

“Transforming Liberia through Reconciliation and Responsible Citizenship”
Remarks by H.E. President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf
At Celebration in Observance
Of the 166th Independence Anniversary of the Republic of Liberia
Tubmanburg, Bomi County
Friday, July 26, 2013

[Protocol]

We give thanks to the Almighty, who has brought us thus far, in this Land of Liberty, and who will see us through our national reconciliation to lasting peace and prosperity. With God, all things are possible. It is by His grace and mercy that we celebrate our 166th Anniversary as an independent and sovereign Republic. We give Him the glory for His multiple blessings bestowed upon our native land, our Liberia.

Liberia is, indeed, blessed. God has given us a great gift – this land, which is endowed with rich and abundant natural and human resources. At 166, we have a lot more to do with our land. We have to fully utilize the gift God has given us to our ultimate advantage and benefit. We can do this as a reconciled, united and responsible nation. We can make great leaps forward in progress and development when we understand who we are, what we are, and where we are headed.

Once again, I say Liberia is truly blessed! Our country stepped out of the shadow of civil war in 2003, and we are now in our tenth consecutive year of uninterrupted peace and progress, disproving the dire predictions of the pessimists about the fate that awaits post-conflict nations. It is fitting, therefore, that today we recognize the “Decade of Peace,” marking the tenth anniversary since we signed the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in Accra, Ghana, on August 18, 2003. Thanks go in no small measure to the regional and international support we have long enjoyed, and also because we, Liberians, a resilient people, have declared, “No More War,” and have committed ourselves to peace and reconciliation to develop this gift that God has given to us.

For the peace we enjoy, and the progress we are achieving, we are indebted to so many individuals and organizations, and we thank them for the tremendous effort on our behalf. Because of ECOWAS, Liberia is today considered as one of our Community’s flagship achievements. Because of the international community, supporting our security and reform effort through the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL), and also because of our development partners, we have maintained and sustained the peace for these past 10 years as we embark upon the path to transform our country through reconciliation, reconstruction and responsible citizenship.

On this “26 Day,” we welcome citizens from all over our country; we welcome our partners, and extend a special and heartfelt welcome to our special guests, whom we’ve already recognized [Former President Olusegun Obasanjo of Nigeria; Dr. Deborah Harding, President of the Liberian Education Trust-USA; Dr. David Knight, a HEARTT physician; and Mr. David Straz, philanthropist]. We know they travelled thousands of miles to come and be with us. Thank you, once again, for being here.

Holding these celebrations is a tradition we began in 2006, to take the celebration to the people in all of our 15 counties. We do so because they provide the opportunity for expanding and enhancing infrastructural development and also for national healing and reconciliation by bringing our people together as one. We have thus, after Montserrado, taken rotational celebration to Grand Bassa, Margibi, Bong, Nimba and Lofa Counties. As we did in 2006, we returned again to Montserrado County in 2012, where the official observance of this Day began, in the year 1850.

This year's celebration of our nation's 166th Anniversary has spanned three counties: Bomi, Gbarpolu and Grand Cape Mount. Co-hosting this event is a new experience, and we equally acknowledge the challenges associated with it. Our heartfelt thanks and appreciation to the officials and people of these three co-hosts for the very warm welcome and hospitality everywhere, as we toured the various sites to dedicate the many projects – all solid evidence of steady progress in western Liberia. We also acknowledge the Chiefs, Traditional Leaders, Superintendents and the Legislative Caucuses of our host counties. Each of you has been instrumental in this most successful operation and this celebration, with Mother Nature doing its part by holding back the rain.

We commenced the celebrations in Monrovia, last Friday, with the Investiture Ceremony, which we are continuing today, when we conferred distinctions upon citizens and friends of Liberia, in recognition of their accomplishments. Those honored include centenarians, educators, doctors, lawyers, diplomats, journalists, and more.

Last Saturday, our focus was young disadvantaged girls. Under the aegis of the Ministry of Gender and Development, we dedicated the renovated Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), in Sinkor; a Science Building at Bromley Mission, in Clay Ashland; and the rehabilitated girls' dormitory at Ricks Institute, in Virginia.

In Bopolu, on Sunday, we held the Thanksgiving and Intercessory Worship Service, hosted by the Bopolu Bible Community Church. We then paid a second visit to the once isolated Belle Yalla, site of the once notorious prison. But this time, with the once invincible Goma Hill conquered, we were able to drive all of the way there to spend the night and dedicate the Bopolu to Belle Yalla Road, which we know will bring countless opportunities to the people along that roadway. As stated before, this place of horror has now become a place of hope. Other dedications in Gbarpolu included the 16th Judicial Circuit Court – the very impressive and the largest such facility outside Monrovia – and the Finance Ministry's Gbarpolu Cash Center, aimed at payroll decentralization.

In Robertsport, on Tuesday, we joined in the Thanksgiving and Intercessory Prayer by the Supreme Islamic Assembly of Grand Cape Mount County, in collaboration with the National Muslim Council of Liberia. Between Tuesday and Wednesday, Vice President Boakai and concerned Ministers traversed the length and breadth of the county and dedicated over 30 development projects, including roads and bridges, schools and libraries, health facilities, street lights, police and immigration posts, and so much more. Also to be dedicated in Cape Mount, tomorrow is the poultry farm of former President Olusegun Obasanjo, where chickens are being raised to supply eggs to the local market. President Obasanjo, once again, we salute you for this investment and the confidence which is implied in Liberia's future.

Yesterday, here in Tubmanburg, we launched, through the Ministry of Health & Social Welfare, “A Promise Renewed-Liberia’s Commitment to Child Survival.” An initiative of UNICEF and USAID, it holds Liberia to honor its pledge to redouble efforts to reduce under-five mortality in all counties by 2015. At that event, we noted the progress in our health service, where it was reported by the World Health Organization that among the countries so challenged, Liberia is Number One in the reduction of infant mortality under five years.

Together, we dedicated or inspected some 26 development projects, among them, the regional office of the West African Examinations Council (WAEC), the Presidential Guest House, Chief’s Compound, Superintendent’s Residence, and, among many initiatives, including the modern Gbah Market Building, in Gbah Jakeh, which gives due recognition to our market women, the driving force of our economy. Particular commendation goes to the leadership of our county – the Speaker, the legislators and other prominent citizens – who are transforming Tubmanburg and other communities through their private endeavor.

Today, we are holding the Official Programme to mark our Independence Day. We have just heard the stirring National Oration, delivered by Cllr. Varney Gboto-Nambi Sherman, a proud son of Grand Cape Mount County who was born and educated there, and who is today one of Liberia’s pre-eminent lawyers and politicians. As we celebrate our nation, we say a special thank you for your insightful recommendations. I only wish that I had invited you to be the Orator three years ago so that today we might be celebrating the implementation of those recommendations, including submitted Bills on the Code of Conduct, Dual Citizenship and Residency Expansion, and we ask you to use your considerable influence to join us in appeal to the Honorable Legislature for their early passage of these important Bills which he has endorsed.

Today, we have been treated to all of the ingredients that go into making every July 26 such a Special Day – musical selections, cultural performance, and so much more. Early this morning, the guns fired and our National Emblem was hoisted, signaling our nation’s 166th Independence Anniversary. I officiated, as Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Liberia, at the Military Inspection of Units and the March Pass-in-Review at the C.H. Dewey Sports Ground.

Of course, no “26” would be complete without the traditional Children’s Party, and so that will be happening on tomorrow, in several places throughout the country.

As stated before, next year, 2014, it is on to Sinoe and Grand Kru, with the main activities in Greenville; in 2015, we will celebrate in Maryland, River Gee and Grand Gedeh, with the main activities in Zwedru; and, in 2016, it is on to River Cess, to celebrate what we hope will be a county transformed.

Transforming Liberia through Reconciliation and Responsible Citizenship

My fellow Liberians:

The first six years of our administration was our period of stabilization – where our goal was to formulate the laws, strategies and policies to reform state structures by changing procedures and technologies to make existing systems more effective. In this second term, our goal is transform our nation economically, as well as socially, guided by our *National Vision 2030*, our *Agenda for Transformation*, and our *Strategic Roadmap on National*

Peacebuilding, Healing and Reconciliation which, together, are charting the path to the future we desire. It is a privilege for me to be a part of the leadership of our nation in this era of transformation – a process that will positively impact every aspect of our society.

On June 20, we launched the implementation of the Reconciliation Roadmap at a National Dialogue Conference on Peace and Reconciliation. At that event, speaker after speaker called upon us to set aside past differences and hurt, to embrace peace and reconciliation for a united Liberia. Through the provisions of the Roadmap, we seek to account for the past; address present challenges; and collectively aspire for a better and shared future. To claim the future, we are coming together to reflect and heal the past.

Our country continues to make steady strides in transitioning from recovery and reconstruction to inclusive growth and sustainable human development. We should not forget that our conflict was recognized as having two root causes: the systematic marginalization and exclusion of significant proportions of the population from the political process; and an economic crisis that emerged through the 1970s and 1980s, leading to increasing impoverishment of a majority of our people.

Moving away from the conflict requires a two-pronged approach: political reform and economic development, both of which need to be fully inclusive in terms of geographical and social scope, enabling greater “voice” and space for participation by citizens of Liberia in political processes and economic empowerment.

Oftentimes, when the discourse turns to reconciliation, the diehards exclaim that reconciliation cannot take place because the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) have not been implemented.

Let me reiterate that our government is fully committed to the implementation of the TRC recommendations in those cases where they are in compliance with our Constitution and laws. In this regard, we are pleased that the Peace-Building Office in the Ministry of Internal Affairs has completed a detailed study which shows clearly the action already taken on the 200-plus recommendations and suggestions that had been made by the Report. Although this remains a work in progress, the results will be released to the public. The Independent National Commission on Human Rights (INCHR), which has the mandate, under the TRC Law, to ensure the implementation of the recommendations, submitted a work plan to the Executive and the Legislature over a year ago. This includes the Palava Hut System, which is seen as an essential ingredient of the reconciliation process. A reconstitution of that body will help us to accelerate the implementation of those recommendations.

I am pleased, in this regard, that our Orator has offered his assistance, and that of some of his colleagues, to help us carry out some of these activities. I appeal to him to join one of the initiatives that are aimed at ensuring that those legal recommendations are, indeed, implemented.

In searching for lasting solutions to our problems, we have found that when we share the work of governing with the people of Liberia, we foster an environment of inclusiveness and promote sustainable development. This is possible because in combining our energies, we can achieve more; in sharing our fortunes fairly, we do justice and promote peace; and in participating in decisions that affect us, we can together take responsibility for our destiny.

We have chosen a path of decentralization of decision-making and government authority, so as to improve governance, increase transparency, enhance accountability and, ultimately, deliver better public services. In keeping with this policy, the Agriculture, Education, Health and Gender Ministries and, more recently, the Civil Service Agency, have begun to move their operations to the counties, and that process will continue for all sectors.

However, transformation of Liberia through decentralization also requires responsible citizenship. We need to transform our nation from a system in which the Government has all of the responsibilities and the citizens have only rights and privileges.

Being responsible citizens mean we do not stand in the way of progress. Responsible citizens do not build homes in such a way that construction of the roadway is delayed, and building the railway to transport the iron ore cannot proceed. We should not threaten the start date of bringing cheaper electricity to our people because construction of the hydro is hampered as a result of people having planted rubber trees in the basin where the water will flow. Such actions cost Government additional money we did not budget for, in order to settle the many claims. We ask you to join us, as responsible citizens, to do the right thing. It means doing your bit to help our country advance, and to accelerate its growth.

More importantly, we can only become responsible citizens by changing our attitudes and our behavior. We need, as Liberians, to think positively; to balance criticism with constructive solutions; to love our country and ourselves; to want to uplift ourselves and everything around us; to be patriotic. That's what citizen responsibility is all about. That's what progress is all about.

Let me state emphatically that although health and education and agriculture will remain of the highest priorities, we are determined to give emphasis to infrastructure, particularly road and power, for these facilities enhance the quality of service in all sectors. We will follow this chosen path of other countries which have achieved the transformation we seek.

Although a full report will be made to you in the January Annual Message, I thought to mention the progress that we have made in the development of infrastructure, despite the challenges. We are well under way to meet our promise to road-connect the different capitals of our counties. Our commitment to provide electricity to our people is showing promise, through an increase in the number of customers served in Monrovia, the establishment of the first mini-hydro, and our confidence that the Mount Coffee Hydro Plant will come on-stream at the end of 2015. This will supplement the additional power that will be provided between now and that time.

Several places now enjoy solar lights, and I am delighted to report that our cross-border initiative, through which we will see eighteen communities start to receive electricity. As of three nights ago, the lines for the Nimba portion of the project were being tested, to the joy of the residents of Luguatuo, Duoplay, Karnplay, Sanniquellie and Ganta, who now have street lights in those communities. Testing will continue throughout the remaining lines in the county, and by August residences and businesses will start being connected to the electricity grid. We hope that by Christmas, the citizens of Maryland and Grand Gedeh will experience similar joy, Nimba having come on-stream by the end of August.

The same progress can be reported in the provision of water and sanitation, coming from absolutely zero public service in 2006 to where we are today in the rehabilitation of the

Monrovia system and six other cities as well. As we move around the country, the progress is clear regarding the clean water provided through thousands of boreholes and sanitation to an increasing number of facilities.

We are also pleased about agriculture, and we emphasize its importance for economic development. We are pleased that our Ministry of Agriculture has developed local rice seed for planting, and provided the market exclusively with local seed rice since the year 2010. Apart from providing all the rice that the World Food Programme needs for its School Feeding Programme, the Ministry has now released 22,000 bags of rice on the local market, further ensuring a continuing decrease in the level of foreign exchange used for the importation of rice.

A few years ago, as regards the involvement of our youth in activities outside the capital city, we initiated a program that recruited young people to work in the areas of health and education in the rural areas. We see this as the start of a National Youth Service Program, and we join the Orator, who has suggested same and will work with the concerned ministries to ensure the continuation and expansion of the program.

We are also pleased that in partnership with the Peace Corps Volunteers, new Liberian Volunteers will be placed alongside Peace Corps Volunteers in high schools throughout the country, beginning next month, to improve student performance. A total number of 120 college graduates are now being trained by the Peace Corps to participate in this program.

In order to promote the private sector, new regulations are being proposed under a Liberianization program. These include an established minimum for local participation in the procurement of goods and services. The proposed local content policy will include, but not be limited to, the establishment of policies regarding foreign and domestic ownership in registered companies.

Everything we are doing is specifically targeted for the growth and development of our small and medium enterprises, and is necessary to provide a clear, focused direction for Liberia's private sector development. We only ask that those targeted for such benefit act responsibly and honestly in their operations.

Abroad, Liberia continues to enjoy the goodwill and respect of other nations. We were honored to represent our country, and our continent, on the United Nations High-Level Panel on the Post-2015 Development Agenda. We will perform a similar role, as Chair of the African Development Bank's High-Level Panel on Fragile States, and also Chair the African Union's Peer Review Mechanism.

Despite our size and the challenges we face, Liberia, a month ago, deployed a small contingent of troops for the ECOWAS, now United Nations, peacekeeping mission in Mali. The feedback I am getting is that our highly professional and well-trained soldiers are performing very well. Liberia's participation is our small way of giving back, after the many years in which ECOWAS, the UN and other friends and partners intervened to restore peace, order and stability here during our own darkest hour. Our participation in a peacekeeping operation signals our intention to resume our historic role as a peacemaker in the region and on the continent.

Fellow Citizens:

Today we celebrate our collective and individual contribution to our country's development and progress. Let us re-sensitize and renew ourselves, in terms of our patriotism and responsibility. Let us love our country; this is fundamental to progress. Join us in nation-building. Join us in the processes of change. Make a small sacrifice, for the good of ourselves and our country.

We have work to do. We must get on with the task of building a better Liberia for all Liberians. We must work together in the spirit of teamwork, cooperation and love for our country. We must build a vibrant and strong Liberia of which we can be proud.

We have come a long way. We have survived the worst; there is no turning back. Let us seize the moment, and make the most of what God has given us. The goodwill and respect for Liberia, by the international community and the majority of Liberians, remains strong, as they believe in us and they know that the promise can be fulfilled and the dream can be realized. Let us turn the opportunity into success.

To everyone present, to Liberians and residents throughout our nation, to our compatriots in the Diaspora, to our special guests, to our partners and friends, Happy 26!

May God continue to bless Liberia!