

ANNUAL MESSAGE

To the

First Session of the
53rd National Legislature of the Republic of Liberia

Theme: “Reflecting the Past, Claiming the Future”

By

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President of the Republic of Liberia

Capitol Hill, Monrovia

Delivered Monday, 23rd January 2012

Mr. Vice President and President of the Senate;
Mr. Speaker;
Mr. President Pro-Tempore;
Honorable Members of the Legislature;
Your Honor the Chief Justice and Associate Justices of the Supreme Court, and
Members of the Judiciary;
The Dean and Members of the Cabinet and Other Government Officials;
Mr. Doyen, Excellencies and Members of the Diplomatic Corps;
Her Excellency, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General of the United
Nations in Liberia;
Officers and Staff of the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL);
The Command Officer-in-Charge, Men and Women of the Armed Forces of Liberia;
Former Officials of Government;
Traditional Leaders, Chiefs and Elders;
The Clergy;
Political and Business Leaders;
Officers and Members of the National Bar Association;
Labor and Trade Unions;
Youth and Student Organizations;
Civil Society Organizations; Members of the Press;
Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen;
Special Guests;
Fellow Liberians:

INTRODUCTION

As we celebrate the beginning of the New Year, we must again give praise and thanks to Almighty God for his guidance and protection of our country and its people. In memory of the dear dead departed, who are no longer with us, I ask you to join me in a moment of silent meditation.

Thank you.

Honorable Legislators: A week ago, we gathered at this Capitol for the swearing-in of the President and Vice President of our Republic to a second term in office – the first successful, peaceful democratic transition seen in our country in twenty years. In that Inaugural Address, we called upon the Liberian people to be patriotic, to put country first and to defend the tenets of freedom and democracy that are vital to our prosperity.

One week on, we gather once more, in compliance with the constitutional requirement, to deliver an Annual Message on the administration's legislative program and the state of our nation. It is an honor to perform this duty for the seventh time overall, and for the first time of our second term. Subsequently, we will submit to your honorable body a full operational report and reference document on the progress made and the challenges faced during the past six years.

Mr. Vice President, Mr. Speaker, Mr. President Pro-Tempore, Honorable Legislators: I can report to you that Liberia is poised for prosperity. We have laid a strong foundation, we have faced the crossroads and chosen the path of peace, and we stand here today ready to reap the rewards and embrace a new Liberia.

Going beyond that which is required by law, I intend, in this Message, to focus on the new Liberia – the legacy of our generation – the themes I highlighted in my Inaugural Address. My administration will spend the next six years making the government and economy work for our people by reducing inequities, ensuring equal opportunity and providing guarantees of social justice. This is true reconciliation. We will also address more urgent issues that have resulted from tensions, war and marginalization over the years. These include land reform, ethnic strife and inadequate communication between the Government and the people.

My fellow Liberians: Our historic election reminded us that we are all part of something greater – something more than individuals, communities, parties or

tribes. We belong to a family, citizens of a proud nation and we are bound together by a common destiny. As I said last week, there is no country, no society, no people in human history who have advanced only on the actions of their leaders. Every successful society has attained that success because each individual member played a role, made a contribution. Liberia will only move forward on the hard work of Liberians, and this is the essence of patriotism, this is the essence of love for our common patrimony, Liberia, our only home. Under my administration, the government will do all it can to make this possible, but we cannot do it alone. The people, our people – you, Honorable Legislators, you, my fellow citizens, must play the leading role in our next chapter of national renewal.

LEGISLATIVE AGENDA

Mr. Vice President and President of the Senate: You have been a steadfast and dependable partner and confidante as we have taken this journey for re-election and now commencing, together as a team, our second term of office. Thank you for your invaluable oversight and guidance in governance of the State.

Mr. Speaker, Mr. President Pro-Tempore, Honorable Members of the Legislature: Congratulations to you Mr. Speaker, on winning your legislative seat and the confidence of your colleagues for a second stint as Speaker of the House. Mr. Senate Pro-Tempore: congratulations, too, on your victory. We look forward to a close working relationship with the leadership of the 53rd Legislature, just as we had with the 52nd.

I want to congratulate the members of the 52nd Legislature who were re-elected to this body and, in the same vein, to thank, on behalf of the Liberian people, former legislators. It was my honor and privilege to serve the Liberian people with you over the first term. Thank you for your service to the nation, and especially for your diligence in enacting over 125 pieces of legislation into law. In welcoming the incoming members, let me express the hope that we can continue to make tremendous progress together in consolidating the peace, advancing our development agenda and bringing prosperity to our people. The strength of our democratic process will be measured by the coordination and independence of the three branches of Government.

Honorable Speaker, Members of the Legislature: I am pleased to note that during the Sixth and final Session of the 52nd Legislature, my Office submitted seventeen bills for enactment. Ten were decided upon, and were among thirty bills approved by you and submitted to my Office for approval. It is my

understanding that the remaining seven, along with other bills previously submitted, are in Committee Rooms.

These Bills, important to the reconstruction of our nation, include: A Bill to Protect Whistleblowers; A Bill for Establishment of the Rural and Renewable Energy Agency; The Decent Work Bill - our new labor law; A Bill of the Legislature to prescribe A Code of Conduct for all public servants of the three branches of Government of Liberia and parastatal bodies; An Amendment to the LACC Act; A Bill to Amend Chapter 4, Subchapter C, Parts I and II of the Domestic Relations Laws relating to Adoption; A Bill Adopting a New Payment System for Liberia; A Bill to Amend Chapter 12 and 18 of the Judiciary Laws; Chapter 7 and 22 of the Civil Procedure Law; Chapter 20 and 23 of the Criminal Procedure Law; and Chapter 50 of the Penal Law; inter alia, relating to Juries, Jurisdiction of Magistrates' Court, and Sentencing, among others. As required by law, I will be resubmitting these Bills, and I hope that you will play your part in enacting them into law speedily.

We also seek your usual support and cooperation for the enactment of draft legislation we will be submitting before you, which have significant implications for the achievement of our goal of national renewal and for the protection of our people. These include, but are not limited to: the National Insurance Act; the National Insurance Commission Act; the revised Act providing for Retirement Pension for the elected officials and political appointees who have served their country; the Copyright Act of Liberia; the Industrial Property Act; the State-Owned Enterprises Act; and an Act to Re-organize the Executive Branch of Government which, when enacted, will enable us to enhance efficiency, reduce duplication, conserve resources, and promote our national development agenda.

Mr. Speaker and Mr. President Pro-Tempore: My government will continue to work closely with the Legislative Branch in ratifying instruments that will continue to advance our national agenda and raise the profile of Liberia in this region and the world.

THE ECONOMY: A CLIMATE FOR PROSPERITY

Honorable Legislators: As you are aware, we inherited a heavily indebted country and immediately set out to relieve our people of that burden. But more than anything, we committed ourselves to creating the structures and institutions for responsibly managing our public finances. We have not wavered in that commitment.

Over the last year, due to the effects of climate change and European financial contagion, we witnessed the beginnings of worsening economic conditions around the world. I am pleased to report that despite these global disruptions, the Liberian economy continued its strong six-year growth, providing more jobs and incomes for Liberians.

We expect the final GDP growth for 2011 to be at least 7 percent, helped in no small part by the restart of iron-ore exportation. A higher level, about 9 percent, is expected in 2012. In the midst of a looming global recession, this is no small achievement. Over the last year, our economy has doubled and has been recognized as one of the fastest growing economies of the world. At the same time inflation, which averaged around 7.5 percent for 2011, has been decreasing and is expected to reduce to 4-5 percent in 2012 based on an expected fall in commodity prices. A growing economy and declining inflation mean that our people have more money to spend and the value of this money is retained.

Looking ahead, operations from iron-ore mining, logging, smallholder farmers, and small and medium enterprises (SMEs) are expected to reinforce growth in the coming year, and to sustain higher rates of growth over the medium term.

Our government budgets continue to grow. Total projected revenue for fiscal year 2011/2012 stood at US\$516 million – 32 percent above the revenue generated in fiscal year 2010-2011, over US\$127 million more than for 2010. In six short years, our national budget has quadrupled. Our partners are also more confident in our use of this money. As a consequence, direct budget support grew to almost \$40.3 million in 2011 from \$1 million in 2006, with the European Union (EU) as the main contributor.

To show our commitment to longer-term economic planning, this year we are moving to a three-year budget cycle. We will thus be in a better position to complete long-term infrastructure projects such as roads and hospitals, because we will be able set aside money for them over a three-year period.

The multiyear budget preparation process of fiscal years 2012/13 to 2014/15 has commenced with the Budget Formulation Calendar being finalized and initial resource envelope developed. The Finance Ministry has commenced the preparation of the third Budget Framework Paper which will align government budget process with the national development agenda.

The period January to December 9, 2011 accounted for a total government expenditure of US\$385.70 million, 39.2 percent more than the previous year's expenditure. The increase in fiscal space has enabled targeted public investments in the core and project budgets.

In fiscal year 2011/2012, our government has committed 8 percent of the national budget, through the Project Budget, to public investments through programs and capital expenditure. In addition, another 12 percent of the core budget is targeted at capital expenditure.

Accordingly, we have managed to spend more resources targeting the key areas for development: education, health and infrastructure, which have consistently received above average rates of expenditure growth of 5.4 percent each year. Since 2006, we have made significant progress on ensuring transparency and accountability in our expenditure allocations and management in these sectors have seen almost 42 times more funding than they did when our government first came into office. This is an achievement of which we can all be proud. We have made government serve the people, and targeted our resources to invest in our people.

The foreign exchange reserves position of the Central Bank of Liberia (CBL) remains strong. It increased to US\$327.1 million at end-December 2011, from US\$288.1 million over the same period in 2010. The build-up of reserves has placed the CBL in a better position to help maintain the value of the Liberian dollar, serve as a bank of last resort and support a stable macroeconomic environment for growth, development and social progress.

The banking sector continues to expand. There are now nine banks operating in the country, with 78 branches. Ten of the fifteen counties now have at least one bank branch. Total loans and advances increased by 28 percent, to L\$15.7 billion by end-November 2011, compared with the same period in 2010. Credit to the private sector was 34.4 percent of GDP in the year 2011.

There is still, however, the problem of a high interest rate and the number of non-performing loans. This hurts the profitability of banks and makes it harder for the public to access credit. The Central Bank has done much, and will continue to do more to make credit available to the public. The public, for its part, has a responsibility to repay the banks, and the courts have a responsibility to act quickly and fairly in the judgment of defaulters.

The CBL also launched a credit stimulus initiative for Liberian-owned businesses, making US\$5 million available for soft lending. So far, some 29 Liberian-owned businesses have benefited from this initiative, employing 2,700 individuals either as employees or independent contractors. Just a few days ago, the CBL made funding, equivalent to about US\$2.7 million, available to the microfinance sector for soft lending, and plans are under way to inject additional resources into the economy for agriculture and general Liberian-owned businesses. These are resources of the CBL at work for the economy. If this nationwide project is to

work, then each of us must play a role. If the government endeavors to make loans available at reasonable interest rates, our people have to act responsibly and repay the loans.

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Liberia continues to maintain excellent relations with our neighbors, as we continue to serve as Chairman of the Mano River Union and, for the first time, Liberia will take on the important position of Vice President of our regional institution, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). Our relations with our partners remain strong, productive and mutually rewarding. Over the last year, 15 Ambassadors presented Letters of Credence. There are, currently, 13 Resident Foreign Ambassadors in Monrovia, 19 non-Resident Foreign Ambassadors accredited to Liberia, and 12 Honorary Consuls General resident in Monrovia.

We are pleased to note that the United Kingdom has advised us that they will be reopening their diplomatic mission near Monrovia. As a demonstration of the strength of the ties between our two countries, the United States, on January 17, opened its new, state-of-the-art \$164 million Embassy at Graystone, in Mamba Point, and has made Liberia a family duty station.

YOUTH EMPOWERMENT AND OPPORTUNITY

Mr. Vice President, Mr. Speaker, Mr. President Pro-Tempore, Honorable Legislators, my fellow Liberians: As I noted in my Inaugural Address, we have heard the message of our young people. We must do our best to provide equal opportunity to them, whether they are in Monrovia or in Picnicess.

With over 60 percent of our citizens below the age of thirty-five, Liberia has one of the world's youngest populations. Many caution that this youthful demographic is our greatest risk, the most likely source of instability. As I see it – and I'm sure you'll see it – our youth are the future of our country, and their future is in our hands. If we invest well and educate them, our future will be bright; if we invest poorly, fail to nurture and develop our young talent, then our future will look dim. I believe that over the next six years we can make our young people Liberia's greatest strength; we can harness the energy, enthusiasm and desire of our children to drive Liberia's future success. It is therefore, our youth, not diamonds, gold, oil or iron ore – that will be the driving force behind the nation's development and economic growth.

Because we will center our long-term development strategy on our young people, we have to adequately prepare them for the future. Today we can say something we could not say six years ago: We have rehabilitated our schools and built several new ones. There are more children, from more diverse backgrounds, in our schools than at any time in our history. Their education must provide the knowledge and nurture the creativity that will allow our nation to thrive in the new economy. We have opened the doors of community colleges to our students in rural Liberia.

Nevertheless, as you know, our students continue to perform poorly on the West African examinations. Our sixth and ninth graders are below average in math and reading, and our twelfth graders rank near the bottom. Many of our students graduating from high school and college are reading and writing at the junior high or elementary school level. For these young people to lead us to a more prosperous future, we have to invest more in their basic education.

With your support, we will set higher academic standards for public schools and will develop and introduce a voluntary national test similar to the WAEC exams to measure the progress of our students.

With the Africa Coast to Europe (ACE) cable we landed right here in Monrovia last year, and our resolve to rehabilitate our hydro, we are well on our way to our goal of connecting our classrooms to the Internet. Therefore, while we continue to increase access, over the next six years we will focus on the *quality* of our educational system, improving standards so that our graduates can compete with their counterparts across the region. The first step was the passage, last year, of the Education Reform Act, but we must move quickly to improve teacher quality and make higher standards the norm.

The great majority of our teachers do a fine job. But in too many schools, teachers don't have the university majors or even minors in the subjects they teach. New teachers should be required to pass performance exams, and all teachers should know the subjects they are teaching. Next year's budget will contain new resources to help them reach higher standards. As we strive to bring excellence to every part of Liberia, we will continue to create the economic incentive some of the best and brightest of our university graduates to become teachers. Those teachers who do not measure up will be dismissed.

We also need to improve our vocational and higher educational sectors. In our long-term strategy to equip our youth with marketable skills and expertise, we will provide incentives for our high school graduates to pursue university

degrees in technical disciplines – physics, engineering, mathematics, biology and chemistry.

We will continue to expand vocational opportunities by, among other measures, developing the Booker Washington Institute to increase the number of students, the variety of disciplines and modernize the training equipment. We will partner with the Liberia Opportunities Industrialization Center (LOIC) to open and expand training centers all around the country. We will partner with the Red Cross to expand their program of literacy and vocational training whose prime target are ex-combatants. With support from the Government of China, the Monrovia Vocational Training Center (MVTC) will, finally starting in April, receive a US\$10 million expansion grant. We are also consulting with mining companies to share with government their projected growth areas so that we can target our training programs to meet their emerging needs.

We will make provision for our young people outside of Monrovia. Government's decentralization program will create economic incentives for young people to remain in their counties or even begin migration away from the Capital. This will entail creating the environment to encourage entrepreneurship so that young people can start their own businesses and be self-employed.

We must pay special attention to our girls. It will be to Liberia's benefit when our women are educated and contribute as equal partners in government and the private sector. As I travel around the country, it breaks my heart to see what are, virtually, babies having babies – teenage girls raising families when they should be in school. Large numbers of young girls live on the streets, and resort to prostitution to make a living. Many girls, some very young, have their dignity and their future undermined by the viciousness of rape. This must be unacceptable truths for all of us. We therefore plan to partner, where possible, with faith-based institutions, with the churches, to reopen and expand girls' boarding schools, to reduce the pressure on our young girls and provide a nurturing environment where they can learn and become contributing members of society.

My fellow Liberians: While the government will do all this and more, our young people also have a role to play. Over the Christmas vacation, as you know, we established a short-term jobs program to put money in the pockets of many of our youths for the holidays. While mistakes were made in the planning and implementation of the program, the response of some of our young people was appalling. The vandalism to property exceeded the total worth of the program itself. While we will continue to defend the right to protest within the confines of the law, there is no room for wanton violence and destruction. Thus, the many

young people arrested during the Christmas riots will be prosecuted and, if found guilty, they will go to jail and serve out their term.

Honorable Members of the Legislature: Last May, the Senior Advisor Office embarked on a Social Enterprise Development Program (EDP), to make Liberians self-sustainable and enterprising. The program earmarks youth and women in economically challenged communities in Montserrado County. Since its inception, 18 groups have benefited. Today, we are pleased to have with us Ms. Elizabeth Dorkin and Ms. Vero Santi. These are the owners of the Doe Community Women Tailoring Shop. With an initial investment of just US\$5,271 Elizabeth and Vero rented a shop, purchased sewing machines and other materials, and have already enrolled and successfully trained 150 women.

Also with us are Emmanuel Parrison and Burphy George, from Strapper FC in New Kru Town. Strapper FC is comprised of 17 young people. With an investment of US\$10,627 a shop was rented, furnished with play station, barbering materials and two motorbikes to start a business. Today, these young people who were once neglected have a sustainable source of income to help feed themselves and contribute to their educational advancement.

The stories of these young people show that they have empowered themselves through their efforts and industry. We hope they will serve as a motivation and incentive to others. Let us all give them a big applause.

A MORE JUST ECONOMY AS A PATH TO PROSPERITY

My fellow Liberians: In our first term, our task was to lay a foundation, a springboard, for the progress of our great nation. We have done this, with stability, growth, debt relief and new infrastructure. That foundation was a means to an end, and that end is the improving quality of life for ALL our citizens. This is our mission today: to create the infrastructure, jobs, services and conditions that will not just meet our people's needs but improve their lives. Over the next six years, therefore, we must grow our economy to accommodate all Liberians, from the biggest landowner to the smallest petty trader. In our first term we lifted Liberia; now we will lift Liberians!

How, then, do we transform our old economy from a plantation or concessionaire economy perceived to run for the benefit of a few, to a modern, inclusive economy? There is no magic wand that we can wave to turn our subsistence agricultural economy into a vibrant manufacturing economy. We cannot turn our uneducated and unemployed youths into doctors, lawyers and professors overnight. However, there is hope; there's hope for a better future if we all work

toward it, in which every Liberian has access to a decent education, is gainfully employed, and every young person can own their own business. Such a future is within our grasp.

We must start by rebuilding our infrastructure. It is impossible to create new Liberian industries without the energy to operate machinery, the roads to transport supplies and products, and the ports to cheaply export these goods to foreign markets. The only way to create a robust economy is to supply access to these economic essentials – the electricity, road and port infrastructure that fuel these businesses. Without this national backbone of high-quality, affordable infrastructure, our other efforts will be in vain. This, then, must be a top priority.

We have laid the foundation for the task ahead of us. We have restored energy to Monrovia, and have connected 5,000 customers to the public grid. We have rehabilitated over 1,000 miles of up-country roads and built 400 miles of feeder roads to connect communities. We have restored Monrovia's roads, made the Robertsfield Highway driveable again, and are on the final stretch of the Cotton Tree to Buchanan road. The contract for reconstruction and paving the Red Light to Gbarnga road will finally be signed this week, and the process will commence on the Gbarnga/Ganta/Mendicorma segment.

Concerning our ports, last year we signed the concession to the Freeport of Monrovia, and we are well on the way to restoring the marginal wharf. We have made progress. But we have a long way to go to make the Bassa, Sinoe and Harper ports functional and modernized. Similarly, we have some ways to go to modernize our international gateway, Roberts International Airport.

In the next six years, we are determined to build the infrastructure of the next generation – a set of public works that will be used for the next fifty years and beyond. Starting this year, we will start the process for the restoration of the Mt. Coffee hydropower station, thereby returning the fast-flowing waters of the St. Paul River to its rightful place as the primary source of energy for our nation. We will build the accompanying transmission and distribution lines so that all nearby counties have access to this great energy source.

While Mt. Coffee is being rehabilitated, we will add another 30 MW of power to our existing base, expanding electricity to Monrovia and its environs. In the next five months, the Liberia Electricity Corporation (LEC) will connect 5,000 households, followed by another 5,000 customers in the five months after that.

By expanding the customer base, we hope to be able to reduce the cost of electricity – too high today, at fifty cents per kilowatt hour. This, in turn, will

relieve the pressure on small businesses and allow them to increase their profit margins. If the economy is to work for all Liberians and not only for big concessions, then we have to generate electricity that is reliable, affordable and accessible to a greater number of people. This is what we mean when we say we will make the economy more just.

In expanding opportunities, we will continue to invest in the construction of roads to connect our cities, improve access to markets and reduce the cost of transportation. Roads connect us as a people and help farmers reach towns, and townspeople to reach cities. They are the arteries of any nation. In the next six years, we will not have rebuilt our entire road network, but we will aim to have completed as much as we can.

As proof of my government's intent, in the next 150 days we will lay out a plan for the construction of all major roads in Liberia over the next six years. By making it easier to travel between our cities, we will reduce the price of food and other commodities. We will make it easier for traders to move their goods around the country. This is investment in a just economy.

While we expand physical infrastructure, we will continue to improve access to quality services for our people. We have already increased treated water from 3 million gallons in 2010 to 5.5 million gallons a day in 2011, toward a target of 11 million gallons by the end of the year. This will enable the Liberia Water and Sewer Corporation (LWSC) to add 100,000 more customers to the 700,000 it currently serves.

We are partnering with multilateral organizations to complete the restoration of pipe-borne water to Buchanan, Zwedru and Kakata, and finalizing negotiations with our partners on the rehabilitation of facilities in Robertsport, Sanniquellie and Voinjama. We have also completed assessments of four cities in Nimba and Lofa Counties. We are considering a public-private partnership (PPP) with the Coca-Cola Company to provide clean water to areas beyond LWSC's capacity.

Because we are expanding access to health and social services, the proportion of people living within five kilometers of a health facility increased from 41 percent in 2006 to 71 percent in 2011. The number of health facilities increased from 354 in 2006 to about 550 in 2011.

For quality health, we will continue to provide resources to health centers and expand the healthcare workforce, whose numbers have increased from 3,966 in 2006 to 8,553 last year, and with the skilled birth attendant to population ratio

increasing from less than one per 10,000 people in 2006 to six per 10,000 people in 2011.

Beyond access to potable water and adequate health services, we must also tackle our people's urgent need for decent shelter. To address our housing deficit, the National Housing Authority (NHA) has concluded arrangements for the construction, in two phases, of a low- to middle-income housing community development in Schiefflin Town, with up to 600 units. Other initiatives include the NASSCORP/NHA Brewerville Project, the Buchanan Housing Project, and the NOCAL Housing Project. A long-term home mortgage finance program is being finalized to enhance this effort.

Over the next year, NHA will focus both on building affordable homes and providing complete urban environments, to serve as viable living alternatives to Monrovia. This will help ensure a more decentralized and dispersed national population.

The issue of land and land rights continues to constrain our housing and agriculture programs. The Land Commission will be given more support to address the excess or inappropriate use of land by concessions, the holding of undeveloped prime urban land, and the many areas of illegality relating to land use and purchases. This will provide impetus to our program for prioritizing agriculture, with a focus on small farmers who represent the potential to ensure our nation's food security. This focus has already shown results, with more than the doubling of production of our basic staples, rice and cassava, by small farmers.

GOVERNANCE AND RECONCILIATION

Honorable Legislators, my fellow Liberians: As we marvel at our progress, and look forward to the future, we can never forget that all our progress has been possible because we are at peace. To guarantee this, for the last six years, with the help of our international partners, we have started the process of transforming our security forces into a modern professional, defense force. Starting this year, we must begin preparing for the eventual departure of our friends in UNMIL. This leaves us with an important question: What else do we need to do, as a country, to ensure that our peace is irrevocable, that we can never slide backwards?

I have talked about the economic empowerment of our people: giving especially young people an education, the right skills, and access to jobs so that they have a

stake in society; I have talked about the need for quality services and the infrastructure that we need to succeed. The improving quality of life, and the equality of our people, is a fundamental necessity for our continuing peace and progress as a nation.

But peace and progress are not a matter of material conditions alone. We have to address those aspects of well-being that we cannot see or touch, those which lie beneath the surface but are no less real. I believe the greatest challenge in our revival as a nation lies in the rehabilitation of the Liberian national spirit, and that was the reason I chose the theme of patriotism in my Inaugural Address a week ago.

Governance & Democracy

To rehabilitate the Liberian national spirit, we must continue to raise the quality of our democracy. One week ago, we celebrated the passage of another national election. As I stated then, it was a miracle summoned by the people and the beginning of a new chapter. The only way we can ensure that our peace does not unravel, is if we protect and uphold our democratic principles. Freedom, not our armed forces, is our greatest guarantee.

This is why, in the years ahead, we want Liberia to become one of Africa's strongest democracies. To begin with, we will bring all voices together in a National Forum to reform our Constitution and reconcile our politics. We will continue to protect and deepen human rights and civil liberties. In Liberia, no one is persecuted or imprisoned for their views, but we will not slip or let our guard down. A week ago, I spoke about creating a democracy of policies not personalities: we will support the creation of Liberia's first independent policy research think tank, to improve the quality of our public policy debate.

We will continue to protect freedom of expression, but hold people responsible under the laws for their utterances. To those in the media who vigilantly guard our right to expression, we salute you. We will be your sparring partner but not your enemy. You must continue to speak truth to power, and to wield your own power with responsibility. The coming year will see the creation of a new broadcast regulator, along with clear guidelines to protect freedom of expression and accuracy. We will appoint an independent Commissioner for Information, to keep our promise of freedom of information.

We will continue to raise the quality of our governance, and implement the Report of the Governance Commission to rationalize ministries and make government more efficient. This includes merging the Ministries of Finance and

Planning, and operationalizing the National Bureau of Concessions to absorb the Bureau of State Enterprises and the Concessions Secretariat.

Our new Code of Conduct is a landmark step to improve the quality and accountability of those in government. This will be matched by an open assets declaration for all public officials. To set the example, I will submit my declaration to the LACC before the end of this week and expect all nominated officials to do likewise. The Governance Commission plans to convene a National Integrity Forum to build a stronger partnership between government and civil society and root out corruption.

Corruption still blights our society, and remains deeply ingrained. Although we have strengthened the institutions and processes for prevention, we must continue to improve the punishment of wrongdoing. We will submit again an amendment for greater powers of prosecution for the Liberia Anti-Corruption Commission (LACC), so that it can prosecute as soon as an investigation establishes cause. We will nominate a new Auditor General, and continue to support an effective and independent General Auditing Commission (GAC).

Our justice system still needs radical reform and improvement. We will construct five new regional justice and security centers to enhance security and increase access to justice, the first of which is already under construction in Gbarnga. We will increase the number of county attorneys, extend the probation program to reduce prison overcrowding, and commence the construction of a new central prison in Montserrado. Our thorough review of the justice system will include proposals to strengthen the jury duty system –which is at the heart of a fairer court process and access to justice for our people.

Above all, we are approaching a turning point where our institutions are strong enough to pass responsibility to where it really belongs: with people. For too long, people have looked to the State to provide for them. But if you live off someone else, you have no power. If one capable of work resorts to begging or extortion to survive, you are dependent, reliant and disempowered. We have to reverse this disempowerment to put control in the hands of responsible citizens.

Our agenda to decentralize government is at the heart of this agenda. Within three years, all government ministries and agencies responsible for delivering public services will have created county centers for the delivery of goods and services, thereby pushing power out of the capital and into the hands of regions, communities and people. Local Education Boards will give people more say over their children's education, as will local health authorities in that sector.

National Healing and Reconciliation

Members of the National Legislature: To guarantee our peace, we must do more to unite our people. Liberia is today a nation at peace, but not yet at peace with itself. Our journey of national healing is under way, but it is not complete. To claim the future, we must reflect and heal the past.

True reconciliation is a question of justice: justice in dealing with the past, justice in our processes of government and law, justice in our economic development. I believe that our reconciliation depends most on the things I have spoken about: empowering our youth, creating jobs and opportunity, and spreading development to **all** our people, so that progress belongs to everyone.

But we cannot move forward unless we address the wounds of the past. We will advance the Truth and Reconciliation process by implementing all practical recommendations. This will not be a hollow exercise, but the pursuit of genuine, meaningful closure with the past.

If this objective is to be achieved, it will require a more effective leadership at the Independent National Commission on Human Rights (INCHR), which is poised to initiate the most important part of our reconciliation and healing process: the National Palava Hut Program. Under this grassroots, locally led process, Palava Huts in communities up and down the country will reverberate with a great National Dialogue. We will create a space where the truth is sacred, and renew our peace-building efforts to heal fractured communities. I am prepared to be the first to appear before it, to say what I have already said, to challenge untruths, to say what I have done and what I have not done, and to demonstrate that no one is above this process of healing and truth-telling.

This process of consultation will be reinforced by my fellow Peace Laureate, Leymah Gbowee, as she launches the Liberian Reconciliation Initiative. Under her leadership, it will provide an independent platform for Liberians, irrespective of the social, economic, political, and geographic orientation, to address past abuses, reconcile fractured relations and communities. It will be integrated into the work of the Independent National Commission on Human Rights, as well as the National Visioning exercise. Indications from Ms. Gbowee's initial consultation demonstrate how misinformation and misunderstanding can result in misplaced perceptions that contribute to unnecessary divides.

Finally, we will launch a National Visioning process that imagines a new future for Liberia. Our country has come a long way as a nation and has endured many challenges. Through it all, Liberia has stood as a blessed and strong nation. Our people have demonstrated immense resilience and resolve throughout the ages,

but during the years of challenges and strife, the world changed. What was relevant 100 years ago is no longer relevant today. Ugly things happened to us as a people and a country; we must talk about them, and with that understanding we will forge a new collective vision for our country.

Through the visioning exercise, we will choose together a direction for our country. Before we do, we will answer five important questions: Where have we come from as a nation? Where are we today? Why are we here today? Where do we want to go? And how do we get there? We must do so in an open and inclusive way, in a dialogue that captures the hopes and dreams of everyone. I will therefore appoint a National Steering Committee, which will reflect regional, gender and generational constituencies, to carry out an inclusive consultation on our national vision, beginning in February.

This new vision for our country, built from the ground up, will guide our three-year budget process. Ministries and Agencies will develop strategies in line with the conclusion of the National Visioning process and the new five-year plan being formulated by the Ministry of Planning and Economic Affairs. Budgets will be set in accordance with implementing the strategies in the plan to achieve our development goals.

Let all join the dialogue, and let all voices be welcome. Let all come to the table, and let us all send a message: To those who would cling to the hatred of the past, you cannot succeed. If you sow the seeds of hatred and division, your bitter fruits will not nourish you, they will poison us all. But if you join the path of peace that our people have chosen, then together we will find common ground, rediscover what unites us and build an inspiring vision for the future.

This vision is the final part of the rehabilitation of the Liberian spirit. Healing with the past is a means to an end, and that end is to be able to move forward as one people, united. To be able to look forward and steer a clear path, we must renew our sense of self and nationhood, of what it means to be Liberian, of our common destiny. This is the spirit of patriotism.

NECROLOGY

It is often hard to accept the passing away of loved ones, but we take solace in the memories of the roles they played in the life of the nation. In the past year, we have lost many of our prominent citizens, among them:

Rt. Rev. Edward W. Neufville, Bishop, Episcopal Church of Liberia; Cllr. Isaac Wonasue, Senior Legal Counsel, Central Bank of Liberia; Hon. Gabriel J. Tucker, former Minister of Public Works; Mrs. Antoinette Tubman, former First Lady of the Republic of Liberia; Hon. Jonathan S. Reffell, Ambassador-at-Large; Mr. Joe W. Mulbah, former Minister of Information; Dr. Louise York, Founder & First President of the African Methodist Episcopal University; Chief Jallah Lone, former Head of the Liberia Council of Chiefs; Hon. Nelson Wah Bah, Representative, Sinoe County; Dr. Peter L. Naigow, former Vice President, IGNU; Mr. George Sackor, former football player, Liberian National Team; and Hon. Emmanuel Togba Twegby, former Minister of Post & Telecommunications.

CONCLUSION

Mr. Vice President, Mr. Speaker, Mr. Pro-Tempore, Honorable Members of the Legislature: All of the policies I have outlined in this address – economic justice, empowering our youth, expanding and modernizing our infrastructure, making our government more responsive, accessible and accountable, and reconciliation – and all of the promises are intended to restore, once again, Liberia as a place where dreams are nurtured and encouraged.

There was a time when young people came to Liberia to study. They came from Sierra Leone, Guinea, Côte d’Ivoire Ghana and Nigeria because our country was a land of opportunity. It is amazing to travel across this region and meet people who say, “I used to live in Liberia. I was born in Liberia. I went to school in Liberia. I used a Liberian passport in our liberation struggle.” It was a place where a person who worked hard could succeed, even those who were not citizens. This is why people came here, and that is our vision for Liberia, the legacy to which we aspire.

But our own citizens will provide the means of enhancing national capacity. We will therefore continue our engagement with Liberians in the Diaspora, one of our greatest resources, who play an important role both in the economic and political life of our country.

Fellow Liberians: Together, we can create the new Liberia. We can re-create a Liberia where a young person growing up in Buutuo needs not come to Monrovia to succeed, because there will be plenty opportunities in Sanniquellie or Ganta or Yekepa. A young school girl in Bo will not have to leave Grand Cape Mount because she can obtain quality education in Sinje or in Robertsport. And after she graduates, she should be able to find gainful employment right there in her county. Young men and women will not have to leave Maryland or the southeast,

for they should receive quality higher education in Harper and Zwedru and Barclayville and Fish Town. The very founding of our country, all of the values we uphold in our Constitution, and the many sacrifices of those who came before us all point to one outcome: a Liberia where opportunity is plentiful and available to all. This new Liberia will have to be created by all of us. We will be responsible in how we deploy the country's resources to achieve these goals. We expect you, legislators and fellow citizens, to play your role.

It is my solemn promise to you that the people of Liberia are my priority. Everything we have done so far was to improve your lives and your future. There is so much more work to do. With the foundation in place, we can now build a house big enough for all of us, and make it a place of fairness, prosperity and freedom. We lifted Liberia so that we can now lift Liberians. That is our mission, and in its fulfillment lies our reconciliation, our hopes and our dreams.

All through the difficult years, I retained an abiding hope in our people. What joins us together is greater than that which divides us. Our strength will always be found in our unity. Our destiny remains in our hands. We can decide to lift each other up, and transform our country into a place that becomes a model to Africa and the rest of the world. One hundred and sixty-five years ago, we transformed a continent when we became the first independent Republic. Our example became an inspiration to Africa as other countries sought independence. Seven years ago, we made history again when we became the first country in Africa with a female democratically elected Head of State.

We can make history again. We can transform a quaint nation into a productive, equitable land of opportunity. We can replace dependency with self-sufficiency, poverty with prosperity, conflict with peace and resolution. A new Liberia is rising, and I call upon you, my fellow citizens, to join me in this sacred mission to make our nation great again.

May God bless you.

I thank you.