

Short Opening Remarks

Delivered by

**Her Excellency Ellen Johnson Sirleaf
President of the Republic of Liberia**

At

**The Center for Global Development
Washington, D.C.**

On

Monday, March 20, 2006

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you very much. It is wonderful to see such a large crowd of supporters, friends, and well wishers. I am pleased to see so many people here from the US government, Capitol Hill, foreign embassies, the International Financial Institutions, the vibrant NGO community, and the private sector. It is good to see old – and new – friends. I extend warm greetings from the people of Liberia, and offer our deep appreciation for your support during this visit and during the first months of my administration.

I want to give special thanks to Ed Scott, the co-founder and Chairman of the Board of the Center for Global Development, and to Fred Bergsten, another co-founder of CGD and the President of the Institute of International Economics where we are all gathered today. And I send warm greeting to Nancy Birdsall, CGD's third co-founder and President, who is on sabbatical leave in Italy and unfortunately could not be with us today. Thanks to all three for the support you have given us.

As you all know, Liberia has gone through a nightmare of violence, destruction, and mismanagement for the last 25

years. But the people of Liberia have said: Enough. We have climbed back on our feet, reclaimed our country, and taken the first steps on the long hard road to recovery. Our journey will not be easy. But I am determined, and the people of Liberia are determined, that we will succeed.

The costs of our conflict run wide and deep, and manifest themselves in many ways – mismanagement, corruption, bad governance, massive looting of public treasury and assets. A quarter of a million of our three million people were killed, and most of the rest were injured or were forced to flee their homes.

Clinics and schools have been destroyed. Children only want to go to school, but the schools are ruined, the teachers are gone, and there are no schoolbooks to read. Our precious children die of malaria, parasites and malnourishment because there are no nurses to see, clinics to visit, or medicines to be found. The adult prevalence rate of HIV is by some estimates 12 percent and rising, the highest in West Africa.

One in four children in Liberia die before their 5th birthday. Can you imagine: One in four! How can we in the world today accept a situation where 1 in 4 children die before they are 5 years old? I do not accept it. Our people do not accept it. It is but one example of how the sad record of tyranny and senseless violence continues to take the lives of innocent children even today. We must turn this around.

Our infrastructure lies in ruins. Roads have been destroyed and are impassable, undermining security, destroying jobs, and cutting off villages from the rest of the country. Government buildings are riddled with bullet holes. There is no electricity anywhere in the country except that which is produced by private generators. And most people do not have access to the most basic commodity of all: clean water.

There are very few jobs for the men and women who wish to work and provide for their families. Agricultural production has fallen sharply, and with so many people displaced from their villages, and so little seed left over from previous harvests, getting started again is a daunting challenge. We are under sanctions from the UN that prohibit exports of diamonds and

timber, and for good reason, since the money generated by these activities fueled the violence. But as a result legitimate workers in these sectors have lost their jobs.

Our debt burden is enormous. Money borrowed by my predecessors – much of it wasted or stolen – has not been repaid for a quarter of a century. The combination of accumulating interest and a devastated economy have left us with a huge burden. Just think – our debt/export ratio is now 2,700 percent! Today's Liberians are stuck with the bill for the excesses of our tyrant's past.

But while the challenges we face are enormous, we will not be deterred. We have found our freedom, and we will make the most of it.

We thank the United Nations, the people of the United States, and the people of other nations that sent troops to Liberia in 2003 to chase the tyrant out. As many of you know, last week I formally requested that President Obasanjo of Nigeria extradite Charles Taylor to stand trial in Sierra Leone for war crimes. He WILL be brought to justice.

The people of Liberia courageously went to the polls last October and November and sent a clear message: they want change. They want their lives back. They want to move forward. I am deeply humbled and honored that they chose me as their new President. And I am determined that I will not let them down.

My government is building its strategy for recovery and development on four pillars. First, we must enhance security, preserve freedom, and keep the peace. With the support of the United Nations and the United States, we are demobilizing all armed combatants and reintegrating them into society. We are training a new Liberian Army, police force, and other security services. We are determined to bring home the thousands of internally displaced people and refugees that fled the war.

Second, we will pursue good governance and the rule of law. For 25 years I have fought against corruption, mismanagement, and the violation of civil liberties. I went to jail twice because I spoke out against misrule.

We will be different. We will base our government on transparency in our actions, accountability to our people, and honoring the rights of all Liberians. We will fight corruption wherever it rears its ugly head. I have already demanded that all my appointees publicly disclose all of their assets, and sign a code of conduct. I am choosing my senior appointees based on their record of probity, honesty, and professional qualifications, not on patronage. My Finance Minister Antoinette Sayeh is with me today. I chose her because she has an outstanding record working for twenty years with the World Bank, and she is the best and most capable Liberian economist for the job. I am very proud that she has accepted this assignment.

We are enhancing our financial oversight, and establishing controls to ensure that funds do not disappear. We are vigorously implementing the Governance and Economic Management Assistance Program – GEMAP -- with strong support from our international partners. My first Executive Order when I came into office rendered null and void over 200 non-compliant forestry concessions and fraudulent contracts.

We will strengthen our judiciary system, appointing professional and well respected judges, and giving them the support they need. We will rebuild our civil service to be smaller, more professional, and merit-based. We will publish financial information, publicize our specific goals, and ask our people to hold us accountable for achieving results.

Third, we will rebuild our infrastructure and restore basic services. One of my highest priorities is to bring electricity to parts of Monrovia by this summer, and to areas beyond in the ensuing months. We will introduce a major public works program to put people to work building roads, sinking wells, and clearing fields in order to provide employment and to provide the foundation for private sector activity.

We will rebuild our schools and give our children the chance to get an education. I was very fortunate to get a good education, and we need to provide basic opportunities for all of our children. Our girls, in particular, need the chance to go to school.

I am determined to fight against HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases that kill our people. I will fight the growing HIV epidemic head on. I have announced that we will prepare a revitalized national strategy to fight HIV by June of this year so that we can aggressively fight the spread of the disease.

Fourth, we will revitalize our economy. We need to get our financial house in order. We are proud to announce that our efforts have already led to an increase in revenues of more than 20 percent in just our first two months in office compared to last year, and we are just getting started. We are on course to sign a Staff Monitored Program with the IMF in April.

Our biggest economic challenge will be to create jobs. As I mentioned, a first step will be a public works program to rebuild our infrastructure. At the same time, we must revitalize agriculture by providing seeds and tools to farmers, and ensuring that farmers have roads to transport their crops to market. We are already moving to take steps to end the sanctions on timber and diamonds to create jobs in these sectors. And we will create an environment that will welcome foreign investment to eventually create jobs in agro-

processing, basic manufacturing, and services once the economy gets back up on its feet.

I know that there is no quick fix for the reconstruction of a country. This will be hard work. But Liberians, young and old, share their government's commitment to work, to be honest, to unite, to reconcile and to rebuild. We know that much is at stake for all of us. Liberia at war brought misery and crimes against humanity to its neighbors. A peaceful, prosperous Liberia can contribute to democracy, stability and development in West Africa and beyond.

We are grateful for the strong support that the United States and other members of the international community have already shown us. We will need your continued generous support in order to continue to move forward. But we are determined to demonstrate that democracy can work, even under the most challenging conditions. We WILL make it work.

Thank you very much for your support and your kind attention.

QUESTIONS

After making your remarks, Steve Radelet will ask you a few questions before turning to the audience for Q&A. Some possible questions include:

- 1. You have listed some of the steps you have taken since coming to office. What do you consider your most important action so far?**
- 2. What do you hope will be visibly different one year from now to the average Liberian?**
- 3. You have fought for many years against corruption. At the same time, Liberia has a reputation for deep problems with corruption. What steps, specifically, can you take to bring about a fundamental change in controlling corruption?**
- 4. One of the most unusual programs in Liberia is the GEMAP program, which the interim government signed with the donor community in September 2005. Among other things, it calls for international financial experts to have co-signing authority for financial transactions in 7 government entities. How do you**

feel about having foreign experts with co-signing authority in these agencies?

5. What is your sense of the security situation at the moment? Are you concerned that the extradition of Charles Taylor could create security issues?

6. How do you see the phase out of the UN peacekeeping mission unfolding?

7. You have worked as part of the donor community both with the World Bank and with the United Nations. You have also worked on the other side of the table, first as Minister of Finance in the late 1970s, and now as President. When are donors most effective, and when are they least effective? If you could change one thing about donor support so far in Liberia, what would it be?