

**ARMED FORCES DAY MESSAGE
DELIVERED BY HER EXCELLENCY MADAM ELLEN JOHNSON SIRLEAF
PRESIDENT, REPUBLIC OF LIBERIA AND COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF OF THE ARMED
FORCES OF LIBERIA
DURING THE 56TH ARMED FORCES DAY CELEBRATION
BARCLAY TRAINING CENTER, MONROVIA
MONDAY, FEBRUARY 11, 2013**

[As Delivered]

The Commanding General in Charge;
Officers and Members of the Armed Forces of Liberia;
Special Guests;
Officials of Government;
Fellow Liberians;
Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen:

May I ask you to remain standing for a moment of silence to our own General Sande Ware who passed on yesterday, and to the several members and senior Defense Staff of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Guinea who were involved in a tragic plane crash on their way to these ceremonies. Thank you.

Mr. Dean of the Diplomatic Corps and distinguished Ambassador, please convey to our brother and colleague, the President of the Republic of Guinea, our profound sadness over this loss. In their honor, we will declare tomorrow a working holiday.

On this day every year we gather to honor our courageous men and women for their invaluable service to our country. We appreciate their commitment to protecting the territorial integrity and aiding civil authority in the maintenance of internal peace and security. We commend all members of the Armed Forces of Liberia – those on active duty, those honorably retired, and those who have paid the ultimate price and departed us, for their immeasurable service. Your dedication and sacrifices remain indelible in our hearts and minds. Today, especially on your day, we applaud you as you continue to serve as a “Force for Good,” and the pride of our nation.

We are very pleased to have in our midst friends and colleagues from ECOWAS countries, especially those from the Mano River Union, including the Ministers of Defense and Chiefs of Defense Staff of the Sierra Leone Armed Forces, and the Republican Guard Forces of the Republic of La Côte d’Ivoire. We extend our gratitude to all ECOWAS countries that have sent military personnel to help our own AFL become a professional and reliable force. We want to recognize and welcome, particularly, Lieutenant General Charles R. Kayonga, Chief of Defense Staff of Rwanda, and his commanding officers for celebrating this day with the Liberian people.

We also welcome Major General Charles Hooper, Commander of U.S. AFRICOM and his delegation, who are here with us today. The support of the United States Government, specifically the role of U.S. AFRICOM, under Operation Onward Liberty, has been pivotal in the restructuring of the Armed Forces of Liberia.

We want to recognize the enormous contributions of the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) in maintaining the peace and security of our nation, while simultaneously helping with the skilled advancement of our military. Through its various units, UNMIL has consistently helped build AFL capacity in tactical and technical areas of specialization aligned with our national strategic interest. Your Excellency, Karin Landgren, Special Representative of the U.N. Secretary-General to Liberia, we applaud you for your leadership and support.

We also welcome to Liberia the new UNMIL Force Commander, Major General Leonard Muriuki Ngondi of Kenya. Your presence is held in high regards. I am confident the AFL will continue receiving the same cooperation and support under your leadership.

To our foreign dignitaries and guests, some of whom have travelled longer distances to be here, we appreciate your esteemed presence. Your groundwork has helped shape the men and women we see before us today into a professional outfit through rigorous training, mentoring and other pertinent strategic contributions.

We have come a long way since 2006, when we began our security sector reform process. That reform process has seen transformations in the operations and administration of the Bureau of Immigration and Naturalization (BIN), the Liberia National Police (LNP), and the Liberia National Fire Service (LNFS) among others. Our Security Sector reform process has entered a new phase as security agencies and pertinent government ministries work alongside UNMIL towards a smooth transition of security responsibilities back to our security institutions. UNMIL's transition is an inevitable step towards Liberia's growth and self-sustainability. It should be viewed as a benchmark on our country's road to transformation.

The Justice and Security Hub in Gbarnga, to be dedicated tomorrow, will serve to strengthen public confidence and organizational readiness for the LNP, BIN, Fire Service, Bureau of Corrections and Rehabilitation, as well as the Judiciary. We congratulate our law enforcement agencies for responding decisively to our national call to duty. Thanks to all of our partners for their continued support.

In addition to the tangible support to the AFL by our partners, let me recognize the pillar of strength in our Armed Forces, our military families. As families of military personnel, this too is your day as you steadily play a vital role in encouraging our troops and boosting their morale for them to strive for excellence.

During the recently held annual Armed Forces Affiliation Day, I interacted with many families of our military personnel. I observed their high spirits. Your encouragement is invaluable to the service being rendered.

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen: The Armed Forces of Liberia has reached a critical stage in its development – a stage that is faced with challenges beyond our borders but whose consequences could have enormous impact on our country. It has consequences for our peace and security. It is a stage of uncertainties, unfolding realities that we must be prepared to face on a daily basis. Our economic reality, and the potential for growth expansion, creates a unique dimension that could positively impact the level of financial reinforcement needed to sustain the AFL as they continue to develop.

The AFL Coast Guard actions of deterrence against transnational crimes in our territorial waters are also cost recovery operations that can increase returns to our national treasury. The level of potential investments with successful offshore drillings will bring the required future dividend, under the umbrella of a credible, efficient and responsive Coast Guard. We thank the U.S. Government for supporting our Coast Guard. We are proud that several Coast Guard personnel have benefited from training, including a recent graduate from the U.S. Coast Guard Training Center in Yorktown, Virginia.

After competing priorities for limited resources, it is our fervent intention to stay the course in building the tactical and technical capabilities of the AFL as a potential source of economic growth.

Our lead partner in the restructuring of the AFL, the United States of America, has demonstrated their commitment through financial, technical and logistical resources. While this support is viewed within the context of our enduring historical relationship, we must continue our own preparations to take on this responsibility to maintain a competitive and qualitative edge for our Armed Forces.

I offer personal appreciation to those military personnel serving under OPERATION ONWARD LIBERTY. Your dedication and contributions are most appreciated. It is our hope that Gen. Hooper of U.S. AFRICOM will continue this strategic partnership – one which has mutual benefits for our two countries.

We want to also recognize the People's Republic of China for their support to the AFL. The Chinese Government recently confirmed the shipment of an assortment of construction equipment for the AFL Engineering Company worth nearly US\$4.5 million. This technical assistance will enhance the capability of our Engineering Company to undertake strategic interventions in repairing our roads and bridges, especially during difficult periods.

Closer to home, Nigeria remains the lead ECOWAS country that continues to stand by Liberia in the mentoring of the AFL. A corps of Officers and Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs) from the Nigerian Military are presently serving alongside the AFL, providing leadership and guidance. AFL personnel are currently attending the prestigious Nigeria Defense Academy in Kaduna where two of them graduated late last year. Nine others are expected to graduate from the Academy this year. Two of the nine Cadets will graduate as Air Force Officers. What a pride for our Armed Forces!

We also thank officers and NCOs from other ECOWAS countries for their sacrifice and service to our country. Our appreciation has been demonstrated today by the Decoration of two Officers one from Nigeria and another from Ghana for their services which are now part of the historical restoration of the pride and professionalism of the Armed Forces of Liberia.

We also want to thank Great Britain, Rwanda, Ghana and Sierra Leone for partnering with Liberia in providing mentorship and training opportunities for the Armed Forces of Liberia.

As we prepare for the full Liberianization of the command structure, nearly one fifth of the AFL force structure has undergone training abroad. Such training include: basic training, proficiency development, advanced courses, tactical and operational drills, and strategic fields of specialization. Several have completed their graduate degrees, while others are in the process of completing their studies.

Legal jurisprudence has been established with the support of U.S. AFRICOM. The Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ) has been adopted to ensure due process for each and every personnel in the AFL. A Liberian has been appointed Director of the Legal Affairs Section in the AFL, supported by several AFL personnel who have been trained as Legal Aides under the UCMJ. Additional AFL personnel are attending the Louis Arthur Grimes School of Law and will form the nucleus of the future Court Martial and Appeal Board.

A highly anticipated National Defense Strategy is to be released soon. It will outline the strategic imperatives for the Armed Forces of Liberia. It will consider our basic principles of human security, an environment of openness, quality of growth, regional and international peace and security, and an Armed Forces that is subject and accountable to civilian authority. Upon completion of our National Defense Strategy, work on the National Military Strategy is expected to commence shortly thereafter as the architectural design for the Military Table and Organization and Equipment for the AFL. This strategy will answer the question about the future size of our Armed Forces.

We are one year away from declaring the Armed Forces of Liberia fully operational and appointing a Liberian to serve as Chief of Staff. I am pleased to announce to you that we are still on course. The process of vetting, training and mentoring personnel is ongoing. In the coming months, I will be announcing the appointment of a cadre of Officers, indicating my intentions and preparedness for Liberian leadership in the AFL. Those to be retired will be given their due benefits in keeping with provisions of the National Defense Act of 2008. It is possible that their services might be needed in other areas of public trust, including the Foreign Service.

To demonstrate AFL preparedness, I recently authorized the participation of one of our Senior AFL Officers to the United Nations Supervision Mission to Syria. He has since returned and continues to serve with distinction. Likewise, I recently approved a nomination and secondment of a Senior AFL Officer to the ECOWAS Mission Planning and Management Cell in Abuja, Nigeria, where he will serve an initial period of one year.

Fellow Liberians: In solidarity with the ECOWAS decision on Mali, and the authorization of the United Nations Security Council for an African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA), I have ordered that an Infantry Platoon of the Armed Forces be ready to participate in the AFISMA Mission to Mali. I want particularly to thank the honorable members of the Legislature for their approval and their support of this decision for the AFL to participate in such a historic mission. ECOWAS has agreed that this AFL Platoon will be embedded with one of the troop-contributing countries, particularly a Nigerian Battalion. We thank the Federal Republic of Nigeria for their willingness to support Liberia's contribution to the AFISMA Mission. This will be the third time in our military relations that Nigeria has accepted to have the AFL embedded in one of their Battalions.

The activities and operations by the AFL are milestones towards our goal of a ready, willing and capable AFL. My fellow Liberians: Serving your country as a member of the Armed Forces is a professional career, a worthy and patriotic duty. We encourage our young Liberians to join this national service at an appropriate time.

We remain mindful of the immense challenges relative to the welfare of our soldiers and their families. Calculated and swift measures are being undertaken to improve their current conditions. The health facility at the EBK Barracks has been expanded to meet the medical needs of military families. The completion of other facilities on the Coast Guard Base, and at Camp Tubman and Camp Ware, is to ensure that military personnel have access to improved and responsive healthcare.

I want to assure our men and women in service that better facilities remain a high priority of this administration. Renovation of additional housing units has commenced at Camp Ware to alleviate the overcrowding at the EBK Barracks. Approximately US\$2.4 million has been appropriated in our current National Budget for the rehabilitation and construction of apartments and facilities at Camp Todee. At present, US\$1million has been provided to the Ministry of National Defense to commence this project. It is expected that once the construction begins, the remaining balance of US\$1.4 million will be provided to complete the first phase of this project. The AFL Engineering Company, with international assistance, will undertake this project, including the rehabilitation of several bridges leading to the Camp within the Todee District.

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen: I ask you to kindly join me in extending congratulations to those who we have recently honored with the Distinguished Service Order Awards: Ambassador George D. Wallace, Jr. of Liberia; Colonel Samuel Kofi Adorkor of Ghana; and Colonel Waidi Shiabu of Nigeria.

You may recall that military relations between the United States and Liberia go as far back as our diplomatic relationship. This military relationship was formalized in 1956 – the year that Ambassador George Wallace joined the Foreign Service, then called the Department of State. Ambassador Wallace’s services at the Department of State played an irreplaceable liaison role in ensuring a smooth relationship between our then Department of War and the United States Department of Defense. We say to you, Ambassador Wallace, thanks for your long envisioned and committed service to our country and our people.

Colonel Adorkor of Ghana and Colonel Shiabu of Nigeria served the AFL distinctly and credibly since their deployment in 2007 and 2008, respectively. Their transformative impact on the restructuring of the AFL is seen in the quality of output of our young men and women who are serving today. Thank you for your service to our country.

I want to particularly commend the Ambassador of the United States of America for the leadership she has continued to give in the strong relationship between Liberia and the United States. Madam Ambassador, I commend you.

Behind the success of the Armed Forces of Liberia are individuals, whose focus and exemplary leadership credentials have given us cause to celebrate and appreciate the evolution of a credible and respected Armed Forces of Liberia – our own Minister of National Defense and his corps of officials. Minister [Brownie] Samukai, please keep up the good work. He is assisted by Command Officer-in-Charge, Major General Suraj Abdurrahman, under whose guidance and mentorship the Armed Forces of Liberia is maturing into a dependable and professional army. General Abdurrahman, thank you for your leadership.

Lastly, to the members of the Armed Forces of Liberia, this is your day. I want to thank you for your discipline and your dedication to duty. You exemplified your tactical and technical competencies and leadership in “Operation Restore Hope,” in the border areas of Grand Gedeh, River Gee and Maryland Counties, as part of a joint security force to protect our territorial integrity and restore public confidence in your capabilities. To all of you, our gallant men and women of the Armed Forces and those who served so well at the borders, gaining the confidence of our own nationals and nationals of our sister State, we want to applaud and commend you.

As Commander-in-Chief, we’re proud of your service; we’re proud of your sacrifice. I, therefore, charge you, in the same spirit, to discharge your duties with valor unpretending as we prepare to deploy to Mali.

Keep the Lone Star hoisted forever.

Happy 56th Armed Forces Day!

May the Almighty God bless our land and its people.

Once again, our profound sympathy to those who were on their way to join us; may we all pray to the Lord for their souls.