

Address by Her Excellency, President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf

At An Event Hosted By Congressman Chris Coons and

The U.S. Institute of Peace

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Capitol Hill, Thursday, February 26, 2015

- Senator Chris Coons
- Madam Nancy Lindborg, President – Institute of Peace, Johnnie Carson, USIP
- Distinguished Senators, Congressmen and Congresswomen
- Congressional staffs
- Friends of Liberia,
- Members of the Press

I am here in Washington, DC – here in the US Capitol –to say thank you. On behalf of the government and people of Liberia, and in my own name, I express profound gratitude to the US Government, the US Military, the non-governmental organizations, the faith-based organizations, and the American people, for the depth of friendship, remarkable partnership and exemplary leadership which you have shown in joining us on the frontlines of the battle against the deadly Ebola Virus Disease.

My brothers and sisters of neighboring Guinea and Sierra Leone, similarly afflicted by this outbreak, join me in expressing our heartfelt thanks to all of you.

As you know, it was in March of last year that this enemy, which we did not know, which we could not have been prepared to confront, invaded our country, spread rapidly, and for many of us, became more than an epidemic. Threatening those most intimately connected to the sick, Ebola robbed us of our human need to care and be cared for. The cruelest of scourges deprived many of livelihoods and stretched the sacred bonds of families and communities to breaking points. It attacked our way of life as well as a health system gradually rebounding from years of decline.

Overstretched and over-tasked, our health system collapsed. Early in the epidemic, doctors and nurses, giving of themselves without proper protective gear, died treating the sick and needy for what they believed to be known and common diseases such as malaria and yellow fever. With each painful death, the hopes of a nation, only recently regenerated after years of war and destruction, faded, to be replaced by understandable doubt and fear.

The international predictions were grim and terrifying. We were told that before the end of January, at least 20,000 of our citizens would die every month in our

three countries. Our economies froze and nose-dived into recession, threatening to reverse the progress we had worked so hard to achieve. Airlines stopped their commercial traffic, trade and travel routes were suspended, contractors folded tents and left, and Liberians experienced the chilling effect of stigmatization and abandonment. The future of Liberia's peace and democratic stability, whose foundations we had diligently established, thanks to this virus, appeared tenuous and fragile.

It was at this precarious moment, early in August, that I reached out to the government and people of the United States. I wrote to President Obama asking for America's support. I called my friends in Congress. Senator Coons, do you remember those phone calls? I know your scheduler does.

It was not just our friend from Delaware who I awakened at night; I called Senators Jeff Flake and Patrick Leahy, Minority Leader Pelosi, Congresswoman Karen Baas, Chairman Ed Royce and maybe a dozen Congressional staffers.

Well, America responded. You did not run from Liberia. As this great country and people continue to do with many of our global challenges, America stood up, and America stood with us, providing the critical resources and partnership to enable us fight back. And that's exactly what the Liberian people did.

Community by community – religious leaders, tribal chiefs, women and youth groups, businesses, civil society organizations, political leaders across Liberia’s 15 counties, we fought back. And so today, we are reclaiming the future once threatened by this deadly disease.

And although we are not altogether out of the woods, today, Ebola is no longer an unknown predator hunting the Liberian people. Thanks to your support, we are now hunting down Ebola.

From the White House, both Houses of Congress, and both sides of the aisle, America responded. If I had the time, I would go door-to-door thanking all 535 Members of Congress. However, there is not enough time on this brief three-day visit. So, I hope these expressions of heartfelt gratitude reach all of you wherever you may be.

President Obama, thank you for your leadership. Thank you for sending Tom Frieden, Director of the Centers for Disease Control, to Liberia. This decision was perhaps the single most influential event that awakened the world to the scope and

magnitude of the disease's virulent spread in West Africa. We also recognize the extraordinary decision by the president to deploy the US military to help Liberia.

We want to give thanks to the USAID DART teams for their assistance in setting up an integrated command and to the many US implementing partners, the first responders, who reached beyond their fears and ran toward the danger, and not away from it. We give thanks to the US Embassy in Liberia and Ambassador Deborah Malac for their steadfast support and continued compassion, walking with us every day even when the journey seemed impossible.

Liberians know that it was the leadership of the Obama Administration, supported by Congress that allowed the disease to stabilize in Liberia and encouraged the rest of the world to respond to this global crisis.

And so, with the support of partners like you, we have made great progress in containing the virus. Today, 13 out of 15 of our counties have reported no new cases in over 21 days and we are down to 1 to 3 infections per week and chasing the VERY last chain of transmission!

Notwithstanding, we have continued to warn our citizens against complacency. We can neither rest nor lift our foot off the gas. We are determined to "***Get to Zero***"

cases by April 15 in keeping with agreements reached recently at our Mano River Union Summit. We are all keenly aware that travelling that last mile to zero new cases will be much more difficult because the disease has retreated and must now be chased down in every corner.

We also know that full eradication will not be achieved until the whole region is freed from Ebola. This is why securing our borders remains a priority requiring additional resources, as well as providing assistance to our neighbors.

We remain confident of getting to zero because our 19 Ebola Treatment Units, although virtually empty now, have the capacity to treat infectious diseases. Our trained burial teams can safely remove bodies in less than 24 hours. Our five active laboratories can test up to 61 persons per day. The 4,000 contact tracers, largely community workers, are now following some 7,000 persons.

Doctors, nurses and other health care workers, some 179 of whom died, are no longer at risk because quality treatment facilities are available to them. And while Ebola has rendered more than 3,000 children orphaned due to the deaths of 3,608 people, 1,401 people, including 254 children, have survived the disease.

Ladies and gentlemen, even as we celebrate our success, the truth also is that the cost has been extremely high – too high for many grieving families and our recovering nation to bear.

You may recall that on March 16th 2006, I had the honor to address a Joint Meeting of the US Congress. I committed our leadership to paying any price to lay the foundation for durable peace in Liberia. Ebola struck after ten years of sustained peace, during which we saw an average annual growth rate of 7%, experienced a 50% reduction in the infant mortality rate; increased life expectancy by 17 additional years; relieved ourselves from crippling external debts; restored economic and social order and infrastructure, and perhaps more importantly, established a free and democratic society, thereby reversing the many decades of authoritarian rule.

We must now return to rebuilding Liberia's peace and prosperity, even as we eliminate the threat of Ebola.

This requires updating the healthcare system, including an early warning system that integrates the public and private sectors. We have begun to do so, revising our 10-year health plan with a heavy focus on training to rebuild and strengthen capacities that were lost when many of our frontline healthcare workers died

during the epidemic. We aim to strengthen the capacity of community workers to continue be first responders should we ever experience this threat again. We are seeking to rebuild our health infrastructure, prioritizing “roadways to health” to access hard-to-reach facilities.

We are transitioning from treatment to prevention with the support of over 100 partners from 26 countries. Liberia has only 218 medical doctors and 5234 nurses to serve a population of 4.3 million. These facts will not change overnight.

We are determined to fill the gap and gradually transition to a Liberian-built and led national healthcare delivery system that will withstand the size and scope of another Ebola-like outbreak should it ever happen.

There is an inherent link between healthcare systems revitalization, economic recovery and peace building, which is stronger now than ever before. Therefore, Liberia’s post-Ebola economic recovery, while continuing to accelerate improvements in infrastructure – roads, electricity and WATSAN operations – will prioritize healthcare delivery revitalization.

We also intend to heavily invest in the agricultural sector for food security and job creation. In this regard, we are working closely with our USAID partners to address

the immediate issue of food scarcity and a longer term program to develop a robust agricultural sector capable of feeding the nation.

We will tap into Liberian entrepreneurship in accelerating a private-sector led revival of the formal and informal sectors of our economy. We have told our donor partners that the private sector must become the engine of our recovery and therefore we must together consider the obstacles that have emerged in this post-Ebola economy, including the increased costs of doing business and challenges to travel and trade.

On this note, I want to commend the Ebola Private Sector Mobilization Group (EPSMG) for their role in Ebola response and now encourage them to maintain their critical place at the table in the Ebola recovery.

Closing:

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen: On account of this deadly outbreak, Liberia's progress has experienced only a temporary setback. I promise you that our success as an emergent democracy will continue to grow. We have shown the resilience to persevere, first through decades of conflict and now by conquering what is greatest threat to global public health in this generation.

Our resolve to meet the challenges that lie ahead is strong and unrelenting. As I speak, the curfew has been lifted, children are back at school, our borders are open, our women marketers are at work, our farmers are preparing for the planting season, our spirits are lifted.

We will win this battle with God's help. We will defeat Ebola!

Once again, I thank you and the American people for your support and the opportunity to address you today. Thank you.