

Message by H.E. President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf
To Mark the 201st Birth Anniversary of Joseph Jenkins Roberts
First President of the Republic of Liberia
Monday, March 15, 2010

**Madam Chairperson and Members of the Board of Trustees of the
Joseph Jenkins Roberts Educational Foundation;
Members of the Clergy and Congregation;
Scholars, Students, Boys and Girls;
Ladies and Gentlemen;
Fellow Liberians:**

Today we celebrate the birth of a man who, though born into slavery in America, left those shores for a better life in a land where people of color could truly be free; and who, in exercise of that right of freedom, rose to become the first President of a new nation called Liberia. I refer to none other than President Joseph Jenkins Roberts, whose 201st birth anniversary our nation commemorates every March 15th.

We remember Joseph Jenkins Roberts, not only because he was our first President at age 38; or that he was a skillful diplomat, having spearheaded Liberia's declaration of its independence as a sovereign nation.

More importantly, we remember President Joseph Jenkins Roberts today because of the legacy he left to the people of Liberia, one that resonates and has an impact in 21st century Liberia.

As long ago as 134 years, our first President recognized that education was the cornerstone of any nation's development – the way to pull oneself out of poverty. Through his Last Will and Testament, he reinforced the importance of education and literacy as the key to a country's economic development and to improving a people's social conditions.

The Joseph Jenkins Roberts Educational Foundation, through its Board of Trustees, is supporting the implementation of the education sub-pillar of our Poverty Reduction

Strategy to “Lift Liberia.” It does so by sponsoring, through scholarships for tuition and related fees, the education of students at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels, including vocational and technical, who have demonstrated exceptional academic performance and good moral behavior.

Since 2006, the Foundation has sponsored 3,379 students, 781 in 2009 alone. The Foundation also sponsors teachers and, since 2006, has funded a total of 427 -- 112 from 35 schools in 2009 alone -- again addressing the country’s need for well-trained, qualified and motivated teachers.

As we strive to improve our educational standards and increase literacy, scholarship programs, like the J.J. Roberts Educational Foundation, play a major role.

I commend the Board and staff of the Foundation, as well as the First United Methodist Church, for upholding and promoting the legacy of our first President by demonstrating good leadership values and managing the Educational Foundation that bears his name.

I call upon the students benefiting from the Joseph Jenkins Roberts Educational Foundation to look upon education as the key to improving your lives and to rebuilding Liberia. You are here today because you have excelled academically. I urge you to continue to make the most of the opportunity that has been accorded you, and to stay the course. And when you have gained your education, it will be important that you give back to your community and to your country, for all that you have received.

Educating the children of Liberia is a priority. Let me applaud the J.J. Roberts Educational Foundation for promoting education and fulfilling the dream of Liberia’s first President, Joseph Jenkins Roberts.