

ANNUAL MESSAGE

TO THE

SIXTH SESSION

OF THE

FIFTY-FOURTH NATIONAL LEGISLATURE

OF THE

REPUBLIC OF LIBERIA

DELIVERED

BY

HIS EXCELLENCY DR. GEORGE MANNEH WEAH

PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF LIBERIA

**THE CAPITOL BUILDING
CAPITOL HILL
MONROVIA, LIBERIA**

30 JANUARY 2023

***Her Excellency Madam Clar M. Weah
First Lady of the Republic of Liberia;***

***Her Excellency Chief Dr. Jewel Howard-Taylor
Vice President of Liberia, and President of the Senate;***

Mr. Speaker;

Mr. President Pro-Tempore;

Honorable Members of the 54th Legislature;

***Your Honor the Chief Justice, Associate Justices of the Supreme Court, and
Members of the Judiciary;***

The Dean and Members of the Cabinet and other Government Officials;

The Doyen, Excellencies and Members of the Diplomatic and Consular Corps;

***His Excellency, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General of the United
Nations in Liberia;***

The Chief of Staff and Men and Women of the Armed Forces of Liberia;

Former Officials of Government;

Traditional Leaders, Chiefs and Elders;

Political and Business Leaders;

Religious Leaders;

Officers and Members of the National Bar Association;

Labor and Trade Unions;

Civil Society Organizations;

Members of the Fourth Estate;

Special Guests;

Fellow Liberians;

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen:

I come before you today in fulfilment of Article 58 of the Liberian Constitution, which requires me to report to the people of Liberia, through you, their elected representatives, on the state of affairs of the Nation.

This year has a very special meaning for me, as it marks my sixth and final State of the Nation Address to this Honorable Body for the term of my Presidency to which I have been elected.

In 2017, I was given a resounding mandate by the Liberian people to steer the nation through a constitutionally guaranteed six-year term. As this year concludes that period, I am happy to apprise you, my fellow compatriots, of the enormous progress that has been made, in spite of inevitable challenges.

MADAM VICE PRESIDENT, MR. SPEAKER, AND MEMBERS OF THE NATIONAL LEGISLATURE:

Let me welcome you back from your annual break. It is my hope that your individual endeavors during this much-deserved interlude proved useful and productive, including interactions with your constituents. I look forward to more fruitful engagements during the course of this 6th session.

The past year marked a crucial historical milestone for Liberia, when we celebrated 200 years of the founding of our Nation. I need not belabor you with accounts of how much we have all been through as a People during these two centuries, including wars, pestilences, and economic setbacks and downturns. But together, we have remained strong and progressive, and have managed to always emerge triumphant and united, through and after every trial and tribulation, regardless of our ethnic backgrounds, religious beliefs, or political affiliations.

As your President, I have made it my overarching purpose and duty to work towards preserving the peace of this Nation, ensuring always that we do not slide back into conflict. This has been the fundamental underpinning of all development and policy initiatives of my Administration. The record will show that we have achieved undeniable success in this endeavor, while at the same time always ensuring that there is strict adherence to the rule of law, and protection for the constitutional rights of our citizens, as we consolidate our democracy and develop our Nation.

Our well-earned credentials as a nation of peace and democracy in West Africa will be put to the test in about nine (9) months from today, when we head to the polls for General and Presidential elections. These will be the fourth elections since the end of the war in 2003, and they will be an important benchmark for judging the extent of the consolidation of peace in our country.

Perhaps most significant is that these elections are the first to be primarily organized and administered by Liberia, since the drawdown of the United Nations peacekeeping

mission in 2018. This is our moment, therefore, to continue to demonstrate to the world that we are a peace-loving nation, and that we are capable and ready to undertake elections that include all Liberians in a free and credible process.

Not only will our individual patriotism be put on trial, but our institutions of democracy will also be tested. I am of the strongest conviction that this is a test that we can - and will - pass. As you may be aware, I have continuously reaffirmed my commitment to free, fair and transparent elections, and to respect the democratic will of the Liberian people. I remain committed to that pledge.

I want to thank our partners - chief among them, Sweden, Ireland, ECOWAS, the EU, the UNDP, and the UN Peacebuilding Fund - for their technical and financial assistance to the electoral process, and for their partnership and collaboration to support the National Elections Commission, political parties, other national institutions, and civil society organizations, to be ready for this defining moment in our history.

MR. SPEAKER, DISTINGUISHED LADIES AND GENTLEMEN:

We were all recently in shock when we awakened to news of the discovery of a large cache of arms in a container at the Freeport of Monrovia. We applaud the vigilance of all national security agencies for their collaborative efforts in effecting this bust. Coming on the heels of the October elections, this development is a major cause for concern.

I have been made aware that the National Police Force continues to pursue every possible lead in their investigation of this illegal act, including diplomatic measures to have the alleged perpetrators face justice.

As this year marks two decades since the signing of the Accra Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2003, which ushered in the peaceful environment we continue to enjoy, it is my hope that we can work together - putting aside our political differences - in ensuring that we can all peacefully abide together in our 'Sweet Land of Liberty' without the chaos of recent years.

In so doing, it is both important and imperative, that we summon our collective will to vigorously confront potential troublemakers and anarchists, by applying the full force of the law that is provided for such circumstances. We owe it to ourselves, to our children, and to our children's children, to repel and eliminate any threat to our hard-won peace.

**MADAM VICE PRESIDENT AND PRESIDENT OF THE SENATE, MR. SPEAKER,
MR. PRESIDENT PRO-TEMPORE, AND HONORABLE MEMBERS OF THE
LEGISLATURE:**

In keeping with the tenets of Article 58 of the Constitution, I hereby present my Administration's Legislative Program for the ensuing session; and report to this august body on the State of the Republic, covering the economic condition, including expenditure and income.

As I deliver this my last Annual Message to the Nation in this term as President of Liberia, I would first of all want to thank my **Vice President** for her support during these years. I would also like to extend special thanks and appreciation to the **Legislature** and the **Judiciary** for the level of cooperation and collaboration that our three branches have enjoyed during these past years.

MR. SPEAKER:

Since this is my last annual message during this term, permit me to aggregate the total number of bills that have been passed during my Administration, to date. The 54th

Legislature has enacted almost **two hundred** (200) Acts, covering all aspects of our national endeavor.

Permit me also to highlight from among these numerous pieces of legislation, a few which in my view, were particularly significant. These include, but are not limited, to the following:

I applaud you for passage of the **Land Rights Act** and the **Local Government Act** in your first session in 2018. The Land Rights Act has been considered by many as the most progressive pro-community land reform law on the African continent, as it recognizes and protects customary land tenure, as well as women's rights to land.

The Local Government Act has established a system of governance consisting of locally appointed and elected officials, and grants them authority and resources to enable them to cater directly to the care and needs of the citizens in their respective counties, in the areas of health, education, roads, agriculture and other development needs. No longer must our people always have to come all the way to Monrovia to get better services, because most of the things done in Monrovia can now be done in the counties.

In a related development, you passed the **Revenue Sharing Law** in 2022, to enable revenue-sharing between central and local governments in Liberia. It was designed with the main objective of promoting domestic resource mobilization through fiscal decentralization for local empowerment.

In 2019, during your second session, approximately **fifty-four** (54) pieces of legislation were passed, amounting to the **second highest** number of bills passed during a single session under this Administration. This is highly commendable, and we applaud you for that achievement.

Additionally, I want to commend you for passing the **Power Theft Law**, the **Domestic Violence Act**, and the **Kamara A. Kamara Press Freedom Act of 2019**.

The Power Theft Law seeks to address the increasing theft of electricity through illegal connections, tampering with meters and with transmission and distribution lines, as well as theft of LEC's assets, including light poles, wires, and transformers. It establishes a

system of prohibitions and penalties to deal with electricity theft, for which Government intervention and protection is appropriate.

Thank you also for the passage of the **Domestic Violence Act**, which is expected to promote gender equality and protect women and children from domestic violence. This law is intended to reduce the entrenched gender inequality practices which were on the increase in our country. Let me assure you that these laws will continue to be fully and appropriately enforced under my Administration.

Let me also congratulate you for the enactment into law of the **Kamara Abdullah Kamara Act of Press Freedom**, which is a very historic piece of legislation that codifies and decriminalizes free speech, as enshrined in our 1986 Constitution. With the passage of this new law, we have cast into the dustbin of history all outdated criminal statutes that once restricted freedom of speech. Today, we are proud to see that dozens of newspapers exist, unhampered and unrestricted, along with numerous radio and TV stations that are now flooding our airwaves.

MR. SPEAKER:

While there were other significant bills enacted in 2020 and 2021, in the interest of time, I would like to draw your attention only to some of the bills passed last year, which is the year under review. The year 2022 saw the passage of **fifty-six (56) bills, the highest number** of bills passed thus far in a single session under my Administration. In the interest of time, a detailed listing of these Acts is attached to this Annual Message as **APPENDIX "A"**.

Among these were several judicial reform Bills, including a Bill to provide conditions and authority to arrest; a Bill to provide for a new standard on preliminary examination in cases above the trial jurisdiction of magistrates and justices of the peace; a Bill to provide for plea bargaining; and a Bill to provide for the appointment of additional relieving judges.

Together, these Bills have instituted major reforms to our judicial system, and will help to establish trust and give credibility to the judiciary. I thank you once again for passing these laws.

MR. SPEAKER:

As our fight against corruption and financial crimes remains paramount, we applaud you also for passage of bills seeking to strengthen our integrity institutions, such as the **Amended Central Bank of Liberia Act**, the **Financial Intelligence Agency Act**, the **Anti-money Laundering Terrorist Financing, Preventive Measures, And Proceeds of Crime Act, 2021**, the new **Internal Audit Agency Act**, and the **Amended and Restated Liberia Anti-Corruption Commission Act**.

Together, these laws will strengthen our anti-graft institutions and minimize the vices associated with corruption and financial crimes in our country. They will also further strengthen our financial sector and make it consistent with international best practices, and will also ensure secure financial transactions in support of our monetary and fiscal policies.

Thank you also for the ratification of several agreements with our international partners to provide development financing in support of our budget and infrastructure needs.

MR. SPEAKER:

One of the most significant achievements in support of our call for national unity was the passage of the **Dual Citizenship Bill** last year, which was the year of our Bicentennial. The moral significance of restoring citizenship rights to our brothers and sisters in diaspora can not be overemphasized. We now call on our families from the diaspora to come home and join us in the noble and patriotic task of nation-building, so that we can all continue to enjoy our **Sweet and Glorious Land of Liberty**, which was given to Liberians by God's command.

Thank you again, Members of this Honorable Legislature, for codifying the 23rd of December 2019 Opinion of the Honorable Supreme Court, making more true the saying that ... "**Once a Liberian - Always a Liberian.**"

MADAM VICE PRESIDENT, MR. SPEAKER, MR. PRESIDENT PRO-TEMPORE, AND HONORABLE MEMBERS OF THE LEGISLATURE:

While we applaud you for the record-breaking passage of these various bills, we would like to remind you, however, of some important bills that are still pending before you, including the following: **Agreement Establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area; An Act to Establish the West African Police Information System; The Statute of the International Renewable Energy Agency; The Legal Aid Act of 2022; The Liberia Corrections Service Act; An Act to Establish the Civil Service Commission; A Revised Public Health Law of Liberia; The Revised and Restated Charter of the University of Liberia;** and the **International Solar Alliance (ISA) Framework Agreement;** just to name a few.

These Bills are very significant to the success of our Pro-Poor Agenda, and we therefore urge you to consider their urgent passage in this Sixth Session.

MR. SPEAKER:

It is our understanding that an affirmative action bill, aimed at increasing women representation in the National Legislature, is being introduced under the sponsorship of the **Women Legislative Caucus** and our **Vice President**. We wholeheartedly support this endeavor in our quest to achieve gender parity in our political space, in keeping with international best practices. We therefore urge speedy passage to enable it be signed into law.

I will also be submitting additional bills for your consideration, that seek to improve our overall governance systems and structures, enhance our economy, protect our business environment, and create jobs for our people.

MR. SPEAKER:

Under this Administration, a total of **twenty-two (22) Executive Orders** were issued by me (from Executive Order 93 to Executive Order 114) in order to meet exigencies that could not await the lengthy legislative processes.

More specifically, however, during the year 2022, I issued eight (8) executive orders, as follows: **Executive Order #107 Suspending Tariffs on Off-Grid Solar Renewable Energy Products; Executive Order #108 Supporting Integration and Access to Social Services and Safety Nets for Refugees and other Vulnerable Populations in Liberia; Executive Order #109 Extending Executive Order #100 Exempting the Liberia Water and Sewer Corporation (LWSC) from Customs Duties on Selected Items.**

Other Executive Orders issued by me were **Executive Order #110 Extending Executive Order #101 Repositioning the National Food Assistance Agency; Executive Order #111 Exempting the Liberia Electricity Corporation from Customs Duty and GST on Generation, Transmission and Distribution Equipment, Materials & Fuel; Executive Order #112 Establishment of the National Railway Authority; Executive Order #113 Suspending Tariff on Rice; and Executive Order #114 Establishing the West African Police Information System.**

MR. SPEAKER:

As you go through the Sixth Session of this august body and the final year of the first term of our Administration, let us be reminded that, although we have worked hard, there is still a lot more to do together. We must now recharge our energies and re-double our efforts to complete what we started five years ago, in a spirit of cooperation and collaboration, so as to fully realize the goals and objectives of the Pro-poor Agenda for Prosperity and Development.

MADAM VICE PRESIDENT, MR. SPEAKER, MR. PRESIDENT PRO-TEMPORE, AND HONORABLE MEMBERS OF THE LEGISLATURE:

In fulfilling my official duty to report to you on the State of the Republic, our Constitution mandates that specific mention should be made of national income and public expenditure. I will now set out to do so and to describe the broader state of our economy.

Permit me now to take us all back to the beginning of the macroeconomic journey that we began five years ago.

When I took the oath of office in January of 2018, the Liberian economy was in a state of major distress. The macroeconomic foundations were weak. The country's net international reserve, which had been used by the previous Government to stabilize the exchange rate, was very low. The exchange rate had plunged into free fall, and the then Government did not seem to have the tools to deal effectively with stabilizing the currency at that time. As a consequence, inflation was increase at an alarming rate, while domestic revenue and development assistance were in decline.

Our development partners met with me during my first week in office and informed me that the Health Pool Fund, which had been paying the salaries of some **2,000** health workers, had dried up. They asked us to take these workers on to the Government's payroll, at a cost of about **\$12 million** U.S. dollars a year. The United Nations Mission, which had been spending some **\$115 million** US dollars annually in Liberia, was also leaving, thereby depriving the economy of these resources. By 2018, all of these inflows were gone.

The Government's credit rating with commercial banks was at its lowest because the Government could not settle its domestic obligations to lenders. The total Government obligation to the Central Bank of Liberia was not even known because some Government debt to the Central Bank was not officially recognized. This was the bleak nature of our economy when we assumed responsibility for the leadership of the Government at the beginning of 2018.

MR. SPEAKER:

What we did not realize at the time is that the recipe for economic disaster had already been set. We had assumed that our economy was sitting on a strong foundation, but we were in for a rude awakening when the decline in the exchange rate began to accelerate. We had to get to work quickly, to re-think, to re-work and to re-establish the principles of macroeconomic fundamentalism as they are known around the world.

In 2019, I delivered an **Economic Address to the Nation**, in which I announced an end to Government borrowing from the Central Bank of Liberia. This policy forced the Government to depend on its own resources and to live within the means of the national budget. This was a policy to help contain inflation and to reduce the Government deficit.

In 2019, we also set out to fix the broken and unfair wage system in which Government workers were paid without any set rules or pay grades. To end this unfairness, we had to abolish a general allowance system that was allowing this to happen. Although we were faced with revenue challenges, we were determined to keep all civil servants on the payroll. And so we adjusted the wage system and gave every Government worker a salary which is based on a standard and consistent pay-grade. As a result of this exercise, **fifteen thousand** (15,000) civil servants received higher salaries, while some **seven thousand** (7,000) were adjusted downward.

Also in 2019, we entered an IMF-supported program, and began a series of fiscal, monetary and governance reforms. Under this program, the Central Bank of Liberia developed a new monetary framework that worked to stabilize the exchange rate without drawing down excessively on net international reserves, as had been done by the previous Government. We set out to improve our fiscal balances, domestic debt management, and strengthen the fight against corruption.

As a means of restoring Government's credit rating, which was at its lowest in 2018, my Administration formally and officially acknowledged all of its debt owed to the Central Bank of Liberia, and issued bonds to commercial banks to settle the legacy debt that we met on the books.

MR. SPEAKER:

Five years after the launch of these painstaking reforms, the results are out there for the world to see. Today, Liberia is a macroeconomic exception in the West African region. We have brought inflation down from a high of **thirty (30%) percent** to a single-digit rate that is now under **seven (7%) percent**. We accomplished this in just under two years, making it one of the fastest rates of inflation collapse in recorded economic history.

We also stabilized the exchange rate for one of the longest periods, and we grew net international reserves to their highest level in decades. We increased domestic revenue to the highest level in Liberian history, and took our national budget to its highest level as well.

We established credibility to Government's finances; and reformed the banking sector, which had been exposed to excessive risk-taking and a high level of non-performing loans. With the increased domestic revenue generated, we undertook a series of development programs in roads, electricity, education and health.

MR. SPEAKER:

These results were obtained despite the outbreak of COVID-19. What this means is that if the pandemic had not happened, Liberia would have been on a faster growth trajectory than it is today. But we give Almighty God the glory and we thank our international partners for standing with us and for the confidence they continue to repose in our judgement and in our leadership.

MR. SPEAKER:

These are the broad lines of the story that will define our Administration as we face national elections in 2023. These are the macroeconomic and development narratives that the world is now beginning to learn about Liberia, but which our critics and opposition have tried to repress over the last several years. But as it is often said that: ***"truth crushed to the ground, shall rise again."***

The truths of the difficult decisions and courageous corrections we have made during our tenure, concerning the pro-poor investments in education, health, roads and electricity, are out there for all Liberians to see and experience. It is on these truths that we stand, as we continue to face existing challenges to deliver a more prosperous future for all Liberians.

MR SPEAKER:

Let me now turn to the fulfillment of my constitutional responsibility to report to you that which obtained with the Nation's finances in the last fiscal year.

Revenue collection for 2022, including grants, was **\$740 million** U.S. dollars, compared to **\$646 million** U.S. dollars in 2021. A large part of this difference is attributable to an increase in domestic revenue mobilization for the calendar year 2022. This revenue performance was driven by higher receipts of tax and non-tax revenues, especially taxes on international trade and taxes on income and profits. Of this amount, domestic taxes was **\$605 million** U.S. dollars and external resources received from our Development Partners was **\$135 million** U.S. dollars.

On the other hand, total cash expenditure for the same period under review was **\$774 million** U.S. dollars. The excess of expenditure over revenue collection, amounting to **\$34 million** U.S. dollars, is attributed to the use of treasury instruments.

Of the total cash expenditure, **\$286.38 million**, or **37%** percent, was spent on compensation of Government employees; **\$258.93 million**, or **33.45%** percent, was spent on goods and services, including grants and subsidies; **\$89.37 million**, or **11.46%** percent, was spent on domestic and international debt; and **\$139.32 million**, or **18%** percent, was spent on public sector investment programs.

The past fiscal year recorded the highest level of domestic revenue performance since the end of the civil conflict. This is clear evidence of economic recovery and macroeconomic stability. We continue to show strong improvements in mobilizing domestic revenue, which are due to key reforms under the domestic revenue mobilization strategy of the Liberian Revenue Authority.

These mainly include expanding the tax base, minimizing revenue loss through raising the tax effort, building public confidence in the tax system, and implementing greater effectiveness and efficiency in tax administration through innovation and technology.

Sustaining domestic revenue performance is the only way we can guarantee the funding of our public sector investment programs, which will then enable us to address critical infrastructure and social sector challenges, such as roads, electricity, healthcare, and education. It is also the only means to diversify the Liberian economy.

I now hereby call on all national stakeholders to support these reform efforts, and I would like to also encourage all Liberians and businesses operating within Liberia to pay your taxes fairly and timeously as is required by law.

Last year we spent **\$139.32 million** U.S. dollars on public sector investments. To support public sector investment for the 2023 fiscal year, in support of our Pro-Poor Agenda for Prosperity and Development (PAPD), we have proposed to spend about **\$154 million** US dollars, which is **19.8%** percent of the proposed national budget for the 2023 fiscal year.

Major public expenditure items include: **\$46 million** US dollars, mainly for the transmission of electricity from La Côte d'Ivoire through the CSLG transmission lines, and to expand our electricity distribution; about **\$44 million** US dollars for road infrastructure; **\$23 million** US dollars through the National Road Fund, **\$21 million** US dollars through direct national budget; and about **\$36 million** US dollars for the holding of the 2023 presidential and legislative elections.

Thus, Mr. Speaker, electricity, roads and elections will consume about **\$126 million** US dollars in 2023, demonstrating my Government's commitment to put the Liberian peoples' money where it matters the most.

MR. SPEAKER:

During the year under review, the Government made significant interventions in a number of sectors including Health, Education, Social Development Services, Energy and Environment. In the health sector, we spent about **\$17.3 million** US dollars on vaccines and vaccine-related supplies; COVID-19 vaccination administration; and drugs and medical consumables.

In the education sector, we spent nearly **\$38.9 million** US dollars on tuition-free policy; renovation of public universities; WASSCE and Junior High School examinations; the "**Support to Closing Teachers Salary Gaps**" project; and support to the Engineering College.

In the social development sector, we spent around **\$12.8 million** US dollars on the County Tour Implementation & Spot Checks; the National County Meet tournament; the completion of the Omega & Duala Market projects; the continuation of the Albino Society Headquarters construction; and our contribution to the National County Projects through the Liberia Agency for Community Empowerment (LACE).

In the energy sector, we spent about **\$29.7 million** US dollars on CLSG Payment, streetlights, & LEC transformer projects, as well as the River Gee Hydropower Project.

MR. SPEAKER:

As you are aware, for at least the last fifty (50) years, Liberia's fiscal year has run from July 1st to June 30th . Liberia was the only country in the ECOWAS sub-region to have this July-June fiscal year, which was inconsistent with the rest of the countries in the region.

I am now pleased to announce that, after successful adjustment in 2021, the year 2022 marked the first full implementation of the **calendar year budget** in our nation's history, making it now aligned with the rest of the ECOWAS subregion. This has made reporting and regional comparison between Liberia and ECOWAS countries much easier.

MR. SPEAKER AND MEMBERS OF THE 54TH LEGISLATURE:

The 2023 National Budget of **\$777.9 million** US dollars has been submitted to the House of Representatives for review, which is consistent with the total resource forecast for the period. The estimated domestic revenue is **\$667.9 million** US dollars, or **85.9%** percent, while external resources are projected at **\$110 million** US dollars, or **14.1%** percent.

Consistent with our commitment to support public investment projects, we have increased capital expenditures in the proposed budget for fiscal year 2023 to **\$154 million** US dollars, up from **\$143 million** US dollars in the last fiscal year.

Public investment is focused on key infrastructure investments, such as roads and bridges, and the CLSG transmission line. Other programs include the upcoming General and Presidential Elections, election-related security, county tour implementation, the compulsory primary education policy, the At-risk Youth Empowerment Fund , and support to vulnerable small businesses.

MR. SPEAKER:

Liberia recently concluded its Fourth Review under the IMF Supported Program. The outcomes demonstrate robust fiscal and monetary performance. In the Review, the Executive Directors of the IMF have noted, and I **QUOTE:**

"The [Liberian] authorities managed to keep the program broadly on track by preserving macroeconomic stability, ensuring a comfortable international reserve position, and maintaining debt sustainability."

UNQUOTE

This favorable appraisal by the IMF was promptly followed by a transfer of **\$22.1 million** US dollars to the Central Bank of Liberia to increase the nation's reserve stock.

In support of economic reforms leading to a stable economy, we have maintained our commitment to the independence and autonomy of the Central Bank of Liberia.

Although the preceding year was a difficult one for the economy, my Government supported the various CBL policy measures that have kept the economic recovery on track.

Despite the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and the on-going Russia - Ukraine war, the economy grew by **5%** percent in 2021, after two consecutive growth contractions in 2019 and 2020. Growth this year is predicted to rise to **4.2%** percent from **3.7%** percent in 2022.

Our macroeconomic environment remains relatively stable, at a time when several other countries in our region are facing serious macroeconomic challenges. Inflation at end-December 2022 was **6.9%** percent, and the exchange rate between the Liberian dollar and the United States Dollar has remained stable within the range of **150 - 153** for the past twelve (12) months.

MR. SPEAKER:

We have made significant progress in restructuring our domestic debt. At the outset of the IMF-supported program three years ago, all legacy loans owed to the Central Bank of Liberia, including the debt owed to the old National Bank of Liberia, were bundled into a Restructured and Consolidated Loan. My Government continues to live up to its obligation in meeting these payments in support of the recapitalization of the Central Bank of Liberia.

I am pleased to inform you that a recent debt sustainability analysis by the IMF has upgraded Liberia's debt management rating from **“HIGH RISK OF TOTAL DEBT DISTRESS”** to **“MODERATE RISK OF TOTAL DEBT DISTRESS”**.

As a Government, we remain committed to pursuing concessional financing to support our public sector investment program. This is consistent with our long-term strategy on debt sustainability.

As of November 30, 2022, the total stock of domestic debt stood at **\$835.2 million** U.S. dollars; and the total stock of external debt stood at **\$1.13 billion** U.S. dollars, for a total public debt stock valued at **\$1.96 billion** U.S. dollars, which is an increase of **12.6%** percent when compared to the end-December 2021 debt stock of **\$1.74 billion** US dollars. The growth in the debt stock was mostly triggered by disbursements from external and domestic creditors.

The Government paid **\$89.37 million** US dollars in debt service on both domestic and foreign debt. Of the total debt service, interest payments accounted for **\$33 million** US dollars, or **36.9%** percent, while principal repayments accounted for **\$56.37 million** US dollars, or **63.1%** percent. Also, from the total debt service, **\$57.07 million** US dollars was paid to the Central Bank of Liberia, to commercial banks for treasury bonds, and to other institutions for domestic debt, while **\$32.3 million** US dollars was paid to multilateral and bilateral partners.

Of the domestic payment of **\$57.07 million** US dollars, about **\$17.8million** dollars, or **31%** percent was paid to the Central Bank of Liberia. This payment, and the ongoing continuous payments of Government's obligation to the Central Bank, clearly demonstrate our Government's commitment and support to the financial and operational independence of the Central Bank of Liberia.

MR. SPEAKER:

I am pleased to report that the audit of the Consolidated Account is now current; with all audit backlogs being cleared. Currently, the General Auditing Commission is concluding an audit of the Special Fiscal Year 2021, the Fiscal Year 2021, the Payroll Audit, and the audit of the Domestic Debt. These audit reports are expected to be submitted to you within the next 30 days.

MR. SPEAKER:

We continue to implement reforms for the Central Government payroll and pension systems, with the objective of improving the welfare of both active and retired employees of government. Through centralization and digitization, our payroll is now easily auditable, predictable, and adjustable; in order to ensure fairness and efficiency, while at the same time increasing the welfare of civil servants.

Since establishing pay-grades for all positions at the start of our reforms in 2019, we have partially or fully increased or adjusted the gross salary of more than **28,000** Government workers, out of more than **70,000** Government employees. These beneficiary employees include teachers, health workers in rural and hard-to-reach counties, and security officers within various security agencies.

Others include academic staff at the University of Liberia, Tubman University in Maryland County, and other community colleges outside of Monrovia. These adjustments have been made possible through the larger fiscal space created under our reform efforts.

MR. SPEAKER:

Because of the integrated nature of these reforms, today we are executing the Legal Power of Attorney (LPA) scheme, and the Quick Cash Credit scheme, which now benefit thousands of civil servants who, through salary deduction, now have access to fast credit for cash, building materials, furniture and fixtures, electronics, and food items.

This year we plan to expand the LPA scheme to rural Liberia to benefit more civil servants, including teachers, health workers, security officers, traditional leaders and workers. This expansion will also benefit rural businesses by increasing their sales and profits.

MR. SPEAKER:

As domestic revenue improves, we remain committed to enhancing the welfare of Government workers. I have been informed that some **15,000** Government workers still make below the minimum wage of **\$150 US dollars**, as mandated by the **Decent Work Act**.

This is completely unacceptable. No Government worker should make below the minimum wage mandated by public law. I have therefore directed that, as part of the 2023 budget, the wages for all such workers be raised at or above the minimum wage. I am informed that the cost to achieving this is estimated at **\$6 million** US dollars annually.

And so **Mr. Speaker, Mr. President Pro-Tempore, and Distinguished Members of the 54th National Legislature**, as we accelerate the discussion for the 2023 National Budget, I urge you to make the securing of this amount of **\$6 million** US dollars for these 15,000 workers one of your highest priorities. I look forward to engaging you further on this.

MR. SPEAKER:

Official Development Assistance (ODA), otherwise referred to as Foreign Aid, is critical to Liberia's economic growth and development, as it represents an important share of the national budget.

In 2022, we negotiated and signed approximately nine (9) financing instruments with Development Partners worth a total of about **\$282.2 million** US dollars. These projects and programs supplement our continual commitment to inclusive growth and development in Liberia.

We continue to take steps to improve aid coordination. At a **Steering Committee Meeting** of the **PAPD** held last year, I emphasized to our Development Partners the importance of coordinating resources in critical sectors such as health, education, and agriculture for more transformative results.

The Government and its partners have both reaffirmed their commitment to upholding the tenets of the **Paris Agenda on Aid Effectiveness**, and are delivering frameworks under the PAPD to achieve this. But much more work needs to be done to deliver more results for the Liberian people.

MR. SPEAKER:

Two years ago, I delivered an address at **COP 26** in Glasgow calling for carbon trading on the African continent. I repeated similar themes at **COP 27** that was held in Egypt last year. My vision is to have Liberia work with the international community to enhance Liberia's potential of being a carbon sink for the world, given our huge forest reserves. Smart climate finance is the way we want to go, and we encourage our international partners to help to get us there.

We are committed to doing our part to transition to this new model of climate change financing in Liberia. Liberia remains committed to the global climate change agenda and to meeting its Nationally Determined Contributions. We are looking to improve governance of the forest sector and move toward a more effective management of our forest reserves, as a means to transition to a better model of climate finance.

We are also working to enlarge our protected areas and are committed to reducing our reliance on commercial logging. But much more needs to be done in these areas, and we will continue to work along with our development partners achieve these goals.

Towards this end, I will open a climate finance forum to be held at the EJS Ministerial Complex in a few days, where the Government and its development partners will explore ways of re-thinking climate change, climate finance, and carbon trading in Liberia.

MR. SPEAKER:

Climate change is affecting Liberia in various ways, and we are accordingly responding with meaningful projects. For example, following submission of a coastal defense funding proposal to the **Green Climate Fund** in 2021, a **\$25 million** US dollar coastal defense project for the **Township of West Point** was approved and the project has commenced. Another coastal defense project for **Greenville, Sinoe County**, has also been approved by the **Global Environment Facility**, at a cost of **\$10 million US** dollars.

These two coastal defense projects are expected to reduce the vulnerabilities of the respective communities against the adverse impact of climate change. In this regard, I would like to thank our partners and stakeholders for assisting Liberia to secure the needed resources to address these glaring manifestations of climate change damage to some of our coastal communities.

My government values the support provided by the UNDP, which is not only co-financing both projects, but which has helped Liberia to secure the resources needed from the **GCF** and **GEF**. UNDP is also partnering with the **EPA** and the Ministry of Mines to implement the programs.

MR. SPEAKER:

Together, we have worked together to improve governance and to strengthen the fight against corruption and public accountability. You recently passed a **new Liberia Anti-Corruption Commission Act** that gives the LACC the prosecutorial power it has lacked, and also giving it greater independence from interference.

For example, none of the seven LACC Commissioners under this new law can be removed or dismissed by any President, including me. I have made sure that this provision was enshrined in the law because I wanted to make it very clear that my

Government has nothing to hide and we are committed to fighting corruption. You have also passed the **Witness Protection Act** and whistle-blower laws.

Additionally, my Government has increased budgetary support to both the **General Auditing Commission** and the LACC. In the proposed budget the LACC will receive the highest share of funding it has ever had in its history.

We have also placed new leadership at the **Internal Audit Agency**. The Government is working to place the IAA at the center of the fight against corruption, since it is the first anti-graft institution that can prevent corruption before it happens. We will increase the level of funding to the IAA in this 2023 budget, and we now challenge the new management of IAA to find innovative ways to protect public resources.

MR. SPEAKER

Last year we passed **12** out of the **20** indicators on the Millennium Challenge Corporation scorecard. This is the first time Liberia has reached this level of success. These passes show improvements in the overall trend of governance under my Administration. We continue to exert every effort to transform the governance space. However the MCC report **does** show that we need to pay more attention to quality and effectiveness in health and education. With the increase in domestic revenue that has been engendered by this Administration, we will look to apply these new resources to further develop and enhance the nation's human capital.

MR. SPEAKER AND DISTINGUISHED MEMBERS OF THE 54TH LEGISLATURE:

The development and improvement in Liberia's human capital has emerged as the biggest generational challenge we face. Education is the cornerstone for our national development agenda and the pathway to a brighter future for our young people. It will empower them to create opportunities for themselves, their communities, and for our country.

To this end, I have endorsed an **Education Sector Plan** which has been developed by the Ministry of Education in conjunction with our development partners. This Plan,

which will span five years, from 2023 - 2027, summarizes our vision for turning education around in Liberia. I am confident that it will be a powerful tool to mitigate the current challenges in the education system, as it provides a strategic roadmap for the achievement of the key education policy goals of the Government over the next five years.

The Education Sector Plan will require Government to commit more than **\$500 million** US dollars over the next five years. As Government revenue increases as forecast, my proposal is that we should devote an increasingly larger share of these new revenue streams to this new plan, in order to secure the future of our young people in Liberia.

However, the success of this Plan will depend not only on the Ministry of Education, but also on the goodwill and commitment of all education stakeholders, government ministries and agencies, and the full participation, contribution and cooperation of all Liberians and foreign residents in Liberia.

Therefore, I want to encourage all of us to join our collective efforts together in working vigorously to achieve the targets identified in the **Education Sector Plan 2023 - 2027** in order to make our education sector better.

MR. SPEAKER:

Consistent with **Article 39** of the Liberian Constitution, and your **Joint Resolution of 2022**, empowering us to undertake the **2022 National Population and Housing Census**, I am pleased to report that the census process is about to be concluded and that the provisional results are being finalized.

The 2022 Census represents not only Liberia's fifth national population and housing census, but most notably, it also represents Liberia's first ever **Digital Census**; and is one of the first Digital national enumerations in our region.

As you are aware, the processes leading to the commencement of the census encountered various operational and logistical challenges. This was not to be unexpected, given the large scale of a project such as a national census. Nevertheless, with a strong and concerted effort from all stakeholders, these challenges are being handled, under the able leadership of the **Vice President**, to whom I assigned oversight responsibility.

I have been informed that a significant percentage of the Liberian population has been enumerated, and that provisional census results are expected to soon be announced; while the census thematic reports and final result should be published shortly thereafter.

MR. SPEAKER:

I am pleased to inform you that the census process has been conducted in accordance with the United Nations technical recommendations for the 2020 Round of Census, and is in conformity with both regional and international standards.

I therefore take this time to express my profound thanks and appreciation to all national and international stakeholders who formed a part of this national endeavor to deliver a successful Census.

My special thanks and appreciation also go to the many young persons who braved the tough environment across our Nation and worked from dusk to dawn until the process was successfully concluded. You are our **National Heroes**. Congratulations for a job well done!

MADAM VICE PRESIDENT, MR. SPEAKER, MR. PRESIDENT PRO TEMPORE, AND MEMBERS OF THE 54TH LEGISLATURE:

During the year under review, the monetary policy thrust of the **Central Bank of Liberia** was focused on price stability, by keeping Liberian dollar money supply and liquidity in line with macroeconomic fundamentals. Because of the soundness and effectiveness of these monetary policies, we have been able to protect the purchasing power of the Liberian dollar.

The exchange rate of the Liberian dollar vis-à-vis the US dollar has recorded one of the longest periods of stability in recent times, and is today considered as one of the most stable currencies in the West African sub-region during 2022.

In 2023, our government will remain focused on improving the living standard of our people by promoting a low-inflation and stable exchange rate environment, which are important preconditions for macroeconomic stability and sustainable economic development.

MR. SPEAKER:

Net personal remittances for the eleven-month period (January to November, 2022), including remittances terminated through mobile money wallets, expanded by **31.8%** percent to **\$531.6 million** US dollars, an increase from the **\$403.2 million** US dollars recorded for the corresponding period in 2021. This development shows that Liberia remains one of the major destinations of remittances in Africa. This is contributing significantly to our national development efforts. We would like to thank Liberians in the Diaspora for their support in this direction.

MR. SPEAKER:

We have endeavored to keep our banking system stable and sound as part of our efforts to enhance confidence. During the year under review, the system continued to be capitalized and liquid, with increased lending to the private sector, as well as growth in private deposits. However, the rising level of non-performing loans poses the single most important risk to the profitability and overall stability of the banking system.

In this regard, the government will give full support to the Central Bank in pursuing delinquent borrowers in line with the law and in the interest of the public good.

MR. SPEAKER:

For the year 2022, our external sector showed strong performance. Our trade deficit narrowed due to growth in exports, despite the significant rise in our import's payments, especially for petroleum products.

Our current account deficit also improved. Despite the challenges with our current account balance, my Government, through the CBL, has made significant efforts in building Liberia's international reserves position to over **four (4) months** of import coverage, largely due to Special Drawing Rights allocation from the IMF.

This target exceeds both the ECOWAS reserves threshold of at least three months of import cover, and the target set under the IMF-Extended Credit Facility.

This achievement means that Liberia is in a strong position to withstand any potential external shock in protecting the value of the Liberian dollar and promoting macroeconomic stability.

MR. SPEAKER:

I am pleased to inform you that, for the first time in the history of Liberia's financial system, my Government has established a secondary market to redeem public debts. The Central Bank licensed the **Liberia Merchant Capital Limited** to own and operate a **discount house**, which will provide additional liquidity to respond to the demand of our economy. This effort, in addition to the issuance of CBL bills and government's Treasury bills, will further support the development of the money market and a functioning financial market in the country in the medium-term.

MR. SPEAKER:

In addition to ensuring that there are adequate banknotes and coins to serve the needs of the economy in both the short and medium-term, my Government is also promoting the **National Payments System Program**. The digitization of our financial services and transactions is important not only for achieving our financial inclusion agenda, but also enhancing efficiency in our public financial management.

In this regard, the government, through the Central Bank, has secured up to **\$7.0 million** US dollars from the World Bank to finance the upgrading of our **National Electronic Payments Switch**. This project will significantly help in promoting interoperability among the different players in the payments system space, promote regional trade through the **Pan-African Payment System** infrastructure, and promote effective and transparent public financial management through improved revenue collection and payments for expenditures.

MR. SPEAKER:

In May 2021, the **54th National** Legislature, through a **Joint Resolution**, and with approval from my Office, authorized the CBL to implement a comprehensive currency reform program. This mandate called for the full replacement of the existing Liberian banknotes and the legacy coins which are assumed to be in circulation, with a new family of banknotes and to introduce new coins.

As we all know, this is a major national task, critical not only to addressing the perennial problem of shortage of Liberian dollar in the banking system, but also supporting our broader objective of promoting **de-dollarization** of the Liberian economy over time.

I am pleased to commend the efforts of the CBL under the leadership of the Board of Governors and the Management for the achievement thus far. The currency reform project has been proceeding well, and according to plan.

Notwithstanding all the many challenges, the CBL has worked with both the printing and minting companies to ensure that the quantities of banknotes and coins planned to be brought into the country in 2022 were all delivered before the end of 2022, adhering to the stipulation of the Joint Resolution of the National Legislature that no new currency shall be brought into the country in the 2023 election year.

The total currency brought into the country during 2021 and 2022 was nearly **L\$34 billion Liberian dollars** in banknotes and coins. This amount represents **71.8%** percent of the total **L\$48.73 billion Liberian dollars** that has been approved by you.

The consignments brought into the country covered all the denominations, including **L\$1000, L\$500, L\$100, L\$50 and L\$20** for the banknotes and **L\$10 and L\$5** for the coins. The remaining amount of the approved banknotes and coins, representing about **28.2%** percent, will be brought into the country in 2024. It is worth noting that as at end-December 2022, the Bank had withdrawn and destroyed a total of **L\$10.41 billion Liberian dollar** legacy banknotes from circulation.

I am now pleased to inform you that, in line with the bank-approved plan, the currency exchange exercise is being implemented in a gradual process through the commercial banks. The CBL has also informed me that it has also taken measures to decentralize the exchange exercise across the country, through the utilization of its **Gbarnga Cash Hub**, and plans to extend to Voinjama and Zwedru by the first quarter of this year. In addition, the CBL has reached an agreement with the commercial banks to ensure the exchange of the new currency in all parts of the country.

Meanwhile, the CBL has been engaged with various stakeholders, including the public, to educate and sensitize the population on the currency reform program, the features of the new currency, and the implementation process. These engagements have helped both in managing public expectations, and in protecting the integrity of the exchange process. While the CBL has not announced a specific time-line for the exchange exercise to be completed, the Bank is optimistic of replacing a significant portion, if not all, of the old banknotes and coins by the end of the first quarter of this year.

As a Government, it is important that we acknowledge the policy advice and technical support of our partners, notably the **United States Agency for International Development (USAID)** for hiring the services of **Kroll**, and the **IMF**, who provided the needed technical assistance to the CBL throughout this process. We want to say to USAID and the IMF that the Government and People of Liberia are grateful to you for your support and assistance.

MADAM VICE PRESIDENT, MR. SPEAKER, MR. PRESIDENT PRO TEMPORE, AND MEMBERS OF THE 54TH LEGISLATURE:

During the year under review, our foreign policy and foreign relations remained on a firm course, as we broadened and strengthened our ties with the international community on both the bilateral and multilateral levels. Of note is that the cessation of the COVID-19 Pandemic allowed for in-person participation in summits and other meetings, following two years of restrictions.

We were therefore enabled to fully participated in the activities of the international organizations of which Liberia is a member. Consequently, we attended the statutory and extraordinary meetings of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the African Union (AU), and the United Nations (UN); either personally or by competent representation.

MR. SPEAKER:

During the period under review, the search for genuine and lasting peace in the sub-region, as well as the restoration of constitutional democracy, remained the priority issues on the agenda of ECOWAS. The security and political situations in Guinea, Mali and Burkina Faso have been of paramount concern.

We continued to support the peacekeeping operations in Mali with the presence of a contingent of the Armed Forces of Liberia embedded within the United Nations Mission (MINUSMA) in that sister state. We continued to work with our colleagues to resolve the

constitutional impasse in the Republic of Mali in order to restore constitutional democracy. The key objective is to restore political order through the holding of free, fair and transparent elections in the soonest convenient time.

The grave security situation in the Sahel is of paramount concern to Liberia because it poses a serious threat to the peace and security of the entire West African sub-region. My Government will therefore do all within its power to support the Transition Agenda of ECOWAS aimed at bringing the republics of Mali, Guinea and Burkina Faso; to peace, security, stability, democracy, and constitutional order.

MR. SPEAKER:

With the lifting of COVID-19 restrictions, we made several trips abroad to represent the national interest of Liberia, most notable among which were the following:

1. Antalya, Turkey, March 11 - 13, to attend the **Second Antalya Diplomacy Forum**. On the sidelines of the Forum, we held a bilateral meeting with His Excellency **Mr. Recep Tayyip Erdogan**, President of the Republic of Turkey.

2. Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, May 8-10, 2022, to attend the **HoD Summit on Drought Resilience and Sustainable Land Management**.
3. Malabo, Equatorial Guinea, May 27-29, 2022, to attend a **Summit of the African Union**.
4. Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, May 29 - 31 2022, for a working visit.
5. Accra, Ghana, June 1 - 9, 2022, to attend an **Extraordinary Summit of ECOWAS**.
6. Accra, Ghana, July 2 - 4, 2022, to attend the **Ordinary Session of the Authority of Heads of State and Government of ECOWAS**.
7. Dakar, Senegal, July 6 - 8, 2022, to participate in the **IDA Summit for Africa**.
8. Yamoussoukro, Cote d'Ivoire, August 6 - 8, 2022, to participate in events marking the celebration of the **62nd Independence Anniversary of the Republic of Cote d'Ivoire**.
9. New York, USA, September 18 - 24, 2022, to attend the **77th Session of the United Nations General Assembly**.
10. Tangier, Kingdom of Morocco, November 2 - 5, 2022, to participate in the **14th Edition of the MEDays International Forum**, where I was invited to give the **Keynote Address**.
11. Sham el-Sheikh, Egypt, November 6 -18, 2022, to attend the **COP27 Summit**.
12. Paris, France, November 11 - 15, 2022, to attend the **5th Edition of the Paris Peace Forum**.

13. Doha, Qatar, November 18 - 29, 2022, to attend the **Official Ceremonies of the FIFA World Cup 2022** as **Guest of Honor of FIFA** and the **Emir of Qatar**.
14. Principality of Monaco, December 1 - 2, 2022, to attend and serve as **Keynote Speaker** at the **13th Edition of the International Peace and Sport Forum**; and held bilateral discussions with **His Serene Highness Albert II, Sovereign Prince of Monaco**.

MR. SPEAKER:

Last, but by no means the least, I was privileged to honor an invitation from **Mr. Joseph R. Biden, Jr., President of the United States**, to participate in the **US - Africa Leaders Summit**, which was held in Washington DC, USA, from 13th to 15th December, 2022, where I addressed different forums.

Delivering the Keynote Address at one of the largest of these forums, the **African and Diaspora Young Leaders Forum**, I highlighted the vital role of the youth and diaspora in Africa. I called on young people and Diaspora Africans to play meaningful roles in Africa, through innovation, investment and knowledge transfer.

I informed them of the passage in Liberia of the **Law Authorizing Dual Citizenship and Allowing Women to Pass Citizenship to Their Children**, which reverses a long-time ban and is essential for consolidating a vibrant, progressive, inclusive, and just society.

I received a special public commendation from United States Secretary of State Antony Blinken, when he stated, and I **QUOTE:**

"President Weah, I would like to thank you for your great leadership and for strengthening the US-Liberia bond" UNQUOTE

(it is not me who said so, o...da ley US Secretary of State sef say so!).

Mr. Blinken also said, and I **QUOTE:**

"Mr. President, I am sure that US-Liberia relations will flourish under your leadership." UNQUOTE

And, you know what? He is absolutely right!

MR. SPEAKER:

I am further pleased to inform you that I was among **five** (5) other Heads of State, out of the nearly **fifty** (50) African Heads of State and Governments who were in attendance at the Forum, who were specially selected to meet with President Biden at the White House. We had a robust discussion with President Biden on the very crucial issues of elections, democracy, rule of law, and development.

During this exclusive but vital meeting, I, and the other Heads of State, made a strong pledge and commitment to hold free, fair, transparent, peaceful, inclusive and democratic elections in our respective countries. I also made it abundantly clear that, under my watch, the democratic credentials of Liberia will be safeguarded, as well as its peace, stability, and security.

These productive meetings afforded me the opportunity to reaffirm my commitment to strengthen the already existing ties between Liberia and the United States of America, and deepen the close bonds of friendship and cooperation.

I pledged to that friendly Government my determination to continue close collaboration with them in improving good and accountable governance, democracy, and the rule of law in Liberia.

In response, I am pleased to report that the U.S. Government made a promise to spend **\$165 million** US dollars this year on providing financial support to elections in our respective countries, of which Liberia is expected to receive approximately **\$20 million** US dollars.

MR. SPEAKER:

In order to continue the enhancement of our leadership role in the sub-region, we were pleased to appoint **Madam Maria G. Harrison** as Secretary General of the Mano River Union, to succeed **Madam Medina A. Wesseh** whose tenure ended. We congratulate Madam Wesseh for successfully steering the affairs of the MRU during her sterling leadership.

Similarly, we effected changes in our foreign service where **Ambassador Jeff G. Duwana** was transferred from Kuwait to replace **Ambassador George Patten** in Washington, D. C. as Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Republic of Liberia to the United States of America.

Also at our Permanent Mission to the United Nations, **Madam Sarah Fyneah** was appointed Ambassador and Permanent Representative of the Republic of Liberia to that august body.

MR. SPEAKER:

While we recorded general success in our foreign relations, I would like to highlight the following outcomes, for your information:

1. Construction and dedication of a 100-bed state-of-the-art Referral Hospital known as the **Emirates Hospital**, in Bopolu City, Gbarpolu County.
2. Commitment of **\$2 million** US dollars by the Government of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia towards the renovation of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs building, and the subsequent construction of an entirely new building to house the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Saudi Kingdom has also given strong support to the implementation of the PADP.
3. A commitment by the Government of the Kingdom of Morocco to undertake the renovation of the sixth floor of the existing Foreign Ministry building.
4. A strong commitment by the Emir of Qatar to fund Phase II of the Gbarnga-Mendikorma Road with support from the Arab Bank for Economic Development in Africa (BADEA) of an estimated **\$100 million** US dollars.
5. The commitment of the Government of Hungary, conveyed to me during a bilateral meeting held with its Foreign Minister on the sidelines of the **MEDays International Forum** which I attended in Tangier, Morocco, of **\$50 million** US dollars in export credit guarantees to encourage Hungarian companies to invest in Liberia.
6. The establishment of diplomatic relations with **Jamaica** and the **Republic of Tajikistan** at Ministerial levels.
7. The establishment of new **Passport Application Centers** to facilitate the speedy processing of passports for our citizens outside the country. These centers will ease the constraints Liberians have faced with obtaining travel documents, as well as generating more revenue for government.

Additional centers are located in **Nairobi, Kenya; Pretoria, South Africa; Melbourne, Australia; Chicago, USA; Los Angeles, USA; Minnesota, USA;** and **New Delhi, India**. These centers are set to be commissioned and made operational very soon.

MR. SPEAKER:

During the year under review, a number of new Ambassadors were accredited to Liberia. These include emissaries from **Japan, South Africa, the Gambia, the Czech Republic, Zimbabwe, Spain, and the Slovak Republic**. The Ambassadors from the **Vatican** and the **Republic of Guinea** were recalled.

MR. SPEAKER:

During the period under review, we signed eight Legislative Acts that were published into handbills. They are listed in **APPENDIX “B”** attached to this Annual Message.

Also during the period under review, some of our compatriots ended their earthly journey and transitioned from the earthly realm of the terrestrial, to the glory of the celestial. To honor their lives and works, **Official Gazettes** were issued by the Government announcing their sad demise. In the interest of time, their names are listed in **APPENDIX “C”** attached to this Annual Message.

May I now ask you to stand for a moment of silence, as we pay our respect to their passing:

ALL STAND FOR A MOMENT OF SILENCE

May their Souls, and the Souls of the Faithful Departed, Rest in Perfect Peace, and may Light Perpetual shine upon them.

Amen.

MR. SPEAKER:

I would now like to make an important announcement about a singular and unprecedented honor that is about to be bestowed on Liberia. Although this event will not take place until 2026, all the diplomatic activity leading to this success have been undertaken by my Administration and under my personal initiative and directives.

During the period under review, Liberia's Candidature for a Seat on the United Nations Security Council as a Non-Permanent Member for the 2026 - 2027 period; was endorsed during the 40th Ordinary Session of the Executive Council of the African Union, held from February 3 -7, 2022 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

This Candidature of Liberia for a seat on the UN Security Council was also unanimously endorsed by the African Group of Ambassadors at the United Nations in New York.

I am now pleased to announce that the election for Liberia to sit on the Security Council as a Non-Permanent Member for the 2226 - 2027 period will be held in New York in 2025.

Needless to say, this will be a very proud moment for our Nation, and represents the full acceptance of Liberia among the comity of nations, as a responsible country capable of making significant contributions to global peace and security by sitting on the United Nations Security Council, the highest and most important forum for world peace.

Imagine the significance of the journey we have traveled over the past two decades, from being a war-torn country, ravished and destroyed by a civil war that lasted for fifteen years, which required the deployment of the largest United Nations Peacekeeping Force at that time, UNMIL, to bring peace to our troubled land; and now having a seat on the Security Council of the very United Nations that had been sent to save us from ourselves. We have a lot to be thankful for as a People.

TO GOD BE THE GLORY, FOR THE GREAT THINGS HE HAS DONE.

MADAM VICE PRESIDENT, MR. SPEAKER, MR. PRESIDENT PRO TEMPORE, AND MEMBERS OF THE 54TH LEGISLATURE:

The road network of our country continues to remain the focus and passion of my Administration, and today I am pleased to inform you that we have made considerable gains in the road and transport sector during the period under review.

The Ministry of Public Works remains the fulcrum of our development agenda through the full execution of its mandate to plan, procure and construct public infrastructure. It has continued its constructive engagements with our traditional financing partners, and has been successful in raising funds for the construction of new primary road networks, as well as for the implementation of several additional development projects.

With the support of our partners, we have made significant gains in the pavement of primary roads for all ongoing projects. To date, a total of **45 km** have been paved on the **Gbarnga to Salayea** road corridor, **20 km** has been paved on the **Ganta to Saclepea** road, and **31 km** of the **Sanniquellie to Loguatu** road corridor has been paved.

I am also pleased to inform you that we have paved **30 km** of the **Ganta to Yekepa** road corridor, and continue to make progress on the **Robertsport to Medina** road and the **RIA road corridor**; both of which are funded exclusively by the Government of Liberia. All of these road works are still ongoing.

In addition to these gains on our primary road construction projects, the **40 km Tappitta to Toe's Town** road construction project is ongoing, while we have commenced the payment of project-affected persons along this corridor to facilitate early commencement of works when the project is contracted and signed in the first quarter of this year.

In an effort to ensure accessibility of our people between Ganta and Zwedru, I reported to this body in my address last year that the Government was engaged in discussions with the World Bank to secure the financing that will alleviate the problems faced by commuters using this stretch of road.

As Liberians, we can all recall the difficulties faced by road users that travel along this particular road corridor. This situation also causes major impediments to the economic development of our people, as this route is a major trade corridor to a large part of this country and to the rest of the region. The completion of this road will be a game changer in the travel dynamics of our country.

Against this background, Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to inform you that talks with our partners were very fruitful, and we have now secured the **full financing** required to connect the remaining **75km** between **Toe's Town and Zwedru City** as well as the **10km** road corridor between **Toe's Town and the Ivorian border**.

In addition to these achievements in the sector, the Consultant for the design and studies of the **110 km** road corridor between **Flewokan to Zwedru** has been procured through funding by the African Development Bank. I am also pleased to inform you, Mr. Speaker, that this is the last remaining road section between **Zwedru and Fish Town**, for which my Administration has already secured the financing.

With these major commitments secured and processes ongoing for the preparation of documents leading to the procurement of consultants and contractors, I can assure this august body that our nation is on a positive path to make the smooth travel from Ganta to Harper on asphalt paved road a reality.

As a matter of fact, as we speak, the construction of the **20 km** road section between **Fish Town to Flewokan** is currently ongoing.

Continuing with our primary road connection between county capitals, I had previously mentioned that progress have been made in securing the commitment of funding by our Arab partners which include **Saudi Fund for Development, Kuwaiti Fund for Arab Economic Development, BADEA**, and **OPEC Fund** for International Development for the construction of the **Salayea to Konia** road corridor.

This arrangement is still on course and the recent re-verification exercise between Government and the funding partners has given us hope that these works are soon to be moved from the planning phase into active construction activities.

Additionally, studies are far advanced on the **50 km Barclayville to Klowne** road, which is being funded by the ECOWAS Bank for Investment and Development, and construction works are expected to commence this fiscal year.

MR. SPEAKER:

When we commenced our leadership, the total paved roads in our national road network was only **745 km** throughout the entire country, representing less than **5%** percent of the network. Today, we have increased this number to **1,375 km**, with an additional **436 km** paved in the primary roads category alone.

Madame Vice President, Mr. Speaker, Mr. President Pro-Tempore, and Honorable Legislators:

As we advance with our road construction works, it is important that maintenance on the primary road corridors is continued, in order to ensure accessibility of our people throughout the country, even during major setbacks like the rainy season.

While new road construction is a priority, my Administration has also committed resources for the maintenance of the already existing road assets throughout the country.

In this regard, maintenance works are ongoing on approximately **500 km** of unpaved primary roads, including the **38 km Greenville to Wiah Town** road in Sinoe; the **118 km Greenville to Boah Geekan** in Sinoe & Grand Kru; the **115 km Pleebo to Boah Geekan** road in Sinoe and Grand Kru; the **130 km Ziah Town to Zwedru - Putuken** road in Grand Gedeh, the **72 km Brewerville to Compansu** road in Bomi; and the **68 km Konia to Voinjama** road in Lofa County.

Maintenance works are also ongoing along the **St. Paul Bridge to Tubmanburg** highway and the **Harper to Karloken** road.

We have also continued our efforts in the cleaning of drainages across Liberia, including Monrovia and other cities which are prone to flooding during the heavy downpour of rain each year. With the active involvement of communities, we incorporated community-based organizations which ensured employment of several community members in taking up responsibility for the cleaning of drainages within their respective neighborhoods.

MR. SPEAKER:

Upon my ascendency to the Presidency in 2018, one of my Administration's immediate action in the road sector was to operationalize the **National Road Fund** office of Liberia. Today, this action has derived immense benefits for the road sector and has enabled the effective delivery of our roads program for our beloved country.

I am proud to reveal that, since my incumbency, a total of **198 km** of community roads in 7 counties have been completed, with over **75 km** ongoing.

Through the contribution of Liberians who pay their fuel levies from every gallon of gasoline or fuel oil they purchase, we continue to expand this program in maintaining our existing network and the construction of new community roads.

In this regard, the construction of the **5.4 km** road from Johnsonville to Mount Barclay is ongoing and will be completed by June this year; the **12km Johnsonville Turning Point to Mount Coffee** road is also ongoing; along with the **4.2 km Soul Clinic Road**, the **2.1 km Peace Island to 540 Community Road**, the **0.6 km Fanti Town Road**, and the **2.3 km New Georgia to Gulf road**.

In addition to these works, Mr. Speaker, we have also commenced some new projects, including the **1.5 km River View Road to Hotel Africa** road; the **Kissi Camp to GSA Road** which is about **300 meters**, the layout and ongoing pavement of **8.7 km of the Kakata City streets**, and have resumed construction of the **3.2 km Bali Island access road**.

My Government has also broken grounds for the **6.5 km Freeport to St. Paul Bridge road**, which constitutes a continuation of the grant we received from our partners, the Government of Japan.

As we focus on our roads program, we continue to see the significant adverse impact of climate change on our communities and people. We recognize the need to address important livelihood issues as we expand our developmental efforts throughout the country.

I am therefore pleased to inform this august body that our Government has signed a **10 million Euros** grant for the funding of the **Monrovia Integrated Development Project**, provided by the Government of France through its **French Development Agency**. This amount is to be used to improve the livelihoods of three (3) communities in Monrovia, through the provision of climate-resilience facilities such as roads, drainages, community halls, recreational facilities, etc.

In an effort to expand this program to the rest of the country, an additional funding of **\$40 million** US dollars has also been provided by the World Bank, through the **Liberia**

Urban Resilience Project, to promote climate-resilient infrastructure in the rest of Monrovia by the construction of new drainage networks.

Plans and designs are already being prepared for the commencement of works in this year and efforts are being made to extend similar activities to three additional cities namely, **Gbarnga, Buchanan and Ganta**.

MR. SPEAKER, DISTINGUISHED LEGISLATORS, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN:

My Administration is fully aware of ongoing activities on the **Roberts's International Airport Road**, and we are working closely with all stakeholders to deliver this project for our people. The success of this project will benefit all Liberians, and will positively impact the safety of all commuters using this highway. I remain focused on its delivery, and wish to assure all Liberians that this project will be a success.

MR. SPEAKER:

As the agenda for development continues in these challenging times, we have completed and dedicated the additional 4 markets constructed at the **Omega International Market**, and are working with the leadership of the Liberia Marketing Association and partners to ensure a smooth transition of marketers to this market ground.

I would also like to mention that works on feeder and rural roads continue to make head-way through the support of partners and with funding from this Government.

In this regard, we are continuing our rural road maintenance activities through the establishment of ten (10) **Community-Based Organizations** that are now directly benefitting seventeen (17) towns and villages from these counties, and providing improved livelihoods for the people along these road corridors.

Similarly, the **Liberian Swedish Feeder Roads Project**, in support of our Pro-Poor Agenda, continues to demonstrate a strong commitment to the development of farm-to-market roads that serve the livelihood of small rural communities. In line with this objective, the period under review saw the complete rehabilitation of an additional **77 km** of feeder roads, as well the re-graveling of an additional **94 km** of feeder roads under the same program.

To further strengthen our intervention in local communities and provide economic opportunities for our people, our routine maintenance program completed an additional **950 km** of feeder roads and provided job opportunities in seven counties for **180** communities and more than **1,000** individuals.

Additionally, in collaboration with our Swedish partners, the period under review saw the commencement of a new flagship project to improve village access through the construction of **134 km** of village tracks for **168** communities. This project has employed a total of **1,760** individuals and will continue till May this year.

MR. SPEAKER:

As part of the progress we have made in the sector, it is important that we inform our people on gains made in constructing and maintaining bridges across our country.

During the period under review, this Administration completed two (2) additional bridges and broke grounds for the construction of the **Buchanan Community College Bridge**

in Grand Bassa County, which is currently ongoing, and the **Dorkota Bridge** in Gbarpolu County.

I would now like to express my profound thanks and appreciation to our development partners, including the **European Union**, the **European Investment Bank**, the **World Bank**, **UK Aid**, the **German Government**, **KFW**, and **GIZ**.

I would also like to thank our Arab partners, including the **Saudi Fund**, the **Kuwaiti Fund**, and **BADEA**, as well as the **United States Agency for International Development (USAID)**, the **Japanese Government** and **JICA**, the **Swedish Government** and its **LSFRP** program, the **Chinese Government** and its **China Aid program**, the **Norwegian Government**, the **Indian Government** and most especially the **African Development Bank**.

The people of Liberia will forever remain grateful to these important and significant development partners, for their commitment and continual contributions to the development of our Country, and for their support to our the national development plan of my Government, the Pro-Poor Agenda for Prosperity and Development (PAPD).

MR. SPEAKER:

In October last year, I launched the **Accelerated Community Development Program** or **ACDP**, as it is commonly called. The first phase of this flagship program, which is being implemented in partnership with the **UNDP**, is budgeted at **\$100 million US** dollars, and will help us to create more jobs and reduce poverty and inequality in some of the poorest rural and urban communities in Liberia.

As I stated at the launch, our aim is for the ACDP to become our largest national program investing in community development. Over the next few years, our Ministries and Agencies - specifically, the **Ministry of Agriculture**, the **Ministry of Public Works**, the **Ministry of Internal Affairs**, the **Ministry of Education**, the **Ministry of Health**, and the **Water and Sanitation Commission**, and others - will collaborate with UNDP and other development partners such as the World Bank, to invest in constructing agricultural feeder roads, water and irrigation systems for farmers, hydro power plants, sanitation facilities, and markets to serve local communities.

Also included in the ACDP will be agricultural hubs equipped with food storage facilities, machines, schools and health centers, boreholes, and hand pumps placed in hard-to-reach communities across Liberia. We will also be providing agricultural tools, tractors, and farm equipment to help our farmers and cooperatives increase their productivity and improve their livelihoods.

Today, I am pleased to announce that the initial **\$14.5 million** US dollars has been secured for the program, and work is now starting in 18 communities, namely; **Donfah, Boimah Town and Jowuleta Town** in Bong County; **Borpulu City, Compansu, Madina, Sappima, Loloma Town, Farweinta, and Totoquelleh** in Gbarpolu County; **Yarpah Town, Gberdiah Town, Tompoe Town, Duo Town, Quarcee Town, Whyongar Town, and Old Yarpah Town** in Rivercess County; and **Fanti Town**, in Grand Cape Mount County.

Over the coming months, the program will expand to forty-two **42** additional communities in Montserrado (Greater Monrovia), River Gee, Grand Gedeh and Grand Kru County, and by next year, we will be investing in all counties and districts across the country.

MADAM VICE PRESIDENT, MR. SPEAKER, MR. PRESIDENT PRO TEMPORE, AND MEMBERS OF THE 54TH LEGISLATURE:

As a part of our strategic plan to ensure reliable and affordable energy, we have embarked on several initiatives; namely, 1) the purchase of power through the CLSG transmission line from Cote d'Ivoire; 2) the implementation of a **20 megawatt** solar power plant; 3) the expansion of Mt. Coffee by two additional turbines; and 4) undertaking feasibility studies for further development of the St. Paul River with the view of developing another hydro and a reservoir.

I am pleased to report that the Liberia Electricity Corporation has signed a power purchase agreement with CI Energies of Cote d'Ivoire for the initial purchase of **27 megawatts**, which will be scaled-up to **50 megawatts**, based on increases in our energy demand. The supply of power commenced on December 1, 2022, and our national grid now enjoys stable electricity from the CLSG line.

I am also pleased to inform this august body that the Executive Board of the World Bank has approved an amount of **\$96 million** US dollars to finance a **20 megawatt Solar Project** and the expansion of the **Mt. Coffee Hydro Plant**. These projects will increase our internal installed energy capacity from **126 megawatts** to **188 megawatts**, representing a forty **40% percent** increase of installed capacity.

More importantly, our renewable and clean energy generation capacity will constitute **80% percent** of our total installed capacity. With such a major component of our generation mix being clean energy, we will be contributing to the reduction of CO2 emissions in the environment.

Additionally, with the support of the World Bank and the West African Power Pool, we have commenced feasibility studies for a **second hydropower plant** of **150 megawatts** upstream of the **St. Paul River** and the **Via Reservoir**. The realization of additional hydro generation assets will propel Liberia into a new stage of energy security.

To date, our national grid now extends to eight (8) counties: namely, Montserrado, Bomi, Cape Mount, Margibi, Bong, Nimba, Grand Gedeh and Maryland Counties. Our high-voltage transmission line covers **254** kilometers, while our medium voltage transmission lines cover **641** kilometers. Today, there are over **180,000** households with access to grid electricity.

I want to thank our key development partners in the energy sector for their roles in financing the rebuilding of our national grid, and the restoration of our generation assets, including the rehabilitation of the Mt. Coffee hydro.

Special recognition goes to the World Bank, the European Union and the European Investment Bank, African Development Bank, the United States Government and its aid agencies, the Government of Norway, the German Development Bank (KfW), and the Government of Japan.

As we strive to bring reliable and affordable energy to our people, which is necessary for the economic growth and development of our country, I want to clearly state that we will not accept any attempt to undermine these efforts. Power theft has led to a loss of over **\$40 million** US dollars last year, and threatens the sustainability of LEC and the reliable supply of electricity.

With your cooperation, we successfully passed the **Power Theft Act** which made power theft a second degree felony. I am therefore reminding all our citizens and foreign residents that power theft is a crime in Liberia.

Furthermore, my government has allocated significant budgetary support to realize the CLSG project, despite so many competing social demands and a limited fiscal space. We made this sacrifice because we strongly believe that our people deserve to have access to electricity. But electricity is not free, and we must all be good citizens and pay for the electricity we consume.

I am pleased to commend the Anti-Power Theft Team for their hard work and dedication and wish to assure the team of our fullest support for their efforts. My government will remain vigilant and resolute against power theft

MADAM VICE PRESIDENT, MR. SPEAKER, MR. PRESIDENT PRO TEMPORE, AND MEMBERS OF THE 54TH LEGISLATURE:

My stance in ensuring the rights and protection of all Liberians cannot be overemphasized. However, as Liberia's Feminist-in-Chief, I remain committed to upholding the dignity and safeguarding the human rights of the most vulnerable segment of our population -- women, girls and children. Within this context, my Government has made, and continues to make, significant efforts to address the scourge of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV) in a strategic and more coordinated manner.

We continue to work with our international partners to address the issue of SGBV against our women and children, deploying available resources to provide appropriate support, and to enable ready access to justice systems, in order to achieve a meaningful reduction of SGBV during this year, and the years to come.

Through implementation of the Anti-SGBV Roadmap, we have provided financial resources, not only for prevention and response, but also for the well-being of survivors, through the renovation of safe homes, and the provision of functional operational support services.

Even as we are cognizant of our responsibility to uphold our traditional tenets and cultural practices, we believe that we still have an obligation to ensure that harmful traditional practices, such as female genital mutilation and early child marriage, are addressed holistically in order to protect our women and girls. In so doing, we are mindful that we must respectfully employ culturally appropriate approaches with our traditional leaders.

In this regard, I would like to express my thanks and appreciation to **Chief Zanzan Karwor**, head of the **National Council of Chiefs and Elders of Liberia**, and all of our traditional leaders, for historically leading by example, in a show of support for my administration's Gender agenda. We acknowledge their role in ensuring that we keep the beautiful parts of our culture, even as we work to do away with harmful traditional practices.

Since my declaration to finding a pathway to achieve this goal, we have seen their expressed commitment to work with me, as was exemplified by the ceremony held this month in Sonkai Town, Todee District, symbolizing the end of harmful traditional practices in Montserrado County. This marks the beginning of a new era, where our beautiful girls will be initiated and given deep knowledge of our culture, without mutilation.

To buttress these efforts, alternate livelihood programs are being setup for our Zoes and traditional leaders - through financial and technical support from the **European Union Spotlight Initiative**, being implemented by the **One-UN** organization.

Under this program, three (3) **Vocational and Heritage Centers** have already been completed in Grand Cape Mount, Montserrado and Nimba Counties. These Centers will serve as alternative means of livelihood for our cultural custodians, who are entrusted with enlightening our girls on our traditional culture, mores and values.

MR. SPEAKER:

The **Liberia Social Safety Nets Project**, under the Ministry of Gender, is now in full swing and continues to make significant impact in targeted counties. We say a special thanks to the **World Bank, UK Foreign Commonwealth Development Office, and USAID** for their generous support to this project.

With support from the World Bank, **\$44.6 million** US dollars has been secured for the **Liberia Women Empowerment Project**, which is geared towards empowering women, addressing social norms, inequalities and gender-based violence in over **750** communities, targeting more than **258 thousand** beneficiaries.

Today, I reaffirm my commitment to seeing more women on the ballot for elections in Liberia. Being cognizant of the impending 2023 elections, funding has been secured from **UNWomen** for a nationwide awareness and dialogue campaign aimed at promoting women's political participation in this year's elections.

In this context, let me remind you that Liberia has an exemplary history of record-breaking female leadership, both in politics and civil society organizations. We were the first to produce an elected female President on the African continent. We also proudly take credit for producing the first female Vice President of Liberia.

Today, I am pleased to inform you of another important glass ceiling that has been broken by a female who has ascended to leadership of an organization that has always been led by males. For the first time since its founding forty-eight (48) years ago, the **Federation of Liberian Youth (FLY)**, Liberia's largest youth grouping, has elected its first female President, in person of **Ms. Banica Stephanie Elliot**. We congratulate Ms. Elliot and the members of FLY for this pioneering and progressive achievement.

MADAM VICE PRESIDENT, MR. SPEAKER, MR. PRESIDENT PRO TEMPORE, AND MEMBERS OF THE 54TH LEGISLATURE:

The Government of Liberia continues to build the operational and administrative capabilities of the Armed Forces of Liberia in order to ensure that it remains a "**Force for Good**". In this regard, I am pleased to inform you that the Government has signed a **Memorandum of Understanding** with the United Nations to strengthen our troop presence with the UN Peacekeeping Missions. Last year we continued the rotation of troops to Mali as part of Liberia's commitment to the United Nations peacekeeping operations in that country.

This, together with other activities that were carried out during the period under review, is further demonstration of our commitment to change the story of the Liberian military. Let me thank you, Honorable Lawmakers, for the passage of the **Uniform Code of Military Justice** into law. This will go a long way in ensuring that we have a force that is first and foremost accountable to the Liberian people.

MR. SPEAKER:

I am happy to report that the latest school enrollment data has shown a massive improvement in the gender gap between male and female students in the education system in the country: **49.5%** are female, while males constitute **50.5%**. This is quite impressive and represents the fulfilment of a major goal of my Administration, which is to ensure that women have equal access to education as their male counterparts.

Also, the school data shows that there has been an increase in the number of schools in the country by **20%** percent, with teachers numbering more than sixty (**60,000**) thousand, although a significant proportion of them are volunteers. In order to address this situation my Administration has been accelerating efforts in recent years to reduce that number by employing hundreds of volunteers.

With the various interventions the government has made in the sector aimed at improving access and quality, it comes at no surprise that Liberian students have shown remarkable performance improvements in the WASSCE and WACE exams.

MR. SPEAKER:

I have consistently emphasized that the development of young people remains fundamental to the attainment of the goals and objectives of our Pro-Poor Agenda. To this end, a number of programs are being implemented, which are aimed at developing the capacity of our youths and providing them short-term employment opportunities. Some of these include the **National Youth Literacy Program, Temporary Employment for Community Youth; Youth on-the-Job Training program**. Another such program is the **Recovery of Economic Activity for Liberian Informal Sector Employment**. This is a **\$10 Million** US dollar Project which has been launched by the Government of Liberia to give **19,000** economically vulnerable people in the informal sector increased access to income earning opportunities in the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis in Liberia.

We have established technical and vocational schools in eight counties. These are meant to equip our young people who are willing and determined to add value to their lives by giving them market-relevant skills and training.

It is my hope that the thousands of **At-Risk youth**, who are being targeted for rehabilitation under the new multi-million dollar initiative launched last year, can also benefit from our national TVET programs.

Let me now use this opportunity to congratulate winners in all categories of the just-ended **County Sports Meet** tournament, particularly **Nimba County**, on its much deserved victory over **Lofa County** in the soccer category. Talents spotted from this tournament, which continues to gain strength, can be used to augment the capacity of the country's national soccer team.

MR. SPEAKER:

During the period under review, my Government implemented various programs to ensure more access to justice in a people-centered way, through critical reform of the legal regime of the criminal justice system - with a view to improve access to justice, enhance expeditious trials, reduce the case dockets of courts, and decrease overcrowding of correction facilities, as well as other justice-related and security services delivery.

The **Alternative Dispute Resolution**, a non-litigation and reconciliatory approach to resolve conflicts and dispute settlement, has been revitalized. Other key law reforms were introduced, such as the enactment of an amendment to the Criminal Procedure Law which introduced plea bargaining, extended the terms of courts, increased the number of Relieving Judges, preliminary examinations, and the procedures on arrest.

These endeavors were made possible largely with support from Liberia's international partners, including the United Nations Family, through the Office of the Resident Coordinator.

The passage of the **Amended Drug Law** In 2022 was a key milestone in our fight against narcotic substances in our country. The law ensures that offenders receive stiffer punishment for their involvement in illicit drugs trafficking.

MR. SPEAKER:

I am happy to report that last year was a high-performing period for our agriculture sector, where more focus was placed directly on impacting rural and urban farmers, as well as those in the agricultural value chains.

This is evidenced by the delivery of implements to farmers to enable them boost local production. The Government and donor partners disbursed financial grants to farmers in the rice, vegetable, oil palm, rubber, poultry, piggery and cassava sectors, so as to expand their production and capacity in their respective value chains.

The agricultural sector now enjoys the confidence of donors, whose support and presence allow for greater production of rice and other crops, and the employment of climate-smart agricultural practices that help mitigate the impacts of climate change on farmers.

MR. SPEAKER:

In the early days of my administration I signed the **Liberia Agricultural Commercialization Fund (LACF)**. Funded by the **World Bank** and the **International Fund for Agriculture Development**, the **LACF** has expanded from an initial three (3) value chains (rice, oil palm and horticulture), to now include four (4) more value chains (rubber, cassava, piggery and poultry). The **LACF** is also spread nationwide and provides access to finance for commercial farms and agribusinesses.

I am pleased to report that **\$4 million** US dollars, out of a total of **\$41.5 million** US dollars, has already been approved for disbursements to selected beneficiaries, particularly rice and vegetable producers and processors.

I am also pleased to inform you that President Biden has recently named Liberia as one of very few African countries to be a beneficiary of the **U.S. Feed The Future** program, which is the U.S. government's flagship global food security initiative.

MR. SPEAKER:

As we are all aware, preparatory works are already ongoing for the conduct of the 2023 General and Presidential Elections that will be held in October this year. I am told that the **Board of Commissioners of the National Elections Commission** has reaffirmed its decision to use **Biometric Technology** for the registration of voters for these elections.

We remain grateful for the continued support to our electoral process that we continue to receive from our international partners, including the **African Union, ECOWAS, the U.S. Government** and the **European Union**. Let me reiterate that my Administration remains committed to ensuring that the expressed will of the Liberian people prevails, and that the process is free, fair, transparent, and peaceful.

MADAM VICE PRESIDENT, MR. SPEAKER, MR. PRESIDENT PRO TEMPORE, AND MEMBERS OF THE 54TH LEGISLATURE:

Since the end of violent conflict in 2003, followed by transitional justice processes, including the 2009 Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), Liberia remains on a gradual but certain path to genuine reconciliation.

In this regard, my Government looks forward to a future of consolidating the peace, enhancing continuous stability, and undertaking reforms to address the culture of impunity and to foster national reconciliation and social cohesion.

MR. SPEAKER:

As President, I have continued to preach about the virtues of peace from this high platform, as an extension of my well-known career in peace advocacy, which began long before I ascended to this Office. This was recognized many years ago by the international community when I was appointed as a Peace Ambassador of the United Nations. A further manifestation of my passion for peace was when I was invited by my predecessor, former President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, to serve in her government as her Peace Ambassador, even while I was in opposition.

I preach peace, because I realized a long time ago that there is, and can never be, any victor in a civil war. When brothers kill sisters, and sisters kill brothers; when parents kill their children and children kill their parents; when friends kill each other; and citizens with a common patrimony turn violently on each other; no one wins. Instead, every one loses, either directly, or indirectly. There is not one single Liberian family that did not lose a relative or friend to this terrible fratricidal war, that was both senseless and brutally uncivil, almost demonic.

To ensure that we never return to those dark days, we must give peace a chance to create the space in which we can begin the dialogue that will resolve our differences. We must hold the conversations to discuss how we can maintain our peace in a sustainable manner, so as to be able to develop our country.

I have observed that it is mostly young people who are the ones that are used to agitate. These young people have had little or no experience of war. We have now enjoyed 20 years of unbroken peace, and it can readily be seen that young people, who are coming of voting age for the first time since turning 18 years old, have had no experience of war. They are quickly and easily manipulated to do harm and instill violence. We need to guide our young people and inspire them to reject violence and conflict as a means to express their grievances and dissatisfactions.

When the rice riots took place in 1980, I was only 13 years old. That was the first time that I had ever seen violence and destruction on such a massive scale.

As a young man, I was confused and perplexed. That experience left an indelible impression on me about the horrors of civil unrest that can lead to violence, and a lasting distaste for violence that is unleashed for political reasons. The thought occurred to me at the time, that there was no political leader among the hundreds of young people who had been killed during the rice riots.

The moral lesson for all of us who were around during these civil wars and domestic riots, is that we should never allow our young people to be contaminated by everyday politics. No political leader should ever put the life of a single young person at risk in order to assume political office.

There is a song written by Masser and Creed, called “The Greatest Love of All”, which was made famous by George Benson and Whitney Houston many years ago. I want to share a verse of this song with you, because I believe it is relevant to our situation in Liberia, and perfectly expresses my feelings about political violence.

***“I believe that children are our future
Teach them well and let them lead the way
Show them all the beauty they possess inside
Give them a sense of pride to make it easier
Let the children's laughter
Remind us how we used to be.”***

MR. SPEAKER:

It is often said that experience is the best teacher. But I vigorously disagree with this. While experience has certain undeniable merits, one does not have to repeat an experience to learn from it, especially if it is not a positive one. Rather, one should revert to history for one's education, because, as is often said, those who ignore the lessons that history teaches us about our past mistakes, are bound to repeat them.

Without peace, our world will be difficult. With peace, we can find the collective wisdom and consensus to become the best that we can be as a Nation and as a People.

MADAM VICE PRESIDENT, MR. SPEAKER, MR. PRESIDENT PRO TEMPORE, AND MEMBERS OF THE 54TH LEGISLATURE:

I am now going to speak **DIRECTLY** to the Liberian people. Thank you.

MY FELLOW LIBERIANS:

In spite of the negative forecast when we first took on the mantle of leadership of this Nation in 2018, we have accomplished quite a lot, against all the odds. The naysayers and the prophets of doom are perplexed by the progress that we have made. Those who have eyes to see will bear witness to how hard we have toiled in fulfillment of the constitutional mandate that was given to us by an overwhelming majority of the Liberian people.

Together, over the past five years, we have fought a good fight. Collectively, we have undeniably managed to preserve the peace of the Nation, which has become the ultimate goal of all of our national undertakings.

And for this, the Government alone can not take the credit. All Liberians have played a pivotal role in this success story, in various ways, no matter how large or small.

In spite of the negative impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and the downturn in the world's economy, Liberia continues to make giant strides in the attainment of our major development objectives. We have endeavored to mitigate the exogenous shocks that have come our way, and in doing so we have remained resilient as a **United People**.

I want to assure you that because you have shown me unprecedented love, I will not fail you. This standard of care and carefulness will continue under my watch. I will always work diligently, assiduously, and passionately, to justify the confidence that has been imposed in me by you.

The deadly Covid 19 pandemic may have **delayed**, but did not **derail** our development agenda. During the next few months leading up to October of this year, we will **continue** to accelerate, **continue** to build on our momentum, and **continue** to deliver.

MY FELLOW CITIZENS:

I will be coming to you shortly to ask you to renew, for a second time, the mandate that you gave me six years ago: **a mandate** to continue the good work we have delivered; **a mandate** for continuity and stability; **a mandate** for transformation; **a mandate** for development and growth; **a mandate** to consolidate and secure the peace, a peace that we - with your help - have perfectly preserved.

This second mandate will enable us to consolidate the gains we have made in these last few years, and ramp up the trajectory of growth, development, and prosperity for Liberia.

Regardless of your political affiliations, your religious beliefs, or your ethnic origins, I urge you to join us as we together wrestle back the years lost to civil conflict and war, and restore our country to its rightful place in the comity of nations, to a higher place of peace and prosperity for all. ***We can do this, and we must all do it together.***

We will be coming to meet you in your towns, in your villages, in your districts, in your clans, and in your cities, so that together, we can build a strong partnership for Liberia's progress.

But as you can see from all that has been said today, we have done our part in delivering on most of the promises we made to you, while preserving the nation's peace and nurturing its democratic values. We are on an irreversible trajectory of sustainable growth that will necessarily and inevitably lead us to progress as a Nation and prosperity as a People.

When we came before you to ask you for our first mandate, we promised to bring you Change for Hope. Now, after going with you on the journey thus far, you have seen the Change. We now want to assure you that this is the ***Change That You Can Count On!!***

The challenge and legacy that I would like to leave for the younger generation, is that you should not just ***FEEL*** leadership, but that you should also ***CLAIM*** it..

I encourage and admonish you to:

Seize the Day.

Seize the Moment.

Seize the Opportunity.

This is **YOUR** time. This is **OUR** time!

And so, my Fellow Citizens, as we stand here today, let me assure you that:

THE STATE OF OUR NATION IS STRONG!!

THE STATE OF OUR NATION IS STABLE!!

THE STATE OF OUR NATION IS VIBRANT!!

THE STATE OF OUR NATION IS YOUTHFUL!!

THE STATE OF OUR NATION IS PEACEFUL AND SECURE!!

WE INTEND TO KEEP IT THAT WAY.

And so, as we go to the polls in October this year, let us uphold and maintain our hard-won democracy. Let us conduct ourselves in a lawful and orderly way, so that the voices of the people will be heard, and the will of the Liberian people will prevail; because, as is often said: ***the voice of the people, is the voice of God!***

My Fellow Liberians:

In the immortal words of our beloved National Anthem:

“With God above, our rights to prove, we will over all prevail!!”

I thank you.