

Statement Delivered by US Secretary of State
Condoleezza Rice
At the Liberia Partners' Forum

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Good morning and thank you all for coming. I want to thank all of our co-hosts, co-sponsors for this conference. Especially thank you, Paul, and the staff here of the World Bank for organizing the conference. I'm obviously honored to be here in the presence of the members of the Liberian delegation, but particularly Your Excellency President Johnson Sirleaf. Thank you for your outstanding leadership and your inspirational leadership of the people of Liberia. (Applause.) I'd like to thank also all of the countries and institutions that are represented here today, all of whom are committed to Liberia's recovery.

This is a time of optimism in Liberia. Fourteen years of civil war are over. Those displaced by war are returning to their communities. And a new, democratically-elected government is in place.

The Sirleaf administration has worked tirelessly over the past year to ensure that Liberia's reforms and reconstruction and development take root and have the chance for lasting success. President Sirleaf and her team, many of whom are here today, are committed to advancing democracy, to rooting out corruption, and to working in the best interests of the Liberian people.

All of us in the international community applaud this determination -- and we are putting our full support behind Liberia's new government. Since the end of Liberia's civil war in 2003, its many partners around the world have committed more than \$1 billion in relief and development assistance.

The United States has been pleased to provide over \$500 million in an important international effort. The United States is determined to continue and to expand our support for Liberia. To continue our support, President Bush has asked Congress for more than \$200 million of total assistance for fiscal years 2007 and 2008. And we want to do more. The United States currently holds \$391 million in outstanding bilateral claims on Liberia. We will cancel that debt -- all of it -- under the framework from Highly Indebted Countries. (Applause.) We hope that this will help to relieve Liberia's crippling debt burden, a debt burden that today's leadership and today's people of Liberia do not deserve. We hope that it will enable the Government to direct more of its resources toward reconstruction and development. Our 2008 budget request includes funds to cover the start of this process, and we will work closely with other donors, such as the World Bank, the African Development Bank, the International Monetary Fund, to resolve the multilateral debt.

Lasting economic development in Liberia requires investment in the country's most valuable resources -- its people. We must help the Liberian Government to liberate the creativity and energy of all of its citizens -- through a vibrant private sector, robust trade, and access to international markets. To this end, the United States is pursuing a comprehensive economic engagement strategy with Liberia -- with a particular focus on building public-private partnerships.

I'm pleased that the Liberia Private Sector Investment Forum will take place on Thursday. The United States and our international partners look forward to welcoming an enthusiastic crowd ready to invest in Liberia's future. At the same time the U.S. Overseas Private Investment Corporation is working tirelessly with leading businesses and organizations to mobilize capital for Liberia's entrepreneurs and small businesses.

Our government is doing what we can to help. We certified Liberia as eligible to receive benefits under our African Growth and Opportunity Act, which was finalized last month. This Thursday, the U.S. Trade Representative will sign a Trade and Investment Framework Agreement with the Liberian Government. And we are taking steps to resume direct flights between Liberia and the United States by signing an Open Skies Agreement, which will deepen the connection between our people, our businesses, and our economies. (Applause.)

The purpose of these efforts and the more than \$500 million in assistance that we have given, the additional resources that we have spent to try and help in the peacekeeping operations in Liberia -- and I want to say proudly, too, the role that American Marines played in those early pivotal days to help liberate Liberia from tyranny -- this is nothing less than an effort by the United States to try and help the people of Liberia transform Liberia toward a lasting peace, and lasting prosperity. This is a remarkable goal that the people of Liberia have set for themselves -- and it is in that direction that they and their democratic leaders are striving. They desire and they deserve our support.

Madame President, I had the great honor and pleasure of attending your inauguration a little over a year ago. I want to tell you that I still have great memories of that day. I remember the university choir singing The Heavens Are Telling, one of my favorite songs. And it reminded me of Liberia's long tradition of education, indeed higher education, because my aunt went to Liberia to teach in 1961. She was a professor at Southern University, a historically black college in Louisiana. And that Liberian university was strong enough to attract her to go and teach there. So you have a wonderful tradition.

But what I remember most about that day is that it was a day of great joy and great pride, but also a day of great hope. Madame President, members of the Liberian delegation, the people of Liberia: I know, Madame President, that you have no intention of disappointing the hopes of your people, and we have every intention of helping you to succeed.

Thank you very much. (Applause.)