



## **Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf's Inaugural Address** **16 January 2006** **Monrovia, Liberia**

“Prime ministers, foreign ministers, special representatives to heads of states, special envoys, chairman, vice chairman of the outgoing National Transitional Government of Liberia, the speaker, members of the House of Representatives, His Excellency President pro Temp, members of the Senate, His Excellency the Chief Justice, other members of the Supreme Court, distinguished guests, colleagues, friends, political leaders, fellow Liberians.

“Let us first praise Almighty God, the arbiter of all affairs of humankind, whose omnipotent hand guides and steers our nation. Before I give this address, this signifies the high noon of this historic occasion, I ask that we bow our heads for a moment of silent prayer in memory of the thousands of our compatriots who have died as a result of the unrest.

...

“Vice President Boakai and I have just participated in the time-honored constitutional ritual of oath taking, as we embark upon our responsibilities to lead this republic. This ritual is symbolically and politically significant and substantive. It reflects the enduring character of the democratic tradition of a peaceful and orderly transfer of political power and authority. It also confirms the culmination of the commitment to a nation’s collective search for a purposeful and responsive national leadership. We applaud the resilience of our people who, weighed down and dehumanized by poverty and rendered immobile by the shackles of 14 years of civil war, went courageously to the polls to vote not once, but twice, to elect Vice President Boakai and me to serve.

“We express to you, our people, our deep sense of appreciation and gratitude for the opportunity to serve you and our common republic. We pledge to live up to your expectations of relating a government that is attentive and responsive to your needs, concerns, and the development and progress of our country. We know that your vote was a vote for change: a vote for peace, security, and stability; a vote for individual and national prosperity, a vote for healing and leadership. We have heard you loudly, and we humbly accept your vote of confidence as a mandate.

“This occasion ... marks a celebration of change, and a dedication to an agenda for socioeconomic and political rendering—indeed a national renewal. Today, we

wholeheartedly embrace this change. We recognize that this change is not change for change's sake but a fundamental break with the past, thereby requiring that we take bold and decisive steps to address the problems that for decades have stunted our progress, and undermined national unity.... As we embrace this new commitment to change, it is befitting that for the first time the inauguration is being held on the Capitol grounds—one of the three seats of government.

“We pledge anew our commitment to transparency, open government, and participatory democracy for all of our citizens. Fellow Liberians, as I speak to you today, I am most gratified at the caliber of the delegation of our own African countries, foreign governments, partners, local partners as well, who have come to join us to celebrate this triumph of democracy in our country. I am particularly touched by ... the delegation from the United States, headed by the wife of President Bush. My friends, our mediators, who have been with us for so long, who have brought us to this day. We pay homage to all of you. We respect you. We welcome you.

“My dear brothers and sisters of West Africa, you have died for us. You have given refuge to thousands of our citizens; you have denied yourself by utilizing your scarce resources to assist us. You have agonized for us, and have prayed for us. We thank you, and may God bless you for your support to Liberia, as well as the continued commitment to promote peace...stability, and bilateral cooperation within our subregion and beyond.

“I want to acknowledge the stewardship of the National Transitional Government, under the leadership of the former chairman, Gyude Bryant. For their contribution to peace and to a successful electoral process, I also recognize and thank the former National Transitional Legislative Assembly for their service to the nation. And I welcome the members of the 52<sup>nd</sup> Legislature, who were sworn in a few minutes ago. Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, I congratulate you as we assume the responsibilities of representing our people. I look forward to working with each and every one of you as we strive to build a better nation.

“I thank and applaud our gallant men and women of the armed forces of Liberia who have rendered sacrificial service to our nation, and who are now being willingly retired to facilitate the training and restructuring of the new armed forces of Liberia. I also thank the leadership and gallant men and women of the United Nations military Mission in Liberia, who daily labor with us to keep the peace that we enjoy.

“Fellow Liberians, ladies and gentlemen, no one who has lived in or visited this country in the past fifteen years will deny the physical destruction and the moral decadence that the civil war has left in its wake here in Monrovia and in other cities, towns, and villages across the nation. We have all suffered. The individual sense of depravation is immense, and it is therefore understandable that our people will have high expectations and will demand aggressive solutions to the socioeconomic and societal difficulties that we face. But our record shows that we are a strong and resilient people, able to survive, able to rise from the ashes of civil strife and to start anew, able to forge a new beginning—forgiving, if not forgetting, the past. We are a good and friendly people; therefore, even as we wipe away the tears of past suffering and despair, our challenge therefore is to transform adversity into opportunity, to renew the premises upon which our nation is founded: freedom, equality, humility, and individual progress.

“In the history of our nation—in the history of every nation—each generation, each new administration is summoned to define its nation’s purpose and character. Now it is our time to state clearly and unequivocally who we are, as Liberians, as new leaders, and where we plan to take this country in the next six years. First, let me declare that in pursuit of our political renewal, the political campaign is over. It is time for us, regardless of our political affiliations and persuasions, to come together to heal and rebuild our nation. For my part, as President of the Republic of Liberia, my government extends a hand of friendship and solidarity to the leadership and members of all political parties that are sitting right in front of me, who participated in the recent presidential and legislative elections. I call upon those who have been long in the struggle, and those who recently earned their stripes, to play important roles in the rebuilding of our nation.

“We are committed to advance the spirit of inclusion. I show all Liberians, and our international partners and friends, that our government will recognize and support a strong democratic and loyal opposition. It is important because we believe that our democratic culture and our nation are best served when the opposition is strong and actively engaged in the process of nation-building. Moreover, we call upon colleagues of all political persuasions now in the diaspora to return home and join us in meeting this exciting challenge of national renewal.

“We send an appeal to the thousands of our citizens who continue to live in refugee camps throughout the subregion and beyond. We recognize and sympathize with your plight and we are [finding] with our development partners ways and means to facilitate your early return home as a national imperative for our renewal and development.

“For those who continue to be internally displaced, we pledge to work with our partners to get you back to your communities, to enable you to start the process of rebuilding your lives. We must have a new understanding: your job as citizens is to work for your family and your country. Your government’s only job is to work for you. That is the compact that I offer you today.

“Fellow government leaders, ladies and gentlemen, ours has certainly not been an easy journey to where we are today. .... The tendency for intolerance against others’ opinion, rooted in parochial and selfish considerations and greed, have driven us to recent tragedies and paralysis as a nation and as a people. These negative national tendencies have in the past bred ethnic suspicion and hatred, and led to injustice, social and spiritual exclusion. They have also weakened our faculties to peacefully co-exist as a people with diverse social, cultural, economic, and political backgrounds. Consequently, we have witnessed needless conflicts.... I know this struggle because I’ve been a part of it. Without bitterness or anger or vindictiveness I recall the inhumanity ...the terror of attempted rape, the ostracism of the exiles, but I also recall the goodness and the kindness of the many who defied all of their instructions to save my life. To give food to the hungry and water to the thirsty. I recall their humanity, and I thank them.

“And so, my fellow Liberians, let us acknowledge and honor the sacrifices and the contributions of all. Let us rejoice that our democratic exercise has been a redemptive act and an expression of our new confidence in ourselves. Let us be proud that we were able to

ultimately rise above our intense political and other differences in renewed determination as a people. To promote unity rather than disharmony; to engender hope rather than disillusionment and despair. My administration therefore commits itself to the creation of a democracy in which the constitutional and civil liberties and rights of all of our people will be respected.

“In a similar quest for economic renewal, we start on the premise that we are a wealthy people. Our nation is blessed with endowments, rich in natural and human resources, yet our economy has collapsed due to several civil conflicts and economic mismanagement by successive governments. The test of reconstructing our devastated economy is awesome, for which there will be no quick fix. Yet we have the potential to promote a healthy economy in which Liberians and international investors can prosper. We can create an investment plan that gives confidence to Liberian and foreign investors. We can promote those activities that add value in the exportation of our natural resources. We can recognize and give support to our small farmers and marketeers, who through their own efforts through the years, have provided buoyancy and self-sufficiency to economic activity. We can revisit our land tenure system to promote ownership ... in the communities. This will cause a transformation of our economic vision and our economic goals that are consistent with our national endowment and regional and global dynamics. We will show that the allocation of our own resources reflect those priorities. Finally, on the basis of sequential measures of structured change, we will provide for transformation. And we will call on our development partners to recognize that although they have made significant investments to bring peace to our country, this peace can only be consolidated and sustained if we bring development to our country.

“With this in mind, we are working with partners to develop key objectives ... in the first 150 days of our administration, which coincides with the remaining [fiscal] period of the former government. We must meet our commitment to restore some measure of electricity to the capital city. We must put Liberians back to work again. We must put our economic and financial house in order. We must revive our mindset for courage, hard work, honesty, and a can-do spirit.

“Our strategy is to achieve quick and visible progress that reaches significant numbers of our people. To gain momentum, consolidate support, and establish a foundation for sustained economic development. For the long-term, more will be required from us and our partners, who will formulate a multi-layer economic reconstruction plan tied to a poverty reduction strategy program that relieves our country from ... debt and paves the way for acceleration in our national effort to make progress in the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals.

“We will also tackle the HIV/AIDS problem, thereby ensuring that this threat to our human capital and prosperity is addressed.

“We know that our desire for an environment of private sector driven growth cannot be achieved without the political role and the civil service that is efficient, effective, and honest. The workforce in our ministries and agencies is seen [negatively]. Our administration will therefore embark upon a process of rationalizing our agencies of government to make them lean, efficient, and responsive to public service delivery....

“Fellow Liberians, ladies and gentlemen across this country ... our citizens at this very moment are listening by radio, some are watching by television...I want to talk to you.

“As you know, in our various communities and towns, our children have a way of greeting their fathers when they come home after a long, tiring day of trying to find the means to feed the family at night and send the children to school in the morning. They say, ‘Papa now come.’ Too many times, for too many families, papa comes home with nothing, having failed to find a job or to get the help to feed the hungry children. Imagine the disappointment ... in the mother and the children, the frustration and loss of self-confidence in the father. The message of this story: I want you to know that I understand what you ordinary citizens go through each day to make ends meet for yourselves and your family. Times were hard before. Times are even harder today. But I make this pledge to you. Under my administration we will work to change that situation.

“We will work to ensure that when our children say, ‘Papa now come,’ papa will come home joyfully with something ... to feed his family. We will create the jobs so that the mothers and fathers will be gainfully employed, with the infrastructure and economic opportunities that will restore people’s dignity and self-worth. We will make the children smile again.

....

“Now I want to speak particularly to our youth who are out there. You can [trust] my words that our administration will do its utmost to respond to your needs. We will build your capacity to empower you to enable you to meaningfully participate in the reconstruction of the country. We will give you the education that you ask for and the skills training that we know you desire. We will actively pursue the Kakata Declaration, which resulted from the National Youth Conference held in 2005....

“Fellow Liberians, we know if we are to achieve our economic and income distribution goals, we must take on forcibly and effectively the debilitating cancer of corruption. Throughout the campaign, I assured the people that if elected, we would wage war against corruption.... Today I renew that pledge. Corruption under my administration will be the major public enemy. We will confront it, we will fight it. Anyone who sees this acclamation as mere posturing or yet another attempt by yet another Liberian leader to play to the gallery on this issue should think twice.

“To this respect, I will lead by example. I will expect—demand—that everyone serving in my administration lead by example. The first testament of how my administration will tackle public service corruption will be that everyone appointed to high positions of public trust, such as the cabinet and heads of public corporations, will be required to declare their assets. “I will be the first to comply. And I will call upon the honorable Speaker and President pro Tempore to see that they comply.

....

“Fellow Liberians, we know that to achieve our development and anti-corruption goals, we must welcome and embrace the government [who will be] managing the program, which the

National Transitional Government of Liberia, working with our international partners, have promulgated to yield the foreseeable economic and financial management [situation] in our country. We will accept and enforce the transitional [oversight we will receive], recognizing the importance and assistance which it is expected to provide during the early days of our government.

“We will ensure competence and integrity in the management of our own resources....

“My fellow Liberians, [the values of] regional cooperation and co-existence will continue to guide the conduct of our foreign policy over my administration. Our foreign policy will take root in the sacrifices and contributions that have been made by our brothers and sisters to restore peace, security, and stability to our country.

“We will therefore work to be a responsible member of subregional, regional, and international organizations including the Mano River Union, Economic Community of West African States, the African Union, and the United Nations. We will do all that we can to honor our obligations, past and current, and enforce all international treaties to which our country has prescribed. To [the countries] west, east, north and south of our borders we make this pledge. Throughout my administration, no inch of Liberian soil will be used to conspire, to perpetrate aggression against your countries. In making this commitment, we will work for a new regional security that is based upon economic partnership and on enhancing the prospects for regional cooperation and integration.

“My fellow citizens, my presidency shall remain committed to serve all Liberians, without fear of favor. I am president for all the people of the country. I therefore want to assure all of our people that neither I nor any person in my administration will pursue any vendetta. There will be no vindictiveness. There will be no policy of political, social, and economic exclusion. We will be inclusive and tolerant, ever sensitive to the anxieties, fears, hopes, and aspirations of all our people, irrespective of ethnic, political, religious affiliation and social status. By their vote, the Liberian people have sent a clear message: they want peace, they want to move on with their lives. My charge as president is to work to assure the wishes of our people and therefore encourage our citizens to utilize our system of due processes to settle their differences. We will be sure that we work together as a people, knowing however that we will forcefully, quickly, and decisively respond to any acts of lawlessness, threats to our hard-earned peace, or destabilizing actions that could return us to conflict.

“I pledge to bring the government closer to the people. The days of the imperial presidency, of a domineering and threatening chief executive, are over. This was my campaign promise which I intend to keep.

“And now before I close, I want to talk to the women. The women of Liberia, the women of Africa, and the women of the world. Until a few decades ago, Liberian women endured the injustices of being treated as second-class citizens. During the years of our civil war, they bore the brunt of inhumanity and terror. They were conscripted into war, gang-raped at will, forced into domestic slavery—yet it is the women who labored and advocated for peace throughout our region. It is therefore not surprising that during the period of our elections, Liberian women were galvanized and demonstrated unmatched passion, enthusiasm, and support for my presidency. They stood with me. They defended me, they walked with me,

they prayed for me. The same can be said for women throughout Africa. I want to here and now gratefully acknowledge the powerful [role] of women through all walks of life. My administration will endeavor to give Liberian women prominence in all affairs of our country. We will empower Liberian women in all areas of our national life. We will support an increase in laws that will restore their dignity... We will enforce the laws against rape recently passed by the National Transitional Government. We will encourage families to educate all children, particularly the girl child. We will also try to provide economic programs that enable Liberian women, particularly our market women, their proper place in the economic community.

“Fellow Liberians, we are moving forward. The best days are coming. The future belongs to us because we have taken charge of it. We have the resources, and we have the resourcefulness. We now have the right government.

“We have good friends, brothers and sisters who will work with us. Our people are already at work—cleaning the streets, cleaning up the environment, creating jobs, rebuilding schools, bringing back water and electricity. We are a good people, we are a kind people, we are a forgiving people, and we are a God-fearing people. So let us begin anew, moving into a future that is filled with promise, filled with hope. When union is strong, success is sure. We cannot, we must not, we will not fail.

“God bless you all.”