

**AT SUPERINTENDENTS' RETREAT, LIBERIAN PRESIDENT CHALLENGES
COUNTY LEADERS TO BE PROACTIVE AND ENGAGED IN COMMUNITIES**

FALIE, GRAND CAPE MOUNT COUNTY, 14 November 2009 – Following is the text of the remarks, delivered extemporaneously, by President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, at a one-day Counties Superintendents and Assistant Superintendents for Development Retreat for the Review of the Poverty Reduction Strategy (PTS) and County Development Agenda (CDA), held at Falie, Grand Cape Mount County:

Let me thank the Superintendent, the Elders, the Citizens of Grand Cape Mount County, particularly the people of this district, for receiving us and showing us such great courtesy and welcome. A big thank you to the Minister of Internal Affairs and his staff, and all of you who work at the County Seats, for preparing the reports and making the long journey so that we have the opportunity for this exchange.

Your reports have been good – comprehensive and informative. This tells that there is real capability, knowledge and commitment in our Counties. All I ask is that, for future meetings, we have a template so that we can have the same type of reporting. Counties had different ways to report their achievements and their challenges, making it difficult for comparability. A common template will be prepared for next time. We should also have a clear distinction between those activities that are financed by the County Development Fund and those that come under the CDA and PRS, for which there is funding not only from the other government's budget but from partners. That way, we can know what we are doing ourselves, on the basis of our own resources, and what is supplemented through the support of our partners.

You have just sung a very important song, and in that song you made some very strong commitments – a commitment to good governance; that means transparency, accountability and integrity. So I expect that each of you will live by those principles. We know that we have a lot of problems with the County Development Fund that have come under serious criticism. Some of these may not be true; some may be rumors; some may be misunderstandings. But in several cases, funds have been misused or misallocated. Your responsibility is to take charge of the County Development Fund in such a way that the mandates given by our Constitution to the three branches of Government are fully respected. We are not going to do anything in a confrontational way; we are going to do it through consultations, through dialogue, through working with colleagues with one common objective in mind, an objective that is common to all the branches and to all the leaders and to all the citizens of the County, and that objective

is: to bring development to the people. I am sure that with that spirit, we will be able to find a solution, to come up with new procedures that will enable us to get more results and have more effectiveness and efficiency in the implementation of our County Development Projects.

In this respect, let me urge each of you to start a process of consultation. Too many times we are removed from the people that we say we serve. Many times they do not know; and this is why sometimes the lack of information gives way to rumors and to wrong information. You are responsible to hold consultations with your citizens. You need to go into the districts, into the communities, into the villages. Tell them what you are doing. Show them that the CDA comes out of a process in which they contributed. It's their project. Now you have to tell them, "This is the project that you gave for us; this is what has been done; these are our problems; this is our progress," so they can know. Because they are the ones that will defend you.

You also have to have consultations with the legislative caucuses. They represent the people. There may be problems there, but you know, sometimes you don't wait for problems to arise before you consult, because that's when it gets contentious. If you were to take the initiative and be proactive, so that you go to the caucus, whether it's in the County, or whether it's in Monrovia. Call them for a meeting and say, "We want to inform you of what is happening on the County Development Projects. If you can go beyond those that are funded by the CDF, to even get information on what the Government is doing, what the partners are doing, then you can sit and have an interactive session with them. Show them where the roads are; where the schools are; where the clinics are; what you're doing in agriculture; how much has been spent on these activities. You build that kind of relationship with them, and it will make it much easier for you to be able to carry out your job.

I'm glad that the Deputy Minister of Information for Public Affairs has talked about communications. Listen to the things the people are talking. It only takes one person to say something; the next person picks it up; they don't even ask whether it's true or not true; the next person picks it up and magnifies it. The next thing you know, they are saying, "Nothing's happening. All the people just eating the money." But when you listen to what we've heard today, you know that you people are at work, and you people are doing something. There may be some problems; there may be some deficiencies; there may even be some misuse, and corruption. But I know, from what I've heard today, that, indeed, most of you are at work; all of you are trying your best to achieve our objective. You need to get the message across to have communication reach the people on your achievements. Today's event has been recorded; it will be put on TV; let the public know so that it can come and look at it, so that everybody can know what's being done and what some of the challenges are. None of this is challenge-free. Development is a

very slow and sometimes risky process. It's a process sometimes of trial and error, because nobody has the right recipe to say, "I will do this, and everything will happen the way I planned it." We always run into constraints. But when you can sit down and recognize those constraints, and find a way to surmount them, so you can achieve your objective. That is what enables us to be proud of what we're doing.

We are going into the Dry Season, we hope, and our first 90-day deliverables are coming to an end on November 30th. Many of the deliverables of these 90 days were policy-based, and done, to a large extent, in Monrovia, in the Ministries, with your support and your information. Right after that will be the next 90 days – the heart of the Dry Season. We want to make sure that you all are at work, and are perceived to be at work, so that nobody will be mistaken about it, when they go into the Counties, that the Superintendent, the Development Superintendent, and other local government officials are at work. That means we must see you, not just sitting in the office, but we must see you out there, in the communities, in the villages, on the farms, visiting the hospitals, visiting the schools, to make sure that there are chairs and textbooks. We are told that every elementary student in public school is supposed to have books today, with a ratio of 2 to 1. This means that each student is supposed to have two sets of school books. That's what the Ministry of Education tells us. So when I look at photographs in the media that say, no books in the schools and children sitting on planks, that's unacceptable.

You need to go and find out. I go around in Montserrado County every now and then, and I discover things that are not correct. We then try to correct it. But you should try to do that first. So I challenge each of you to be a bit more proactive during this period, to go in there and find out what the people are doing.

We need a public-private partnership; this Government is promoting private sector endeavors. So, you have business people in your place; not to harass them, not to go ask them for money – please don't do that; but to sit with them and see what they can do to support some of your development work – whether it's creating jobs, whether it's helping to make a contribution to some development project. Please do that.

Decentralization is coming, which will also include a fiscal system. This means that we will have policies that will enable you to collect taxes in your Counties that will be used for the County. It's coming, but you have to start the work in that regard. Right now, you should be looking at the cities and real estate -- one of the first main sources of revenue for local government. Many people are building in your Counties; they have stores and businesses in your Counties; they are building hotels in your Counties. Start to do something about it. Get properties registered. So when the time comes, when we pass the law for decentralized local governance, in accordance with recommendations from

the Governance Commission, you will be prepared to take advantage of the new policies.

In keeping with our usual policies, the Cabinet will be on the road for the next few meetings. In December, we go to Bopolu, in keeping with a commitment made over a year ago to spend Christmas in Belle Yellah. That commitment has to be kept. They are trying to work on the road, and I've told them that wherever the road reaches, Chief Jallah Lone and I will enter Belle Yellah. If the road doesn't reach, we will walk the rest of the way. The plan is to have the Cabinet Meeting a few days before that, so that we go on to Belle Yellah for the Christmas. Those who can't manage to go will find their way back for their Christmas. The January meeting will be in Zwedru. A schedule is being prepared to be provided to you, Between December and April, the Cabinet will be on the road, and we want to announce it in time, so that those of you from the County can do what you can, and the citizens of the County who reside in Monrovia can know we are going to their County so they can also join the effort and be a part of the Cabinet meeting because we will use the occasion to have town hall meetings.

As you know, the "26" next year will be in Nimba County, in Sanniquellie. That has already been announced, and we are already planning for it.

Once again, thank you for a good meeting. Sorry I was late; we could have spent much more time together, but it's very difficult on Saturdays to leave the house. So what we will do is to plan these retreats every quarter, when we can come together and assess the progress, look at what some of our challenges are, find a way to continue to work together and to keep the nation informed of what we are doing out there in the Counties. We all know, as everybody says, that "Liberia is not Monrovia; Liberia consists of all the 15 Counties and their various subdivisions." We have an obligation and responsibility to work in all of those Counties and to bring a level of development to all of our people.

Thank you all for being here, and thank you for your good presentations.