

KEYNOTE Address

Delivered By

Honorable Chief Dr. Jewel Howard-Taylor

Vice President of the Republic of Liberia

at Program Marking

WORLD RIGHT TO KNOW DAY

Under the Auspices of the

Independent Information Commission (IIC)

Bella Casa Hotel

Monrovia, Liberia

September 28, 2018

Excellencies;

Officials of Government Present;

Members of the Diplomatic Corps and Friends of Liberia;

Chief of Party Pewee Flomoku and The Carter Center Family;

Commissioner Mark Bedor-Wla Freeman and the Independent Information Commission Family;

Representatives of Inter-news;

Representatives of the Press Union of Liberia, and members of the 4th Estate;

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen:

Good morning. Permit me to firstly express my gratitude to the Carter Center Family for this invitation, which affords me the opportunity to be here this morning. I am grateful to God, for granting us the privilege of a brand new day in an environment of peace.

I bring you special greetings from our President, His Excellency President Dr. George Manneh Weah; who sends his regards and asked me to extend to you a Happy ***World Right to Know Day***. Being aware of the international and local interest in the tenets of good governance, open government and the need for citizen-state collaboration built on trust; the commitment from our Government remains that we "***will uphold these tenets for the growth and development of our beloved nation.***"

This is at the core of sustainable development, and in this context Access to Information (ATI) plays a critical role. Citizens' ready access to government information—through information requests or proactive disclosure by government—is a key dimension of open government and a necessary condition for meaningful citizen participation.

When citizens have access to information they can, for example, learn about and demand their entitlements under certain government programs: By finding out how public resources are allocated and used, such as the availability of medicines in local health centers, or the availability of programs which support gender equality; or direct support to programs which actually reduce maternal mortality; or support to victims of domestic and sexual violence. By the provision of public information, citizens can assess Government's programs; follow up to ascertain whether funds provided are utilized for the purpose and provide concrete feedback for better services.

For the past 12 years, on September 28, the world has celebrated the International Right to Know Day, during which practitioners have highlighted the importance of access to information both as a transformative tool toward development and a human right. As has been done in the past years, the world and all partners join to commemorate this day in various countries.

Excellencies; Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen; indeed we live in different times but thankfully the dictates of our organic law, the Constitution, guarantees access to information as a right.

In Article 15 (c) it is clearly stipulated that, **"In pursuance of this right, there shall be no limitation on the public right to be informed about the government and its functionaries."** And so, your theme for today's discussion, **"Access to Information: An Indispensable Tool in Promoting Good Governance and Development"**, could not have been more appropriate.

From the gathering of freedom of information activists and advocates in Sofia, Bulgaria, over a decade and half ago, the world has sustained the celebration of this day in hopes of raising awareness and highlighting the value of people's right to access to information and benefits there from derived both by the people and government.

And so on the occasion of this 16th year of commemoration of this day, please accept my sincere congratulations; for as a Senator representing the great County of Bong; and Chairperson on Autonomous Agencies, I worked with other members of the Senate to ensure the passage and subsequent funding for the Independent Human Rights Commission.

If one looks back at our nation's history and the issues which arose during discussions for its Peace and Security, one may agree with me that the underlying linchpin was the quest to institute ***equity, accountability, responsibility and transparency*** in the governance process.

We are all grateful that today the issues of freedom of expression, access to information, open Budgeting and Civil Society responsibility to oversee the processes are vibrant and irreversible.

The proof of our commitment can be seen by this new Administration's thrust, headed by our President, Dr. George MannehWeah, who in no time after his ascension to the helm of leadership, submitted to the National Legislature a bill seeking the amendment of Chapter 11 of the Penal Law of 1978. This Bill requested the repeal of portions on criminal libel against the President, sedition and on criminal malevolence. In this bold and courageous step in the submission of this much debated issue, our President reiterated his Government's resolve to uphold commitments undertaken under duly signed and ratified international instruments.

Permit me to remind each of us gathered here, that with the proper laws in place, guaranteeing Freedom of Information is an attending responsibility of all actors in this space. The responsibility of Government is clear. As you, advocates and activists, pursue your roles in this process of keeping the proverbial "**government's feet to the fire**", you must equally take seriously your obligation on the one hand to instill responsibility and accountability in how information is accessed, interpreted and released in the public domain, and on the other hand to show the same level of accountability and responsibility in your organizations.

Please correct me if I am wrong, but in my more than 20 years of National Service, I have never received any audited report from the organizations in the civil society. It is commonly said that. - **TO WHOM MUCH IS GIVEN, MUCH MORE IS EXPECTED**. Our Civil Society Organizations must also be accountable and transparent in order for the system to work as it should; for they too receive funds from different sources to work in Liberia, on behalf of our people. So the funds received, on behalf of our people just as the Government does, must also be accounted for.

As I look back in our history, I am reminded of comments made by the then President of the Press Union Honorable Peter Quaqua in his Report of 2013 during the observance of World Press Freedom Day being celebrated that year when he noted that:

"The ownership of a growing number of media outlets presents a new kind of dilemma in journalists' quest for ethical standard and professionalism. This is an apparent reference to the situation wherein some of these media institutions are either owned or patronized by politicians and other people with commercial and vested interest."

Mr. Quaqua sounded this warning in order to bring to light a new phenomenon of a plethora of institutions sprouting up as, **"RENTED MEDIA,"** the owners of which were allegedly targeting others on purpose with little regard to the ethics of Journalism. This situation continued unabated during the 2017 elections, without much condemnation or correction by the national bodies responsible for same. This, I believe, is also a part of the responsibility of actors in this most treasured space.

It is my heartfelt prayer, as we use the serenity of this first celebration under this Government to summon your sense of patriotism; as you seek information and utilize it in your roles as watch dogs of society. I implore all of us to be deeply reflective of whence we have come, noting that we have indeed made some long strides but not without great sacrifices.

This occasion must bring our minds together in deep thought on how we are all responsible to keep our nation sailing smoothly on the tidal waves of our national challenges, for truly we as a people must agree that the better world we all seek is possible, but only in an environment of peaceful coexistence and not crisis and war. This was expressed by the sage, Dali Lama when he observed, and I quote:

"PEACE DOES NOT MEAN AN ABSENCE OF CONFLICTS AND MISUNDERSTANDINGS; DIFFERENCES WILL ALWAYS BE THERE. PEACE MEANS SOLVING THESE DIFFERENCES THROUGH DIALOGUE, EDUCATION, KNOWLEDGE, AND THROUGH HUMANE WAYS."

Excellencies, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen;

As the Government of the day, we give you the solid assurance of our recognition and reaffirmation of the fact of the vital, catalytic and indispensable role that access to information, free press, and free expression play--when used responsibly and objectively--in ensuring the best practices in our national governance processes.

Our reliance must always be on the body of laws, rules and procedures that guide the processes for access to information and our sublime urge to foster that always-needed climate of harmony, honesty, and mutual respect.

I am moved by the solemn aura of this celebratory event to restate a much vaunted phrase which, though now a cliché, is a truism—***Liberia is all we have, the only country we cannot be deported from.*** Yours is my passionate urge to meditate on this profoundly meaningful statement and always allow the facts to lead you to conclusions, and not the reverse.

In closing, let me again warmly congratulate you on this great day and, in the same breath, thank you immensely for all you do in service to our Common Patrimony.

May God continue to guide and bless us all.

Thank you.