

“The Role of Peace in Youth Empowerment”
Lecture delivered by H.E. Mrs. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf
President of Liberia
at the United Nations University for Peace
San José, Costa Rica
Monday, September 30, 2013

Rector Francisco Rojas Aravena;
The Faculty and Students of the United Nations University for Peace;
Ministers and officials of the Government of Costa Rica;
The Liberian Delegation and the ‘Put Ma Ellen There’ Project Team;
Special Guests;
Ladies and Gentlemen:

Let me begin by thanking President Chinchilla, the Government and the people of Costa Rica, and University officials for the gracious hospitality accorded our delegation since our arrival in this beautiful Caribbean country. Our team of young people, who came ahead, has been singing the praises of your country and its people.

Today is very special, for we are in a country whose natural beauty, climate and vegetation remind me, in many ways, of my own. It is also special because I share with your President the distinction of being the first female President of our countries. As such, we give hope to women all over the world that gender inequality can and must be overcome.

It is a special privilege to visit this country to receive the honor to be bestowed on me by the United Nations-mandated University for Peace, which is the unveiling of a sculpture, in my honor, in the University’s Garden of Nations.

It is with reflection that I note that the United Nations established this University for Peace in 1980 – the year my own country started its descent into chaos. The mandate of the University – to promote understanding, tolerance and peaceful coexistence; to stimulate cooperation among peoples; and help lessen obstacles and threats to world peace and progress – remains a cardinal call for all nations. The University’s continued role in researching and educating students from all over the world to resolve conflict, promote peace and the dignity of humankind is as important today as ever, given the increasing number of terrorist attacks all over the world.

Today is also historic because of the singular act by some dedicated and committed young people from my country, Liberia. I am told that this is the first time that a group of young people have come together to erect a monument in the Garden of Nations, and that I am the first woman of African descent to be installed there. I consider this an awesome recognition and honor!

We applaud the determination and the drive of these young people and their Project Team, called “Put Ma Ellen There.” We commend their tireless efforts to fulfill a project to complete

something in which they truly believed, for never giving up, despite the difficulties and setbacks they encountered along the way.

The enormity of what they have achieved through this project will be remembered in history. Indeed, they have facilitated, as Liberia's youth ambassadors, the first official contact between our two countries and governments, laying the foundation for establishing a long and mutually beneficial relationship between Liberia and Costa Rica. Because of what they have done, I will have the opportunity to interact closely with President Chinchilla and with members of her government. Because of them, we now have the means to reactivate the previously dormant diplomatic relations and bilateral cooperation between our two countries.

Let me recount how it all started, and how we came to be here today. A year ago, I granted audience to fifteen young people, representing the political sub-divisions of our country. To my surprise, rather than wanting something from me, they offered to erect a monument in my honor, here at the University for Peace Campus. They told me about the significance of the Garden, and why they wanted to put me in there.

I will remember today, not because my statue is unveiled in the Garden here, but because young people from my country, many of whom had never traveled abroad, took the time to learn about the significance of this place. They concluded that their President deserved to be there as well, and they worked towards that end. They rose above the challenges they confront every day to contribute to the success we are celebrating today.

You, the youth of Put Ma Ellen There Project, have demonstrated what you can achieve if you work together and show commitment. I'm proud of the level of your professionalism; I'm proud of what you exhibited during the implementation of this project, proving that there is nothing you cannot achieve, once you put your mind to it. You represent the future of Liberia, and you will drive the destiny of our country, long after my generation has left the stage.

Many may recall that Liberia experienced one of the deadliest civil crises on the African continent. Over the fourteen-year period of civil war in Liberia, our GDP plummeted by nearly 90 percent of 1990 levels; and our entire Mano River Union Basin – comprising Liberia, Côte d'Ivoire, Sierra Leone and Guinea – became unstable and conflict prone, thereby threatening prospects for economic development in our region.

Despite the odds, we have all been relentless in the pursuit of peace, the pursuit of justice, the defense of human rights, the promotion of human dignity. We have fought to enforce the rule of law and democracy in a society beset by conflict; and to defend the rights of women and education of the girl child.

Peace has allowed us to institute reforms aimed at restoring access to basic services, rebuilding institutions and improving governance, thereby enhancing accountability, and creating an enabling environment for the exercise of basic freedoms. Peace has enabled us to rebuild our economy, to promote education and reconciliation. We have now completed our long-term agenda, **Vision 2030**, which lays a foundation for the transformation of our economy aimed at

better management of our natural resources to reduce aid dependency, thereby moving our country to middle-income status by the year 2030.

Last month, the people of Liberia celebrated ten consecutive years of peace and progress, putting into the dustbins of history 14 years of civil war and decades of upheaval. Over these ten years, our nation's pride and credibility has been restored, and we have returned to the comity of nations as a respectable and responsible partner, thanks to the support of the international community, especially the peacekeeping and peace-building efforts of the United Nations.

The empowerment of young people is essential in a country where 60 percent of the population is under the age of 35 – many of them war-affected youths of our civil conflict who did not have the opportunity of an education or skill. They remain the vulnerable elements of our society, but peace has given them a chance to live a normal life, to seek an education and vocational training, to engage in small enterprises, to regain their respect and dignity. We recognize that they are the catalyst for driving the economy and socio-political landscape of our country. We know that to maintain the peace, we must make education and employment of our youth a paramount commitment of governance.

We know that the value of peace, security, and stability are central to any development effort, and in the absence of achieving these corollaries, development will remain elusive. We thus commend Costa Rica for hosting the BYND2015 International Conference, which brought together thousands of youth from all continents to recognize the importance of youths as promoters of development in this technological age.

The record shows that, globally, about 1.5 billion people live in areas affected by conflict; the countries where these people live lag behind other low-income countries in achieving the Millennium Development Goals. Until these countries can establish more stable and peaceful societies, development will remain a continuous challenge. Among countries working towards achieving the MDG targets, the worst performing states are found among the 26 countries considered conflict-affected or fragile.

This is proof that the consolidation of peace and stability is inextricably linked to efforts that spur sustainable economic and inclusive growth. A peaceful environment enables governments the means to tackle the challenges that confront their countries, and respond more meaningfully to the expectations of their people.

A classic example of the dividend of peace can be found in the positive transformation of Africa in the last decade. Although problem spots still exist, the continent has seen relative peace and stability, and this has translated into unprecedented economic growth and development. Most of the global success stories of economic transformation have occurred in regions that experienced sustained, uninterrupted peace and stability, creating the necessary conditions for investment in human capacity and strengthened institutions. In Africa as elsewhere, peace has engendered transformation, and transformation has given the youth an opportunity to prepare for leadership.

Dear Friends, it is with deep humility that I share this space, which honors outstanding personalities and world leaders who have made immense contributions to world peace and

stability. These luminaries include Mahatma Gandhi, who was very much on my mind as I journeyed to his native India earlier this month and visited his Samadhi, or Memorial, and also the place of his assassination. I think of Eleanor Roosevelt, who chaired the committee that drafted the seminal Universal Declaration of Human Rights; and David Ben Gurion, chief architect of the State of Israel; and Jean Henri Dunant, founder of the Red Cross.

My journey to this place started, I would say, in 1969 when, as a junior official of government, I challenged the status quo and got into trouble. Later, empowered with a Harvard degree, and again working in government, I delivered the commencement address at my Alma Mater, in which I questioned the government's failure to address long-standing inequalities in the society. Similar events would follow in my life in and out of country and exile, in and out of jail, in and out of professional service.

My life was forever transformed when I was given the privilege to serve the people of Liberia as President, taking on, in January 2006, the herculean task of rebuilding a broken nation, nearly destroyed by war and plunder. There was no roadmap for post-conflict transformation, but we knew we could not let our country return to conflict, and that our greatest responsibility was to keep the peace.

Two years ago, I was honored to have been awarded the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize, and accepted it on behalf of Liberian and African women, in recognition of the many years of their struggle for justice, peace and equitable development. We believe that it serves as a catalyst and inspiration for women everywhere to take leadership roles, to have the courage of their conviction in standing up for the principles in which they believe.

In closing, I want to highlight some of the things that our two countries, Liberia and Costa Rica, have in common. As small countries with populations in once volatile neighborhoods, we both look to the United Nations as an indispensable institution that safeguards the peace and our prosperity. Both of us are littoral states; we are bordered by the Mano River Union nations of Sierra Leone, Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire and the Atlantic Ocean, while your neighbors are Panama and Nicaragua, the Caribbean Sea and the Pacific Ocean. Our populations are comparable: 4.3 million yours, and ours just over 4.1 million.

The name, Liberia, is familiar to Costa Ricans, as the name of the capital city and gateway for one of your major provinces. Costa Rica has achieved the middle-income status to which we, in Liberia, aspire by 2030, if we stay the course and ensure that our transformation is irreversible.

As a post-conflict nation, we seek to learn from your tremendous progress toward achieving universal access to education, health care, clean water, sanitation and electricity; from your successes in the agriculture sector, and in environmental sustainability and eco-tourism; and about how you have addressed the issue of human development, youth empowerment and employment. There is much that we can learn from your experience of sustaining peace, stability and economic development.

I dream of a Liberia that is fully peaceful, fully prosperous, and fully unified. By honoring me today, you give me renewed hope and zeal to continue working to achieve peace and

development at home, in Africa, and around the world. I will remain steadfast and resolute in my fight for peace and dignity for all and also the empowerment of women and youth. When you empower these two groups, you commit to maintaining peace and stability. It is only when we live in peace can we develop ourselves and our society. We can only achieve lasting peace when we have peace within ourselves, our fellow men and our creator.

I thank you.