

**Remarks by
H.E. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf
President of the Republic of Liberia
at Opening of the “Consultation on Climate Change,
Human Rights, Peace and Security”
Hosted by
the All Africa Conference of Churches
and the Fellowship of Christian Councils
and Churches in West Africa
in collaboration with the Liberian Council of Churches
Held at the First United Methodist Church
Monday, June 16, 2009**

**West African Church Leaders and Ecumenical Partners from
Northern
America and Europe
Members of the Clergy
Distinguished Guests
Ladies and Gentlemen:**

I am honored to be in this historic House of Worship, in the presence of devout men and women of God. Let me extend a warm welcome to the many religious leaders who have traveled here, not only from the West Africa sub-region, but also from Europe and the United States. The fact that you selected Liberia as the venue for this “Consultation on Climate Change, Human Rights, Peace and Security,” is a strong signal that your organizations see our country as a

place where people of God want to live in peace, and where important discourse can bear fruit.

I have listened with keen interest as the preceding speakers highlighted the linkages between climate change, human rights, and peace and security in West Africa. I could not agree more, as these cross-cutting issues touch on critical aspects of our lives. Unless there is peace and security in our sub-region, human rights will continue to be violated; and as people flee persecution and wars, they face the harmful effects of climate change on our shared environment. If we are to succeed in tackling these challenges, we can only do so by pulling together.

To underscore the point: peace and security are prerequisites for sustained economic progress and poverty reduction in Liberia. Sustainable peace depends upon the ability to create inclusive economic opportunities and deliver basic social services. Similarly, basic infrastructure is required for broad-based growth and delivery of services nationwide, and for decentralized governance systems. Governance and the rule of law provide the institutional base for strong economic performance and poverty alleviation,

and the justice that is needed to ensure that grievances are settled through dialogue within the political system as opposed to violence.

As you assemble to assess the impact of climate change, human rights, peace and security on West African States, permit me to touch briefly on each of these topics, within the framework of our national Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS) – the roadmap for Liberia’s future for the period 2008 to 2011.

Anchored on four pillars, the PRS articulates our vision and strategies for moving toward rapid, inclusive and sustainable growth and development. The four pillars focus on expanding peace and security; revitalizing the economy; strengthening governance and the rule of law; and rehabilitating infrastructure and delivering basic services. They are mutually reinforcing, and progress in one area facilitates progress in the others.

For Liberia to be a place where peace and security, respect for human rights and protection of the environment from the damaging effects of climate change are a way of life, the country will have to create greater economic and political

opportunities for all its citizens and ensure that growth and development are widely shared, with the benefits spread equitably. Unless and until we can do these things, Liberia will continue to be plagued by the challenges that are the topic of this Consultation.

West Africa, as we know only too well, holds the dubious distinction as this continent's most volatile sub-region, with most of the States experiencing various levels of political, economic and/or humanitarian crises. As a consequence of that volatility, our sub-region is today host to some 25,000 United Nations peacekeeping and peace-building missions in Côte d'Ivoire, Sierra Leone, and here in Liberia. Presently, our population enjoys security protection that is largely dependent upon the expertise and resources of the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL), as well as support from unwavering international, regional and sub-regional partners. Liberians are therefore able to pick up the pieces of their lives, shattered by civil war, and to begin the slow process of recovery and rebuilding.

Under the Peace and Security Pillar of our Poverty Reduction Strategy, we are endeavoring to create a secure and peaceful

environment, both domestically and in the sub-region. To reduce the potential for violence, we are building a capable and democratically accountable military force by training a 2,000-person Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL), and rebuilding and strengthening our police and other security-related personnel. Believing their country to be safe, Liberians are going about their business without fear, many others are returning home from abroad, and more and more investors are coming to do business in Liberia.

The goal of Pillar 3 is to build and operate efficient and effective institutions and systems that promote and uphold democratic governance, accountability, justice for all, and strengthen peace. One of its strategic objectives is to expand access to justice, and enhance the protection and promotion of human rights under the laws of Liberia.

We are mindful of our shortcomings in the protection and promotion of human rights, the lack of equal access to the justice system, and limited public understanding of citizens' rights under the law, and are doing our best to address and correct them. Two weeks ago, I signed legislation to amend certain provisions of the 2005 Act on the Independent

National Commission on Human Rights, paving the way for that Commission to conform to international standards and best practices. We are also awaiting the recommendations of our Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and hope to implement them. We are also ensuring that gender justice and equality are core values within the legal and judicial system; that the length of pre-trial detention is significantly reduced; and we are implementing measures to protect vulnerable groups within the justice system, particularly children and young people, women, the elderly and the disabled. These and other related activities are ongoing.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

While Liberia has not contributed in any significant degree to global warming, it is, nevertheless, a victim of the phenomenon of climate change.

As a result of rising sea level and beach erosion, we are losing territory all along our coastline – home to over 50 percent of our population. Monrovia, our capital, is almost below sea level, and is being impacted as well. A rising sea level will pollute our water resources. For a majority of Liberians, the most affordable source of protein comes from

the sea; that food source will diminish with a rising sea level. Elsewhere, subsistence slash-and-burn agriculture – the main farming technique employed by many of our people – is being affected because of the variation in rainfall. The cutting and burning of trees for fuel wood, particularly charcoal, is destroying our forests and contributing to erosion and a warming planet. Although no study has been conducted, it is widely believed that the caterpillar infestation that ravaged crops and polluted water supplies in dozens of towns in Liberia and Sierra Leone in January of this year, forcing the people in those areas to flee their homes, was caused by the climate variation, which provided a longer incubation and gestation period for the caterpillars to thrive.

Among the measures we are taking to address climate change are the following: to raise awareness about the consequences of our actions vis-à-vis the environment; preservation of our forest ecosystem by setting aside 30 percent of forest land to serves as carbon sinks that cleanse our environment of pollutants; with literally thousands of bags of charcoal being trucked into Monrovia every day for sale, we must reduce, and replace, the number of trees being felled. And because the coal-pot stoves we cook on waste

some 75 percent of the energy, we must encourage the use of more efficient stoves. We know that poverty, land and the environment are inextricably linked, that our rural poor depend almost entirely upon the land and other natural resources for their livelihoods. At the same time, we must do all we can to protect our environment by not contributing to climate change.

To address the adverse effects of a changing environment, our Government is also revitalizing the National Disaster Relief Commission to educate the public about disaster risk reduction and to coordinate the response to disasters when they do occur. In addition, we are developing an integrated coastal zone management plan, a wetlands management policy and a water resources management plan to govern the use of, and interaction with, these valuable natural resources.

Climate change is very real, it constitutes a serious threat to our way of life, and we must tackle it head-on – nationally, regionally and globally.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

You have set for yourselves a very ambitious agenda. Over the next six days, you will also be examining and analyzing such topics as the root causes of regionalized civil conflict in the Mano River Union Basin; regional challenges to peace building in West Africa; the impact of weak democratic institutions and institutionalized corruption; the nexus between human rights and good governance in West Africa; and so much more.

That's a lot of ground to cover, but I am sure that after six days of intensive deliberations, you will agree an advocacy campaign that will respond to some of the major challenges facing our sub-region.

I wish all of you a most productive and successful session, assured that you will reach decisions that will be beneficial to all of us in West Africa.

With that said, I now declare open the 2009 Consultation on Climate Change, Human Rights, Peace and Security.