

*EXECUTIVE MANSION  
OFFICE OF THE PRESS SECRETARY TO THE PRESIDENT*

**OPENING COMMENTS BY PRESIDENT ELLEN JOHNSON SIRLEEAF AT A  
PRESS CONFERENCE HELD AT THE FOREIGN MINISTRY, Tuesday, May 26,  
2009**

Once again, let me say good morning to you and thank you for responding to our request so that, as we always do every now and then we respond to you to discuss some topical issues and discuss some issues that we had. I will just mention a few things and we can open it up.

The Poverty Reduction Strategy, as you know, we launched this about a year ago; it's a three-year development agenda. We have started on it; we just made an assessment of the first year. We are behind; I'll be the first to admit that, in achieving the different targets of what we expected to get in the first year. The Ministry of Planning has been doing that evaluation and we are going to be discussing it at a Liberia Development Reconstruction Committee (LRDC) meeting to be held on June 5<sup>th</sup>, which is when we sit with our partners and assess things. And yet, a lot progress has been made even though we say that we fell short of our own ambitious expectations. In many cases, some of it has to do with the completion of legislations and so we will continue to push that meeting. We will be going on a retreat after the LRDC meeting with pillar heads and those concerned to really see how we can consolidate our efforts. We are determined to see that all of those targets in the three-year time frame will be met. Some examinations have been made in the media. We appreciate that.

For example, in the case of schools, we know that some people have covered certain schools which are not up to standard, but there are so many schools that have been built all around the country. I have dedicated some of them myself. I know the program, which I promote through the Liberian Education Trust is building 22 schools using LACE, the institution which is supported by the World Bank. Those 22 schools have been finished, the schools that are nearing completion and so those that have some way to go. We know that there are many schools being built around the country. The Minister of Education says a hundred (100) schools have been built. I've asked him to do more than just say, he should go out there, take photographs, make an assessment, and publish where these schools are, where they have been built. For the ones that are still substandard, that is still unchallenged and we intend to meet it within this time frame, within this PRS period, we intend to make sure. Books have been ordered and prepared, some of it with it with the help of former U.S. President, remember he talked about giving a school, rather have them send books from America, which is not really our orientation. They decided to publish the books in England with our own curriculum so those books are here now. And the ratio will change, instead of 1: 26; it will be 1: 2, I believe they told me. And so that will improve a whole a lot, the same with furniture, I believe that the Ministry has not been willing to put furniture since we are ending the school year, but to hold them back until the school year, but to hold them back until the school opens in September and then do so.

Let me move on to the Security Council visit. Many of you have already reported on that. I believe that the message that came to us was that they feel that Liberia has made some progress in moving forward in all our areas of our endeavor, the four pillars that we have identified under the PRS, but we all admit the situation is still remains fragile, and that is because our own training of our security forces have not been completed. The army training is going on well, but they still need a couple of years to become fully operational. The police too needs a whole lot in terms of training, logistics, etc., and that goes for some of the other security forces. So with that they agreed with us. Also the regional situation, even though we are on the best terms with all of our neighbors and have good coordination and information-sharing, but still there are uncertainties that if they did not go the right way, it could have problems for us. So with all that, they all agreed that the best thing is let's consider that it's all just still fragile and so we should keep the peacekeeping force here in keeping with recommendation that will keep the forces here through 2011 at the levels that have been agreed.

On corruption, a very strong topical issue and the General Auditing Commission reports, we have received all the reports. I have sat with the Auditor General and discussed some of them. I have sent the majority of those reports to the Ministry of Justice, because once it comes from him and I read it, if I had a problem with it, if I question anything, I'll talk to the Auditor General and question it, it goes to the legislators and the same time it comes to me. Their process is quite different from my process. So my process is to read it, if I have a question, I talk to the Auditor General to clarify the question and after that, send it to the Minister of Justice for him to be able to take legal action against those who have been able to take legal action against those who have been charged, or those who are accused. We do not talk too much about it, because I am told by the Minister of Justice that a person is innocent until proven guilty. So if I get on the air every time to talk about it, then we prejudice the right of the accused and he has the right to his defense. Where the problem is that when we take this report to the Ministry of Justice, they then send it to the National Bureau of Investigation, to call these people in, ask them questions and then write a report to the Ministry of Justice. That process needs to be changed, because it sets a whole second stage of investigation that is time consuming and may not give us the result that we want. Our thinking right now to the Ministry is, on the basis of a report, go and get the indictment and let the person have the right to defend themselves in the court and let the court's judgment be the final say, whether its prosecution, restitution or a combination of both, just go for it. We're going to be making quite a few changes in that whole thing because we feel that there's much to be desired in the whole judicial process and that has hampered us.

But corruption remains a serious problem here and we are going to ask you all, it is one thing to criticize and condemn and that's fine, but we need all to help fight it. It is not just in the government, it is in the society. And if each one of you want to examine your own personal relationship, that yourself and that you know that you admit that in churches, institutions, in places, that is a problem and we have to understand the reason for it and how we understand the reason for it and how we address it. Some of it is for many years, degradation, where people did not get paid, or did not get paid on time, so they lived by

their wits. They just managed anyway they could to survive. Some of it is a lack of systems. All the institutional systems for transparency and accountability broke down; so that anybody was doing everything and there was no record. I don't know why you didn't expose it before, because it had been here long time. But I thank God that we got freedoms and that we can expose it completely without retribution or any kind of action. And that is good, because you cannot solve a problem, until you see the problem for what it is.

I am happy that is coming out, because it's a like a purge and when we get this purge through the system, you all will say it's a small fish, big fish go free. And when we have the evidence on big fish, the same thing will happen. You know I keep telling people that in 2006, if I had stayed with my word, today we were not going to have this trouble. Because in 2006, I went in the Ministry of Finance and fired everybody and they all prevailed on me, saying you can't do that! Then I relented, and today I am facing the consequences of that. We may still have to do some of that if we find out the problem. It frustrates me, because that's the one thing that is holding us back right now in terms of the progress of this government and what we can do. That's the one area that we know that we have to address. But please work with us on trying to attack this thing, because we need your help and your support on that.

Mr. Minister, I think I've covered the main issues and we can deal with concerns.