

**National Oration on the Celebration of the
164th Independence Anniversary of the Republic of Liberia**

By

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Voinjama City, Lofa County

July 26, 2011

Your Excellency Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, President of the Republic of Liberia,
Your Excellency Ernest B. Koroma, President of the Republic of Sierra Leone,
Uncle Joseph N. Boakai, Vice President of the Republic of Liberia,
Honorable Alexander Tyler, Speaker of the House of Representative, and members
of the legislature,
Honorable Cletus S. Wotorson, President Pro Tempore of the Liberian Senate,
Your Honor Associate Justices of the Supreme Court,
The Dean and members of the cabinet,
Your Excellency, the Special Representative of the Secretary General and members
of the United Nations Mission in Liberia,
The Doyen and Members of the Diplomatic corps,
Men and women in arms for the defense and security of our country,
Members of the Christian Community,
Members of the Muslim Community,
Zoes, Elders, and traditional chiefs,
Representatives of International Organizations,
Members of the Business Community,
Members of the fourth estate,
Distinguished ladies and gentlemen.

I am **very pleased** to be chosen from among many fine Liberian women to
serve as orator of the 164th Independence Anniversary of our beloved
Republic, Africa's Oldest. By choosing me a young Liberian business woman to
speak to our nation on this great occasion, you have again demonstrated your
willingness to take risk with ordinary Liberians, to give them a chance to offer
their ordinary contribution to the extra ordinary progress of our dear country.

I am especially grateful to you, President Sirleaf for choosing Lofa County for
the observance of this 164th Anniversary. Especially, after a disturbance in our
county that challenged our unity and threatened the peace.

On this day and at this moment, that sad past is behind us! Lofa, the mother of our nation's Unification Policy is still home to six ethnic groups living in harmony and sharing the enviable gift of a multicultural community. **For the President to have chosen Lofa County and a citizen of Lofa as Orator**, in spite of all of our recent indiscretions and challenges, **Lofa knows this much, Madam President**, you have shown that you believe in us. **Lofa never forgets its friend!** We may have stumbled, **but you have made us one and stronger than ever**. By making the resources of the state available to support peace in Lofa County, you helped Uncle Boakai, our Vice President, and the Committee for Peace in Lofa to find unity in our county. You helped us find peace amongst ourselves and made us whole again. **We believe in what you are doing for our country and we believe in you!**

My fellow citizens, I am sure you were overjoyed to learn that your speaker would be from the host county, Lofa, and most importantly, a businessperson in the local community. I hope you will agree that after living in Guinea as a refugee and discovering a livelihood in business, my story is still in good order to inspire our people about the direct benefits of growing small and medium enterprises, and how this might become a powerful force for rebuilding our shattered economy.

Today, I want to share with you issues that are very near to my heart. I want to talk about what our nation can do to be a great country for the next 164 years. I want to focus on why our country matters to us – what its story means for all the ethnic groups of Liberia:

For our economic interests, as we rebuild our economy, renew our competitiveness, and fashion new ways to engage the population into commerce; for our security and strategic interests, as we design a 21st century structure of cooperation with like-minded partners; for our core traditional values, as we promote democracy and human rights in Liberia; for

our society and our culture as we develop stronger relationships among all ethnic groups of Liberia, and with our African neighbors and all countries in the comity of nations.

It is important to note that all of us who inherit this country arrived at these shores longing for freedom. The fall of the Sudanic kingdoms by warfare and the struggle of the free people of color in the New World to escape conditions of slavery, and second-class citizenship led to the evolution of the Republic of Liberia. Because of this, the ethnic groups making up the Liberia body politic have always shared three common values –

1. A search for new opportunities,
2. A search for identity and belonging, and
3. A desire to live free, secure, independent, and to be masters of their own destiny.

These are the common values we celebrate as a people –

We are one people! And “this glorious land of liberty shall long be ours. In joy and gladness [and] with our hearts united, **we will shout the freedom.**”

Our country is unique. There is no other nation like Liberia on the face of the earth. Liberia was founded as a land of freedom and opportunity in the midst of the African Slave Trade and Colonization.

During that period, we also served as a beacon of hope to all of our African brothers and sisters seeking to throw off the shackles of colonization. However, our recent civil war cast a dark shadow on this remarkable feat, but we will rise again stronger and establish new milestone in this 21st century.

Now I will tell you my story. I was born into a family of two hard working parents. My father was a gardener and later a driver with the OAU Conference Center in Virginia, Liberia. And my mother was a vegetable small trader. My father is here with us today. Please join me in acknowledging my father, Mr. Stephen Z. Korboi, my darling husband, Victor Cavins, and my children- Emmanuel, Miracle, Stellvin, and Victor, junior. Unfortunately, my mother, Gborlu is in Guinea and could not be here with us today.

I entered the small business market at the age of 16, selling infant clothing for three years, and then expanded on that experience while in Guinea as a refugee. In my Conakry neighborhood, I established a small catering business service to sustain my family. In six months, my effort grew into a big thriving enterprise in the community and then spread into the larger Conakry society. I even expanded on my catering experience by learning to prepare exotic European cuisine from a French National.

I am deeply thankful for my refugee experience in the Republic of Guinea – I took my learning experience in community catering service and transformed it into a career, while raising a family, and experiencing the wider world. I am happy to report that to an extent, it turned out not to be very bad to have been a refugee in another country. But it does feel good to be back in my own home and to do what I enjoy doing right here among the great people of Lofa County.

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, business and commerce constitute the heartbeat of a nation. Rather than viewing Liberia as a commercial wasteland, I see the whole of Liberia as a Mecca for unparalleled business prospects. Business is all about job creation and economic growth. As we all know, in developing economies, small and medium - enterprises are responsible for most of the job creation. This is crucial for our economic development as well as the social stability of Liberia. We do not need to look further than right in

our own country, Liberia and our larger continent - Africa to see the connection between an absence of opportunity and social unrest. For our part, fourteen years of civil war broke our spirits and deepened the wounds left by conflict. But it has made us more resilient and resolute to confront our challenges and prevail.

Following World War II, Liberia was the second fastest developing country to Japan. Today, the development gap between Japan and Liberia makes my premise a false starting point for measuring comparative progress. While it is true that we are now measuring up as a nation and meeting the United Nations' Millennium Development Goal of eliminating gender disparity in primary education, winning prizes for being leader of gender balance in governance, it is also fair to point out that a significant level of improvement has not been achieved in education. It is also fair to state that creating consciousness is only one element of educational empowerment. Perhaps, we should take another approach to Education. It is all about relevance, rationale, and practicality.

Our country's youth population is more than 60 percent, but the skills of its youth population for work is challenged. With the youth explosion amongst the citizenry, we should add another component to formal education – apprenticeship. This is how I developed my own skills.

With a large percentage of our population still uneducated and unskilled, due to the civil war, this form of education will supplement adult education, thereby assisting girls as well as a huge number of the population that have reached adulthood without much formal education. The idea here is to help the youth acquire certain functional skills that could be useful in adulthood and for earning legitimate incomes. Again, this is a key step towards empowerment. If some of our citizens can acquire skills through apprenticeship to become mechanics, midwives, caterers, farmers or small

business entrepreneurs, we can gradually battle poverty and outgrow our tendencies towards idleness, deception and particularly the belief that government should provide all of our needs.

Consider the fact that there are still school-age children without access to education at all in Liberia; the majority of these children are girls. Moreover, girls are underrepresented at all levels of education and in almost all counties. **This is unacceptable! The bottom line is this: as long as girls do not have access, and equal access to education, that empowerment vision will remain out of reach, and our goals of healthier families and healthier communities will remain a pie in the sky.** For our young people, we should consider the reintroduction of boarding schools as a means of reversing the rise in teen pregnancy and school dropouts.

We cannot solve the challenges of our country relying on half the knowledge of our population. **We have to go at it with the full force of the combined knowledge of our women and men.** Because, **when “our country’s cause defending we [must] meet the foe with valor unpretending.”**

President Sirleaf’s administration continues to attract big companies to Liberia with huge job potential in mining, agriculture, and many more for Liberians.

And we salute her forward thinking leadership. But do we have adequately trained Liberians to take advantage of the potential job opportunities? Do we want these companies to employ people from outside our country to fill these jobs? The answer is NO! Now, these jobs require specific skill sets. This is why our schools must be ready and get prepared to train Liberians in the skills that these companies will want to hire for.

Therefore, we must expand educational programs with emphasis on vocational and technical education. Institutions such as the Monrovia

Vocational Training Center (MVTC), the Booker Washington Institute (BWI), and the Liberia Opportunities Industrialization Center (LOIC) need to be given special attention and support. We also need to promote many other special programs such as the ones offered by the YWCA for girls and the NIKE and World Bank - sponsored Economic Empowerment of Adolescent Girls Program.

Then we must solicit the support of key international partners – including the IMF, World Bank, the UN agencies, the EU, the Asian Community, and our historic friend, the United States of America – to strengthen our efforts to achieve access to quality education and skills development all over Liberia.

Within the spirit of my advocacy for a vision of empowerment and improved access to quality education, let me note in particular the importance of languages and science and math education. I do so not just in the context of improving the lot of youths and women in Liberia, but also in light of this country's well-known connections with two of our strategic neighbors, the republics of Guinea and Ivory Coast. I, for example, had the great good fortune of learning much of my French when I was a refugee-business woman in the Republic of Guinea.

And I would be remised in my duties as orator and as one of many former refugees in Francophone Africa to pass on the opportunity to strongly encourage the vigorous pursuit of a second or third international language. It paid off for me in the Republics of Guinea and Ivory Coast. And as we do that, let me also extend the same encouragement to learning a second or third Liberian language. I was born into the Lorma ethnic group and learned to speak Lorma fluently. But, my community neighbors and others in the bordering towns with the Republic of Guinea are Mandingos.

Through living and sharing experiences in a common community, I have learned to speak Mandingo fluently. This is encouraging for good

neighborliness, business, cultural exchanges, and the consolidation of trust and lasting connections among our people. The acquisition of a second language would also help Liberian citizens, who are technically qualified but lack the requisite foreign language skills to compete for employment in international organizations such as the UN, AU, ECOWAS, World Bank, IMF, and etc.

Ladies and gentlemen: The youth and particularly, women are the leaders of tomorrow. How do I know that? The election of President Sirleaf as the first woman president of Liberia and Africa has shattered centuries of old traditional glass ceilings all over our continent. And this historic event is inspiring many more “Ellens” all over Liberia, Africa, and the world to unlock their potentials and chase their dreams. Moreover, I know that I speak for women all over Liberia that Madam President is laying the foundation for Liberia to come from behind and finally catch up with our African neighbors, like Ghana, Botswana, Mauritius, South Africa, etc. in terms of economic leadership and innovations.

In the past, repression and corruption subdued much more than provided opportunities for Liberians to do business.

Thank God, that the Ellen Johnson Sirleaf administration is taking measures to make government more accountable, and is pushing for a decentralization policy that will promote inclusion, and roll back some powers to the local level. The spaces for political repression are gradually been overtaken by the rights of Liberians to exercise free choices, speak freely, publish freely, and make demands of their government without persecution.

All of us must seek to promote and maintain this future of Liberia. Today, I am doing so to advance and protect Liberia's national security. I am doing this

because I have a vision of Liberia where women will remain equal partners in governance and protectors of its future.

An opportunity like the one I have today helps me to share ideas about serious issues in difficult times. We build friendship and respect for each other because we recognize that we make more progress when we work together.

This is true when the business people and the government work together; this is true when the customer and the business people work together; and this is true when all the tribes of Liberia work together to make our country better for everyone.

So, let us create a chance for us to learn from one another and find new areas where we can work together. Shared experiences empower the buyer and seller, the investor and the innovator.

Knowing how many impossible dreams became realities right in Liberian refugee camps, I think everyone here would agree that we have begun to do just that right here in Lofa County and all over Liberia. We are drawing on best practices from our refugee life to reconstruct our lives.

My catering business was a highly successful business inspiration. When I started, I only served the neighborhood and generated a small profit to take care of my family. By the time I left Guinea, we were a nationally recognized catering company that created jobs for Guinean citizens and Liberian refugees. As a refugee, achieving this remarkable business success was not easy, but it was an exciting experience. I am proud to say that it is this kind of experience that is changing the face of shopping stores and places of businesses: on Camp Johnson Road, Benson Street, United Nations Drive, Broad Street, and the used car lots on the Tubman Boulevard in Monrovia. Before our refugee experiences in foreign lands, non-Liberians operated all of

the shops on these streets. Today, the Liberian small and medium enterprises run the shopping stores in these places.

This is where we need a collaboration of government and private sector to have a truly effective impact for growth and development.

In addition to the one-stop shop business registry established by the Ministry of Commerce with the help of our international partners, what can we do to make it easier for individuals to start a business and have a chance at succeeding? Where can we link up our youth entrepreneurs in Liberia with capital funding for small and medium business training and practice? How can we improve the environment so that when women and youths invest in Voinjama and Foya, their returns will be as safe as when they invest in Monrovia? More importantly, how can we link Liberians at home to commerce abroad and open business partnerships. Simply put, Liberia needs to develop an open opportunity system that allows the business spirit of the Liberian people to grow. It brings out what is best in our character – our endless hopefulness, our belief that an individual who is willing to take a chance and work hard can achieve the impossible.

Madam President, I thank you and your Government for the good work on the road network in Lofa and all over our country. Places that took us six hours are now taking us two hours. However, it has been a long time since we saw the yellow machine building roads in all parts of our county. Madam, we humbly request that before the yellow machines leave Lofa, please allow them to stay awhile to also open and connect our farming villages to markets with good road networks. With good road network farmers can bring their produce to markets and generate income to take care of their families. In this light, I also request, Madam President, that you extend the commendable initiatives of the Ellen Johnson Sirleaf Market Project to Lofa County's seven districts as

well as to all other parts of the country where ordinary Liberian women make their living from farming.

It is important to involve all citizens, in particular, rural farmers in national commercial initiatives. It expands the tax base of government and creates an ownership society. We are indeed grateful for our foreign partners, but encouraging Liberian entrepreneurship will serve as a catalyst for immense economic growth and achieve our long-term interest. It has been proven that Government cannot provide all of the jobs and neither can our foreign investors.

Therefore, if government continues to create a welcoming and inclusive business climate, it will link Liberian businesses with global markets; farmers and businesses will enter the money economy; and we will create our own jobs right here at home. Businesses need laws and systems that protect individuals and their ideas. Therefore, we must demand compliance to rules and regulations, as well as greater transparency and accountability from both government and businesses alike, wherever they are in Liberia.

So, if we can advance opportunities for businesses in the Liberian market even slightly, the prospects to make money together and build long-lasting relationships among people will speed up the process of economic growth, reconciliation, reconstruction, inclusion, and creation of the Liberian middle class.

How are we going about this in Liberia?

First, we need to attract more Micro-Finance Loans to advance opportunities in Liberia's emerging economy.

This program should offer a basic training approach to help start-ups succeed – from identifying promising young entrepreneurs, to connecting them with funding and business mentors, to celebrating their successes.

The second critical area for Liberia's engagement is so closely connected with the first that I consider them two parts of a whole.

Together, innovation and entrepreneurship make up a continuous cycle of growth that can drive a nation's production.

Innovators refine processes or think up new ways to do things. Then entrepreneurs bring these new developments to market.

Liberians are always innovative. It does not matter whether you live in Tubmanburg or Harper; the pehm-pehm drivers have customized their motorcycles to take as many passengers and load as a regular car can carry. Pehm-pehm operators are the new masters of the roads taking sizable goods and services to connect people, and places throughout our country. There are no pre-qualifications for great ideas. But, we must find laws to protect the pehm-pehm riders, provide safety training to help them become safety conscious, and capital to fund their growth.

That is what will make innovation and entrepreneurship such powerful catalysts for change in Liberia. Given the right condition, we have seen that we can educate people how to innovate, transform, and control their environment.

Just a few miles from here, the bricks used to construct the walls of the presidential palace for our president are from the earth.

The technology used is challenging the way we think about building future village homes and is teaching new ways to unlock creativity both in village and city home construction.

In Tobugizzizu and the surrounding sectional towns, the students used mud bricks to build a centrally located school, which now services three sectional towns.

The improved mud brick technology provides answers to new ways of improving the ancient tradition of home construction in our villages to meet the housing needs of our people; it provides an alternative for villagers to consider and for help to transform the plaster mud walls of their homes, which seem resistant to changing times.

Brick making innovation can be learned in the classroom, applied to real-world problems, and brought to a marketplace of villagers hungry for new ideas. It is a formula that can work for Liberia and across all of its cultures. **The technology is here, it has been transferred, villagers, city dwellers what are we waiting for?** The Liberian people must recognize that innovation is essential to better connect our people to improve life style, better standard of living, global markets, and thereby promote our economic development. So we need to work with learning institutions and the private sector to create an innovation hub for capacity building.

Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania are pioneering mobile technology in ways the developed world might never consider. One of the most striking examples of this is the mobile banking boom pioneered by "M-PESA," a Swahili word for "Mobile Money."

As you might be aware, only about twenty percent of families in Africa have bank accounts. But, over 400 million Africans now have mobile phones, Liberia included. Because the need for banking institutions, particularly in the remote places is imperative, they have employed M-PESA to move moneys from city centers to rural population on mobile phones.

I am pleased to note that just on Sunday, July 24, the Angie Brooks-Randolph Center launched similar technology, Trade at Hand Cell Phone System.

This means that trading and negotiation between farmers and market women can now take place on cell phones without either side having to travel to the

other. We too, can now have a more secure means of bargaining without putting the buyer in harm's way. Market women would not have to chase vegetable filled trucks and throw their lappers on an item to buy. They will have access to farmers and markets right from the comfort of their homes.

In Liberia, our story must be a demonstration of the power of an individual to make a difference in this country. And because no country can succeed without innovation, Liberia must tap into innovation by rewarding new ideas and advancing creativity. We must take on opportunities as they arise and be part of conversations as they happen. We, in Liberia, are not limited by legacy systems or ideas of how things should be done. We simply figure out what works and we go about doing it. Two words, **best practices**.

In this election season, I want to call on all Liberians to show their patriotism for country. Election is an opportunity for us Liberians - big or small, rich or poor, educated or uneducated - to contribute to the decision on who will lead our country. In a sense, elections make each of us a decider on the fate of our nation. So as we go to the voting booth, we will see on the ballots the pictures of candidates seeking our votes. But I urge all of us to look beyond the pictures of the candidates and instead focus on the red, white and blue Liberian flag. **Liberia and Liberians should emerge stronger from these elections, not weaker; Liberia and Liberians should emerge better from these elections, not bitter.**

Liberia and Liberians should progress as a result of this elections, not retrogress. Most importantly, Liberia and Liberians should smile at the results of these elections, not cry.

So let us vow to play by the rules and go through a violence-free election that will make us a great nation - that will make you proud that you contributed to a great decision for the greater good of the motherland.

On this 164th Anniversary of our country's independence, I call on all Liberians to join our advocacy for a unified, progressive Liberia and to wish our country, Happy Independence.

I hope that you will all join me to advocate for ideas and resources that will transform Liberia to become what we want it to be.

So that:

"When freedom raises her glowing form on Liberia, we will lift her proud name, and raise a people long forlorn to noble destiny, and make The Lone Star forever! Desert it, no never! Uphold it, forever! O shouts for the Lone Star banner."

To the people of Salayea District...

To the People of Zorzor and Voinjama Districts...

To the people of Qudugboni District...

To the people of Kolahun District...

To the people of Foya District...

To the people of Vahun District...

And to all Liberians and partners who celebrate with us today, I say - thank you.