

**ADDRESS BY**

**HER EXCELLENCY ELLEN JOHNSON SIRLEAF**

**PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF LIBERIA**

**ON THE OCCASION OF THE**

**45<sup>th</sup> COMMENCEMENT OF**

**CUTTINGTON UNIVERSITY**

**SUAKOKO, BONG COUNTY**

**JULY 9, 2006**

Honorable members of the Legislature here present;  
Honorable members of the Judiciary here present;  
Honorable Cabinet Ministers and Officials of Government;  
Traditional Leaders;  
The President and Members of the Faculty Senate;  
Members of the Administrative Council,  
The Graduating Class, Students;  
Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am most delighted to join you, Mr. President, the Administration and Faculty on this 45<sup>th</sup> Commencement of Cuttington University. I am equally pleased to join the graduates and their relatives as they share in this special occasion of joy and happiness. The successful end of an academic journey culminating in commencement ceremonies is always a sobering moment and equally one of joy. It is the formal conclusion of long and tiring work.

Ladies and Gentlemen: Let us first reflect upon some historical significance of this venerable institution. The magnanimous gesture of a gift of \$5,000 in 1885 from an American clergyman, R. Fulton Cutting to Bishop Samuel Ferguson of Liberia laid the cornerstone of what became Cuttington College and today Cuttington University. Were Mr. Cutting alive today, he would be deeply gratified by how far his seminal gift has propelled this important institution of higher learning in our country. Credit must also be given to the far sightedness of Bishop

Ferguson and the Episcopal Church in Liberia who utilized this gift to such a noble end. Five thousand dollars in 1885 was no small money. It could have been used for other purposes. It could have been misapplied or misappropriated to personal use, as much of our national experience show. But those patriotic Liberians chose to do what many of our compatriots find difficult to do today – invest in the future of our nation. Happily, we are reaping the benefit – harvesting the crops from their hard work, dedication and foresight. Our graduating students today bear ample witness to that reality.

In related vein, whenever I occasionally reflect on the question, ‘How did Liberia survive the wrath of colonialism to keep her sovereignty inviolate’, I invariably come back to a few interrelated factors. Liberia has survived as a nation because our foreparents employed and effectively utilized the values of what can be considered the three pillars of the foundation of our nation and its development.

The **first pillar** is religion. The church has unquestionably played a pivotal part in the socio-economic and political existence of the country. History tells us quite correctly that the founders of the Liberian nation-state were Christians who had abiding faith in God. That the convention leading to the Declaration of our Independence was held in the edifice of the Providence Baptist Church speaks volume to this. The fact that the foreparents introduced religion into an assimilating society is attested by

results that show that the larger portion of our citizenry are Christians of strong faith in God and His son Jesus Christ.

The **second pillar** of our foundation is commerce and trade. Perhaps because of their unfortunate experience, the Founding Fathers developed a strong sense of self-sufficiency and independence. Ships manufactured in Liberian shipyards conveyed commodities of trade and commerce from Liberia to Europe and the Americas. For many years in the distant past rice, the staple that makes and breaks us, was exported from Liberia. The records show that it was Liberia that introduced piassava to the industrial market; it was Liberia that made the world conscious of the industrial value of palm kernel. Our history further tells us that ancient Liberian iron-mongers were forging iron tools and other metallic implements long before the industrial revolution in the West.

Contrast these achievements with the realities of today – eighty-five percent of the supply of our most important strategic commodity, rice, is in the hands of two expatriate importers. Iron ore and steel in the form of scrap are exported as primary commodities while we import them in the finished forms of cutlasses, hoes, whippers. We still export palm oil, fruits, vegetables in their natural state and bring them back in a processed state. Our market women who dominate our trading sector still work under difficult conditions – lack of credit mobility, storage, banking facilities in effect relegating them to performance in the informal sector. Let the message go to all that in time we will change

this. Liberians will once again take charge of their commerce, take hold of their destiny.

The **third pillar** of our foundation, and perhaps the most important, is education. Through their erudite skills and thoughtful application of their knowledge, the Founders of our state knew how to adopt, relate and become very skillful in diplomacy by zealously guarding the sovereignty of the state. In the latter years of nationhood, they allocated resources for the training of thousands of our young people abroad. However, insufficient attention was paid to the development of institutions at home; inadequate resources were directed at the development of human capacity; not enough effort was made for the conscientization of our youth for an appreciation of the power of knowledge which comes through education.

It is precisely for this reason that my Administration has squarely placed education at the centre of our national development agenda. One proof of this commitment is reflected in the Budget allocations for 2006/2007 recently submitted to the Legislature for approval. As you may know, education received almost 8% or US\$10.3 million of the total amount of that budget. Considering what we urgently need to do in the field of education for our nation, this amount is small. But it constitutes the largest chunk in a budget which, though growing, remains constrained for the time being. Moreover, while there are limitations in what the Government can do presently from our own national resources, it is by

no means all that is being invested in this important area. Many of our development partners have reached the same conclusion as we have – that the real and sustainable future of Liberia rests largely on its educated people. As such, many of these partners are directing significant development expenditures on the rehabilitation of our school buildings, classrooms and other facilities; on roads and other infrastructure which facilitate access to these schools; on accommodation for our teachers in remote areas of the country; on school feeding programs for our children; on the provision of scholarships for the eligible. They are closely supplementing our own Government's efforts in all and more of these very important areas.

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen: Your Government's commitment to education is unswerving and unflinching. For a nation that has practically been in the wilderness for so long, in which more than 85% of its formal sector is unemployed and with more than an 80% illiteracy rate, there is genuine reason to be alarmed if no immediate action is taken to remedy the situation. I know, and I am truly convinced that the renewed hope and aspiration of this country is embedded in the policy of education for all particularly our children and youth. I heard this call so clearly and so often as I criss-crossed the land to get my message of hope out to our nation – a message to which the nation responded by electing my Government.

The imperative of education as a national development priority is manifest when we consider the enormously low capacity at virtually all levels of our society. This is particularly critical in the public sector. We feel on a daily basis the capacity constraint which limits our development efforts. We know that this is caused, in part, by the loss of the best brains of our nation to other parts of the world over a sustained period. But equally, the capacity problems we now confront are in large measure due to our failure as a nation to renew and expand our educational stock – at all levels – for too long a time.

Yet, even as we seek to redress these obvious national deficits, our emphasis must be on quality and relevant education. Many years back, there were just two institutions of higher learning in Liberia – the State owned University of Liberia and the church run privately owned Cuttington College. These institutions produced limited numbers of graduates, but they were, for the most part, of high quality and substance. Indeed several of our best and brightest leaders and managers in public and private service today and in the past had their formative training in these two institutions. From Cuttington we can identify many now serving with the utmost of commitment – Walter Gwenigale, Jeremiah Sulunteh, Mils Jones, Willis Knuckles, Ceaneh Johnson, Edward McClain. In the past, we often heard criticisms that the entrance requirements and available places in the University of Liberia were so unattainably high that it was only able to attract a limited amount of the better and more refined minds. Similarly, it was said that Cuttington

College was too costly and with a location in central Liberia, that limited wider access. Entrance requirements were said to be equally formidable.

Some twenty years later we are fortunate to have many more colleges and universities in the country. This is a laudable development because it provides for more of our people with eager minds, expanded opportunities to enroll at the institutions of their choice. The greater number of colleges and universities has eased the entry situation noticeably, but in turn there are concerning issues that need to be addressed. Our expectations of all these institutions of higher learning is that they will each continue to produce quality students and in areas of direct relevance to the continuing development of our nation. In fact, let me say that while we welcome 2,000 students graduating in the various disciplines of their choice, the relevance of their disciplines to the day-to-day conditions of our country and people is of greater importance.

It is also not enough to boast of enrollment of 10,000 or more students when these students come out of poor secondary schools and the Universities have inadequate facilities to provide them with the level of instruction that ensures their eligibility for admission to external institutions and their competitiveness in professional life.

It is in this context that we must deepen our ongoing planning process of national reform and reconstruction making our first order of business a comprehensive look at our national educational architecture and policies.

I am fully aware that work has already begun in earnest on this, but we must conclude this effort with all dispatch, given its central importance to the success of our development efforts. This is because it is well established by empirical evidence that education, more than any other variable, is the principal long term determinant of growth and development. One has only to take a look at the Far East. Three decades or so ago, Liberia was at the same level of development as Malaysia, Singapore or Thailand. Today thanks to their overwhelming investment in education, underpinned by appropriate policies at all levels—primary, secondary, technical and tertiary, these nations are economic forces to be reckoned with globally. Among other things, their technology is first rate in a world where Liberia and many of our countries in Africa, remain severely challenged and handicapped.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the records show that the last time a National Consultative Conference on Education Policy and Planning was held was on September 14, 1974 on the campus of the William V.S. Tubman High School in Sinkor. The policy and plan of action that emerged from that forum embraced the program of education for our nation's children up to, and including the year 2000. I am sure that we have deviated from that plan, and six years since, we have been operating outside a proper plan, and policy framework to guide our educational system.

This is troubling from an educational perspective as well as from a security dimension. As we all know the vast majority of our population

is comprised of young people .They represent the most significant part of the greatest potential for the development and growth of the country. Unfortunately, the vast potential at their disposal is not being optimized and fully tapped for productive and positive purposes. This is dangerous, as in such situations our young can easily fall prey to the manipulative behavior of others whose acts are inimical to national development. If they stay untrained, unemployed or underutilized for too long, we gravely run the risk as a nation of relapsing into our unfortunate recent past. We cannot afford this as a people; none of us wants this as a nation. We are all weary of strife and conflict. Too much is at stake for our welfare; for our families; for our relations; for our survival as a country.

At this juncture, therefore, one of the things our planners might seriously consider is the holding of a comprehensive national forum on educational reform and policy to chart a meaningful course for our system and define a relevant philosophy of education for Liberia. A clearer and better articulated policy on education, arising from national consensus will better guide us in our national manpower resource preparedness and responsiveness. It will enable us to better plan how many doctors, agriculturists, engineers, scientists, economists, historians, sociologists, etc., we need over what future time frame, and in which sectors and localities. Only on that basis could we meaningfully predict what the future demand of the country will be in ten, twenty and fifty years. Only on that basis can we shape the kind of

nationally-centered and home-grown development responses that we so badly lack at the present time.

A renewed philosophy of education for Liberia will enable us design not just a curriculum, but to have a fuller and richer understanding of what our students should and must learn to make them meaningful and relevant to their environment. They must once again be taught through curricula that remind them of their proud history first as a part of the great empires of Africa and after independence as a nation. They must learn of Liberia's historical contributions to Africa and the world. They must again be taught the need for Liberia to know more of itself, while not forgetting the need to become once again regionally and globally competitive in trade, in diplomacy and international relations.

Most importantly as we seek to do all of that, our new education system must teach our young people the importance changing attitudes of commitment to the society of which they are an integral part; of the need for them to reindulcate good values, a sense of morality, integrity, honorable commitment to public and private service. Our education system should constantly remind us all that the *raison d'être* for public service in particular must not be to acquire illicitly for private gain, but to be able to contribute through the delivery of public goods and services, to a better quality of life for all of our citizens, especially the less deserving and the needy.

Against such a back-drop my fellow citizens and friends, our national experts, with support of our partners and friends, must move and act faster to rescue our country from being strangled by her own children many of whom have long grown accustomed to idle life and surviving through illicit means. We have to get them back to school, into Colleges and Universities not only in Monrovia and Gbarnga, but in Harper and Cape Mount and Nimba and Lofa. We have to prepare them for the way back into meaningful employment, back into gainful development. Our Government takes this aspect of our development challenge very seriously. We recognize that now is the time to develop a new reality for Liberia. It is time for a new national mind set, a time for a new work ethic, and for a new perspective that will lead to self-fulfillment and self-reliance in a new Liberia.

Ladies and Gentlemen, there are so many reasons for which we must be very grateful to the Founders of our country. They played their role. They laid the foundation for us. They pointed the way and held the torch high for us to see. Unfortunately, over the past two to three decades as a nation we have done little to fulfill the burning aspirations of those founding leaders and to further expand the frontiers which they so dedicatedly explored and pushed back. As we all know so well, a devastating civil war and all that brought in its wake have things severely undermined our sense of national unity, cohesiveness and purpose of nation building.

Today, Liberia continues at the delicate crossroad and confluence in its history. We have many serious choices to make as a nation, as a people. At this juncture we can sustain the path of the past two to three decades of instability, anarchy and retrogression; or we can decisively break with the past and commit to the new journey that our nation has embarked upon since we conclusively voted for peace and democracy last November. This is a journey on the way to national reconstruction and development; to reform the way we do things; to reorder our institutions as we organize and account for our national resources. It is to change the way we relate to each other, the way we engage each other; about change in our mind-set as we seek a common identity as a nation.

I appeal to the inner souls of all Liberians to put their hands on deck and again begin work to restore Liberia to past progress and to an even greater future potential.

It is at this crossroad that I once turn to our graduates of today. Our leaders of tomorrow, our hope for the future. Yours is both a challenge and a task to put at the disposal of your country the knowledge you have now acquired. Our drive for national reconstruction will be meaningless unless we utilize the full potential of your creative minds.

Let me therefore heartily congratulate you as you savor your well earned success and sparkle with the thought of your personal individual and

collective achievements. This is indeed your day and your parade, and you have every right to enjoy it and be proud.

You have carefully chosen your initial fields of study and will be commissioned to go forth and demonstrate the knowledge you have acquired for the general good of yourself and country. But in a larger sense your real knowledge, your quest for more knowledge, will begin as you come face to face with the real world out there. As of the moment you are pronounced graduates of this historic institution, which has prepared you for this day, you will also be shedding the protective environment of this your alma mater to embrace the larger, tougher and more complex world of our wider society. At one level, while you were under the protective shield as it were of Cuttington, you were a collective mass with strength because you were united. You knew one another, and were prepared to defend any one of you who came under threat from outside your unit. In the walls of Cuttington, you were labeled as a student pursuing scholarship. But in many respects the larger society into which you now emerge provides quite the contrast. In that forthcoming phase of your life, you will be quickly on your own: relying on your acquired skills, your own strength and courage to survive and deliver the goods and services for our society. Here in Cuttington, you were students and scholars who must provide answers to questions. Out there from today onwards, you will yourselves often have to ask the questions for which you must turn to yourselves to provide the

answers. You will be, as you are now, academically independent. You will be tried and tested in the classroom of life.

Are you appropriately prepared for the enormous challenges of our post-conflict Liberia? Are you ready to play your roles in the reinsertion of Liberia into the global competitive environment? Do you have the necessary tools to hit the ground running in a fast moving world of the twenty-first century?

In large measure, the real answer to these questions can come only from you, from yourselves as graduates. It will be you who will have to lead the charge out there.

I believe that you are uniquely placed today to take up the challenge; to show leadership; to deliver for our people's development; to contribute to the process of reconstruction and renewal to the benefit of our nation's children, grand children and Liberians still unborn.

I congratulate you once again graduates as you move forward to pursue your future potential. In doing so, remain independent and strong in your knowledge, standing tall in the confidence of your ability to chart the course of your own destiny.

Encourage mutual respect and understanding in your daily interactions with each other and with your less fortunate compatriots. Meet the

challenges of change in your contribution to national endeavor. Be proud of your achievement today. You have labored for it and have earned it.

Enjoy the rest of the day - and celebrate in the night. But get ready to work tomorrow.

We salute you and we await you.