

**Independence Day Message by H.E. President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf  
At Celebration in Observance of 164<sup>th</sup> Independence Anniversary  
Of the Republic of Liberia  
Voinjama, Lofa County  
Tuesday, July 26, 2011**

Mr. Vice President, President of the Senate and a Son of Lofa; and Mrs. Boakai;  
Mr. Speaker, Mr. President Pro-Tempore, and Honorable Members of the Legislature, including the  
Legislative Caucus of Lofa County;  
Mr. Chief Justice, Associate Justices of the Supreme Court and Members of the Judiciary;  
Members of the Cabinet and Other Government Officials;  
Mr. Superintendent and Members of the Local Administration;  
Mr. Doyen, Excellencies and Members of the Diplomatic Corps;  
Her Excellency, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General of the United Nations in Liberia;  
Officers and Staff of the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL);  
Our Development Partners;  
The Command-Officer-In-Charge, Men and Women of the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL);  
Former Government Officials present;  
Traditional Leaders, Chiefs and Elders;  
Political and Business Leaders;  
Labor and Trade Unions;  
Youth and Student Organizations;  
Civil Society Organizations;  
Members of the Media;  
Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen;  
Our National Orator;  
Special Guests;  
Good People of Lofa County;  
Fellow Liberians:

As we do every year since our Founding Fathers proclaimed the independence of this Republic, it is our solemn and patriotic duty not only to celebrate our sovereignty and independence, but to also reflect deeply on the path we have taken, the successes and challenges along the way, and the obstacles we have overcome as a strong, determined and united nation since that historic declaration on July 26, 1847.

In the course of our historical sojourn to where we are today, we have battled, we have persevered, and we have survived as a nation because of our faith in God, because of the resilience of the Liberian people, and their determination for peace, reconciliation and development. Indeed, we are a nation today because Providence has been on our side, and our experiences have set us on a forward path of higher achievement as a people.

I welcome citizens from all over the country, and our guests, who have converged on Lofa's capital city, Voinjama. Thank you for joining us in celebrating our "26".

We had expected President Ernest Bai Koroma of Sierra Leone to join us, but I'm sure he's with us in spirit. As his note said, because of the weather, he could not join us.

We also thank President Goodluck Jonathan of Nigeria, who's not with us, but who celebrated with us during a few hours last Thursday. To all our many special guests, including our Honorary Consuls who are visiting, we say welcome.

With so many distinguished citizens and personalities among us, we have held, this year, two Investiture Ceremonies, the first one in Monrovia last Thursday, and today, where we have conferred distinctions on luminaries such as our own dear Vice President and Son of Lofa; the Speaker of the House of Representatives; the President Pro-Tempore of the Senate; the Acting City Mayor of Monrovia; and all the others, including our National Orator, who has given us much food for thought.

Since becoming President, we have rotated the observance of our nation's Independence: Monrovia in 2006; Grand Bassa in 2007; Margibi in 2008; Bong in 2009; Nimba in 2010; and, now, Lofa in 2011.

We have, equally, featured a cross-section of National Orators, representing various segments of our society: Judge Emma Shannon Walser, in 2006, an eminent legal mind; Kimmie Weeks, a youth advocate, in 2007; Professor Dr. Sakui Woiba Malakpa, from academia and the visually impaired, in 2008; Paramount Chief Flomo Barworor, from the traditional sector, in 2009; and in 2010, Monsignor Dr. Robert G. Tikpor, from the religious community.

And today, it is Madam Garmai Estella Korboi, from the market sector. Madam Korboi, you have made all of us proud, proving that market women can make vital contributions to our national development. There is no greater honor for women across this land than to have selected a businesswoman, from the grassroots, to serve as the 2011 National Orator. We thank you, and through you we applaud all the women of Liberia.

Taking the Independence celebration outside the capital, and choosing orators from across our society, achieves the twin objectives of fast-tracking infrastructural development, in keeping with our postwar reconstruction drive, as well as directly involving more of our people in the celebration. Our purpose has been to be a more participatory and inclusive government, demonstrating to people in the farthest reaches of our country that we are, indeed, one nation, one people, under God.

Our "26" Day began very early when, as Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Liberia, I inspected our troops and witnessed our military's March Pass-in-Review. Let me acknowledge and commend the colorful turnout of the Army, our AFL, of which we are so proud, the Coast Guard, the Police and Fire Service and the AFL Band, all of which participated in today's parade.

## **LOFA TOUR**

Named for the river that flows through it, Lofa, our northernmost county, is synonymous with hospitality. The wonderful reception we've received, not only on this trip to celebrate our nation's 164<sup>th</sup> Independence Anniversary, but every time we've come this way, fully reflects this hospitality of the people of Lofa County. Thank you, Lofains, for your exceptional generosity and kindness.

Exactly a year ago, I told the good people of Lofa to get ready for the 2011 celebrations. As you can see, Lofa is ready, all doubts about its preparedness having been laid to rest. Let me pay tribute to Lofains all over, the progressive people of this county, for being such gracious hosts.

I would be remiss if I did not mention the historic role Lofa played in hosting an Executive Council Meeting, in Kolahun, under the National Unification Program. That laid the basis for the erection of the National Unification Monument here in Voinjama, which President William V.S. Tubman dedicated on January 5, 1961.

In that connection, many prominent men and women of Lofa, past and present, have played important roles in our national development. We pay tribute to all of them for their duty to country.

Development is taking place everywhere in this resource-rich county, as evidenced by the number of projects we've dedicated since our arrival last Friday – projects in six districts: Salayea, Zorzor, Voinjama, Quardu Gbondi, Kolahun, Foya, and in Voinjama City.

We have dedicated roads; schools, including the new Lofa Community College; mosques; government offices and administrative buildings; a technology transfer center; low-cost housing units; guesthouses; rice and cattle projects; and so much more.

As I told citizens from there, we are saving Vahun for a special trip, and we are committed to getting there.

## **LOFA RECONCILIATION**

Created in 1964 out of what was the Western Province, the people here are Lorma, Kissi, Gbandi, Mandingo, Kpelle and Mende. Until the sad events of February 2010, which pitted religions and tribes against one another and set back development, these six ethnic groups had lived in peace. The rest of the country used to look to Lofa as the cradle of tranquility, where multiple ethnic groups co-existed in harmony, remained loyal to the State, and made invaluable contributions to our food security and critical resource needs.

Thanks to swift action on the part of many stakeholders, we were able to rapidly defuse a dangerous situation from escalating and to restore calm.

I am therefore happy to report that the people of Lofa opted to embrace genuine peace and reconciliation through local dialogue between the seven districts. On May 14, I congratulated Lofa, through the Committee for Peace in Lofa (CPL), on the signing of the Lofa Peace Pact, ending the tragedy that threatened peace and stability not only locally but nationally, thereby demonstrating that Liberia, and Liberians, can heal and move on. Moreover, the people of Lofa recently robed Vice President Boakai as a Peace Ambassador. Thank you, Ambassador Boakai. We strongly believe that all Lofains acting in concert sends a powerful message of solidarity – a message I delivered personally, a week ago, to the Lofa community living in Jallah Town, in Monrovia.

Peace has thus returned to Lofa. Its citizens have reconciled their differences and are now working together to develop their county, eager to showcase all that is right about Lofa – its music, dance, culture, farms, and its people.

This Independence celebration is opening Lofa up for development, with its vast potential in mechanized rice production and in exploitation of the Wologisi Mountains, which hold significant iron ore deposits. It is interesting to note that in recent years, many conglomerates have expressed interest in developing Wologisi. We are studying those proposals, the proper timing, and the benefits that would accrue from them. But I know that, once we've reached the right decision, and with all the many other things going on in Lofa, the future for this county is bright, indeed.

## **RALLYING OUR NATION FOR PEACE, RECONCILIATION, DEVELOPMENT**

This year's theme, "Rallying Our Nation for Peace, Reconciliation and Development," is as pertinent in Lofa, as it is in the rest of the country, for the three concepts are interlinked and inseparable. To rally and unite our nation, we must first have peace. Once peace and security prevail, our people will have the space to truly reconcile and minimize that which divides us. Only when peace and stability and reconciliation exist can Liberia develop to its full potential.

First, **peace**. There's nothing you can do if you don't have peace and stability in a country. Our eighth year of peace has enabled us to attract investment in all sectors. Since 2006, we have worked to ensure a secure, peaceful and democratic nation. We introduced policies that helped to foster peace, accelerate reconstruction and development, and build a strong governance system. Throughout these years, we have recognized that durable and lasting peace is vital for Liberia's transformation and development.

I believe that lasting peace is irreversible in Liberia. That optimism is based on the determination of the Liberian people to put the past behind us, reconcile, and build a vibrant nation. That is why we must all work to ensure that our hard-won peace is maintained as we go through this critical year in our political sojourn.

With that peace, comes our great need for **national reconciliation** and for healing the country, and to do it through dialogue across geographic and ethnic divides. We have started that process, and made important strides.

From its founding, our nation has struggled for unity and reconciliation, through the long years of cleavage that resulted from the divide between the settlers and indigenous populations. Over the years, we've tried to bridge that gap through various political strategies and social interactions, including intermarriages and education.

Since our incumbency, we have embarked on a crusade to propel our people toward moving into the future by putting the past behind them. We have done so openly as well as quietly, depending on the nature of the reconciliation issues involved.

We have embarked on the long road to national reconciliation not out of political opportunism, nor out of the urge to score propaganda points or gain political relevance. We have done so because we firmly believe that reconciliation can be a long and enduring process, and never a one-shot deal. It is a process that cannot be imposed or legislated.

To the contrary, it needs nurturing and a collective will and determination to move forward instead of remaining stuck in the past. Our approach to national reconciliation includes not only encouraging families and communities to bury the hatchet, as we have been trying to do over the years; it also encompasses leadership efforts aimed at providing opportunities for all, irrespective of socio-economic status and partisan affiliation. And we are proud that we have been trying and have had the ability and capacity to lead this process.

That process will be long and slow, and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was only the first step. We know that we have a long way to go. Punishment of the main protagonists is important, but as a people we have to find a way of understanding and accommodating our differences. The heart of reconciliation, Fellow Citizens, is truth and forgiveness. This has been clearly expressed by the people in the TRC report itself, as well as in subsequent surveys of attitudes about security, dispute resolution and post-conflict reconstruction.

We accept that, as a Government, we must do more; we must find more time to bring people together. We continue to reach out to those with grievances to make sure everybody feels included. From our travels around the country, and conversations with community and traditional leaders, we know that there are pockets of problems involving land, and we have tried to address them. In the case of Nimba, we set up a Commission to investigate and report back, and we'll soon bring that issue to rest by implementing the recommendations. There are other disputes over land, and the Land Commission is working to establish proper borders.

The Independent National Commission on Human Rights (INCHR) is functional but not robust enough in its effort. They need to move forward with the National "Palaver Hut" Program by engaging all stakeholders in consultations. That will validate the processes detailed in their Work Plan.

But let me say this, Fellow Liberians, that reconciliation is a national issue; it's not a personal issue, it's not a party issue, and those with suggestions on how to improve the situation should come forward so that we can all work together.

Finally, **development**. Our Government is pleased with what has been achieved in the short period of five years. In order to appreciate what we have done, we must look from whence we've come. This would not have been possible were it not for the people's patience, resilience and support.

Together, we've achieved an average growth rate of over 6.5 percent; per capita income has increased by 60 percent (from \$168 in 2006 to \$261 in 2010); and our national budget has increased from US\$80 million, and we have now passed the US\$500 million mark. We have settled our huge debt. We have built schools, clinics and roads. We have trained nurses, doctors, teachers, and security officers. We have rebuilt institutions, installed systems, and promoted an open society.

Yet we know that development goes beyond merely repairing and rebuilding burned-out structures. It involves changing the system of governance and transforming people's lives for the better; giving people unhindered freedom of association, press, expression, and speech; respect for and protection of fundamental human rights; institutionalizing good governance, transparency and accountability; battling corruption by adopting an approach that's both systemic and preventive; increasing access to opportunities; making public institutions accountable and responsive; building infrastructure and basic services to respond to those basic needs of roads, bridges, schools, hospitals, electricity, water; and decentralizing the agencies of government to bridge the gap between the capital and the periphery. We have kept our promises "in da area." The job is not yet done, but we can agree that we have laid a solid foundation.

As I speak to you today, Fellow Liberians, my heart goes out to the young people of this country, our children, school-going and otherwise, for they constitute the future of our nation. And in order to lay a sound foundation for their future, our Government has spared no effort in formulating policies and implementing measures that will have a progressive impact on youth development.

Toward this end, we have moved across different fronts to expand educational opportunities for those who wish to continue their education, while working with our partners in building the practical skill sets for others who have long been disadvantaged in respect of formal schooling.

Rest assured that our deep-rooted commitment to our young people will continue to take center stage in our reconstruction and development efforts. We have taken all the necessary first steps for the creation of jobs and skills building opportunities that will enable our youth to take advantage of jobs in both the private and public sectors in fulfillment of our commitment to youth development.

## **DEMOCRATIC PRACTICES**

Fellow Liberians:

Today, as we celebrate our country's Natal Day, I reiterate Government's continued commitment to a democratic society free of intimidation, harassment and human rights violations. As has been very well demonstrated by my leadership in the last five years, we have chosen the path of democratic practices to encompass freedom of speech, freedom of association and assembly, freedom of religion, and the right to life and security of all persons and their properties. We will not deviate from this path.

We have chosen peace and stability and the rule of law over and above violence and instability. And because of this fundamental ideological commitment to democratic tendencies, our country today is no longer one which investors and business people shun and move away from; rather, they have come and committed to major investment, based on the confidence that we will remain a democratic and open society.

You only need to look around you, at our cities, villages and towns, and our streets and communities to see the clear gains our country has made in the past few years, to understand how peace, unity, stability and reconciliation can bring about development.

As we celebrate another milestone in our country's progressive march forward, we wish to assure all and sundry, irrespective of ethnic, party, religious and social affiliations, that our Government will provide full protection to all at this momentous time in our history. So let the word go forth, that while we will remain attached to our core principles of respect for all freedoms, we will remain resolute, especially as we get into the electoral campaign leading to general and presidential elections, in ensuring that no one, irrespective of political association and social standing, is allowed to disturb the peace and stability and development we have continued to enjoy since five years ago.

## **NATIONAL ELECTIONS**

Fellow Citizens:

It's been a good five years for Liberia. We've put all the fundamentals in place, building a sound foundation. All indications are that we're in the right direction, and that Liberia is poised to truly become a prosperous nation. What we must now do is consolidate these gains.

This year's Independence theme can hold no greater meaning than now, when the world's attention is turned on us to see how we conduct ourselves during this period of democratic transition. This year, we'll be holding the first uninterrupted multi-party elections in succession since the 1980 military coup d'état. We have a unique opportunity to demonstrate our maturity as a nation that has come of age.

Because of the historic nature of these elections and the major benefits we will reap from its success, we simply cannot afford to have the processes of peace, reconciliation and development interrupted, and the progress we have made turned around. We therefore reaffirm our pledge to engage in credible, transparent, free and fair elections leading to a smooth and peaceful democratic transition.

But we cannot do it alone. We call on all compatriots, including those in opposition, to cooperate and play their role to enable us to hold peaceful and credible elections. We also call upon our international partners to participate fully and continue to support this democratic process. The outcome of the pending elections has the potential to move Liberia irreversibly forward toward its goal.

## **CONCLUSION**

Good People of Lofa County;  
Fellow Liberians;  
Our Partners in Progress;  
Distinguished Guests;  
Our National Orator and our Honorees;  
Dear, Dear Citizens of Liberia, wherever you are in radio land:

Our sincere thanks and appreciation to everyone here – the people of Lofa County, Liberians, residents who have come to our country and have supported us, those in the Diaspora who also join us in celebrating this day.

Best wishes for all of you, a joyous “26”, and thank you, as God continues to bless Liberia!