

Pres. Sirleaf Annual Message

to the Third Session of the 53rd National Legislature of the Republic of Liberia
Theme: "Consolidating the Processes of Transformation"
By Her Excellency Mrs. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf
President of the Republic of Liberia
Capitol Hill, Monrovia

Monday, 27 January 2014

Mr. Vice President and President of the Senate, and Mrs. Boakai;
Mr. Speaker;
Mr. President Pro-Tempore;
Honorable Members of the Legislature;
Mr. Chief Justice, Associate Justices of the Supreme Court, and Members of the Judiciary;
The Dean and Members of the Cabinet and Other Government Officials;
Mr. Doyen, Excellencies and Members of the Diplomatic Corps;
Her Excellency, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General of the United Nations;
Officers and Staff of the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL);
The Command Officer-in-Charge, Men and Women of the Armed Forces of Liberia;
Former Officials of Government;
Traditional Leaders, Chiefs and Elders;
The Clergy;
Political and Business Leaders;
Officers and Members of the Bar Association;
Labor and Trade Unions;
Youth and Student Organizations;
Civil Society Organizations; Members of the Media;
Special Guests;
Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen;
Fellow Liberians:

INTRODUCTION

Once again, in fulfillment of the mandate given by Article 58 of our Constitution, we are here to present the Administration's legislative program and report to you on the State of the Republic. As we have done in the past, a full Executive Report, with comparative statistics, will subsequently be submitted to you. We hope that you will use it as a reference for more detailed information on the various public sector entities.

First, let us all give praise and thanks to the Almighty God for his manifold blessings upon our Nation, including our celebration, in 2013, of a decade of peace, stability and continued development.

With saddened hearts we bade final farewell, in 2013, to cherished loved ones. In their memory, please join me in a moment of silent meditation. Thank you.

Mr. Vice President and President of the Senate: Let me again, in this public manner, express my thanks and gratitude for your dedication and unflinching commitment to the national cause we Financing Agreement between Government and the International Development Association for the West African Power Pool plus the Act ratifying the Treaty for the Construction, Operation and Development of the

Interconnection Lines joining Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia. These will lead to the rebuilding and expansion of generation, transmission, and distribution of electricity, providing an economic stimulus of widespread effect. An economic boost is also expected from passage of the Act ratifying the Loan Agreement between Government and the African Development Bank (acting on behalf of the Nigeria Trust Fund) and between Government and the African Development Fund (on behalf of the Fragile States Unit) which will give us a paved highway along that critical corridor connecting Harper and Karloken, that links our most southeasterly county, Maryland, to the rest of the country.

Honorable Ladies and Gentlemen: We recall also your ratification of the Restated and Amended Production Sharing Contract for LB-13 between Government and ExxonMobil Exploration and Production Liberia Ltd., a subsidiary of the world's largest oil company, and Canadian Overseas Petroleum (Bermuda). This contract brings into the offshore oil exploration arena in our territory another reputable, credible giant oil company. It elevates Liberia on the list of frontier countries with encouraging prospects. Today, in the mineral resource sector, Liberia boasts the presence of some of the largest, most-experienced, and reputable companies as contracting partners for exploration and extraction of our mineral and hydrocarbon resources.

Honorable Ladies and Gentlemen: We were especially pleased that you ratified the Financing Agreements with the International Development Association for the Smallholder Agricultural Productivity Enhancement and Commercialization Project, and for the Smallholder Tree Crop Revitalization Project, both aimed at stimulating agricultural production among our small farmers. We also recall passage of the Voluntary Partnership Agreement with the European Commission, which sets the stage for assured access of our forests products into European markets.

Mr. Vice President, Mr. Speaker, Mr. President-Pro Tempore, Honorable Ladies and Gentlemen: Thank you for the several bills passed in support of good governance and the rule of law, thereby promoting administrative efficiency and fostering peace and security for our people. Paramount among these were bills to improve the investment climate and strengthen the financial system against money laundering by, among other things, establishing a Financial Intelligence Unit; and creating the Ministry of Finance and Development Planning and a semi-autonomous Revenue Authority. Our Penal Code was strengthened by amendments on illicit human trafficking, extortion, environmental crimes, and fraud. The Jury Law was amended to expand access to justice, improve sentencing in criminal cases, and to better facilitate the conduct of trials.

For local government, several new statutory districts were established which are likely to be integrated into a larger governance structure once the Local Government Act is passed. This will ensure that new statutory districts are not created solely for political purposes or would not impose undue burdens on the National Budget.

As you commence this 3rd Session of the 53rd Legislature, we urge you to consider passage of other bills that have been submitted but remain under deliberations. In particular, we refer to Bills that would:

Amend the Penal Code by providing for the Criminal Conveyance of Land; ♣

Amend the Act establishing the Liberia Anti-Corruption Commission to provide for immediate Direct Prosecutorial Powers; ♣

Amend the New Executive Law of 1972 to establish the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection; ♣

Repeal Chapter 60 of the Executive Law Creating the John F. Kennedy Medical Center and replace it with a new Chapter 60 to be titled The John F. Kennedy Medical Center Act (2013); ♣

Amend the Telecommunications Act of 2007 with respect to the Liberia Telecommunications Authority; and ♣

Amend Title 21 of the Liberian Code of Laws of 1956 to update the provisions of the Maritime Law and Maritime regulations to implement the Maritime Labour Convention, 2006. ♣

Honorable Ladies and Gentlemen: Several Bills already submitted await your ratification. They are:

the Instrument of Accession to the World Customs Organization (WCO) and the International Convention on the Simplification and Harmonization of Customs Procedures; ♣

the Financing Agreement for the Health Systems Strengthening Project between Government and the International Development Association (IDA); ♣

the African Nuclear Weapon Free Zone Treaty; ♣

the Protocol Relating to the Establishment of the Peace and Security Council of the African Union; ♣

the Bamako Convention on the Ban of the Importation and the Control of Hazardous Wastes in Africa; ♣

the Constitution of the African Civil Aviation Commission; ♣

the Charter of the Africa Finance Corporation; ♣

the African Union Convention on the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources; ♣

the African Union Non-Aggression and Common Defence Pact; ♣

the Protocol on the Statute of the African Court of Justice and Human Rights; ♣

the OAU Convention on the Prevention and Combating of Terrorism; ♣

the Protocol to the OAU Convention on the Prevention and Combating of Terrorism; ♣

the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance; ♣

the Convention on the African Energy Commission; ♣

the OAU Convention for the Elimination of Mercenarism in Africa; ♣

the Cotonou Partnership Agreement; and ♣

the African Union Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons. ♣

embarked upon together nine years ago. I know that I can continue to count on you for support as we consolidate the progress and meet the challenges of the next four years.

Mr. Speaker and Mr. President Pro-Tempore: Thank you for your dedicated leadership of this august body, and for passage of significant legislations to improve the lives of our people. Honorable Legislators: We welcome all of you back, from your annual Recess, and look forward to continued good working relations.

Honorable Legislators: In addressing the Third Session of the 52nd National Legislature on January 28, 2008, I said that we could not bring “quick fixes to the monumental problems that we inherited,” that our tasks would be difficult and our challenges demanding. They remain so today.

We know that we have some distance to travel to overcome the challenges bequeathed to us by the long years of conflict, division, marginalization and exclusion. We know that it will require commitment to stay the course in the fight against corruption. We know that it will take courage to ensure that rights and freedoms are protected. But today, the bonds of our nation are stronger; the direction of our advance is clearer; and the common purpose of nation-building is compelling us to reach out to each other beyond our superficial differences in tribe, age, gender, religion and associations.

Therefore, Mr. Vice President, Mr. Speaker, Mr. President Pro-Tempore, notwithstanding the mounting challenges we face, and the difficult roads we must continue to travel, as a consequence of our combined efforts and the resilience of our people, I am proud to report to you that our Republic is, today, stronger, safer, and steadier than it has been in many years. I can thus say, with confidence, that the consolidation of the processes of Liberia’s renewal is solid; that our Agenda for Transformation, within the context of our National Vision 2030, is sound, realistic and achievable. I salute all Liberians, and thank our development partners for this remarkable achievement.

LEGISLATIVE AGENDA

Mr. Vice President and President of the Senate, Mr. Speaker, Mr. President Pro-Tempore and Members of the Legislature: Thank you, again, for your cooperation in passing into law several pieces of legislation relevant to the reconstruction process of our dear country. The records show that 46 bills were passed and received during the 2nd Session of the 53rd Legislature.

The ratified bills include the Mount Coffee Hydro-Generation Rehabilitation Finance Contract between Government and the European Investment Bank (EIB) and the International Development Association (IDA) for the Accelerated Electricity Expansion Project, and the Liberia Mr. Vice President and President of the Senate, Mr. Speaker, Mr. President Pro-Tempore and Honorable Legislators: We intend to submit several new bills, in particular:

A Bill to ratify the Loan Agreement between the National Port Authority and the Kuwait Fund for Arab Economic Development for the Port of Greenville Rehabilitation Project; ♣

A Bill to Amend the Judiciary Law to Create Criminal Court “F” of the First Judicial Circuit, Montserrado County and Special Divisions of the Circuit Courts of other Counties to have Exclusive Original Jurisdiction over Corruption and Related Economic and Financial Crimes; ♣

A Bill to ratify the 1988 United Nations Convention against Illicit Trafficking in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances; ♣

A Bill to Amend the Executive Law, Chapter 22, on the Ministry of Justice, Subchapter F, to strengthen the Liberia Drug Enforcement Agency; ♣

A new Controlled Drug and Substances Act; ♣

A Bill to Establish the Rubber Development Fund to mobilize financial resources to regenerate the rubber sector; ♣

A Bill to Establish a Securities Market in Liberia; ♣

A new Local Government Act in harmony with national policies designed to more efficiently render services in a decentralized manner; ♣

An Amendment to the Public Health Law to add a new Chapter on Mental Health; ♣

An Amendment to the Civil Procedure Law on Special Proceedings Concerning Mentally Disabled and Legally Incompetent Persons to be titled the “Mental Health Procedural Act”; ♣

A new law for regulating insurance to be titled the Insurance Act (2014); ♣

An Amendment to the Charter of the University of Liberia; ♣

An Amendment to the 1989 Act Creating the National Commission on Higher Education; ♣

A Bill to Establish the Liberia National Tourism Authority; ♣

A Bill to ratify the protocol establishing the Community Court of Justice for ECOWAS; ♣

Multiple Bills relating to ratification of several treaties, conventions and protocols Government has signed with the United Nations World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) and the Africa Regional Property Organization (AFRIPO) to protect the literary and artistic works of musicians, motion picture producers, writers and inventors; ♣

An Amendment to the Mineral Development Agreement among the Government of Liberia, Sesa Goa Limited and Bloom Fountain Limited; ♣

A Bill to ratify the Hague Convention on Inter-Country Adoptions; ♣

A Bill Outlining Procedures for the Exercise of the Constitutional Authority for Expropriation; ♣

A Bill to ratify a Mineral Development Agreement between Government and Hummingbird Resources (Liberia) Inc.; ♣

A Bill to ratify a Concession Agreement between Government and the Liberia Cocoa Corporation, a wholly Liberian-sponsored agricultural enterprise; and ♣

A Bill to ratify a Power Purchase Agreement and an Implementation Agreement between Jindal Corporation and Government for the construction of a 175 MW coal power plant. ♣

Honorable Ladies and Gentlemen: Additionally, we will be submitting, for your consideration:

A Bill to Create Special Economic Zones in the country; ♣

A Bill to Establish an Energy Law to govern the energy sector; and ♣

A Bill for National Wildlife Conservation and for the Management of Protected Areas of Liberia; and Concurrently, in keeping with the Forestry Reform Law of 2006 that requires Government to place 1.5

million hectares (30 percent) of forestlands under protection, we will submit a bill to establish the Gola National Park. ♣

Mr. Vice President, Mr. Speaker, Mr. President Pro-Tempore and Members of this Honorable Legislature: Laws crafted must be consistent with our national interests, determining, before submission to you, the financial implications. Antiquated laws that retard the promotion of our fledgling democracy should be abolished. This Government was one of the first two African States that signed the Table Mountain Declaration, which calls for decriminalizing freedom of expression. Therefore, we will submit, for your consideration, bills to repeal all repressive laws as found in the statutes and in decrees of the PRC.

During the last several weeks, Honorable Members of the House of Representatives have been conducting consultations on a new Petroleum Law and the restructuring of the National Oil Company of Liberia (NOCAL). We trust the process you have undertaken will lead to a Petroleum Act that we would find suitable to approve.

Honorable Ladies and Gentlemen: During the period under review, we issued seven (7) Executive Orders to address national imperatives. They are: Executive Order #49 – Extension of Executive Order No. 36 Exempting the Liberia Water and Sewer Corporation from Customs Duties on Certain Products; Executive Order #50 – Moratorium on the Exportation of Unprocessed Natural Rubber; Executive Order #51 – Extension of Executive Order #41 Exempting Selected Entities from Customs Duties on Fuel; Executive Order #52 – Suspension of Sections 904(a) and 904(b) of the Revenue Code of Liberia as Amended 2011; Executive Order #53 – Moratorium on Public Land Sales; Executive Order #54 – Temporary Suspension of Import Duty and Goods and Services Tax on Commercial Public Transport Buses; and on Spare Parts for the National Transit Authority (NTA) Buses; and Executive Order #55 – Re-Issuance of an Administrative Code of Conduct for Members of the Executive Branch of Government.

THE STATE OF THE ECONOMY

Honorable Ladies and Gentlemen: We have indeed made significant advances in economic growth and development over the last eight years of our national stewardship. We are proud of the achievements of the Liberian people. But we must all be reminded that our country is recovering from a low economic base where 90 percent of our productive capacity had been destroyed, which is arguably the greatest decrease in economic output recorded in any country since World War II. Coming from where we were – a broken, destroyed and nearly incapacitated country – we have made marked progress in economic revitalization and the restoration of basic social services as part of the governance pact with the Liberian people. Socioeconomic conditions have improved as a result of the combined strong efforts of the national government, the people of Liberia and our development partners. As much as has been achieved in economic and social development and reduction in the effects of the multi-dimensions of poverty, we do admit that significantly more must be done and more will be done. What is required now is continued peace and stability and the combined efforts of all Liberians in advancing the national cause of shared growth and development.

In the decades preceding instability, Liberia's growth record was remarkable as shown in statistical terms, but this masked serious problems of poverty and inequality in much of the country. The Agenda for Transformation recognizes this, pointing out that Vision 2030 will only be achieved if there is Economic Transformation – addressing long-standing structural deficiencies. The beginning years of our national recovery required reactivation of growth in those traditional economic sectors; however, these latter years demand a commitment not to repeat the mistakes of the past – to respond to inequality by lifting a larger number of the population out of long-standing poverty through inclusive growth.

Historically, our growth potential is challenged by chronic deficits in critical infrastructure, and a largely undiversified economy dependent mainly upon traditional export products – iron ore, rubber and timber – which are exposed to global markets' volatility.

Despite these historical constraints and the sluggishness of global economic recovery in the last two years, the Liberian economy continues to be resilient. Growth registered an average annual 8 percent between 2006-2013 – the third highest in the ECOWAS region and well above the sub-Saharan Africa average of 2.5 percent.

Growth and progress could have registered even higher levels if greater effort had been made to unleash the potential consistent with the more than US\$16 billion which was mobilized in Direct Foreign Investment. As we move to address historical constraints, infrastructure is a first priority. An economic Constraints Analysis conducted by the Government in collaboration with the Millennium Challenge Corporation, has identified electricity and roads as the two binding constraints to economic growth and private investment.

Reform of the fiscal system which started in 2006 is still a long way away from the efficiency level required to fully support our economic aspirations. The budget has increased significantly since FY2006/7, allowing service provision and investment to expand. Core revenue (tax revenue, non-tax revenue and grants) increased by an average of 29 percent each year, and total revenues, including contingent revenue and on-budget borrowing, rose from US\$148 million in FY2006/7 to US\$559 million in FY2012/13. Continued sluggishness in core revenue, increasing by only 17 percent over the previous year, and an average 27 percent over the seven years, suggests more effort to strengthen the Ministry of Finance which needs to take bolder steps, including proposed legislation to broaden the tax base.

Even though good partnership relations through grant support and one-off payments from sign-on bonuses have covered revenue gaps over the past years, this practice is not sustainable and could become a disincentive to efficiency in tax collection and tax consciousness. A vigorous tax enforcement plan is being finalized by the Ministry of Finance, to be implemented by a Special Task Force as we move to make the Revenue Authority operational at a much faster pace. The activities of this Task Force may cause discomfort and embarrassment for some public officials and prominent individuals and businesses that are yet to pay their fair share of taxes. We encourage each of us to check our records and move quickly into full compliance. It is only by paying our fair share of taxes that we can boast of truly contributing to our national reconstruction and development.

Expenditure for budget year 2012/13 totaled US\$593 million, an increase of 22 percent over the previous year and annual average growth of 28 percent over the seven-year period. Recurrent expenditure, especially wages and salaries and goods and services, continue to dominate the budget, crowding out the capital expenditure required for a growing economy. In 2012/13, this amounted to US\$326 million out of a total expenditure of US\$593 million.

Capital expenditure in the Public Sector Investment Plan (PSIP) increased to US\$138 million in FY2012/13 from the US\$51.9 million allocated in the previous year. This included off-budget lending of US\$14.4 million through concessional loans and credits. Additional off-budget financing through grants and loans to support programs and projects amounted to a disbursed amount of US\$499 million, representing about 83 percent of the aid projection of US\$567 million.

Loans contracted from external sources to date total approximately US\$757 million. In support of a wide range of development activities, Acts covering US\$456 million have been ratified while Acts for US\$300 million are currently before you pending ratification.

Domestic debt service during the period totaled approximately US\$40 million, representing settlement of Central Bank of Liberia's US\$7.5 million bridge and US\$21.2 million overdraft facilities. An additional US\$11.8 million was paid to settle other domestic debts, and US\$7.09 million to external debts.

Having complied with the requirements of the HIPC program, which led to the waiver of a significant portion of our external debt, Liberia is able to access financial markets once again to increase public sector investment with fiscally prudent borrowings aimed solely at addressing the infrastructure deficit.

For the first time, the FY2012/13 budget was prepared using a Medium-Term Expenditure Framework (MTEF), a process that programs revenues and expenditure over a three-year period, thus aligning with the Agenda for Transformation.

Many challenges remain in improving financial management, a situation exacerbated by unduly long procurement processes which must be corrected. We are addressing these shortcomings by strengthening the Medium-Term Expenditure Framework budget process; strengthening the technical capacity of the Project Management Office in the Department of Budget; and reviewing the laws, provisions and organizational arrangements in the procurement process. We will also implement stringent guidelines relating to the State-Owned Enterprises which will no longer be allowed to make discretionary disbursements, approved by self-serving Boards that are not in conformity with our priorities and goals.

Honorable Legislators: If we are to achieve our development goals and respond to the calls of our citizens for better roads, more lights, available and affordable power, more water, more schools and more hospitals, we must reduce the waste in recurrent expenditure, and increase public sector investments to the level of minimum annual US\$150 million, as required to achieve our growth targets.

We therefore ask, in the interest of a smooth budget process in this political year, that you exercise caution and consultation in your review and action on the budget submitted by the Executive. We too want more development in the rural areas, but this can only be achieved through a realistic budgetary process and a collaborative effort that recognizes respective constitutional mandates.

The financial system has continued to expand under the guidance of the Central Bank of Liberia (CBL) – in branch networks, foreign exchange bureaux and credit unions. This resulted in significant expansion in credit which was buoyed by policy measures relating to more stringent action by the CBL and the Commercial Court, resulting in a decrease in non-performing loans. Credit expansion will also be positively impacted once delayed implementation of the decision to reduce the reserve requirement of commercial banks is made, thus bringing the CBL in harmony with similar institutions in the region. Credit expansion will also have greater potential and maximum impact when citizens demonstrate their responsibility by repaying their loans, a factor which continues to weaken access to credit for local companies.

Relatively stable since 2010, the Liberian dollar came under enormous pressure during the year, resulting in a depreciation of 15 percent. This was due in part to deteriorating terms of trade caused by rising demand for imports and decline in exports from rubber which, along with iron ore, represents 95 percent of total exports. The UNMIL drawdown has also impacted the injection of foreign exchange into our market. The depreciation was also due to speculative capital flight which was addressed by CBL intervention in the foreign exchange market, which mopped up excess Liberian dollar liquidity that contributes to exchange rate volatility. At the same time, international reserves fell US\$14 million below the target level required under our program with the International Monetary Fund, implying less than three-month import cover. A CBL decision placed US\$22 million in commercial banks as economic stimulus lending to the agricultural and construction sectors and to Liberian businesses. The beneficial results of this action can only be assured through better coordination and cooperation by the leadership of the Central Bank and the Ministry of Finance.

Nevertheless, the high level of dollarization moderated the effect of the depreciation, keeping inflation at a single-digit 7.5 percent, which compares favorably with other countries in the region. The reserve target under our program with the International Monetary Fund was also met at the end of December.

The CBL remains a strong institution with potential to do more in support of growth in the economy. Significant progress has been made in regulating the activities of the insurance sector, modernizing the payments system and establishing a collateral registry. The issuance of 90-day Treasury bill denominated in Liberian dollar commenced in the fourth quarter of FY2012/13, primarily to facilitate revenue smoothing and as an initial step towards the creation of a domestic money market.

A four-year roadmap was formulated to address the dual currency issue through a rational and gradual transition process of de-dollarization through the removal of barriers to increase demand for transaction in Liberian dollars. A more effective cooperative role by the monetary and fiscal authorities will ensure that the economy performs as planned and the roadmap is implemented as envisioned.

Agriculture remains the key sector of the economy for local employment creation, poverty reduction, food security and income generation, as over 60 percent of the population depends on this sector for livelihood. Food security is listed as a national priority, but we must admit that there has been under-investment by both the public and private sectors. Only massive investment can fix this under-performing sector so that it can play the vital role of delivering inclusive economic growth, environmental sustainability and long-term poverty reduction. Our scarce budget resources cannot do this, given the many other priorities, so we will need to attract investment from the private sector. At the same time, the private sector will not respond if there is continued harassment, extortion and unreasonable community demands.

Consistent with national priority, the Ministry of Agriculture has mobilized support for smallholders with production potential in rubber, coffee and cocoa, as they will have positive impact on exports and employment. More needs to be done for smallholders in food crop and animal production who continue to produce at subsistence level in the informal sector. Support will require more than tools and seeds, as the lack of roads, storage and markets also serve as major constraints.

Bold action may be required by shifting from the existing low funding level to one that will build a solid foundation for a highly productive, internationally competitive and diversified agricultural sector. The 2014/15 budget submission will thus include: support for access to credit for farmers at an initial funding level of US\$9.3 million; addressing the serious health concerns of small farmers – especially those producing rice in the more productive lowlands fields – with a three-year annual investment of US\$ 1.7 million; and a three-year agricultural mechanization proposal with an annual investment of US\$2.3 million.

Progress was made in developing the poultry industry. With direct support from the former President of Nigeria, the Obasanjo Farms, Liberia (OBL) was established in Grand Cape Mount County, and the first part of the operation – the production and sale of fresh eggs – was formally opened for business in July. A hatchery for the supply of day-old chicks will become operational in early March, and a Feed Mill will become fully operational thereafter.

Project New Outlook (PNO), an agricultural-based NGO established in 1998, is headed by its founder and Executive Director, Mrs. Beatrice Togba Wuo, with their head office at Barnard Farm, Paynesville, and two production sites in Zoe Dahn Clan. With funding from the Finnish Refugee Council, PNO launched a community-based program in 1999 with vulnerable women – widows, single parents and young girls that have dropped out of school, are unemployed, and yet bearing children – from the Forzohn Community, Mambahn District, and lower Margibi County. Between 2003-2006, PNO worked in 30 communities in Margibi County, in partnership with Mercy Corps, and provided training and support for improved farming methods. Mrs. Togba Wuo and her team are currently partnering with Finn Church Aid to implement two agricultural projects in which they support 96 vulnerable women farmers that have been trained to produce and market eggs and assorted vegetables in rural and urban areas of Montserrado County. We commend them and recognize Mrs. Togba Wuo's presence here today.

Important action has been taken to stimulate the fishing industry, which has the potential to supply the local and export markets, increase revenue and create jobs. Tuna fish licensing will commence in February; and two fish landing clusters – a one-stop center where caught fish are stored, processed and distributed for the local market or for export – will be constructed in Grand Bassa and Grand Cape Mount Counties. A coastal station will be built in Harper, Maryland County; and industrial fish offloading and export jetties will be constructed at the Freeport of Monrovia. The head office of the Bureau of National Fisheries will be constructed at the Omega Village, in Paynesville, to monitor the implementation of the National Fisheries Policy. Legislation, as required, is near completion for submission to you.

Land is the critical asset of a natural resource rich country. Liberia has a total land area of 111,370 square kilometers, including 96,320 square kilometers of land and 15,050 square kilometers of water. Agriculture land constitutes about 27 percent of the total land area, but only about 5 percent of the land mass is under cultivation, making land utilization extremely low and lagging behind other countries in the region.

Access to land and security of tenure have been major constraints to increased production and productivity in the concession agriculture sector. This is due to competing and conflicting rights of tenure among mining, agriculture and forestry operators, creating tensions exacerbated by the historical claims to land in affected rural communities.

The Government has responded robustly to the issue. The Land Rights Policy promulgated in May is the clearest and most comprehensive categorization of land rights ever articulated in public policy in Liberia. Categories of land rights include: Private Land Rights, Customary Land Rights, Government Land Rights, and Public Land Rights. The Land Rights Policy represents a paradigm shift away from the unwritten but widely accepted policy of the past that gave government ownership rights over all lands. This is consistent with our decentralization program, and will provide opportunities for empowering rural communities by allowing them to manage their land and land-based resources so as to advance their economic growth and development. To ensure implementation of the new Policy, a draft Land Rights Law has been completed and is undergoing public validation for subsequent submission to you.

The Land Commission has also tackled other areas in the land sector. Land disputes continue to be a dominant feature of community life throughout the country. Land Coordination Centers have been established and are fully operational in Lofa, Margibi, Bong, Nimba and Maryland Counties. They serve as pilots in coordinating Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) for dealing with land disputes in these five counties.

Passage of the Criminal Conveyance of Land Bill is awaiting House concurrence. This bill which addresses criminal activities in the land sector, such as fraudulent sales, will enhance access to land and improve tenure security.

There is urgent need to create a new land agency, which would consolidate the land sector and improve efficiency and transparency of land administration and management. A draft creating the new agency is under review and will subsequently be forwarded to you.

Liberia is rich in natural resources: virgin forests accounting for 43 percent of the biodiversity in West Africa; mountains filled with iron ore, gold and other minerals; fertile land, with plentiful rain for agriculture; and our share of the Atlantic Ocean filled with varieties of fish and the potential for hydrocarbon.

The exploitation of these resources must be done in an appropriate governance framework that will protect the national interest but continue to create a conducive environment for investment. The management of our natural resources calls for an open and transparent environment which guarantees investors a fair return on their investment, while maximizing benefits for Liberian citizens and Liberian businesses.

New forest laws stress the integration of community, conservation, and commercial forest management, while a Community Rights Law empowers communities to fully engage in the management of forest resources.

The National Forestry Reform Law of 2006 makes provision for the issuance of five categories of forest resource licenses to access forest contracts: Forest Management Contract (FMC), Timber Sales Contract (TSC); Private Use Permit (PUP); Forest Use Permit (FUP); and Community Forestry. Poor management of the implementation of those laws resulted in a setback in attracting quality investors to the sector and in a major loss in revenue.

The issuance of 63 PUPs prior to the formulation of relevant regulations to guide the process raised national and international concerns. A Special Independent Investigating Body (SIIB) we constituted to probe the matter made recommendations that led to a moratorium on the issuance and operations of all PUPs pending the validation of the draft regulation. Meanwhile, 29 of the 63 PUPs issued have been revoked, while the remaining 34 are being reviewed for further action and possible cancellation. It should be noted, however, that this has no effect on forest operations which continue for entities with valid Forest Management Contracts.

Full revival of the sector, including contributions to revenue, is expected with passage of the legislation relating to bid premiums. The Board of Directors has been reconstituted and new management has taken bold steps toward compliance with all laws and regulations. The Voluntary Partnership Agreement with the European Union should attract quality investors committed to value addition to the sector.

The National Bureau of Concessions began work, with stakeholders, to develop a uniform national template to monitor and evaluate the compliance of concessionaires in the country, in order to reduce the many and often confusing reportorial lines. A National Concessions Cadastre is to be established for the administration and operation of a unified National Concessions Database System that will integrate and consolidate a repository of concession information. The Bureau is to make certain that concessionaires remain in full compliance with the terms and conditions of their respective concession agreements, and ensures that Liberian citizens and firms get the anticipated employment and business opportunities from these concession contracts.

The Bureau faces challenges, including the lack of human capacity, logistics and insufficient budget allocation. The new management is expected to address these challenges to meet the purpose for which the Bureau was created.

The Liberia Maritime Authority, despite the current global economic crisis was able to conduct its planned activities, contributing approximately US\$19 million to the National Budget.

The Liberia Marine Training Institute, opened in October 2011 after closure since 1989, graduated 80, bringing to over 500 the number of trained and certified Liberians who are now prepared for employment in the Maritime sector. This is most inadequate when we consider that 4,000 vessels are registered under our Flag. Plans are under way to expand opportunities and train more Liberians for employment in maritime work.

The Authority initiated the innovative Beaches and Waterways project which, in its fifth year of operation, continued to employ over 1,900 beach community dwellers. This adds value, as many citizens can now walk and play on the beach without risk to safety and unsanitary conditions.

In 2013, Liberia was one of three sub-Saharan African States re-elected, for the 2014-2015 biennium, to the International Maritime Organization Assembly's 40-Member Council, a notable achievement of the Authority.

The Ministry of Commerce is exploring ways to address the growing trade deficit and the difficult situation faced by consumers who are experiencing the negative consequences of the exchange rate depreciation. This highlights the urgent need to expand the export sector and diversify our economy away from traditional exports to new value-added sectors.

The fastest growing sectors are dominated by micro, small and medium-sized businesses, located in the service and industrial sectors that are producing beverages, vegetable oils, flour, plastic products, agricultural goods and cement. New firms established in 2013 are developing value-added sectors such as biscuit manufacturing and furniture.

One such company, the TIBA Industrial Group, is a local manufacturer of a variety of biscuit products – Marie, Nice, Ginger, Digestive, Glucose, and Cream Cracker – all of them very familiar to Liberians. TIBA biscuits are 100 percent manufactured and packaged here, with plans to export “Made in Liberia” products. TIBA currently employs 90 Liberians operating one shift – 90 percent of whom are women. At full capacity, the plant will operate three eight-hour shifts seven days a week, thereby increasing its workforce to 270 Liberians. This is an excellent example of the private sector creating industrial jobs for Liberians, and we want to recognize here and applaud the proprietors of the TIBA Group: Mackel Gharib, his father Rizkallah Gharib, and Cousin Atta Gharib.

We applaud another successful Liberian businessman who CNN has recognized as the street vendor who turned US\$200 into a potential multi-million-dollar business. He is Mr. Fomba Trawally, founder and owner of National Toiletries Inc. (NTI). Under the label of Kumba, Bendu & Sons, NTI manufactures paper towels, napkins, toilet paper and baby diapers, as well as cleaning products. The company, which started production a little over a year ago, has 45 employees-32 of them women — and is located in Whein Town, in Montserrado County. Let us recognize and appreciate this enterprising Liberian.

The Ministry ensured that MSMEs are assisted with a supportive business climate, by eliminating the L\$4,200 business license fee and simplifying the procedures so that the entire registration process takes an average 48 hours. Liberia is thus rated the third easiest place to register a business in sub-Saharan Africa. This was highlighted during the first MSME Conference which brought together 800 participants comprising banking institutions, service providers and international equity investors, while equally highlighting the challenges faced by local entrepreneurs.

As a partial response to this challenge, we are preparing the guidelines for scrupulous implementation of Government's decision to direct 25 percent of public procurement of goods and services to Liberian businesses, which amounts to access to millions of dollars in public procurement opportunities.

These businesses will also be helped by the Liberia Innovation Fund for Entrepreneurs (LIFE), in joint support from budget resources and the Liberia Bank for Development and Investment (LBDI). Efforts are under way to formulate policies and systems to protect consumers from arbitrary price increase and from poor quality goods. Without prejudice to our commitment to competitive open markets, we are considering ways to help private investment in local industries, which need protection from the influx of competing imports. Another measure under consideration is to impose a one-year transitional period after which non-Liberians will be restricted to wholesaling, providing retailing opportunities for Liberians.

The government has provided multiple opportunities to bring business to local SMEs, totaling over US\$400,000 in the last year. Additionally these businesses have access to assistance in business planning and development. More help to local businesses translates into more jobs for the Liberian people. Tax waivers, the first SME Directory and an entrepreneurial exchange with Forbes Magazine were some of the initiatives undertaken during the year on behalf of SMEs.

Among initiatives for job-placement opportunities is the WELD program, which recently graduated over 300 students in the areas of welding, carpentry, and heavy-duty machinery. This program will be continued through the Booker Washington Institute, which has already provided the land for constructing a training facility through the UNIDO/Komatsu project.

Having been classified in 2013 by the World Bank Doing Business Survey as the third easiest place to register a business in sub-Saharan Africa, Liberia is now poised for more progress in achieving accession to the World Trade Organization.

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Honorable Members of the Legislature: Consistent with our national interest, the Executive continues to engage positively with all friendly countries and peoples around the world.

We play an active and leadership role in the Mano River Union (MRU), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Union, upholding the ideals of peace and security, and the advancement of regional integration and cooperation.

Overall peace and stability in West Africa has remained stable through the individual and collective efforts of ECOWAS Member States. Notwithstanding, the region faces multiple political and security challenges, mainly linked to transnational organized crimes, piracy and terrorist activities. Liberia was proud to contribute an infantry platoon-size unit of the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL) to join the Africa International Support Mission in Mali (AFISMA) – the first time that our country is participating in peacekeeping operations in 52 years.

Liberia successfully participated in the 50th Anniversary of the Organization of African Unity/African Union (OAU/AU) and, as a founding Member State, planned and executed several nationwide activities in commemoration of the historic event. We also participated in the AU's Extraordinary Session, held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in May, also marking the celebration of the Anniversary.

We continue to serve Africa in leadership positions under the African Union Commission mandate: the African Peer Review Mechanism, aimed to improve governance processes; and the High-Level Committee of African Heads of State to ensure inclusion of Africa's Common Position in the Post-2015 Global Development Agenda. We also chaired the High-Level Panel on Fragile States, under the aegis of the African Development Bank, which aims to mitigate the vulnerability of fragile States to new political and economic shocks.

Honorable Members of the Legislature: As a result of intense diplomacy and concrete confidence-building measures, our administration has deepened friendly relations with the Government and people of Côte d'Ivoire, forging positive cooperation to address border-line tensions such as that which occurred in 2012.

Our two governments, with support from the UN Missions in Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire, made good our respective commitments to stabilize and restore calm along our border through measures intended to bolster security and build confidence. Meetings in Monrovia in September and October among our two governments and the UN peacekeeping missions, led to the establishment of a Joint Council of Chiefs and Elders to encourage border safety and continual promotion of confidence-building.

Our administration continues to pursue a robust development diplomacy agenda through the conclusion of cooperation agreements and joint commissions with friendly governments, including the People's Republic of China, Japan, India, Indonesia, Guinea, Qatar, Equatorial Guinea, Brazil and Côte d'Ivoire. Memoranda of Understanding and Statements of Intent were also concluded with the United States of America and the European Union, establishing political consultation mechanisms for the promotion of

bilateral cooperation. A bilateral forum with the European Commission was held during the year, and similar fora are planned in the United States and Japan in the next few months.

Liberia, as one of three co-chairs, hosted, last January, the Third Meeting of the High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons established by the United Nations Secretary-General to craft a global development framework to replace the Millennium Development Goals when they expire at the end of 2015. We recommend your reading of the report of the Panel, titled "A New Global Partnership: Eradicate Poverty and Transform Economies through Sustainable Development," which has received global acclaim.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs notes with satisfaction the increased foreign diplomatic presence in Liberia as a result of effective diplomacy, and a vote of confidence in the country's future. These include the reopening of the British Embassy in Monrovia, with a Resident Ambassador, after more than 20 years of non-resident diplomatic presence; and opening of Embassies of Brazil, Sweden and the State of Qatar in Monrovia, at the level of Resident Ambassadors.

There are about 38 facilities housing our Chanceries and the residences of our diplomatic staff abroad. Fifteen of these properties are owned by Government. The properties in Washington D.C., Paris and Abuja are in relative good shape; the rest are in serious disrepair and have suffered from neglect over the last quarter century of our civil crisis.

Most of these properties are located in prime areas around the world and, with enough funding to give them a face-lift, Government could find itself owning properties of great value.

Most of the Embassies are understaffed. Staff accommodation is less than desirable, and because of inadequate rental allowances, many of the officers are forced to live in areas that are not representative of their status as diplomats of the Republic.

Additionally, there is no provision in the budget for education allowance or medical insurance coverage for staff and, in many instances, Government is in breach of laws of the host countries regarding benefits of local employees. In the MRU region, we own prime properties for Chanceries in Abidjan, Conakry and Freetown, which are in urgent need of repair and renovation. The residence of the current Vice President of Ghana is a neighbor to the premises of our Embassy, and our Chancery is occupying land in the heart of Accra that is a few feet of the Foreign Ministry of Ghana. If immediate action is not taken to erect decent structures in these two locations, Government could lose them.

The same goes for the property in Addis Ababa. Because Liberia was among the first to acquire property in that country, our Embassy is within a stone's throw of the new multi-million-dollar AU Commission Headquarters. The Ethiopian Government has been patient with us, but we could lose the property unless we meet the standards for properties within that vicinity.

In all, Government may need an allotment of at least US\$20 million in order to bring all of our properties to a minimum standard so that they do not stand out among glittering buildings around the world. Such an allotment would also enable us to improve salaries and other benefits for our staff, and would make it easier to rotate, retire and clean up the Foreign Service.

SECURITY, PEACE, JUSTICE, AND RULE OF LAW

The celebration of a Decade of Peace in 2013 was a milestone achievement for us as a nation, regardless of our individual status, ethnicity, political and religious affiliations. We are all proud of this collective achievement, recognizing that violence, which knows no boundaries or differences, shatters and destroys; while peace pools the resources of a people, leading them to greater development.

With the support of the international community, especially the United States and United Nations peacekeeping and peace-building efforts, Liberia has rebuilt a new, ethnically balanced and professional army; and has embarked upon a process to enhance the professional capacity of the Liberia National Police, immigration and intelligence agencies in line with their responsibility for security within our borders. However, much work remains to be done, and so we welcome the recent UN Security Council Resolution 2116 that extends the mandate of UN peacekeepers to September 30, 2014.

Under the leadership of the Ministry of National Defense, a 1,980-person-strong Armed Forces of Liberia continues to position itself to support a democratic environment through tactical and technical proficiencies and the development of a robust capacity to defend our territorial integrity.

The Armed Forces Training Command, now headquartered at the newly renovated Todee Camp, assumed responsibility for tactical and proficiency training locally, and is presently training 140 new army recruits, which will be increased by some 400 recruits who were vetted and endorsed by the Joint Personnel Board. The AFL is also expanding its Engineering and Medical Units to assist in reconstruction projects and social service delivery. Similarly, the Coast Guard, of 82 persons, is expanding and strengthening its capabilities to patrol and protect our maritime domain, as evidenced by the arrests of several illegal fishing vessels in our waters.

The UNMIL transition plan, which transfers security management of the state to the Government of Liberia, has entered its second phase, having completed phase one in the following strategic locations: Robertsport, Foya District, and the Loguatomou Border, Nimba County. Plans are well under way for trained security units to fill security personnel gaps created by the UNMIL drawdown.

Mr. Vice President, Mr. Speaker, Mr. President Pro-Tempore: In my last year's Annual Message, I indicated that we would, at the 2014 Armed Forces Day Celebration, install a Liberian Army Chief of Staff. Having consulted the relevant committees and your good selves, we have officially nominated, for confirmation by the Honorable Senate, the Chief of Staff, the Deputy Chief of Staff and the Brigade Commander, all of whom, if confirmed, would be installed in these positions on February 11, Armed

Forces Day. We will then bid farewell to General Suraj Abdurrahman who has served us so well as the Command Officer-in-Charge.

In collaboration with the United Nations Peacekeeping Department, the Ministry of Justice managed the establishment of a regional justice and security facility, called the Hub, to decentralize and strengthen the Criminal Justice System. The first Hub, established in Gbarnga to serve Bong, Lofa and Nimba, was inaugurated in February 2013 and is currently at 95 percent completion. This has facilitated a successful management of disruptions in the three counties in the Gbarnga Region over the past year. The new Circuit Courthouses which will open within a month, buttressed by construction of three Magisterial Courts, in each of the other two Hub counties, will further strengthen and make the justice system more accessible to our citizens in the leeward counties. The inclusion of immigration services, starting in the Gbarnga Hub Region, will pre-empt the need to travel to Monrovia to regularize immigration status.

The construction of Hubs 2 and 3, in Zwedru and Harper, respectively, will commence soon. Similar facilities should follow, within the next year, for Buchanan and Tubmanburg, thus covering the entire country on a regional basis.

As mentioned earlier, an Alternative Dispute Resolution program has been established to enhance citizens' access to justice. Activities under this action will include a scoping study to map and evaluate existing approaches; and a pilot project to explore and support innovative approaches at the local level.

Probation services that now cover only Montserrado, Bong, Nimba and Lofa will be expanded this year to include the entire country so that criminal defendants who deserve a second chance will have the opportunity to avail themselves of that right.

The prosecutorial capacity of the Ministry of Justice remains weak, although greatly enhanced by the appointment of a new Solicitor General. Progress is noted in the prosecution of gender-based violence, bank fraud, murder, armed robbery and corruption. A total of 172 cases were tried, with the government winning guilty verdicts in 144 of them.

During the year, a comprehensive nationwide baseline assessment of the Liberia National Police (LNP) was conducted to identify issues and develop a strategic framework for promoting effectiveness and advancement within the service. This is in recognition of the need to address difficulties faced by the LNP in terms of compensation, barracks, and logistics. A forthcoming reorganization and restructuring of the LNP will address these issues and ensure proper treatment for long-tenured officers who have served us well and kept our nation safe.

Training of police at the Police Academy to increase the current strength is ongoing. It is projected that, annually, 600 new graduates from the Academy will enter the LNP. This number will have to be substantially increased to meet the UNMIL drawdown target. We are pleased that the last graduating class included 97 university graduates, who are expected to help enhance the professionalism of the police. Concerns continue about reported corruption and disorderly conduct by police officers that

undermine the reputation of the hundreds who continue to serve honorably despite the difficulties. The LNP must continue to enhance the capacity of its Professional Standards Division to investigate unethical conduct. We ask citizens to continue submitting complaints on unethical conduct for investigation.

In light of the substantial increase in vehicles and the lack of alternative roads, the record showed significant increases in the rate of injuries, deaths and property damage resulting from accidents caused by motorcyclists, particularly on the main arteries. It thus became necessary, as a public safety measure, to regulate and enforce the movement of motorcyclists in and around Monrovia, particularly on Tubman Boulevard. The sharp decline in the number of motor vehicle accidents indicates that this was the right decision.

The Liberia National Fire Service (LNFS), as another safety-promoting measure, undertook a massive Fire Prevention and Safety Awareness campaign in six major communities in Monrovia and its environs. It is planned to extend this to certain at-risk communities in other counties. The government has expressed special gratitude to the Fire Rescue Alliance of Minnesota, USA, for its support in procuring new fire service equipment and in-service training for LNFS officers.

The fight against trafficking in persons (TIP) is gaining momentum. Amendment to the 2005 Act on Trafficking in Persons to include Migrant Smuggling, resulted in a number of offenders being investigated and prosecuted for human trafficking. Endorsement of the five-year National Action Plan and early prosecution of offenders will add to this momentum and give evidence of progress to reverse the negative reporting which the country faces.

Drug usage and drug-related offenses remain one of the greatest security challenges, as our small country is plagued by an alarming rate of drug abuse and drug trafficking. Major effort is under way by the Drug Enforcement Agency, in coordination with other security agencies, to enforce vigilance and aggressive response in investigating and dismantling domestic illicit drug activities. Two major cases involving international offenses were prevented by the Drug Enforcement Agency and the National Security Agency, resulting in indictment in U.S. courts.

ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATION

Honorable Members of the Legislature, My Fellow Liberians: The absence of reliable and affordable electricity, and the poor condition of a significant portion of our primary road network, represents major constraints to private sector value addition, investment and overall national development. If we are to achieve the economic transformation of our country, which guarantees a future of prosperity and employment for our youthful population, it is paramount that we invest, among other things, in infrastructure, giving priority to power, roads and ports, as well as to agriculture and forestry which have the potential to expand the economy for rural participation and food security.

Our Energy Program, under the leadership of the Ministry of Lands, Mines and Energy, is guided by a comprehensive electricity master plan which covers the development of electricity infrastructure and expansion of access to quality and affordable electricity services in the short, medium and long term.

In the short term, the focus is to expand the transmission and distribution infrastructure and to respond to the demand of residential and commercial customers. The medium term of one to three years will see major expansion in generation capacity.

In this regard, rehabilitation of the Mount Coffee hydroelectric power plant, our flagship program, is well on course. Manufacturing of the turbines, the most critical component of the project, is already under way, and physical work on the powerhouse and dam has already commenced.

Two days ago, on January 25, to the rousing reception and delight of the people of Louisiana, a few of you joined me and several of our partners in groundbreaking for the civil works phase of the project.

Even as Mount Coffee progresses, plans formulated by the Liberia Electricity Corporation (LEC) call for continually increasing our power-generation capacity by constructing three heavy fuel oil (HFO) power plants at the Bushrod Island facility. A total capacity of 38 megawatts will more than double the existing generation capacity, enabling us to connect more customers and offer electricity services at more affordable prices.

In order to upgrade the grid to absorb the power generated from Mount Coffee and the HFO power plants, the grid will be extended to new areas in the city, including the City Center, Sinkor, and communities along Duport Road, Rehab Road, Zuba Town Road and ELWA Road.

The Cross-Border Project, through which electricity will be provided to Maryland, Grand Gedeh and Nimba Counties from Côte d'Ivoire, progressed significantly, thereby expanding electricity access outside of Monrovia. Citizens are today rejoicing in Ganta, Saclepea and Sanniquellie as grid lights reach cities in Nimba, with Grand Gedeh and Maryland to benefit similarly within the next few weeks. The commissioned Yandehoun micro-hydro power plant, in Lofa County, is already supplying power to Yandehoun and surrounding towns, benefitting close to 1,000 persons. Plans are under way to secure a US\$50 million facility to replicate this success, constructing up to ten mini- and micro-hydro power plants in rural areas across the country.

The Three Corridors Project – to construct a transmission line from Monrovia to Kakata, Monrovia to Klay, and Monrovia to Harbel – is well advanced. A US\$144 million line of credit from the Republic of India for the construction of high-voltage 225 kV transmission lines across the country will facilitate the delivery of power services in these corridors.

Liberia was among six African countries included in U.S. President Barack Obama's Power Africa initiative, which aims to double electricity access in sub-Saharan Africa by building on the continent's

potential in gas and oil as well as its huge potential to develop clean energy. Power Africa will mobilize the U.S. private sector to add 10,000 megawatts of cleaner, more efficient electricity generation capacity, while also increasing electricity access by at least 20 million new households and businesses. We are actively engaged in identifying a U.S. private sector partner, as required by the program, to ensure that Liberia succeeds in benefitting from this important initiative.

Deteriorated and inadequate road networks throughout Liberia have had adverse effects on the costs and transport of goods and services, vehicle operation costs, safe movement of citizens and residents within our borders, regional investments and trade opportunities, and the delivery of development and humanitarian assistance for our citizens.

In order to address this situation, we have, under the direction of the Ministry of Public Works, invested huge sums in the construction of roads and bridges. These investments focus principally on primary road networks that connect production areas to markets, connect county capitals, and enhance national and sub-regional security, trade and commerce.

Pavement of the Diahn-Blae Gbehzohn Highway, in Grand Bassa County, is completed. Construction is now accelerating on two major corridors: the Red-light to Gbarnga to Ganta (Guinea Border) Highway and the Kakata to Bong Mines Road. In order to address the delay, and in conformity with financial requirements, the Government had to pay over US\$22 million to resettle individuals with properties in the right of way – many of whom lacked title and built illegally, knowing the road construction was coming. By the end of 2014, our people will begin to feel the immediate impact of these major developments in their lives – reduced travel time and costs of vehicle operation and maintenance, better access to and reduction in costs of basic goods and services, and enhanced development in affected communities.

Efforts and negotiations are under way, in fulfillment of our commitment to connect county capitals with paved roads. Feasibility studies and detailed engineering design for the Kornia to Voinjama and Mendekorma Corridors are completed, and a similar study for the Gbarnga to Kornia Corridor is nearing completion. A special donor conference, in Monrovia, is planned for this year, to mobilize support for the construction of these vital roads which have high economic potential. The importance of this road is sufficiently high, requiring, if necessary, the allocation of budget resources to achieve this objective. We are unlikely to be able to meet our commitment to pave the Buchanan to Cestos to Greenville Corridor in time for the July 26 celebration, but an upgrade will take place as we seek financing for the full pavement.

The first phase of the asphalt pavement of at least 50 kilometers of road that will link Harper to Karloken is scheduled to commence this year – a significant milestone that signifies Government's commitment, making the southeast section of the country more accessible. The Ganta to Harper road has been divided into segments to allow for phased development: Ganta to Tappita, Tappita to Zwedru, Zwedru to Fish Town and Fish Town to Harper. Feasibility studies for the segment between Zwedru and Fish Town are under way, as we seek financing for the feasibility and pavement of all segments.

In partnership with the Government of Sweden, the development of our feeder road networks continues. More than 100 kilometers of feeder roads have been rehabilitated in Nimba and Lofa Counties, thereby increasing community-level farm to market access and connectivity to secondary and primary roads.

Plans for the pavement upgrade of the 70-kilometer road between Ganta and Yekepa are concluded, with work expected to commence this year. The pavement was upgraded from double surface treatment “chip seal” to full asphalt pavement in consideration of the anticipated typical traffic load. As a means of accelerating our road construction program, we will require all concessionaires to deliver on their commitments for road infrastructure development as agreed in their individual concession agreements. This includes pavement of the Zwedru to Greenville and Tubmanburg to Kongo Corridors.

Maintaining laterite roads remains one of the biggest challenges, a situation largely necessitated by budgetary and capacity limitations. This is not helped by an extended rainy season, and the continued abuse and misuse of our roads by road users, particularly with overloaded, multi-axle trucks.

Investment in the upgrading of urban roads is part of an initiative to be felt not only in Monrovia and its environs, but throughout the country. An overall Urban Renewal Initiative aims at upgrading critical community/neighborhood roads to asphalt paved roads. Investments in this initiative include complete upgrade of the SKD Boulevard to a four-lane road corridor; and linking the Monrovia-Paynesville Highway to Somalia Drive. Asphalt overlay works are ongoing on over 10 kilometers of Sinkor streets and avenues, and asphalt upgrades are in progress on the Jamaica, Clara Town, AB Tolbert, Duport, Soul Clinic and Police Academy Road Corridors. Construction of a new double-lane Caldwell Bridge will be completed before the end of 2014, completing the first phase of intervention in the rehabilitation of the Caldwell to Louisiana Road Corridor. A new policy initiative will require that all major road infrastructure projects passing through major cities and county capitals must ensure that primary streets in these cities are also paved.

Reconstruction and upgrade of Somalia Drive will begin within the next month. With support from the Government of Japan, we have commenced an investigatory survey within communities to identify and lay out the auxiliary alleys and roads along the ELWA to RIA Corridor, to ensure proper zoning, planning and laying out of communities. This initiative shall provide a model action plan template for developing communities, designing and constructing road corridors, thus minimizing the potential for citizens to continue building within the rights-of-ways (ROWs). The success of this program will afford Government the opportunity to replicate these activities in other major urban communities throughout the country.

There has been less than satisfactory progress on the enforcement of our Zoning Laws and land-use planning regulations. Although hundreds of Stop Work and Removal Orders in Monrovia were issued, developers and builders continue to ignore the rules of engagement, by constructing without the approval and permitting required by the Government. In order to enforce our zoning ordinances and laws, all illegal structures built within the rights-of-ways of existing and future road corridors will be removed. I have also instructed the Ministry of Public Works to demolish all structures on Tubman Boulevard that violate

pedestrian pavement safety and the Zoning Laws. Those who, for personal gain, have allowed the defacing of our prime corridor will face the brunt of their illegal and corrupt practices.

We recognize the challenges throughout the country for affordable housing, and in this regard, are pleased to report that plans are near completion for a 500-unit housing complex near the University of Liberia Fendell Campus, with support from the Government of Equatorial Guinea as a show of solidarity among African nations. The housing situation at West Point, which accommodates 31,000 citizens, demands a long-delayed response. Architectural design is under way to address this problem for which your approval will be sought through budgetary allocation in the next fiscal year.

Construction or rehabilitation of new facilities at the Monrovia Vocational Training Center in Paynesville is nearing completion, but we have experienced delays in rehabilitation or construction of the Samuel Kanyon Doe Sports Complex, a new Ministerial Complex in Congo Town, and expansion of facilities at the Capitol Building Complex.

These delays, which include land ownership and long-standing contractual arrangements and depositor rights, have also delayed reconstruction of important public facilities, including Ducor Hotel, Hotel Africa, the National Housing & Savings Bank Building, and the E.J. Roye Building. We can no longer accept these claims and delays, and will move, with court action or otherwise, as required, to complete these works. Large holdings of urban land have also delayed the development of our cities, a situation that must be addressed through the draft Act that provides the process for implementing the constitutional right of eminent domain.

The transport sector is beginning to feel the effect of the reform under the Transformation Agenda and management by the Ministry of Transport. A Sector Master Plan was concluded which includes the rehabilitation and modernization of three of the country's four seaports and the one international airport. Plans are under way to rehabilitate several county airstrips, the first one already operational in Foya through support of the NGO, Samaritan's Purse. Surveys, policies and strategic plans aimed at improving travel efficiency and road safety for the road system are well advanced, awaiting detailed project planning for implementation.

The National Port Authority has performed well to counter the situation in which the lack of maintenance over decades left our seaports in dire straits. A 25-year Port Master Plan, which includes investment in human capacity development, was completed during the year. Under a public-private partnership arrangement, the 600-meter Marginal Wharf and the mining pier at the Freeport of Monrovia were completed. Dredging and development at the Sinoe and Buchanan Ports have improved efficiency, with Buchanan judged ready for 24-hour operations. Discussions are under way to secure third-party user rights at the Buchanan Port to facilitate export of iron ore from Guinea. This will result in significant financial and economic benefit to Liberia.

Discussions are also well advanced to meet the requirement for access to port facilities for exports of iron ore from the Bong and Bomi deposits and exports of agricultural produce from Sinoe and Grand Cape

Mount. The Port Authority faces challenges of insufficient space, requiring action by Government to acquire seafront property from county or individuals by purchase or exercise of eminent domain. Another challenge relates to requests from several investors to construct new ports for the export of their products. This must be handled with caution so as not to exacerbate the serious erosion along the entire coastline.

Far from the early days when only one or two airlines flew into Roberts International Airport (RIA), the Airport now services 11 regular international airlines. Passenger numbers have increased on an average of 25,000 a year. With numerous airlines providing services to regional capitals and destinations in Asia, North America and Africa, ticket prices have become so competitive that it is possible to fly round-trip to Accra for less than US\$300 – more than a 100 percent decrease in airfare from as little as four years ago. We are currently negotiating financing with the European Investment Bank, the Saudi Fund for Development and the Arab Bank for Economic Development in Africa to begin the first phase of rehabilitation of the Airport this calendar year.

A major setback in efforts for the development of the airport resulted from an unscrupulous and conspiring newly recruited Managing Director, who returned kindness and deference with entrapment and intriguing accusations to damage the credibility of several individuals and the image of the country. This matter is under review by counsel in the United States for legal redress, including extradition.

An informal perception survey undertaken by the Ministry of Transport indicates that although power is considered a number one priority due to the implication for business and investment in industry, the Liberian people consider good roads as a major condition for improvement in their welfare. The ongoing work for improvement in road condition throughout the country is a response to this call, which will also reduce the high level of road traffic deaths and injuries, and as means of reducing the cost of transportation to facilitate better flow of goods and services.

The same results are expected from the installation of weighbridges, the first currently under construction on the Diahn-Blah Gbehzhohn Highway. Additionally, a requirement for Third Party Motor Vehicle Liability Insurance will be enforced beginning next month by 18 insurance companies recently certified by the Central Bank of Liberia. This action will be enhanced by the established One Day One Stop Shop Platform for vehicle registration and driver license issuance.

Useful transport services are provided throughout the country by motorcyclists operating over 70,000 motorcycles. A few months ago, as a means of reducing the alarming traffic congestion and level of deaths and injuries, it became necessary to restrict motorcycling traffic on the primary artery, Tubman Boulevard. The Ministry of Transport continues to work with the Motorcyclist Union to identify means to assist them.

The National Transit Authority continues to provide reliable and safe road transport services on all existing roads in Montserrado County, with expansion to Bo Waterside, Buchanan, Gbarnga, Harbel, Schieffelin, Kakata and Zwedru. Special transport service, with Government subsidy, is provided to students who commute from Monrovia and environs to the University of Liberia Fendell Campus. The

NTA completed a total of 644,389 passenger trips between March and December 2013 in favor of UL students.

Further expansion of NTA service is hampered by limited fleet. The conclusion of local purchase of nine buses will relieve transport difficulties on Tubman Boulevard, and successful conclusion of ongoing negotiation with the Government of India for 15 additional buses will expand national service to commuters, including those in Gbarnga, Kakata and Bo Waterside who will benefit from the construction of modern bus stations.

The General Services Agency (GSA) is the custodian of Government of Liberia properties and physical assets. This gives it the authority to execute leases, to enforce proper use of vehicles and other assets; to monitor the use and cost of assets purchased through public resources. New leadership at GSA is, perhaps for the first time in decades, trying to carry out these responsibilities successfully. To enable the GSA to accurately record and track all Government assets, and ensure their effective and efficient management for the next generation, urgent funding is required to purchase the Inventory Registry and Assets Management Systems, and implement the Fleet Management System. The Ministry of Finance has been instructed to respond to this need, without further delay.

The telecommunications sector continues to expand. Landing of the Africa Coast & Europe (ACE) fiber cable in Liberia on November 3, 2011, represents a milestone for which the Managing Director of the Liberia Telecommunications Corporation must be applauded for his tireless effort in this achievement. Today, approximately 193,912 Internet subscribers benefit from fast-speed Internet connectivity, with positive impact on income, competition, employment and potential direct foreign investment. The absence of a terrestrial network as a national backbone has constrained growth in this service – a situation to be addressed once the ongoing study on design and cost is concluded. This will also facilitate connectivity in the Mano River countries, thereby promoting regional integration.

As a result of the conclusion of an agreement which failed to meet our legal requirement, the entire LIBTELCO Board of Directors and Managing Director have been suspended until an ongoing investigation is concluded. A reconstitution of the Board and a restructuring of management will follow.

The Liberia Telecommunications Authority (LTA) had a successful and active year of regulatory oversight in the execution of its statutory function. A major contribution was made to the establishment of the Cable Consortium and Liberia's launch, in January 2013, of the ACE (Africa Coast to Europe) fiber optic cable. Consumers are thus able to access true high-speed broadband connectivity through their service providers, the majority of whom are connected to the landing terminal station. This massive operational initiative, funded by a loan with support from the World Bank through the West Africa Regional Communications Infrastructure Program (WARCIP) Liberia Project, will be beneficial for a national capital intensive effort to connect the nation to fast, low-cost, broadband services.

The LTA's new International Gateway Monitoring (IGM) program monitors the performance of incoming international calls to Liberia, providing accurate revenue assurance, quality of service and anti-fraud

management. Since its official launch in April 2013, the IGM program has made significant contribution to Government's revenue. This amount could have been significantly more, were it not for losses attributable to fraudsters' use of illegal SIM Boxes to avoid paying regulatory fees for incoming international calls through the IGM system. The LTA has given assurance that it will continue to vigilantly go after entities and individuals who try to deprive Government of its revenue in the telecommunication sector.

A long-tenure licensed operator, Libercell, was forced to close for lack of resources, and is likely to face auction of its assets to settle outstanding debts to the Government.

In adherence to the mandate of ECOWAS Member States to enact national laws that will develop, modernize and coordinate telecommunications networks throughout the region, the LTA led the process in Liberia to transpose nine legal instruments into national laws that are intended to protect the public's use of telecommunication services and to mobilize national and international financial resources aimed at attracting private sector participation in the provision of telecommunication services in the sub-region.

The LTA and the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications are working towards ensuring compliance with the ITU's June 17, 2015, digital migration deadline. Designated frequencies are assigned for Liberia in the re-planning process, and public and consumer awareness campaigns on migration issues have been planned.

The Liberia Broadcasting System (LBS) has broadened its coverage and has extended its services through the national television to five counties – Montserrado, Margibi, Grand Bassa, Bomi and Grand Cape Mount. The introduction of television services has expanded the scope of service. Nevertheless, cost-efficient and reliable service is likely to be constrained unless there is success in ongoing efforts to mobilize the resources and support to migrate from analogue to digital terrestrial broadcasting by 2015 as internationally required. The cost of the installation is estimated at over US\$50 million. Until that time, both technologies known as "dual illumination," will be used, but we must move quickly to find the means to bring Liberia into the modern technological era.

The Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications has been able to expand and modernize postal services despite limited budgetary and financial support. Twelve of the 15 counties now have functioning post offices, with plans to construct similar facilities in the remaining three.

Services at the main Monrovia Post Office are exemplary, having improved to the level of efficiency which enables them to provide mail and package service to citizens at home and abroad and to resident international citizens and institutions. A pilot program to number structures under a National Postal Address System will further enhance the service. Plans for a future regime which consists of a modern financial electronic transaction processing platform will facilitate the capacity to provide postal financial services such as Local and Regional Electronic Money Order, and Wage/Salary Payments to pensioned government employees, as required by the Universal Postal Union (UPU) protocol.

HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Human development is central to our transformation agenda, and our goal is to improve the quality of life of Liberians by investing in more accessible and higher quality education; affordable and accessible quality healthcare; social protection for vulnerable citizens; and expanded access to healthy and environmentally friendly water and sanitation services.

Education is the most critical element of a development agenda. It is not cheap and it requires sacrifices by parents, students, teachers, leaders, and the entire nation. Our situation is made more difficult by the damage, displacement and cultural mutation of the past, by the spacial nature of our habitation, by the listless attitude of beneficiaries, by the institutional aversion to change.

According to the 2010 Census the system, as currently exists, consists of 2,849 schools – 2103 of which are public, 343 private, 226 religious and mission schools, and 177 community schools. There are five community colleges existing or in pre-operational status – Grand Bassa, Bomi, Bong, Grand Gedeh, Lofa, and Nimba; nine four-year degree-granting institutions, including the University of Liberia and Tubman University which are public; two vocational training institutes – Booker Washington Institute, which plans to move from high school to junior college; and the Monrovia Vocational Training Center, which should move this year into new modern and well-equipped facilities.

The University of Liberia has a current enrollment of 34,000 students in facilities, at both the Capitol Hill and Fendell campuses, that are most inadequate for the numbers. It is time that we create a more conducive atmosphere for learning consistent with what pertains in other countries by completing the Fendell Campus with all the boarding, housing, academic and sporting facilities that are required. A survey of the land is nearing completion after which we will start the process of demolishing the structures, most of them illegal, which have prevented the building of a proper university. Proposals will be made in the next budget to start this process of full relocation from the politics of Capitol Hill to the knowledge center of Fendell.

Tubman University, a proper learning environment, with enrollment of 838 for the first semester of the academic year 2013-2014, is gaining the reputation of a quality technical institution, under a no-nonsense administration. The University will hold its first Commencement program in June 2014. More financial support will enable us to train the professionals needed to enhance national capacity. This will be reflected in our next fiscal budget submission.

While we initiated and promoted the establishment of community colleges, it is clear that we must now limit further expansion due to the lack of teachers and education materials that will result in quality education. A shifting to regional community colleges is now under consideration.

Honorable Legislators and Fellow Liberians: Several months ago, I used rather unsavory terms to describe the education system. I did so as a reality check and a call to action. The Constraints Analysis puts the case: "Though overall school enrolment and educational attainment rates have seen improvements in recent years, it is also important to note that a large percentage of Liberia's current workforce is made up of unskilled labor, particularly in the rural areas and among women. Forty-five

percent of Liberian males age 15 and over have no education or did not complete primary school, and 67 percent of females have no or did not complete primary school. The literacy rate is 57 percent.

“The quality of education will also remain a major challenge in the medium term as most educational institutions lack the necessary laboratory and training materials, and are in need of reconstruction. The performance of the students who have taken nationally administered secondary school examinations tend to be below standard, although there is slow gradual improvement.

“A large number of primary school students are considered inadequately prepared for school. For example, early grade reading results from the 2010 Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) show an average score well below the average for the region. This poor foundation makes it difficult for students that move on to junior and secondary high school and into the workplace.

“The quality of technical/vocational training system also is extremely poor and limited in scope. A 2008 ILO Technical and Vocational Education and Training Tracer Study found that 93% of TVET institutions in Liberia had poor quality education; 69% provided training not relevant to marketplace; and only 19% of graduates were able to find full employment.”

Following a Sector Review, an Education Task Force was established to formulate a four-year plan to respond to the crisis in education. The Operational Plan 2014-2016 focuses on three key areas: increased learning achievement by improving the quality and conditions of teaching and learning; improvement in student performance and completion through increased access, enrolment, transition and retention; transformation of systems through improved education governance and management within the context of decentralization for effective delivery of education services.

Admittedly, the implementation of the Plan is a tall order with huge financial implications. But we must start the process as there is no better way to ensure a better future for our children. I will revert to you once the financial implications of the Plan have been determined.

The Ministry of Youth and Sports continues its response to the growing number of youth through efforts to increase employment and employability by providing short-term jobs, technical and vocational training, and sports development.

To address youth unemployment in particular, the Liberia Youth Employment Program (LYEP), in which the government will invest US\$75 million over the next five years, was launched. It has provided one-year employment for over 3,000 youths who are currently supporting various city corporations in improving waste and sanitation in 26 cities in the 15 counties. As part of a scaling up of the LYEP, plans are under way to fund the technical and vocational training component of the LYEP in next year's budget. This will ensure that many of the youths who are currently working will have the opportunity to acquire technical skills for more gainful employment. To prepare youth to seek employment opportunities outside the LYEP, 200 youths were trained in satellite maintenance and installation to meet the growing needs for digital satellite TV connection in the country, and many are already serving as contractors for satellite service

providers. This year, other components of the program aimed at providing skills and entrepreneurship opportunities for the empowerment of youth are expected to be launched.

This will include: vacations jobs for 5,000 young people under the Special Presidential Back to School Clean up Initiative; the National Youth Volunteer Service Program, which complements the work of key government agencies providing basic services in the areas of education, health, and agriculture and community development in rural parts of Liberia; job readiness training for 100 senior high school female students in information and communication technology; the National Cadet Program, to train scholarly university students at varying ministries and the public sector and develop a new breed of professionals in government.

The Youth, Employment, Skills Training (YES) Program, which in 2013 trained 2,088 youths (689 female and 1,399 male) in various categories of skills and vocational education, including agriculture, general hospitality, food preservation, tailoring, fashion design and road maintenance, was successful in placing 580 of them in jobs, while efforts continue to place the remaining 1,508 over the next ten months.

A Task Force on Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) was established to coordinate and help implement strategies that would close the skills gap, and provide high-quality, demand-driven skills training programs that align with private sector needs. These programs are crucial in helping Liberia's youth obtain jobs until the private sector is fully developed and a diversified economy is fully operational to absorb a larger proportion of the labor force.

Sports have proved to be a major catalyst for peace, reconciliation and development. The 2012/2013 National County Meet, won by Grand Cape Mount, was held under the theme of "Peace and Unity"; that of the 2013/2014 Games is "Celebrating Ten Years of Peace through Sports." The Games provided short-term employment opportunities for 1,365 youth athletes participating in sporting disciplines. We congratulate Grand Bassa County for winning this year's Football Trophy.

We are proud of and applaud our National Amputee Football Team which has won, for the third consecutive time, the championship of the Cup of African Nations on Amputee Football, winning the 4th Cup of African Nations on Amputee Football (CANAF) in Nairobi a month ago. I was proud to accept/receive their trophy at the finals of the National County Meet a week ago.

With support from the Office of the Senior Advisor (OSA), and with a focus on youth empowerment and enterprise development, a modernized car wash center, the first of its kind, called the Executive Car Wash, located at the Old Road Junction in Congo Town was established. The construction work, on land donated by the Von Ballmoos family, took three months, at a cost of US\$87,000, privately donated.

A 30-day training period including courses in financial management and business registration was undertaken, responding to the commitment to our youth.

Today, 54 young lives, removed from the streets, have forever changed; 22 of them have returned to school by financing their own education giving hope via empowerment. They now generate over US\$5,000 monthly from the car wash and other services.

I am pleased to present to you representatives of these successful young entrepreneurs, whose example will be replicated by the construction of three such facilities with the support of NOCAL.

Labor and employment are sides of the same coin. Creating enough jobs so that our people are gainfully employed is essential if they are to work their way out of poverty, thereby enabling our country to reach middle-income status by the year 2030. For this to occur, it is the private sector, rather than government, that must drive the economy and generate more and better employment. Agricultural and mining concessions are expected to generate over 100,000 jobs over their multi-year term, but this is insufficient to absorb the 50,000 youth that are entering the labor force each year. At the same time, with clear policy on linkages and local content, concessions will provide a major opportunity for Liberian businesses to supply goods and services, leading to additional job creation.

Despite the country's robust growth since 2006, unemployment, especially youth unemployment, remains high and a major challenge. According to the Labor Force Survey 2010, vulnerable employment accounted for 77.9 percent of total employment, while informal employment was a staggering 68 percent. Such high levels of vulnerable and informal sector employment mean the Government would have to strengthen efforts to build skills of workers and provide incentives for informal sector businesses to formalize.

A Rapid Assessment on Job Creation was conducted under the auspices of the Ministry of Labour with the objective of (i) determining the socio-demographic characteristics of new entrants into the formal sector; (ii) establishing well-acceptable indicators on the additional jobs created in the economy; and (iii) furnishing policy makers with the required tool for decision-making on the labour market.

In the light of surveys undertaken, the Labour Ministry has formulated policies and strategies to guide the activities of the sector. These include the National Employment Policy Action Plan, along with its monitoring and evaluation secretariat; the 2010 National Child Labour Survey Results – the first report of its kind on child labor activities in the country; and a five-year National Action Plan to fight human trafficking.

The welfare of workers improved considerably under Collective Bargaining Agreements, nine of which were signed between the management of several companies and their respective workers' unions, with significant improvements in the living and working conditions of workers. Unskilled workers at these companies now receive US\$5 or above as daily wages.

The Ministry also docketed 1,515 labor cases from aggrieved employers and employees in the workplace. This high number of cases, an indication that Liberians now have greater confidence in the system and know that cases reported to the Ministry will be speedily adjudicated.

Honorable Ladies and Gentlemen: A great human capital resource for the development of this country lies in the Liberian Diaspora. We trust that as you move forward during this session, and in your deliberations, you will give adequate consideration to the recognition of citizens' rights for those persons born as Liberians, and those born of Liberian parentage who wish to contribute fully to the development of this country as citizens. The grant of Liberian citizenship would enable us to draw on the wealth of financial, technical and other resources available to that category of persons that could be deployed nationally.

The health sector, under the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare, continues to perform well, maintaining the support and confidence from partners who contribute to a pool fund in which priorities are collectively agreed and implemented.

As a major decentralization effort, health service centers have been established in all 15 counties, with aggregate staff of almost 9,000. The training of doctors and other health practitioners, locally and abroad, has enabled the placement of doctors in all 15 county hospitals. Similarly, a post-graduate residency program will deploy specialists in all county hospitals. The country can boast of over 173 Liberian and 83 foreign doctors, up from a total of 90 doctors in 2006, and almost 9,000 health workers, including 699 trained midwives. The construction of five microscopic laboratories in five counties, the installation of solar panels at health facilities in six counties, and the construction of eight incinerators to improve waste management and sanitation in eight counties will enhance the quality of health service delivery.

The launch of the "Promise Renewed" Program, in line with the international "Child Survival Call to Action," will further accelerate the reduction of childhood mortality and improve child health. The Ministry, in an effort to address the plight of vulnerable children provided support to 83 orphanages that cater to 3,357 orphans throughout the country. A National Health Insurance Scheme, now under consideration and planning, is essential to expand citizens' access to health service, and will be presented to you for possible commencement in the next fiscal year.

Despite progress in the sector, major challenges remain. Additional resources will be required to absorb and incentivize the increasing number of doctors and health workers that are trained annually. County hospitals need renovation and equipment enhancement, with Phebe and Redemption Hospitals requiring special allocation. The JFK Medical Center performs the role of country and national referral facility. In the past year, the number of patients receiving service increased significantly to a monthly count of 9,700, up from almost 8,700 in 2012. Lack of a full range of sophisticated equipment limits the quality of care that JFK renders, but this lack is fulfilled in large measure at the Jackson F. Doe Memorial Regional Referral Hospital, which serves monthly patients totaling 1,242 from the country and from regional countries as well.

In order to provide ready access for minor health cases, more clinics and health centers would need to be constructed at district and community levels. Availability and affordability of drugs throughout the country is also an area to be addressed by change in the mandate and structure of the National Drug Service. Government's commitment to free health services for children under five must remain resolute.

There is good news in the sector. The number of children receiving basic vaccines has increased significantly, with Liberia having already achieved the target set for the year 2021 – 90 percent of children under one year are receiving the DPT3/pentavalent 3 vaccination.

The distribution of 100,000 long-lasting mosquito nets to pregnant women receiving antenatal care, contributed to the reduction in the prevalence of malaria from 66 percent in 2005 to 28 percent in 2013; there has been no outbreak of infectious diseases since 2006; and the population living within 5 kilometers, or one hour's walk from the nearest health facility increased from 69 to 72 percent the previous year, making us well on track for the 2021 target at 85 percent.

The maternal mortality rate, although still unacceptably high, has reduced considerably, from 994 in 2007 to 770 per 100,000 live births, with the target at 497 by the year 2021. The under-five mortality rate has declined significantly that Liberia is joining the countries in Africa that are considered to be on-track to achieve Millennium Development Goal 4 by the 2015 deadline. This makes us likely to achieve two of the eight goals – a remarkable achievement since Liberia's effort on these Goals started six years after the kick-off of the MDGs in the year 2000.

This Government remains committed to improving overall health and the quality of life of our people, and increasing access to safe drinking water is at the core of our plan. By reducing the incidence of water-related diseases in our urban centers and rural communities across the country, we will be able to further reduce under-five mortality. We have continued our expansion of pipe-borne water to thousands of customers in and around Monrovia, and in places where it is as yet cost prohibitive to introduce pipe-borne water, we have increased the number of boreholes and sanitation facilities.

Ongoing improvement at the White Plains water treatment plant will increase the daily output of water from 6 million to 10 million gallons by year's end. Even though we now supply as much water to Monrovia as was available before the war, the increase in population means that we have to do more. Efforts are under way to bring online two high-lift electric pumps of 12 million-gallon capacity, allowing us to deliver up to 24 million gallons daily. As a result of these efforts, the water supply to Monrovia and its environs has increased by 30 percent over the past year. Some 175 water kiosks have been activated, reflecting a 60 percent increase in pro-poor water access.

As most Liberians will be quick to point out, Liberia is not Monrovia. In partnership with the African Development Bank, we have succeeded in supplying water either full time or on a partial basis in Buchanan, Kakata, Zwedru and RobertSPORT. With support from USAID, the Liberia Water and Sewer Corporation is completing a situational analysis in Voinjama, Sanniquellie and RobertSPORT, the result of which will form the basis of civil works in these cities. Surveys are also being concluded on water facilities in Greenville, Gbarnga, Ganta and Harper, in order to determine the scale of the required works and funding sources for implementation. Crozierville, Bensonville and the University of Liberia's Fendell Campus will be served this year, once the second set of high-lift pumps has been installed.

The development of a Rural Water Program, to include an operational plan, a program implementation manual, monitoring and evaluation, and operation and maintenance frameworks, is under way. An updated assessment is required for rehabilitating and improving the Fiamah Treatment Plant for the Monrovia sewage system.

The scale of the devastation of infrastructure in and around Monrovia is evident for all to see. However, we still needed an objective evaluation of the facilities and the projected cost to restore and expand the city's infrastructure. We therefore worked with the Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA) who has produced a Master Plan for the restoration and improvement of urban facilities in Monrovia. That plan covers everything: roads, water supply, sewage and sanitation and drainage systems. At a projected cost of approximately US\$594 million, it is impossible to implement the entire plan at one go. However, we must tackle some of its more urgent components, such as the drainage system in central Monrovia, Bushrod Island and Sinkor. The US\$10 million projected cost of this urgent work will be included in the next fiscal year's budget submission.

GOVERNANCE AND PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS

Mr. Vice President, Mr. Speaker, Mr. President Pro-Tempore, Honorable Members of the 53rd Legislature: Our economic transformation for growth and development would be unsustainable without reforms to governance and public institutions. It remains the goal of this administration, in partnership with citizens, to create transparent, accountable and responsible public institutions that contribute to economic and social development as well as inclusive and participatory governance systems.

Our governance reform program receives praises both in Africa and beyond. The 2013 Mo Ibrahim Index of African Governance ranked Liberia 9th in Africa in terms of the participation of its people in the political life of the nation.

The Governance Commission has developed a plan of action for the deconcentration and devolution of functions to sub-national units. A draft Local Government Act, if passed into law, will provide the legal basis for implementing the National Policy on Decentralization and Local Governance, aimed essentially at the delegation of political, fiscal and administrative powers to sub-national units, to promote efficient service delivery. The expansion of public services to local government jurisdictions is a very important phase of the decentralization program, especially as we implement the UMIL transition.

Our Vision 2030 includes the five-year Liberia National History Project which aims to provide guidelines for devising a history curriculum for Liberian schools, and has the potential to contribute to national reconciliation, unity and social cohesion. Other important initiatives include the work of the Constitution Review Committee and the National Symbols Project.

After due consultation, we have endorsed the recommendation of the GC to move ahead on a stakeholders consultation regarding the need for change in the National Symbols – the Flag, Motto and Decorations, as proposed in the development agenda, Vision 2030.

Work on public sector reform aims to make governance more responsive, effective and efficient, thereby improving living standards – resulted in the restructuring of 13 government agencies, including the restructuring and re-naming of the Ministries of Gender and Development, Internal Affairs, and Health and Social Welfare, as well as the establishment of the Liberia National Tourism Authority. The reform agenda also calls for the establishment of a Civil Service Commission to make it more autonomous, so as to enhance merit-based appointments and strengthen professionalism. The establishment of the position of Principal Administrative Officer, to ensure continuity and build institutional memory, is far behind schedule, requiring early action by both the Executive and Legislature.

The GC has also promoted, through the National Integrity Forum, the National Code of Conduct; the Legislative Monitoring, Transparency & Accountability Project; and the Integrity Barometer, which contains an assessment of the public experience of corrupt practices.

We congratulate the Honorable Liberian Senate, with special thanks to the sponsoring Senators, in passing the Code of Conduct Bill, and we urge you, distinguished Members of the House, to join your counterparts in doing so.

Mr. Speaker and Honorable Members of the Legislature: The new leadership of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, building upon the progress of the past, has initiated a dynamic program of re-engagement with our 15 counties. In a partnership of local government authorities and citizens, the Ministry successfully led the first ever effort to co-host, simultaneously, our 165th Independence Celebrations in the three western counties: Grand Cape Mount, Gbarpolu and Bomi.

In October, in furtherance of consolidating trans-border peace, security, and stability between the Republic of Côte d'Ivoire and our country, the Government hosted the First Joint Council of Chiefs and Elders Meeting in Zwedru, Grand Gedeh. President Alassane Ouattara and I participated in the closing program of the meeting which was attended by Chiefs, Elders, and eminent political and community leaders from our two countries. A follow-up meeting is planned for March in Guiglo, Côte d'Ivoire.

In the spirit of the Zwedru meeting, future peace promotion meetings will include our other sisterly Republics of the Mano River region, Sierra Leone and Guinea.

Other programs aimed at trans-border peace, to be undertaken during the first half of this year, will focus on youth and women. A further consolidation of domestic peace and reconciliation involved the final payment of more than L\$43 million, or US\$577,288 equivalent to 244 respondents to settle land and property claims in Nimba County.

Several key partners continue to strongly support our peace building, reconciliation and decentralization programs. The United Nations, through the Peace Building Support Office and the Liberia Configuration in New York, provided US\$15 million to support various aspects of the programs in security, youth development, constitution review, governance, law reform, Palava Hut Talk, as well as community and faith-based peace and reconciliation initiatives. Other reconciliation and conflict-resolution efforts were

undertaken between the affected communities and concessionaires in Sinoe, Bong, Bomi and Grand Cape Mount.

Together, we took a major step aimed at decentralizing financial management and accountability by the appointment of Assistant Superintendents for Fiscal Affairs. In making these appointments we were guided by experience and competence, not regionalism, ensuring focus on development of our country rather than distraction by local politics.

During the reporting period, the Liberia Decentralization Implementation Plan (LDIP), the guiding document for implementation of the National Policy on Decentralization and Local Governance, was formulated and signed. We are committed, under this partnership program, to provide US\$24 million which will be included in the next fiscal year budget submission.

We are pleased to report that the Millennium Village project in Korkoya District has been revived with funding from the Government of Norway, and we can now ensure completion of the villages with modern facilities, as envisioned.

Honorable Legislators: In advancing our flagship programs – Peace Building and National Reconciliation and Decentralization – the National Reconciliation Roadmap was launched, in June, with the participation of Liberia's Peace Ambassador, George M. Weah. The Roadmap, under direction of our Ministry of Internal Affairs, noted our nation's history of cleavage, disunity and confrontation, but also a history of a resilient people who have, time and time again, risen above the odds, able to stand tall in the midst of adversity to reach across the divide and promote a united country. We urge Liberians to muster the courage to let bygones be bygones, and embrace one another with a new mind, a new spirit and a new attitude.

The Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) that ended the Liberian civil conflict called for the establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and an Independent National Commission on Human Rights, thought to be essential for lasting peace in Liberia. In its final report, in June 2009, the TRC recommended the creation of a National "Palava Hut" Program as a traditional and cultural conflict resolution mechanism common in rural Liberia, and that the INCHR should oversee the Palava Hut process and coordinate its activities.

In the lead-up to the launch of the National Palava Hut Program, in Zwedru, on October 19, the INCHR held consultative meetings in 13 counties, in which about 1,000 citizens, representing all groups, participated. The official launch took place in the presence of other stakeholders and international partners. We used the occasion to challenge the INCHR, traditional and religious leaders, the Liberia Council of Churches, the Muslim Council, political parties, civil society and all Liberians to fully participate and support the National Palava Hut Program, in order to ensure lasting peace and harmony.

A National Palava Hut Technical Forum was held in November to determine the commonalities and differences of the Palava Hut Practice among the four linguistic groups in Liberia, in order to design

preliminary guidelines and methodologies for a system which is uniformly applicable throughout the country.

The next steps in this process, which must conclude within the next two years, will be to conduct a comprehensive ethnographic study of Liberia's Palava Hut System; create nationwide awareness on the process, safety and benefits of the Palava Hut System; and conduct the Palava Hut Talks, in the form of community-based truth-telling, atonement and psychosocial recovery. Palava Hut dialogues and discussions will take place in towns, villages and cities across the country, and will provide victims and perpetrators a safe space to tell their stories and seek the means of fostering national peace and reconciliation. I urge the new leadership of the Independent Human Rights Commission to accelerate this process, and I appeal to all Liberians to endorse and participate in its implementation.

The Civil Service is the backbone of the government, yet it continually underserves the Liberian people due to low performance and a runaway wage bill. When a large portion of civil servants have little motivation or capacity to do the work they are charged to do, this undermines the ability of government to provide even the most basic of services. Our people deserve, and expect, better.

Unfortunately, the current system simply does not attract or retain talent, nor does it reward performance. The Civil Service examinations are outdated, which makes them a poor judge of ability and character. Civil servants continue to be paid unequally, lack essential tools such as computers and printers, and have few incentives to excel due to weak Human Resources management processes such as poor oversight and performance evaluation.

As a result of measures undertaken to clean up the civil service payroll through the implementation of the biometrics system, we have begun to see a slight decrease in the total numbers. While in 2013 there were 35,664 regular and 8,580 supplementary employees, in January 2014 the number stood at 35,445 regular and 8,512 supplementary employees. The Civil Service's wage bill, which includes thousands of ghosts, is still bloated, nearing one-third of the total national budget. Every day we waste precious resources to maintain a broken system that, instead, could be used to fund important activities such as expanding our power grid, purchasing chalkboards for our schools, and stocking our health facilities with medicine.

To make sure that the next generation of civil servants can meet the challenges and the needs of the future, each year the Government funds a number of Liberians, numbering over 380 today, to pursue degrees in five strategic fields – Health, Education, Engineering, Agriculture, and Public Administration – in more than ten countries, including Australia, Botswana, China, India, Morocco, and the United States.

The reform of our Civil Service rests on three key legs: to optimize the size of the Civil Service, so that it can perform its mandates sustainably and cost-effectively; to reform the pay structure to attract and retain talent; and to remove favoritism, bias, and replace them with merit-based and performance-driven principles.

It has not been an easy task, but we have made good progress and have ongoing dialogue with partners for support. We expect to submit the details and costing of this very important initiative for start of implementation in the next fiscal year budget.

The recent Constraints Analysis reports that corruption remains endemic, although the country has improved on key corruption indicators. Enhancing integrity in public life has to remain a preoccupation of all of us. Reforms in the Civil Service, establishment of the Liberia Anti-Corruption Commission, the Public Procurement and Concessions Commission, the Liberia Extractive Industry Transparency Initiative, the Commercial Court, the Freedom of Information Act, the Code of Conduct when enacted into law are all measures that will make a difference only if we respect and make them work. We have made significant progress on the preventive side in combating the scourge of corruption, and acknowledge the reforms ongoing in the Judiciary that will enhance our efforts on the punishment side of our fight.

A reorganized General Auditing Commission (GAC) has initiated 57 audits for 2013, giving us an opportunity to break from the lethargy of inaction on past reports that were challenged. Our Constitution and laws are clear on accountability in the use of public resources. We will therefore require that work plans of the GAC go beyond the Executive to include the other two branches of government.

We look forward to a reorganized and re-energized GAC that is media shy and committed to a good governance process which ensures the highest level of integrity and a commitment to uphold the public trust. We also commend the work of your Joint Public Accounts Committee which has initiated public hearings on the reports. A new draft GAC Bill will be submitted to you and, if enacted into law, will meet our commitment to place GAC operations on par with other Supreme Audit institutions by ensuring full financial and operational independence.

The Liberia Anti-Corruption Commission (LACC) investigated and prosecuted corruption cases; created awareness about the ills of corruption through education and prevention activities; and executed the Income, Assets and Liabilities Disclosure Regime and the Assets Verification Exercise.

Of 18 cases reported to the Commission, six were investigated and concluded, and a guilty verdict, under appeal, was handed down in the case involving the purchase of uniforms for the Emergency Response Unit of the Liberia National Police.

Public officials filed 42 declarations, after which a five-person committee was established to ascertain which assets have been declared; whether assets have been truthfully declared; how those assets were acquired, and whether they are commensurate with income. Renewed declaration of assets and a verification exercise will be required by all officials of the Executive, consistent with the example I have set by my own filing on the second anniversary of the first filing, as required by the Code of Conduct.

Among the challenges faced by LACC are: insufficient in-house prosecutors to investigate and prosecute corruption cases; the absence of critical complementary legal instruments to enhance its work, such as a Whistleblower Act, a Code of Conduct for Liberian Public Servants, and Corrupt Offenses and Illicit

Enrichment Acts; difficulty in obtaining documents from some ministries and agencies, which is hindering ongoing investigations; the lack of subpoena power; and the lack of a Fast Track Court to deal exclusively with corruption cases.

We intend to work with the Commission to draft and submit to the Legislature for enactment these critical anti-corruption instruments, which are also recommended by the United Nations Convention against Corruption. At the same time, we intend to resubmit an amendment for greater prosecutorial powers for LACC, so that it can prosecute as soon as an investigation establishes cause.

Under its mandate, the National Elections Commission (NEC) conducts free, fair, transparent and credible elections. The tenure of membership of the NEC having expired, a new corps of Commissioners, with the consent of the Senate, was appointed. With renewed vigor, the NEC has begun work on voter registration preparatory to the 2014 Special Senatorial Election. In 2013, the Commission successfully conducted one Senatorial By-election in Grand Bassa County, to fill the vacant seat created by the unfortunate death of Senator John Francis Whitfield.

Other activities included interactions with the 31 registered political parties directly and/or through the Inter-Party Consultative Committee; and providing appropriate forums for voters' education.

More financial support is required to enable the Commission to conduct this year's Election.

OPEN SOCIETY: THE MEDIA

From where we were just ten years ago, the media market has evolved remarkably. Today there are more than 30 newspapers and online services, 19 radio stations and 45 community radio stations – all independently owned and operated. This is a positive development which needs to be commended.

A free media is an indispensable tool to the preservation, promotion and protection of a free, democratic society. It can be an effective mirror for society. It is an industry that trades in news and has great impact on public opinion. It therefore has a grave responsibility to make sure information is disseminated; and that the information so disseminated, most importantly, is accurate.

This is a political year, and elections are around the corner. Great interests will be at stake. People will speak loudly to be heard and will want the media as their echo chambers. The media will play a major role in this year's elections. The worse that could happen, and which we do not expect and do not want, is a media that transforms itself into political weaponry of selfish individuals. The media can impact our electoral process, and we hope it will do so by orienting the political debate, bringing the issues to the people and to the candidates, and by playing the responsible role expected of it.

The nation of freedom and peace we want is the personal responsibility of each of us. During the years, we have taken steps to create an enabling environment: we created the office of an Independent

Freedom of Information Commissioner; engaged civil society on issues of transparency and accountability within the framework of the Open Governance Partnership; began implementing the Freedom of Information Law; signed the Table Mountain Declaration, thus becoming only the second African State to do so. All these are clear indications of our inalienable attachment to the values of free speech, free thinking and unfettered access to information.

But freedom is not free, and the price is oftentimes not measured in monetary value. The price the nation and many innocent victims pay from irresponsible reporting damages the image of our country, damages to hard-won reputations, and adversely affect national growth and development opportunities. As we maintain our values, supporting the right of free expression, we must do so conscious that the purpose of that value is the collective enhancement of our society. We must therefore rebuff abuse of that right and recognize that the Constitution requires that we are responsible for the abuse of that right. The children of Liberia deserve to inherit a better society a stronger, united Nation. Let us in unison strive to achieve and bequeath that to them.

NGO ACTIVITIES IN LIBERIA

Since the restoration of peace and democratic governance in Liberia, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) – both national and international – continue to contribute to the reconstruction process of our country.

To date, Liberia has a total of 997 NGOs – 874 National and 123 International – operating in the 15 counties of Liberia. These NGOs had traditionally provided services in wide areas of humanitarian assistance and development. More recently the emphasis has been on democracy and governance; human rights; environment and natural resources. In these latter functions, some NGOs have sought to become super-national bodies challenging national sovereignty even as they themselves lack national and international governance status and rules in transparency and accessibility.

As we strive to speed up our post-conflict development, we must ensure efficiency, transparency and accountability by NGOs in their delivery of services to our people. We must guarantee a strong inter-sectoral framework and information-sharing mechanisms between the institutions of government and non-governmental organizations.

To ensure that we achieve this partnership, the Government will require national and international NGOs to submit a report of their annual activities, and register with the relevant government agency every year; that NGOs disclose to the Government of Liberia the details of the funds pledged by donors for project implementation in the country; that funds secured for capacity building are utilized, in collaboration with the relevant Ministries or Agencies of Government; that all funds released to NGOs by a donor should be transferred from the donor to the NGOs through an account in a commercial bank in Liberia; that all vehicles owned by NGOs should be registered in the name of the organization and be clearly marked with the name and logo of the organization or face impoundment; and that all assets owned by international non-governmental organizations purchased or acquired with donor funds are the property of the Liberian

people who are the direct beneficiaries. In an instance where an organization decides to close down its operations, the organization shall surrender such assets to the sector Ministries or Agencies of Government in which such NGO operated.

CROSS-CUTTING ISSUES

Honorable Legislators: The Agenda for Transformation identifies a number of cross-cutting issues – gender, child protection, disabilities, youth empowerment, the environment, HIV/AIDS, human rights, and labor and employment.

The Ministry of Gender and Development is successfully leading us to the achievement of Millennium Development Goal number 3 on gender equality and the empowerment of women. One of the biggest challenges is sexual violence, a growing concern in our country, especially the rape of young children. Of all the rape cases reported from the 15 counties, over 65 percent were children below 14 years.

Last year, ten children between the ages of 3 and 14 years died as a result of rape. It is shameful that this continues to mar the image of our country. The law which makes rape a non-bailable offense has had limited effect because of families of victims who are easily compromised, by the lack of evidence, and by sympathetic judges.

I chaired a meeting of women leaders and representatives of women organizations who are working on a program that will call on religious, traditional and community leaders, parents, teachers, women and youth groups to become agents of change and commit to take action to prevent sexual violence, as this is everyone's responsibility. We need your support also, to ensure that our children and our women are safe.

While we have done well in the enrollment of girls in primary schools, retention is a problem. In response, the Ministry renovated a dormitory, and recruited and enrolled 60 vulnerable and underprivileged girls from Grand Cape Mount, Gbarpolu, Bomi and rural Montserrado at Ricks Institute and Bromley Mission to complete their secondary education. A further 125 girls, recruited from Nimba, Lofa, Bong and Grand Bassa, are enrolled at the newly renovated Victoria A. Tolbert Girls Hostel in Gbalatuah, Bong County.

The Economic Empowerment of Adolescent Girls and Young Women (EPAG) project has, since 2009, increased employment and incomes among 2,500 adolescent girls and young women between ages 16-27 years in business development skills, job skills, and life skills, in Montserrado and Margibi Counties. A third round of training, targeting an additional 1,000 adolescent girls and young women, is under way in Montserrado, Margibi, and Grand Bassa.

The Social Cash Transfer program, under the Social Protection component, provided monthly cash transfers to 3,448 households – 60 percent of them headed by females – which translate into 14,083

individuals in Bomi and Maryland Counties. Some 5,162 children are benefiting from education grants or schools bonuses under the program.

Eight rural women who obtained solar engineering training have used their skills to electrify 171 houses in communities in Grand Bassa, rural Montserrado, Lofa and Grand Cape Mount.

In partnership with Liberia, the Foundation for Women (FFW) – a pet program of our Vice President – has, since 2007, provided microloans to more than 10,000 women in 14 of the 15 counties. An excellent example of the entrepreneurial spirit of women is the story of Madam Ducas Guannu and Madam Wehyee Paikao, both of Peace Island, Congo Town. The two market women, both in their mid-sixties, have for several years benefited from microloans offered by FFW-Liberia. They received their first loans of L\$6,000 each in 2009. Having successfully paid back all subsequent loans, they received their fourth loans of L\$15,000 each in 2011. They then decided on something unique; they formed a partnership whereby they pooled their finances and opened their own business, a mini-store to sell building materials.

In October 2013, when they paid off their sixth loan of L\$25,000 each, and were expected to request additional funding, Ducas and Wehyee surprised the Foundation, by telling them, “We now run our own business; we will manage it without the loan.” Their mini-store, whose daily sales cover their family needs and business expansion, cannot compare with bigger stores doing similar business, but we applaud this entrepreneurial spirit, and ask you to patronize them by buying from their store. Please recognize them in our audience today.

Environmental quality is particularly important for economic output, sustainable livelihood, and poverty reduction. Liberia is richly endowed with natural capital and has a climate favorable to agriculture and environmental quality for the survival of our people. However, the current adverse effects of pollution and climate change will negatively impact the health of communities and the economy unless measures are taken to address environmental challenges. Sustainable environment management is the third dimension of sustainable economic development, requiring a concerted effort to protect the environment as the underpinning of the livelihood of our people.

The Environment Protection Agency (EPA), the national focal agency mandated to protect the environment and support the government in the sustainable use of our natural resources, faces many challenges in fulfilling its mandate. The Agency needs to be fully modernized to tackle the many global environmental problems affecting the country.

The Agency has been successful in securing funding from the Global Environment Facility (GEF) to carry out pilot projects to enhance resilience of vulnerable coastal areas to climate change risk in three of our coastal cities that are badly threatened by coastal erosion, namely Monrovia, Buchanan and Robertsport. Presently, construction work is ongoing in Buchanan, and work there and at the other two pilot sites will help us find solutions to apply to threats along our 597,000 kilometer coastline.

NECROLOGY

Mr. Vice President, Mr. Speaker, Mr. President Pro-Tempore, Members of the Legislature, Ladies and Gentlemen: Nothing replaces the memories and roles that departed officials and loved ones played in the life of our nation. During this reporting period, with a heavy heart we bade farewell to Archbishop Michael Kpakala Francis, of the Catholic Diocese of Monrovia; and His Excellency Moses Zeh Blah, former President of the Republic of Liberia.

Several government officials and prominent citizens were also called home to rest. Among them are: Hon. John F. Whitfield, Senator, Grand Bassa County; Hon. Robert Benjamin Freeman, former Member of the House of Representatives, Montserrado County; Hon. Isaac Tozay Dahn, former Member of the House of Representatives, Nimba County; Hon. Francis K. Garbo, former Representative of Zorzor District, Lofa County; Hon. Leroy E. Francis, former Mayor, City of Marshall and Representative of Margibi County; We bade farewell to: Counsellor R. Leroy Urey, former Chairman of the Independent National Commission on Human Rights and former Deputy Minister/Legal Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Hon. Charles A. Greene, former Executive Governor, CBL; Hon. Edwin J. Williams, former Minister of Finance; Hon. Louis Alford Ross Sr., former Minister of Agriculture; Hon. M. Tarnue Mawolo, former Minister of State without Portfolio; Hon. Harold J. Monger, Director General, Liberia Institute of Public Administration; Hon. Theophilus Totee Bettie, Deputy Governor, Central Bank of Liberia; Hon. Gedeon Kofi Michael Gadegbeku, former Auditor General, Republic of Liberia; Hon. Malchaiah Walter Goda Baker Sr., former Deputy Minister, Ministry of Lands, Mines and Energy; Hon. Samuel T. Hooke, Sr. former Deputy Minister for Administration, Ministry of Agriculture; and Hon. Samuel Othello Coleman, Sr., Ambassador accredited to the Benelux Countries.

We also lost: Hon. Augustus Emery Major, Deputy Director for Operations, General Services Agency; Hon. Henry Y. Allison, former Director of Finance, GSA; Hon. Jonathan H. Knuckles, former Tax Collector, Treasury Department; and Hon. Jon Lancelot Macauley, former Director, Animal Multiplication Division, Ministry of Agriculture.

Also departed were: Mother Irene Gbessay Jaleiba-Paasewe, former City Mayor, Robertsport City; Mother Maryann Elizabeth Smith, former Head Matron, John F. Kennedy, Medical Center; Mother Adeline Beatrice Weaver Neal, former professional nurse; Rev. Judson Benedict Addy, Sr. First Precision Machinist of Liberia; Mr. Adolphus Bedell Smith, Sports Icon and Member of the Board of Tax Appeals.

CONCLUSION

Mr. Vice President, Mr. Speaker, Mr. President Pro-Tempore, Members of the Legislature, Fellow Liberians: By numerous objective accounts, over the difficult course of the last decade, ever so increasingly, the democratic character of the Republic continues to be strengthened; the independence of the three coordinate branches of the government sharpened; the foundational principles of separation of powers and checks and balances entrenched; and the previously narrowed participation of the people in national decision-making broadened.

At the same time, from the Mano River Union to the African Union and the United Nations – from bilateral to multilateral interactions – the Liberian nation has been returned to respect and prominence around the family table of the world. As is expected of the oldest independent African Republic, we have continued to bring the fullness of our capacities and the value of our experiences to enable the global search for international peace, regional integration and economic transformation.

Today, our Republic is stronger, safer, securer and steadier than it has been in many years. A stronger, safer, securer and steadier Republic has increasingly meant that peacekeepers will stand down and the Government will stand up. It means that we can no longer only rely on development partners to fund our budget, build our schools, hospitals, roads and ports, and educate our people – the overdue tasks by which we expand the economy and increase opportunities for all Liberians.

Indeed, a stronger, safer, securer and steadier Republic means that each year will be more challenging than the previous not because we will be expected to do less, but because we will be expected to do more. There will be more Liberians to be empowered; more electric power to be generated and distributed; more doctors and nurses and teachers and policemen to be trained and deployed; more quality education for our students not only to develop the skills they need to find a livelihood at home, but also to compete with their contemporaries in the global marketplace. There will be more jobs to be created; more opportunities to be provided; and more Liberians to be uplifted. Each year, we will be expected to do more than the previous.

Admittedly, while we must collectively do more, the public fight against corruption, abuses of power and the misuse of government resources is being emboldened and intensified. With your help, through decided reforms and progressive practices of inclusion, openness and accountability, we will continue to exercise the maximum feasible participation of Liberians in the management of our economy, and advance the general welfare of all Liberians.

Honorable Legislators: As I said last year, in previous decades, we fought for political freedom and the right to vote and participate in a democratic process. It is now time for economic freedom, which can only be achieved through increased citizens' participation in our economy through the implementation of an aggressive Liberianization model.

But as we pursue the goals of Liberianization, our citizens must be guided by the principles of business ethics, such as honesty, trust and creditworthiness. No country can improve the lot of its people, if business relationships are categorized by a lack of trust and refusal to pay legitimate debts. We urge our citizens to prepare themselves to move into profitable areas of the economy through a process of learning, apprenticeship and, above all, a burning desire to make substantial contributions to our economic growth and development. Our citizens must be prepared to relinquish long-standing business relationships and forego vested interests, if our Liberianization is to be real and realized. Our citizens must go back to their counties of origin for the farms they make and the houses they build.

Mr. Vice President, Mr. Speaker, Mr. President Pro-Tempore, Ladies and Gentlemen: Much has already been done, but deep in my heart I know we can do more. However, to do this, we must demand more of each other – more accountability, more reforms, and importantly, more emphasis on how we achieve the common good for our people as opposed to how we maneuver to bring each other down. We can disagree with each other's ideas and yet, together, celebrate Liberia's success and progress. We must look beyond narrow self-interests – beyond what is good for our political parties and see what is best for our country. The truth is clear: A better Liberia works well for all Liberians; a better Liberia is a credit to all Liberians.

May God bless our beloved Republic, our Liberia.

I thank you.

Comments

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