wasn't because you were so vulnerable you couldn't feed your family or send your children to school.

Compensations to judges, where we met them and where

they are today, again to make sure that their independence is not based upon their vulnerability. To the police, to the security, to teachers, to health workers. In so doing, we've also, as a government, led the way to the private sector, because by setting the minimum wages and increasing compensation, it means the private sector, too, must follow. Those people who work in the homes as domestic servants must also be able so that they don't engage in stealing from the homes, or drivers making deals with the garages. So we all have to work on compensation.

The second thing we did was to say, build the institutions to reduce personal discretion. That's why we have, first of all, the Governance Commission, itself trying to set the tone for the rationalization of government institutions, trying to help us to develop the anti-corruption strategy, policies – all of those things that we now have facing the challenge of implementing them.

The General Auditing Commission – something which we have now made reportable to the Legislature, not to the Executive as it was before, to ensure that they have the independence. And they've exercised it, in going around and doing their work plans, and they've produced hundreds of audits – audits that we now have, some with the Ministry of Justice, and some with the Anti-Corruption Commission, and just seeing how we enforce some of the recommendations.

The Liberian Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (LEITI) has worked so well for us. It's worked well because we established it as a partnership between the government and the private sector, the non-governmental. Today, Liberia was the first African country to be declared compliant and conforming to the requirements. In our concession agreements today, they are required to make reports to LEITI so that they whatever compensation, whatever they give to anybody, whether it is government revenue or to any individual, they are required to make those reports. That's how come we became compliant.

The LACC (Liberia Anti-Corruption Commission) and the work they're doing. They have yet a long way to go, but at least they've started to get their act together. The Public Procurement and Concessions Commission, and the procurement laws which we've just had renewed and revised. We are in the process of restructuring and reorganizing the PPCC with strong people who will enable us to implement them. The Public Financial Management Act. Not too many people know the details of that, and that's part of the problem for us to be able to implement it. But the law is there, the institutions have been built.

Systems. To conform to international standards – standards of transparency and accountability. One of the first things we've done there is assets declaration. You are required to file your assets with the Liberia Anti-Corruption Commission. Our report shows that many of our people have already

complied. There are one or two laggards in the Executive Branch, because this is where we can enforce it. So we've enforced it on the Executive Branch, and that record is there. Today our budget, our fiscal reports, our concessional agreements are open to all. They can be accessed, they are put in the papers; they are put on the websites of the concerned institutions so that all the people can be able to go and see what's in it. There's no secrecy in our financial transactions, so please take advantage of that, ask for it, you are entitled to it, you can see what's in it.

We are now starting a system in the Ministry of Finance and our Customs Service and in many places to go to automation – automation that will reduce public and private discretion, where people can then change things. Computerization is how we're moving. Direct deposits, to stop the payroll checks recycling, with people taking checks, rewriting them, voiding them. Today, your checks go directly to your account in the bank, to stop people from going to the Ministry of Finance in a line, and having to pay somebody to get your paycheck. It goes to the bank, then you go to the bank and take your money. So direct payment, even to contractors, to minimize their having to go and try to make deals with people and give kick-backs.

An internal audit system is now getting started. With the support of the Auditor General and technical assistance from our partners, an entire internal auditing system is being built that's going to be run autonomously. There will be a

monitoring group that will be tied into Internal Auditors in all of our Ministries and Agencies, where they are going to have the monitoring on a continuing basis until the General Auditing Commission can come in on a periodic basis and make sure that people are conforming to the laws.

The Whistleblower Act, which we did by Executive Order, is being referred to, but not many people are taking advantage of it. So far, to the best of my knowledge, we've had one case that we've taken to finality. We wish some of you would take advantage. The journalists, when you write these stories, it's not enough to write the stories; please, take it to LACC, take advantage of it. If we get enough people taking advantage of the Whistleblower Act, it helps us, because that, in itself, will be a deterrent from the many others who would do it. The Freedom of Information Act has been referred to. Please take advantage of it. If you know of somebody who has filed something, go and ask for that information, ask for the contract. It's available to you, and you can use it.

The fourth one is capacity building. You can't implement a law when you don't understand the law, when you don't understand the procedures, and that's much of our problem – the lack of capacity, at the working levels, to understand these laws and policies and to be able to adhere to them to implement them. So what we've been trying to do is to give scholarship programs to enhance people's capability, to do workshops, to do on-the-job

training, so that people understand what's available to them to fight corruption, and they can take advantage of it.

Finally, punishment. An important part of it is to enforce the rule of law and instill discipline. Our judicial system – our courts, our judges, our lawyers, the jury system which has been referred to. All of those are part and parcel of the punishment system, and if they're not working, it makes it difficult for us. If they're not functioning, we've talked about a second court, about a fast-track court. We talked changing about the jury system so that it can be less of a professional jury system referred to by the Keynote Speaker, it can be one based on the systems of other places where anybody can be called to jury duty, people at all levels in the society, and they're exercising their civic duty, not necessarily for pay. So all of those systems are now underway to see what we can do.

We've done a lot but we still have challenges. There's no doubt about it. Some of those challenges have already been pointed out. What are some of those? The Code of Conduct. It's been languishing in the Legislature since 2006. It's not going to come out next year, in an election year, I can tell you that. That's a fact. So let us see what in it we can start to implement until we can get the whole thing passed. We're conferring with them, what we can do by Executive Order, what they can do. But let's all put the pressure on them. If they can pass it next year, I will honor

them greatly. But let's try hard. Senator, you hear that? You're right here, so we'll ask you to take the challenge on that one.

A stronger judiciary. There's no doubt that the punishment side of our fight against corruption still has a long way to go. And what we can do there, working with the Chief Justice and his Associates and his colleagues in the court system to be able to address it.

We want to give prosecutorial powers to LACC, which they lack in their Act today, to strengthen them to be able to be complementary to the judicial system, to the Ministry of Justice, which is the one that has prosecutorial powers right now, and the only one that has it today. If we extend it to LACC, I hope they will be able to take advantage. That will require us doing an Act that will have to go before the Legislature, to be able to amend their Act to give them that right. I hope the Ministry of Justice will work with that and see to it so that they don't see this as their own preserve, the exclusive preserve of themselves. These are some of the challenges we will be facing.

Assets freeze – something that the United Nations is on our back about all the time to say, how can we talk about this when you can't freeze assets. The former Minister of Justice told us that by our law we can't do it. Maybe at LACC she will rethink it. Should we then change our laws? We need to know that. If we have the law to back us up, then we'll be able to do something about it.

Accountability and transparency is not the preserve of government alone. I want to see NGOs publish their financial statements to tell us where they get their funding, and how they use it. I want to see the donor community publish theirs; tell us where the money that's in our name is going. It's not just government. I want to see the newspapers, the journalists, publish their financial statements, and let the world know that Liberia stands for accountability and transparency by all, not just by government. We've got to do our part. I want to see Mr. [Kenneth] Best publish from the *Observer*.

So you see, if we want to get a society that's really fighting corruption, the point I'm trying to make is that it is the responsibility, the obligation of everybody.

Our balance between rights protection and punishment. There are many times when we are torn. We want to name and shame, we want to put people's faces in the paper and say, this person took a bribe. Then the Ministry of Justice will tell us that a person is judged innocent until proven guilty in a court of law. Please help us to find that balance. How can we name and shame without prejudicing our case in the courts? It's that balance that we're looking for. So we need some help there.

Finally, our value system. The values that we have, the epical values that we have as a people that have been lost over the years. I cited a simple case in a speech in the States, to see how values have changed. In our days, as

you approached Christmas, we had something called Santa Claus. Santa Claus was an exhibition, a manifestation of skills. The Santa Claus used to dance to show they could dance. They had a speaker who would come and speak and tell a tale that was based on oratory skills. You had people who were beating the saw or the drums that showed their skills. Today we've got Old Man Beggar. What skills does he portray, when he dresses up in a grotesque manner to just go and beg? We have to go back to some of those old-time values that instill things in people. The expression you get, and I hear it every day, that "where you tie the goat, that's where it must eat." What does that mean? You're sending a message to all the young people there who are doing their job to say where you are, you'd better take what you can take. We've got to fight this value system.

Dependency and patronage. You let me try to fire somebody; see how many calls I will get that night, from their uncle, their cousin, their brother, their Ma to say: "Ay, you can't take the bread out of the person's mouth." I told them to steal to put bread in their mouth? You see, those are the problems!

I've also said, please help us to find some unorthodox way to deal with corruption, because the Ministry of Justice is overwhelmed. They've got all of these cases there. Their limitations and capacity do not allow them. The court system is slow. Justice is slow. And so, what other measures

can we use? Name and shame? Go back to the old ways and beat some people up?

Finally, please help your President to maintain personal integrity. Stop asking me for things that I don't have. Every day I get letters: please pay my children's school fees, please build my house, please buy me this...

We must learn to live with what we have; to earn what we want. Those are some of the basic tenets of integrity, of a value system that appreciates honesty, hard work, humility. Let's all work towards that.