

**“The Challenges of Development in a Post-Conflict Country”  
An Address by Ellen Johnson Sirleaf,  
President of the Republic of Liberia**

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President Robert Wild;  
Chairman and members of the Board of Trustees;  
Members of the Administration, Faculty, Students, Prelates  
Friends, Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am honored by the opportunity to make a few remarks to you at Marquette University and I thank Mr. David Straz for making this happen.

It has been barely nine months since the full responsibility of rebuilding post-conflict Liberia was passed over to us, following our victory during the democratically held 2005 elections. We accepted the responsibility fully aware of the magnitude of the challenges that our country faces after 15 years of civil war and destruction. The damage and negative consequences have been enormous, deepening the state of poverty.

Today, GDP per capita at US\$163 (2005) represent a 90 percent decline as compared with 1980's pre-war levels due to sanctions and cut back in activities in productive sectors such as agriculture, forestry and mining. Exports declined similarly by over 95 percent for the same period. Our huge external debt estimated at US\$3.7 billion represents 800 percent of GDP and 3,000 percent of export earnings while domestic debt and non-salary arrears are estimated at US\$ 700 million.

When we took office there was no electricity and no water. Schools and clinics had crumbled, and roads were impassable. Institutions of governance had completely collapsed and corruption was rampant. HIV rates had soared. Few children were in school, and many were dying of curable diseases. Today, well over three quarters of our people live below the poverty line of US\$1 per day. An overwhelming majority of people, mainly the youth, are either unemployed or employed in the informal sector.

Yet, Liberians are a resilient people. For even after everything they have endured, the people of Liberia have faith in new beginnings. They are counting on me and my administration to create the conditions that will guarantee the realization of their dreams.

Their dreams are not complicated. They just want the simple things that most people take for granted: to live their lives in peace, get a good education, and be able to provide for their families.

These things are not too much for Liberians to dream about.

But time is pressing. The records show that, the risks of regression to war in post-conflict societies is high when the government and the international community are not able to make strong efforts at key moments, and sustain them over time.

Liberia today is at one of those key moments. Our efforts joined by those of our partners over the next few months, the next year, and beyond will determine the future course of the nation. If we wait too long to introduce the policy changes and reforms that are needed, or if our international partners wait too long to ramp up its support, then we may lose the best chance Liberia has had in a generation to end the conflict permanently and build the foundations for growth and prosperity.

We can't let that happen. We must quickly consolidate the potential dividends of Liberia's hard won peace and arrest the economic and financial decline. We must respond to the deep wounds of the civil war, and enhance national governance, while quickly introducing new measures of structural reforms and reconstruction. We must base our approach on the core principles of democracy, accountability, free enterprise, good governance, respect for human rights, and equitable distribution of our natural resources.

So with everything to be done, what must we do first? Poverty reduction strategies are at the core of both averting a return to conflict and establishing the foundation for sustained development. We are basing our strategy on four pillars of reconstruction and development.

The first is enhancing security and consolidating the peace in Liberia. Without peace and security there cannot be development or prosperity. We must double our efforts to train our forces, not just in security matters but also in being accountable to the people. Our security forces over the years have been quite corrupt and largely dysfunctional. They have lacked the trust of the population and have been used to terrorize the population and to intervene in political processes without respect for due process or law. We want to change that. We must develop a clear national security strategy that will take into account the gradual withdrawal of UNMIL troops.

We have already started the process. We have completed the deactivation of members of the former Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL) and we are well into recruiting a new army comprising 2000 soldiers to be adequately trained and well equipped. Our police force and other security units are being restructured and trained. With the strong help of UN agencies and other partners, we have facilitated the return of 70,000 refugees and 50,000 IDPs since the inauguration. It is important that we find the means to resettle them in productive endeavors.

Second, we need to revitalize our economy. We need to focus strongly on agriculture, both in food and cash crops with emphasis on the rehabilitation of our traditional rubber industry. We also expect rapid growth in our forestry, mining, and other natural resource-based industries based upon policies that aim at creating an investment climate that will encourage investments in activities in which Liberia can compete internationally. These activities will create jobs to tackle the 80 percent unemployment which we face, particularly among our youth.

Towards this end, we canceled all non compliant forestry concessions and are in the midst of establishing a new concessions framework for our natural resource products, to ensure the strong growth of these sectors. We have taken an aggressive stance in collecting revenues owed to the government, and already revenues have jumped by nearly 20 percent.

We have successfully completed the first phase of an IMF Staff Monitoring Program, under which, by all accounts our performance has been strong.

We are concluding our Interim Poverty Reduction Strategy which articulates priority interventions over the period July 2006 through June, 2008. This builds upon our first 150 day Action Plan under which 70 percent of our desired results were realized.

The third element of our vision is improving democratic governance. The over-concentration of power and a closed political system bred corruption, restricted access to the decision making process, limited the space for civil society participation in the process of governance, and fuelled ethnic and class animosities and rivalries over time. We are working through statutory and policy changes to revise these constraints on democracy and development.

We are determined to fight pervasive corruption, which has eaten away the fabric of our nationhood and society. We are well along in developing a strong anti-corruption strategy and the supporting legal and regulatory framework. Our weak judicial system is under reform and being strengthened. We are working towards decentralizing decision-making and allocating appropriate resources to county and municipal governments to support identified projects. We are placing emphasis on empowering the people, especially the poor and vulnerable, to become active participants in the development process.

The fourth and final pillar of our agenda is revitalizing our social and physical infrastructure. Education is central to renewal and reconciliation. Our vision of education for all – young and old – demands that we enforce the policy of full universal primary education and introduce literacy programs in communities throughout the country with our resilient market women as key targets. We recognize that no nation can develop under conditions of a 70 percent illiteracy rate.

We must respond particularly to our war affected youth providing them opportunities for school and skills training programs.

We also must rehabilitate health facilities that have been partially or completely destroyed. Only 10 percent of our population has access to health care. This must increase to at least 50 percent within the medium term. We must confront the growing HIV/AIDS problem, and fight malaria, parasites, malnutrition, and other diseases that kill so many of our children.

Our roads are in terrible shape. Without a decent road network, it will be nearly impossible to consolidate security, encourage new economic activity, and strengthen local governance. We must also improve other social infrastructure such as water and sanitation facilities. In one of our most important achievements, in July we were able to turn on electricity and water to parts of the capital city, Monrovia for the first time in 15 years. We are proud that we were able to achieve in six months what previous governments had utterly failed to do over many years.

But that accomplishment is just a beginning. Our mission is to make the Liberian Government work again and be more responsive in delivering quality services to the Liberian public.

The associated challenges are so daunting and the needs and expectations of our people so massive, that the Government of Liberia cannot satisfactorily respond by itself. There is a critical need for forging and building strong strategic partnerships. To this end, let me use this opportunity to express our deep appreciation for the continued assistance we have received over the years from the United States.

The Bush Administration, First Lady Laura Bush, the U.S. Congress have all been exceptional in supporting our effort to build a new Liberia. The Government and people of Liberia appreciate this concerted support and we are keen in ensuring that it is used for the recovery, reconstruction, and development of our country.

In summary, we are off to a good start. For that we are grateful to the Liberian people, to the international community, and to several US institutions, official as well as private, which are key partners to us in this regard. But it is just a start.

We must go beyond the usual to create the conditions to attract private capital and investment that will create the jobs and process our primary commodities for exports and domestic use. In the next few months we will be engaged in serious planning for a major Partnership conference, which is to take place the first quarter of next year in Washington, DC. Our partners will be working with us to develop our medium term poverty reduction and growth strategy. We will continue our strong start in strengthening the budgetary process and adopting appropriate fiscal regulations within the GEMAP framework.

But it is critical that in the next few months Liberians begin to see steady, tangible progress. We will therefore ask all of our partners to work closely with us in the next few weeks so that we can make sure that the many activities that need to be implemented during the upcoming dry season are ready to go on time. We cannot afford to waste any time, and in many projects we need to speed the process of disbursement and implementation. We will specifically ask for U.S. support of this objective through the US Embassy in Monrovia. Wisconsin Congress members can be helpful to us in this regard.

We also want to make sure that we do not face gaps in critical support during the transition between some emergency programs winding down and longer-term development programs getting started. In too many countries this transition does not go smoothly, and critical momentum can be lost.

Finally, I want to make sure that the efforts of Government and partners' are fully synchronized and harmonized. To best prepare for the Partners Conference, we need to make sure that partners are supporting the most important initiatives, that there is not undue overlap and duplication, and that there are not critical gaps that are left unfilled.

We need to work together with both strong planning, and rapid and effective implementation, to ensure that we take advantage of this critical moment in Liberia's history to put the conflict to rest and speed the process of reconstruction and development.

We are glad that our nation has been blessed. Liberia is not a poor country but a country that has been poorly managed. We are committed to change this; to pursue those goals that will move us from the crisis of the past to the opportunity of the present. We are committed, as a people, to build a new Liberia from the ashes of an old turbulent and tragic past to a future of hope and promise. We are committed to strategic partnerships based upon mutuality of respect and benefits.

And now let me say a word about a special partnership that brought me to Marquette today. I met Mr. David Straz when he came to Monrovia to participate in a workshop organized by our Ministry of Foreign Affairs for Honorary Consuls. He had served our country in this role for several years. I agreed to meet a few of the workshop participants and he was one of those. We

had a meeting along with a couple of other colleagues and he responded positively to helping us meet a major need – the rebuilding of the College of West Africa, one of the high schools in our capital city that go as far back as Liberia’s history. Its structure has been in decay for over three decades. When we fix it Liberia’s history and education will resonate once again. Liberia thanks you Mr. Straz for this good gesture.

And again, I thank you for the opportunity to be here.