

Welcome Statement

of

Her Excellency Ellen Johnson Sirleaf

President of the Republic of Liberia

On the Occasion

of

The Visit to Liberia

Of His Excellency George W. Bush

President of the United States of America

And

Mrs. Laura Bush

Thursday, February 21, 2008

Your Excellency George W. Bush, President of the United States of America;

Mrs. Laura Bush and other Distinguished Members of the U.S. Delegation;

Vice President Joseph N. Boakai and Mrs. Boakai;

Mr. Speaker, Mr. President Pro Tempore, and Honorable Members of the National Legislature;

Mr. Chief Justice, Associate Justices of the Supreme Court and Members of the Judiciary;

Members of the Cabinet and other Government Officials;

Mr. Doyen, Excellencies and Members of the Diplomatic Corps;

Her Excellency the Special Representative of the Secretary General of the United Nations Mission in Liberia;

Officers, Staff, Men and Women of the United Nations Mission in Liberia;  
Heads of Other International and Local Partner Organizations;  
The Chief-of-Staff, Men and Women of the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL);  
Former Officials of Government;  
Traditional Leaders, Chiefs, and Elders;  
Political and Business Leaders;  
Labor and Trade Union Leaders;  
Youth and Student Organizations;  
Heads of Civil Society Organizations;  
Members of the Press;  
Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen;  
Fellow Liberians;

Mr. President, today is a significant day for Liberia-U.S. relations. It is therefore a combined honor and privilege for me to welcome you, Mrs. Bush, and your delegation to Liberia.

You are the third President of the United States to visit our country. The visits of your predecessors and this visit have all occurred at moments in our country's history when Liberia was at crossroads, and had to make a choice between the paths of progress and peace on the one hand, and conflict and bad governance on the other.

The visit of President Roosevelt in 1943 came at a time when humankind was confronting the scourge of the Second World War, the end of which ushered in a New

World Order punctuated by the creation of the United Nations and a global commitment to peace, protection of human rights, advancement of democracy and freedoms, and respect for the territorial integrity of all nations.

Liberia, then, chose the path to peace; that choice made it possible for us, as a nation, to be a signatory to the establishment of the United Nations; to take leadership in the liberation struggles that resulted in the independence of several African states. Efforts to forge African solidarity through the Organization of African Unity found its roots here in 1959 in our northern City of Sanniquellie.

When President Jimmy Carter visited in April 1978, Liberia was at the peak of its pre-Civil War days, showing signs of steady economic growth on the one hand while, on the other, juggling the challenges and realities of the radicalization of our political and ethnic diversity. Simultaneously, perhaps in the neglect of those realities, we continued to put emphasis on our regional and continental leadership role as the Oldest Black Republic in Africa. Shortly after that visit, our nation descended into a spiral of decline starting with the military intervention in politics in 1980 which subsequently degenerated into a Civil War that spanned more than 14 years. It was during this time that the forces of evil hijacked the Liberian State and a period of mutual suspicion between our two countries became a painful reality.

Your visit to our country today is a clear indication that that "cloud of suspicion" has been dissipated by our renewed, bi-lateral relationship; a relationship that spans the birth of this nation, two World Wars – and the chilly years of the Cold War.

Mr. President: This visit, like those of your two predecessors, comes at a time when Liberia is recovering from the bitter experience of our recent past and entering a phase of our national polity that positions us to reclaim our place in the comity of nations by

following a path of good governance, economic growth for our people, and ensuring justice and the rule of law for our citizens and all others who reside within our borders.

And lest the historians fail to note, let me quickly point out that never before in the relationship between our two countries have the same two Presidents of Liberia and the United States met four times in a space of two years. And to you, Mrs. Bush, and Secretary Rice, no other American First Lady or Secretary of State has visited our country twice in just two years. I am one of only two Liberian Presidents to have been given the opportunity to speak to a Joint Meeting of the U.S. Congress and the first to have been honored with the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

We therefore have an obligation to you, Mr. President, and to the American people to justify this confidence by improving the quality of life of all our people through programs that are designed to reduce poverty, build human and institutional capacity, and help our citizens to operate at their full potential, to cross that psychological threshold where they will be limited only by their imaginations.

As we welcome you, Mr. President, Mrs. Bush, and your entourage, it is befitting that we acknowledge with thanks the key role the United States has played and continues to play in helping to end our civil crises through your financial support for UN Peace Keeping Missions which will ultimately be replaced by our own security forces whose ongoing training is supported by your Administration and by the Congress.

We understand the need for reducing the level of support for the Peacekeeping Force, but please do not do so sharply as to affect our Security until our forces are ready. As you see them here, standing tall, proud of their achievements in training but needing more time to be truly ready in size and capability.

Mr. President, we thank you also for the economic and technical assistance your country continues to provide through USAID and the other bi-lateral programs to help us meet some of the critical needs of our people in the areas of roads, electricity, health, education, rural governance, and other pro-growth initiatives. The support for relief from debt arrears accumulated over a twenty-five-year period removes a burden from generations to come. The special support through PEPFAR to combat HIV/AIDS and the Special Education initiative announced by Mrs. Bush and the UN General Assembly last year move us closer to achieving the Millennium Development Goals. The reopening of the American International School and the expected return of the Peace Corps sends a strong message of confidence.

On a more personal note, Mr. President, I was deeply honored two years ago when you sent a delegation headed by Mrs. Bush, accompanied by Secretary of State Rice, to attend my Inauguration. That show of support helped immensely in signaling to the world that our bi-lateral relationship is back on track and Liberia is indeed open for business with America and the world. This follows a similar show of good will when Mrs. Nixon attended the inauguration of President Tolbert in 1972.

I want to take this opportunity to thank you, my friend, Mrs. Bush, for this visit and all the support you have given to support our girls' education and health initiatives. These activities have earned you a special place in the hearts of young Liberian girls.

Mr. President: I say with the strongest conviction that Liberia is on its way to economic recovery, a recovery aided immensely by the support from your Administration, the Congress of the United States, and the American people. Yet, we are proud that there is a mutuality of interest and benefits, proud that our nation has full ownership of our agenda and assumes primary responsibility for our own destiny.

This is why, Mr. President, we intend to make the private sector the main engine of growth in our economy. This is why we have qualified for AGOA, and are struggling to become a threshold country under the requirements of the Millennium Challenge Corporation. This is why we welcome the renewed interest that OPIC and corporate America have shown in investing in our natural resource rich economy. This is why we will aim for trade rather than aid, investment and business partnerships rather than humanitarian handouts. This is why we are bold to welcome innovative initiatives which others see with suspicion.

Mr. President: As we welcome you and your entourage to Liberia today, we thank God that the guns of war are silenced, our reconciliation process is underway; our people are beginning to sleep more soundly at night; our children are smiling again, and Liberians at home and abroad are reclaiming their pride and national identity.

We invite you and your entourage to enjoy our unique Liberian hospitality. You are safe here and it is our hope that this visit will be remembered by historians not by the length of your stay, but by the pleasant memories we know you will take back home – by the promise it holds for stronger U.S.-Liberian relations as we stand together to promote democracy, good governance and economic development, and to fight our common implacable enemy of terrorism.

Once again, a hearty Liberian welcome.

I thank you!