

## Response to the Citation at the Investiture Ceremony held in his Honor

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April 28, 2016

*H.E. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, President of the Republic of Liberia, Mr. Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives; the President Pro Tempore and Members of the Senate; His Honor the Chief Justice and Associate Justices of the Supreme Court; the Dean and Members of Cabinet; the Doyen and Members of the Diplomatic Corps; our Development Partners; our Chiefs; Officials of county and local government; Members of Civil Society; Members of the Private Sector; Members of the Fourth Estate; my Family and Friends; Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen; Fellow Liberians:*

If only I were afforded such a luxury, I would say that I am speechless at the high honor that you have chosen to bestow upon me tonight, Madam President. But this auspicious occasion demands a response that expresses the height of emotion that you have evoked in me, and the challenge it presents to continue along this path that I have chosen to serve my country, Africa and the world.

Let me begin on a note of profound gratitude to you, Madam President, and through you to the Liberian people, for affording me the opportunity to serve my country for as long and in as distinguished a capacity as I have. I remember standing at this very same podium in this same venue in September 2008 expressing gratitude for the risk you took to place on the shoulders of two young men – Amara M. Konneh and Augustine K. Ngafuan – the highest responsibilities of coordinating and financing the development agenda that would become your legacy.

As my friend Ngaf, as I affectionately call him, so rightly said on that day, your decision to appoint your two youngest, and arguably your least experienced, members of Cabinet represented a paradigm shift in Liberian governance where your generation was passing on the baton of leadership to ours. Today, I am proud to be counted among several younger current and former members of your Cabinet, all of whom have made and are making major contributions to Liberia's progress and cementing your legacy through the implementation of our national development agenda. As I have passed the threshold of youth and as I get older, I am also honored to be counted among those vibrant and dynamic patriots of higher generations who never said die; but who resolved within themselves to make up for the years that the locusts had eaten, and worked tirelessly to see the vision of their fathers fulfilled. I am proud to have served alongside you, and I assure you of my greatest admiration and respect.

Let me, therefore, take this opportunity to congratulate all of my colleagues in Cabinet, past and present, whose service and personal sacrifice have made all the difference between the physical, psychological and systemic devastation that we met here in 2006 and the hope and resilience that we very clearly see today. Together, under the leadership of our President, we have taken major strides on this nation's long journey toward economic and human development. We have paved some of the major thoroughfares that take Liberians from home to work, and from farm to market; we have made significant headway in building our electricity generation, transmission and distribution capacity; we have laid the legal and structural groundwork for public financial management reform and results oriented budgeting. We have gotten our children back into school, especially our girls; and gradually, we are restoring to our citizens the dignity of water, sanitation and hygiene; and strengthening our governance and public institutions to deliver the quality services that they deserve.

Together, we have also fought one of the fiercest battles in our nation's history – the battle against the Ebola Virus Disease. This time, it was brother killing brother – not by malicious intent, but by the instinctive tendency that we have as Liberians to unite and hold together in close proximity. Ironically, it was that very same inborn urge toward unity that helped us to fight this virus and win. And we proved to ourselves and to the world that, with God on our side and with unity in our hearts, we are more powerful a force than the sum of our parts.

We have also learned together critical lessons along the way about how to do development effectively. The greatest crisis that we have faced yet has become our greatest opportunity to look with new eyes at our priorities and adjust them according to what really matters – our people, our children, and their future. And so our successive budgets have reflected these priorities, focusing on health, education, security, energy and transport infrastructure. Through the Medium Term Expenditure Framework, we have taken tough decisions together to spend our limited resources on what Liberians need most – key projects such as the Mt. Coffee Hydroelectric Plant that will deliver cheap electricity to a private sector desperately in need of that growth promoting resource.

And while the dividends of our work are slow to be seen, they remain a reality that will soon become undeniably apparent. One small but key indicator for the work our team has done over the last eight years – and especially over the last four – lies just outside my office window. From the 9<sup>th</sup> Floor of the Ministry of Finance building on Broad Street, I can see the famous borough of West Point, surrounded by water. In 2012, when I looked outside my window at about 8:00P.M., I could see absolutely nothing. The entire borough was pitch black, with not one single indication that electricity existed in that community. Tonight, if you were to stand at my office window you could count at least 40 different bulbs burning over West Point. Those bulbs are not nearly enough to light the thousands of homes in that community, but it is a clear sign of progress that I am proud to have been a part of.

There are so many more success stories for which I can only congratulate you, Madam President and all of your Cabinet Members past and present, as well as the National Legislature and the Judiciary, all of whom have played a critical role in the achievements of the last decade. It has been tough, exhausting and exasperating – especially when you're coming to the Minister of Finance to secure funding for something important and all he has to tell you is, "No money." Then you just wonder, "what kinda man here so? Who he think he is?" But it was never personal; it was all in the interest of ensuring that we could also come out of this in 2018 being able to say that we did our best as a team to make optimal use of every resource available, to transform the lives of our people.

In the process, I hope you can agree that I have grown as a person. Being a part of this team, and serving under your leadership, Madam President, has afforded me the guidance, challenge and support that I needed to get closer to being the kind of leader I would like to be. The kind of leader who listens to people; the kind that heeds constructive criticism; the kind that stands in the face of destructive criticism with humility and wisdom and extracts from it what positive lessons I can learn to become a better man.

I have also benefitted from this role through the many friendships I have developed and sustained, over the last decade, with great personalities who served our country in and outside of Government. Your wisdom and diverse perspectives have helped me walk circumspectly and tailor my activities appropriately, with my highest hopes for the Liberian people in mind. I have enjoyed my interactions with all of you, however testy at times - whether it was in Cabinet, in the MFDP building, or with our Development Partners; with the Chiefs, the Christian and Muslim leaders who have blessed and prayed for me and my team; with the Yanna Boys' Association, or while spraining my ankle playing football with the Alpha Old Timers; with the guys that I work out with at the top of Benson Street Snapper Hill; or the shoe shine boys, the orange and ground pea sellers on Broad street; with the autistic lady who sweeps

the streets so diligently for the Monrovia City Corporation, or Ma Sia and Madam Esther Dahn from Concerned Women; my own United Sisters of Nimba; and the good people of Gbarpolu County. I am glad I never turned my back on you. My cordial and fun interaction with you has kept the gray hair from on my head. Your prayers and encouragement have kept me going, and I will miss you all crowding up my reception desk, every so often, to say hello and involve me in whatever you have been doing. I would also like to recognize in a special way the woman who helped my late mother to deliver me, Ma Bintu Kamara. Thank you all for the important role you have each played in my life. I will miss you very much.

I will miss our Honorable Representatives and Senators, and members of the Supreme Court Bench, who made sure they called me at all hours of the night and bulldozed my schedule at all hours of the day, to ensure that their programs and activities were well funded; who provided the much needed oversight of our public financial management system; and who ensured that the critical laws that they passed were implemented with great effect. I am sure that I will be bored without you, and I thank you for keeping me awake and on my toes.

I would like to thank my beautiful wife, Mrs. Hawa Konneh, and our children for who they are to me, and for the sacrifice that they have made to allow me to serve our country. Ma Hawa, although you were not here on the ground with me because you had to stay and make sure that our children received the education, care and guidance to prepare them for the real world, your support, your prayers and your faith in me have kept me grounded and safe. To my children, Konnie, Aisha, Ahamed, and Va Mohamed: I want to thank you and your mother for agreeing so graciously to share me with Liberia. I hope that you will count yourselves as having served this country right along with me during my prolonged absence from your lives over these last ten years. I know that it hasn't been easy, because when you needed me most to be physically present, I could not be there. And as a result, I have missed out on much of your childhood. I can only hope that you will not count it a loss; but rather, that when you come to Liberia, you will always feel a sense of accomplishment, ownership and belonging, knowing that your own sacrifice helped in some small way to make this country a better place. And I want you to know that every bit of the work that I have tried to do here has been to prove to you that your sacrifice was not made in vain.

More than that, I hope that you will share with us this sense of responsibility that your mother and I feel, to sacrifice our own comfort and safety, in submission of ourselves to the service of our God and our country. I hope that, one day, you will feel deep in your souls that same magnetic force that we feel, which pulls us back home to Liberia no matter where we go and no matter how hard it gets - that fierce passion for the land of our fathers and mothers, that will never let us rest until we pay her her due respect and service. Liberia is your responsibility by reason of your flesh and blood, and it is up to you and those of your generation to take your place beside us and build it up into a place you would be proud to call home.

Indeed, if you are going to build and advance any country, I urge you in the name of God to build this one. Build it for the Kpelles and the Kissis, the Gios and Manos, the Mandingos, the Vai, the Grebo, the Krahn, the Bassas, the Sapos, the Dei, the settlers, and for every other tribe that inhabits this great land. Build it for the Christians, the Muslims and the traditionalists. Build it for those who don't have a voice, and for those who do. Build it for you. Because our forefathers that settled here and founded this nation knew that in their day and in days to come there would always be a need for people of the color of our skin to have somewhere safe that they could call home. And this country, this continent, with all its discomforts and challenges, is one of the few places in the world where you will not risk being shot down like a dog in the streets just because God gave you that beautiful dark complexion. And, if for nothing else, build it because of love for your fellow man, your fellow Liberians. And consider it a privilege to be counted

among them; because you belong to them and they belong to you; and you should count yourselves fortunate that that will never change.

I am addressing my children, but really I am speaking to all of the young people out there who are looking up to us now for a sense of direction. You don't have to be in Government to serve your country. You don't have to hold a high position. Just follow your dreams and make sure that they are focused and service oriented; and make sure, wherever you go, however high you rise, that you continue to use your skills, talents, resources and hard work to make Liberia what it should be – one country, one people, united for peace and development.

I would like to conclude with a quote by Abraham Lincoln:

*"Every man is said to have his peculiar ambition. I have no other so great as that of being truly esteemed by my fellow human beings, by rendering myself worthy of their esteem."*

Like Lincoln, I hope when you look back at my interaction with you, you will consider me in this light.

Thank you.