

Speech

Delivered by

Her Excellency Ellen Johnson Sirleaf

President of the Republic of Liberia

At the

95th International Labour Conference

June 7, 2006

Geneva, Switzerland

I am honored but humbled by the invitation extended me to join you at the 95th Convening of the International Labor Organization. It is an honor equally bestowed on my country Liberia and on Africa in general.

This is a critical period for my country as it strives desperately to recover from the legacy of a civil war which decimated its institutions and undermined its socio-economic fabric.

As a woman, a mother and a worker, I represent the millions of women in Africa particularly post-conflict Africa whose strength and determination to influence national decisions is propelled by their blood, sweat and tears. The barbarity of civil conflict leaves in its trail human sufferings of immense proportions yet those of us who survive can pay tribute to the world including this organization for the courage, strength and determination to accompany us on this journey to peace and national renewal.

In this hall today are representatives of many nations of the world whose political will and enormous support accompanied Liberia on its path to peace and stability. Ours is a journey which cannot end with elections and the inauguration of a government. It must be nurtured continuously by our commitment to national renewal, an agenda to reconcile, a vision to rebuild and a determination to study war no more. Equally significant will be the international goodwill and partnership that will sustain stability and the dividends of democracy.

In this important interaction with the ILO, I come to renew Liberia's commitment as one of the founding members of this important international body. We acknowledge the unparalleled capacity of this organization to achieve the goals set by

the international agenda for the eradication of poverty, goals inherent in the ILO Decent Work Agenda; the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) as well as other development initiatives advanced over the years. Poverty alleviation, sustained economic growth and development and employment under favorable and humane conditions will constitute key indicators upon which stability will anchor.

At this forum, I wish to offer our share of the practical measures that will lift our people from poverty but one that will develop a covenant that reinforces public-private partnership and strengthen the tripartite dialogue required to enhance our development agenda.

Our national agenda encapsulates a vision deeply rooted in our determination **TO HUMANIZE AND RESTORE DIGNITY TO THE LIBERIAN LABOR FORCE.**

We realize that our labor force is the soul of our nation. Our survival unquestionably rest upon its competitiveness and productivity. This expectation requires us to energize and humanize our labor force through a process requiring the formulation of policies, enabling legislations, legal and constitutional reforms, terms of trade and multinational negotiations. The end objective is to develop a framework which guarantees proper conditions for work and benefits.

Our civil war was unprecedented wrecking state institutions and criminalizing our sense of humanity. Our institutions, both public and private experienced physical and moral decay. Unemployment has risen to an estimate of 85 %. The level of unemployment and the idleness of our youth have a propensity for social disenchantment. For us, employment is synonymous to peace.

Our response to this rapid decline embodies the development of firm programs in four important areas: Institutional Capacity Development, Rule of Law and Labor Standards, Manpower Development and the restoration of Regional and International Cooperation.

These four program areas will seek to strengthen the capacity of the Government of Liberia to effectively dispense its statutory functions of administration, regulation and supervision of the labor administration of the country. This will require training and resources to cope with our national demands. It will also necessitate the review and scrutiny of our labor laws to ensure those standards which seek to dignify and humanize our people in the work place. We have already commenced the review of our labor laws and initiated programs to repeal and/or amend those found offensive to democratic governance. This will lead to a national labor conference in which all stakeholders will contribute to the ownership of a new national legal framework. Areas of child labor, human trafficking, labor relations are wanting and will occupy our priority. We need to restore confidence by reviewing the standards set by our laws and the international community to adequately provide the framework for protection and the fulfillment of our international tripartite commitment and obligations.

At times history, fate and destiny connive to shape the future. Strong, willing and able citizens are frustrated in their search to become productive. Our unemployment rate compels them to live merely in hope. There is no cause for pride in our recent past but there is cause for hope because our new political dispensation and our national commitment summons us to respond with greater speed and urgency. We must respond to the understandable expectations of a

battered population. Their pains and agony must summon us to act. Our mission is simple to right the wrong and do justice but most importantly to serve with humility.

Today, I come to advance a different agenda and partnership with the ILO on behalf of Liberia and other nations. It is an agenda enunciated by the excruciating poverty and dehumanization I see everyday in my country. I reckon that the G8, Millennium developments Goals and several initiatives aimed a derailing negative development will eventually lead us to the future. We all acknowledge various reports of the World Summit Outcome Document of September 2005 which placed full employment and Decent Work as global goals at the center of national development strategies. This year's ECOSOC will also focus on Productive Employment and Decent Work. The report of the World Commission on the Social Dimension of Globalization issued in 2004 dealt extensively with issues in the context of a Globalized World Economy, and recognized the significant trends and profound changes that labor markets are undergoing. We must develop policies to deal with opportunities and threats. Our international and national strategies must aim at fighting poverty and secure a firm foundation for sustainable and equitable growth that will bring real dividends to the working class and the poor in our various countries.

My fear is that the global trend, the unfair and unequal markets tends to focus and reinforce profit motives at the expense of working people. The private sector remains even more focused and compete in ways that seek to dehumanize and increase poverty. We must reverse this trend and bring consciousness and some sense of morality to a world whose sense of humanity has seemingly dissipated.

Our country reality strikes me daily. It comes to me at my doorsteps. Each day I see the face of a woman returning from a refugee and displaced camp, children victimized by war lying hopeless desperately in search of a future of promise and nobility. This is a real call to action. I want to challenge this audience to join in meeting this call with urgency; join us in providing immediate relief to those who don't really understand the delays associated with our processes. They want action and results.

This conference must build on this renewed opportunity of tripartitism to restore hope in our devastated populations, restore their dignity and build a new partnership.

We cannot do this alone. We acknowledge the role that the international community particularly the ILO can play in this important endeavor. We commend their recent visits of Liberia and efforts being made to work with our government to develop an Emergency Employment Program leading to the long term Employment Action Program. Both programs will solicit your expertise and financial support. Our government will fully support this initiative as a pillar to sustain our democracy and begin to address the employment needs of our country. These labor intensive initiatives are expected to deploy more than 1,500 persons per month in several areas of rehabilitation and reconstruction. These programs will design employment intensive programs, intensive and coordinate skills training and employment placement, organize and implement social interventions for vulnerable groups. This is in response to the urgency of creating new jobs in the system as a security measure but also as the need to alleviate poverty and jump start the economy. We need the support and resources to reach this goal. The rebirth of our nation will rest on the emergency program in the short run.

The ILO's Decent Work Agenda in diverse circumstances best suits our prevailing condition. It is deeply characterized by rights at work, and social protection together with employment and enterprise creation and social dialogue with gender as cross cutting theme. It is a rights-based agenda and an agenda for development that provides a sustainable route out of poverty. It is rooted in the central role of work in the lives and well-being of women and men, their families, their communities and societies. It is key to human security and social stability.

Decent work is one of the democratic demands of people everywhere. It is connected to the growing recognition of the inadequacy of policies in which employment is residual and not a direct objective.

This year will focus on substantive issues such as promotional framework for occupational safety and health; a review of the employment relationship in today's world; and the role of the ILO on technical cooperation.

In this regard, I call upon the ILO for a covenant which will assist Liberia in the design and development of a Decent Work Country Programme which will enable us seek assistance in areas other than those in which the ILO has comparative advantage.

The design and development of a medium and long term employment creation programme as well as a programme for the strengthening of the tripartite partners.

Our determination to develop a public private partnership is crucial to our success. The Decent Work Agenda should envision the need to develop good corporate

citizens. The demand for transparency and accountability on the part of government must create an equal demand for accountability and transparency from the private sector, unions and all of those involved in the tripartite dialogue. It is a partnership that requires mutual obligations to achieve our goals.

Distinguished Participants, my presence here today reaffirm Liberia's commitment to the ideals of the ILO and marks our progressive return to this community. We come to forge a new partnership that will yields dividends to our working people. It is one which must humanize our people assuring them that their resources and talents will be used for their own development and progress. We are in the process of making several submissions to our national legislature on various international commitments including convention 100 which seeks to strike the balance in wages and benefits between men and women, Convention 138 on minimum wage and Convention 185 commonly referred to as the Maritime Convention on Seafarers Identity which we intend to sign while we are here. These practical commitments equally mark an important statement on our seriousness to advance the cause of our seafarers and working people. We pledge our fullest commitment to the success of the ILO.

Finally, let me extend my congratulations to the Director-General and members of the Secretariat for their support, to the Africa Program for their renewed dedication to our country and to all of you for your undaunting courage to make change possible and alter the negative trends of global degradation.

I thank you!