

ADDRESS

By

Her Excellency Ellen Johnson Sirleaf

President of the Republic of Liberia

To

The Security Council of the United Nations

On

Friday, March 17, 2006

(New York)

Your Excellency, the President of the Security Council of the United Nations;

Your Excellency Secretary General of the United Nations;

Distinguished Excellencies, Members of the Security Council;

Ambassadors Accredited to the United Nations;

Ladies and Gentlemen.

It is this morning a distinct honor and privilege to address distinguished members of the Security Council of the United Nations, in the name of the 3.5 million people of Liberia. I thank you for this special opportunity. As many of you will know, the people of Liberia last October/November took the heroic step of voting, not once but twice, to elect a new Government to direct their affairs for the next six years. In that process they entrusted me with the stewardship of a nation that had until only two years earlier still been the object of unprecedented internal civil strife, resulting in massive physical destruction and immeasurable moral and spiritual degradation. Today, thanks to the will and resilience of our, and buoyed by the unstinting support and commitment from you in the international community, a new Liberia has been ushered in since last January 16, 2006. Liberia is back, the long walk to our renewed freedom and aspirations as a nation has now begun in earnest. And after all, in the popular saying of a distinguished member of this very Security Council, “the longest journey starts with the first step”. Liberians have now taken that first step towards a more just and democratic society, once again respecting of the rule of law and committed to a new and secure economic dispensation for all our citizens.

As I stand before you today, I am also mindful of what my very presence represents for the women of Liberia, who campaigned tirelessly at all levels of society not only last year, but through many years, for my election as President of Liberia, and as Africa’s first elected female Head of State .On that basis I also today represent the hopes and aspirations of all women of Africa and indeed of the world. I know that this body has consistently fought for the rights of those women. As a former Assistant Secretary General of this very United Nations, I more than many know what this Security Council has done over the years, to ensure that women live better, with greater dignity and take their rightful place in areas of national and global leadership in our world of today. I salute your Council for this and I say to our women all over-**I will not let you down. Keep hope alive!**

What we have inherited

Mr. President, while as recently as four decades ago, Liberia's state of economic development and quality of life paralleled that of today's "Asian Tigers" at that time, today Liberia is sadly among the poorest societies on our planet. Liberia has for the past 25 years or so, witnessed one of the most catastrophic and stunning reversal of development progress, driven mainly by internal civil strife. As a result, the legacy for the new Government which I now headed is one that of a country that is sadly the world's second or third poorest. In the devastating wars of the past 15 years in particular, some 250,000 were estimated dead; 500,000 were internally displaced from their communities of origin, with 300,00 as refugees in neighboring countries. Liberia's national production of goods and services has declined almost seven fold in the past 25 years.

As I traveled the length and breadth of Liberia in recent years, and especially during my electoral campaign last year, I saw ample and heartbreaking evidence of how three in every four of our citizens now try to live the less than one dollar a day that they earn. Almost one in 5 Liberian children will never live to see five years of age-one of the worst ratios in the world. Well less than half of our young people are currently enrolled in a primary school, partly as a result of us having had one of the highest enrolment of child soldiers in the world. One does not have to go far to see that almost 80% of the schools and health facilities of our country have been destroyed by the war. Our environment has been seriously damaged on all fronts. The average Liberian will probably die by the age of 47. At about 10-12% prevalence rates, Liberia has almost the highest rate of HIV/AIDS infection in West Africa at the moment. There is chilling evidence in Monrovia and across our country that four out of five eligible persons in Liberia are unemployed currently, the vast majority of these being young people.

What is worse is that the costs of war, mismanagement, misgovernance and sheer corrupt looting of our state have left us with a debt of some \$3.5 billion, well over a \$1000 per Liberian, earning less than \$1 a day. This debt has to be serviced from a national budget currently of a mere \$80 million dollars, probably smaller than the budget of most small corporations and many schools in an New York City. With this level of debt averaging

almost 40 times what we earn from our exports of once lucrative rubber, iron, diamonds and registrations of international ships, Liberia had not been able to service its indebtedness for more than two decades now.

Moreover, our new Government has inherited some of the worst and systemically pernicious forms of corruption for any developing country. Most of our state systems have collapsed; human capacities have migrated in abundance; institutions have disintegrated and remaining ones are at best fragile. In a word, had it not been for the tremendous support that we have received from you the international community over the years, Liberia would have been even more calamitous than presently, having already been declared a failed state only a few years ago by the UN. The people of Liberia know that this Security Council has steadfastly stood by them in the past. **I thank you for rescuing us through the years.**

International Support

Mr. President, in this connection we gratefully recall your tangible support through Resolution 1343 in 2001 justifiably embargoing the trading of Liberian diamonds. We recall that of Resolution 1478 of 2003 that imposed sanctions on our forestry industry, restricting the sale of our timber. Both of these resources were indiscriminately being used in the past to fuel the civil conflict, in which thousands of our citizens internally and externally displaced and lost their lives and property. I would in particular also like to acknowledge the facilitation of the Accra Peace Agreement signed August 18, 2003, by the International Contact Group for Liberia (ICGL), consisting of international and African regional Governments and institutions; the deployment of some 15000 UNMIL peacekeeping forces by Security Council Resolution 1509; and your support for the first International Reconstruction Conference in early 2004 co-hosted by the US, the UN and the World Bank. That conference enabled us to launch critical funds for humanitarian and early reconstruction needs, including the very important demilitarization, demobilization, rehabilitation and reintegration (DDRR) program for some thousands of ex-combatants, since end 2003 and prepared the ground for democratic elections, which successfully

paved the way for the new democratic process now underway in Liberia. For this we are deeply indebted to the international community. We simply cannot betray the faith and hope that you have all invested over the years in us as a nation in our darkest hours. **Again I say, thank you so much.**

Where are we going?

So how are Liberians responding to the new challenges with which we are now faced, thanks to your generous support over the years, work has already begun on inclusive national economic reform and reconstruction. restoration of national peace and reconciliation as a top priority .Sustained national security, buoyed by the continuing support of UNMIL's forces, is imperative. But we recognize that to make a success of these we must move quickly and decisively to reassure our long suffering people that their new Government means business .This we are already doing .Working in close collaboration with our development partners, we are concentrating on enhancing security; pursuing programs of economic revitalization; strengthening good governance and the rule of law; and quickly rehabilitating our badly broken infrastructure , while seeking to provide basic services for our deprived people. Importantly, we have already begun to put our financial house in order.

More specifically, in the short term i.e. within the first 150 days of my Administration, we have already seriously embarked on, and are firmly committed to, modest restoration of electricity in a few sections of our capital Monrovia, which has been totally without power for more than 15 years now. We have already put in place and are rapidly expanding a number of community-based projects providing basic social amenities such as health clinics, primary schools, water and sanitation, throughout the length and breadth of Liberia .Our people demobilized from conflict and returning from refugee camps in neighboring countries to their communities of origin, are already embarking on the rebuilding of their own sustainable livelihoods. Work is advanced on the rehabilitation of some 600 kms of primary and feeder roads and several interconnecting bridges, as we quickly repair severely damaged commercial and agricultural access across our nation.

Importantly, we have already defining a national anti-corruption program .This will be over and above ongoing implementation of a framework already agreed with our partners for a focused governance and economic management program ,especially for a number of our State -Owned Enterprises (SOEs) , among many of whose operations there several instances of corrupt practices in the past. This underscores my Administration's unflinching commitment to stamp out corruption in all facets of national Life in our new Liberia. **We have absolutely no tolerance for corruption in this new Liberia.**

Beyond these specific things that we are well on our way to completing within the first 150 days of office , we are leady actively collaborating with our Bretton Woods partners, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, to quickly put into place the building blocks for our planned medium and longer term programs of economic reform and revitalization. Work is advanced towards a Staff Monitored Program with the IMF. By late this year the elements would be in place for ultimately clearing our external debt arrears of some \$1.5 billion to the multilateral, eventually facilitating significant debt relief within the HIPC process. With the World Bank and other partners we have also begun work towards a Poverty Reduction Poverty Strategy process, to more systematically confront the persistent poverty that has plagued our nation for so long.

Liberia needs to grow again. It needs to expand its national pie, for the greater good of all our long suffering people. They deserve no less; but more. I would have failed them if they got less. **I do not intend to fail the people of Liberia.**

The Road Ahead

But Mr. President, Members of the Security Council, even as we in the new Liberia embark on this long journey of reform and reconstruction, we are keenly aware of what lies before us. I am personally certain that sustained national security, consolidation of peace and the reaping of the post-conflict peace dividend for our people will not be possible without large and continuing flows of international capital and investment. Specialist World Bank research tells us that countries coming out of conflict run the risk

of relapse within four to five years, in the absence of such early and sustained support. We estimated our reconstruction needs for only this year and next year alone to be in excess of \$1 billion. Much of this will have to come from private capital sources. We have no illusions about this.

We are already doing what we could to prepare a more propitious environment for private investment and to deepen public-private partnership in Liberia, **To our private sector friends, I say, come to the new Liberia –you are very welcome.**

But I spoke earlier about our young people and how most of them have no jobs; how much they feel a sense of helplessness and hopelessness at the moment. As I mentioned in my Inaugural Address, I am particularly troubled by the unemployment situation now confronting them. Our youth are the future of our nation. But they are equally potentially the fuse, if not properly engaged and productively employed in the necessary process of national development. We must as a matter of priority, therefore, seek workable and concrete opportunities to create quick, meaningful employment activities for these young people, in areas of micro-finance development for instance, and to technically equip them as quickly as possible in the acquisition of basics skills to serve as necessary inputs for the significant amount of emergency and public works rehabilitation that we would need to undertake in coming months and years. I would personally very much welcome any suggestions or reference to translatable good practices in this area from any other parts of the world, both nationally and at a regional level **.Please share these with me.**

The conflict of the past two decades has also deprived us of the best and finest of Liberia's brains and skills .Thousands have left our shores and are now living abroad. Many would like to come back, but cannot do so over night. We are trying to do whatever we could to attract them back, to encourage them to make the national sacrifice. But as we all know this is not always as easy; there are often domestic and professional factors to be considered. It is our hope nevertheless that we could continue to count on our development partners and regional institutions to support any programs such as the UN's TOKTEN, to make special dispensations to fund the return from the diaspora of as many of our citizens as are willing to return for the process of national reconstruction.

For our part, we have initiated efforts to strengthen national educational and technical institutions. Practical schemes to facilitate cross-fertilization of other post-conflict experiences from other continental countries and elsewhere are also being explored. In addition, we are embarking soon on a systematic program of civil service reform, not only to right size the currently over-bloated public sector, but also to assure that those who are retained in service can command a much better package of remuneration than presently obtains.

Importantly also, Liberia is a part of a dynamic and entrepreneurially charged region of West Africa, whose citizens have invested an enormous amount to assure that we in Liberia are where we have come today.

We owe it to them to build on this spirit of regionalism, to positively expand cross – border contact, and to capitalize on the many regional and wider continental opportunities that exist for mutually growing our respective economies. To our brothers and sisters of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Union (AU), **I say a special thank you for all you too have done for us in the past. We look forward to jointly walking with you along our aspiring paths of peace, stability and revitalization in the long journey ahead.**

Continued Support

Mr. President I have tried to outline above the present realities and the way ahead for the new Liberia. I count in your continued and unstinting support. I ask your continued support for speedily removing the remaining sanctions on trading our forestry products and diamonds. We have now met just about every agreed precondition. I am confident that any minor remaining few will be fully achieved in a matter of a few weeks. This will greatly assist our national budget, and grow our national pie.

I also seek your further support in the repatriation of any legitimate resources of our state that may have in the past been illegally stashed away by citizens of Liberia for personal gain. Where these are identified and can be properly documented and traced, we trust that we could count on your future support for their repatriation .Such reverse flows could go a far way towards alleviation of the wide spread poverty and suffering that have afflicted our people for so long, given our current annual budget of a meager US \$80 million dollars.

I equally ask as many of you as possible to forgive as much of our \$3.5 billion of the unsustainable debt burden we have inherited. Servicing an inherited debt of that magnitude, deprives us from buying basic medicines for our people, from sending more of our young girls to school, from expanding badly needed employment opportunities for our young men and eventually from staying secure as a nation.

I also call on our development partners among you to continue to go the extra mile wherever possible for small, poor post- conflict countries like Liberia, by showing even greater willingness and flexibility in the application of your bilateral and multilateral rules of engagement. In showing greater tolerance and flexibility in their implementation. In harmonizing your procedures wherever possible, and using more our own country systems, which are on the mend. In looking for concrete opportunities for modifying procedures to facilitate speedier return and support for Liberians abroad, and for funding of local costs for aspects of our operations, or for flexibly deploying assets to our government service following closure of projects they supported. **These will all help greatly.**

Closing

Mr. President, Secretary General, Distinguished Members of the Security Council, Ladies and Gentlemen:

I have tried this morning to signal the new journey upon which the nation of Liberia has now embarked, with the coming into office of my new Government just over two months ago. The journey to recovery and renewal has begun. It is a journey at the centre of which lies the need for continued stability, peace and maximum national security. At one level, as a people, we have patiently and peaceably done our part to ensure the initiation of this process of change and renewal now fully underway. Through enormous personal and collective sacrifice, we have already vindicated the hopes and aspirations that the entire community of nations have invested in us. And we are prepared to do more. But it is a task that will require sustained material and moral support-national, regional and international.

I therefore appeal to this august body to do all within your power to further assist us in building on an already emerging democratic legacy. As I walked through thick and thin, rain and shine, mud and solid ground, over the past several years- and especially the past one- the eyes, the tears and the smiles of our people told me all. “We want a better life, we need a brighter future, we are tired of the past, of the wars, of the pain, of the suffering, of the corruption”, they consistently cried. They have called upon me now to deliver a better way for them. I intend with all my strength to walk the talk with them. To try to make a real difference for each and everyone of them – our long suffering people. **I owe them no less.**

I ask you to stay with me.

I thank you.