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# Remarks by H.E. Jeremiah C. Sulunteh at Harvard University Medical School

*Embassy of the Republic of Liberia in the United States* , Thu, Feb 5, 2015

*The Challenges of the Ebola Outbreak in  
Liberia: The Socio-Economic Impact,  
and a call for Global Response.  
By H.E. Jeremiah C. Sulunteh,*

Salutations: Dr.

Gregory A. Volturo, Chairman of the Department of Emergency Medicine and Medicine, and Members of the Harvard Medical School; Fellow distinguished panelists and speakers; Excellencies, my fellow ambassadors and other members of the diplomatic corps; Fellow academics, invited guests, ladies and gentlemen

I would like to extend appreciation to Dr. Gregory Ciotto for the warm welcome remarks. Let me also thank Dr. Mustapha Fofana for the invitation to attend this important forum and the warm hospitality accorded us since our arrival.

I have been requested to direct my remarks on “**The Challenges of the Ebola Outbreak in Liberia: The Socio-economic Impact and a call for Global Response**”

After 14 years of brutal civil war which witnessed the destruction of our entire infrastructure, claimed the lives of more than 250,000 people, and displaced about one million of its citizens, our nation was completely unprepared to combat a disease like the Ebola virus. Even after considerable progress made by the current Government of President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf toward economic resurgence, the onslaught of the Ebola virus disease revealed the fragility of our systems, health and hygiene, water and sanitation, transport, communications, and overwhelmed practically all of our institutions.

On March 31, 2014, Liberia confirmed its first two cases of Ebola virus disease. From that time until the virus caused the closure of schools in the nation, July 30, 2014, what prevailed was a combination of confusion, infighting and the overall inability of all concerned to fully understand and control the rapid spread of the disease. This is completely conceivable, given that even in post war Liberia, an epidemic of this kind had never happened. And if it had, we would have been in much better condition as a nation than now.

Our President, Her Excellency Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, immediately established a National Task Force which, she



co-chaired. The purpose of the force was to support technical teams, comprising health workers, government officials, media, political leaders, security sector and concerned citizens and residents. Similar structures were established on a county level as well.

Her Excellency, being fully cognizant of the nature of the virus, classified it “as a national health problem that had attacked our way of life, with serious economic, and social consequences.” As such, she continued, “we are compelled to bring the totality of our national resolve to fight this scourge”. If there can be a success story from this deadly episode, this would be the beginning of where it started: full and complete cooperation and interest of the leadership of the country.

### **The Social Impact:**

The Ebola virus disease was a horrible tragedy that as of today have destroyed the lives of 3,601 (three thousand, six hundred and one) Liberians and others, including 178 health care workers. It is very important to mention that foreign health professionals, doctors and nurses were amongst those who contracted the virus and received treatment abroad that saved their lives. We note also that American nurses who attended the Liberian national in Texas, were also healed of Ebola. We are grateful for their lives.

Without the intervention of traditional partners, especially the United States of America and the international community, including China, Japan, and a host of other countries, as well as, the World Bank, the IMF, WHO, and international NGOs, such as, Samaritan's Purse, Doctors Without Borders and dozens of other NGO's, the decline in the virus may not have been accomplished as we have today. It is also noteworthy to mention the successful efforts made by Liberian doctors who headed ETUs, emergency treatment units. I am reminded also of a Liberian nurse who used local materials gathered from the local market, including common plastic bags to save the lives of two of her three relatives that were stricken by Ebola.

With the outpouring of support from the international community and the resilience of the Liberian people, there has been significant decline in the outbreak of new cases. Although the virus disease was not eradicated on December 31st, as was envisioned by the government, today, 13 of the 15 counties in Liberia have no report of any confirmed cases. In her state of the nation address early this week, our President, H.E. Madam Ellen Johnson Sirleaf reported that there were only 47 patients currently at 13 of the 19 constructed Ebola Treatment Centers. About two days ago, the Liberia Ministry of Information reported a further dramatic reduction in the number of Ebola patients receiving treatment in the country.

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, I should also like to report that Liberia has now transitioned from cremation of Ebola victims to the more traditional burial practice, at a new cemetery near the capital. The Liberian people are hailing doctors in Liberia for the treatment and cure of 1,401 Ebola patients. As we remember those of our compatriots who lost their lives, we are equally concerned about the over 3,000 orphans that they have left behind, which will be an additional challenge to the government.

### **The Economic Impact:**

Since 2006, Liberia's growth potentials have been great, reaching a level of 8.9 % in 2012. In 2013 however, due to global economic downturn which had its effect on global prices of primary commodities, our growth rate fell to 8.3%.

In 2014 the deadly Ebola Virus Disease struck which negatively impacted our health and social systems, as well as our economy. There was sharp decline in domestic food production, mining activities, cross border trade, transport services, which led a dramatic decline in our growth rate, from 5.9% to -0.4%. Evidently, this scourge has taken a toll on our economy and calls for the attention of all friends of Liberia.

Fellow academics, we should like to once again applaud and appreciate the international community response to the Ebola Virus Disease and call for a global involvement in a process that would lead to the prevention, early detection and treatment of any tropical disease of this nature throughout the world.

In light of this, I should like to conclude my remarks with the following recommendations:

1. That the Harvard University Medical School be designated to serve as a center for a consortium of medical universities to be supported by the US Government on the study and prevention of tropical diseases in Africa.
2. That the Harvard University Medical School considers establishing technical cooperation with medical schools and universities in the Ebola affected countries to renew efforts aimed at manufacturing a vaccine for Ebola Virus Disease
3. That the United States lead a global effort in establishing a Regional Center for Disease Control on the continent of Africa.
4. The Government of Liberia would wish to request for partnership with Harvard Medical School to support the designing and construction of Medical Emergency and Disaster Centers and Response to Disasters.
5. As training and the transfer of knowledge is key for our preparedness for the future, we like to request that Liberian citizens be recruited and trained at Harvard in a wide range of medical and public health fields.
6. Finally, we would encourage the Harvard Medical School to see the need to send some of your medical students for job training in Liberia, where they would have insights in tropical diseases, such as lassa fever, yellow fever, and malaria. This could be a win-win situation for your students and our institutions.

Excellencies, distinguished ladies and gentlemen, once again, thank you so much for the opportunity to make these few remarks at this great occasion.

Thank you.

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