

**Speech by H.E. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf
President of the Republic of Liberia and
Commander-In-Chief, Armed Forces of Liberia
Barclay Training Center, Monrovia, Liberia
February 11, 2011**

Fellow Liberians:

What a pride and joy it is today to see these gallant men and women of our Armed Forces and our paramilitary institutions celebrating the 54th Anniversary of Armed Forces Day. I can confidently say that Liberia is progressively preparing to take care of its own safety and security. We are on an irreversible course and there's no turning back.

I want to welcome and express my heartfelt thanks to our Guest Speaker, the Honorable Minister of Defense of Nigeria, Honorable Prince Kayode, for his inspiring speech with relevance to the peace and security of our country and the sub-region as a whole.

I also would like, once again, to welcome United States Military General "Kip" Ward, Commander of U.S. AFRICOM, and his corps of senior officers. He has been a very good friend to Liberia. We are pleased that he's able to join us, and invite you to come many more times in any capacity possible.

We also like to welcome the Honorable Minister of Defense from Sierra Leone, Honorable Palo Conteh, and all senior officials from Mano River Union countries, as well as from all ECOWAS countries.

This array of distinguished personalities clearly demonstrates a show of solidarity, and international cooperation, in the search for peace and security as we transition from a region of instability to one where democratic governance reigns.

This occasion affords us the opportunity to reflect on the tremendous sacrifices rendered to the nation by our men and women in uniform, and also by their families. Their contributions to peace – your contribution to peace and stability – have enabled us to provide guidance to the processes of recovery and development.

The celebration of Armed Forces Day is a momentous legacy in the history of our country. It recognizes the services and sacrifices of all those that have served Liberia, from the Liberia Frontier Force to the Liberia National Guard, and today the Armed Forces of Liberia. This is a day for which our men and women have the opportunity to express their pride and service to country, through ceremonial parades and demonstration of military capabilities; and to give assurance to our citizens and residents that the integrity of our nation is preserved and protected at all times. This is what we celebrate today. We salute you our men and women in arms for your diligence, duty and service to country.

On this day, we also remember the sacrifices made by many countries in the sub-region and elsewhere to bring peace and stability to our country. We are particularly grateful to the leadership of Nigeria and its people, and to all contributing countries of ECOMOG, including Senegal, Mali, Guinea, Gambia, Ghana, and Sierra Leone, for all that they did for us to bring us to the peace that we have today.

Today, that role is now in the hands of the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL), and we want to extend to them our thanks and appreciation for all they have done since the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2003.

I join the entire nation to remember and cherish those that paid the ultimate price for bringing peace to our country.

This 54th Armed Forces celebration marks the significant strides and accomplishments the armed services have made in the past five years, and specifically during the past twelve months, in collaboration with our international partners. We have gravitated from security sector reform to institutional development processes, such as the Defense Sector Reform Program.

We are grateful to the Government of the United States of America for her steadfast commitment and support to the development of the AFL. The partnership we share through the Onward Liberty Program has laid the foundation for the gradual operational efficiency of the Armed Forces. We thank them for their unflinching support which has helped to buttress the technical and tactical efficiency of the AFL.

Our thanks also goes to the Republics of Benin, Egypt, Ghana, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, the Kingdom of Sweden and the United Kingdom for their various capacity development initiatives afforded our officers and enlisted personnel.

We are specifically grateful again to the Government and people of Nigeria and Rwanda for their enormous investment in developing the tactical and operational efficiency of personnel of the Armed Forces of Liberia.

Today, I am pleased to announce that the Government of Ghana has granted nine military scholarships to the Armed Forces of Liberia, to begin with immediate effect. This level of assistance, coupled with the current mentorship being provided by active-duty U.S. military personnel, will enable the AFL to be proficient in their military occupational specialties to equally participate in the social development initiatives of our country.

The theme chosen for today, "Fostering a Credible, Cohesive and Robust Armed Forces of Liberia," is timely as we enter the transition phase of our interaction with the U.N. Mission in Liberia. Our goal is to strengthen the capability of the AFL, moving it into a manageable-size force within our resource constraints, to effectively carry out its mission.

Since January 1, 2010, our Government assumed full responsibility for the training, maintenance and sustenance of the AFL. Today, the Armed Forces, under the banner of the 23rd Infantry Brigade, has two Infantry Battalions, an Engineer Company, Service Support Company, Military Police Company, Headquarters and Headquarters Company, and the Liberia Coast Guard, among other specialty units.

The strength of the AFL is slightly above 2,000, which we hope can be augmented by increasing the size of the Engineering Company to battalion strength, and the size of the Coast Guard to within half of a Company size. This increased capacity should pave the way for the AFL to be capable of carrying out at least two missions simultaneously: protecting the territorial integrity of our country, participating in the reconstruction of our country, and, at the same time, contributing to regional and international peace and security, as directed.

Our Armed Forces of Liberia is moving in this direction, and we expect the AFL to become mission capable by the year 2014. By this time, a Liberian should be appointed Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces of Liberia. We will thank you, General Abdurrahman, for all you've done to bring us to that point of progress.

As the AFL transition towards becoming operationally capable, the final draft of our National Defense Strategy (NDS) is under review. The Defense Strategy will lay out the policy direction and guidance to our Armed Forces in accomplishing constitutional mandate and missions assigned to them. It will also provide guidance and range of options in de-escalating armed conflict. We look forward to the completion of our National Defense Strategy, and the subsequent completion of the National Military Strategy, which will define the Military Table of Organizational and Equipment of our Armed Forces in carrying out their duties.

As the Economic Community of West African States proceeds with the establishment of an ECOWAS Standby Force (ESF), our Armed Forces should be prepared to contribute and participate in the missions of the ECOWAS Standby Force when the need arises.

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen:

As part of our bilateral partnership with the United States Government, I am pleased to announce today that the U.S. Government has purchased and will be donating to the Liberian Government two 22-foot Class Defender Boats for use by the Liberia Coast Guard. Later this morning, I will ask you to join me as we commission these two boats, the "Boatswain Defender," in memory of one of our chiefs, Chief Boatswain, and the "Ethel Wright," in

memory of the first woman to become Assistant Minister of National Defense. These boats will protect our coastal waters.

It is our ardent hope that the Coast Guard will collaborate and cooperate with other agencies to provide timely search and rescue operations and to deter and interdict illegal activities along our coastal waters, as well as within our Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).

I will now recognize a Special Guest, a professional who herself is a pioneer in the service of her country. She is the first female Naval Officer who rose through the ranks, against all odds, and became the first female Rear Admiral, which is equivalent to the rank of Major General. I am pleased to recognize Rear Admiral Itunu Hotonu of the Nigerian Army, and she stands here with us today. General....

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen:

Within the context of the Mano River Union, we want to acknowledge the continuous intra-border collaboration with our partners in the region. Specifically, collaborative efforts between personnel of our Bureau of Immigration and their partners across the border of neighboring countries have been commendable. We intend to support their efforts within the recurrent means of our budgetary process.

Of paramount importance, also, are the untiring efforts of personnel of the Liberia National Police, and those with the Police Support Unit and the Emergency Response Unit. Today, they are the pride of every Liberian who sees them as they are responding wherever there are crises. They are the guardian in maintaining peace in our society, and responding to any unexpected eventuality.

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen:

Five years ago, we began the process of transforming our Security Sector. Today, that process has progressed beyond its initial steps of vetting, recruiting, training, and proficiency development. We are now in the process of completing the last remaining act within the Security Sector Reform, which is the National Intelligence and Security Act. It is now before you, members of the National Legislature. We call upon you to act timely in passing this Act, to enable us to complete the much needed reform that our security sector requires. Thank you, Mr. President Pro-Tem, for taking the lead in that regard.

The Liberian people are grateful to all of our service chiefs, including the men and women of the Armed Forces of Liberia, the Bureau of Immigration and Naturalization, the Liberia National Police, the Special Security Service, the National Security Agency, the Liberia Fire Service, the Ministry of National Security, the National Bureau of Investigation, and all the other security and paramilitary apparatus, for their countless dedication and service to protecting the citizens and residents of our nation. Your contribution to the revitalization of the Security Sector brings credit to yourself and our country.

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen:

Let me, once again, join in extending resounding congratulations to our Distinguished Service Recipients:

- His Excellency, Former Chairman Charles Gyude Bryant, for his leadership, steadfast and relentless determination in moving us towards peace. He has helped to pave the way for this celebration today.

- The Honorable Minister of Defense of Nigeria, Prince Adetokunbo A. Kayode, for his leadership and the countless sacrifices that Nigeria has made during our civil conflict
- And to U.S. Army General Kip Ward, AFRICOM Commander, for his leadership and professionalism, and strengthening the tangible partnership between the AFL and the U.S. Military.

Thanks and congratulations.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I take pride in congratulating our own Minister of National Defense and his corps of officials, and to our Command Officer-In-Charge General Abdurrahman, for their leadership in bringing credibility to the Armed Forces of Liberia.

My personal congratulations and best wishes to you out there – the men and women of the Armed Forces of Liberia, all paramilitary units and to all security personnel, for your steadfast service to our country. Thanks to your families for their love, patience and understanding, and the support which they have given you and the moral boost that they have provided to enable you to carry out your duties.

There remains a lot to be accomplished. We are committed to providing you the necessary logistical support to enable you to carry out your mission successfully. We will continue to support your efforts that will improve the general welfare of our military personnel and their families.

I salute you, Gallant Men and Women of the Armed Forces of Liberia.

HAPPY ARMED FORCES DAY, AND GOD BLESS US ALL!