

**Transcript of Interview with H.E. President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf**  
**“Liberia: The Road to Peace & Prosperity”**  
**Moderated by Axel Threlfall, Lead Anchor of Thomson Reuters Television**  
**Held at the Ronald Reagan Building, Washington, D.C.**  
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Mr. Threlfall: Ladies and Gentlemen, it’s a great pleasure for me to be hosting this Newsmaker conversation with the President this afternoon. It seems that the Liberia story is getting more and more newsworthy by the minute, so we couldn’t have asked for a better time to host this event. I went into the “green room” just about a half hour ago to meet with the President ahead of this. She said to me, “Let’s have some fun.” So, let’s try and have some fun today. There’s plenty to talk about. It is not hard to identify the many positives in this story, some of which the Ambassador [Linda Thomas-Greenfield, former U.S. Ambassador to Liberia (2008-2012) and currently Director General of the Foreign Service and Director of Human Resources] has already touched upon: growth of 8.3% last year; on track for 7½% this year; the country continues its ascent in Transparency’s Corruption Perception Index, as well as the IFC’s doing Business rankings. There’s been talk of plans to introduce Treasury Bills, followed eventually by bonds or a stock market. The President has been applauded for her efforts to battle corruption in her administration, and has placed a premium, in her words, on the criteria of competence, integrity, commitment and loyalty. Now, of course much of the Liberia story comes back to land, as Brian [Peccarelli, President of Tax & Accounting at Thomson Reuters] mentioned, around tenure, effective land administration seen by many as the single most explosive issue in the country. Great strides are being made in the area – it was an area that the President, in her Annual Message to the National Legislature in January, called attention to.

But there are some more worrying angles to the story that we must also address today. How will the commodities slump, or wobble, hit economic development? Is the continent too resource reliant? What of the recent, some might say embarrassing, results of the government ordered audit? How detrimental will that be to Liberia’s image as an increasingly favorable investment destination? What of the education system, which the President has highlighted as needing an overhaul. And then, there’s now this story of threats being made against the local media, prompting a blackout on coverage of the President. So, a very, very busy agenda, this afternoon. We are being broadcast live across all the Reuters platforms. The President and I will talk for 35-40 minutes, and I do plan to open it up to Q&A after that. Madam President, many thanks for being here today.

President Sirleaf: Thank you, I’m glad to be here.

Mr. Threlfall: It’s with your profile that I’d like to start. How important a part has your strong, visible international profile played in what you have achieved so far?

President Sirleaf: A very important part, because I've been able to build those partnerships bilaterally, multilaterally; I've been able to get the kind of technical help that we needed. And all of that has transformed into support for our own development agenda. It also has helped us to promote the peace, realizing that there are international friends out there, and entities out there, that have interest and support for our country; that has also emboldened and re-energized our own people to know that Liberia has come back into the mainstream and that today the international community recognizes the resilience that they have demonstrated over the many years of difficulties and deprivation; and, today, being accepted and being recognized for the effort to make progress. It has just been such a great synergetic relationship between that international support and the Liberian people's own resilience as they strive to get back on track.

Mr. Threlfall: Some might say there's a discrepancy between this strong international profile and the perception on the ground at home. Would you agree with that, and how will you close that gap?

President Sirleaf: There's no discrepancy as such; we have a very active civil society, political system concentrated in the capital city. But as you go out into the countryside, there's such great appreciation for everything that I have done, but I have a great team – so many people that have helped me, on the local front, to achieve those objectives. And when I get into the countryside, it's all there. I'll grant you that the circumstances in which I find myself – first democratically elected President on the African continent – puts a great demand on my time, internationally, and I must respond to this. I also must demonstrate leadership. And so that takes me away from the home front more than I would want to.

Mr. Threlfall: Too much?

President Sirleaf: I like quality time, and so when I'm there I get the most of it. I'm always on the go, not only in the office but in the countryside. When I'm away, I get results – results that get transformed into doing more things at home, and I think there's a lot of appreciation for that. Don't misjudge the Liberian situation; I think they know what we do, and that what we do is for them.

Mr. Threlfall: You have pledged double digit growth in your second term, as well as a dramatic improvement in the unemployment rates. Will we see that double digit growth?

President Sirleaf: You definitely will. We were headed in that direction until the global recession of 2008/2009, and we're now recovering again. The direct foreign investment which we mobilized, some US\$16 billion of it, is just beginning to show results. The operations that come from those investments are just beginning to start. And that's when you really get the growth. We've averaged 6.5% over the past four years, despite the slump that I mentioned. And we have every reason to believe that we can hit double digit in the next couple of years when those operations begin to lead to exports, and begin to lead to jobs and begin to lead to increased per capita income.

Mr. Threlfall: You say this in spite of the slump we've seen in commodity prices. How worried are you by that?

President Sirleaf: We benefitted a lot from increased commodity prices in the past few years when iron ore and oil palm and rubber prices were high. But we also know that if there's depression in commodity prices, there could be a reversal. Our response to that is diversification, and that's why we're moving beyond the mineral resources to agriculture resources, to fisheries resources, to forestry resources, so that commodity prices will not face a slump in all of these areas. With that diversification taking place, we believe that we can manage. We also know that there may be rising commodity prices on our imports, our main staples, like rice. But to do that, we're supporting small-farmers agriculture so that we aim at food security in our basic areas. We're working on all of those measures, and our responses are well in place.

Mr. Threlfall: You're not worried about resource reliance, that diversification is enough to quell that concern?

President Sirleaf: That diversification is going to work and we will make sure that we've put in place those measures that will ensure that if there's a slump in one area, we'll be able to make compensation in others.

Mr. Threlfall: Let's step back and talk about the big "Africa Rising" context. Everyone is talking about it. Do you think this surge can consolidate sustainable development and significantly reduce poverty in Africa? Does the reality match the hype, in your view?

President Sirleaf: I feel convinced of that. People tend to forget that Africa has been through a period of reform for two decades, making sure that they get their financial and economic house in order, making sure that democracy takes root, and now we're beginning to see the results of that. So today, Africa as a region is growing at a rate that equal to – I think it's the third fastest growing region – well over 5%, and it comes on the basis of those reforms that are taking root. It comes from Africa mobilizing investment. Some US\$2.7 trillion is estimated for GDP, which by the year 2050 will rise to US\$27 trillion. You're talking some significant increases, and it's based upon a solid foundation. It's based upon two decades of hard work, to be able to mobilize the investment, to improve the investment climate, to build the capacity, to put the systems in place. All of those things are today coming together for Africa, and that's why Africa today remains one of the more attractive investment regions.

Mr. Threlfall: What would you say, Madam President, of the weaknesses of this Africa Rising?

President Sirleaf: Infrastructure and value addition, and that's where we're concentrating on now. We're still exporting primary commodities, and we've got to get away from that. And to do it, we've got to have sufficient power, sufficient roads, telecommunications systems that are starting now. And once we reach the place where we have enough of those, we're going to insist that we get manufacturing. There

are some countries that have done that; don't forget, we've got South Africa, a major economy that's equal to any in Europe or anywhere else. Nigeria and others are fast in there – Kenya, Ghana. So many have already made that transformation; it's for the rest of us smaller ones to catch up, and also to improve our own intra-Africa trade – the trade among ourselves. Infrastructure will enable us to expand into regional projects, to use comparative advantages. Those are what we're concentrating on now, and Africa is very, very determined that we're going to go that extra step and we're going to move up the ladder to be as competitive as countries in other regions.

Mr. Threlfall: What are you doing, on trips like this, to convince institutional investors, who are already interested in Africa, to become more interested in Liberia? What can you do to convince them that it is a secure and a sustainable place to invest?

President Sirleaf: I'll first start off, in the Liberian context, to say that in about three months we'll be able to celebrate our tenth consecutive year of peace. That's a big plus for us, and we've remained stable by attracting the investment on the order that I've mentioned, which says that the potential is there. We do have the natural resources. We have challenges, challenges such as infrastructure – which I've mentioned – capacity challenges, unemployment challenges. But those challenges can be turned into opportunities, and based upon our natural resources, based upon our commitment to move ahead, based upon all that we've done in the past eight years to build that solid foundation, to stabilize the situation, to settle a US\$4.9 billion external debt, not serviced for 30 years, that's just about gone. Rebuilding our relationships. I think the fact that today, as we enter into oil exploration, where we made a concerted effort to bring in the big players to show that Liberia has the potential, that's how we were able to get Chevron to come in, and, more recently, ExxonMobil to come in. They know the potential, and I think others see it, and we hope that as we move into that program, it'll provide the basis for us to be able, not only to sustain but to accelerate our growth.

Mr. Threlfall: With a journalist's hat on, of course, this allows me to segue into the government ordered audit. We've seen some initial results to that audit which do not look particularly favorable. How much of a step back for you is that? Have you lost momentum as a result of what we've found out?

President Sirleaf: Let me put that audit in context. Liberia, in 2008, joined the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative. We added what was not required – the forestry sector. And since then, Liberia became one of the first African countries to become compliant. The record on that is there. We have had, by Moore Stephens, three financial audits that have demonstrated consistency in reporting revenues raised through those industries. This particular audit to which you refer is a process audit, not a financial audit, to determine whether there was compliance with the rules, with laws and what not.

Mr. Threlfall: Which there was not.

President Sirleaf: Which there was not. We commissioned the audit. We wanted to know what went wrong because we want to set it right. That's exactly what we've done. Now we, ourselves, were

reluctant in responding to the questions raised by the auditors, and that's our mistake, our error; but we have done that now. In the forestry sector, where 38 of the 68 were found non-compliant, the audit is behind the action because we've already suspended all forestry operations because of our own discovery of non-compliance to our laws. We suspended them and took a big budget hit, a big revenue loss, because of that. The government is doing what it can, but there are problems. I will tell you that the process audit shows a certain procurement process was not followed, certain instruments and documents that should have been on the file, certain approvals that should have been given, maybe given but not properly documented. All of those are things that we need to know and we need to correct.

Mr. Threlfall: Has there been a loss of momentum for you as a result of that?

President Sirleaf: Not really. We've had people ask questions, and they should; we've had a lot of coverage of it in our local papers, and they should. But we also know that we want to know what went wrong, and we want to correct it, and I think people appreciate that. If we didn't want to correct it, we would never have commissioned that audit. So give us credit for that.

Mr. Threlfall: But I've got to ask it. The world is awaiting a response, or at least something from the government. Will you have to cancel or revise any of the contracts as a result of that?

President Sirleaf: The response has been given. A full report to the issues raised by that audit has been prepared, and has been sent. Don't forget that the LEITI is a group, a local entity comprising civil society representatives, government representatives. They both sit on the Board. The Board commissioned the audit; the response has gone to them; they are now going to set the stage for being able to start the corrections. As I said to you, we have already suspended all forestry operations; not so much on the results of that audit, but because we found out before that there was non-compliance with our rules. I'll tell you what it is: We have what they call forest management contracts (FMCs) where we give large forests to entities; and we have what we call private use permits (PUPs). Those private use permits allow people who have forestry on their lands to be able to harvest the forest without paying government revenue and land fees. Well, some of the larger companies, because they could bypass and not pay those fees, they have proper contracts but they went by the backdoor and began to work with private owners and communities to harvest forests, thereby escaping taxes – tax avoidance, maybe even tax evasion. But as soon as we found that out, we immediately suspended all operations, completely, until we set it right.

Mr. Threlfall: You talk about capacity constraints. How long will it take to really begin to start tackling these constraints?

President Sirleaf: We have begun to tackle them. How long will it take to have a critical mass of expertise to ensure that there will be full compliance – because sometimes non-compliance is simply lack of knowledge, lack of ability to understand the rules? Learning and education is not a quick fix; it's a long

process. The process has started; we're trying to get some of our people repatriated – those that already have the skills to infuse them with incentives into the system; incentives are a big problem. How long will it take? Maybe ten years to get to the level of competence and integrity that we would want to see. But we're working on it. It's gradual, it's progressive, it can be accelerated, and we're trying to find the measures to get that acceleration.

Mr. Threlfall: Clearly, a big part of the context is land, as I mentioned at the start. It was mentioned by you in your Address in January, it's clearly a priority. The Land Commission, of course, was formed in 2009; a lot has been done. What can we expect to see from the government over the next 2-3 years in this area?

President Sirleaf: You know, your Vice President named it all when he introduced the whole land area; he said it. We are very proud that we are correcting a historical land tenure system that did not give the equity and the ownership to those who occupy the land. That's why we formed a Land Commission. That's why they've been working on a Land Policy that has been concluded. That's why it now recognizes that people who live on the land should own the land; that communities who are on that land should be participants in any decision and any process in which that land is put to use, particularly by foreigners; that it should have a title. That Land Policy is today being validated by consultations throughout the country. With that validation, that Policy will be turned into law, and you will find the registration of title now – we're moving from a system of what was called tribal certificates, huge land rights – all of those are being reformed and we're very glad that the U.S., the World Bank have all been partners with us in getting this reform. It's the first time that the land issue in Liberia will settle and will recognize community rights, public rights, private rights, government rights – those four categories – and they will be well documented.

Mr. Threlfall: Are you content with the pace of the progress? Are you content that the people on the ground will be the beneficiaries of these changes and Policy?

President Sirleaf: I'm very content that the people on the ground will embrace this as the first time that the land issue in Liberia will be fixed. I'm very convinced of that. There are going to be trade-offs because it means, for example, some large concessionaires that have been granted large tracts of land beyond their ability to put it to proper use, will be called upon to relinquish the land. Private landowners holding large segments of urban land, historically, will be asked to give up some land in the interest of equity. Those who have been living on land, illegally, that belongs to somebody else, will be asked to vacate those lands so they go to the proper owners. That's all part of the reform process. Can it move at a faster pace? I don't think so; I think it is moving at a pace consistent with our capacity, consistent with our own desire to make sure that this reform is understood, is appreciated, is accepted by all. We're almost there; we're on the right track, and we're going to stay there.

Mr. Threlfall: You've just made a very good statement; you said that it's going to be fixed?

President Sirleaf: It's not fully fixed yet; we're in the process of fixing it, because it will not be fully fixed until you've got the law. When you get the law, that makes it enforceable – not just a policy but a law – then that's when I think we will have reached the fixing point.

Mr. Threlfall: I also mentioned education and the education system in my introduction. You have clearly played a large part in this area; you've made your views well known in this area. What can we expect from the government on education, again against this backdrop of constraints and capacity?

President Sirleaf: We've got to reform the entire education system. When we came in, we emphasized enrollment, because so many of the kids were out of school. We emphasized facilities, because there were no school buildings. Our enrollment increased fourfold, and we placed emphasis on girls because they had been neglected over the years. What we found was that the quality of education was not improved upon because we did not look at the teacher situation, the quality of teachers, the qualifications of teachers. We didn't look at the facilities that go with quality education, like laboratories, and so we didn't have that full, comprehensive approach. We concentrated on enrollment – get the kids in school; give them the uniform; give them a school lunch. We worked on facilities, but we left out a lot of things. Now we have to backtrack. We had an Education Roundtable and brought all of the educators together. They are now identifying the steps that we need to take to correct it. I haven't got the report yet, because that meeting took place just before I travelled. But when I get back, I've asked them to give me a report that shows me immediate action that needs to be taken, action that takes a little bit longer, and the long-term solution. We are now going to step back and start the process all over again, and including in that, also, is vocational and technical education because youth unemployment is a big challenge for us – those who have not had schooling and don't have a skill – and how we'll build that into the system and give it some priority to address that specific challenge.

Mr. Threlfall: If you were to look to other African nations, neighbors, as a way in which they have improved the education system, who would you point to?

President Sirleaf: Ghana, perhaps. I think Ghana has done a good job in our West African and English-speaking systems. I think so.

Mr. Threlfall: I want to get back to land, and this is a question I meant to ask before. As you take your leadership role in the development of the post-2015 MDGs, is it time to consider including a global indicator on land governance and rights and land? Is this something you can imagine happening over the next ten years?

President Sirleaf: First of all, I am part of a group that makes recommendations; the people that make the decisions are the Member States and the Secretary-General who appointed us.

Mr. Threlfall: Would you make that recommendation?

President Sirleaf: You will see, I believe, an indicator on the proper use of natural resources, so that it will go beyond land, to be able to talk about the forests, the ecosystems, because the indicators under the global agenda have got to be sufficiently broad to enable countries to then have a take-off from those and have the country specificity to meet their own situation and their own circumstances. There's definitely going to be an indicator, but whether it is land specifically, is something I'm not certain of.

Mr. Threlfall: Would you personally like to see that?

President Sirleaf: I would see it in the Liberian indicators, because for us it's important because we know the land problem.

Mr. Threlfall: What are some of the Liberian indicators?

President Sirleaf: We haven't gotten the global agenda yet. It's part of our national development agenda indicator; that's why we have the reform ongoing. The post-2015 global agenda will certainly continue, under the Liberian development indicators.

Mr. Threlfall: As we head towards the G8, transparency is clearly one of the big issues on the agenda this time round, and it's been an issue on the G8 agenda for some time. What role are you playing in the discussions leading up to the G8?

President Sirleaf: We're going to be looking at their agenda; I think they're going to have poverty figure prominently on that agenda; they are going to have things like environmental sustainability, to be able to determine how we respond to the effects of climate change. We are facing all of those domestically because climate change is real – our own forests, green growth, are the things that are being looked at. We will be looking at their agenda within the context of our own experience and our own requirements. Now what will come out of the G8, and how they will affect how we implement our own agenda, is something that we'll just have to wait and see.

Mr. Threlfall: Prime Minister [David] Cameron yesterday, I believe, called for the G8 to work on this effort at the June gathering. When talking about transparency, he pointed a finger at Liberia, among other countries. Is it frustrating to hear comments like those comments from Prime Minister Cameron?

President Sirleaf: Not at all; I don't know the context in which he said it, but if he was saying that Liberia needs to continue on its transparency track, then I would endorse it completely.

Mr. Threlfall: "We need to make sure that mineral wealth in developing countries becomes the blessing and not a curse," was the quote we heard from Mr. Cameron yesterday.

President Sirleaf: I fully agree with that, and that's what we've been trying to say; that's why we joined the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative to make sure that we have transparency, to make sure

that we have accountability. This is why we continue to be on track with the EITI – our LEITI – because we subscribe to that; we took that initiative, it was nothing imposed on us. It's because we know that we had to do that, to meet today's standards and to meet the requirements of our own people. Our own people demand transparency and accountability. Look at the vibrancy of our civil society and our media; they are watchdogs for us. What we're doing is responding to our own requirements, our own needs.

Mr. Threlfall: I'm going to open it up to the floor in just a second, time is going as quickly as we suspected. I have to ask you about the media. It would be remiss of me not to ask you about the media. I think most of us in here will know the context of the comments made recently about the media in Liberia. There's clearly confusion about the government's position on this in Liberia. You haven't said anything about it yet. Can you say anything now that might clear up the confusion?

President Sirleaf: There is absolutely no confusion. My record, unchangeable, is one of media and press freedom. It is evidenced by the fact that for the first time in the history of our country, we did the Freedom of Information Act; first time the Table Mountain Declaration, we subscribed to it. It's evidenced by the multiplicity of newspapers and radio stations – private radio stations – in our country. It's evidenced by the talk shows on those radio stations and in the media, in which the government is taken to task all the time for one thing or the other. And there's no reaction. There's definitely nothing repressive about the press. So the evidence on that is clear; the government's position and policy is clear. Anything else is completely out of context.

Mr. Threlfall: It seems that the relationship between the media and the government is faltering right now, and clearly that is not in your interest.

President Sirleaf: We go through these spats like you do, in your home and in your church and in your office. You have these differences, you have these spats, and then you make up. We'll make up.

Mr. Threlfall: I must say that your comment, "we welcome the benign neglect," stood out. I'm not neglecting you, though.

President Sirleaf: Sometimes somebody says something, and you say, O Lord...

Mr. Threlfall: This is something you will have to address when you go home, surely?

President Sirleaf: My position is exactly what I've just said, and the media knows it. The media knows that there is absolutely nothing that we will do that will take away from our commitment to press freedom.

## QUESTION-&-ANSWER PERIOD

Mr. Threlfall: Let me open it up to the floor, questions from anyone in the room. We've got a couple of roving mikes. If you would state your name, where you're from, and make it a quick question and no statements, please.

Question (Banyon Global): Your administration has placed a pretty strong emphasis on women's empowerment, so I was wondering, with this the land reform process, are you integrating gender equality considerations into the process to make sure that women can have access to and ownership over land?

President Sirleaf: Women will have the full rights to own their land, like anyone else. It will be women who have inherited land; it will be women who have bought land, private land; and they will get the same rights like everybody else. As a matter of fact, I think you will see that women will come out ahead of this because no longer will it be a question of whether they have to have it jointly with the husband. Women have full rights to land and to everything else. If we can even give them a little extra, we'll do that too.

Question (Radio Liberia): My question to you is, with the clear gap between the Liberians that are making it in the country and Liberians that barely have enough to eat, with all of the advantages that you talk about for vocational education and infrastructure, is there anything being done by the administration to make sure that the Liberians who aren't as connected have opportunities in growth, in jobs, etc.?

President Sirleaf: The investment we're trying to get is exactly to be able to create jobs. Giving skills to them is to enable them to take advantage of those jobs. Providing basic services to them, like the restoration of lights and water and roads, is exactly to make it easier for them. It is, again, something that is a process. There's no way that every Liberian, all of a sudden, will be wealthy, will be materially well off. It takes time to do that. But I daresay that the poverty level has fallen; the record is clear on that. We can do more; we will do more to be able to respond to those needs, through a combination of all of these efforts. We only say that all Liberians must see the opportunity for what it is, and take advantage of it. Take advantage of going to school, getting your skills, getting your job, making your contribution. That's all, and if we all do it collectively, I think we will get there.

Question (Global Witness): You mentioned land rights and natural resources. We estimate that around 20% of Liberia is covered by large-scale natural resource concessions, and the Land Policy right now does not explicitly discuss land rights within natural resource concessions and the tens of thousands of people who live on them. We were wondering if, when you mentioned the potential revision of some of these concessions, to incorporate land rights, and that land rights negotiations will take into account the people who live there.

President Sirleaf: No doubt about it. Once we say that the community has rights to what's on their land, even if we decide to negotiate concessions – because they don't have the resources to put the land to use that, in effect, will benefit them with housing, jobs and social benefits – but they will be full participants. As a matter of fact, the two major concessions that we've already given, which we feel did not have sufficient community participation, we have stopped. And today that consultation is ongoing with those communities to make sure that they agree that what land is being used and to know exactly what benefits they will get from those concessions. And in those cases where the acreage of the land far exceeds the company's ability to develop it in the way we want, I've said there would be a requirement to relinquish some of that land. And we're making sure, again, that whatever we do, there will be enough land left for people to do their farming to feed themselves; their ancestral land will not be violated; their sacred sites will not be violated; their clean water sources will not be polluted. Those discussions are ongoing right now. Thank you, Global Witness, for bringing some of that to our attention. Now please record the progress!

Question (World Bank): You mentioned that Liberia will be enjoying its tenth consecutive year of peace, and inevitably there will be a drawdown of the United Nations contingent in Liberia, UNMIL. Can you tell us a little bit about how the government prepares the systems for the drawdown and withdrawal?

President Sirleaf: We have a transition plan with the United Nations for the drawdown. The drawdown has already started. We have created security hubs around the country to have the ease of intervention, and have ease to justice, because these hubs are going to have all the security, including the courthouse, situated in regions across the country. Our own security forces are being trained; many of them are being trained in-country, some are being trained in many of our neighboring countries. The process of preparing ourselves is ongoing. We still need to work hard if we're going to meet that target deadline of 2015 for them to exit. But we're very pleased that together we work on this, and we've agreed on flexibility to ensure that we are ready to take on the prime responsibility. The plan is on course, and our own forces are getting ready, with more training. We're just, at this stage, confident, but know that we'll be ready. And if things change, that they will be there with us. As a matter of fact, they've already reconfirmed that a residual force will still be left, right through another five years or so. That gives us extra confidence.

Question (Books for Africa): Liberia has become part of the Extractive Industries Initiative, and I'm very interested in education. In order to spur your economy and make the country sustainable, you will have to have a higher education system that produces the skills. What percentage of your extractive industries will really go to education? Besides, I'm aware of the community initiative that you have, which Books for Africa has also been supporting. I would like to know, is there an initiative to really have an extension of higher education that produces the skills for your country?

President Sirleaf: I really don't know what percentage of our total allocation goes to higher education. I'll have to find that out. But I do know that we're trying to strengthen the higher education institutions. Today, as you quite mentioned, aside from the government's own national university, we have another

five church-supported, private universities which the government also subsidizes through the budgetary system, and we have these community colleges – six of them have started already. We're committed to more of them. But now we're also finding some constraints. The constraints would be whether we have enough qualified teachers to give quality education at those highest levels. It's the same problem I've mentioned about quality education throughout the system. So, we've even put a brake on the community colleges until we can get enough professors, until we can get enough good facilities into those places, so you're not just producing graduates who cannot compete and don't have the full qualifications to become full professionals. So we have to find a balance in the expansion and making sure that we get the quality that we want.

Question (The Bridges Institute): Thank you, Madam President, for being such a good model as a Head of State that answers questions with both competence and candor. A couple of weeks ago, there was the U.S.-Liberia Dialogue, and there were two discussion points that I thought were particularly important: one on energy and power – both in terms of access and price; and the other on agriculture – the role of youth, of women and of small farmers. I'm wondering if you can tell us a little bit more about what you anticipate in those two areas, particularly in terms of competency that you were talking about earlier, and also transparency, because those are going to be two such huge areas of activity.

President Sirleaf: First of all, those two areas are some of our primary areas of focus, going forward in the next two years. Energy, because we are determined that that is the major constraint to sustainable growth. Whether we're dealing with the security sector and the fact that having electricity in communities gives people security; whether you're dealing with the education system, we can't introduce new levels of technology into schools, like computers, unless you've got reliable power. If you're dealing with health services, we have modern equipment that's going into our hospitals, but without reliable power you find that they cannot last and you have to keep replacing them. Whatever we do in the area of economic growth and our growth targets, unless we can add value to our raw materials, unless we can move to manufacturing or processing, we're not going to create those jobs. For us, it is very clear. The transparency part of it is to make sure that whatever arrangement we make for power, is subjected to our procurement laws, is subjected to full information to the public. In the area of agriculture, the small farmers for food security. Even though we have a large concessionaire export agriculture sector, which we're promoting with diversification, so we move away from our traditional rubber and go back to areas like oil palm, coffee and cocoa, where we had long years of production in those areas – that's the diversification we want. But we're not forgetting, and we're putting emphasis on small farmers' food security through the production of our local staples such as rice and cassava and other things. Those two areas, which were the basis of the Dialogue, just fit so well within our own determined development agenda priorities.

Question: Can you address government's continued effort in addressing Public Enemy No. 1, which is corruption, and government's position on the issue of dual citizenship for Liberians?

President Sirleaf: I always say that one must always put things in the context of what we inherited: two decades of deprivation, where people lived by their wits; they survived on whatever way they could to be able to live, to be able to feed themselves. We're coming into a situation like that, and trying to change it. The first thing we need to do is to come up with a strong system of prevention, because that's the most sustainable way to fight corruption. And that means you do something about compensation, to reduce people's vulnerabilities; you do something about institutions, and that's why the General Auditing Commission, the Liberia Anti-Corruption Commission, the Whistleblower's Act – all of those that we put into place to build those institutions. You do something about systems. There was no automation in the country; everything was by discretion and by hand, in books that can be changed, and all of that. We're introducing systems, whether you're dealing with the IFMIS, the ASYCUDA customs system, we've tried to put them in. You've got to deal with capacity. Many people manning our public services do not understand the new laws. We put in all these new laws, most times with someone else's standards. Our Procurement Law, very rigid procurement law, realizing the limitations of a post-conflict country with very limited capacity in the public service. On the prevention side, we think we've done everything. We're now working on the punishment side. The punishment side is where you've got all of these audits that we have – how you take people to court. Our court system is modeled after the American system that says "Everyone is presumed innocent until proven guilty in a court of law."

Mr. Threlfall: Are you winning the fight on corruption?

President Sirleaf: We are winning the fight on corruption, and if you see a lot of talk about it, if you see a lot of exposure today, that to me is an indicator of success. It's no longer hidden, it's no longer under the carpet, it's talked about openly, on the radio, in the newspaper, and the courts are now beginning to function. We're winning the fight, and that's why the talk because we're winning the fight!

Mr. Threlfall: Let's get a quick status to the question on the dual citizenship bill.

President Sirleaf: First, the administration has been very clear that we promote dual citizenship; we want to get our repatriates who are here in the Diaspora. They do a great job on the remittances – sometimes much more than our own revenue – but we want to move them one step further so that they get that dual citizenship, so they can go beyond remittances to start making some serious investments. We're working on the Legislature to see if we can pass that bill.

Question: I represent a company that manufactures goods that I would like to take to Liberia, but I've been getting problems here and there. So I decided to come to this meeting for your help.

President Sirleaf: What's the problem?

Questioner: Public Works in Liberia is giving me loopholes. I've been in this country most of my life, and I don't know which way to turn.

President Sirleaf: I've got some people in this audience that you can talk to; give him the details and see if he can provide you some assistance.

Question (Marylanders for Progress in Liberia): We just conducted a workshop at Tubman University, in Harper, training market women from Maryland and River Gee Counties in the use solar cookers. It was very successful. My question is that Tubman University is trying to work towards renewable energy – solar – to have the whole campus with solar energy, and we're having difficulties showing the proposal to people over here to support us. Everybody we go to say that the government has funding for renewable energy. How can you help us to help Tubman University, so that it will be the first area in Liberia to have solar energy?

President Sirleaf: Now you want me to help you from that side or from this side?

(Marylanders for Progress in Liberia): From both sides.

President Sirleaf: Why don't I take my side; which means that whatever budgetary appropriation we have for renewables, we'll put our share in, and then you take it from your side to mobilize your people here. Fair?

Question (Reuters): You've seen reports about the increase in Islamists in your region of West Africa; we see that in Nigeria as well. I was wondering, from a broader point of view, whether you think that the Africa Force in Mali right now would be able to deal with Islamist forces, when and if the French withdraw. Also, what kind of concrete decisions do you expect from the African Union at the Summit coming up, which Secretary [John] Kerry is going to be a part of?

President Sirleaf: The ECOWAS position on Mali is quite clear; that there's going to be an intervention force, which is already there from most countries; that they will continue the process of political accommodation to get all of the Malian parties together for reconciliation, and that's already ongoing. The African Union supports the position of ECOWAS, and we believe that the containment that has taken place, with the support of the French through their immediate quick and welcomed action, that it will be consolidated under the African forces, namely, ECOWAS forces and some East African forces too; that that effort will continue, and the process toward a return to democracy is ongoing and will take place and will be intensified. Is there an Islamic threat? Maybe, but I think we have taken all of the measures necessary to put Mali back on course.

As for the Summit, my long years of political work tell me that you don't anticipate anything from those meetings; you go and... (laughter).

Mr. Threlfall: And on that note I'm going to wrap it up. My apologies. You can no doubt continue some of these conversations afterwards; the President is now going to have a discussion on our global chat room, the Global Forum at Reuters. We've covered a lot of ground. I do have to stop now, because we

are running this as a live broadcast. My apologies that I have to stop, but as I said we have covered a lot of ground; I know there are people out there who will say there are areas we should have covered but we have not. No doubt discussions will continue. I want to thank the President for her candor, and I think, also, Madam President, that we had a little bit of fun.

President Sirleaf: I think we did, Axel. Let me say, because of Maryland and Tubman University, that it is a great university; Elizabeth Davis is doing a great job there, and I'll talk to you afterwards about it. Thank you, Axel; you've been a great host.

Mr. Threlfall: Thank you so much.

President Sirleaf: It's been fun.

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