

**“A Call to Excellence”**  
**Remarks by The Visitor of the University of Liberia**  
**Her Excellency Ellen Johnson Sirleaf**  
**President of the Republic of Liberia**  
**At the University’s 89th Commencement Convocation**  
**SKD Complex, Paynesville**  
**December 22, 2010**

*[Although present at the Graduation Ceremony, The Visitor did not deliver her prepared remarks, and instead directed students and guests to her website, [www.emansion.gov.lr](http://www.emansion.gov.lr), for the full address.]*

Honored and Special Guests;  
Graduates of this 89<sup>th</sup> Commencement Convocation;  
Families and Friends of the Class of 2010;  
Ladies and Gentlemen:

As The Visitor of this State-owned University, it is always a pleasure to join in celebrations such as this Commencement Convocation, proud to see 2,139 of our brightest and best young people take the next step in their life’s journey. Let me congratulate you, Class of 2010, on behalf of the Government, and in my own right, for your singular achievements.

I am delighted to hear that among today’s graduates is the second female ever to graduate from this University’s College of Science Technology in geology. I speak with confidence when I say that, with her degree in geology, Miss Rustolyn Dennis will never have to look for work, and that she will have our Ministry of Lands, Mines and Energy and our National Oil Corporation (NOCAL), as well as the mining concessions, knocking at her door. I congratulate you, Miss

Dennis, for pursuing a difficult discipline and sticking it out. Now you will reap the benefits.

I said this last December, and the message has not changed: Our country desperately needs scientists, and all types of engineers, and doctors, nurses and teachers to push forward our development agenda.

Let me also congratulate our Commencement Speaker, H.E. Zhou Yuxiao, upon whom you have bestowed an Honorary Doctor of Humane Letters Degree. This University could not have selected a more deserving individual for this distinguished honor – someone who is a true friend of Liberia.

There have been many occasions this year when I have had to thank you, Ambassador Zhou, and the generous Government of the People's Republic of China for the manifold gifts bestowed upon our country and people. Let me recall: the dedication of this University's Fendall Campus; of the Agricultural Technology Demonstration Center at CARI; of the modern referral Tappita Hospital – and that was just during our "26" celebrations! There's also the ongoing rehabilitation of the Ministry of Health Complex in Congo Town, and the planned construction of an office complex to house several government ministries in the Paynesville area.

We, Liberians, can never thank you enough for all the development you, personally, have helped to bring to our country during your years as China's Ambassador. We appreciate you, and we cherish the strong partnership between our two nations.

This is the fifth Commencement Exercise since I became President in 2006. I trust that when the next one rolls around, the grounds of the new Fendall Campus will serve as the venue, to lend added pomp

and circumstance to the occasion. I also want to propose the holding of a truncated Convocation going forward, following which graduates would proceed to their respective colleges for the presentation of degrees.

Dear Graduates:

You are receiving your degrees at a time when our country's education system is at a critical crossroads. Of particular concern to us is the fact that a large percentage of our college graduates are ill-equipped to perform effectively in our nation's reconstruction and development, let alone in the knowledge-based global economy. This failing is attributed to the weak foundation at the primary-school level, and continuing all the way through secondary school. We need look no further than the dismal results from the recent WAEC examinations, and at this very institution where only 6,000 of the 23,000 students who took the University's entrance exam passed.

Aware of this crisis in education, Government is taking the necessary remedial measures: through the rehabilitation and reopening of our rural teacher training institutes; through the presence of Peace Corps Volunteers who are deployed in our schools to teach Math, Science and English; through the granting of tuition-free education and other incentives to students enrolled in the UL Teachers College and Tubman University's College of Education, together with the College of Medicine to encourage students to serve their country by pursuing careers in these vital disciplines. The Government is contemplating similar incentives in other areas it deems necessary to backstop the Poverty Reduction Strategy and, ultimately, fulfill the Millennium Development Goals.

Government is largely responsible for the budget of this State-run University in recognition of the important role of education in achieving the PRS. Government's current subsidy of US\$9.8 million for FY 2010/2011 represents 58.3 percent of the University's budget, a sizeable increase from US\$6.9 million in FY 2009/2010. Remember also that in 2006 when this government started, the budget was only US\$1.3 million.

To reduce pressure on the University of Liberia regarding its soaring student population – over 21,000 at last count – our Government is decentralizing higher education. A significant boost to higher education is the donation, by the Government and people of China, of the US\$21 million UL Campus at Fendall, which I cited earlier, and which will ease the perennial congestion problem and markedly improve the learning environment. We have also reopened the W.V. S. Tubman University in Maryland County, which now has 492 students from the southeast.

We have established regional colleges in Grand Bassa and Nimba Counties, under the 2010/2011 fiscal budget, and similar ones will follow in Grand Gedeh and Lofa. Less than three weeks ago, we broke ground for the construction, in Gbarnga, of a community college that will specialize in Information Technology. And the David Straz Polytechnic, in Sinje, Grand Cape Mount County, part of the University of Liberia, will shortly be inaugurated.

So you see, Ladies and Gentlemen, Government is fulfilling its commitment to make tertiary education available to all citizens.

We are also keeping that promise through our overseas scholarships program. Our Bilateral Scholarships scheme has undergone major reforms in the past year. In 2006, when my administration inherited

the program, we found discrepancies in the way scholarships were vetted and awarded, with very little record keeping on Liberian students abroad.

After a comprehensive study of bilateral awards, we began an overhaul of the entire process. The Cabinet established an ad hoc Inter-ministerial Scholarships Committee to streamline the process, making it merit-based, gender-balanced, and aligned with our capacity needs. And since November 2009, a total of 250 students are benefitting from bilateral scholarships awarded in various disciplines for study in 10 countries. In addition to vetting all bilateral scholarships, the Committee liaises with line ministries and other Government agencies to monitor compliance with a Bilateral Scholarships Policy that was endorsed by the Cabinet in March 2010.

As a result of these transparent measures, the public has regained confidence in the bilateral scholarships process. Scholarship offers are now advertised on the Executive Mansion Website Scholarships Link ([www.emansion.gov.lr](http://www.emansion.gov.lr)), on radio programs, and on the message boards at various ministries and tertiary institutions, with clear criteria stipulated and methods of submission specified. Scholarships announcements are also sent to Cabinet officials, the Vice Presidents for Academic Affairs at the various universities, and County Superintendents.

Students are shortlisted based on demonstration of fulfilling all the requirements of the call for scholarships, and asked to sit for a written exam based on essay questions administered by the Inter-ministerial Scholarships Committee. Successful candidates are shortlisted further for interviews, which consist of a point system judging oral communication, demonstrated interest and love of service, leadership skills, knowledge of the sector to be studied, and motivation and drive. This is important as it enables the host country

to vet candidates who have successfully passed through an intense vetting process within Liberia, strengthening the application pool.

We thank host Governments for enabling our students to further their studies, and commend the ministries and agencies that absorb them when they return to Liberia.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I mention the grueling vetting process for bilateral scholarships because it leads into what I want to touch upon briefly – in a word, excellence. We once took pride, as a nation, in the pursuit of excellence, but along the way, and through the years of a bitter and destructive civil war, we lost our sense of values and of excellence.

When Liberia College was chartered by an Act of the National Legislature as the University of Liberia 59 years ago, it was to serve primarily as a “center of learning with high academic standards, dedicated to the pursuit, promotion and dissemination of knowledge, with emphasis on practical knowledge useful to economic, social and cultural development needs.”

By 1962, with a grant from the United States, its Agency for International Development (USAID) dispatched a team of consultants from Cornell University to assist in enhancing the academic and administrative capacities of UL. Thereafter, the University acquired the reputation as a center of excellence in the region, producing quality graduates and attracting students from most sub-Saharan African countries. A top priority of government was to develop the country’s human capital for national development. And because of

the very important role this University played in Liberia's development, the merit system began to take root.

After 1980, however, merit gave way to a "spoils system," and the pursuit of excellence in Liberia was abandoned, supplanted with the illusion that anyone with connection could hold any top government position without the requisite training and experience. The bloated bureaucracy and the failed education system we inherited in 2006 attest to this disastrous way of thinking.

In restoring excellence, it is pleasing to hear that the University Administration has reinstated the Probation and Honors Lists, which admonish deficient students and reward exceptional ones. Also included in this reform is the reinstatement of faculty evaluation, to encourage faculty to upgrade the quality of their instruction if they want to be retained.

Restoring excellence in our country and in our education system must be the business, and the duty, of every Liberian, with the emphasis on consistently rewarding exceptional performance and applying negative sanctions on mediocre performance in every facet of our national endeavor.

Two weeks ago, on International Anti-Corruption Day, I spoke of how our values as a people have been lost over the years, and called for a return to some of those old-time values that instill good in people. Thus my message to you, Graduates of the Class of 2010, is to excel in all that you do – to be the best, the most outstanding, in all that you do. At the same time, learn to live with what you have; to earn what you want. These are some of the basic tenets of integrity, of a value system that appreciates honesty, hard work and humility.

Class of 2010:

In my message a year ago to another Graduating Class, I pointed out that Government does not have the resources to hire everyone, and listed the many fields where there were job opportunities here at home. They include agriculture, forestry, mining, construction, community development, teaching, health and social welfare, security, environmental protection, eco-tourism; or you could start your own small or medium enterprise. That list remains valid a year on.

I salute you, the 2010 Graduates of the University of Liberia, and commend your achievements. I wish you a successful and productive life in your chosen career path, in the pursuit of excellence. Congratulations!

I thank you.