

TRANSCRIPT
OF
PRESS CONFERENCE BY H.E. PRESIDENT ELLEN JOHNSON SIRLEAF
C. CECIL DENNIS AUDITORIUM, MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS
TUESDAY, APRIL 20, 2010

Protocol Officer: Ladies and Gentlemen of the Press, I am pleased to announce to you H.E. Madam Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, President of the Republic of Liberia.

Cyrus Badio (Press Secretary): Members of the Press, will you have your seats. Welcome, once again, and thanks for accepting our invitation to attend this press conference. Without much ado, let's turn over to Her Excellency to keep the ball rolling. Madam President.

President Sirleaf: Thank you. Again, a good morning to all of you and our appreciation for your response to our call for another press conference I will start by going over some of the topical issues, most of which have been covered by you one way or the other in your media reports, both radio and press. And then, of course, in keeping with the standard procedure, we will open it up for discussion so that you can raise things that I may not have covered or seek clarification or question some that I have covered.

THRESHOLD BILL

The Threshold Bill: As you all may know, we've been on this, the Executive and the Legislature, for a long time. It's a very difficult one as it's a political issue. We've looked at it, from the Executive, as a financial issue. When they passed the Threshold Bill at 40,000 and we looked at the financial implications, we just could not do that, given the resources of the country, because it would have meant diverting resources from other important priorities, such as education and health and public works, to be able to accommodate the 23 additional members of the Legislature which the 40,000 implied. There was also a proviso that, in our estimation, violated the Constitution, so we vetoed it and send it back. Many legislators saw the wisdom of our action and began to consult on how they could resolve this issue. They sent it back again, with the same thing, and we had to send it back.

Anyway, consultations are going on between ourselves and among themselves to try to resolve this issue. It's a question of finding the right balance between making sure there's proper representation in the Legislature, based on the Census, and putting a number – if we are going to have additional numbers – putting a number that can be financially supported without undermining the allocation to other priority sectors. We hope that this matter will be resolved within the next week. There's serious, serious work being done by the legislators to find a resolution so they can give me a Bill that I

can sign immediately. We ask the NEC [National Elections Commission] to start preparatory work for registration so that as soon as it's passed, the NEC can go to work right away, beginning to register people for the elections, because nobody wants a delay in the elections. There won't be a delay. We've got to make sure it comes off on time.

INTERNATIONAL MONETARY FUND/HIPC

As many of you know, the IMF team was here to assess our performance under the debt relief – the HIPC program – and we are pleased to say that they've confirmed to us that all of the “triggers,” as they are called – that's a new word for conditionalities – all the triggers have been met. In June, they will make another assessment but we are hoping now that the IMF Board will meet between now and June and, on the basis of that report, will confirm that Liberia has reached the completion point. The end result of this, of course, is to open the fiscal space to enable us to do a certain amount of borrowing. We are going to be very cautious to make sure we don't put Liberia in debt trouble again. But it does give us a little bit of flexibility to be able to accelerate our development work and so we are very pleased about that.

The IMF looked at our overall economic performance and, again, our growth, which was timid as a result of the global crisis. The projections are now showing that growth going back up, and we're pleased that some of our investment that had been delayed will move forward. ArcelorMittal is now accelerating, and they've confirmed to us that all those who were laid off will be re-employed, and they will start their activities rapidly toward the objective of having the first iron ore exports somewhere around the third quarter of next year, 2011. Negotiations with other companies are ongoing: the Western Cluster negotiations have started, and DECORIS, the oil palm plantation in Maryland, is also ongoing. China Union is back on course. We have to turn the assets over to them, and once we do that they will start operations.

REVENUE

On the revenue side, we know people have been writing all kinds of things: that the government is broke, therefore they're flying Economy Class. No, that Economy Class decision was taken as a bold decision by the Cabinet to say that in times of resource constraints, we, the Cabinet, are willing to make sacrifices. It was a positive thing, not a negative thing. It was not imposed upon the Cabinet. The Cabinet imposed it upon themselves to say we are going to fly Economy until this thing is resolved. The decline in revenue was related to the China Union problem – what we call our big ticket items, those big items where the companies have to pay a signature fee. But like I say, all of that is now resolved, even though the Cabinet has agreed to continue to sacrifice through the rest of this fiscal year. We hope, when we get to the next fiscal year, that everything goes back to normal.

BRAZIL/LIBYA

As many of you know, I was in Brazil and I passed through Libya on the way back. The purpose for the Brazil trip was, again, to encourage our South-South relationship; to diversify our partnership; and with a specific focus that we wanted Brazil to come and take a look at our hydro. And so they will be sending a team out. They have a major construction company that also has a contract with ArcelorMittal to do some work on the mining operations. It is a very large company, and we want to see if we can also get them to come and bid for some of the works that are being financed – our road works and other construction works financed by the World Bank – just so we diversify those that will compete to carry out the work. They will be sending a team; they also will be working with the Ministry of Agriculture to see how they can support the agriculture sector. So we expect, early next month, a team to come from Brazil based on the Memorandum that we signed. We signed several Memorandums of Understanding with them.

In Tripoli, we were trying to get the Ducor issue resolved. The money for the Ducor is already allocated; the problem is to reach an understanding with the squatters and to get the squatters off the land so that the hotel can start the renovation that the Vice President has been working on. They are close to resolution, including those who also have houses there. Big people like yourself, “You got house there.” So we’ll see how we can get everybody off the land so that we can start building there. A team is coming in tomorrow to do that and to look at Hotel Africa and the Conference Center to see if we can do something. We want to have a big international conference next year; but unless we can get the facilities, we won’t be able to qualify for it.

GENERAL AUDITING COMMISSION (GAC)

The GAC Audits: You know, we are on the right track to fight corruption. It’s a big problem; it’s a societal problem. It’s more than a government problem or Executive problem; it’s a societal problem which we all have to fight -- the private sector and the public sector. You know, as well as I, that after so many years of deprivation, so many years of lack of compensation, so many years of indiscipline and what not, that corruption has crept into our value system. We’ve got to fight it. And so we’re attacking it on many fronts: improvements in compensation to reduce vulnerabilities; introduction of systems that have been missing in our institutions for years; being able to have pillars of integrity, such as the General Auditing Commission and others; strengthening the judicial system; the important part in the fight against corruption, the Anti-Corruption Commission – all of those things. If you look at the LEITI [Liberia Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative] Report -- they’ve just put out a second report. I urge you all to read it and see the good work that Liberia is doing on that front.

On the other front, we’re still having problems. The GAC Audits make an important contribution to our work. We read the audits. In those cases where it’s very clear from the evidence that somebody has violated the public trust, what the Executive can do is

to remove the person from office, by suspension or by dismissal, and then send a report to the Justice Ministry which also has to investigate it to make sure they have enough evidence to go to court. In some cases where they do, they've been to court. They've lost one or two cases. I think recently they either have won or are expecting to win a couple of major corruption cases in the courts.

The judicial system takes long here because once you indict somebody, they take bail. Some of the cases that come up in the Press, these people have been indicted but they are out on bail awaiting their trial for the court to determine whether they are innocent or guilty. That process is on, so we are very pleased with the way in which we are moving.

Disclosure is an important part of fighting corruption. It used to be hidden; nobody could talk about it, and you couldn't write about it. If you did somebody, or if you called some big name, it would come down on you. You can call any name today. You can disclose anything you want to, and we encourage you and we support you in that. The only thing we say is: please be careful of other people's rights when you accuse somebody. Don't infringe upon the person's rights until they have had a chance to defend themselves, which is what our law requires. We want to stick within the law on that one. And don't do false information because if you do, you just create a problem for us. So we're pressing on, on that one.

People have complained about the quality of the audience, people have complained about political objectives, but we're not going to deal with that; we're going to deal with the audits on the basis of the information and the analysis and the recommendations contained therein, and then we're going by the law as we try to deal with it.

GBOYO

The Maryland situation and the *gboyo* thing. Somebody... (laughter)... Well, *gboyo* is not a laughable issue. Ritualistic killing is a serious thing which this government does not condone. It is illegal, it is inhumane, and we are going to deal with it in accordance with the law, and that's exactly what the Ministry of Justice is doing. On the basis of the evidence, they had certain people arrested. Those people were indicted and jailed. When there was a lack of evidence after they looked at it, in some cases some people were released. They're still looking at it because our law also establishes what evidence is. For example, there has to be testimony by more than one person when they accuse you. I don't know all the details of the law, but the Minister of Justice, I am convinced, is following the law in these particular cases. And if the law leads to where somebody will be prosecuted, then they will be prosecuted. So the case is on, and we should just allow it to take its course.

LOFA

In the case of Lofa, there is a similar situation and we've had several investigations. We've had the Inter-Ministerial Committee; we've had the Inter-Faith Movement Committee to go up there; we've had the Legislative Caucus go up there. This was support under the direct oversight of the Vice President. All of those reports are now

before him. He's looking at the different recommendations and findings to see what action we should take and look at the root causes. But, again, let's be very clear: there's a method to follow in addressing grievances. We aren't going to allow people to destroy government properties as a means of expressing their grievances.

People that burn houses, that burn churches, that burn vehicles – these people will be prosecuted because that is not the way. We say we live by the law. Both the government and the population must live by the law, and the law says there's certain way to channel your grievances to address them. So they are looking at that, and if we find those young people who just burn things as a means of expressing their dissatisfaction, we're not going to let them get off, we'll have to deal with that.

NIMBA

The Nimba land dispute case has been under a committee headed by an eminent citizen, businessman Musa Bility. His committee includes representative groups from the different areas in Nimba. They've met for over a year, trying to judge those cases. He was on the air himself, not too long ago, saying that the report is now coming to a close. They will be giving me a final report with recommendations, and we will use those recommendations to bring this to a close.

At the same time, there's some citizen group that wrote to say they will disturb the Independence Day celebration if they don't get their land. Let them try it! We're not going to allow it! We will have the Independence Day in Nimba. Nobody will disturb it. At the same time, we learn that the report will be made public, so people can know what the recommendations are and what we can do. I've been told that it'll cost us a lot of money to settle the land dispute cases. We'll see what it costs and how we can find the resources to settle them amicably. We hope that all those involved will give government the fullest cooperation so we can bring this matter to an end.

U.S. HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT

We have read the U.S. Human Rights Report and we disagree with some of the findings. I'm writing to Secretary [Hillary] Clinton to put it on record that some of the findings are just erroneous. That's the way to do it. We accept the report for what it is because some of it we need to take seriously. We need to address wherever there have been violations. We do all we can to address it where we think there are inaccuracies. The Minister of Justice and her team have pointed out the inaccuracies and have demonstrated the efforts we've made to address those issues, and we will send the Secretary our letter on that.

At the same time, the Honorable U.S. Under-Secretary for Political Affairs [Mr. William Burns] will be here tomorrow and you will have a chance to meet with him. I'm sure he's having a press session. The Deputy Minister of Commerce from China will be here on Thursday, and he'll be launching the start of the Bong Mines operations.

One last point, about the Independent Human Rights Commission, which is vested with the mandate to implement the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Report: That

process is ongoing by the expert group that was organized by the Chief Justice in keeping with the law. I'm told they should be completing their work in a couple of weeks. We've facilitated that work by giving them the resources they requested, and they will, in keeping with the process, give me a shortlist of names and then we will appoint someone and send them over to the Legislature for confirmation. I'm hoping that all of that will be concluded within the next month, so that body can get to work.

That's all I can think of. Mr. Badio, let me turn it back to you.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Electricity

Question (John Kollie, of Liberia Media Institute (LMI)): I heard you talk about Brazil. When China Union first came here, they looked at our hydro. Is China Union going to deal with the hydro, or are they out and we are looking for new partners? Will it be Brazil or China Union?

President Sirleaf: We are concentrating on the Mount Coffee hydro, but we don't want to put all our eggs into one basket. There's a company called Sinoe Hydro that made a proposal sometime ago to do the hydro, because Bong Mines will need cheap power to operate. We're looking at their proposal. We are also talking to the European Commission about funding, because the Mount Coffee hydro is part of the West African Power Pool (WAPP) facility. We also went to Brazil. The proposal we get that is quick and that produces the results for us, that's the way we'll go. These three options are on the table. In the meanwhile, we are concluding with USAID to install a 10-megawatt diesel plant here that should cover much more of the power needs in Monrovia. That should be done by the third quarter of this year, so we can have more electricity in the city.

Children Selling in the Streets/Corruption

Question (Alphonso Toweh, of Reuters and The New Republic newspaper): I have two very short questions. Sometime ago, you announced to the country about children leaving the streets. After a certain time, we realized that it hadn't worked. We still see children moving up and down. Does that really worry you, and what do you intend to do? Secondly, you spoke about corruption as a serious problem in your government, which you called upon everybody to help fight. Some ministers get sacked, but we don't know the reasons why. Some resigned, and some are here. We are seeing some of your ministers constructing huge buildings. How do you see that? For instance, the former Minister of Internal Affairs, Ambulai Johnson. That's one. Another is the Minister of Defense. We see these people building such huge mansions. Does it really worry you, Madam President, looking at their salaries?

President Sirleaf: Well, let me put it this way: I hope somebody, yourself included, reports this to the LACC [Liberia Anti-Corruption Commission] so that the LACC can

investigate. Another person was building a very big house near the Chinese Embassy, and somebody took it to the LACC and they examined the case. It bothers me, of course, and I ask questions if I see a Cabinet member building a big house which I think they don't have the capacity for, based on their government salaries. I ask them, as in the case of Minister Johnson, and the answer I get is: "Look, I didn't just come to Liberia to work. I've been working in the States and I owned properties there, and I sold my properties and moved to Liberia, and I used my money from that to build my house." So, unless I have evidence of misuse of government funds, that's an answer. However, it can be probed further by the LACC, if people have evidence on that. On the other hand, if I don't like what I see, then I use my political powers and remove you from office. That's the least thing that I can do, and that's what I do. In fact, I'm waiting to hear when you people will tell me what happened to the US\$100,000 to build the Press Union headquarters.

About the children, you've all got to work on this one. We're trying our best to enforce the ruling, but it's the parents, the mothers and fathers, that have to help on this. Sometimes when I see children on the streets, I stop and say to them, "Why aren't you in school?" They say to me, "Oh, my Ma sent me." Sometimes, the children tell good stories: if you see them in the morning, they say: "Oh, I go to afternoon school." If you see them in the afternoon, they say they go to morning school. So, it's difficult. But we have to keep at it. Please help me. If you see a child out there with a big pan on her head, please stop the child and say, "Where's your Ma? Tell your Ma you're supposed to be in school."

We have to enforce the decision, but we also have to enforce it through education and working with the parents. It does concern me. I'm so glad, though, that it's beginning to have an effect. Enrollment is up, and if you look on the streets you see many children in their uniforms now, and that, in itself, will send a message to others, because the others will begin to tell their parents, their peers, that their young children are in schools everywhere, so we will keep fighting it.

Judiciary

Question (Bill Jarklor, New Vision newspaper): I have two important questions I would like the President to address. The first question is that we've held lots of judicial workshops here and there. As you stated, the judiciary is an important instrument for the realization of HIPC qualification. The judiciary seems to be rotten, and we don't know whether it's coming from the bottom up or from up to bottom. What's your administration doing to ensure that the judiciary will give the Liberian people relief that's different from that of past regimes?

The second question is about the HIPC Audit. Since last week, the noise in the media is all about the HIPC Audit, and we heard that Minister [Eugene] Shannon's Ministry is on the line, as well as the Health Ministry, the Finance Ministry, and the rest of them. Last

Saturday, your Finance Minister held a press conference in defense of his Ministry, saying the HIPC Audit is political. What is your reading on this?

President Sirleaf: On your first question, we can only work with the Chief Justice and the entire judiciary to be able to strengthen them, and that's what we've tried to do – to strengthen them through better compensation, better training, and better logistics. If you look at the records, you will see that today the judiciary is much better off in terms of their ability to carry out their functions. When it comes to the dispensing of justice, they have a certain amount of independence, and they have to follow that road. We can't go to court and order it to declare this person guilty, or do this or that. Our Justice Ministry must be able to carry cases to court and do it in such a manner that they can win them. They tell me they are at a point where we will begin to see a turnaround in the judiciary. But we cannot dictate to the judiciary based on the independence of the three branches of government.

As to what we will do with the HIPC Audit, I'm not getting into that. I take the audits for what they are, based upon the evidence contained therein. I read them. If the evidence to me is very clear, I send it to the Ministry of Justice to look at them, to read them, go through their investigation process to see whether the evidence leads to possible prosecutions, and we look at the recommendations. One or two recommendations in some reports I may disagree with, and I've disagreed with some of the recommendations from reading the reports. In those cases, I tell the Auditor General: "I disagreed with this," and I give him an example. In the case of the Ministry of Information Audit, where the two people involved, who are now in court, actually cashed the check, if they shared it with somebody else, that's a different issue; but they cashed the checks. So you say I must reinstate those people. No! I won't do that because I don't agree with that recommendation. If I disagree, I call the Auditor General and say that I disagree with it on the basis of 1, 2, 3, 4 & 5, and most times he will tell me, "You have the right to disagree with me." So that's it. What we deal with is the evidence that is before us, and to make sure that we respect people's rights and follow the law.

Corruption and HIPC Audit

Question (Robert Clarke, Star Radio): My question has to do with prosecuting people for corruption. The government is accused of selective justice; that is, there are certain people who are prosecuted while others go scot free. You are saying that the reports will be sent to the Justice Ministry, and later for a resolution to come to you. In the past, some people have been suspended pending investigations, and now you're saying that recommendations should come before action. In the case of the former Information Minister, Lawrence Bropleh, when you gathered information that there was a scandal there, you asked him to step aside, until investigation. Your Finance Minister is now implicated in the GAC Audits. Will you also ask him to step aside until investigation?

President Sirleaf: First of all, please get me right! I did not say I send it to the Justice Ministry to wait for their recommendations. I said that I read the report. If the evidence to

me is clear that I need to take action regarding the person, then I take the action. The trouble with the report is that you get it before I get it. So you read it before I read it. And you accuse before I have the opportunity to even understand. I'm just reading the HIPC Audit Reports. You've already read it, you've already formulated your position, and you've already written on it before I even have a chance to read it. I think that, based on my background, I understand financial issues much more and I know on the basis of evidence whether that evidence is something to act on or not to act on. When I send it to Justice, it's for Justice to determine whether prosecution is necessary, not for them to make recommendations to me on political issues. I take the political decision.

Cement

Question (Bai Best, Daily Observer newspaper): My question is on the cement issue and the hike in prices. The Executive Order you passed, temporarily doing away with the 10 percent tax so that more cement could be imported on the market, has expired, and the price is going up. This is also affecting the job market. And since the government is interested in furthering the PRS [Poverty Reduction Strategy] goals, I want to know what is your take on this whole issue?

President Sirleaf: It's only hurting the big people who are building. The Finance Minister needs the money to pay the small people and we're looking at the cement issue? It's been raised with us by the Minister of Commerce and others, and we're looking at the implications. When the Executive Order expired, the Finance Ministry went and carried out the law, because the law requires a 10 percent charge. They enforced the law, and now we've had complaints that cement price is rising. We have a problem with moving back to the monopolistic situation with Cemenco. The situation is being looked at, and we'll make some adjustments. We know that a lot of you – those in the middle class – are trying to build homes, and were happy with the low price of cement. We have to do something to keep it at that level, and we're looking at that.

Education

Question (Cyrus McGill, Royal Communications): I'd like to draw you back to the issue of compulsory primary education. Many see it as a two-way street. You spoke on it, and used to encourage parents to take their children off the streets, especially during school hours. But looking at the government's side of it, some parents complain about the lack of materials at the Key Hole Primary Schools – government-owned schools that are being opened in the communities. Some parents are complaining that they are still paying fees; others are talking about the decentralization of this, especially for those in the rural parts of Liberia. Can you say how much is being done so that those out there can also feel the impact?

President Sirleaf: I can only say that we are trying to build more schools; we are trying to equip more schools; we are trying to put good teachers in the schools. I don't have the statistics, but I'm sure we can get them to show you. There should be no fees

charged in the public schools. And even in the private schools, some subsidy is given them so that their charges can be kept at the minimum. If there's any parent who sees that somebody in the public school is charging them, please bring it to our attention. Bring it to the Ministry of Education's attention so it can be dealt with. Now, it will take time to build all the schools required throughout the country, and to equip all of them properly. We will continue to make progress in that regard.

HIPC Audit

Question (Henry Sumo, Power TV): With all these negative results from the HIPC Audits, do you see a positive prospect for Liberia reaching the HIPC completion point?

President Sirleaf: I don't think you were listening to me. In my opening remarks I said the IMF team was here, and they have confirmed that we have met all the "triggers," and we're on the road to completion point. So, yes! I am very confident.

Threshold Bill

Question: (Othello Garbla, The New Dawn): To answer your question about the PUL: Yes, indeed, the matter of the US\$100,000 is in court, and we are working on it. But to my question: the first one is the issue of elections and the Threshold Bill. I know the Senators recently passed the figure at 54,000, and we got information that the Lower House is unhappy with the numbers. What do you think will be the actual numbers? We are looking at the financial aspects and the 2009-2010 budget shortfalls. We look at the risk areas. For instance, there was estimation that if China Union or another concession had started on time, we would not have had the kind of shortfall we have at present. What lesson has been learned that, next budget, we won't make the forecast lapses that we had this year?

President Sirleaf: On the Threshold Bill, I don't want to undermine my negotiating power with the Legislature by telling you what number. We are negotiating; let me leave myself free to negotiate with them. But let me say that we will find a solution.

On the issue of the budget, last year the Ministry of Finance made certain estimates on the revenue and submitted them to the Legislature. The Legislature increased that considerably, and told them to go and try harder. This year, we are going to be more conservative and stay with the realistic number and don't anticipate. Even though the payment by China Union was a factor in the risk management regime, it was not the only factor. We are holding our budget meetings now to make sure that what they estimate this year is what they will be able to achieve.

Achievements

Question (Ferricks Dainsee, ELBC): You've been in power for a little over four years. Every day we are hear people saying that nothing is being done in this country. People

are saying that there's hard times, and there's no food to eat. Can you tell the Liberian people what exactly you have achieved in four years?

President Sirleaf: You want me to stay here two hours? (Laughter) Mr. Dainsee, I think we've tried our best to go over, time by time, what we've done under our four pillars of the Poverty Reduction Strategy. I could take a long time going through all of that. But, quickly, under Pillar I, we built a new 2,000-person Army and we established the ERU [Emergency Response Unit]. Under Pillar II, economic revitalization, we are opening the mining sector, the agriculture sector, and the forestry sector; we're starting to get private investors and private capital there. Under Pillar III, governance and the rule of law, we've completed the work with the Civil Service and are trying to get the public service completely reorganized. The Biometric System will be in place. We are installing a system of accountability in the different ministries and agencies; we have a media that is free to say anything they want to say, and civil society is very active in the affairs of state. We're trying to strengthen the judiciary, and more. And under Pillar IV, infrastructure and basic services, look at the roads we're building, not only here but in the country. We are building streets. We have also done much with the health system – you saw the hospital in your area, Tappita – and with the educational system and our schools. Now if you want statistics on all of that, the Ministry of Planning and Economic Affairs has prepared reports, and we can make them available.

U.S. Human Rights Report

Question (J. Cholo Brooks, Global News Network, publisher of Star newspaper): You mentioned that portions of the U.S. Human Rights Report are erroneous. Would you mind telling us what those are?

President Sirleaf: Since I'm sending a confidential report to Secretary Clinton, let me not disclose what's in there before she receives it. Once I've sent it to her, we will make it available to you. It was a report prepared by the Minister of Justice, who went through the report step by step, to be able to look at the areas she thought were inaccurate. She's given me a report on that. The report has a lot of merit so I'm sending it forward.

Government Vehicles/Passports

Question (Isaac Yeah, UNMIL Radio): Two quick concerns. One, Madam President, is the abuse of government's resources, especially vehicles. If you check the budget, millions of dollars are spent on vehicles every budget period. But the management of these vehicles is very poor. More besides, they are kept at night clubs and drinking bars every evening, and if you did a survey, every Sunday morning there are damaged government vehicles by the roadside. Is this really a concern to you, Madam President? I heard you talk about gas slips, but I think this is more pressing than the gas slips issue.

The second one: every time I come here for press conferences, I like to talk about passports. I don't know what's happening now. Coming from Ghana about three days ago, with three Liberians onboard, we had three different passports. I don't know how we intend to address this, but it's embarrassing sometimes when you're on a flight with other people. As to the cost, we complained about the US\$50 expense, and then you managed to reduce it to US\$25. A few months after that, we saw the price of what is called the Liberian biometric passport going up, again to US\$50. People are saying, Madam President, this is too high for them. If the ECOWAS passport is US\$23 and the Liberian passport is US\$25, how come the new machine-readable biometric passport is being sold for US\$50? I hope something will be done before the elections.

President Sirleaf: I agree with you on the use of government vehicles. That's an issue that will be taken up. In fact, I'd like to see the government get out of the vehicle business, but to do that, we'll need to have a public transport system where people will have an alternative to get to work. A public transport system will reduce the need for government to have to give individuals vehicles, but it is abused. You say Sunday morning, eh? That means after Saturday night? Please show me the places where they can be, so I can go check there. It's a problem, and we're trying to fight it. We're going to have a policy and guidelines whereby you can only buy vehicles for certain types of use, for example, for those who have to go into the countryside. Not everybody has to have a US\$35,000 or US\$45,000 Jeep and such. The GSA [General Services Administration] is working with the support of technical help from the USA to try to correct that.

Our passport situation is a big problem for us. Usually, the Minister of Foreign Affairs doesn't sit in at my press conferences, but you see her here today, because she knew you were going to ask this question. But let me just say what it is, and if more needs to be said, she can say it.

This government inherited a contract for the issuance of new passports. The passports had already been produced and were sitting in a safe in Paris at the company that produced them. The cost of the passports was US\$7 million, and the money had been advanced by an intermediary – not the producer, not the government, but an intermediary that had this contract arrangement for the passports.

When we came into office, we said we needed new passports because too many criminals all over the world are holding Liberian passports – passports that had been sold to them through different regimes. We had cases where people were refusing to give Liberians visas because they had criminals with our passports that were going around. So we needed to change the passports, and we had one or two choices: either go out and get a whole new set of passports and then pay the US\$7 million to discard the ones that were in Paris; or we take the ones from Paris and use them under an arrangement whereby the passports are sold, with some of the money going to settle the debt, and some of it going for operations. That's how come the US\$50 charge came about – to settle this debt, because we didn't have the US\$7 million to pay.

So we decided to get the new passports from Paris, and to implement them, because they were one step above our own passports. Our passports did not meet international requirements. This one was above, because it was machine-readable, and ICAO [the International Civil Aviation Organization] had given a deadline by which non-machine-readable passports would no longer be allowed for international travel.

So that's why we did that. However, we now find out that those passports did not meet the full requirements and this is why we have put them under suspension and the company is coming to see if they can correct them. At the same time, we also found out that – and we should have known this, let me admit to you – that the older passports could be used for a period beyond the end of April and could be used until 2011, so we are in this dilemma.

We don't want people to use the old passports because many of them are in the hands of criminals. The new passports can be used, and those that have been issued can be properly used anywhere over the world. They are machine-readable and they meet some of the standards. And if we can get the company to improve the standards, we will start to re-issue them again.

The US\$50 cost, like I said, is because of the debt, as simple as that. The ECOWAS passports are still valid and can be used. There was a time when they could not be used all over the world because some countries will not put visas into ECOWAS passports. Now, I've been told that more countries are able to do that. And that's why you are hearing about three passports. It's a big problem, but some of it is something we just inherited and couldn't help. I don't know if the Minister wants to say any more; when I finish, you can say some more about it.

Minister Olubanke King-Akerele: No, Madam President. We have question sheets that are available, and we hope to solve this problem in a very short period of time, when the supplier comes as we try to correct it. Thank you very much, Madam President.

Roads

Question (Jonathan Paye-Layleh, Associated Press): I just want to seek a clarification, not really a question, on the issue of road construction across Liberia. During the 2005 elections, we heard a lot that there was something called the "Liberia Trust Fund" that was being generated for any government taking over to get started with, in terms of road contracts. Sometimes we hear the World Bank saying that it's building the roads in Liberia, and sometimes we hear that it's the same money I'm talking about that's being channeled through the World Bank. And then, again, when you ask some Liberian officials what this government has done, the first thing they will say is, "You can't see the roads that the government is building?" In fact, there are billboards around town

announcing that our taxes are the funds that are building these roads. So, just for some clarification, who is actually doing what? Is it the World Bank that is building the roads, or are the roads being built out of the taxes collected locally?

President Sirleaf: Let me first correct you. This government did not meet any Liberia Trust Funds for roads – zero! What we did, in connection with the PRS, was to establish, through the World Bank, a fund. It is called the Liberia Infrastructural Fund that was organized when we went to a major Donors’ Conference in Berlin, in 2007. That’s where that Trust Fund was launched. That Trust Fund is managed by the World Bank. We encourage all donors supporting our infrastructure development to put the money in that Fund. Under our PRS, based upon consultations we had with the people, we have said, in terms of infrastructure, that roads are our No. 1 priority. Therefore, the Trust Fund money funds roads. The World Bank doesn’t own roads in our country; our roads don’t belong to them. They manage the money that comes from themselves, because the Bank does give us grants. They also manage the money that comes from other donors for road-building projects that we identify in our own development agenda, our Poverty Reduction Strategy.

But, in addition, we build roads that are not financed by donors. If you see some of the neighborhood roads – where they paved the SKD Boulevard and other roads – that’s not from the Infrastructural Fund; that’s not from donors. It’s still within our development agenda, but that one comes from taxpayers’ money in the budget, and the Ministry of Public Works has supervision over all those projects, whether it’s World Bank-funded or USAID. USAID builds roads too. They don’t put money through the Infrastructural Fund. As is their policy, they contract themselves directly. For example, they built the road to Robertsport. They also built the road to Todee, through their funds, but under the supervision of the Ministry of Public Works. The roads are our roads. Please understand. No donor has any project here. They support us and we appreciate their support. They provide funding to supplement our own resources, but it is not their projects. That’s your project, the Liberian people’s project!

International NGOs

Question (Sheriff Adams, reporter): I recall, recently, that you spoke quite well, coming down hard on international NGOs, and you requested them to give account of monies or funding that they get from abroad. I really want you to go in-depth and explain, because sometimes when you make some of these comments, it becomes difficult for us to understand, and sometimes your language becomes technical. Could you give a full explanation of what you meant?

President Sirleaf: I only used the language that they used in the workshop when I went there. When I went there, they talked about “mutual accountability.” That’s in the Paris Declaration, agreed upon by the international community. Mutual accountability means we, as a government, must be accountable for what money we raised and what we used it for. We must tell everybody, through reports. For the NGOs, it means they must

also tell us what they raised, what they allocated, what they spent. That's mutual accountability and that's all I was trying to say, that we need to respect the principle of mutual accountability.

We need it from you, too, in the media; you are also NGOs. The Ministry of Planning and Economic Affairs is very serious about one thing. We have, if I remember the numbers, over 400-plus NGOs operating in this country, and the amount of money they command, again if I remember, is over US\$200 million a year. That's a lot of money.

Most of the donors' money does not go through our budget; it is direct. We are trying to attract such funds now, based upon the growing confidence. We're trying to attract money through the budget like other countries. For most other countries, donor funding goes through their budgets because they have proper financial systems, and the confidence in their ability to manage the funds is there. We're trying to get there; we're not there yet, so we don't get budget support. We are starting to. We got some from World Bank support, and we're going to get some from the European Commission, etc. What we're saying – what the Ministry of Planning is saying – is that we want regular reports from NGOs as to who are your sponsors, who are the sources of your funding, what is your organization, and what activities are you undertaking? With that information we will be able to report to the Liberian people that this is what you're doing. Maybe it's good that could applaud you. But we want to know. So we're requiring these reports, and if we don't get them, we have to question you. And if you still refuse to give us the reports, then we cannot give you accreditation.

Liberia Petroleum Refinery Company (LPRC)

Question (Patrick K. Wrokpoh, The Inquirer): I was wondering what you can say to the nation as it relates to the removal and replacement of Mr. Harry Greaves at LPRC. I think you can remember quite well that there was a Justice Ministry investigation into the incident. The Ministry completed its investigation and forwarded its report to your office, and then the Board, led by Madam Amelia Ward, was requested to review the report. I don't know what is the status of the whole issue, so can you update the nation on that?

President Sirleaf: You want to know about LPRC, or you want to know about Harry Greaves? (Mr. Wrokpoh: Both!) Mr. Greaves is pursuing his personal interest. End of story. On LPRC, we have a Board; in fact we have a new Chairman who will be meeting with me today, Mr. Wilson Tarpeh. We have a Board that's operating. We have a management company that's operating. We have some serious problems at LPRC that relate to safety of the facilities. Many of you have been there, and we all get very scared when we look at it. On the basis of the lack of compliance with our laws, we did not go ahead with the contract with Zakhem. LPRC is now negotiating with a UK-based company, one of the companies that bid, to see if we can start some urgent work at LPRC, and the management is performing well. Mr. Greaves a very talented individual. I think he's pursuing other interests, and so there's no issue unless you get one.

Tourism

Question (Mohammed Kanneh, The Heritage newspaper): Madam President, I just returned from The Gambia, and what I saw in that little country is amazing. My question is this: Is there any plan by government to see how they can relocate West Point and people at the waterfront? In Gambia, the tourism industry is actually booming because of their waterfront. When you drive from Clara Town, coming to town, you see the water, and you see the dirt and everything floating on the water. Is there a need for government to relocate the people there and to bring in investors for, say, eco-tourism?

President Sirleaf: You want to get me in trouble now, so that tomorrow you can say, “The President say she will move West Point.” Look, I think we can do some work there. What you said about the Mesurado River is correct, and I’ve said it before. The Mesurado River is fast becoming a sewer; let me be candid about that. The Ministry of Lands, Mines and Energy has been working with people on the waterfront, not West Point. We will get to that later. But on the waterfront, where people are putting up toilets over the river and all of that, every time we take it down, they build it again. So what we will do now is to take down the buildings. We have a right of “Eminent Domain” under the Constitution. We can take the land, as long as we can compensate the landowners.

We’ve already called for their deeds, and we know who own the land now. We’ve told them that those buildings will have to come down. What we’re trying to wait for is the bridge [Vai Town], which is being worked on. When the bridge is finished, that entire waterfront needs to be cleared, and we need to do something about Providence Island.

Providence Island can be a recreation place where people can go for entertainment and can take their families on Sundays, etc. We’ve also called on the Ministry of Information for suggestions about the monument. We want to complete that monument. Maybe we can turn it into the monument recommended by the TRC Report, or something like that. So we’re looking for ideas on that. But you asked about The Gambia. They’ve had much longer to work on their country; we’ve had four years, but we’re working on it.

Closing Remarks

Mr. Badio (Press Secretary): Alright, Madam President, thank you very much, unless you have anything final to add.

President Sirleaf: My only thing to add is what you said to me. Mr. Badio said I should come and stand up, because some people say that I can’t stand up anymore. So he said I should please stand up for the whole press conference, “so that they can see you can stand up.” I did not even drink so they can know I don’t even need water. Members of the Press: This Old Ma is very, very strong, and we even saw that in Belleh Yallah.

Mr. Badio: Thank you, Madam President, and ladies and gentlemen of the Press.