

ANNUAL MESSAGE TO THE FIFTH SESSION OF THE FIFTY-FOURTH NATIONAL
LEGISLATURE OF THE REPUBLIC OF LIBERIA

DELIVERED BY

HIS EXCELLENCY DR. GEORGE MANNEH WEAH

PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF LIBERIA

THE CAPITOL BUILDING
CAPITOL HILL
MONROVIA, LIBERIA

24 JANUARY 2022

Madam Clar M. Weah, First Lady of the Republic of Liberia;

Madam Vice President and President of the Senate;

Mr. Speaker;

Mr. President Pro-Tempore;

Honorable Members of the 54TH Legislature;

Your Honor the Chief Justice, Associate Justices of the Supreme Court and Members of the
Judiciary;

The Dean and Members of the Cabinet and other Government Officials;

The Doyen, Excellencies and Members of the Diplomatic and Consular Corps;

His Excellency, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General of the United Nations in
Liberia;

The Chief of Staff and Men and Women of the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL);

Former Officials of Government;

Traditional Leaders, Chiefs and Elders;

Political and Business Leaders;

Religious Leaders;

Officers and Members of the National Bar Association;

Labor and Trade Unions;

Civil Society Organizations;

Members of the Fourth Estate;

Special Guests;

Fellow Liberians;

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen:

I stand before you today in fulfilment of a duty in accordance with Article 58 of the Constitution of Liberia, which mandates that the President of Liberia, on the fourth working Monday in January of each year, is to present the Legislative Program of the Administration for the ensuing session, and report on the State of the Republic, covering the economic condition of the Nation, including expenditure and income.

MADAM VICE PRESIDENT, MR. SPEAKER, MR. PRESIDENT PRO-TEMPORE, AND MEMBERS OF THE 54TH LEGISLATURE, DISTINGUISHED LADIES AND GENTLEMEN:

With deep regret and profound sorrow, it is my duty to inform you of a major national tragedy which befell our country on last week Wednesday night, January 19, 2022, in which 29 Liberians died and many more were wounded in a stampede which occurred during a religious crusade in New Kru Town on Bushrod Island in Monrovia.

I am informed by the authorities that those who died included 18 adults (16 females, including 1 pregnant woman, and 2 males), and 11 children (6 girls and 5 boys). Of the 15 persons who were seriously wounded, there were 7 children and 8 adults.

May I now ask you to rise on your feet and remain standing, in remembrance, respect, and honor for those who have lost their lives in this terrible disaster.

I have declared a 3-day State of National Mourning, and have ordered that the national ensign

be flown at half-mast at all public buildings throughout the Republic while the Nation mourns.

I have also mandated the Liberia National Police to conduct a full-scale, thorough, and speedy investigation to ascertain whether or not there is criminal culpability, and have met with the religious leadership and pastors of the Christian community to discuss ways to safeguard their congregations at mass events such as rallies and crusades in order to prevent a re-occurrence of this tragedy.

I have also called on health authorities, including the Liberian National Red Cross and the Disaster Management Agency, to assist with treatment and recovery efforts.

I have personally visited the scene of the disaster and met with some of the survivors, and have also led an array of officials of Government to visit the wounded in hospital.

Let us now convey our deepest sympathies to the families of the bereaved, while expressing our gratitude to all those who provided help to the victims in the immediate aftermath of the stampede.

It is worthy to note that the Government has received dozens of messages of sympathy and condolence from the leaders and governments of many countries and international organizations, all of whom have expressed their solidarity with Liberia in our time of grief. In return, other countries which have recently experienced similar disasters, especially those in our sub-region, have received messages of sympathy and condolences from our Government.

I now call upon you to observe a moment of silence for all those who lost their lives in this unspeakable tragedy.

MOMENT OF SILENCE

May their souls, and the souls of all the faithful departed, rest in perfect peace, and may light perpetual shine upon them.

In Jesus' Name. Amen.

PLEASE BE SEATED.

MADAM VICE PRESIDENT, MR. SPEAKER, MR. PRESIDENT PRO-TEMPORE, AND MEMBERS OF THE 54TH LEGISLATURE:

Let me now welcome you back from your Annual Recess as you begin this Fifth Session of constructive dialogue and deliberation in the supreme interest of the Liberian people. I would also like to take this opportunity to express my sincere gratitude to this Honorable Body for your constant and consistent support to our legislative program. I look forward to working with you

during this Fifth Session, in the usual spirit of collaboration and cooperation that we have always enjoyed.

During the period under review, our collaborative efforts have resulted in your passage, and subsequent approval by me, of twenty-three (23) pieces of legislation, which include financing agreements, creation of regional universities, and ratification of international instruments, amongst others. These laws, most especially the financing agreements, have important implications for the growth and development of the Liberian economy.

While I applaud you for your hard work, I want to respectfully remind you that there are still thirty-five (35) pieces of legislation which are pending before you, eight (8) of them from your Third Session of 2020, and twenty-seven (27) of them from your Fourth Session of 2021

Many of these proposed laws have important significance to strengthening our governance and judiciary systems, as well as our relationships within our sub-region.

Others, when enacted by you, will help to ensure and secure financial transactions in support of our monetary and fiscal policies, and will help to prevent our country from being a conduit of illicit financial transactions, money laundering, and terrorist financing.

Taken together, these pending bills constitute a major proportion of our legislative agenda for the ensuing year, although we will be submitting new bills during this Fifth Session for your further consideration.

In the interest of time, a detailed list of the 23 bills passed during your Fourth Session, together with the 35 pending bills presently before you, as well as the three Executive Orders signed by me during the period under review, are attached as an Appendix to this Annual Message.

HONORABLE MEMBERS OF THE 54TH LEGISLATURE:

We are counting on you to consider the expeditious passage of these pending bills, as well as the other new bills which we will be submitting to you for your timely consideration during this Fifth Session. It is our fervent hope that we will continue to work together collaboratively, in the best interest of the Liberian People, to timeously execute our Constitutional duties.

MR. SPEAKER:

Two hundred years ago, some of our forebears returned to our shores, after enduring four centuries of bondage in slavery, and helped to found the Republic of Liberia.

As I said during my remarks at the Kick-Off program held this month on Providence Island to commemorate the day that the settlers landed here, we must redouble our efforts to promote unity amongst all Liberians worldwide, and encourage all to make meaningful contributions to the nation-building task of our country. For ..."in union strong, success is sure. We cannot fail..."

We therefore would like to commend the Honorable Supreme Court for its Opinion handed down on the Twenty-Third of December 2019, which found that certain provisions of the Alien and Nationality Law are inconsistent with the Constitution of Liberia.

For instance, the current Alien and Nationality Law provides that a natural-born Liberian citizen automatically loses his or her citizenship, without any due process of law in a court in Liberia, upon taking up citizenship of another country or acting in some capacity for that country. This law undermines our quest for unity amongst all Liberians - everywhere!

Therefore, as we celebrate the Bicentennial anniversary of the founding of our country, I want to call on the Honorable Members of this 54th Legislature, in particular the Liberian Senate, to consider passage of the Bill currently before you, which seeks to codify the Opinion of the Honorable Supreme Court and make it more true that ... "once a Liberian - always a Liberian."

MADAM VICE PRESIDENT, MR. SPEAKER, MR. PRESIDENT PRO-TEMPORE, AND MEMBERS OF THE 54TH LEGISLATURE:

Our Constitution places upon me the solemn responsibility to report on the State of the Republic, with specific mention of public expenditure and national income.

Revenue collection for 2021, including grants, was \$646 million U.S. dollars, compared to \$653.9 million U.S. dollars in 2020. This apparent decrease is attributable to more international Covid-related funding that was received in Calendar Year 2020. This revenue performance was driven by higher receipts of tax and non-tax revenues, especially taxes on international trade.

Of this amount, domestic taxes was \$577 million U.S. dollars and external resources received from our Development Partners was \$68 million U.S. dollars. The last fiscal year recorded the highest level of domestic revenue performance since the end of the civil conflict. We are all encouraged and challenged to sustain these efforts.

On the other hand, total cash expenditure for the same period under review was \$668 million U.S. dollars. Of this amount, 44 percent was spent on compensation of Government employees, 25 percent on goods and services, 17 percent on domestic and international debt, and 5 percent on Public Sector Investment.

MR. SPEAKER:

For at least the last five decades, Liberia has had a fiscal year that runs from July 1 to June 30. Liberia has been the only country in the ECOWAS sub-region that has run this fiscal year, which is out of alignment with the rest of the countries in the region. We have been encouraged by ECOWAS for nearly two decades now since the end of the civil war to revise our fiscal calendar.

Mr. Speaker I am proud to report that the change has finally taken place, and the year 2022 will be the first fiscal year that is also a calendar year for the national budget and other instruments and processes of the Government.

MR. SPEAKER:

To facilitate this transition, we had to enact a special transitional budget which you approved at \$347.9 million US dollars in the year under review. December 31, 2021 concluded this transitional budget, which was funded exclusively by domestic revenue, and the draft national budget is presently before the House of Senate for consideration, having been passed by the House of Representatives.

MR. SPEAKER AND MEMBERS OF THE 54TH LEGISLATURE:

The 2022 budget was passed by the House at \$785.6 million U.S. dollars. This is the largest national budget in the history of Liberia, and with the support of the National Legislature we hope to make it the most transformative. Domestic revenue is projected at \$640.5 million US dollars, or 81.5 percent, while external resources are projected at \$145 million US dollars, or 18.5 percent.

We have increased capital spending in the proposed Fiscal Year 2022 budget. In response to the need for more development, we are putting more resources to solving the many development challenges confronting our people in various sectors.

These capital investments will cover roads, electricity, education, national security, health, water and sanitation, transport and several other sectors.

I am thankful that the House of Representatives approved \$10 million U.S. dollars for projects under the County Tour that I undertook in the year under review. These county tour projects will bring serious relief to many of our people, especially those in rural areas.

MR. SPEAKER:

It is very clear that the success of this budget depends on strong revenue measures. It depends on all citizens paying their lawful taxes and doing so in a timely manner. In this regard, the Government in 2022 will support even more vigorously the domestic resource mobilization strategy of the Liberia Revenue Authority.

Government, through the LPRA, has launched a program to keep 50 percent of all real estate taxes collected back to the counties, districts and cities where the real estate taxes are collected. This is a measure to boost real estate taxes by involving local communities and their residents, as well as ensure that part of the money stays at the local level, in keeping with the Decentralization Law that was recently passed under my Administration. The program is being piloted in Margibi County.

MR. SPEAKER:

We are working with the National Legislature to limit tax waivers or tax expenditures, which in the last three years alone have cost us more than \$300 million U.S. dollars. While duty-free privileges and incentives are important to spur development, I believe that, as a country, we have been too generous with these instruments and must now begin to take a more conservative approach.

MR. SPEAKER:

We have made significant progress in restructuring our domestic debt. All legacy debts owed the Central Bank of Liberia, including the debt owed to the former National Bank of Liberia, were bundled into a Restructured and Consolidated Loan at the start of the IMF-supported program two years ago. This Restructured Loan totaled \$487.5 million U.S. dollars. The Government pays an annual interest of \$13.9 million U.S. dollars to the Central Bank of Liberia on this loan and will start to pay principal in the year 2030.

The total stock of domestic debt now stands at \$660 million U.S. dollars and the total stock of external debt now stands at approximately \$1.03 billion U.S. dollars for a total public debt stock valued at \$1.69 billion U.S. dollars as at December 31, 2021.

The total debt stock grew by 6.29 percent compared to end-December 2020 debt stock of \$1.59 billion U.S. dollars and this growth was from disbursement on both external and domestic loans.

On both domestic and external debt the Government paid the amount of \$83.4 million U.S. dollars in debt service. Of this amount, \$62.8 million U.S. dollars was paid for domestic debt to the Central Bank of Liberia, to commercial banks for Treasury Bonds, and to other institutions, while \$20.6 million U.S. dollars was paid to multilateral and bilateral partners.

The Treasury Bonds, which were issued by the previous Government in 2013, are costing the Government more than \$6 million U.S. dollars in interest annually, just to roll them over to the next period. This is a legacy debt which my Administration inherited. However, in the interest of continuity of Government, it is an obligation that we have to pay.

Therefore, I am pleased to inform you that, working with the IMF, we have allocated \$35 million U.S. dollars to completely redeem these very expensive Treasury Bonds. This will free up space for investment in education, healthcare and other important priority areas.

MR. SPEAKER:

We are almost at the point where the audit of the consolidated revenue account will be current up to any fiscal year. In 2018 my Administration inherited an audit backlog dating back to the 2015/2016 and 2016/2017 national budgets. We have worked overtime to conduct these audits and make current the audit of the consolidated revenue account.

With the completion of the Fiscal Year 2019/2020 audit, we are making good progress. The General Auditing Commission is presently conducting an independent payroll audit funded by the World Bank, and is developing a new framework to ensure better audits and financial reporting that is consistent with the Public Financial Management Law.

MR. SPEAKER:

We must continue to show strong gains in the fight against corruption, money laundering and illicit financial flows. The Government is strengthening and empowering the Liberia Anti-Corruption Commission to prevent fraud and acts of corruption before they occur. You will be aware that the House has already passed the new LACC Act giving a broader mandate to the LACC to fight corruption. It is my hope that, in the supreme interest of the Liberian People, the Senate will soon concur.

The House has also passed the new anti-money-laundering legislation, which empowers the Financial Intelligence Unit to fight illicit financial flows, such as money laundering, and drug and terrorist financing. We will spare no effort to bring Liberia within international compliance in the fight against corruption and illicit financial flows.

MR. SPEAKER:

With your support our Administration continues to implement several reforms on the Central Government payroll and pension schemes. For example, we have successfully placed all Government workers on biometric ID; reduced non-contributory pension scheme from about 17,000 pensioners in 2017 to about 6,000 pensioners to date; expanded social security coverage and increased social security contribution by 300 percent in some instances.

The Government, through the Ministry of Finance and Development Planning, the Civil Service Agency and the National Social Security and Welfare Corporation, intends to fully reform the entire process of retiring and paying retirees on time. In this regard, I am hereby admonishing all relevant entities to accelerate their work and complete the reform by the middle of this year.

At the completion of this exercise, workers who retire today must receive their money the following month. I will be looking to announce this to the Nation in my 2023 annual message.

MR SPEAKER:

Liberia recently completed its Third Review under the IMF External Credit Facility. The results show strong fiscal and monetary performance. The Executive Directors of the IMF have noted in the Review that:

QUOTE:

“The [Liberian] economy is on track to rebound strongly next year, following setback from COVID-19 pandemic. The medium term outlook is favorable and the authorities are committed to steadfast implementation of their macroeconomic stabilization and structural reform program.”

UNQUOTE

MR. SPEAKER:

This positive review from the IMF was immediately followed by a disbursement of \$23.64 million U.S. dollars to the Central Bank to add to the nation's reserve stock.

MADAM VICE PRESIDENT, MR. SPEAKER, MR. PRESIDENT-PRO-TEMPORE, MEMBERS OF THE 54TH LEGISLATURE:

We have remained committed to the independence and autonomy of the Central Bank of Liberia in support of economic reforms for a stable economy. Although the year under review was challenging for the economy, my Government was fully supportive of policy implementations from the CBL that have kept the recovery of our economy on course.

TO GOD BE THE GLORY, FOR THE GREAT THINGS HAS DONE, AND CONTINUES TO DO, FOR OUR GOVERNMENT, AND FOR OUR NATION, LIBERIA.

Despite the challenges of dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic, the economy grew by 3.6 percent from negative 3 percent in 2020, and growth this year is expected to be 4.7 percent, through increased agricultural and public investments in social compact program. In nominal value the Liberian economy expanded by more than US\$300 million in 2021. Inflation was reduced to less than 6 percent in November 2021, from 13.1 percent in December 2020.

We were successful in increasing the gross international reserves of our country to more than US\$600 million, representing more than 4 months of import of goods and services in compliance with ECOWAS convergence target.

MR. SPEAKER:

In our effort to extend the visibility of the Central Bank of Liberia beyond Monrovia, the Bank completed the construction of a modern cash hub in Gbarnga, Bong County, to provide more financial services for our people outside Monrovia, which was dedicated by me last month. The Bank is planning to commence the construction of an additional four (4) cash hubs in other rural areas of the country that will make it easy to access financial facilities.

MR. SPEAKER:

As part of the currency reform approved by you, the members of the 54th National Legislature, the Central Bank of Liberia brought in the first consignment of banknotes totaling L\$4.0 billion Liberian dollars out of the approved L\$48.734 billion Liberian dollars in November 2021.

The second consignment is expected in January 2022. The first and second consignments are all denominated in 100 dollars bills, only intended to respond to the liquidity demand in December of last year and to commence the replacement of mutilated banknotes respectively.

The bulk of the new currency, which will include coins, is expected in the second half of 2022,

while the balance will be coming in 2024. In compliance with the restriction of the Joint Resolution of the National Legislature, there will be no printing or delivery of the new currency in 2023, even though the exchange exercise will continue through 2023.

In the interest of transparency and credibility, the Central Bank of Liberia has ensured that the process is inclusive of our National Legislature, media community, the Liberian Marketing Association, the Liberia Business Association, traditional elders and youths, as well as our international partners, including the IMF and Kroll through USAID.

Based on the sound management and good performance of our economy, Liberia received \$345.3 million US dollars in August 2021 under the general Special Drawing Rights allocation to IMF members.

MADAM VICE PRESIDENT, MR. SPEAKER, MR. PRESIDENT PRO-TEMPORE, AND MEMBERS OF THE 54TH LEGISLATURE, DISTINGUISHED LADIES AND GENTLEMEN:

I have now concluded the mandatory reporting requirement for the Annual Message, as stipulated in Article 58 of the Liberian Constitution, which requires me to provide details of national income and public expenditure for the previous year, as well as my legislative agenda for the ensuing year, and to comment on the economic condition of the Republic, and the State of the Nation.

Based on the Report that I have just made to you, I can state categorically, and with confidence, that the State of our Economy is Stable and Growing, and that the State of the Nation is Peaceful and Strong!

Let me assure you that as President of Liberia, working in close collaboration with you, I will do all that is in my power to ensure that our Nation will remain peaceful, stable and strong, and that our economy will continue on a trajectory of sustainable growth and development. Together, we can – and will – succeed!

MADAM VICE PRESIDENT, MR. SPEAKER, MR. PRESIDENT PRO-TEMPORE, AND MEMBERS OF THE 54TH LEGISLATURE, DISTINGUISHED LADIES AND GENTLEMEN:

With regards to our foreign policy, Liberia remains positively engaged with its partners and friends at the bilateral and multilateral levels, as a responsible member of the international community, and with keen focus of our own national interest.

In accordance with the guiding principles of our Foreign Policy Objectives, which stipulate the maintenance of national security; the preservation of the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the country; the promotion of peace and harmony based on the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other states; and the promotion of unity in the international community

based on the values of liberal democracy.

During the period under review, we played significant roles in promoting our Foreign Policy Objectives and strengthening our foreign relations at the bilateral and multilateral levels, which brought productive results and affirmed our leadership in the comity of nations.

MR. SPEAKER:

Consistent with our international obligations, we fully participated in the activities of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the African Union (AU) and the United Nations (UN); either virtually or in-person.

We were honored to address the 76th Session of the United Nations General Assembly. We also participated in the Summits of the African Union (AU); as well as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

At the level of ECOWAS, the focus was on crisis areas in our sub-region, namely: the security and political situations in the Republic of Mali and the Republic of Guinea.

In Mali, we continue to support the peacekeeping operations with the presence of a contingent of the Armed Forces of Liberia embedded with the United Nations Mission (MINUSMA).

Also, we are working with our colleagues to resolve the constitutional impasse in the Republic of Mali to restore that country to constitutional democracy and order through the holding of free, fair and transparent elections in the soonest possible time.

We will do all within our power as a Government to remain supportive of the Transition Agenda of ECOWAS for our Sisterly Republics of Mali and Guinea; as well as those in the Sahel, to restore peace, security, stability, democracy, and constitutional order.

During the reporting period, we actively engaged our partners and friends, an endeavor that strengthened our friendly and cordial relations, as well as produced mutually beneficial results for us all.

MR. SPEAKER:

Most notable among the many achievements we made in pursuit of our international policy/relations were the following:

1. We participated and addressed the Generation Equality Forum convened in Paris, France in June of the reporting year.
2. We also attended, and addressed, the 26th UN Climate Conference (COP26), which was convened in Glasgow, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, where we made a

proposal for the establishment of a new African Carbon Credit Exchange.

3. We also participated in the 4th Edition of the Paris Peace Forum in November 2021 to tackle global problems and strengthen multilateral cooperation and collective action for a peaceful world.

4. While also in Paris, we attended the occasion marking the 75th Anniversary of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and addressed the 41st Session of the High-Level segment of the General Conference.

5. Pursuant to our strong commitment to peace, security, stability and democracy, particularly in the Mano River Basin, with special emphasis on the political situation in the Republic of Guinea, Liberia took the initiative to invite our neighboring Sister Republics – Côte d'Ivoire and Sierra Leone – to convene the “Mano River Union Diplomatic, Peace, Security and Democracy Conference”, which was held at Farmington Hotel in Margibi County in November

MR. SPEAKER:

In addition to the County Tour Projects, a number of projects were undertaken by the Liberian Agency for Community Empowerment, in keeping with its statutory mandate.

Completed projects include the following:

1. Popo Beach Phase 2
2. Grand Gedeh Housing Units Construction Project II
3. Kendeja Renovation Project
4. The 14th Gobachop Market Phase II – Open Markets
5. The 14th Gobachop Market Phase II – Road Improvement
6. The 14th Gobachop Market Phase II – Backfilling of Market Premises with rocks
7. 100 Housing Units Construction Project in Bong County
8. 100 Housing Units Construction Project in Nimba County
9. Three Additional Market Facilities Constructed in Omega Community
10. West Point-Waterside General Market
11. Wells Hairston High School Annex
12. The Youth Opportunities Project

Ongoing Projects being constructed by LACE include the following:

1. Popo Beach Third Phase
2. Grand Gedeh Housing Units Phase II
3. Monrovia Central Prison Compound Project
4. Duala Road Market Construction Project
5. The Youth Opportunities Project

MR. SPEAKER:

In addition to her official duties and responsibilities as First Lady of the Republic of Liberia, my

darling wife, Her Excellency Madam Clar Marie Weah, has shown a keen interest in charitable good works which involve infrastructure to accommodate some of the less fortunate in our society.

As a result of her passion to help Liberians move towards prosperity in support of the Pro-poor Agenda, she established the Clar Hope Foundation in 2018.

One of its major initiatives is the City of Hope, which is a multipurpose complex that will provide quality education to 200 girls between the ages of 3 - 5, as well as serve as a refuge, a home, and a rehabilitation center for destitute Liberians, including disadvantaged youths, orphans, and street girls.

The complex is comprised of modern dormitories to accommodate the students and the staff, a vocational training center, two academic school buildings with a 300-student capacity, an administrative building, a number of guest houses, a conference center, and a clinic. The City of Hope is approximately 85 percent completed, and the opening is scheduled for early this year.

The Clar Hope Foundation has also built an old folks home in Buchanan, Grand Bassa County. Construction was completed in 2021, and it has been named the Decontee Home for the Elderly. The 29 bed-room facility seeks to restore the desired respect and dignity seniors deserve through quality care. Although this old folks home was built with funds raised by the Clar Hope Foundation, I have learned from a reliable source that they intend to turn the building over to the relevant Government agencies, free of charge.

Additionally, through the Office of the First Lady, a modern vocational training center has been built for the use of the Army Wives Association at the Edward B. Kesselly Barracks. It comprises offices, classrooms and a conference hall. Through this initiative, the First Lady wants to boost the capacity development of hundreds of women and girls from military families, thus enabling them to earn a decent living and support their families. This project will be dedicated in the next few days.

Another infrastructure development project of the Clar Hope Foundation is the Rock Hill Restoration Project, which aims to restore clean and safe drinking water to some 16,000 residents of the Rock Hill Community in Paynesville for the first time after more than 70 years. The project has been completed and will also be officially dedicated within the next few days.

Allow me to thank you, Clar, for your charitable good works in the interest of the Liberian people.

MR. SPEAKER:

We are making steady progress in the electricity sector, but strong challenges remain. Since 2018 total households connected to the electricity grid has increased by more than 260 percent, from more than 49,000 customers in 2018 to about 130,000 customers by December of 2021.

New investments in transformers, meters and delivery of new sub-stations are all contributing to changing the electricity landscape. The Government was also able to provide more than 10,000 street lights in Monrovia and around the country, and under the current budget more street lights, including solar lights are going to be provided.

MR. SPEAKER:

I am proud to report that the cost of electricity, a major challenge for businesses and households, has been reduced from 35 cents per kilowatt hour to around 24 cents per kilowatt hour for residential customers and to 22 cents per kilowatt hour for businesses. While at 22 cents, this tariff is still higher in the West African sub-region, it is a massive development for the electricity sector in Liberia.

MR. SPEAKER:

The Millennium Challenge Compact signed between the Government of Liberia and the Government of the United States of America came to an end on January 21, 2021 after 5 years of implementation.

The Compact provided a grant of \$257 million U.S. dollars for the electricity and road sectors. The Compact also contributed \$147 million US dollars to the rehabilitation of Mt. Coffee Hydro Power Plant and the increase of connections from 34,000 customers to over 82,000. The Liberia Electricity Regulatory Commission was also established under the Compact which is now empowered to license private operators in the electricity sector.

Additionally, an \$18 million U.S. dollars raw water pipeline was constructed which has led to savings of \$780,000 U. S. dollars annually on pumping costs. These are only but a few of the projects covered under the Compact.

I take this opportunity to gratefully appreciate this kind gift of the American People to the People of Liberia. My Government has embarked on concerted efforts to re-qualify for another compact through vigilant reforms that will lead to achievement of critical governance benchmarks.

MADAM VICE PRESIDENT, MR. SPEAKER, MR. PRESIDENT PRO-TEMPORE, AND MEMBERS OF THE 54TH LEGISLATURE:

During my last address to this Honorable Legislature, I informed you that agricultural productivity would be a key priority of this Administration. The year in review saw several new beginnings and milestones for the agricultural sector. Private sector interest and investment in agriculture grew heavily, especially after the holding of the National Agriculture Fair in February, 2021.

The Fair highlighted Liberian agricultural productivity, and while outlining the challenges faced by producers and agribusinesses, it also presented the abundant opportunities in agriculture

and agribusiness.

I can proudly report to you that the number of commercial farms and agribusinesses more than significantly increased from 77 in 2021 to 164 in 2022 , while there are now dealerships of agricultural machinery, complete with spare parts and workshops.

This is a positive development for the efforts to mechanize Liberian farm production, and is a natural next step to the Government of Liberia's own efforts through the Ministry of Agriculture, to provide tools, equipment, seeds, seedlings to farmers, farming communities and cooperatives.

The interventions we made as a Government have led to increased acres planted in most crops, but especially so for basic foods like rice, cassava, oil palm and vegetables.

As the country moved into harvest season towards the end of the year, bumper crops are reaching rural and urban markets, due to improvements in the logistics and supportive infrastructure that we have provided for agriculture.

Dedicated warehouses for cocoa producers were constructed and/or rehabilitated in Nimba, Lofa and Bong counties; while processing plants for palm oil were built in Grand Bassa, Bong and Lofa counties. Rice processing plants in Lofa county were finalized in time to process the massive harvests coming in from expanded farms.

The Ministry of Agriculture developed and negotiated and signed, along with the Ministry of Finance and Development Planning, key new projects valued at over \$73 million US dollars. The World Bank's Rural Economy Transformation Project, (RETRAP), which is meant to expand the ongoing Smallholder Transformation and Agribusiness Revitalization Project, STAR-P, was developed for a total value of \$55 million US dollars.

The RETRAP will oversee the paving of the road from Tappita in Nimba County to Toe Town in Grand Gedeh County, completing a vital portion of the Ganta-Harper Highway that is already ongoing.

This major piece of road construction will, by next year, see the paving of the road going into neighboring Côte d'Ivoire, and will facilitate the free movement of goods, passengers and services in the sub-region. In addition, the RETRAP will drive resources into the rubber, cassava, poultry and piggery sectors to complement other projects in rice, oil palm and vegetables.

MR. SPEAKER:

Access to finance for our farmers was a key focus during the period in review.

The Rural Community Financing Project implemented in collaboration with the Central Bank of Liberia and the Ministry of Finance and Development Planning, having been impacted by

COVID-19-induced lock-downs and the closure of several banks in rural areas, was successful in getting eleven (11) Rural Community Financing Institutions more operational.

A key part of the transformation of Liberian agriculture involves the engagement with the Private Sector. In 2021, the Nimba Rubber Corporation began exporting processed rubber from Liberia, including processing rubber from private farms for export markets. This represents a fundamental shift towards industrializing Liberia's oldest commercial agricultural sector.

Also in 2021, the Atlantic Cocoa Corporation exported the first containers of certified organic cocoa from Liberia. While Liberia's cocoa production lags behind production giants in the region, Liberian cocoa continues to win awards and prizes in international competitions for its exceptional quality. My administration is therefore promoting and working to provide the enabling environment for high quality production of cash and food crops.

The Consumer Packaged Goods (CPG) industry in Liberia is growing exponentially, especially with the establishment and growth of light industries. In this regard, the award-winning J-Palm

Corporation with its Kernel Fresh products made from Liberian palm kernels stands out as an example of Liberian entrepreneurship excellence.

Several companies and agro-processors in the cassava sector, arguably Liberia's largest agriculture sector, also stand out for their outstanding supply of gari and fufu flour to national food reserves for re-distribution during the COVID-19 emergency.

MR. SPEAKER:

We will continue to increase our efforts to ensure value addition to our agricultural products, provide for access to our farmers and enhance support to expand mechanized farming throughout the country.

MR. SPEAKER:

Providing quality education to our future leaders has remained a paramount priority of my Administration.

I am pleased to report that we have made great strides in improving literacy and other learning outcomes in the educational sector, with milestone achievements in the areas of Access, Quality and System Transformation.

These achievements and interventions include the development of continuous learning platforms and smart classrooms throughout the country, and the introduction of a distant learning framework along with virtual laboratories.

I am also pleased to report that we have made the largest single investment in Senior Secondary School since the 1970s to address the huge infrastructure deficit in the education sector.

A \$47 million US dollar grant received from the World Bank with a wide scope of interventions including new construction, rehabilitation, equipping training, and text books development has

greatly contributed to the huge push we are making to fix the mess in the educational system. I am also pleased to report on the following deliverables in Education:

Renovation and rehabilitation of all 156 Public Senior Secondary Schools throughout the Country are ongoing simultaneously. As of June 2022, it is expected that all renovations works would have been completed and dedication shall be planned in phases, preferably by county.

Under the IRISE Project and in partnership with the World Bank, we will begin the construction of three Model High School complexes in the first quarter of this year now that design and procurement requirements have been completed. Each of the three institutions has been designed to accommodate 1,500 Senior High School students. My government will replicate this in other school districts to provide a better learning environment for our children.

MR. SPEAKER:

Available school statistics have it that the total number of senior secondary schools in the country is 752 as of Academic 2020 / 2021, of which, the Government owns only 156. To reduce that gap, the IRISE Project shall fund the construction of 25 new Secondary Schools strategically situated in 25 school districts that are currently without secondary schools.

Under this project, we are also funding the training of 35 University instructors out of the country, procuring a digital library, revising textbooks for students and upgrading curriculum. Additionally, in an effort to address the gaps in girl education, we will provide scholarship financial support for 3,000 Girls transitioning from 9th grade in 4 counties considered as having the highest rates of Girls dropout from High School. As there are no tuitions in Public Schools, sponsorship shall cover all registration fees, uniforms, text books, and annual cash allowances.

For Liberia to develop, we must develop the minds of our youths. We must train our teachers so that they themselves will be able to train the minds of our youths. During the period under review, curriculum training was provided to 1,250 teachers and caregivers who have since returned to their places of assignment in Sinoe, Maryland, Grand Kru, Rivercess, River Gee & Bomi.

Major strides and inroads have also been made in technical and vocational education and training. The TVET projects include a major rehabilitation and construction of training centers in six of the 15 counties of Liberia. Additionally, an initial number of 76 TVET teachers have been sent abroad for training to support TVET institutions in Liberia upon their return.

A number of them will be Master Trainers with assignment at the Booker Washington Institute, which is being scaled up to a TVET Teacher Training Institution for the future. The total number of teachers for this purpose, will be 120, of which 76 have been hired and are in training, while the reminder 44 are being recruited for subsequent training.

MR. SPEAKER:

The largest single spender for education is the Government. For the budget period 2020 / 2021

the government appropriated US\$79.4M US dollars out of a budget of US\$570.1M million US dollars, which amounts to a 14 percent share of the national budget going to education. The total appropriation which covers all education expenditures for the year, was sub-allocated such that Basic, Secondary and Early Childhood Subdivision of education received US\$41.8M or 52,64 percent of our budget.

Under the 2022 National Budget, we intend to increase spending in education so that all the interventions we are making can lead to us transforming the sector from mess to best.

MR. SPEAKER AND MEMBERS OF THE 54TH LEGISLATURE:;

My stance in ensuring the rights and protection of all cannot be overemphasized. As a HeForShe Champion, I remain committed to the dignity of upholding human rights and safeguarding our most vulnerable population -- our women, girls and children.

As a Government, one of our priorities is to reduce the incidence of sexual and gender based violence by 30 percent by 2023, through the provision of appropriate support services and access to justice systems. I am pleased to report that significant progress is being made to make this a reality.

With the emergence of the COVID-19 when most women and girls were confined in their homes, there was a steep increase in the reporting of sexual and gender-based violence cases due to the heightened awareness that we conducted in communities and at the grass-root level.

However, we saw a reduction in Sexual and Gender Based Violence cases in December of 2021, compared to the reports of 2020 December. We have been able to raise awareness among communities about the referral systems, the government's anti-Sexual and Gender Based Violence Call Center and can ensure its functionality.

Traditional and religious leaders are also beefing up the efforts to change the story and narratives of survivors and victims, as well as supporting prevention efforts of sexual and gender-based violence. While we all may be aware that "prevention is better than cure", we will continue to work with our UN counterparts,

INGOs, NGOs, and civil society organizations to increase efforts in preventing sexual and gender-based violence.

On the other hand, we are also concerned about our response to sexual and gender-based violence, which prompted the setting up of the Presidential Taskforce on Sexual and Gender Based Violence through the implementation of the "Government of Liberia and Partner's Anti-Sexual and Gender Based Violence Roadmap 2020-2022".

My Government has been able to procure DNA machines to aid in evidence gathering of related sexual and gender-based violence cases. This will bring relief and justice to both survivors and alleged perpetrators during the legal proceedings of Sexual and Gender Based Violence cases at the level of the court.

We have made interventions in rehabilitation of safe homes and one-stop centers, including in River Gee and Grand Cape Mount Counties, as well as other safe spaces for children. My Government will continue to ensure that no perpetrators shall go unpunished.

MR. SPEAKER:

While we strive to meet our national target of ensuring that 5,000 extremely poor and food insecure households, and 13,000 individual beneficiaries, receive cash transfers by 2023, the Liberia Social Safety Nets Project is in full swing and making significant impact, special thanks to our collaboration with World Bank and USAID.

Based on the economic crisis posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, we expanded the beneficiary pool with support from the Foreign Commonwealth Development Office (UKAID) and the World Bank. An additional 15,000 households within Urban Montserrado County were enrolled and benefitted— making a greater impact in the lives of 18,300 beneficiaries in three counties, with 82 percent of the beneficiaries being females and 27 percent being males.

Phase Two of the program has been launched to add an additional 6,500 households by the end of March 2022. To establish the basic building blocks for social protection and an equitable and objective process to the distribution of our limited resources, the Liberian Household Social Registry under the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection is well on its way with 233,000 Households profiled across five (5) counties -- Bomi, Bong, Nimba, Maryland and Montserrado. Enrolment continues across the country and I would like to encourage all households to participate.

Our government remains cognizant of main-streaming gender in the formulation of policies and programs that drive the development of Liberia. With support from our UN counterparts we have developed, for the first time, the country's Gender Equality Profile.

It provides an in-depth analysis, that will enhance the understanding of the differences in the conditions, needs, participation rates, access to resources and property rights, development planning and control of assets, decision-making powers between girls, women, boys and men in their assigned gender roles.

MR. SPEAKER AND MEMBERS OF THE 54TH LEGISLATURE:

During the period under review, the government and its partners implemented several programs intended to improve the lives of the country's youths. This is a sector that is central to every program meant to empower ordinary people. The young people of Liberia have already gone through quite a lot. While many have advanced to the next stage of their lives, others need our push.

Amongst the many programs we have initiated to improve living condition for young people is the Youth Entrepreneurship and Empowerment Program (YEPP), a \$2.4 million US dollar

initiative funded by the African Development Bank, to get graduating students work-ready. We also are implementing the Entrepreneurship Development program; the Liberian Employment and Entrepreneurship Program (LEEP) and the recently launched Recovery of Economic Activities for Liberia Informal Sector Employment (REALISE), which will provide short-term employment opportunities to a much wider demographic, including young people.

The government also wholly sponsors a National Youth Literacy program and a National Cadet Program.

The Monrovia Vocational Training Center (MVTC) continues to provide vocational and technical skills to youths of diverse backgrounds. The Center offers a variety of training courses, including Heavy Duty and Auto Mechanic; Welding & Fabrication; Auto Electricity and Electricity; Electronics; Refrigeration & Air Condition; Masonry, Plumbing, Architectural Drafting, Carpentry; and Graphic Arts.

The European Union (EU) has approved additional 26 million Euros to cover the cost of establishing state-of-the-art TVET schools in the rest of the 8 Counties that do not have them. This is in fulfillment of our vision to have TVET Institutions in all 15 Counties.

These initiatives are targeted at all Liberian youth, regardless of which county they may reside in. Thousands have already benefitted. Over the ensuing period, the government will dedicate more resources in order to tackle the growing menace of disadvantaged Youth, otherwise referred to as Zogos.

As we are focused on the youth, let me highlight an activity that keeps them physically and mentally strong: Sports. Despite the challenges the country's sports program has faced, it has been improving years, with the County Meet being a major highlight.

Once again, I would like to congratulate Nimba County for clinching this year's soccer category. My congratulations also go to all other winners. The tournament has brought Liberians together regardless of our differences. It is my hope that the momentum can be sustained, while we ensure the National Soccer team, the Lone Star, can build on this energy.

It would be remiss of me if I did not also take this opportunity to personally congratulate the Volleyball and Basketball teams from Grand Kru County for their historical victories in these categories in the 2022 National County Meet. They made history in two ways: Firstly, they won the first ever Volleyball category that was included in the County Meet, and secondly, they are the first county to ever win TWO categories in the County Meet. Congratulations, once again!

MR. SPEAKER:

I regret to inform you that in spite of our efforts to upgrade the team, we still did not qualify for two of the main soccer events in the world: The World Cup and the African Cup of Nations. But we remain committed to doing more. We will dedicate more resources and scout the best talents for the team in the coming year.

MADAM VICE PRESIDENT, MR. SPEAKER, MR. PRESIDENT PRO-TEMPORE, AND MEMBERS OF THE 54TH LEGISLATURE:

May I now respectfully beg your kind indulgence to permit me to use this opportunity to speak directly to the People of Liberia, wherever they may reside beyond the walls of this chamber, both within our borders and out in the diaspora. Thank you.

MY FELLOW CITIZENS:

In 2017, I came to you promising the following:

- To Give You Power;
- To Improve Our Economy;
- To Empower Our Youths; and
- To Sustain Our Peace.

Against this backdrop, you elected me as the President of Africa's First Independent Country, LIBERIA.

On the day of my Inauguration, you, and I, and Liberia, made history together. For the first time in many decades, on January 22, 2018, our democracy witnessed a smooth transfer of power from one elected government to another; and from one ruling political party to another political party in opposition. We also witnessed the inauguration of Liberia's first ever female Vice-President, Her Excellency Dr. Jewel Howard-Taylor.

Also, another historic first was the venue itself, the Samuel K. Doe Sports Stadium, where a Liberian inauguration ceremony was held outdoors and in the open air for the very first time in our history, and for the SKD Stadium itself, it hosted the largest ever audience since its construction. The mood was electric and ecstatic, peaceful and harmonious.

MR. SPEAKER:

I have played in many stadiums and have been applauded by many fans during the days of my professional football career. But nothing compares to that day at the SKD Stadium.

I will live with those memories for the rest of my life.

The People.

The Stadium.

The Oath.

And My Promises.

And then, Mr. Speaker, the cheering and the dancing and the celebrations came to an end, and we had to begin the work of the People and commence the serious business of governance. Our first task was to formalize my promises into a national development plan that would guide and lead us to fulfill them. We developed that plan, now known as the Pro-Poor Agenda for

Prosperity and Development (PAPD). And four years ago, we began a journey to raise our country to a new level of prosperity and development.

The goals and objectives of the PAPD are to give power to our people through better education and healthcare, create stronger possibilities for our young people, especially for our girls and women; to transform our economy and continue to build critical road and electricity infrastructure; to protect our peace and strengthen national security in the wake of the departure of the United Nations peace keeping troops; to intensify the fight against corruption; and to improve the quality of our governance, among others.

I am proud and pleased to inform you today, Mr. Speaker, that four years from where we started, this Pro-Poor Agenda remains actively on course!

MY FELLOW CITIZENS:

It has not been all smooth sailing, and indeed, we never expected it to be. We were challenged to seek high office because of the serious and seemingly entrenched nature of the governance and socio-economic problems of this country that were very obvious to everyone. And we were further challenged by the opportunity that you have given us to address and eventually solve them.

Surely, we faced some major challenges in the last four years, but as a Government and as a People, we have emerged stronger. The challenges may have tried to derail and distract us, but they did not prevent us from continuing the work of national development.

Today, four years on, we continue to protect the peace and security of our people, to build more roads, transform electricity, build new hospitals and improve the quality of care, transform the challenging situation in education, build more markets for our market women around the country, and work toward improving governance and accountability for public resources. While the challenges are many, our recent macroeconomic crisis and the current COVID-19 crisis have taught us that when we are united, we can solve any problem. I am of the firm conviction that no development challenge is too big to solve when a people combine their energies, talents and resources in solving them.

We came together as a people to end a deadly civil war and to overcome its effects. We came together to solve Ebola. We came together to stabilize our recent macroeconomic problems and we are together fighting COVID-19. We can do and achieve anything once we set our minds to it. That is who we are as Liberians.

So let us NOT let politics divide us to the extent of destroying our country. In this Bicentennial Year, let us invoke the spirit of national unity when commemorating the first 200 years of our nation's founding – no matter how painful and difficult those first 200 years may have been. Our past may be bittersweet, but with unity and oneness of purpose our present and our future can be sweeter.

MY FELLOW CITIZENS:

As we go from this place today, let us continue to walk in unity and peace. I want to thank you, wholeheartedly and sincerely, for maintaining the peace. Let us continue to do so. For without peace, there can be no development. In the words of Nelson Mandela, and I quote:
"Peace is the greatest weapon for development that any person can have. It is so easy to break down and destroy. The heroes are those who make peace and build."
Unquote.

MY FELLOW LIBERIANS, DISTINGUISHED GUESTS, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN:

The Almighty God has endowed and blessed the Liberian people with a beautiful country. Let us embrace each other with love, and Let Peace Reign Throughout Our Land!

From the Heights of Wologisi, to the Peaks of Mount Nimba:
LET PEACE REIGN!!

From the Slopes of Putu Mountain, to the Top of Mount Gibi;
LET PEACE REIGN!!

From the Golden Sunset of River Gee, to the Savanna of Grand Kru:

LET PEACE REIGN!!

From the Sunset Beaches of Grand Bassa, to the Golden Beaches of Rivercess!!

LET PEACE REIGN!!

From Cape Palmas to Cape Mount!!

LET PEACE REIGN!!

From the Belleh Forest of Gbapolu, to the Sapo Forest of Sinoe;

LET PEACE REIGN!!

From the Blue Lake of Bomi, to the Kpatawee Waterfalls of Bong;

LET PEACE REIGN!!

And from the Providence Island of Montserrado;

LET PEACE REIGN!!

God Bless Liberia, and God Bless you all!!!

I thank you!