

ANNUAL MESSAGE

To the

Sixth Session of the
52ND National Legislature of the Republic of Liberia

Theme: Our Nation Is Heading in the Right Direction

By

Her Excellency Ellen Johnson Sirleaf
President of the Republic of Liberia

Capitol Hill, Monrovia
Delivered Monday, 24th January 2011

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
(AFL);
Former President and Mrs. Moses Blah;
Former Officials of Government;
Former Chairman of the Interim Government of National Unity, Dr. Amos Sawyer;
Traditional Leaders, Chiefs and Elders;
Ambassador George Weah – thank you for coming – and Other 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

When Presidents speak to this honorable body and the nation from this podium, they report on the long range of legislative and executive activities to date. We will meet the constitutional requirement in this regard. But this year's Message is special because these are not ordinary times for Liberia. We have an opportunity to look back not only at the last year, but also the last five years and remember where we have come from. And we have an opportunity to look forward, into the future, to where we are going and the challenges that we face. Our country stands at a crossroads, and together we must choose the right path.

Five years ago, we began a historic journey together, looking toward new shores, where peace, stability and a new culture would unite us as a nation. This was a journey filled

with uncertainties, because for most Liberians who have lived through the past three decades and for those born during the years of war, hope had all but ceased to exist.

We knew that the problems we faced were immense, but inspired by the resilience of the people who elected us, we understood that to keep and deliver on the promise to them, we had to be diligent. We understood that we had to answer three fundamental questions: First, how do we quickly rebuild to make the dream of opportunity a reality for all Liberians who are willing to work for it? Second, how do we meet the challenges our country faces together, as one Liberia? And, third, how do we preserve our peace as we move into the future?

Given our recent history, most Liberians did not expect to have much to celebrate in the year 2011. Our people had been battered and oppressed for so long that they started to slip into the deepest form of cynicism and despair. The nation was gripped by economic distress, social decline, and political disarray. As I took the oath of office, I had no doubt of the immensity of the problems facing us.

I found my inspiration and my strength in the resilience of the people of Liberia, those who never gave up, those who toiled in every possible way to keep this nation going and those who fought every day for peace, justice and a fair society. When we walked into office, just deciding what to prioritize was a test of its own: schools, salaries, health care centers, roads, jobs, you name it. It was all lacking. There was no time to pick and choose. The people had been waiting for any glimmer of hope for so long! We were aware of the expectations trap, which leads to disappointment and resentment. So we had to move quickly on all fronts.

I knew from Day One – in fact long before I got into office – that the first and most crucial issue was to allow Liberians to have freedom, a chance to think freely and act freely and feel that this nation, born out of the great dream of freedom and opportunity for all, could now start to fulfill its promises. This nation of 163 years had lacked a few fundamentals that were enshrined in the founding documents: a land of personal freedom, equal opportunity and a government that cares for its entire people, not just a few, but all of us.

Throughout my political life, whatever I have done, whatever I have written, whatever I have said has always been an attempt to be part of the processes of change, in the pursuit of the noble goals that led to the creation of Liberia.

In today's Annual Message, I will highlight where our Government met the country in 2006, how far we have brought it today, and what remains to be done to build the future we have all sought for so long.

We have come a long way already. There is no doubt that we have reached this far in our national renewal because of the resilience, patience, and understanding of the ordinary Liberian citizen. Without you, it would have been impossible to make such great strides in so short a time. But the job is not finished. The future now requires our attention, our continued focus and our unity. If we choose the right path together, we can make our great country prosperous once again.

It is therefore my profound honor to perform this duty for the sixth time. And so, in reverence towards Almighty God by whose Providence we are guided, and in memory of the departed leaders and citizens who are no longer with us, please join me in a moment of silence.

LEGISLATIVE AGENDA

Mr. Speaker, Mr. President Pro-Tem, Honorable Members of the Legislature: Consistent with our total commitment to the tenets of democracy, we have enhanced the separation of powers, breaking away from the past when every other branch of government was a rubber stamp for the Executive Mansion. The strength of our democratic process will be measured by the independence of the Legislature and the Judiciary.

I want to express our gratitude to your august body for enacting into law 30 pieces of legislation that were important in meeting our development goals under the Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS).

My office submitted 25 pieces of legislation to this honorable body; 14 were passed into law during its Fifth Session and 11 are in deliberations in Committee Rooms. Five legislative instruments submitted to this honorable body in previous years were also enacted into law during the Fifth Session. If anyone says you don't work, I can correct them! However, there is more to come and we expect more from you, because the people of Liberia expect so much from us all.

During the year under review, our Administration issued six Executive Orders in the interests of the public or to meet emergencies which could not await the lengthy legislative process to run its course. These included Orders to suspend road and equipment tariffs, an amnesty on tax arrears, and bringing back a total ban on firearms.

Honorable Members of the Legislature, we appreciate your continuous support and seek your usual cooperation for the enactment or ratification of draft legislation still pending before you. These include the Code of Conduct for Public Servants, the Children Protection Bill, and the Africa Youth Charter.

As we enter the Sixth Session of the 52nd Legislature and the final year of this Administration, I will submit to your honorable body several Acts intended to tackle some of our social, political and economic challenges. They are:

- 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
- The Education Reform Act.

Mr. Vice President and President of the Senate, I want to use this formal setting to express my deepest gratitude for your loyalty, dedication, and unflinching commitment to the national cause and our common political agenda. Your partnership has made it easier to face the challenges of the task we jointly undertook five years ago. I know I can count on you for support in governing this nation, attracting investment and representing Liberia internationally. In the resolution of disputes I recall, in particular, your adept and skillful handling of the social tensions that surfaced in Lofa County in early 2010. You provide oversight and guidance in the agricultural sector and in matters relating to the disabled and, in general, as my dependable, dedicated lieutenant. This is why I have chosen you to continue to be by my side.

Mr. Speaker and Mr. President Pro-Tempore, you have brought renewed dignity and visionary leadership to this august body, as evidenced by the work of the Legislature in passing an unprecedented number of legislation that will improve the quality of life for our people, and in ratifying instruments that will continue to advance our national agenda and raise the profile of Liberia in this region and the world. We have accomplished much together in this regard.

Keeping the Promise for Stability

Mr. Vice President, Mr. Speaker, Mr. President Pro-Tempore, Honorable Legislators: We have tried to keep the promise for stability. We took office five years ago, at the end of a brutal war and a very destructive period in our nation's history. The sources of the conflict were many and complex, but the consequences were visible everywhere. I will not attempt to describe the human despair, loss of lives, destruction and hopelessness that Liberia suffered.

Even though we knew that we could not solve all of Liberia's problems in three years or in six, we understood that we could lay the foundation for the rebirth of our nation out of the ashes of war and destruction. We campaigned with the promise of returning Liberia to a place of respect. Today I can declare that we have kept that promise. Liberia has

regained its prestige and our country is cited as an international success story, a country that has reclaimed its status after complete collapse. Unlike the past, today you can present a Liberian passport anywhere in the world and be given a positive reaction.

Our greatest challenge went well beyond rebuilding broken bridges and shelled-out buildings. Those were essential, but our people needed to regain their confidence and sense of safety. Personal safety was a major issue for people to return home, either from refugee camps or displaced centers. Thus, our emphasis on creating a new, professional security apparatus was essential for the national recovery process.

We are grateful to the international community and the United Nations which, through its Mission in Liberia (UNMIL), have been guardians of our stability, giving us the space to develop domestic capacity to ensure our own peace and security.

We have taken this opportunity to rebuild our military, vetting and recruiting young men and women of moral integrity to form the backbone of our new Armed Forces of Liberia. We are proud and every Liberian should be proud of the new AFL. It is, by all standards, a professional army, with a corps of engineers, medics, social workers who can easily transition into the civilian world.

Today, the sight of an armed soldier or a soldier in uniform no longer strikes fear in the hearts of our citizens. Never again must our military be used to achieve political advantage.

Every AFL soldier and Non-Commissioned Officer today is at least a high school graduate. Every officer in the military, from First Lieutenant up, has a college degree. This is a novelty and we take pride in it. Character, integrity and performance are the criteria for promotion and leadership. In only five years, we have completely transformed the culture and outlook of our military.

On January 1, 2010, the United States Government transferred the responsibility for training, management and sustenance of the AFL to the Government of Liberia, a responsibility carried out with credibility, accountability and professionalism.

The process of transforming our military is far from complete. An army of 2,016 is inadequate to protect the length and breadth of this nation. Therefore, we will give our full support to plans to begin the process of recruiting to fill in the attrition rate within the AFL, as well as construct billets for both the Engineering Battalion and the Liberia Coast Guard. We will maintain the same stringent and merit-based standards. In keeping with budgetary appropriation, we will soon undertake the rehabilitation of a fourth Military Barracks at Camp Todee. We intend to improve the accommodation facilities for our military personnel and their dependants. Finally, we will complete the process to provide reasonable pension benefits for members of our Armed Forces who serve more than 15 years of active duty. At the end of the transformation process, we will appoint a Liberian

as Chief of Staff of the AFL, a position currently held by General Suraj Abdurrahman of the Nigerian Army.

The new AFL is the most ethnically and gender balanced military force in our nation's history. I am very proud that our new army will look like Captain Geraldine Janet George, the first post-war female Captain in the restructured AFL. Captain George is here with us today. We salute all of our brothers and sisters who have answered a call to serve their country.

Another component of the defense of national sovereignty and individual liberty lies with the national police. There are some challenges in that corps that we have been tackling as they surface. Just a few years ago, there were human rights and civil society reports describing the police as "heavy-handed." We have tried to turn the page on such behavior, acting swiftly to discipline, disrobe and dismiss officers, recognizing that there is no place in the new Liberian society for such conduct. We have already begun to see the results of these incentives, training and discipline as more of our citizens apply for recruitment into police service.

The officers of our Emergency Response Unit (ERU) and the Police Support Unit (PSU) are the stars of the Liberia National Police (LNP). We continue to receive requests from communities across the country for their deployment to troubled areas.

As a reflection of the level of stability engendered by our police, the United States Government and the United Nations have indicated that Liberia is no longer a "danger post." Given our recent history, this level of success is impressive and is a signal of the positive changes that have occurred here since 2006. Monrovia can now boast of being as safe as any other capital in Africa. None of this happened by accident; it is the result of leadership, planning and allocating resources to law and order.

Similarly, the Bureau of Immigration and Naturalization (BIN) continues to be vigilant in carrying out its duties to ensure that aliens conform to government policies and international rules and regulations. They have been able to interdict certain people attempting to get into the country illegally and have been robust at the borders in trying to stop the illegal movement of goods and people across borders.

The National Fire Service (NFS) now has well-equipped vehicles and can respond to fires in Monrovia. The National Fire Service has saved lives and hundreds of thousands of dollars in property damage, and we are hoping to expand these services to other county capitals.

As you join me on February 11th, Armed Forces Day, to celebrate the achievements of our men and women in the security sector, we must resolve to address their basic needs. It's not realistic to put our peace and safety in the hands of young men and women without providing them with adequate incentives and logistics. We will submit in

our next budget funding to ensure that our men and women in the security sector are taken care of, as they make daily sacrifice to keep us safe.

THE ECONOMY

Honorable Members of the Legislature, as our peace becomes permanent, our most important challenge is to create a society that empowers the people, to make Liberia a land of opportunity where hard work is rewarded. Our priority for the future is creating more jobs so that our people, especially our young people, can earn a living. Today, as I stand before you, we can say that all is on course.

We have created strong economic foundations, having experienced the strongest recovery in twenty years. During the year in review, real GDP grew by 6.3%, up from 4.6% in 2009. Since 2006, income per capita has risen by approximately one third. Taking this economic performance into account and the significant level of direct foreign investment that we have been able to secure, we can expect double-digit growth over the next five years. We are, fellow Liberians, by international standards, one of the twenty fastest growing economies in the world.

Five years ago, our national budget stood at \$80 million. Together, we have been able to increase that amount to US\$369 million, an impressive 400% increase. This is something to celebrate! The aggregate revenue over the last five calendar years is US\$1.03 billion. Conforming to our policy of a balanced budget, expenditures, on a cash basis, have been tightly controlled, an aggregated estimate of US\$1.018 billion over the five-year period. More importantly, we have this year restructured the budget so that capital or project expenditures are clearly categorized and now represent 10% of total budgetary appropriation. The resulting surplus from the excess of revenue over expenditures has provided the basis for supplemental budgets totaling over US\$15 million. We will be submitting a third supplemental budget for your consideration within the next four weeks, consistent with our agreed understanding that all surplus will be used exclusively for the development of economic infrastructure such as roads, bridges, power and ports.

We have been able to increase civil servants salaries from US\$15 on average in 2006 to about US\$80 for the lowest grade. It is a manifestation of our strong desire to improve the delivery of government services to Liberians. We add here, with much modesty, that since 2006, we have been able to pay all eligible civil servants on time. And we never borrowed one penny from anywhere to meet our obligations to our people.

Our economic performance, due to prudent policies, has also led to the lowest inflation in thirty years. Five years ago, when we took office, inflation stood at 20%, when prices fluctuated almost on a daily basis. But today, we have managed to maintain inflation in single digits.

As a result, we now feel confident enough to broaden the tax base, and take steps to reduce tax rates and simplify the tax structure. Starting this month, personal and corporate taxes have been reduced by nearly a third to 25%. We have reduced customs duties on select items by 50%. In practical terms, this means that if your take-home pay in December was L\$6,603, when you take pay, or have taken pay a couple of days, you will find a deposit of L\$7,029, representing a 7% increase. If you make L\$5,680, you will pay no taxes. It means that if you paid US\$5,122 last year in customs duty for a vehicle valued at US\$12,750, today you would pay only US\$2,325, representing a 54% reduction. I invite you to test it.

In essence, this new tax scheme is an increment of personal income for all, no matter what you do or where you work for a living. Therefore, Honorable Legislators, we can say that we have increased the income level of every person working who lives in Liberia!

Mr. Speaker, Mr. President Pro-Tempore, Honorable Members of the Legislature, we thank you for the transparent manner in which you have conducted the budgetary process, allowing full debate and reporting by the public at large. The people now know that the budget is their money and they know they have their say in how government spends the money. It may seem simple, but this is an important aspect of the democratic process. These public debates, and your ability to review the budget, have earned us good governance ratings in our country.

Honorable Legislators, the performance of our Central Bank in exceeding all of the HIPC targets for sound reserve management has been instrumental in our economic growth. In 2006, the reserves of the Central Bank were a mere US\$5 million. Today they stand at US\$293 million. Let me repeat this again: five years ago, the Central Bank had US\$5 million in reserve, and today, it has US\$293 million. A big thank you, Mr. Governor, to you and your staff.

But one huge step stands above all others: our freedom from debt. In 1989, our external debt stood at US\$1.3 billion; 1999, ten years later, it had doubled to US\$2.6 billion, almost five times our entire national income, on account of interests and penalties and commercial debt arising from questionable transactions. By 2009, we were faced with a staggering US\$4.9 billion debt. This was more than seven times our national income and almost 20 times what we received as aid from the international community.

Today we are virtually debt free. This success was achieved in a world record period of three years. We have won back our reputation, we have regained our financial independence and we will use that new freedom to speed up development. With this burden of debt lifted, we can spend the money saved on improving the lives of our citizens.

INVESTMENTS

What does all this economic reform mean? We are not doing it for its own sake, but to create an economy where Liberians can get ahead. This means more jobs, and jobs require business and investment.

Over the past five years, we have attracted more than US\$16 billion of investment in every possible field of industry and trade. Through the vigorous work of the National Investment Commission, and their counterparts in the Ministries of Finance, Planning and Economic Affairs, Justice and others, Liberia has become more visible in the international marketplace.

Our foreign investors are hiring and training Liberians, and working with Liberian businesses to meet their local needs. They are creating jobs and improving infrastructure across the country. We are proud of how we have attracted and spread investment among the 15 counties. As these investments start coming on-stream, Liberians will see with their own eyes the jobs, schools and clinics that arrive with them. With every investment we have insisted that each company meet a certain degree of social responsibility. We have asked investors to provide social services, in the areas of health, education, infrastructure development such as roads and even ports, in the communities where they operate. They are all doing so and we intend to hold them accountable to this.

Last year we focused on an essential facility for investment – the Freeport of Monrovia. Over 95% of goods pass through this gateway to the nation's economy. Today the wharf is in a precarious state, but will be rebuilt through a concession agreement to renovate and reconstruct it and modernize its operations within the next three years. The Freeport of Monrovia is only one hub of our port system. We are poised to work on the country's other three ports, in Buchanan, Greenville and Harper, which are essential to serving our whole population, particularly during the rainy season. This will bring trade and jobs to our people in Grand Bassa, Sinoe and Maryland Counties in the coming years.

In the energy sector, we anticipate oil exploration off our coast in the last quarter of this year. Liberia is on the verge of becoming a petroleum exporter in the coming decade. But before we export one drop of oil, we will have the policies in place that dictate how oil wealth will be used for development, stability, and poverty reduction. If properly managed, resources from oil wealth can be invested to transform our nation. This is the future that Liberians voted for – the kind of future parents want for their children.

Honorable Legislators, some may question our approach in attracting foreign investment. We stand by our accomplishments as necessary steps to bring economic growth that will produce the income for poverty reduction. These seeds take time to grow, but there is not a single prosperous country in the world that does not have foreign investors. With foreign investment we get much needed capital, new technologies, access to markets, and world-class training and business development.

We can now shift our policy and our effort to the promotion and development of Liberian enterprises that will create jobs and constitute the middle class, and small farmers that will benefit through outreach and procurement programs of the concessionaires.

Our plans for the future are all focused on these aims. First, we want to transfer the bulk of employment to the private sector, moving away from our present condition where government is the largest employer. Our second goal is to graduate to industrialization so that we begin to manufacture finished goods and add value to our own products instead of simply exporting raw materials.

Some Liberian entrepreneurs are already on the forefront, taking advantage of this new environment and incentives. We want to cite Mr. Chid Liberty, who will make the first export under the U.S. facility, the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) which allows African producers to export products to U.S. markets. We also have Mrs. Josephine Francis, who is engaged in diverse economic activities such as the production of water, bricks and seed multiplication. I believe that both Mr. Liberty and Mrs. Francis are with us today. These are the examples of the potential of Liberian entrepreneurship.

To tap into that potential, our people have to attain the education and skills that investors will need. We will therefore expand the network of vocational training institutes around the country, especially in places where concessions are operating. In the very near future, the Monrovia Vocational Technical Center will be reconstructed and expanded. The Booker Washington Institute is also being renovated and equipped to provide better skills training opportunities for our unemployed youth.

As a first step in our plans for decentralization, you may recall that in 2006, working together for the first time in our history, we allocated budget resources directly to the counties and established the County Development Fund. Under a conceptually sound policy, development priorities would be determined by the people themselves through their selected local representatives. Since this policy was implemented, over US\$15 million has been allocated to the 15 counties. This has provided funds for roads, schools, power, public buildings, clinics, scholarships and other activities.

As you know, we have had some major violations in the way the funds have been managed, sometimes out of ignorance of procurement laws, sometimes from plain fraudulent practices. We are now taking corrective measures. We have also changed the procedures so that now all construction work under the County Development Funds will have to be undertaken by an external autonomous agency under a contractual arrangement with the Ministry of Internal Affairs. This will be short-lived as we develop the local capacity in our local government offices to enable them to discharge this function with efficiency and effectiveness and integrity.

EMPLOYMENT

Honorable Legislators: The outlook of the job market has evolved considerably since 1991 when the then Bureau of Statistics released a report indicating that unemployment was 85%. 1991. Back then, government had collapsed and all productive economic activity had ceased. We know that those numbers no longer reflect current realities. Today the Government is fully functional and staffed throughout the country. Businesses have started to operate and have hired a great number of people. Small businesses, the real engine for economic growth, are operating everywhere. Many Liberians have returned to their lands to work on their farms. The ongoing review of employment data will soon provide us with the correct information.

Jobs are the central part of our development policy. However, jobs are best created from small businesses. This is the core of our economy for the development of a strong middle class. This is why I have given the National Investment Commission, and its new leadership, a new mandate: to focus their attention and activities on the domestic private sector. We will start implementing a National Private Sector Development Strategy.

We will help Liberian businesses not just by what we do, but also by what we don't do. The regulatory system we inherited in 2006 was one of the most cumbersome in the world, filled with red tape. We have worked to cut out that red tape, in 2009 earning the position as one of the top reformers in the world according to the World Bank. The new Liberia Business Registry Office in Monrovia, along with two satellite offices in Buchanan and Ganta, will open next month. The time it takes to register a business in Liberia is now 10 days, down from 99. When automation is concluded, this process will be completed in 48 hours.

Working with the Central Bank, we have continued to engage with commercial banks to reduce loan interest rates and extend the maturity of loans to domestic enterprises. The Central Bank has made available a US\$5 million facility to the commercial banks for this purpose. We will continue to work with commercial banks to improve the lending atmosphere.

Seven major microfinance institutions (MFIs), up from two in 2006, are operating in the country, with a large increase in the number of clients from under 8,200 to 51,489. This is a development strategy with a positive social impact. Repayment rates of over 90% suggest that it is our poor people, our working people, who respect their obligations. We hope to expand this success to commercial lending.

One beneficiary who has an excellent credit record, having successfully paid off her first loan in record time, and qualified for a second loan, double the amount of the first, is with us today, Celestine Setoe – the famous R.L.

Keeping the Promise for Quality of Life

Honorable Legislators, the ultimate goal of our development strategy is to improve the quality of life of our people: to reduce the level of poverty and enhance living standards. I am talking about action, action to restore roads, bridges, electricity, water, public buildings, schools, hospitals, and clinics – much of which had been destroyed during the conflict. We have done a lot, but there is still a lot to do.

We focused immediately on the main roads and the streets of our Capital City. Visitors and citizens returning to Liberia after a five-year absence marvel at the ease to get from Robertsfield to Monrovia, or to drive down the streets in central Monrovia. We have done or concluded arrangements for constructing all major primary roads and a large number of secondary roads. The ongoing Cotton Tree to Buchanan road is of a grade equal to any in Africa. Bridges are under construction throughout the country, including the replacement of the collapsed Vai Town Bridge, which will be completed next year. Although the cost is very high, given our weather conditions, the follow-up agenda for the next three years is to ensure that all primary roads – Red Light to Ganta, Gbarnga to Foya, Ganta to Fish Town, Buchanan to Greenville, Fish Town to Harper, and Pleebo to Barclayville – will all be fully paved.

In the area of health, the Telewoyan Hospital in Voinjama, the Jackson Fiah Doe Referral Hospital in Tappita, and the Japanese-Liberia Friendship Maternity Ward boast of some of the most advanced medical equipment, while the JFK Medical Center is fast approaching pre-war status in terms of service quality and referral facility. The A.M. Dogliotti Medical School, in Congo Town, is moving into renovated and expanded facilities. Construction will soon begin on the 50-bed Fish Town Hospital in River Gee County. It will be a big boost for the southeast. Although we have doubled health facilities in the country, there are still too many of our citizens who lack access to basic health care. We are also keenly aware that despite the progress, there are too many child and maternal mortalities. This is the agenda for the next few years. As we expand coverage, we have also included mental health in our basic package of health services and developed a mental health policy and plan.

Education has been and remains the highest priority on my personal agenda. I always say that my greatest joy is to see children toting their book bags and heading for school. While we work with the Ministry to reform our educational system, we must continue to provide a safe and healthy learning environment, including adequate furnishing and instructional material for all schoolchildren. Since 2006, we built over 220 schools. That's close to one school a week! With each new student in school, we get closer to a point where the hopes and dreams of our children can be turned into reality. With 1.2 million students in pre-primary and primary schools, we now have to expand our secondary school system to accommodate such a large student population as they move through elementary to high school and then to college.

We are also delighted that last year the Peace Corps resumed operations in Liberia, after a 20-year absence.

In restoring basic services, we brought light, water and waste disposal to Monrovia for the first time in decades. This was not an easy task because of the decaying state of the networks. Today many in Monrovia and other cities are served by electricity and pipe-borne water. There are at least eight projects underway to restore or expand electricity capacity throughout the country. Work is commencing this month on the Cross Border West African Power Pool (WAPP) Project. When completed, the project will supply power to the 18 Liberian towns in Maryland, Grand Gedeh, and Nimba Counties. In taking the country into the 21st century we are also acting to improve access to the Internet. Within the next 18 months, an undersea Africa Coast to Europe (ACE) internet cable will land in Liberia, making Internet access easier, faster and cheaper.

When additional generation comes on-stream this April, thousands more citizens and businesses in the Greater Monrovia area will have access to electricity. But we recognize that the real solution to our power problem is the reconstruction and the expansion of our hydro facility. I am therefore pleased to announce that as a result on my official visit to Brazil last year, we have been able to attract their leading companies to Liberia. Therefore, we are nearing conclusion of negotiations with Vale, the Brazilian mining company, to reconstruct our original hydro facility at Mount Coffee. We are also in dialogue with partners to have the facility expanded by creating upstream storage on the Via River to realize the full potential of the St. Paul River Basin.

In the area of low- to middle-income housing, we will continue to expand the services of the National Housing Authority (NHA) to provide affordable houses for our people. As a model, the Housing Authority, in collaboration with the National Social Security & Welfare Corporation (NASSCORP), has already commenced construction, on a pilot basis, of a 58-unit low-income housing estate project in Brewerville.

We can all be proud that we have given full property rights to 1,289 families in the Stephen Tolbert, E. Jonathan Goodridge, and New Georgia housing estates, thereby relieving those families of the burden of rent they have had to pay for over thirty years. This process will continue until all eligible families obtain deeds to their properties.

By May this year, over 700,000 residents of Monrovia will receive 24-hour pipe-borne water. We have completed 92% of the distribution network in the capital. By the beginning of April, we will start rehabilitation of water and sanitation facilities in Sanniquellie, Robertsport and Voinjama. We will also expand existing water and sanitation facilities in Buchanan, Kakata and Zwedru.

Mass transport is a major issue, especially in Monrovia. We have instituted a vibrant public bus transport system, with established routes, affordable fares and regular schedules. Last year, we received 25 new buses from the Government of India and we

also purchased an additional eight buses. We granted students a three-month reprieve from bus fares as long as they were dressed in their uniforms. Bus service has now been extended to Gbarnga and to Buchanan. Citizens wept with joy when the first bus rolled in. The people at Bo Waterside will soon experience similar joy. As the road network progresses, public transport service will extend to all parts of the country.

We are not just transforming domestic travel. Two decades ago, the last Pan Am flight flew direct out of RIA, then an international hub which used to bring money and jobs to Liberians. A year ago, I stood in this Chamber and promised that in 2010 we would see the resumption of direct services between the United States and Liberia. We kept that promise, and I am delighted to announce that Delta Air Lines, barely five months after restarting direct flights last September, will add a second flight effective February 2. Other airlines have expressed interest in commencing services to Monrovia this year. But we won't stop there. We will start the process to develop RIA to international standards within the next two years.

We know, many Liberians with expertise and capital to invest live in the United States, Europe, and other parts of Africa, and it is the policy of this Government to cultivate a strong relationship with them. We have come a long way in reaching out to our Diaspora. We are proud of our record, and plan to roll out a full-fledged Diaspora engagement program and formulate a National Liberian Diaspora Policy, which would be unprecedented in Africa.

Last year, we established the Liberia Maritime Authority, ensuring that we are on our way to becoming a maritime nation. The Authority is expanding its scope and has increased its financial support to the national budget. The Liberia Maritime Training Institute, in Schiefflin, has now commenced operation after a 30-year closure. We are pleased that the Freeport of Monrovia, with support of the Liberia Maritime Authority, attained ISPS compliance, achieving that which had eluded us for over five years.

The Ministry of Commerce has continued to be vigilant in the monitoring of prices in the society and in effecting embargoes on sub-standard and unacceptable commodities for sale to the public. They have intervened to stabilize and reduce the price of strategic commodities like rice and cement. The price of cement has dropped from US\$17 a bag to US\$8, and rice is now selling at a stable US\$35 a bag or lower.

Food security is a primary aspect of any social development. Today, farmers' cooperatives, largely women, in Nimba and Lofa Counties, sell rice to the World Food Programme (WFP) to sustain the school-feeding program. There has been similar success with cassava output, almost doubling in two years.

In 2009, a small community on Duport Road organized themselves into a cooperative. The group, Community of Hope, identified agriculture as a prime area of focus and asked the Ministry of Agriculture (MOA) for assistance. The Ministry provided training and they started production of rice and vegetables. Today they have produced

13,558 pounds of certified seeds which the Ministry bought for the national seed program. Other farmers' groups in Mt. Barclay and Johnsonville also received training and are producing certified seeds for the Agriculture Ministry. Members of those groups are here with us today.

The Ministry of Agriculture proudly announced a major scientific breakthrough in seed rice production in that for the first time in our history we have produced foundation seed, called WITA-4. As a result of this, there will be ten metric tons of foundation seeds for multiplication this year. With this breakthrough, Liberia will no longer be dependent on importation of expensive foundation rice seeds.

We can all benefit from the opportunity of the vast lands and great rainfall with which our country has been blessed. Let us help our communities in the counties to turn the bush land into farmlands. Let us go out on weekends, find a small plot and grow something – rice, vegetables or other crops. I, myself have started a farm in my ancestral village and a little farm in my home yard. I have brought four bags of rice from my last year's second harvest to share with the Vice President, the Speaker, the Senate Pro-Tempore and the Chief Justice. Hopefully, next year, after your agricultural break, we will all be exchanging produce as gifts.

To do farming, we need land, and it is this issue that has been the source of many disputes among our people. Now that the Land Commission is functioning, we expect to tackle and resolve land disputes across the country. Until then, we will order that all boundaries return to those set under the Tubman Administration.

Fellow Liberians I have talked about how far we have come, but have yet to talk about the one group that represents our future – our youth – two-thirds of our population. We are keenly aware that no matter how much progress we make in all the areas of infrastructure, we will not achieve our national goals until we have enabled our youth to become the leaders of the future. This is why we are stressing vocational training for those who have no skills, so as to return to them their dignity through employment. This is also why we are instituting strict regulations to change bad habits – drinking and indecent behavior during entertainment. This is why we passed the Rape Law to protect young girls – a Rape Law that needs much more effective enforcement. And this is why we need the legislation on the Children Protection Bill to be passed and the Africa Youth Charter ratified.

Keeping the Promise for Governance and the Rule of Law

CIVIL LIBERTIES

We tried to keep the promise for governance and the rule of law. **Mr. Vice President, Honorable Speaker, Mr. President Pro-Tempore, Honorable Members of the Legislature:** I strongly believe that the most essential ingredient of democracy is the

total freedom of speech with the attendant political right that gives rise to a vibrant and thriving society. If we have learned anything during our years of advocacy and political opposition, it is certainly how precious freedom of speech can be. This Administration has never attempted and will never be part of any effort to curtail the freedom of expression.

It was in recognition of the freedom and the open society that we have promoted since coming to power, that 200 journalists from across Africa, at the African Editors Forum held in Bamako, in October, awarded me the “Friend of the Media Award,” the first to be awarded a sitting President.

We are glad, Mr. Chief Justice, that the saga on the weekend has been successfully resolved, allowing us to continue to enjoy the distinction of having no journalists or politicians in jail.

INTEGRITY

Honorable Legislators, my Fellow Liberians: Decades of deprivation, indiscipline and bad governance have taken its toll on the morals and value system of some of our people. This has led to widespread corrupt practices at every level in our society. This is a national moral issue.

Our approach to tackling corruption has been to adopt a systemic approach. We increased salaries so that government employees would not be so vulnerable. We have put processes under procurement and financial management laws that require transparency and accountability to reduce discretion and abuse on the part of public officials.

We established an Anti-Corruption Commission, which has to date investigated 8 out of a docket of 50 cases, completing 4 which have been sent to the Ministry of Justice for prosecution. We passed the Public Procurement and Concessions Commission Act into law to bring control to government procurement and awarding of concessions. We are the first country to become fully compliant with the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (LEITI), which ensures that every payment made by natural resource firms to our Government get published publicly.

We submitted a Whistleblower Act to the Legislature and issued an Executive Order in the interim to protect people of conscience who want to report corruption.

For our part as a government, the first stage in fighting corruption was to expose and uncover it. To do so, we needed a strong and independent audit mechanism. This is why, while serving as Chairman of the Governance Reform Commission in the

Transitional Government, I personally prepared the Act that made the General Auditing Commission (GAC) an independent institution, operating without fear from the powers that be. This led to the creation and the activation of the General Auditing Commission, which has been unwavering in its commitment and dedication to the fulfillment of its mandate.

As a result of 44 audits conducted by the GAC, or investigation by other concerned institutions, 21 persons from the Executive have been suspended or dismissed. The justice process has been ineffective and slow. Nevertheless, the Ministry of Justice has taken three high-profile corruption cases before the courts, won 1, lost 1, and the third case ended in a hung jury. Because of the progress that Liberia has made, we moved 41 places, from 138 in 2008 to 97th place in 2009, on the Global Corruption Index, and more recently moved 10 places, from 97 to 87, on the Transparency International Index.

We take pride in the structural reforms we instituted to address corruption, and must now move to the next phase: prosecution. Here the challenge is enormous and has to do with a judiciary that has been dysfunctional for so long that it will take tremendous reforms to make it work. We therefore plan to devote great energy to judicial reform, a review of our jury system, as well as the prosecutorial capacities of the Liberian Anti-Corruption Commission.

Although we will never return to the days where the Executive dictates to the Judiciary, we will need to collaborate with the Supreme Court to make our judges more conscious of their ethical, moral and professional duties. The Ministry of Justice has been aggressive and effective in working with the Judiciary. We thank all the members of the Supreme Court for the cooperation we have been given as we try to improve the quality of our Judiciary.

Liberia became the first country in West Africa to pass a Freedom of Information Act. This instrument is an essential aspect of the fight against corruption, and we want our people to take advantage of this right. This is an important legal tool for the press, especially in obtaining information that would serve the public interest. We are doing all this to create a state of complete transparency, where the people of this country will take ownership of their government and where government serves the people.

But I say to everyone, the solution to corruption cannot be left to the government alone. Newspapers, radios, churches, mosques, civil society organizations, private citizens, families and individuals must all play a leading role to stop this blight. It must become a national project in which everybody has a role to play.

CÔTE D'IVOIRE

Honorable Legislators, we have consulted with you on the biggest challenge regarding the conflict in our sisterly Mano River Union country, Côte d'Ivoire. The political impasse

continues despite efforts by the African Union, ECOWAS and the international community to find a peaceful resolution. Liberia remains the most vulnerable, as evidenced by the more than 32,000 persons that have already crossed into our borders for protection as refugees. They have taken refuge in 23 villages scattered along the border. These villages are now overcrowded. Our citizens have been sharing their rice and other produce recently harvested, but they are overwhelmed. So camps are being built to hold the many thousands of our Ivorian brothers and sisters.

I want to reassure the Liberian people that we will not let this sad situation threaten our peace. We will work with regional and international partners to find a solution. We say a big thank you to our bilateral and international partners, including the United States and Libya, the World Food Programme, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and the Norwegian Refugee Council, that are providing critical humanitarian assistance to our Ivorian brothers and sisters in distress.

We also say a big thank you to the Liberians in the east of the country – in Nimba and Grand Gedeh – who are showing kind hospitality to our Ivorian brothers and sisters. You are showing Liberia in the best light.

The Future: Liberia Rising

Mr. Vice President, Mr. Speaker, Mr. President Pro-Tempore, Honorable Members of the Legislature, Fellow Citizens: I have outlined the progress we have made in the last five years. I have contrasted this Administration's performance with our national experience over the last thirty years. I have done so in recognition of this historic moment in Liberia's history. This year, 2011, is the long-anticipated election year, a crucial period for our democracy. As a people, we will declare which direction we want to travel. I have done my best to highlight past shortcomings and the lessons we have learned. But the future of this country is one that we will collectively decide.

That choice rests with us, Liberians. We have done a lot, we have a lot do, but we also have a lot to lose. We are at a crossroads in our country's history: we only have to look across the border to know we could go backwards as easily as we could go forward. But I want to set out what's possible for us to achieve together over the next decade and beyond, if we stay on course.

In ten years, we can double the size of our economy. If we continue investing in agriculture, nurturing small businesses and developing light industry, we can transform our economy and create thousands of jobs in the process. But this is only the beginning. As our country develops and grows, within two decades we can be a middle-income economy engaged in production, processing and marketing for domestic consumption and for export, and to have attained food security, enabling us to export surplus. We can become the economic hub of the region.

With a stronger economy will come jobs. Liberia is a very young country, with two-thirds of our population aged 25 or under. This is a huge national advantage. We can transform our young population into a skilled, educated and vibrant labor force. The young people of today can be our strongest asset tomorrow – doctors, lawyers and engineers as well as electricians, secretaries and mechanics. Investors seeking higher returns will be drawn to countries with a growing labor force. By improving the quantity and quality of our schools, we are poised to reap the benefits at a time when Africa will be a magnet for investment.

Education is essential to our progress. Within a decade, all of our children will be reading and writing. It is not beyond our grasp to have every child in school and every young person who may have been denied an education with skills with which they can earn a living and contribute to the country's future. But to do so we will need a stronger education system, better trained and higher paid teachers, a wide variety of vocational, multilateral and specialist schools, and more books and other resources for those schools. Girls' education must remain a special priority to ensure all Liberians receive the benefit of these changes.

In the next decade, we can have all our major cities connected by paved roads and a network of all-weather secondary and feeder roads with adequate drainage across the country. Farmers in Lofa, Nimba, and River Cess will be selling their produce in Monrovia. Further ahead, it is not beyond our grasp to have bus systems linking our cities as well as cities in neighboring Sierra Leone, Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire, under our regional cooperation and integration goals. We can have our domestic airports functioning, and we can make sure that we transport people not only by roads but also by our waterways. Liberians will be able to travel the length and breadth of the country in hours, not days.

In the next decade, we should expect power to be supplied to all our major cities and for them to be visible from the night sky. We will also talk about harnessing the St. Paul River that will generate 1,000 megawatts in the process and, along the way, develop mini-hydros on the St. John, Cestos, and Grand Cess Rivers, bringing power to towns and villages. Beyond that, we want to bring electricity to every single town and village across the country, so that every child will be able to do their homework and health clinics will be able to provide services day and night.

In the near future, over 1.3 million of our citizens residing in all the county capitals and major cities will have access to safe drinking water. Children growing up in Barclayville, Bopolu, Fish Town and Cestos City will have the opportunity to turn on the faucet and get water. Beyond that, every major city will have a health center fully capable of providing primary and secondary health care, and every town and village will be within reach of a major health center. We hope to cut the number of mothers and children dying in childbirth to rates comparable to other middle-income countries. We will have reduced the incidence of HIV/AIDS to OECD levels. Life expectancy at birth, we hope,

will be 69 years or higher, so that everyone will be able to see their children grow, their grandchildren grow, and maybe even their great grandchildren, if they are so blessed.

We hope to reach a stage where our security services will be fully trained and equipped to handle any security threat, internal or external. We will no longer be dependent on others for our national security, and we can say goodbye to UNMIL. Our army will be able to move men and equipment around the country by roads, sea or air. Our police will be using forensic evidence-gathering in crime scene investigations. Our Coast Guard will have appropriate watercraft to patrol and protect our maritime borders.

But as a country, we must not simply have a short- and medium-term vision. We are developing a successor to the PRS to take our country beyond the next ten years into the future. This plan, Liberia Rising 2030, worked on by the Governance Commission under Dr. Sawyer, and our Ministry of Planning and Economic Affairs, will be a result of nationwide consultation, just like we did with the PRS. It will go back to the historical and cultural ties that hold us together as a people. We will deal with the issues concerning our national identity and mindset: “Who are we?” “What does it mean to be Liberian?” I believe this process will confirm what we already know: that Liberians are a kind, open and generous people.

The successor regime to the PRS will not only address historical and cultural issues, it will have an economic component. This document will guide us as we move from dependency to self-sufficiency, from poverty to prosperity, from a low-income country to a middle-income country by the year 2030.

But most importantly, we will heal the wounds of our nation and be one people, united in a common cause.

My Fellow Liberians, as a country, we may have been through hell. We may have endured a long and terrible fall, yet today we are still standing because we are a resilient people. Through the upheaval and now, in the past seven years of peace, we have learned one hard lesson, one we will never again forget: Our destiny is tied together. We rise and fall as one – one nation, one indivisible people, one common destiny. There is therefore no place in our politics for those who would divide us, for a house divided cannot stand. We have been there before, and there is no turning back.

As a country, we are now on a steady march toward the fulfillment of our national dream. The foundation is in place; now we can build the house. This is the task that motivates me, as I am deeply optimistic about our future. I have said it before, and retain the conviction, that our people and this blessed country are far better than our recent history would indicate. In the last five years, this country has validated my conviction, and our people have vindicated my faith. Like you, Honorable Legislators, I love this country and I love its people. We can be a great nation.

Fellow Liberians, we can achieve all of this, but only if we do it together. Government will help create the jobs, but it is you who will turn up to work every day. Government will build the schools, but it's our children who will need to sit down every night and study. We will build more roads, but it is you who will drive the cars and transport the goods. We will build the bridges and clinics and wells and drains, but you who will have to use them with care. We are in this together, government and people, partners in progress. Keep your faith and we will keep the promise.

All of our achievements have been collective, because we all did our part. Every citizen shares the credit, and now every citizen shares the responsibility to rebuild the future. I am talking to you legislators who stay on to work after the official closing of the Legislature. I am talking to the police officers who, rain or shine, show up for work to keep the peace and enforce the law. I am talking to the teachers and principals who keep the schools open; to the doctors, nurses and midwives who heal us when we are sick. I am talking to the media, the watchdogs of society, who endeavor to keep us all honest. I am talking to our farmers, whose fields keep food on our tables; our shop owners and our marketers, who keep our communities supplied; your wives and mothers and sisters who keep our families together and our markets open. I am talking to the soldiers, the pastors, the students, the street sweepers and the pehn-pehn boys.

I am talking to every single citizen of this great nation when I say: our progress belongs to you, and the future is yours for the taking, a future in which the process would have started to move the capital to the center of the country. Given the effects of climate change and expectation that rising sea levels will threaten coastal cities, including Monrovia, we will have concluded the plan to move the Capital City to Zekepa, where the territories of Grand Bassa, Bong and Nimba converge.

The vision I have outlined is a collective vision but we should be under no illusions about how difficult this will be to achieve. There is a long road ahead of us, and that road will not be smooth. We will need great courage and determination to get to our destination.

So I ask everyone in this Chamber – and every Liberian out there – to look into your hearts, spark your hopes, and fire your imaginations. There is so much good, so much possibility, and so much excitement in our nation. This is our moment. Let us shine our eyes as one nation, and from the mountaintop of this Liberian rebirth, look ahead to a bright future. I have faith in you. I have faith in the Liberian people, and I have faith in a God who promised, having brought us thus far, not to leave us.

May God continue to bless Liberia!