

**Statement to the Nation by H.E. President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf  
on Indiscipline and Lifting the Gag Order  
Monday, December 2, 2013**

My Fellow Citizens:

We are happy to be back home. We thank the Almighty God for our successful and safe travels. As you know, to achieve the goals outlined in our Agenda for Transformation, we must continue to seek support from our development partners to rebuild the country, expand the economy and create jobs for Liberians. We must also continue to strengthen our peace. This is why I have directed the Justice Ministry and the Joint Security Task Force to take the necessary actions, in keeping with law, to stop the wave of lawlessness which is creeping upon the State.

Together, we are trying to become a free, prosperous, just, open, secure and democratic society. This national goal is important because only in such societies can we experience true equality and the full values of our citizenship – where our differences in tribe, age, gender, religion and political associations will not limit what each of us, and our children, can become. It is only in such societies that all Liberians can share in all of the opportunities that the State has to offer, and benefit from the natural resources which we own together.

However, building a free, prosperous, just, open, secure and democratic society will not happen simply because we want it to. It will happen if we respect our laws, preserve our peace, respect the rights of each other, and recommit ourselves to continue to work together to make it happen.

It means that as we grow in freedom to disagree and to express our disagreements, we must use the law, and apply it equally and fairly, to settle those disagreements. Being law-abiding, even when we disagree with one another, is the only way to secure our society. We can no longer use violence, or threaten to use violence, to express dissatisfactions or settle grievances. As we have all seen, peace is good for all of us, and violence is bad for all of us.

In rebuilding our society, we must not confuse the freedom which we now enjoy with lawlessness, which we must avoid. Being free is not an excuse to be lawless, because freedom is protected by the law. This is why no society can be free and, at the same time, be lawless. And so, from expressing disagreements to making claims, and from advocating for an issue to drawing attention to a cause, when we become lawless, we actually take away freedoms and deny rights.

We have said repeatedly, and say again today, that this government will continue to protect the rights of citizens to demonstrate and protest. Peaceful demonstrations and protests are forms of free expression which we have vowed to uphold. What we cannot accept, and cannot permit, is to resort to means which threaten our collective peace, to express a disagreement.

Where you are aware of the rules to resolve an issue, and you ignore them, you will be held fully responsible, and be made to answer to the law for the consequences of your unlawful action. This is not without exception. In free and democratic societies, claiming a privilege or advocating a position is not a writ to violate the rights of others, or to be lawless.

We cannot be a peaceful society and, at the same time, be a lawless society. We cannot be a democratic society and, at the same time, use violence to solve problems. And we cannot be a society in which we demand privileges, and yet violate the fundamental rights of others. The

fundamental duty of any democratic government is to protect the rights of all of its citizens. Government exists to protect us from each other. And we will do just that!

So, if anybody has something to say, we are always willing to listen. If any citizen feels bad about something, we are always willing to work with you to find a solution. But make no mistake: we will not allow anyone or group to violate the law or undermine our peace without consequences. It is really that simple.

A second issue which is not so simple is the issuance of a gag order on an ongoing court proceeding. Prosecuting lawyers sought and obtained the order from the court to minimize what appears to be attempts to provoke a trial in newspapers and on the radios rather than in the courts. We have been made to understand that were we to continue to do this, not only do we risk undermining the ongoing court trial, but also such public discussions as have been cited, locally as well as internationally, as a basis for accused persons to not benefit from a free and fair trial. The possibility, or lack thereof, of accused persons benefitting from free and fair trials is an important condition for extradition.

Recently, also, national security information about the Roberts International Airport was grossly distorted and leaked to the press, ostensibly to influence political discontent in the country and distract from the actual criminal charges and allegations of the violation of the public trust which are the subjects of the indictments. To counter this wicked ploy, the government revealed what really amounts to national security information about ongoing procedures and practices at the International Airport.

We understand what the lawyers are trying to achieve, and appreciate their efforts to bring all accused persons to properly answer the indictments in the courts of competent jurisdictions. However, this is not just the duty of the lawyers. It is a shared duty of all Liberians to act in ways that will enable our courts to remain the proper venues for the conduct of free and fair trials of all accused persons. We expect that we will continue to do so.

However, we also understand the tangential impact of gag orders on free society. Moreover, this leadership has done nothing for which it is ashamed. It has absolutely nothing to hide. We have only been the victims of a warped and criminal mind who, to divert attention from her crime, has rendered evil for good. Therefore, well-intentioned as it is, I am concerned that the timing of this gag order would have offered a contrary impression and risk posing serious questions to our continued commitment to the exercise of free speech in the country.

Accordingly, the Justice Ministry has concluded the necessary proceedings with the relevant courts to lift the order. Moreover, I have directed that efforts be multiplied to bring all of the accused persons to trial. And in that light, government responses, whenever necessary, will be measured to avoid undermining the administration of justice in our country, and of equal importance, if not more important, the security of the State.

Finally, my Fellow Citizens, I want to close by urging everyone to reject the idea that every time a law is broken, government or society is guilty rather than the lawbreaker. It is time to reject the notion that it is the government and the administration which is always wrong. It is time to appreciate the limits of tolerance. It is time to restore the universal precept that each individual is accountable for his actions. We cannot allow our fragile peace to slip from our grasp. This requires all Liberians to change their attitude for the good of the nation.

May God protect our Republic and strengthen our democracy.