

Special Message by
Her Excellency Ellen Johnson Sirleaf
PRESIDENT OF LIBERIA

For a
CALL TO ACTION

Delivered at the
C. Cecil Dennis Hall
Ministry of Foreign Affairs

November 19, 2015
4:00 pm

(As Delivered)

Mr. Vice President,

Mr. Speaker,

Mr. President Pro-Tempore,

Associate Justices, representing the Chief Justice,

Honorable Members of the National Legislature,

Doyen and Members of the Diplomatic Corps,

Dean and Members of the Cabinet,

Officials of Government,

Traditional Council,

Members of the Council of Churches and Inter-Religious Council,

Political Parties,

Non-Governmental Organizations,

Fellow Liberians:

Once again, we thank God and recognize the pivotal role played by all our citizens and foreign partners alike, that enabled us to conquer the deadly Ebola Virus Disease outbreak, thereby enabling the recommencement of our development process.

Without the individual and collective support and cooperation of all of our citizens and residents, it would have been difficult to defeat this scourge. Our resilience, as a people, remains the greatest and most valuable asset of which our country can boast. I consider myself extremely fortunate to be the leader of a country with such resilient people.

In our most recent history, we have gone through many challenges together as a State and as a people but we have always prevailed. I have no doubt that we can continue to prevail in the years ahead.

Recently, we traveled to India to participate in the third India-African Summit and also to the People's Republic of China, at their invitation, for a State Visit. In each country, we met with the Head of State and the Head of Government, renewed and reviewed bilateral cooperation, and discussed ongoing and potential projects including procedures for accessing Lines of Credit to finance our infrastructure development, particularly roads and power.

In reviewing ongoing projects which have already obtained their support, we were reminded that the competition for resources is fierce. Countries that can move their internal processes with efficiency and speed are likely to obtain their desired level of external support.

I am confident that with the support and coordination of all three branches of our Government, this will not be a problem. We fully understand the value to our people of these developments and the importance of concluding, in a timely manner, financing arrangements for several inter-county roads, for improving the Roberts International Airport, for the upgrading of the John F. Kennedy Medical Center, for putting in place facilities to transmit and distribute electricity, and for expanding telecommunications. We are determined to meet these and other national priorities during the remaining years of this Administration.

Fellow Liberians; Ladies and Gentlemen:

I usually would not address you on a particular trip but I deviate from the norm because this trip comes at a time when emerging global economic trends, with dire consequences for our region and our country specifically, require that we not only stay focused on our domestic priorities but remain aware of the constraints these would pose to our development program. Hence, my decision to brief you on the outcome of my recent visits, particularly with the challenges our country faces and the opportunities we can leverage in dealing with these challenges.

Many of you, politics aside, know exactly where we have come from as a nation. You know the country we inherited in 2006 and you know where it is today. You know the status quo that was and the enormous efforts required of all of us collectively, to steer the ship in the direction of durable foundations for peace and development. You know the struggle and challenges which we have faced on a daily basis in restoring governance and you know the progress that we have made together.

In 2006, after years of destruction, Liberia began the onerous journey of reforming, rebuilding, and recovering. We set foundations that would lead to broader citizen's participation in development. And yes, we structured foundations that would enable our citizens to benefit from various national opportunities.

You know that we refused to accept the legacies of a Failed State or the portrayal of our Nation as a pariah, an "exporter of conflict," undeserving of our rightful place of respect and leadership around the family table of the world.

We believed that Liberia could become an example for the promotion of freedoms and rights of all persons. We believed Liberia could become a thriving democracy.

We knew that we could adopt best practices in the management of our resources. And that we could surmount challenges of human and institutional incapacities to become an open, accountable, transparent government and society.

And although our economy had experienced one of the greatest collapses by any nation since World War II, we knew we could garner the capacity and make the commitment to lead the processes of recovery and thus attract, support, and inspire Liberian entrepreneurship. We knew this Nation could be set on an irreversible path to sustainable growth and development.

And so, we took bold steps to achieve our national imperatives and reclaim international respect.

In our economic recovery effort for example, we reviewed concession agreements, cancelled all forestry concession agreements for non-compliance with our laws, and renegotiated the Firestone and ArcelorMittal concession agreements to provide for improved national benefits.

I am proud of our accomplishments to date and as a reminder to point out some of the things together we have been able to do:

We created the fiscal space by removing the external debt burden of US\$4.9 billion through the HIPC process;

We increased domestic revenue from US\$80 million to a peak of US\$470 million in 2014;

We increased electricity on the national grid from zero (0) to 23 megawatts and remain on course to connect the Mount Coffee Hydro in December 2016 with additional 88 megawatts of power. Additionally, we are now completing various projects to add another 38 megawatts of power generated by Heavy Fuel Oil Diesel plants. This will provide affordable electricity to support economic expansion. Progress has been slowed due to the Ebola outbreak, but we do remain on track, with the Mt. Coffee Hydro to increase energy supply to our people, which is necessary as a pre-condition for fostering value addition to raw materials, manufacturing and other related industries. This is not new, but finally the ECOWAS program is on course to bring electricity to eighteen of our villages in four counties bordering Cote d'Ivoire. Ganta and Harper are already receiving current.

Currently, with limited current energy capacity, we were able to increase electricity connections to 33,000 homes and businesses. By 2017, that number will be increased by 3,000 connections per month and electricity will reach as far as Kakata, Tubmanburg and Robertsport.

The high cost and severe climatic conditions have made this challenging, but we paved or rehabilitated nearly 698 kilometers of city, inter-county, and neighborhood roads, the highest by any Government. By the end of 2017, the number of paved roads will be 960 kilometers, of which will be 220 new paved roads. Roads as you know are cardinal to the acceleration of inter-county trade and an imperative for our agriculture sector. Development in rural Liberia has been constrained by bad road networks. A good number of projects will commence this dry season as we work to secure additional financing to connect

more county capitals. A continuation of neighborhood roads in the city will bring relief to many of our citizens.

In our infrastructure development efforts, we constructed the Zulu Domah Bridge to replace the collapsed Via Town Bridge, built a new bridge at Caldwell, and have ongoing improvements to the Freeport of Monrovia and to the ports of Buchanan and Greenville as well. Improvements at Roberts International Airport are imminent. We rebuilt the Robertsfield Highway and are committed to have both the Runaway and Terminal completed by the end of 2017 and to continue the expansion of paved urban roads.

The participation of Liberians in the economy is recognized as the most reliable means of sustainable job creation. Thus, we have initiated laws that will ensure this participation. We require all of our officials and ask our business entities to ensure full usage of the 25 percent of public appropriation for goods and services that by law must be directed to Liberian enterprises. Progress made in Liberianization and Local Content were showcased two days ago during the Annual Trade Fair. A large number of the almost 10,000 registered Liberian Businesses were in attendance. It is important that we give support to small and medium size Liberian enterprises that are now emerging. When you wear your pride by using country cloth and eat your pride by eating country rice, when you buy locally produced products you contribute to jobs and the livelihoods of Liberians.

In Education, we have been able to increase school enrollment to 1,531,489 as of 2014 with girls enrollment nearly 50 percent. By 2017, we expect this number to be 2,603,531. A program to train teachers thereby improving the quality of education is ongoing. Some 10,441 teachers have already been trained.

To accommodate the increase in enrollment, some 115 schools have been renovated and 26 new schools constructed. The construction of comprehensive school facilities target 41 such facilities in 15 counties which will include housing for teachers.

Institutions of higher education have also received support. While financial pressures have led to a reduction, budgetary appropriation to the University of Liberia increased significantly, to a high as close to US\$12 million in the year 2012. New facilities were constructed to restore the Fendell Campus. Tubman Technical College in Harper was reopened, restructured, renamed Tubman University, and has become a quality institution of higher learning.

Availability of technical, vocational and life skills training for thousands of our youths took a giant leap forward yesterday when we dedicated the new state-of-the-art Monrovia Vocational Training Center. Thanks to the Government of the People's Republic of China. The modern facility adds to the Klay Agricultural Vocational Training Center in Bomi, the now unfunctional Arcelor Mittal Vocational Training Center in Nimba, and the Tumutu Agricultural Training Center in Bong which is undergoing renovation. Major investments are being planned for all of the multilaterals and BWI - to make them what they were created to be - combining technical and academic skills, to harness the entrepreneurial skills of young Liberians to be employers. These investments will target young women to compete with their male counterparts in the TVET sector.

In the health sector, which was severely challenged by Ebola, we made some gains but the fragility exposed during the Ebola attack was a reflection of the overall fragility of our post-conflict disposition. However, access to health services access and to health care increased from 41% in 2007 to 71% in 2013. This was made possible by increased health facilities from 354 in 2006 to 712 in 2012. Ten (10) public health facilities were established and we expect to have a targeted 80% coverage which translates to 89 additional health facilities. Plans for rebuilding a resilient health system include improved conditions for

healthcare workers, upgrading major referral and county hospitals, training of medical personnel and arranging an effective system for drug supply.

A free package of health services across the country has increased access by 71 percent. Maternal mortality decreased significantly, but has once again climbed to an unacceptable level due to the impact of Ebola. Progress in reducing infant mortality enabled Liberia to achieve MDG Goal No.4, on child mortality.

Our commitment to women is demonstrated in the programs we support for better living conditions and literacy training for those in the informal sector. Programs are being evaluated and restructured for better results in the control of domestic violence and rape. We are proud to have achieved Goal No. 3 of the MDGs for Women Empowerment.

Challenges continue in our effort to improve access to pipe-borne water particularly in Monrovia. We are making major organizational changes to address this problem. Nevertheless, the reports show that well over 50 percent of the population have access to clean water from all sources. Completed or ongoing projects to bring pipe borne water to Buchanan, Kakata, Robertsport, Voinjama, Zwedru, and Sanniquellie are well advanced; with feasibility studies being completed for Harper, Greenville and Gbarnga.

In agriculture, traditional crops such as coffee and cocoa are once again exports with great potential. Increased production of rice and cassava were affected by Ebola, but is now back on course. Over 353 persons have been trained in every aspect of agriculture science to expand service to the sector.

In line with our investment strategy, we have attracted more than fifteen (15) companies in Forestry, four (4) in Mining, five (5) in oil palm, and several other sectors amounting to agreements for more than \$16 billion in Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). Often, this is construed to mean we actually did receive this volume of investment, whereas most of these investments were projected over a 25-year period. In some cases, like the mining sector, they contributed to moving our economy close to pre-war levels, thereby affecting the size of our budget envelop. In other cases, they too have been challenged by exogenous factors beyond their control with dire consequences to our economy. As a result only US\$4.2 billion of the US\$16 billion that we talked about was operationalized to produce the jobs, infrastructure and revenues. Nonetheless, we remain optimistic that we will continue to do what we can so that these investments will eventually propel growth in our economy. The rubber sector has been hit hard by low global prices, but support has been mobilized to help producers that moved in the direction for value addition to their products. Enterprising Liberian producers have already begun to add value and to seek markets through direct exports. Firestone is now making great progress in the production of wood products and furniture from dead rubber trees. This not only adds value in the sector but opens new opportunities for Liberians in the woodwork industry.

When this Administration took over the helm of leadership of The National Social Security and Welfare Corporation of Liberia (NASSCORP) in February of 2006, Bank balances were USD\$645,000.00 (Six hundred forty five thousand) and LD\$5 million dollars. To date Bank Balances stand at USD\$30 million plus, after completion of numerous Real Estate Investment including, the NASSCORP House at ELWA Junction, that now houses the LRA.

We have started implementation of a program to provide affordable housing to our people. The first step was taken last year when we completed the processing and certification of deeds to long living tenants of the old housing estates. We have completed Phase I and Phase II of the Jah Tondo Housing Estate in Brewerville City for a completion of 93 units. The Ben Town Housing Estate in Marshall is completed

and has been dedicated with 52 units. Phase 2 commences in one week for the construction of additional units at both places.

A major priority in the housing plan is the voluntary relocation of residents of West Point, particularly those who have been repeatedly affected by flooding. The Monrovia City Corporation is working with the Land Commission to identify sites in Upper Brewerville. Our teams that will be going to investment seminars will be putting this on the table; our team at the climate change conference will also be raising this to enable us do this project. The long-anticipated relief to the people of West Point is now closer to realization which they have welcomed.

The first in the history of our country, we established County Development Funds to support priorities decided by the people themselves across villages and towns. We also encouraged and maintained a policy of corporate social responsibility by which corporate entities are encouraged to extend support to community projects and developmental efforts through the establishment of Social Development Funds. Better accountability and management of these funds will bring development to the communities.

In improvement of governance the Liberia Revenue Authority has been put in place and is effectively organizing to implement a rigorous collection effort. There will be no relenting in collecting due taxes from individuals, corporations, organizations and other entities. Duty free privileges from all, except those identified in laws and those under legal or contractual arrangements or for humanitarian purposes, will be withdrawn.

The draft Land Rights Act is considered truly revolutionary as this will grant land rights and security to the people of our communities. The Legislature is urged to pass this Law upon their return. The proposed Land Authority to administer and manage land rights and ease the many challenges in the distribution and the economic use of land needs to also be established by legislation.

The Central Bank of Liberia has increased the level of reserves from US\$5 million to gross reserves of US\$539 million. This has supported interventions to keep the exchange rate reasonably stabilized, despite the dual currency regime that facilitates an outflow of capital. Although caution is now required, the CBL has provided credit through the commercial banks to support Liberian businesses. A new Central Bank Building was dedicated as you know a few months ago.

In the public administration sector, we have increased compensation for civil servants from as low as \$15 per month to a minimum US\$125 as the minimum wage in Government. The level of budget allocation to public administration remains much too large, crowding out allocation for capital investment. Although reform efforts call for reducing this through civil service rationalization, we have been cautious to protect jobs for citizens who have little other alternatives.

We instituted a number of institutional and governance reforms leading to transparency, increased voice and accountability, responsiveness; enhanced freedoms, etc. The result, we have now some 56 newspapers, 35 radio stations and five television stations enjoying the fullest of freedom, sometimes without recognition of the constitutional responsibilities and other times undermining the economic potential and the stability of our country.

Security remain paramount if we will achieve our economic goals. In this regard, we restored honor to the Armed Forces of Liberia. With support from our partners. The United States of America, will train and continue to train a new professional army. Today, they are participating in international peace keeping duties, and are assisting in other civil works for improved infrastructure. Similarly, we continue to work with other security entities, particularly the Liberia National Police and the Bureau of Immigration and Naturalization readying these institutions increasingly to stand up as UNMIL stands down.

Given the scarcity of national resources, we went beyond budget allocation and official development aid to mobilize support from individual and institutional partners and we established the Philanthropy Secretariat in the Ministry of State. The Liberia Education Trust and the Sirleaf Market Women Fund provided and continued to provide support for school construction and repairs, girls' scholarships, market construction and literacy training. The Senior Executive Service, the Scott Program and the President Young Professional Program are all innovative efforts that made significant contribution to our national development.

We worked in the past four years to pass the required indicators, including control of corruption that made us eligible for Compact with the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) of the United States of America. This happened when the Vice President witnessed the signing by the Minister of Finance and Development Planning and the MCC for a US\$256.7 million dollar grant on November 2nd in Washington DC. Power is a major priority under the Compact. The promise of BIG LIGHTS tomorrow is now close at hand. The Compact is significant because it is a new partnership that would transcend the administrations of President Barack Obama and me.

Fellow Liberians, I can go on and on to name a number of gains we have made together but this will distract from the crux of our message today. Most of these modest achievements we have made together since we decided to take the democratic path to governance are well documented. For this, let us be grateful and appreciate what we have achieved together.

Let us now face stark reality. When we assumed leadership of the country, the most pressing problems to address was to ensure political stability through the rule of law, to strengthen the system of governance and deal with the structural issues in the way of economic growth. In this direction we addressed debt relief, while at the same seeking to attract foreign direct investments. We saw our GDP climb to as high as 9.5% and we launched Vision 2030 aimed at getting us to a middle income country by the year 2030. A five-year Agenda for Transformation was also formulated.

We are now faced with the prospects of a weakened economy due to the worsening decline of two of our most important commodities, (iron ore and rubber). In the mining and agriculture sectors, we are beginning to see layoffs, reduced income and taxes, scaling back in current activities, bankruptcy, and delayed investment outlays in various projects.

It is against this backdrop, fellow Liberians, that I felt it important to address you on these critical developments. It is not that the situation cannot be contained. We can and must do so. It is just that we have a lot to do together to ensure that we remain afloat and don't lose the momentum we have built coming out of the Ebola crisis.

Given our country's natural endowment, the private sector will continue to be the engine of sustainable growth. Thus, we have started negotiations with investors who require changes in investment plans given current global conditions. This is important to support and keep them positioned for continued and expanded investments in the future. At the same time, we are concluding arrangements with other investors to keep the economy more diversified.

I have set up various task forces to scan certain sectors and advise on what we need to do to enhance and foster productivity in these sectors. We see great potential in this initiative.

For example, I see that there are lots of promises in agriculture value-chain that demand private sector participation. Our young people must look at agriculture as a very attractive source of employment with

the potential to stimulate economic transformation. It is becoming abundantly clear that agro business holds great promise for wealth and job creation.

Also toward this important end, several teams will be visiting the country within the next few months to follow up on discussions and negotiations held in India and China. These will focus largely on infrastructure and value addition in the mining sector and in agriculture. The African Development Bank had a team in the country last week to assist us in quick wins in the agriculture sector. Fisheries, both marine and inland, have great potential to attract private investment and make a major contribution to food security and the economy.

As we approach the impending 2017 electoral cycle, there are many who are set to put everything in political context and begin the process of assigning blame and scoring political points at the expense of moving our country in the right direction. Like the Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund, Ms. Christine Lagarde, reminded us when she visited a few months ago, there will be plenty of time for politics and to score political points. But at this crucial period in our development process, it is time to remain collectively engaged on delivering for our people and our country.

The time for us to make our case for election is still ahead and we have more than enough time to score political points but we are still two years away. Let's remain focused on achieving more for our people. Let us remember, all of you remember, that what we achieve today will be your inheritance tomorrow.

I make this plea not only to members of my government, but our fellow citizens in the private sector and ordinary individuals interested in seeking political office, that we must all prepare to work harder for our beloved country and people.

Fellow Liberians; as we prepare for UNMIL drawdown, its implications on our collective determination to maintain peace and security in our country, we are mindful of 2017 and how crucial it is in the country's democratic transition. Already, some elements of our society are beginning to test our resolve to ensure the collective security of the country and its people through different acts of lawlessness and criminality. We are witnessing a rise in what appears to be ritualistic killings and armed robbery across the country – thus threatening our security.

Let me assure you, fellow citizens, that the government is fully aware of what is taking place and is currently taking steps to contain these wanton acts of violence. I am instructing the security forces to rigorously enforce the law to the letter and bring this ugly situation under immediate control. For those who have chosen the path to commit murder and armed robberies – let the word go forth that we are coming after you and that there would be no place for you – once caught – the full weight of the law will take its course.

There are specific things that our citizens can do to help as we manage the current crisis. We urge our citizens to refrain from violent protests and destruction of properties in the expression of rights to land, community benefits, etc. This will not be tolerated.

We call for better consideration and cooperation by non-state actors in their advocacy on behalf of their organizations and beneficiaries. This will open up opportunities for more private sector investors for all Liberians.

We too in Government have a major challenge in the role we play. There is need now for improvement in bureaucratic delays, better use of capacity, changes in procurement laws and processes and more vigorous enforcement of our corruption efforts.

Likewise, the media can be more investigative and less sensational in their reporting.

It is time for us to show our patriotism and the love and dedication to our country. This applies not only to the heads of the branches of Government or the cabinet; it applies to each ordinary Liberian. There are things that we will be doing in the next few weeks that require your full participation.

This is where, fellow Liberians, I truly need your support. Everyone doesn't have to start together but at least few people need to lead the way. And for those who have studied business, there is always a "first mover advantage". I encourage you to be the first mover.

Finally, my fellow citizens, the difficulties we face today are not unique. Many other countries faced similar challenges and continue to suffer the effects of global decline in commodity prices but we must be determined to demonstrate character, commitment and political will during these turbulence. I want you to know that we will leave no stone unturned to recover lost gains. I ask for your support as we take the action necessary to do so. I also ask for your full participation in everything that we do. We came together in unity and strength to defeat the Ebola virus and we must continue in the same character to face down this new challenge.

We can do so again. We can overcome.

IN UNION STRONG SUCCESS IS SURE AS WE REMAIN ONE NATION, ONE PEOPLE UNITED FOR SUSTAINABLE PEACE AND DEVELOPMENT.