

# **“POST-CONFLICT LIBERIA: FROM TRAGEDY TO OPPORTUNITY”**

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Address By Her Excellency Ellen Johnson Sirleaf

University of Legon  
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**Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,** let me express my profound gratitude to this historic institution for creating a space for me to interact with you on a topic which, I hope, will provide vital information about the development initiatives as well as the post-conflict challenges and opportunities Liberia faces as a country. I hope this information will contribute to the enrichment and broadening of your intellectual horizon as you strive to develop a positive world view.

I wish to note the honor, as well as the challenge, associated with addressing such an august occasion at Legon University, an institution that has earned an enviable reputation as being one of the great citadels of intellectualism on the West Coast of Africa. Since the founding of the University College of the Gold Coast, now the University of Ghana-Legon, on August 11, 1948, for the purpose of providing for and promoting University education, learning and research, Legon has grown both in status and stature.

Today, you boast of being not just one of the best institutions of learning on the continent, but of also having a student enrollment of over 29,000. However, I challenge you to match your great achievements with an improvement in the male-female ratio from the current 2:1 to a ratio of 1:1 in the near future.

**Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,** as you know, Liberia is emerging from nearly two decades of a fratricidal war that crippled every aspect of the nation's productive capacity, both human and infrastructure. Not counting the loss of human lives, there was massive displacement of the population internally and externally. Critical institutions of the state collapsed and were unable to provide basic social services; the economy was in tatters; and political and social institutions were dysfunctional. In short, the country was bedeviled by the Trinitarian evils of poverty, disease and ignorance.

It was this vexing social and political condition which compelled the international community, led by sister African states, to intervene to create a space where protagonists and antagonists of the Liberian imbroglio could sit and work out a way to haul the country back into civility.

It is important to note that the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) that was signed in Accra, in 2003, was a conflict management mechanism intended to silence the guns and create the necessary environment where Liberians could, together, seek an amicable solution to the nation's damning woes. It is this process which included long days and nights of dialogue and negotiations in

Akosombo, which led to the holding of democratic elections in Liberia and, subsequently, gave birth to my Government in 2006.

Elections are, by themselves, the means and not the end to the attainment of lasting peace and sustainable socio-economic development for any post-conflict society. Economic reconstruction is a critical part of the political economy of peacetime and one of the most important challenges in any peace-building or state-building strategy. After the war ends, countries must negotiate a multi-pronged transition to peace: violence must give way to public security; lawlessness, political exclusion, and violation of human rights must give way to the rule of law and participatory government; ethnic, religious, ideological, or class/caste confrontation must give way to national reconciliation; and ravaged and mismanaged war economies must be reconstructed and transformed into functioning market economies that enable people to earn a decent living.

Liberia is implementing a Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS) which articulates the Government's overall vision and development strategies. Successfully implemented, the PRS will further our central objectives to firmly establish a stable and secure environment across Liberia; to be on an irreversible path

towards sustainable, equitable, and inclusive growth and development; to rebuild the capabilities of, and provide new opportunities for, Liberia's greatest asset -- its people; and to have established responsible institutions of justice, human rights, and governance. We welcome the active support of Ghana and other partners in this endeavor.

### ***ECONOMY***

**Mr. President, Faculty, and Students,** as I stated earlier, my Government inherited an economy that had virtually collapsed. All the productive sectors, including mining, agriculture and forestry, were either destroyed or forced to close down. Unemployment was very high while the Civil Service, probably the only source of employment for the vast majority, was bloated with untrained, unqualified, and demoralized personnel who were poorly and infrequently paid an average minimum wage of US\$18.00.

To compound the country's misery we were being crushed under a staggering debt overhang which, by the end of 2007, had reached US\$4.9 billion in external debt. To those among you who are students of economics and government, I do

not need to emphasize the debilitating effect of debt overhang. It enslaves the economy by taking away needed funds for development to service debt.

**Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,** since our ascendancy, my Government has instituted reforms, and engaged international partners, with the aim of rescuing our economy and creating the space for our citizens to actualize their economic potential.

As a result of this concerted effort, we have successfully negotiated the lifting of sanctions on our diamond and forestry sectors. Additionally, several investment contracts for key mining sectors, including a US\$2.6 billion investment with China-Union and a US\$1.5 billion with Arcelor Mittal for the operation of two separate mines, have been concluded and will soon begin full operation. Similar investments in the agriculture sector are underway. Later this year, we hope to begin operation in our forestry sector. We have started an oil exploration program and hope to be as lucky as Ghana. All of these contracts, we believe, will create jobs for our citizens and reduce the high unemployment rate, especially amongst our youth, which makes them vulnerable and often leads to social tension.

We have instituted sound Civil Service reform to infuse productivity and efficiency in the public sector. The average minimum wage for a Civil Servant is now US\$80, which we hope to further improve in the coming budget year.

Under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative, we have made major progress in purging the country from the debt curse. At present, our external debt stock has been reduced to US\$1.7 billion, down from US\$4.9 billion. Hopefully, by mid-year, we will reach the HIPC completion point which will see the total cancellation of our remaining debt, thus restoring the country's capacity to access concessional loans to accelerate our development agenda.

Despite the fluctuation in figures, our economy registered significant growth in Gross Domestic Product between 2006 and 2009. In 2006, GDP grew by 7.8 percent, up from 5.3 percent in 2005. In 2007, it accelerated to 9.5 percent, but declined in 2008 to 7.1 percent due mainly to the effects of the global economic crisis. There was further decline in 2009, to 5 percent, but we hope make some recovery of not less than 7 percent this year. In fact, Liberia has been named one of the countries to experience the highest growth rate in the continent, with no prejudice to the low base from which we have started.

I must hasten to mention that the recent global recession presented a serious challenge to my Government's effort at reconstruction, peace-building, poverty reduction, and expansion in employment opportunities. We are pleased at the upturn this year which has led to a restart of stalled investment.

### ***INFRASTRUCTURAL DEVELOPMENT***

**Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,** one of the major challenges faced by post-conflict societies is the restoration of basic infrastructure and social services. This is critical to improving the quality of life, attracting critical investments, and boosting the economy.

My Government has embarked upon a vigorous effort to restore basic infrastructure services to the country. I wish to remind you that both electricity and water facilities were destroyed during our civil war, while our motor roads were in a crippling state of disrepair. However, my Administration has restored electricity and water to many parts of the Capital City of Monrovia, while we work in reconstructing our hydro facilities. Ghana, through the Volta River Authority, was the country which responded to our call for assistance to meet a



pledge of turning lights on in our Capital City within six months of our inauguration. Today, there is ongoing reconstruction and repair of roads and bridges across the country.

### ***YOUTH EMPOWERMENT***

**Ladies and Gentlemen,** no nation can survive and no democracy can flourish and be sustained unless its youth are engaged in ways and processes that enhance their leadership capacity, teach citizenship, promote social cohesion, and reinforce those norms and ethos embedded in the democratic culture. Youth empowerment and national development are inextricably linked and form the core of our national strategy. This is why my Administration has made youth empowerment a key component of our development strategy.

For a country that is recovering from nearly two decades of civil conflict, youth empowerment is a critical tool for peace-building. It is a process whereby we ensure that the relative stability, or peaceful climate which exists, is maintained, enhanced, and sustained. It is a process whereby we take incisive and decisive

measures to ensure that we begin to tackle those phenomena or social vices that have the propensity to reverse the status quo and return us to crisis.

Perhaps the greatest challenge which my Government faces today is finding the practical steps to ensure that we do not only empower our youth, but that we also sustain the empowerment of our youth. We have taken steps to improve the quality of education for our youth. Through a grant from the Government of the People's Republic of China, a newly constructed campus for our State University will be completed by June this year. We are in the process of establishing three regional universities to give access and affordability to youth in the rural parts of the country. We are also implementing a policy of free and compulsory primary education.

The opening of our mining, forestry, and agriculture sectors will provide employment opportunities for our young people. By incorporating young professionals in public service, we are developing the new breed of leaders.

More importantly, our youth now have a voice in the development and governance processes of our country. My Cabinet has endorsed a National Youth

Policy, put together by the youths themselves under the umbrella of the Federation of Liberian Youth, which articulates the hopes and aspirations of the Liberian youth. That policy now serves as a cornerstone in our strategy for intervention. At the same time, we have signed the African Youth Charter and will shortly present it to our National Legislature for ratification. We have begun implementing a National Youth Volunteer Service to build social cohesion and teach citizenship.

### ***PEACE AND SECURITY***

**Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,** all of our strides to revamp the economy and provide social services to our citizens and empower our youth will be meaningless if we do not ensure a peaceful and stable environment.

The major challenge, following the violent conflict, is not merely the disarmament and demobilization of former fighters; neither is it the holding of elections and the ushering of democratic elections. As important as these are, they are merely conflict management mechanisms aimed at creating the conducive environment to address those internal contradictions which led to the

conflict in the first place. It also includes balancing and keeping in check those social forces which have the tendency to return the country to crisis.

In the case of Liberia, some of our problems have been historical and systemic and would require a deeper and meticulous approach to reform. Thus, any attempt to address the issue of peace and security must employ a holistic approach that goes beyond the treatment of mere symptoms. It must be multifaceted and take into consideration the immediate as well as the long-term need of Liberians and foreigners to feel secure within our borders.

One of the areas my Government has embarked upon, is that of Security Sector Reform involving professionalizing our new armed forces, police, immigration, and other security units, which were unfortunately factionalized during our civil war. The Government of Ghana, your Government, is a strong partner to us in this regard. Reform of the sector will enable these forces to respond adequately to the needs of the nation in keeping with established constitutional norms. We have also embarked on judicial and law reforms to enable citizens to seek recourse to their grievances, as well as to remove the structural contradictions that are embedded in our systems.

## ***RECONCILIATION***

**Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,** reconciliation is the ultimate objective in all post-conflict societies and post-conflict reconstruction processes. However, reconciliation is often ambiguously defined. It has been referred to as acknowledgement and repentance from the perpetrators and forgiveness from the victim; as non-lethal co-existence; as democratic decision making and integration; and as encompassing four concepts, namely, truth, mercy, peace, and justice. National reconciliation is achieved when societal and political processes function without reverting to previous patterns or the framework of conflict.

In the Liberian context, a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was established out of the Accra Comprehensive Peace Accord to investigate the social and political causes of the civil war, human rights abuses, as well as to create a forum where both victims and perpetrators would face either other and tell their story. My Government supported the work of the Commission throughout its lifespan.

We welcome the TRC's Final Report as an attempt to unearth the historical wrongs and contradictions in our society which often breed conflict. We have stated, repeatedly, that where the recommendations of the Commission live up to its mandate and do not violate the Constitution of the Republic of Liberia, we will implement. In fact, we have already begun implementation of some of those recommendations by, for example, establishing a Land Commission to address land ownership and tenure, an issue which often has generated social tensions. We are also reforming our laws, having established a Law Reform Commission, to remove those which promote structural violence and inequities.

### ***FIGHT AGAINST CORRUPTION***

**Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,** corruption has been recognized as a key challenge to post-conflict peace-building efforts, undermining the legitimacy and effectiveness of state institutions, and compromising key peace-building tasks, such as reconstruction and the provision of basic social services. The corruption discourse has become one of the major lenses through which post-conflict societies are examined.

In the context of Liberia, a wide range of distinct social problems – such as weak and dysfunctional government institutions, mismanagement of public assets, complex relationships between political actors and public economic assets, and post-war extra-legal networks – have all been subsumed under corruption. All of these point to the challenges of tackling corruption in our post-conflict society.

Corruption is systemic; as such the fundamental issues that make people vulnerable and prone to corruption must be addressed. This requires reforms which ensure that policies and systems are put into place that will not only expose corruption but will make it lose its attraction.

My Government has begun implementing practical policies to address the corruption virus. As already stated, we have instituted reforms in the Civil Service and increased compensation. We are carrying out judicial reforms to make our courts more transparent and efficient in dealing with corruption cases. We have drafted a Code of Conduct Act for Public Servants Act, as well as issued an Executive Order to protect whistleblowers.

In August 2008, my Government established the Liberia Anti-Corruption Commission (LACC) with a broad mandate to implement appropriate measures and undertake progress geared toward investigating, prosecuting, and preventing acts of corruption, including educating the public about the ills of corruption and the benefits of its eradication.

In the ongoing fight against corruption, my Government is supporting the work of the General Auditing Commission (GAC), which has so far produced over 25 audits, including audits of key ministries. For the first time in the history of Liberia, and under my Administration, audits are sent to the National Legislature and are publicly distributed, which underscores our commitment and our determination to fight this malaise. Our Government has also joined the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) and is proud to have been the second country worldwide and first in Africa to be in full compliance with the reporting requirements. Yet, corruption remains one of the challenges which we must continue to fight.

## ***CONCLUSION***



**Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,** to conclude, let me remind us all that development is, by definition and practice, a slow and continuing process. In spite of some enduring challenges, my Government has made much progress in the last four years and we remain committed and dedicated to the task. Liberia is recovering, and the trajectory for our long-term growth and development is sound. We are on the verge of eliminating our external debt burden, and our country is on an irreversible path to peace and sustainable development. I wish to express appreciation to successive governments and the people of Ghana for their significant contribution to this progress. We ask your continued prayers and support.

**I THANK YOU!**