

“No to War!”
Statement by H.E. President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf
at Commemoration of the 10th Anniversary
of the Signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement on August 18, 2003
Centennial Memorial Pavilion
Monday, August 19, 2013

(Full text, as recorded following the program.)

My Fellow Liberians;
Our Partners and Friends;
Ladies and Gentlemen:

May I ask that we stand to the memory of the many who died; the many who cannot be with us today – your brother, sister, your mother, your father, your son, your daughter, your partisan, your friend, your church mate; to all of those who paid the ultimate price and cannot be with us today – may we join in this silence to their memory. Thank you.

Today is a day that the Lord has made. We will rejoice and be glad in it! We rejoice in commemorating the 10th Anniversary of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement that ushered in a decade of quiet peace, thereby bringing an end to war and the carnage and devastation to which our people were subjected.

The 2003 Comprehensive Peace Agreement provided the political and substantive framework for Liberia’s post-conflict recovery and defined the terms of a ceasefire that led to the deployment of the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL). The Agreement, signed in Accra, Ghana, paved the way, in October 2003, to an interim National Transitional Government of Liberia, leading to the holding, in 2005, of democratic, free and fair elections that ushered in our administration.

In rejoicing, let us, first and foremost, give thanks to the Almighty God for bringing our nation to this day, when we can proudly proclaim to all the world that we have lived through a decade of uninterrupted peace, and say, “No to War.” We thank God for his manifold blessings bestowed upon us as a people.

God is good, my fellow Liberians. And so in giving thanks for our decade of peace, the National Muslim Council organized prayer services throughout the country last Friday, and some of us prayed at the 72nd Mosque. Yesterday, the Liberia Council of Churches organized programs throughout the country, and some of us joined the services at St. Peter Lutheran Church, the scene, on July 29, 1990, of one of the bloodiest massacres of the conflict.

Over the course of the next year, we will be holding conferences and panel discussions, as well as exhibitions, educational, cultural and sporting events – at home and at the headquarters of the international and regional organizations which played key roles in the peace process – to bring our people together in celebration of this great achievement in our quest for lasting peace, and we should all rededicate ourselves to building a tranquil and prosperous Liberia.

One event celebrating ten years of peace and symbolizing Liberia’s upward journey is next Sunday’s 2013 Liberia Marathon –our second ever – in which some 3,000 persons have registered, the majority of them Liberians. I will start the run, and be there at the end, to congratulate the organizers, sponsors, participants and support teams.

The idea of commemorating this 10th Anniversary of the Peace Accord arose from the felt need for Liberians, along with regional and global partners, to reaffirm our commitment to peace, security and development. Many forces combined in this singular achievement, to bring us to where we are today. We celebrate the will and determination of the Liberian people through our women, faith-based institutions, youths and students, and communities, including the Diaspora. They were assisted and supported by extraordinary African solidarity expressed through the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Union, the United Nations, the European Union, and individual countries such as the United States of America, Nigeria, Ghana, South Africa, the People's Republic of China, and many other friends of Liberia, as well as humanitarian organizations and philanthropists.

Our journey has not been easy, and it is not over. Peace that lasts is hard to come by. In the first years after a war, there are rising expectations. People want to see tangible benefits of an elected government and the new peace. Meeting these expectations requires a functioning government and steady growth in people's standards of living and the economy. There is no magic wand to achieve this, as it requires time, commitment and patriotism.

However, with each passing year since 2003, the chances of Liberia relapsing into further armed conflict have diminished, challenging the theory that almost half the countries that make the transition from war to peace slide back into conflict. When Professor Paul Collier of Oxford University visited Liberia last year, he told us that around half of all civil wars are relapses: a civil war that restarted because the underlying causes of the war had not been fixed. He also gave us two reasons to be hopeful in Liberia: one is the passage of time – that after ten years of peace, the risk of going back to war is much less; the other is economic development. When income doubles, the risk of civil war halves. Despite the difficulties, the record is clear that income per head in Liberia has doubled since 2003, and will double again by the end of this decade. That is something for which we should all be proud! It means that with every passing year, we are putting the dreadful spectre of war further and further behind us.

The Peacemakers

While we will leave the narration of the sad episode in our history to others, we believe it is important to recall the efforts of the many stakeholders which led to the peace: the women and youths and students; the Interfaith Mediation Group; ECOWAS; individual West and other African countries; the international community through the United Nations, the European Union, the United States of America and other fraternal governments.

Liberia today is enjoying a decade of sustained peace because its women made invaluable contributions in peacemaking and peace building. From the onset of the civil war to the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement on August 18, 2003, the women of Liberia advocated for the unity of the country, to reverse territorial claims of the warring factions. By 1994, when all semblance of civility disappeared, and women became the victims, a group of women, led by Mother Mary Brownell, organized themselves into the Liberia Women Initiative (LWI) determined that they needed to do more to restore the peace. Their multifaceted roles ranged from addressing the humanitarian needs of communities, advocacy, peaceful demonstrations, facilitating dialogue among warring factions, and, finally, demanding and obtaining a hearing at the Accra peace table, as observers. The Initiative brought together women of all faiths, through the Interfaith Mediation Council, and women of different ethnic and interest groups.

We all are familiar with the documentary, "Pray the Devil Back to Hell," which chronicles the interfaith, female-led journey for peace in Liberia. The Women in Peacebuilding Network (WIPNET), dressed in white, sat in the rain and sun, and prayed for peace in Liberia. Among their leaders were Asatu Bah, Mama Tumuma, and Leymah Gbowee. Together, we renew the commitment of "No to War!"

Today, the women of Liberia are enthusiastic about the gains made leading to the celebration of 10 years of peace. With war behind us, our women have turned their attention to peace building, strengthening mechanisms to ensure that peace prevails not only in Liberia, but in our sub-region. Among the organizations that have taken up the cause are: the Mano River Women's Peace Network (MARWOPNET), led by Mrs. Theresa Leigh Sherman; and the Angie Brooks International Centre for Women's Empowerment, Leadership Development, International Peace and Security, led by Cllr. Yvette Chesson-Wureh, which promotes the Women Situation Room, for the peaceful conduct of all elections in Africa.

Liberia's youths and children also engaged in protest actions during the conflict, including assembling and holding placards at diplomatic enclaves near Monrovia, and calling for an end to the atrocities in the country in order to protect their future. They too marched, advocated, issued petitions, fasted, and held prayer meetings in mosques and churches.

As the war raged, Christians and Muslim leaders formed themselves into the Interfaith Mediation Group. They determined that the conflict would end only with a cease-fire, if the combatants were disarmed, and if there was an interim administration to lay the groundwork for democratic, free and fair elections. That Group's contribution became the ECOWAS Peace Plan, on the basis of which the Comprehensive Peace Agreement was drafted.

It took the gallantry of the sub-regional body, ECOWAS to give us the decade-long years of uninterrupted peace being enjoyed today in Liberia. The sub-region, under the ECOWAS bloc, deserves to wear our first "Medal of Peace." Nigeria truly showed its West African "Big Brother" nature when it led the initiative, backed by Ghana who too felt that West African solidarity must be upheld no matter the scale of the belligerence in any spot. Other West African neighbors, including Sierra Leone, Guinea and Senegal, joined, in August 1990, in the hot Liberian battles under the name ECOMOG. In time, ECOMOG gained a foothold on Liberian soil. Again, in 2003, when the world's attention turned away from our damaging but last round of civil war, West African troops arrived under the name ECOMIL to save the day. ECOMIL transformed into UNMIL, the United Nations largest peacekeeping force at the time, of about 15,000.

ECOWAS has been very instrumental in rebuilding our Armed Forces. Member countries have provided training opportunities for enlisted and non-commissioned officers. With Nigeria taking the lead in mentoring the AFL, our soldiers have travelled there and also to Benin, Ghana, Rwanda and Sierra Leone to attend military institutions aimed at building their capacities in a wide range of studies, and experienced commanders from those countries have been seconded to the AFL to help provide mentorship.

Fraternal ECOWAS countries sent military personnel to help restore the peace to Liberia. Later, they helped our Armed Forces of Liberia to become a professional and reliable force, with Nigeria taking the lead. We thank our ECOWAS brothers and African Union countries for their sacrifice and service to our country.

In June, we proudly dispatched an Infantry Platoon of our Armed Forces to the Africa-led International Support Mission in Mali, re-hatted as the 11,200-strong United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission (MINUSMA), to restore democratic rule in Mali and to protect its territorial integrity. Not since 1960 has Liberia been in a position to participate in a peacekeeping operation. For decades, we have been on the receiving end of support from our ECOWAS neighbors and other friends who came to our shores to help restore peace and rebuild a shattered nation. Ten years ago, our West African neighbors sent peacekeepers to stabilize a broken Liberia. Today, we are sending peacekeepers to Mali. It's a small gesture, but an important one.

Let us gratefully acknowledge the central role the United Nations, through the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) has played in the maintenance of peace, security and stability that Liberians enjoy today. Our country's phenomenal rise, from a failed and pariah State to one that is recognized and is regaining respect among the comity of nations, has been supported by the international community.

UNMIL's transition is an inevitable step towards Liberia's growth and self-sustainability. When the Mission leaves, in a few years' time, we are confident that our Armed Forces, and our Liberia National Police, will be ready to safeguard our hard-won peace.

Our lead partner in security sector reform, which includes the restructuring of the AFL, has been the United States of America, which has demonstrated its commitment to our peace through financial, technical and logistical resources, and this, in turn, has further strengthened the strong bilateral relationship between our two countries. Among other countries to thank for partnering with us in providing mentorship and training opportunities for our Armed Forces are: the United Kingdom, Rwanda, Ghana and Sierra Leone. We also thank the People's Republic of China for engineering training and equipment.

Governance

At the National Visioning Conference, in Gbarnga, last December, we adopted a National Vision as the guiding principle that will underpin our national development initiatives for the next 20 years. Out of the National Vision, we constructed a medium-term program consisting of an Agenda for Transformation, and a National Roadmap for Healing, Peacebuilding and Reconciliation. Both of these documents speak directly to most of the concerns and recommendations of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and together they are capable of guiding this first stage of our journey to our desired future of "One People, One Nation, United for Peace and Sustainable Development." Once again, in the interest of sustainable peace, we must dig into the toolbox of ideas to see which new measures and approaches we can take to reconcile our people.

Both the Agenda for Transformation and the TRC Report have emphasized the need for an aggressive fight against corruption. This has proven to be a more difficult battle than expected. As we celebrate our hard-won peace, we remain keenly aware that corruption can detract from sustaining that peace. So we will continue measures to fight this scourge. If we cannot get passage by the National Legislature we will re-issue the Executive Order to implement the Code of Conduct within the Executive Branch; Assets Declaration will be made public, and I will start with my own.

We still have to fight corruption. This is not just a President's fight; it must be the Executive's fight, the Legislature's fight, the Judiciary's fight, the media's fight, and society's fight! But let us recognize the progress. Today, it is no longer under the table. We can talk about it and now we can say that prosecutions are taking place, and violations are openly aired. We have a free press, through which people can freely write and say things, sometimes falsely, about other people. Our commitment to peace assures that nothing will happen to them, even as we call upon the media to be a more constructive and responsible partner for the promotion of peace and development.

Moreover, this is not always appreciated, but in the interest of creating a free and fair society, we strive to have an inclusive government – one that is courageous enough to include people from all parties, all counties, all religions, even those who have maligned us. This is in line with our policy to create an environment where all Liberians are assured of their right to own and enjoy the benefits of this land.

We hope to pass into law a Land Rights Act, based on the National Land Rights Policy that was vetted and validated by the Liberian people. This Policy is transformative as it establishes, for the first time, distinct categories of land rights which ensure that all Liberians have equal access to land within the framework of a clearly defined set of policies that provide security of tenure and the rule of law in all land transactions. Most notable and significant is the recognition of customary land rights, along with private, public and government land rights. The recognition of ownership rights to customary land for rural communities provides new opportunities for economic empowerment of rural communities, advances national cohesion and reconciliation, establishes conditions conducive for involving communities in governance of natural resources, and strengthens the rights for all other tenure categories.

Implementation of the Land Rights Policy will include delineating borders, demarcating areas, replacing tribal certificates with fee simple deeds given to communities and others so entitled, so that their rights are fully protected. With rural communities granted ownership rights to their lands, no longer will the central government have the right to turn over such lands to concessionaires without the participation and consent of the people.

In this anniversary of the decade of peace, the Government will do more to focus on creating jobs for our youth, who constitute over 60 percent of the population, many of whom were bypassed by education during the period of civil unrest. We have started, through our Liberia Youth Employment Program (LYEP), which to date has employed a total of 3,211 youths in 26 cities in clean-up activities. Foreign direct investment inflows to Liberia, concentrated in the extractive industries, have been relatively slow in start-up, but as the concessionaires come on stream, we look forward to the creation of jobs for our youthful labor pool to bring growth and development to our people. In turn, we expect that this anniversary celebration will serve as a reminder to our youth of their responsibility to the nation, and their commitment and rededication to upholding the peace.

Conclusion

We accept that challenges remain, among them national cohesion and unity and threats to good governance, but our people are demonstrating with confidence that the gains we are making are irreversible. Liberia is enjoying sustained peace and stability, and is experiencing robust growth and improvement in social and economic well-being.

And so, my fellow Liberians, as we celebrate this Decade of Peace:

Let us present a new image of Liberia; let us recognize that we have turned ourselves around; let us appreciate that our country is different today than it was ten years ago.

Let us change the negative discourse and acknowledge the many good things about ourselves, the commonness in our purpose that has kept us going for these ten years.

Let us thank ourselves that we are all contributing to the peace, and point to the benefits that have accrued therefrom.

Let us remain on course to rebuild our country, to consolidate democratic governance, economic growth and infrastructural development, to promote a multiplicity of peace dividends.

Let us walk the path of nation-building together, looking beyond our individual needs and differences, and embracing the value of true citizenship.

Let all Liberians, and friends of Liberia, join in the rallying cry for peace: “No to War. No to Violence. No to the Bearers of Doom. No to Disunity. No to Selfishness. Backward Never, Forward Ever!”

In declaring our Decade of Peace, let us proudly proclaim – from the Wologisi Mountains of Lofa, and the bounding heights of Nimba, from the cascading Kpatawee Falls of Bong, from the mighty Cavalla River of Maryland, and from the serenity of Lake Piso of Cape Mount – let us loudly proclaim that we are proud to be Liberians!

Thank you, and God bless Liberia!

