

**KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY H. E. ELLEN JOHNSON SIRLEAF, PRESIDENT OF LIBERIA
AT THE ECOWAS INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE
ON TWO DECADES OF PEACE PROCESSES IN WEST AFRICA: "ACHIEVEMENTS,
FAILURES, LESSONS"
SAMUEL K. DOE STADIUM, PAYNESVILLE, MARCH 23, 2010**

Ambassador James Victor Gbeho, President of the ECOWAS Commission;

Ambassador Lynn Pascoe, United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs;

H. E. Margrethe Løj, Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Liberia;

H. E. Said Djinnit, Special Representative of the Secretary-General in West Africa;

H. E. Ramtane Lamamra, AU Commissioner for Peace and Security;

Former Presidents of ECOWAS Member Countries;

Excellencies President Dauda Jawara;

President Olusegun Obasanjo;

President Jerry John Rawlings;

Former Executive Secretaries of ECOWAS, Dr. Abbas Bundu and Lansana Kouyateh;

The Honorable Members of the Legislature Present;

Members of the Cabinet;

Distinguished Academics and Students of the West African Peace Process;

Distinguished Guests;

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Before proceeding, I ask that we stand and observe a moment of silence in memory of the peacekeepers, partners of Liberia, and the thousands of Liberians who perished during the bloody civil war in this country.

Thank you.

I wish to welcome all of you who are visiting Liberia for this Conference. I particularly welcome home to Liberia those who labored so tirelessly for peace in this country. I wish you a most pleasant stay as you deliberate on the achievements and challenges of two decades of peace processes in our nation, and as you chart a course for an even more profound peace in the future.

By an Act of the Legislature, August 24 is set aside each year as national holiday, in commemoration of the national insignia of Liberia, its flag. It was on this day, in 1847, when the Lone Star was hoisted over the first independent African Republic in sub-Saharan Africa.

But on August 24, 1990, there was addendum to our history. The Lone Star had difficulty unfurling because a bloody civil war was being waged. The country was partitioned into spheres of control among three warring factions. Fortunately, up the Atlantic Ocean came a ship laden with peacekeepers, from neighboring countries in West Africa, to intervene in ending the era of violence in Liberia.

The peacekeepers raised a white flag to signify peace, friendship and neutrality. However, their friendly gesture was greeted with hostility, for upon landing on Liberian soil, they were greeted by a firestorm of mortar shelling. Although they sustained casualties, they were brave and courageous, and determined to execute their mission of separating the warring factions, ensuring a ceasefire and, eventually, holding a democratic election.

At the height of the war, there was a popular slogan, which we still passionately believe and acclaim: "Thank God for ECOMOG". So, again, on behalf of the grateful people of Liberia, I salute the men and women of valor – the compatriots of spine and courage who made daring sacrifices for peace to reign in Liberia. I pay special homage to the men and women who paid so dearly for the peace and stability we enjoy today. We thank the succeeding Chairmen of the Authority of ECOWAS Heads of State and Government represented by you in this room; the Force and Field Commanders of ECOMOG; the gallant soldiers in the field; and the diplomats who endured sleepless nights in the pursuit of peace in Liberia, the Executive Secretaries of ECOWAS.

I must single out those leaders of West Africa at the time in 1990 who took the critical decision that helped save our Country: President Dawda Kariba Jawara during whose Chairmanship of the Authority of ECOWAS the decision to constitute and deploy ECOMOG was reached; General Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida, who, as Head of State of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, provided the largest force and bore the logistical brunt of the intervention; President Jerry John Rawlings, who commissioned one of his best soldiers to serve as head of the ECOMOG Force; President Lansana Conte and President Joseph Momo who demonstrated good neighborliness in spite of their difficulties, and deployed their troops to Liberia.

Let me also acknowledge Dr. Abbas Bundu, under whose stewardship, as Executive Secretary of ECOWAS, a decision guaranteeing peace in Liberia was made; and also General Arnold Quainoo, who led the first contingent of 4,000 peace keepers to Liberia to begin an epic military operation that would prove to be enviable, exemplary and worthy. Liberians continue to have fond memories of the heroism and military leadership of Generals Joshua Dongayaro and Adetunji Olurin. To all of these patriots for peace – and to the countless others – I say a big thank you.

You have left indelible footprints on the Liberian landscape. Indeed, you have written your names on the tablets of our hearts.

The record is clear that the root causes of civil conflicts in Africa are bad governance, lack of respect for human rights socio-economic and political inequity and grinding poverty. Liberia is no different. The origins of our conflict can be traced to two broad factors. First, significant portions of our society were systematically excluded and marginalized from institutions of political governance and access to key economic assets. The over-concentration of power bred corruption, restricted access to the decision-making process, and limited the space for civil society participation in governance processes. Second, economic collapse helped to propel the crisis. We descended into war. The tragic consequence of violence was not confined to Liberia alone. Like a cancerous virus, it soon spread widely, slowing the process of democratization that was progressing in West Africa.

When the request for assistance to end the crisis was made – first by Liberia, and then by ECOWAS – to our influential partners, they refused to intervene on grounds that it was an African crisis requiring African solution, meaning that Africans should handle the situation. It was Nigeria which led the bold step to encourage intervention to halt the slaughter and genocide being perpetrated in Liberia.

Excellencies: Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen:

The establishment and deployment of ECOMOG represented the first credible attempt at a regional security initiative since the erstwhile OAU attempted, with an international African force, to intervene in Chad in 1981. The West African operation was generally successful because ECOWAS member States were united in removing armed violence from politics. They wanted peace, security and stability. They recognized that a state of insecurity was completely counterproductive to socio-economic advancement, the main purpose for the establishment of ECOWAS.

Today as it was in Liberia twenty years ago, we call for robust international support for the ongoing efforts of ECOWAS to accelerate the political processes in Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea and Niger. We are confident that this Conference will produce the desired result and that at the end of this exercise, West Africa and the people of the region will be even more proud of the success of ECOWAS, and that the ECOMOG model will be a trademark for West African progress.

Excellencies:

Despite the challenges, Liberia is on the move. After decades of economic mismanagement and fourteen years of civil war, Liberia's national nightmare is over. The country has been at peace since 2003. Two rounds of free and fair elections in 2005 led to the inauguration of a new government in January 2006. The economy is expanding rapidly, with growth accelerating to over 9 percent in 2007. Roads and buildings are being rebuilt, health clinics and schools are reopening, and agricultural production is increasing. The Government is introducing a broad set of policies to foster peace, accelerate reconstruction and development, and build strong systems of governance. We know we have a long way to go, but Liberia has launched its recovery and is poised for rapid, inclusive and sustainable development in the years to come.

We are grateful for the support we have received from our West African, American, European, and Asian nations; from the United Nations and the entire international community.

I now have the honor and pleasure to declare the Conference open and wish you all fruitful and rewarding deliberations.

Thank you. God bless you, God bless Liberia, and God bless West Africa.