Stepping into a Brighter Future, the Joint Session of the Liberian Legislature, Monrovia, Liberia

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As Delivered

Thank you very much for the invitation to address this honorable house. I am deeply honored by the opportunity to address one of this country's most important national institutions - the people's legislature of the Republic of Liberia.

During my career in the U.S. government I testified before the U.S. Congress many times. I answered questions from both Republicans and Democrats alike, and I can tell you it wasn't always easy or pleasant. But I also know that the legislative branch is a pillar of democracy charged with the honorable duty of representing the people.

After more than two decades of devastating war and conflict, this legislature is a powerful expression of the hope and opportunity that is emerging from the ashes of pain and suffering.

Just over a decade ago, another country on this continent was also emerging from a turbulent history. As South Africa marked the birth of a new democracy, a great leader named Nelson Mandela described that moment as "the joy and excitement of a nation that had found itself, the collective relief that we had stepped out of our restrictive past, and the expectant air," Mandela said, "of walking into a brighter future."

You are here today because you represent the voices of Liberia's three million men, women, and children. They, too, have the expectation of walking into a brighter future. From children, eager to learn in the classroom, to mothers seeking healthcare for their infants. From youth who want jobs, to aging parents who want to feel safe in their homes and communities.

Liberia stands today at a critical crossroads. As Liberia joins the rank of African nations coming out of long-running wars and conflicts, you have much to celebrate. But you also have a lot of work to do.

The challenges that lie ahead are formidable, but the opportunities are even larger.

Today, the average Liberian survives on just $120 a year. That's barely 30 cents a day. Well below the extreme poverty line of $1 a day. And it paints an alarming picture of deprivation and suffering.

For every 1,000 babies born in this country, 157 will die before their first birthday. If those same babies had been born in South Africa, a hundred of those lives would have been spared.

Half of Liberia's children are out of school. By some estimates, four out of five Liberians are out of work. That is a staggering unemployment rate.

The opportunities and services available to citizens in other countries are still hopelessly beyond the grasp of most Liberians.

And behind each number, there is one person's story, one human tragedy. Unless those needs are addressed, it will be impossible to sustain the fragile peace that this country has worked and prayed for so long.
Last year, the people of Liberia elected President Johnson-Sirleaf to take on the daunting task of rebuilding this shattered country and breathing new life into its stagnant economy.

It was a tough but a fair election - hard-fought over compelling issues, which now provide a clear mandate for the government and a map for progress and action. It's often said - and said with good reason - that it's hard to make democracy work in poor countries, particularly in the aftermath of conflict. But the voters of Liberia have shown that it can be done. Supported by the public's clear demand for change, your courageous President has charted an ambitious course - she is determined to bring real improvements in the lives of Liberians.

When the public chooses a grandmother to lead change, you know that something special must be happening. That is just one more unique aspect of this country. An electorate that recognized the wisdom of experience - an electorate that recognized the seasoning that allows your President to embrace differences and have the confidence to reach out. To reach out across party lines, to reach out across the entire nation, and commit Liberia to a course of reconciliation.

President Johnson-Sirleaf is now steering this country on the road to recovery, transforming the national vision into action and engaging all Liberians in rebuilding the nation.

Six months into the President's term, we are already seeing promising results.

For the first time in a quarter-century, this country has a real budget. A budget that was drafted to provide for the needs of all the Liberian people. Much of the credit goes to your Finance Minister, Antoinette Sayeh, a graduate of the World Bank. We are extremely proud of Antoinette's capability, and impressed by her courage and her commitment to her country.

The Government of Liberia has made remarkable progress in promoting fiscal discipline through the Governance and Economic Management Assistance Program, which helps ensure that public finances are used for their intended purpose.

They have established an IMF Staff Monitoring Program in record time, that will accelerate Liberia on the road to comprehensive debt relief.

And, through persistence and diplomacy, Charles Taylor has been handed over to face trial before the UN Special Court for his unspeakable crimes. I met with some of his victims yesterday in Sierra Leone. Innocent men and women whose arms and legs had been chopped off by the rebel groups he supported. Rendering justice will help to usher in a new era for Liberia.

These are all significant achievements by your new government. But rebuilding a nation can't happen overnight. And it can't be achieved by one individual. It's a long-term effort that will demand perseverance. It will demand the concerted efforts of every branch of government - from the elected representatives of the Liberian people, from the appointed officials of the executive branch, from all the people of this country, and indeed from the international community, including my institution, the World Bank.

Liberia was born originally out of the tragic history of slavery in the United States, an inhuman institution that was abolished, but only after long and bloody civil war. The American Civil War was as terrible in its own way as Liberia's experience has been. In the Spring of 1865 as the Civil War in my country was nearing its end, President Abraham Lincoln was inaugurated for his second term in office. President Lincoln knew that the task of reconstruction and reconciliation would depend on rebuilding the strong and unified support of the weary American people.

In his inaugural address he appealed to the American people with these words - "With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on," the President said "to finish the work we are in, to bind the nation's wounds ... to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations."

As the first elected legislature since the end of your civil war, you too have an historic opportunity. And you have an historic duty to bind up your nation's wounds and achieve a just and lasting peace among Liberians.
The citizens of Liberia have entrusted each one of you with an enormous responsibility. You are the voices they have chosen to work in common purpose with your President to revive the political, economic, and judicial institutions of this country.

Traumatized by decades of conflict, the people of Liberia need to know with confidence that their government listens to them and faithfully delivers on its promises. The people of Liberia count on you to amplify their voices in the halls of government so that the child who is crying from hunger or the mother who is seeking a job can be heard, even at the highest levels in this country.

To answer their call, you will be challenged to exercise patience and pragmatism. You will be challenged to rise above individual interests to embrace the collective good. Your political constituency now stretches beyond your districts, and it encompasses the entire nation.

When you make budgetary decisions, the entire nation will be counting on you to apply discipline and ensure that every tax dollar is spent in the wisest, most responsible way.

International donors will depend on you to ensure that their support is being used to relieve, rebuild, and renew the lives of those people most in need.

Last month, the national budget was made available to you - and to the public - for review. That is an important first step in your national dialogue. To honor the trust that your citizens have placed in you, that dialogue must be constructive. You must be resolute in the effort to find common ground. You share the responsibility to serve the common good.

This spirit of cooperation is critical to create a government that works to bring education, healthcare, and jobs within reach of every citizen of Liberia. They have endured far too long without their basic human needs being met. The time to act is now.

During this crucial time of transition, the World Bank Group has been providing support to the Government in its journey towards sustained peace and development.

We have provided, on an unprecedented emergency basis, $68 million in grants to help rebuild roads, ports, the airport, clinics, and schools, and to restore water and electricity to the Liberian people.

Through the Community Empowerment Project, we are working with individual communities to identify and design reconstruction projects - so that they can have a voice in shaping their own future.

Grants from the Bank are targeted to create jobs in the short-term. But they will also pave the way for private sector growth, so that this country can unleash the energy and talent of its entrepreneurs to help create sustainable jobs.

Finally, we want to work with you, members of the legislature, to develop a more capable and effective legislative branch. We have been sharing the experience of other partner countries who are in the process of building strong, transparent, and accountable parliaments to better represent the interests of their people. In partnership with the UN Development Programme, we recently organized a seminar here in Monrovia aimed at strengthening governance and enhancing the budgetary process in parliament.

And today, I'm proud to announce that the Parliamentary Network of the World Bank Group will launch a chapter here in Liberia. The goal of this Network is to engage parliamentarians - to engage you - in the global dialogue on development, and to provide support for strengthening parliaments, so that they can fulfill their responsibilities. Already some 800 parliamentarians, representing more than 100 countries, are part of this independent association, and I'm very pleased today to welcome the legislature of Liberia to that distinguished group.

In just a few days, you will celebrate the first birth of this nation - a nation which held so much promise for the freed slaves and immigrants who reached your shores more than a century and a half ago.
Recently I read about an immigrant to my country - a young man who now works for the FBI, the premier law enforcement agency in the United States. He told a very personal story about how he ended up in law enforcement, serving his adopted country. As a young boy, this person arrived in America after surviving 11 years of civil war at home. He might have come from here. He came from a different country, but it's that experience.

As he grew up, he noticed that many Americans didn't share his deep appreciation for the peace and stability that they all enjoyed. He had experienced first hand lives destroyed by war, hopes shattered by conflict. So he knew that peace was not something he could take for granted. "I realized," he said, "without conflict, for the first time in my life I was able to dream."

As you celebrate independence and start a new chapter in this nation's history, it is my hope that you will also see peace prevailing in Liberia as a blessing. A blessing which you must not - cannot - take for granted. So the Liberians too will once again have the chance to dream, and not just to dream, but in Mandela's words "to walk into that brighter future."

Thank you.