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# Ambassador Sulunteh Speaks at Shepherd University, Shepherdstown, West Virginia.

*Embassy of the Republic of Liberia in the United States* , Fri, Dec 11, 2015

Ambassador Sulunteh was invited to give a lecture on the economic, political and cultural life of Liberia at Shepherd University, Shepherdstown, West Virginia on Wednesday, December 2, 2015. Below is the full text of the speech as delivered:

**Special Cultural Day Lecture by H.E. Jeremiah C. Sulunteh**  
**Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of Liberia to the United States**  
**Shepherd University Western Virginia, USA December 2, 2015**

Salutation: \* Interim President, Dr. Sylvia Manning \* Vice Presidents, members of the Faculty and staff \* Community Leaders of Shepherdstown \* The Political Science Honor Society and Political Science Students \* Distinguished invited guests, Ladies and gentlemen

II- Greetings: \* I bring you warm greetings and sincere best wishes on behalf of President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, the Government and the people of Liberia, and our Embassy in Washington DC on this great occasion.\*

I am honored by the request of Dr. Joseph Robbins, Associate Professor, Department of Political Science and Siriki Diabate, Vice President of the Pan African Student Union, to serve as guest lecturer on the occasion of Shepherdstown International Cultural Awareness Day for Liberia. I should also like to thank you for the remarkable vision to showcase the unique history, rich and diverse culture of Liberia at this special cultural day.

III- Liberia and the African Continent: Liberia is one of the 54 countries that make up the continent of Africa. Liberia played a critical leadership role in the formation of the Organization of African Unity (OAU), now Africa Union (AU). The then OAU was very instrumental in the independence of many African countries from Colonial rule. The then Organization of African Unity was founded for the following objectives:

\* to achieve the greater unity and solidarity between the African countries and Africans; \* to accelerate the and social-economic integration of the continent;

\* to promote peace, security, and stability on the continent; \* to promote sustainable development at the economic, social and cultural levels as well as the integration of African economies;



\* and to promote cooperation in all fields of human activity to raise the living standards of the African people.

Since its establishment, the AU has played a very critical role in conflict resolutions in Africa, including the AU's intervention in a member state to intervene in political crisis, such as its peacekeeping force in Burundi, Mali, Central African Republic as well as, Sudan in Darfur and Somalia.

#### Historical Background of Liberia:

\* Liberia is of the size of the State of Ohio, but a bit larger than Tennessee and has a population of 4.5 million people. The country, founded by freed American slaves, became the first independent republic in Africa in 1847.

- In 1816, a group of philanthropic Americans established the American Colonization Society (ACS) to settle freed men and women of color from the United States in Africa. Members of the ACS included Francis Scott Keys, author of the Star Spangled Banner; Supreme Court Associate Justice Bushrod Washington, nephew of George Washington; and James Monroe, during whose presidency Liberia was founded. The name Liberia stands for Liberty, meaning "land of the free."
- Monrovia, the capital city of Liberia is named after President James Monroe, the 5th President of the United States.
- The goal of the ACS was to found a colony in Africa where people of color will enjoy full human dignity and for them to spread Christianity to the African Continent.
- Liberia's Constitution and form of government are modeled along that of the United States. The three branches of government are: Legislative, Judicial and Executive.
- Ten of Liberia's past presidents were born in the United States. Since then, Liberia's succeeding presidents have been descendants of African Americans. Liberia's first President, Joseph Jenkins Roberts, was born in 1809 in Norfolk, VA.
- Most of Liberia's leaders from its founding to this day were educated in the United States.
- English is the official language in Liberia, although there are 16 local languages spoken by the 16 tribes of Liberia. Among the most widely studied Liberian languages in schools and universities are Kpelle and Bassa languages and to a lesser extent, Vai. Loma and Mende also have their own unique alphabets but are studied less.

#### Liberia's Economic System:

- Liberia's economy subscribes to the Free Enterprise System. Through the Open Door Policy initiated by the government, the Liberian economy grew to become a hub for trade and investment in Liberia. The United States dollar is legal tender and it is used in parity to the Liberian dollar. Once a leading exporter of iron ore and rubber in the world, Liberia's natural resources include diamonds, gold, timber, oil palm, cocoa, coffee as well as other agricultural and marine resources. In 2012, oil became a new discovery as a major part of the country's economy.
- Forestry-• Timber and rubber are Liberia's main export items since the end of the war. Liberia earns more than \$100 million and more than \$70 million annually from timber and rubber exports, respectively.
- Mining and resources-• Alluvial diamond and gold mining activities also account for some economic activity. In recent years (2005 - 2012), foreign investment from ArcelorMittal Steel, BHP Biliton, and China Union is aiding the revitalization of the iron-ore mining sector.
- Liberia has begun exploration for offshore oil; unproven oil reserves may be in excess of one billion barrels.[8] The government divided its offshore waters into 17 blocks and began auctioning off exploration licenses for the blocks in 2004, with further auctions in 2007 and 2009. An additional 13 ultra-deep offshore blocks were demarcated in 2011 and planned for auction.[12] Among the companies to have won licenses are Repsol, Chevron, Anadarko and Woodside Petroleum.[13]

- Shipping flag of convenience-• Liberia maintains an open maritime registry, meaning that owners of ships can register their vessels as Liberian with relatively few restrictions. This has meant that Liberian ship registration is usually understood as the employment of a flag of convenience. Liberia has the second-largest maritime registry in the world behind Panama, with 3,500 vessels registered under its flag accounting for 11% of ships worldwide.[14][15] This includes 35% of the world's tanker fleet. Liberia earned more than \$18 million from its maritime program in 2000.Cultural Traditions:\* The overwhelming majority (about 97%) of the Liberian population is indigenous; Americo-Liberians make up the remaining 3%.

- Most indigenous tribes have held on to their beliefs and traditions; tribal culture is still prevalent in Liberia today. • Each tribe has its own distinct languages and customs.

- The indigenous groups speak languages belonging to the Niger-Congo family of African languages,found throughout Sub-Saharan Africa. • Traditionally, women hold very strong roles in tribal life, and most tribes commonly practice female circumcision. • The country is officially “Christian,” but nearly 40% of the population holds to their traditional tribal beliefs, while 20% is Muslim.

- In Liberia, both monogamy (one man having one wife) and polygyny (one man having more than one wife at a time) are permitted and practiced.

- Among non-Western-educated Liberians, dating and marriage are regarded as somewhat of a practical social and economic arrangement between families. Marriage often involves payment of a bride price to the bride's parents at the time a marriage is agreed upon. • Rice is the staple food. Food crops may also include onions, mangos, plantains (banana-like), pepper, and cassava. Indigenous Liberian coffee, palm wines and beer are widely drunk throughout the country. • About 70% percent of the population is engaged in traditional agriculture, growing rice, coffee, cocoa, and other crops. However, The Liberian government has been and still is the single largest employer in the country.Tourism Potential • coastlines of white sandy beaches lined with coconut and palm trees along the Atlantic Ocean, good for surfing • Liberia has 43 percent of the rainforest in West Africa • The Sapo National Park is host to unique wildlife in Liberia • The Kpatawee Waterfall draws a lot of visitors and students during holidays. The Fall could become a source of hydroelectric power in rural Liberia • Lake Piso has the potential to be a good tourist attraction • Liberia has 350 miles of coastal line along the Atlantic Oseason, good for surfing

IV- The Future Prospects for Liberia:\* The Ebola outbreak and its spill-over effects slowed growth in 2014 to an estimated 1.8%; although commercial gold production, manufacturing and a gradual resumption in construction are expected to support real GDP growth of 3.8% in 2015, household incomes have been slower to recover. • Short-term government priorities are focusing on supporting Ebola-affected households, increasing incomes and employment, and resuming health services and education, for which fundamental reform will be critical to develop a healthy and skilled workforce. • Improving the business-enabling environment will be vital to employment generation, especially in the context of reduced international demand for Liberia's commodity exports and the additional stigma from the Ebola crisis. The Ebola outbreak has had a severe impact on Liberia's economic and social progress. About 4,800 Liberians have died in the health crisis. Although the disease is progressively being contained in early 2015, the spill-over effects on economic growth, investment and access to social services reduced growth in 2014 to around 1.8% and will have an adverse impact over the medium term. The impact has been highest on the poor, who have faced a reduction in already precariously low incomes. While mining and rubber exports have continued during the crisis, although with current falling prices, the services sector, which employs around 45% of Liberians, faced a sharp decline. Agriculture is estimated to have a slightly below average harvest, with reductions in areas hardest hit with Ebola and due to flooding in the southeast region.

The government has clear priorities to contain the health crisis and mitigate its short-term consequences on affected households through cash transfers, cash-for-work programs and food aid. It is also working on re-opening health services and schools. Building a healthy and skilled workforce for the future is critical and calls for immediate reform in the health and education sectors, although the government must take care to balance

needed investment in the health sector with support to other sectors. To enable a return to inclusive growth beyond the immediate recovery, improving the business environment to encourage entrepreneurs and investment, including in agriculture, will be key, especially in light of reduced demand for Liberia's exports and the additional stigma of the crisis reducing potential investment. As the government continues with road and energy infrastructure projects, as well as accompanying governance improvements to ensure sustainability, there is high possibility to address the binding constraints to growth.

Improving service provision to rural areas will support the long-term growth and stability of Liberia. While Monrovia has been the centre of economic activity for decades, increasing the welfare of households in rural areas will be key to developing sustainable growth in the country. De-concentration of health services and education will be important factors in this. However, moving towards decentralization will take many years, due to weak infrastructure, low local capacity and the high financial costs. This is a challenge, but such could well be an opportunity for the government to flesh muscles to restore public confidence and rebuild the country.V- Closing:Distinguished invited guests, fellow academics, our development partners, ladies and gentlemen, As I close my remarks, I would like to remind here that achieving inclusive growth for Liberia will call for changes in attitudes and mindsets to strengthen Liberian values and self reliance, solidarity and hard work. It's about time for Liberia to take charge of its own narrative in order to occasion its national realities and priorities that will ensure Liberia's position in regional growth and development.I thank you for the opportunity to share these comments on Liberia at this special occasion.

Below are some pictures from the Ambassador's visit







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