

ANNUAL MESSAGE

To the

Sixth Session

of the

53rd National Legislature of the Republic of Liberia
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By:

**Her Excellency Ellen Johnson Sirleaf
President of the Republic of Liberia**

Capitol Hill, Monrovia

Delivered on Monday, 23 January 2017

- Mr. Vice President and President of the Senate;
- Mr. Speaker;
- Mr. President Pro-Tempore;
- Honorable Members of the Legislature;
- Your Honor the Chief Justice, Associate Justices of the Supreme Court and Members of the Judiciary;
- The Dean and Members of the Cabinet and other Government Officials;
- The Doyen, Excellencies and Members of the Diplomatic and Consular Corps;
- Your Excellency, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General of the United Nations in Liberia;
- The Officers and Staff of the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL);
- Mr. Chief of Staff, Men and Women of the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL);
- Former Officials of Government;
- Former Chairman of the Interim Government of National Unity, Dr. Amos Claudius Sawyer;
- Traditional Leaders, Chiefs and Elders;
- Political and Business Leaders;
- Bishops, Pastors, Imams and other Religious Leaders;
- Officers and Members of the National Bar Association;
- Labor and Trade Unions;
- Civil Society Organizations;
- Members of the Media;
- The Guinean Delegation from the Mano River Union Parliament, and other Special Guests;
- Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen;
- Fellow Liberians:

INTRODUCTION

As we meet, once again, **Honorable Members of the Legislature, Fellow Liberians**, to fulfill the mandate given by Article 58 of the Constitution of the Republic, let us first give praise to the Almighty God, who has blessed our nation with consecutive years of peace under this administration. Through Him, our nation has remained peaceful, surmounted the scourge of a deadly virus, and worked to overcome the negative effects of the global economy. We are thankful to God, to government, to family, to community and to partners, all of whom can take credit for our safety and security. A resilient nation that has faced multiple challenges is rising again.

Now, please join me in observing a moment of silence in memory of distinguished Liberian leaders, including several from this Honorable Legislature, and other citizens who have gone to eternal rest. Thank you.

I thank the leadership of the Legislature, and that of the Judiciary, for the cooperation and collaboration that we have enjoyed over the years. My thanks, also, to you, Mr. Vice President, for your dedication and support. Collectively, we have been able to make significant achievements in our goals for national recovery.

Honorable Legislators: It is with humility, gratitude and soulful contemplation that I stand before you this 23rd day of January 2017, to deliver my last Annual Message to the nation as the President of Liberia.

I am seventy-eight years old. I have been fighting Liberia's battles for more than half a century – all my adult life – and our nation's struggles have blended into and are indistinguishable from my own. I have been a witness as our country has gone from civil unrest, dictatorship, anarchy and war; from the abuse of children conscripted as soldiers, pervasive sexual violence, and economic collapse; and then, finally, to peace, elections, development, and an open and dynamic civil society.

And now, this year, 2017, we will witness an historic transfer of power, providing the basis for consolidation of post-conflict democracy; where the future will be transferred to the next generation of Liberians – a people empowered through education, new technologies, and the experience of having battled and defeated one of the world's deadliest diseases.

Today, I come to take stock of these past eleven years, during which I have had the privilege to be your President. It is not my intent to go over a laundry list of our achievements, because I know that in an atmosphere where there is still poverty, want and deprivation, these milestones will ring hollow.

Rather, I take this opportunity to remind you of Liberia's journey, from where we came in January 2006, when Liberians, through an historic election, embraced change and a future of hope. I take this opportunity to remind you of how we made the impossible possible. I take this opportunity to recognize our shortcomings, and to define what we yet have to do to shape our future. I take this opportunity to remind you of the robust consultation that led to Vision 2030, and I challenge all citizens to vote responsibly and demand the best of Liberia's future leaders.

When we commenced this journey in 2006, **Honorable Members of the Legislature**, I had great expectations in the potential of reform and reconstruction. The nation had even greater expectations of what could be accomplished. Today, we can say with pride that we have travelled a road of uninterrupted peace for these eleven years. We have trained a professional Armed Forces of Liberia and other security units. We have undertaken civil service reform that calls for meritocracy and a more rewarding pension system.

We have young people who have never known war or civil conflict. We have young people who have not had to run, hide or cower in their homes. We have thousands of children back in school. We have farmers who have returned to their villages, refugees and professionals who are returning home.

This peace is our greatest triumph.

LEGISLATIVE AGENDA

Mr. Vice President, Honorable Members of the Legislature: As required by the Constitution, I must now set forth the Legislative Agenda. We appreciate the leadership that all of you have brought to this legislative effort. During this administration, you have passed, to date, over four hundred Acts covering all aspects of our national endeavor.

We applaud you for passing into law, during your regular and special sessions in 2016, seventy-nine pieces of legislation.

In November 2016, you convened a special session to consider nineteen priority bills, ten of which were acted upon by both Houses. In addition, you passed An Act to Ratify an Investment Incentive Agreement for value addition in iron products, and is expected to provide foreign exchange savings and job opportunities for our citizens, especially the youth.

Honorable Legislators: We would also like to remind you of important matters that are still before you. They include: those pertaining to the Amendment of the Constitution of the Republic; three Anti-Terrorism Bills; the Land Rights Bill; the Local Government Law; A Bill to revise the LACC Act; and the Affirmative Action for Equitable Participation and Representation Act, which would enhance women's participation in the democratic leadership of our nation.

As current Chair of the Authority of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and as President, I am particularly grateful to you for ratification of thirty-two ECOWAS Treaties and Protocols, which demonstrates our regional commitment to ECOWAS's objective of promoting economic, social and cultural cooperation and integration. This will also support institutions and specialized agencies of ECOWAS, such as the Community Parliament and the Community Court of Justice.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank members of this august body who have represented our country at the ECOWAS Parliament. Liberia serves as Deputy Speaker for the Parliament and Deputy President of the ECOWAS Court.

The ratification of ten agreements with international partners to provide development financing to support our infrastructure agenda deserves commendation. These include, notably, the Gbarnga-Salayea Road Project; the Liberia Urban Water Supply Project; the Roberts International Airport Project; the Youth Opportunities Project; and the Accelerated Electricity Expansion Project. As our country gravitates towards managing our own security, your passage of the National Police Act and the Immigration Service Act is significant for this transition. Thank you for passing these and other Bills in support of our overall national agenda.

Honorable Legislators: As you commence the sixth and final session of this august body, we will be submitting a number of bills for your consideration. These include: A Bill to Decriminalize the Violation of the Right to Freedom of Expression and to Repeal certain Sections of the Penal Law of 1978, and PRC Decree 88A; A Bill to Create the National Bureau of Concessions and State-owned Enterprises; A Bill to Amend the Act Creating the Monrovia Consolidated School System; A Fisheries Bill; A Bill to establish a specialized Court dedicated to cases of corruption and financial crimes; A Corruption Offenses Bill, designating corruption and specific acts of

corruption as criminal offences under Liberia's Penal Code; A Bill on illicit enrichment, to strengthen and extend the powers of security institutions to investigate financial crimes; A Bill to protect Whistle-blowers and Witnesses; A Bill to revise the Liberia Criminal Procedure Laws removing the statute of limitation on corruption and other financial crimes; A Bill to establish the office of the Ombudsman, as prescribed by the National Code of Conduct; A Truth and Reconciliation Commission Process Bill; A Bill to Establish an Economic Free Zone; A Bill to Amend certain Provisions of the PPC Law; A Bill to Repeal Acts establishing the Agricultural and Cooperative Development Bank and the National Housing and Savings Bank; A Public Debt Bill; Bills to ratify various legal instruments of the African Union; and A Bill to Harmonize our Fiscal Year with that of ECOWAS countries.

During the period under review, I issued six Executive Orders to provide tax and customs duty relief to under-capitalized state-owned enterprises that provide basic services to our citizens. These include the National Transit Authority, the Liberia Broadcasting System, the Liberia Water & Sewer Corporation, and the Liberia Electricity Corporation. We also continued the suspension of tariffs on rice, and agricultural equipment and inputs.

With still about a year to go for this sixth session of yours, and for our administration, there remains much for all of us to do. We therefore call upon this august body to continue to exercise the spirit of cooperation as we, together, try to complete our Legislative Agenda.

STATE OF THE ECONOMY

Mr. Vice President, Mr. Speaker, Mr. President Pro-Tempore: In 2006, we inherited a collapsed economy, which recorded a staggering ninety percent decline in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) – the greatest decline by any nation since World War II. Our administration also inherited an unsustainable external debt level of US\$4.9 billion – more than six times our GDP, brought about by debt unserviced for over two decades. A large verified domestic debt of over US\$900 million lingered in arrears. The Treasury was virtually broke, facing salary arrears, unmet obligations to international bodies, and continuing food and fuel crises. With only US\$80 million in annual revenues, Liberia was at the bottom of a very deep hole, desperately needing revival and emergency measures. With your support, we resuscitated iron ore and rubber – our historical productive sectors. We took bold steps by cancelling or renegotiating concession agreements in the agriculture, mining and forestry sectors.

Additionally, we negotiated the cancellation of an external debt burden of US\$4.7 billion, out of the US\$4.9 million, in a record period of five years, and returned the country to the path of economic recovery by expanding the fiscal space to pursue our agenda of inclusive growth and development. Relationships with the World Bank, the African Development Bank and the International Monetary Fund were restored, providing technical and financial support for the formulation of policies and laws aimed at achieving macroeconomic stability.

On account of wide-ranging economic reforms, we attracted US\$16 billion in foreign direct investment in concession agreements programmed to inject resources into the country over a period of up to twenty-five years. These were in iron ore mining activities, large-scale oil palm operations, resuscitation of coffee and cocoa production, and petroleum exploration. To date, largely on account of land and labor disputes, exacerbated by economic shocks, only US\$4.2 billion of the amount mobilized has been operationalized to create jobs, improve infrastructure and generate national income.

We implemented a wide range of fiscal incentives to provide relief to the private sector, including businesses and large-scale concessions. We also expanded duty-free privileges on all agricultural machinery and farm inputs to incentivize agro-processing and manufacturing.

The economy responded with an average growth of 7.53 percent between 2006 and 2013, thus placing Liberia among sub-Saharan African countries recognized as fast-growing economies.

In 2013, we experienced significant shocks that adversely impacted the economy. The decline in global commodity prices affected our two primary exports. UNMIL drawdown reduced purchasing power. The Ebola virus led to an exodus from the country, which brought most production-related operations to a virtual halt. GDP plummeted to zero percent.

Through effective action, resilience and determination, things have stabilized. Growth, in 2017, is projected at 3.2 percent, and we are confident that with the several measures to be implemented under our Agenda for Transformation, we will be back to a trajectory of more positive growth.

The economic shocks profoundly affected fiscal performance. In FY15/16, actual revenue declined by nine percent, or US\$51.8 million. Given the continuing economic difficulties, we adopted a conservative approach for FY16/17, projecting revenue at US\$555.9 million. You subsequently approved a budget based on revenue intake of US\$600.2 million. This could be a challenge to collect unless we

work together, with cooperation from the public, to intensify mitigants such as tax compliance, and enforcement of anti-money laundering and anti-corruption measures.

In July 2013, the Liberia Revenue Authority was established to administer and enforce revenue laws in accordance with the Liberia Revenue Code. The LRA has concluded collaborative partnerships with several institutions and with key bilateral partners. The performance of the Authority will determine our progress in increasing the level of domestic revenue.

Honorable Legislators, Fellow Citizens: The declining trend in official development assistance is a clear signal of the unsustainability of foreign aid. We must therefore widen the tax base and identify alternative sources of income, including investments in infrastructure, that would result in diversification of the economy and, potentially, increase domestic revenue.

In this regard, Liberians themselves must set the example for all who reside and operate in our country. A higher level of tax consciousness and compliance is required, especially on real property and personal income. Simply put, Liberians must willingly and sincerely pay their just taxes at all times! This is the only path to ensure growth and sustainable development.

Honorable Legislators: As I close the fiscal report, it is important to mention a few issues that we still face. A high level of unverifiable domestic debt, on account of questionable vendor claims, as well as a large potential domestic debt surge arising from judicial decisions, could lead to major spending cuts in priority areas. The private sector, designated as the engine of growth, as required by the Agenda for Transformation, needs more support in capital and technology. Liberian business entities need support to make them the core private-sector actors. Although benefits have accrued from the twenty percent set aside for procurement, specifically for Liberian-owned businesses, we all need to think about additional measures that we can do to encourage Liberians to go into the business sector.

We will also need to implement land rights policies and laws, as these are the only means to attract investment in large-scale agricultural operations which have export potential to earn the foreign exchange required to achieve diversification goals. This will also define the rights of citizens who, by land ownership, will be able to access credit, thereby becoming active participants in investment and operations involving land. Additionally, labor problems which investors have faced, with negative consequences, will be largely addressed.

Honorable Members of the Legislature, Mr. Vice President: The lack of foreign exchange, brought about by economic shocks, negatively impacted the exchange

rate, resulting in a slowdown in economic activity. This was mitigated by applying prudent liquidity management, thereby maintaining an annual average inflation rate within single-digit range. We also met foreign reserves targets. This facilitated extension, to November 2017, of the External Credit Facility with the International Monetary Fund.

In 2005, the financial sector comprised four commercial banks and fewer than eleven branches concentrated in the Greater Monrovia area. Today, the banking sector comprises nine banks with ninety-three branches, and at least one financial institution in each of the fifteen counties. Additionally, eleven Rural Community Finance Institutions were established and licensed to provide banking services in rural areas, thereby offering access and finance to invest in agriculture and other income-generating activities.

Several steps have been taken by the Central Bank of Liberia to maintain financial stability, strengthen and deepen the financial sector, and enhance public confidence. In collaboration with the Liberia Bankers Association, the Banking Institute of Liberia was established to help build capacity in the sector. A new Commercial Code and a fast-track Commercial Court were approved to facilitate commercial activity and expedite the handling of commercial, including credit-related, cases. Replacement of the Insurance Act of 1973 with the new Insurance Law of 2013 aims at strengthening the legal, institutional and regulatory frameworks governing the insurance sector.

The CBL has tried, through strong regulatory oversight and adoption of good practice criteria, to avoid some of the dismal experiences of the past. However, in 2016, the CBL had to take over the First International Bank Liberia Ltd. to protect depositors and the integrity of the Liberian banking system. An independent forensic audit has been commissioned by the CBL to determine the reasons for the failure. When concluded, a report, with recommendations, will be submitted to me. Disruption of banking services to the customers of the bank was avoided through a purchase and assumption arrangement with a regional financial institution.

Efforts are under way to modernize the financial sector. Your passage of the Securities Market and Central Securities Depository Acts, along with the issuance of the first Treasury bonds, has further enhanced money market activities in the country. This will eventually lead to the development of a capital market that provides the basis for domestic capital mobilization and private investment by individuals and corporate entities.

In order to replace the large volume of mutilated banknotes in the system, the CBL, with your approval, has printed superior-quality banknotes, with better security features, and introduced the first L\$500 note, to improve portability.

To encourage the wider use of the Liberian dollar, new and old, the CBL issued a regulation in 2016 which mandates that twenty-five percent of all inward remittances, via money transfer, to be paid in Liberian dollars. The positive results of this regulation are already being felt, as the Bank is using part of the proceeds surrendered to intervene in the foreign exchange market, thereby smoothing volatility in the Liberian dollar exchange rate.

All these measures fall short in addressing the major problem – the low productive capacity of the real sector that leads to a high degree of dollarization in the existing dual-currency regime.

ACCOUNTING FOR OUR STEWARDSHIP

Honorable Legislators, Fellow Liberians: Normally, at this point in my Annual Message, I provide details on the achievements of Ministries, Agencies, Commissions and other entities. I know you don't want me to do this, so the bulk of these details will be made available in my **Executive Report**.

Today is different because, while this is not the final speech of my administration – remember I still have 357 days left. But it is the very last Annual Message – the last one of my presidency – and I want this to constitute my Report Card to the Liberian people; in other words, I want to account for my stewardship.

In 2006, we inherited a broken and devastated nation with destroyed economic structures and dysfunctional political and social institutions. Foreign relations were limited to traditional friends. We inherited a state in which loyalty was to powerful individuals and splinter groups rather than to a central governing authority.

When I stood before the Liberian people, at home and abroad, on January 16, 2006, in the presence of a large number of regional and world leaders, women's groups, representatives of business, bilateral and multilateral and international organizations, I made several pledges and promises. I also said that I was humbled and awed by the enormity of the challenges, and I had no magic wand or quick-fix formulae. I knew that I faced a tall order: to heal our nation's wounds; redefine and strengthen its purpose; make democracy a living and effective experiment; promote economic growth; create jobs; revitalize our health and educational facilities and services; quicken the pace of social progress and individual prosperity in the country; and inspire our people. So much more was required, given the physical destruction and the moral decay brought about by years of turmoil and civil strife.

I pledged that papa would come home with something to sustain his family; that we would make our children smile again; that we would build capacity and empower our youth to enable them to participate meaningfully in our nation's reconstruction. Everyone vividly remembers our pledge that, under our administration, corruption would be public enemy number one, that we would wage war against the scourge regardless of where it existed or by whom it was practiced.

How have we fared?

Let me say, straight out, two areas have continued to pose major challenges for our administration: corruption and reconciliation.

We have not fully met the anti-corruption pledge that we made in 2006. It is not because of the lack of political will to do so, but because of the intractability of dependency and dishonesty cultivated from years of deprivation and poor governance. We could not reap – you cannot reap – in government what has not been instilled in families, schools, churches, mosques and society in general.

Nevertheless, our efforts to fight corruption were recognized as Liberia met eligibility requirements for Compact, under the Millennium Challenge Account, by consistently passing the rigid corruption index. Indeed, our administration has placed the nation on a path that will make it easier for successive governments to meet established anti-corruption targets. We have created more integrity institutions and formulated more laws and policies in the fight against corruption than any government in our history. We have introduced an assets declaration regime, a National Code of Conduct, a Financial Intelligence Unit, and the Public Procurement and Concessions Commission.

We have strengthened the prosecutorial arm of the Ministry of Justice, and established a Presidential Task Force to assist in reviewing and implementing recommendations resulting from internal and external audits. Today, our vibrant press and concerned citizens unearth hidden deals which are being investigated. More importantly, we have increased compensation of public servants at every level, and have introduced systems that limit discretionary compliance of Public Financial Management Laws and Policies.

To go further, we have proposed the establishment of a Special Corruption Court, and the passage of seven anti-corruption bills that could be fast-tracked before this administration ends. All of these measures point to our will to curb this national cancer. We must never forget, however, that in our small, interrelated society, where virtually everybody knows everyone, and papa has made too many stops before getting home, it will take the collective will to subject ourselves, our family, our friends and our colleagues to the rule of law.

Our country's long struggle for national reconciliation has its genesis in history. A coup d'état and years of civil conflict exacerbated longstanding divides that have left deep wounds. The methods and motivations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission have not helped us to find a way forward to achieve the desired results for reconciliation. Nevertheless, we must continue implementation of the 207 recommendations in the Report, the majority of which have already been implemented. We are a small country, with relationships that cross the divide, and this has enabled us to remain united as a nation. Never must we forget that in union we are strong, and our success is assured. Therefore, we must all do more – I must do more – to heal these wounds, and do so this year, by implementing the Strategic Roadmap which has been formulated for this purpose. I believe that it will serve our nation well to take lessons from the experience of other countries by emphasizing restorative rather than retributive justice.

INFRASTRUCTURE

Honorable Members of the 53rd Legislature, Mr. Vice President, Fellow Liberians: The reconstruction of infrastructure – roads, bridges, power, water, schools and hospitals – were all major challenges for this government, given the level of destruction and lack of maintenance over two decades. We knew that we had only six of twelve years to do so, given the annual six-month interruptions of the rainy season, but we did not expect to lose almost two years on account of the effects of that deadly disease.

Nevertheless, we have come a long way in reaching our goals to connect the major county capitals. Funding has been received, and studies are under way for the construction of primary connecting roads. In addition, we have begun repairing neighborhood roads and streets; restoring grid electricity and piped water to the capital city and to several other counties. Significantly, we have also concluded arrangements for the construction of a bridge over the Cavalla River that will link Liberia to la Côte d'Ivoire through the southeastern counties.

We are proud that today, under programs of regional cooperation, lights are already on in Ganta and Harper, to be followed by Zwedru and Fish Town, at an affordable price of twenty-five cents per kilowatt hour. It comes from the grid of Ivory Coast. National effort has already brought electricity to the Kakata corridor, with the Robertsfield and Tubmanburg corridors to follow later this year. A major achievement in power expansion is our FULFILLED promise to rebuild our Mount Coffee hydroelectricity facility. We thank all partners who have contributed to this.

We have secured funding to complete the feasibility study for a reservoir on the Via River. Construction of the reservoir will ensure that the hydro plant has sufficient water to generate electricity throughout the year. Completion, on time, of regional projects that are under way will ensure that electricity is further expanded to communities all over the country. This would ensure a continued reduction in the cost of electricity, which will drop, next month, from forty-nine to thirty-nine cents per kilowatt hour. However, I must caution that these cost reductions are unlikely to be sustained if we continue to face power thefts. Already in the past thirty days, we have arrested 318 persons suspected of this crime.

To improve living standards, we are proud that, since we came into office, a total of 1,700 leasing units have been deeded to tenants, many of them senior citizens who had been paying rent over two decades. New estates comprising one hundred and twenty-four units have been completed in Marshall and Brewerville. Assuming five persons per household, we would have provided benefit to 8,500 citizens.

In fulfillment of a longstanding commitment, the renovation of the SKD Sports Complex is virtually completed. The modernization of Roberts International Airport has commenced, and there is good progress in the construction of the Ministerial Complex and annexes to the Capitol Building, your home.

Liberia remains, despite all, an attraction for foreign investment. In April, Liberia will join the Google Link network, a project that will maximize the potential of the ACE cable and provide our Internet service providers with unlimited bandwidth via fiber optics. This will ultimately deliver much higher reliability, placing Liberia high on the list of African countries with the fastest Internet speeds.

Mr. Vice President, Honorable Legislators: There is no doubt that education is a prime enabler of success, and that this has to be a high priority in government. In 2006, the country was in deep trouble because schools were destroyed; qualified teachers had fled the country, leaving only “volunteers” to provide whatever instruction was possible for the thousands who tried to get an education without facilities or books, and thousands of others who had never been to school.

Today, over 1.5 million of our children – with parity between boys and girls – are in school. Thousands of our youth are pursuing technical and vocational training. Many women, through literacy programs, can do basic tasks in reading and writing. New school facilities are under construction, some with housing for teachers.

This progress in education was dampened by the poor quality of instruction, and exacerbated by the loss of an entire academic year due to the virus. Liberia needed to adopt a more radical approach. We know that education is a long-term endeavor and more rapid results can only be achieved by departing from traditional

structures. For that reason, we adopted the Partnership School System, with direct support from private partners, domestic and international. This system aims at rapid educational transformation through automation. In addressing the concerns regarding the participation of private partners in the sector, I remind you that, except for technology, there is little difference because we have had a system of longstanding partnerships with inter-religious bodies and other private entities in the schooling of our children.

Preliminary results from the Partnership Schools are encouraging. The children and their families are the program's strongest advocates, and that, to me, says it all. Improving education must remain a priority, and we must be committed to increase domestic spending for this. This will be done as the economy improves, working with partners in line with international requirements.

Our administration remains keenly aware of the need to respond to the issues of our youth who form the majority of our population. Over six thousand of our young people have benefited from scholarships from government or our bilateral partners for studies in a wide range of disciplines that aim at strengthening public service delivery.

Additional emphasis is placed on programs to address the thousands of unemployed youth who have never had the opportunity of going to school or to access any form of education. Currently, there are four major technical and vocational training institutions, with some technical training provided in several schools across the country. We are considering additional reform of the educational system to allow those with different aptitudes to transit to technical and vocational training at an earlier phase of their schooling. Sports activities, such as the County Meet, which bring out the best in our youth, should now be further addressed, through budgetary support, for a football academy that provides both quality education and sports training.

In our desire to make higher education available throughout the country, we re-established and reconstructed the William V.S. Tubman University in Harper, Maryland County, as the second national university, and constructed new facilities at the University of Liberia's Fendell Campus. We also established Community Colleges in seven counties, with the intent to expand to others. However, our effort has not produced the desired results due to resource constraints and poor management. Moving away from what is reported to be the international trend, we now propose to make all Community Colleges campuses of the University of Liberia. This will be more cost-effective and will allow common rules and policies, under a common high leadership. The Straz Technical College of the University of Liberia, in Sinje, which is performing well, attests to the need for this change.

We continue to keep our promise to the women of Liberia who, in large measure, have assured our success. Under several empowerment programs, more than eleven thousand women have been trained in various skills, and close to two hundred and fifty homeless girls are receiving education at boarding schools. The Cash Transfer Program, which provides support to extremely poor households to increase school enrollment and improve health, has brought relief to over three thousand households and fifty-five thousand individuals in five vulnerable counties.

I get the greatest reward from our support to women and girls when a leader of the Rural Women's Association says to me, "Mama, thank you, because we now have a voice, we are no longer put at the back of the room"; or when a young girl challenges her teacher to be more considerate, pointing out to him that she, too, can become president.

As I pointed out last year, rape continues to be a menace to our girls, and sometimes even babies are victimized. Our girls cannot become president, or our women maintain their voices, if we do not find more effective means to address this evil in our society.

In 2006, we inherited a broken health system; hospitals, schools and clinics, in dilapidated structures, lacked drugs, and the number of doctors, nurses and other health practitioners was woefully inadequate. Three counties had no functional health facility. Eight had no Liberian medical doctors. Doctors earned US\$30 or its Liberian dollar equivalent, and the average nurse's salary was US\$18 or equivalent. Only forty-one percent of the population had access to any form of basic health care.

Since 2006, our strategy for health care delivery has focused on primary health care, which provides essential health services, free of charge, to everyone in every community. The health system has been decentralized, with the establishment of a functional county health team in each county and district health officers assigned to each health district. This became the first step in our overall decentralization program that is bringing rapid and positive results.

An increasing level of budget support, supplemented by contributors and partners through the establishment of a Health Pool Fund, facilitated a harmonization of priorities between government and partners. Today compensation has been increased to a minimum of US\$2,000 for doctors and US\$350 for nurses, all through public budget allocation.

During this administration, major functional public health facilities more than doubled. I am pleased to have fulfilled a 2005 campaign promise to the people of Nimba County who now enjoy services in the most modern health facility in Tappita that is also used as a referral hospital for neighboring countries. An ambitious

program for the construction of housing facilities for health professionals is ongoing, with twenty-seven units, under construction in four counties, to be completed by the end of this dry season.

Despite improvements, deficiencies of the health system were exposed when the disease hit us. This became a wake-up call to the urgent need to build preventive systems for infection. Towards this end, twenty-six triage facilities have been concluded and attached to our major health centers. A National Institute of Health is being established to undertake the research that will improve the health delivery system. Recalling the effectiveness of mobilized communities in defeating the virus in record time, ongoing programs are training four thousand community health workers to serve as first responders.

AGRICULTURE AND AGRI-BUSINESS

My Fellow Liberians: Our country is richly endowed with natural resources – minerals, fisheries, forestry, agriculture. We have relied essentially on the export of iron ore, rubber and logs, through operations of concession agreements, for support to the economy. Over time, diversification was achieved through promotion of coffee, cocoa and oil palm. As a result of the delay in more aggressive and timely action to diversify, the economic shocks of 2013 and 2014 had devastating effects on export earnings and revenue generation. The structural adjustments called for in our Agenda for Transformation will ensure that there is no recurrence of this downturn.

Our reform agenda is clear that, as an agrarian nation, we must promote agriculture as a number one priority to achieve our transformation goals. Towards this end, we adopted the Liberia Agricultural Transformation Agenda (LATA) as a framework for deeper diversification and transformation into an agriculture-based economy, moving agriculture operations from subsistence to commercial. Under this framework, some 450,000 farmers have already been registered. For the first time in the history of the country, we know who our farmers are, where they are farming, and what they are planting.

The next step, which is under way, is the introduction of machinery and new technology that has the potential for agro-processing for export and improving the livelihood of the rural poor. Early results show a significant increase in the production of basic staples and the development of a nascent agro-industrial sector, operated mainly by women. Further steps aim to promote large-scale agriculture operations with investment from the private sector.

GOVERNANCE

Mr. Vice President and President of the Senate, Mr. Speaker, Mr. President Pro-Tempore, Members of the 53rd Legislature, Ladies and Gentlemen, Friends: In our first two years in office, we took two major steps as demonstration of our commitment to move our country from an over-centralized, personalized system of governance. In 2006, I took the Oath of Office here, on these Capitol Grounds. In 2007, I introduced the County Development Fund and called for rotational celebration of Independence Day in the counties. These were firsts in the history of our country, and were meant to demonstrate commitment to a decentralized governance system that allowed participation of the representatives of the people, and the people themselves, in decisions and the establishment of priorities that affect their lives.

We have gone one step further. We have established County Service Centers in four counties, through which an increasing range of public services, such as birth certificates, driver licenses, business registrations, marriage licenses and other documents, are being provided, making it unnecessary for citizens and business people to travel to Monrovia for that purpose. I will be commissioning three additional Centers in the northeast and two more in the southeast early next month. Before this administration ends, there will be fully operational Service Centers in all fifteen counties.

As proven in our fight against the virus, unleashing the productive talents, skills and initiatives of the people of local communities is the best strategy for deepening our democracy and sustaining our development. The economic improvement of local communities must go hand in hand with the deepening of democratic participation. Your action is now required. The passage of the Local Government Act will provide firm basis for the establishment of a system of local government such that the prerogatives of governance are no longer left to the discretion of the President, thus making it difficult for a non-supportive President to reverse the democratic and participatory gains that have been made by local communities.

The Local Government Act will also constitute the basis for rationalizing our county administrative jurisdictions, which have a proliferation of statutory districts and cities. It will constitute the basis for the most significant transformation of the structures and institutions of local government since the early 1960s when provinces were transformed into counties under the administration of President Tubman.

There is also a critical need to conclude the law for land reform. This administration inherited a land sector that was in disarray, characterized by unequal access to land,

particularly for poor urban and rural communities; insecurity of tenure at all levels; and prevalence of land disputes resulting from multiple sales of land, and from criminal conveyance and illegal occupation of land.

An antiquated deed registration system that made it difficult to establish clear chains of custody to enable land sales to be traced, was made even more unreliable by deliberate destruction and tampering of deeds and deed records, resulting in an epidemic of fraudulent land deeds.

All of these conditions existed within a tenuous post-conflict environment complicated by a contentious land history which continues to give rise to tensions and mistrust. Left unattended, this could potentially threaten our peace and security.

We made a commitment, in the Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS) of 2006, “to develop a comprehensive national land tenure system and land use system that will provide equitable access to land and security of tenure so as to facilitate inclusive, sustained growth and development, ensure peace and security, and provide sustainable management of the environment.”

This was fulfilled by a comprehensive and transformative Land Rights Policy which, for the first time in our history, establishes distinct categories of land rights, thereby ensuring that all Liberians have equal access to land, within a framework of clearly defined policies. A comprehensive Land Rights Bill is before you for passage. This provides the legal bases for recognition of customary land rights along with private, public and government land rights, and facilitates the implementation of the Land Rights Policy.

As we move toward the greatest test of our democracy, the coming elections, we note that despite calls from the National Elections Commission, campaigning for the 2017 elections seems well under way. As we prepare for open campaigning in a few months, I propose a two-day electoral forum, with all political parties and registered independent presidential candidates, to discuss issues pertaining to the electoral process and arrive at a common ground for the campaign and its aftermath. I have asked Dr. Amos Sawyer, Chairman of the Governance Commission, to convene the meeting. Apart from having played a leadership role in crafting the current Constitution, he presided over the Interim Government of National Unity and has served as election monitor in multiple places on the continent. He will be the best person to lead such a process. As soon as we work out logistics, in the next few days, Dr. Sawyer will be asked to proceed.

FREEDOMS

Honorable Legislators, Fellow Liberians: The years since we came to office have witnessed a strengthening of democratic rights in Liberia, thereby achieving new heights in the enhancement of political freedom, religious freedom, and freedom of the press. We are proud to report that, today, there is not a single Liberian facing persecution or imprisonment on account of their political or religious views expressed. We realize that an important ingredient of democratic development is the protection of the rights of all Liberians to freely hold onto their views, whether critical or not. In many instances, in fact, we have paid the price for this atmosphere of unprecedented levels of freedom, even at the painful peril of our character, when highly unsubstantiated things have been said and written, impugning the reputation of individuals developed over years of hard work and integrity.

Our record shows a meteoric rise in the number of media institutions in this country today. The media is free and unfettered, allowing a lively and vibrant public discourse on a wide range of issues of national concern. Newspapers, radio and television stations, as well as printing houses and digital social media usage, are all experiencing a boom era. Currently across this country, there are over ninety-five radio stations, fifty newspapers, and ten television stations, all with divergent editorial policies and slants – statistics that are unprecedented in our country's history.

We will continue to support the development of more media institutions, not only in terms of their quantity but also their quality. While we are happy to adhere to the full framework of the Table Mountain Declaration that requires us to promote free speech and a free media through supportive legislations and policies, media owners, publishers and reporters are also demanded by the same Declaration to conduct themselves with integrity and a high level of professionalism.

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Fellow Liberians: When we assumed the mantle of state authority on January 16, 2006, Liberia was perceived internationally as a pariah state which exported war and instability. The landscape of Liberia was still being defined by the savagery of the civil war, while Liberians remained dispersed as refugees across the globe. Over eleven consecutive years of peace, the stature of our country has been elevated in the international arena to that of a state deserving of high respect, whose views and contributions are sought by international institutions and governments alike.

Our changed circumstances are inextricably linked to political and socio-economic approaches pursued through my two terms. We have consistently applied the tenets of good governance; supported moderation and respect for diversity; aligned the nation decisively with advocacy in the interests of Africa and the least developed countries of the global South and championed respect for human rights, including the rights of children, women's rights and empowerment, as well as protection of the environment. In short, the coherence of our actions on the domestic and international fronts has brought recognition and credit to Liberia.

Peace and security at home have been the foundational underpinnings of all of our achievements and important determinants of our image abroad. Complementing the work of the peacekeeping mission UNMIL, our government has led the nation in preserving the peace, through all forms of peacebuilding and peace consolidation activities. We now face the imperative of sustaining the peace, a challenge we must own and address individually and collectively as a nation to realize our vision for the future.

Eleven years on, our country has risen from that lowly position to a place of honor, dignity and respect in the international community. Liberia has moved from a pariah state to a recognized and respectable member of the international community, accepting leadership in the pursuit of peace and development. We have reclaimed our position as Africa's first Republic. As proof, Liberia is current Chair of the Authority of Heads of State and Government of ECOWAS; has co-chaired the UN High-Level Panel whose efforts contributed greatly in the formulation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); and has chaired the AU's High-Level Committee of Heads of State and Government on the Post-2015 Development Agenda, among other leadership positions. We have regained our lost image and have won the full confidence of our partners.

Our ECOWAS Chairmanship has also brought visibility, exposure and professional growth to other officials who have had to chair ECOWAS meetings in their respective sectors. Our country continues to benefit economically by convening sectoral meetings – at least five already having taken place in Monrovia. Our Chairmanship will be climaxed this May, when the 51st Summit of the Authority of ECOWAS convenes in our capital.

To enhance Liberia's image abroad, our administration has taken major steps to improve physical assets overseas, to acquire new and restore old properties to serve as chanceries and diplomatic residences in various locations. We have enhanced the dignity of our Ambassadors and Foreign Service Officers through better training and compensation.

Despite over eleven years of peace and large-scale return of refugees over the years, there is still a large Diaspora. Our government has made efforts to reach out and better structure and strengthen relations with these compatriots. This continuing effort aims at enabling Liberians abroad to maintain their links with their country and even participate in the national development efforts. Your support for dual citizenship will enable our Diaspora citizens to become participants and supporters of our national development efforts.

As a founding member of the United Nations, it is no surprise that our country has enjoyed longstanding partnership with this global organization. We have, on numerous occasions, here and abroad, given due recognition and appreciation of the pivotal role which the United Nations has played in restoring and supporting the preservation of peace in Liberia. We have worked in a very complementary and mutually reinforcing manner in achieving this objective. Throughout my two terms, I have reserved a special place for weekly consultations with the Special Representatives of the United Nations Secretary-General, which allowed me to benefit immensely from the insights, concerns and advice shared.

The United Nations Country Team also deserves our commendation for their contribution to our recovery efforts in the areas of their respective mandates. They have been reliable partners, sometimes indispensable to some of the successes registered. The agreed termination of the UNMIL, in March 2018, will bring this Team to the fore as the principal channel of UN collaboration in Liberia. This will mark our full return to normalcy in terms of UN representation in our country.

Over two terms, our country regained its rightful standing. We established diplomatic relations with twenty-four other countries. We were pleased to welcome many very important people (VIPs) to our country. Among the dignitaries that visited were thirty-eight Presidents; one Chancellor; five Prime Ministers; two Vice Presidents; ten Former Presidents and Prime Ministers; fifteen Foreign Ministers and three First Ladies. We also received three visits from two UN Secretaries-General; more than thirty visits from the heads or delegations of the United Nations and its specialized agencies. Additionally, we received the heads of the African Union Commission, ECOWAS Commission, the World Bank Group, the African Development Bank, the International Monetary Fund, other multilateral institutions, and donors. These visits have cemented our bilateral and multilateral relations with their countries, institutions and organizations. We were pleased to receive the head of the United States Peace Corps, who has been instrumental in returning the Peace Corps to Liberia after a twenty-year absence.

OTHER INITIATIVES

Going beyond the framework of government, we mobilized support for specific programs to supplement our national effort. This support came from private and non-profit entities such as foundations, funds and programs. A Philanthropy Secretariat was established at the Ministry of State to manage this historical effort.

Initiatives include: the President's Young Professionals Program (PYPP), which has graduated seventy-seven mid-level professionals who are now improving capacity in our ministries and agencies; the Sirleaf Market Women's Fund (SMWF), which built markets, enabling our women marketers to work under more comfortable conditions and to receive literacy and numeracy training; the Liberia Education Trust (LET), which built schools and educated and trained many young and adolescent girls; the HEARTT Program, which brings volunteer doctors from the United States to serve at the John F. Kennedy Hospital; and the Senior Executive Services (SES) program, which recruited Liberian graduates for leadership positions in the civil service. Other philanthropies, notably the International Senior Lawyers Project, have supported negotiations and formulations of laws promoting justice, human rights and economic and political governance; public health care; an end to sexual-based violence; and so much more – all aimed at elevating our people towards a better and brighter future.

We are forever indebted to the many philanthropies that have supported us, as we could not have succeeded without their involvement. For these and many other demonstrations of the world's generosity, our gratitude knows no bounds.

RELIEF MEASURES

We are even more indebted to our citizens who have been patient, even during these trying times. We hear your cries, we understand your pain. Despite current constraints in resources, we are committed to employ all our efforts to help alleviate the burden. Accordingly, the following measures will go into effect.

Amendments will be proposed to the Education Reform Act of 2011, aimed at removing all fees and charges, official or otherwise, from Early Childhood Education in public schools, consistent with our commitment to free education.

We hereby extend, to twelfth grade, free education in public schools, commencing FY2017/18 budget. Penalties will be imposed on all those institutions and their heads that continue to extract money from parents and students.

We will waive storage charges and customs duties for containers aged over sixty days in the Freeport of Monrovia, through procedures to be established by the Liberia Revenue Authority and the National Port Authority, which will include the establishment of a tracking system that will prevent the overstay of these containers at the port, over and over again.

As a way of encouraging Liberian participation in the development of road infrastructure, we will waive duty-free charges on road construction equipment for Liberian-owned businesses for a period of six months, ending June 2017.

NECROLOGY

Honorable Legislators, Ladies and Gentlemen: So many of our public servants have left their earthly labor for peaceful repose. They were recognized in our **Annual Messages** over the years, and we hold their memories dear.

In 2016 alone, our country lost 40 of its dedicated officials of government and prominent citizens. They include: Dr. Edward B. McClain, Jr., Minister of State for Presidential Affairs and Chief of Staff; Hon. Eugene Fallah Kparkar, Representative of Lofa County; Hon. George G. Koukou, Sr., former Senator, Nimba County; Hon. John Hodo Manston, Sr., former Senator, Maryland County; Hon. Nathaniel Williams, former Senator, River Gee County; Hon. Samuel K. Smith Sr., former Representative, Rivercess County; Hon. Karpeh Zolu Barclay, Sr., former Representative, Gbarpolu County; Hon. Jerry Bowier Masseh, former Representative, Rivercess County; Hon. David Wonle Queeglay Sr., former Representative, Nimba County; Hon. Joseph Augustus Sekum, former Representative, Grand Bassa County; and Hon. Harper Soe Bailey, former Representative, Grand Gedeh County.

We also lost Hon. Clarence Lorenzo Simpson, former Associate Justice, Minister of Justice and Attorney General; Col. Eric Wamu Dennis, Deputy Chief of Staff, Armed Forces of Liberia; Hon. J. Adolphus During, former Chief of Protocol, R.L., and Ambassador; Dr. Walter L. Brumskine, Associate Dean, A.M. Dogliotti College of Medicine; Hon. Cyril Afam Allen, II, Deputy Minister for Commerce and Trade Services; Hon. Juanita Mason-Neal, former Deputy Minister for Revenue, Ministry of Finance; Mrs. Doris D. Grimes, Widow of Secretary of State J. Rudolph Grimes; Mrs. Eupheme Cooper Weeks, Widow of the late Secretary of State, Rocheforte L. Weeks, Sr.; Mr. Paul Allen Wie, former Deputy Minister of Information; as well as officials from the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Labour, Agriculture, Education, Finance and Information; and many others. A complete listing will be in our **Executive Report**.

REFLECTIONS

Mr. Vice President, Mr. Speaker, Mr. President Pro-Tempore, Honorable Legislators, My Fellow Liberians: You and the members of the other two branches of government have been with me on this journey. When I took the Oath of Office on the Grounds of the Capitol, I did so in recognition of the important role you play as representatives of the people. Today, I call for that collective spirit to confront and tackle the strong vestiges of the past that have prevented us from reaching the full potential that stares us in the face. I call for individual and collective efforts for attitudinal change in combating the seeds of dishonesty and distrust. I call for a forgiveness that goes beyond the reach of the law.

As I reflect on the early days of my life's journey, I remember, with fondness, the bygone days when we worked together and shared ideas and were supported by those younger and dearly called "progressives". We did not grow up together nor, for few exceptions, did we go to school together, but we went to jail together because we believed in the power of change and shared values – those old-fashioned values instilled by parents.

The star, in my life, was a widow preacher and teacher who experienced, like many others, the swing from prosperity to poverty but never wavered in the determination to instill in her children the values of hard work, honesty and humility – values that accept the equality of all while appreciating diversity; values that scorn the materialistic things of the wealthy to embrace education that can make use of opportunities that lead to a comfortable life.

I stand before you today a leader well aware of my own shortcomings. Schools are open, but we must improve the quality of our education, and offer technical skills training. We have fought but must continue to fight the scourge of corruption, at every level of society, from the highest official to the civil servant, from the private business person to the preacher and teacher, whose duties include inculcating moral values and ethics. We must create more jobs and opportunities; expand infrastructure across the country, connecting every community with power, roads, potable water and sanitation. I am painfully aware that there is still so much to do, but I stand before you with pride for what we have done, and humility for what we have not done.

In closing, I cannot but reflect that my time on this earth is short, and tasks of completion will be left to the next Legislature, to the next political leaders, to our civil society, our media, business leaders and our citizens. Progress can only be accomplished if we seek to build on the present. It is easy to tear down, to criticize, to blame, and to sow anger, frustration and even hatred. It is much more difficult,

but much more rewarding, to propose ideas, to build, and to encourage optimism and hope in the future. The readiness, patriotically, to put country first: this must be the vision and the mission of us all.

Let me ask you to reflect on passages of a poem, "Our Future Today," written by Mohammed Dolley Donzo, a 19-year-old student at the University of Liberia:

*Our world today builds
the future tomorrow
The way we live today
the next generation lives*

*The decisions we make today
The way we treat each other
The opportunities we create...*

*So what are we doing?
Are we leaving the world's problems unresolved?
Are we creating opportunities
For the world's poorest children?...*

*Do we silently do nothing
Do we act on something?
When asked about our legacy
What will we say?
What answer will we give?*

*Are we lessening
Our children's tasks
Or multiplying them?
Oh! What are we doing today?
Oh! What are we doing today?*

*We must all contribute
To solving the world's problems
For a better world today
Means a better tomorrow.*

Mr. Vice President, Mr. Speaker: Before I close, let me mention, with sadness, the passing of our former Interim Head of State, Ruth Sando Perry. Her funeral will take place this weekend in the United States, and our Vice President will be there to represent us.

Mr. Vice President, Mr. Speaker, Mr. President Pro-Tempore, Honorable Legislators, Fellow Liberians, at home and abroad: I have 357 days remaining on this journey, and I intend to make every day, every hour and every minute count, in the realization of our dreams. These were the dreams that scared me in 1985 and 1997 and 2005 and 2011. The journey has not been easy, but I proclaim to you it was worth it. I have paid the price. I have earned the stripes. It is a great journey, working for a nation full of promise and of hope. Join me on this last mile!

I thank you.