

**Remarks by H.E. President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf
at Official Launch of “Stop Fistula” Project
and Inauguration of the Fistula Unit
at St. Joseph’s Catholic Hospital, Congo Town
Thursday, May 2, 2013**

The Director and Staff of St. Joseph’s Catholic Hospital;
Archbishop [Lewis] Zeigler;
My Dear Friend, President de la Vega, President of the Women for Africa
Foundation;
Other Delegations;
Our Doctors, who have been there with us;
Ministers, Other Officials of Government;
The Diplomatic Corps;
Special Guests;
Ladies and Gentlemen:

I first met Maria when we went to Madrid in 2008, when there was a meeting of African women. She was then Vice President and Deputy Prime Minister of her country. We had a really good meeting, a good encounter, and her passion for women, generally, and women in Africa, came forth during that session.

She hasn’t, since that time, stopped promoting the development of African women. She has now established a foundation, to be able to do work – and I’ve seen the program, and I’m honored to be an Advisor to the Foundation. She has programs in many African countries – different types of programs suited to the circumstances, to the needs, to the demands of the women in that country. Thank you for doing this.

It is a great honor for me to launch the “Stop Fistula” Project, and to inaugurate the Fistula Unit here at St. Joseph’s Catholic Hospital. The unit will assist young women who suffer from obstructed labor, and will offer free surgical treatment for women with fistula – to repair those cases which cannot be prevented.

With a fully equipped and well-staffed unit, St Joseph’s becomes the latest hospital site in the country where fistula is treated. The fact that 1,493 rape

cases were reported in Montserrado County alone last year, shows the importance of having a Fistula Unit here at St. Joseph's.

Thank you, Brother Patrick, for agreeing that Catholic Hospital would host this unit, and for all that you've done to promote this program, and all that you do to administer to our women, young and old.

We thank the team of medical doctors – I've already noted them, and I'd like them to stand, so we can all see them, and appreciate them. It takes a lot for someone to leave their country, leave their occupation, leave their family and come all the way to another country, a poor country, to be able to render volunteer service. There's nothing more exceptional than that, and I want you to know that the Liberian people appreciate you.

This initiative, I've already said, is the initiative of Maria Teresa. I just went with her into the wards, where we have seen three young ladies who have completed their treatment. You can see the joy on their faces because now they can go and be reintegrated with their family, with their community. They can now be free to walk, to work, without the shame that was placed upon them, because of a condition for which they had no control.

In your letter to me, dear sister, you thanked me for the support and assistance in implementing this project. But it is I, and the young women of Liberia, who are indebted to you, grateful for your selflessness and humanitarian gesture. We thank you most sincerely, as well as the members of your delegation and your organization, for the interest you continue to demonstrate for the young women of Liberia.

This project has come about through the successful collaboration of our Ministry of Gender and Development, which stands in the vanguard for the protection and empowerment of Liberia's girls and young women.

Collaboration also comes from our Ministry of Health and Social Welfare, which initiated government's obstetric fistula program in 2007, and which treats patients in mobile fistula programs in hospital sites in 11 counties. We can now clap for them!

This is significant, because victims of fistula are to be found in the rural areas, where most times there are no hospitals that can reach them. We look

forward to continuing to work with the program, to give support to the program, so that we might be able to expand this service to the other counties and the other sites that have been missing it.

Yesterday, as many of you know, I launched the 2013 Anti-Rape Campaign at the Gender Ministry. This heinous violation of children is on an increase. It is a sickness – a national sickness – that has to be attacked. We’ve got to find the means to stop this, by any means possible, legal and otherwise. As I said, of the 2,493 cases of rape of young girls in our country, in 2012, many of them will suffer from obstructed labor or end up as victims of fistula because their underdeveloped bodies are not prepared for childbearing. The tearing they experience leads to their inability to control their bodily functions.

To the rapists: just think if it were your daughter, or your wife, or your mother, who had been so victimized.

We trust that this Unit will go a long way in reducing the numbers of young women who will suffer from fistula who, through no fault of their own, live in shame, ostracized from their society, their families and communities. Many of them suffer in silence.

If the young women are to get help quickly, it is important that the word gets out, here in Montserrado County, where the majority of the rape cases are. Many of those that have been treated – I think some 16 of them, in the last few days, by the doctors – have come from many of the rural areas, which is good, because there are no services in many of those places. But a large number of them are right here in Montserrado County, and we must do what we can to get to the communities so that as the services continue, they can bring relief to many of these young women who are suffering because of this disease.

The Ministries of Gender and Health will continue to do all in our power to prevent this from happening; all that we can do to make young girls stay in school; to make sure they are off the streets, to prevent the early pregnancy that can lead them to a fistula condition. We all need to work together on this problem, to save our children.

We have many demands on very limited resources, but we’ll continue to do what we can, and we’ll ask our partners, our loyal, committed friends, through the Women for Africa Foundation, to continue to be a partner to us in this

program.

I thank all of you for being here, and I hope that those not here will listen to the message that has been given by everyone who has spoken today, and will join us in this fight.

Finally, and this one goes to you, Archbishop, I've noticed the condition of the road coming in here, and I will get our Ministry of Public Works to come and take a look at it. I don't know what exactly we will do about all of the marketers who need the markets to earn a living to live, but we'll work on that, too, through the Gender Ministry and to see if we can do something to solve that problem.

I thank all of you for being strong partners to Liberia.