

**Acceptance Speech by H.E. Mrs. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf
President of the Republic of Liberia
at the Ceremony for the Conferment of the 2012 Indira Gandhi Prize
for Peace, Disarmament and Development
New Delhi, India
September 12, 2013**

Excellency, Mr. President;
Excellency, Mr. Vice President;
Excellency, Mr. Prime Minister;
Honorable Chairman and Members of the Board of Trustees of the Indira Gandhi Peace Award;
Dignitaries, Ministers and Officials of Government;
Special Guests;
Ladies and Gentlemen:

I come from Liberia, a tiny country in West Africa, with a land mass of 43,000 sq. mi. and a population of just under 4 million. By comparison, everything about your country, India, defies the imagination: an entire sub-continent comprising 2.4 percent of the world's land area and 17.5 percent of the world's population, at 1.22 billion; a multicultural society, a nation with a diversity of cultures and faiths; a beacon of hope to the rest of the developing world – a super-Power in every sense of the word.

As a member of the BRICS, and among the world's fastest growing economies, worth some US\$1.848 trillion in 2011, India's National Budget for a single year would immediately lift my country, and people, to our desired middle-income status.

Yet despite the differences in geographical and economic sizes and levels of development, there is much that this giant of a country shares in common with my own small nation: India is the world's largest democracy; Liberia is one of the smallest. India struggled for the right to self-determination and

independence from British rule; the dream of Liberia's forebears was to establish, in Africa, a nation where all people of color could live in freedom and dignity. And as third-world countries, we both face challenges of poverty, marginalization and inequality, which we never cease to battle.

With these contrasts and similarities, our two nations have forged a bond of friendship that transcends size and spans decades. There have been Indians in Liberia for as long as I can remember. They have come to trade, to teach, and to heal. Liberia has been the greater beneficiary of this bilateral relationship through the years, which today includes human resource training, transportation, and support to our health and energy sectors.

Today you honor me and you honor my country by bestowing upon me one of your nation's most prestigious awards, the Indira Gandhi Prize for Peace, Disarmament and Development.

I will always remember with great humility the Citation of the international jury, chaired by Prime Minister Singh, which selected me for this Prize. My profound thanks and appreciation to the Trustees of the Indira Gandhi Memorial Trust, chaired by you, Mrs. Sonia Gandhi, for my preferment for this celebrated award.

It is, indeed, an honor for me to join the 26 luminaries who have stood where I am standing today, to receive this Prize that is dedicated to an inspirational leader. They include royalty, presidents, prime ministers, philanthropists, international civil servants, human rights and environmental activists, scientists, economists, humanitarians, fellow Nobel Laureates and more.

I expressed, on November 19, last year, and reiterate today, how honored I am to receive a Prize in the name of former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, who is known throughout the world for her strong character and determination, as a very strong woman leader. Indeed, the late Prime Minister set the path for many of us who have followed her footsteps as leaders of our countries.

As I accept this honor with deep gratitude and appreciation, I dedicate it to the Liberian people who have lifted me and entrusted me with their leadership. I dedicate it particularly to the women of Liberia, Africa, and the world, for their

steadfastness, courage and tenacity in staying the course as we continue to strive for full gender equity, equality and the upliftment of women everywhere. Women are the peacemakers, the engines of development, and are integral to any peace, economic planning and development process.

To women everywhere, I say: Have the courage and the daring to do what is most purposeful and meaningful in your life. And, as I said to the women of the world, upon accepting the Nobel Peace Prize, I told them, "Find your voice! Raise our voices. Let yours be a voice for freedom!"

In accepting this Indira Gandhi Prize, Mr. President, permit me to thank you, and the Government and fraternal people of India, for the honor bestowed upon me and my country, and for the warm welcome and hospitality which our delegation has received since arriving in your wonderful country.

The name Gandhi is revered the world over, associated with non-violence and peace, advocacy for pluralistic and participatory democracy, respect for human dignity, value and rights. It is therefore a singular honor for me to be associated with the Gandhi name in any way.

One cannot therefore accept a Prize bearing the name of Gandhi, without some reflection on the venerable and sainted Mahatma Gandhi, who advocated for social justice, peace and equal rights for all human beings, irrespective of color, creed, religion or ideology.

Africa and Africans are proud to be associated with the name of Gandhi. He was both an African and an Indian – a bridge that connected our two shores. It was Gandhi who launched, in Africa, the struggle for self-determination, freedom and participatory democracy which swept the world. It was on September 6, 1906, that he began the Satyagraha, or the Great Gandhian Movement for peace, non-violence and empowerment in South Africa.

This movement was both the channel and inspiration for self-determination by colonized peoples in Africa, Latin America, Asia, and Oceania. It watered the struggle to remove colonialism and the attending vestiges of discrimination and bad governance, to be replaced by democracy. Through his advocacy of non-violence in expressing grievances, greater democracy,

inclusion and participation, the Mahatma showed us the way for integrating people through peaceful means, notwithstanding the enormity of the tribulations they face. This is the Gandhian Way.

This is the way, as we know, for love and respect amongst mankind; for peace and stability; for the actualization of value, dignity and self-confidence; for enhanced co-existence among humanity; for dialogue amongst civilizations, making the world a more comfortable, safe and peaceful place for habitation, irrespective of structural, physiological and ideological differences.

In accepting this Prize, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, we also reflect on the person for whom this special award is named, Indira Nehru Gandhi. She was, without doubt, a remarkable woman, a woman of substance; a leader of will and force who defied threats and faced daunting challenges to provide quality leadership for India; one of the most respected and revered leaders of your country. Her role in public life was a great inspiration to women around the world. She left an indelible mark on the sands of history.

Indira Gandhi came to power at a time when India seemed ungovernable, with the country deep in strife. Her challenge was to restore order in the governance of the world's largest democracy. Through sheer determination and courage, she faced the challenge and succeeded. She paid the ultimate price for that success, when she was martyred in October 1984. By then, her name had already been written on the international tablet of fame, leaving an impressive legacy.

Indira Gandhi's courage inspired women around the world to aspire to leadership, whether at the national or international level. I salute her, and pay special homage to her memory and her achievements.

The Indira Gandhi Prize for Peace, Disarmament and Development is so aptly titled. We know only too well that a nation that is at peace is one in which the guns, and drums, of war and unrest are silent; and that when such a nation is at peace with itself and its neighbors, development is the ultimate outcome.

In receiving this honor for my role in peacekeeping, I cannot but reflect on the perennial misery and suffering endured by peoples around the world, and

mankind's endless striving for peace and a better life. Millions of people in Africa, the Middle East and Asia are struggling to break the stranglehold of violence, instability and poverty. We can never be safe when we have a world in which the largest proportion of the population is not at ease because of one bad condition or another.

In the case of my country, Liberia, our people waited over two decades for peace to be restored. We stepped from the shadow of 14 years of a devastating civil war in 2003, and we started the process of rebuilding. Today we have just commemorated our tenth consecutive year of uninterrupted peace and progress.

We have endeavored to achieve success, in the intervening years, to formulate laws and policies, create and strengthen institutions, rebuild our shattered economic infrastructure; restore basic needs and services, including returning children to school, promoting an open society and a very free press – all the hallmarks of a tolerant and democratic society. But we know only too well that none of these are fully sustainable until we can sustain the peace.

And so, in our second six years, which we call our transformative period, we are forging ahead to rebuild a country that is stable, strong and prosperous. We are determined that our efforts will not be reversible. In this endeavor, we are grateful to India and the rest of the international community, for supporting the efforts of the Liberian people.

Permit me to reflect on Indo-Liberia relations. India and Liberia have come a long way in forging commonality, solidarity and fraternity on the world stage. We share similar positions on fundamental socio-economic and political issues. It is this shared value that has defined our relations, and underlined our solidarity and fraternity in the global community.

Founded as a haven for freedom, justice and equality, Liberia has never shied away from conditions or actions that will enhance the dignity and respect of peoples, irrespective of their locations. India has developed and spread the philosophy of non-violence and peace around the world. It is this philosophy

that defeated segregation in certain parts of the world, and introduced a new and vibrant spirit of equality of souls, spirit and the dignity of mankind.

History records that India produced the first woman President of the United Nations General Assembly in 1953, Mrs. Vijaya Pandit – the 8th President of the General Assembly and, coincidentally, the aunt of Indira Gandhi. Liberia, in 1969, followed India's trailblazing example by becoming the second country in the world, and the first from Africa, to showcase the potential of women, producing the second woman, and 24th, UN General Assembly President in the person of Angie Brooks – still the only African female General Assembly President to this day.

Dear Friends:

This honor of the Indira Gandhi Peace Prize gives me a renewed impetus and commitment to remain ever steadfast in championing the cause of humanity – advocating for social justice and the exercise by every person of their inalienable rights without precondition. My campaign is energized by this award, by your support and the support of the Indian sub-continent, and all freedom-loving peoples around the world as we try to complete our journey.

It is only when every human being lives in peace and security, that development can flourish and the world and all its people can be at peace. We can make a difference in our world as agents of positive change. We have a duty to do so. You, me, all positive-thinking men and women have a duty to show love, tolerance and compassion towards one another. It is only when we regard every individual as a creation of God, and accord them appropriate respect and love that we can live peacefully on this planet.

I thank you.