

**KEYNOTE ADDRESS DELIVERED BY**  
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**AT THE 39<sup>TH</sup> GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE UNION OF LIBERIAN**  
**ASSOCIATIONS IN THE AMERICAS (ULAA)**  
**HELD IN COLUMBUS, OHIO, USA**  
**SEPTEMBER 20, 2013**

*THEME: "ERECTING THE BULWARKS OF MANY MORE DECADES OF PEACE AND  
PROGRESS IN LIBERIA: THE ROLE OF THE LIBERIAN DIASPORA."*

Mr. Wilmot Kunney, Chairman of the National Board of Directors, Union of Liberian Associations in the Americas (ULAA);

Mr. Gaye D. Sleh, Jr., President of ULAA and other Members of the Executive Leadership of ULAA;

Dr. Leroy Boikai, Chairman of the 39<sup>th</sup> General Assembly Planning Committee;

Heads and Members of Liberian Associations in the Americas;

Fellow Compatriots,

Friends of Liberia:

When the Liberian Institute for Statistics and Geo-Information Services (LISGIS) released the results of Liberia's housing and population census conducted in 2008, it estimated the population of Liberia at 3.4 million with a projected annual growth rate of 2.1%. Therefore it is safe to assume that the Liberian population in 2013 is approximately 3.88 million. As useful as

these figures are for planning and other purposes, they have a very serious limitation – they don't account for Liberians in the Diaspora, Liberians in the Americas included. Although accurate statistics are hard to come by in terms of the number of Liberians in the Diaspora, we may be safe to say that the number is in the hundreds of thousands. Liberians are dispersed in vast numbers all across the globe – in Africa, Asia, Europe, the Americas and elsewhere.

Liberians in the Diaspora often group themselves in associations or organizations as a means of seeking their common interest and impacting on the socio-economic and political life of our common patrimony, Liberia as well as on the life of their host nations. Among the many Liberian organizations across the world, it is an incontrovertible fact that none of them has had a more profound impact on the life of Liberia than the Union of Liberian Organizations in the Americas (ULAA). Founded in 1974 during a period of great political ferment in Liberia, ULAA has never relinquished its position as the premier Liberian organization in the Diaspora.

Therefore, Mr. President and Officers of ULAA, fellow compatriots, friends of Liberia, I consider it an honor of no mean magnitude to have been selected as the Keynote Speaker at the 39<sup>th</sup> Assembly of this premier body of Liberians away from home. I also extend tons of thanks to all of you for the warm Liberian welcome and hospitality you have accorded me and my delegation since our arrival in Columbus, Ohio. I am happy to be in the Ohio, the "Buckeye State" because of its longstanding links with Liberia. History tells us that Edward J. Roye, the 5<sup>th</sup> President of Liberia and first Standard

Bearer of the True Whig Party, a Party that ruled Liberia for over a century, was an African American born in Newark, Ohio. In fact, the capital city of Liberia, Monrovia and the city of Dayton in Ohio have enjoyed sister-city relationship since 1972. I am particularly grateful to be here at this august Assembly also because it has given me the opportunity to meet and interact with many good friends some of whom I have not seen for over a decade.

Mr. President, fellow Liberians,

A little over a month ago, we observed in Monrovia the tenth anniversary of uninterrupted peace in Liberia. And as many of you may be aware, it was on August 18, 2003 that Liberian military and political leaders signed the Accra Comprehensive Peace Accord (CPA) after spending three painstaking and sometimes very frustrating months in Accra, Ghana. The signing of the Accord brought an end to nearly fourteen years of brutal, episodic civil war that witnessed some of the most abominable demonstrations of man's inhumanity to man. The CPA provided for the cessation of hostilities, the formation of a Transitional Government of National Unity, and the holding of free, fair, and transparent democratic elections in two years. Unlike previous peace accords that inspired great hope and elation in Liberians only to be broken later by one faction or all the factions, the Accra Peace Accord was respected by all the parties, as all the critical milestones set out in the Accord were met mostly on schedule. Since 2003, we have had two successive democratic presidential and general elections and have taken giant strides on the path of rebuilding the Liberian State.

The celebration of ten consecutive years of peace conjured mixed and contradictory reactions from the Liberian public. As usual, anti-government critics were to lash out that it was pointless to talk about celebrating ten years of peace when, according to them, the “very vices that occasioned the war are still rearing their ugly heads in today’s Liberia”. For them, not much has been achieved since the end of the war as many people are “still poor” and, to put it as crudely as the critics sometimes put it, “nothing is happening”. However, there are many other Liberians, including myself, who do not see the bottle as half empty, but instead see it as half full. While not dismissing the concerns of those of our compatriots who are not too upbeat about present-day realities in Liberia, we feel that no matter the challenges of our recent past and of today, there is still cause for celebration; if not for anything, but for the mere fact that Liberians are today not disagreeing on the battlefield but are instead waging war with their pens, keyboards, cell-phones microphones, and in the ballot boxes. The mere fact that we have an environment today, unlike in the past, that gives us the luxury of debating whether or not celebrating ten years of peace was necessary, is in itself a cause for celebration. For as we look back to those dark days of war, and as our minds’ eyes capture the ghastly scenes of massacres across our country from the mosque in Barkedu, Lofa County to the St. Peter’s Lutheran Church in Monrovia; as we capture the scenes of the countless cold-blooded executions; as we remember the horror of teenage girls being raped by drunk and drugged fighters, of suckling babes and the elderly dying of starvation; of private and public infrastructure being put on fire

or bombed in broad day light; yes, as we look back on those days of horror and recognize that, for ten consecutive years, we have been spared the cassette replay of such horror, we can only react with one loud chorus, "thank God for peace." We say thank God for ten unbroken years of peace in Liberia because conflict analysts have long espoused the view that most countries coming out of civil war relapse into full blown war and/or into serious political upheaval before they reach their tenth year of peace.

While this Government certainly must and can do more in addressing the critical concerns of Liberians both at home and abroad, we still must agree with the Roman Politician and Philosopher, Marcus Tullius Cicero that "An imperfect peace is better than a righteous war". Peace is so foundational that it is the sine qua non for the achievement of all the other lofty goals to which we aspire as a nation and as a people. We cannot deliver better health care, improve the quality of education in our schools and universities, pave the roads that link all the counties, reduce poverty; maintain a vibrant democracy characterized by regular elections that are free, fair and transparent, enjoy freedom of speech and of the press, if we do not have peace. And obviously, we cannot wage an effective war on corruption if we do not have peace. To put it succinctly, Liberians must seek the kingdom of peace and all other things will be added unto them.

Mr. President, Fellow Compatriots, Friends,

We will be disingenuous if we do not recognize the existence of certain uncomfortable realities in the Liberia of today. As jarring as it may sound to us in Government, we cannot gainsay the fact that there has been an upsurge in anti-government rhetoric both in Liberia and out of Liberia in recent times. From one talk-show to another and from one Liberian blog to another, the number of persons taking positions against the government on various topical issues has increased not insignificantly. As uncomfortable as it may sound to us, the number of Liberians who express cynicism and faithlessness in the leaders of today – whether in the Executive, the Legislature, or the Judiciary, or in civil society and society at large - is not insignificant. As uncomfortable as it may sound, the number of Liberians who harbor the notion that government is nothing but a huge cesspool of corruption is not insignificant. And if one were to judge progress in Liberia merely by following the talk-shows in Liberia and reading Liberian news websites, one could easily conclude that Liberia, if not already at the bottom of the bottomless pit, is plummeting fast to the bottom. As uncomfortable as it may sound to us, negativism, cynicism and pessimism seem to be increasing exponentially in Liberia.

But regardless of the caustic criticisms and the vociferousness with which they are expressed, is it really true that progress is not being made in Liberia? And as uncomfortable as this may sound to anti-government critics, how can it be true that progress is not being made in Liberia when the time spent by drivers on the Monrovia-Buchanan highway has now been reduced by nearly two hours as a result of the paving

of the Monrovia –Buchanan highway by the Government of Liberia? How can one argue that there is no progress when as a result of a US\$50 million dollar bilateral grant attracted by the Government of Liberia from the Japanese Government, work will soon begin in the dry season of this year for the expansion of the Somalia Drive (the road that connects the Freeport of Monrovia to the Redlight) from a two-lane highway to a four lane-highway. How can one argue that there is no progress when, as a result of another bilateral grant of upwards of US\$60 million from the Chinese Government, ground-breaking ceremonies will soon be held for the construction of a modern ministerial complex that will house about ten government ministries, solving once and for all, the shameful, age-old problem of government renting private buildings for its ministries?

How can one argue that there is no progress when Liberia currently ranks at the top of all sub-Saharan countries for the progress it has achieved in the reduction of infant mortality? How can one argue that there is no progress when during the recent Independence Day Celebrations, more than 40 projects including the Bopolu –Belle Yalla Road, a modern market facility in Klay, and two new bridges on the Bomi-Monrovia highway were dedicated? I personally dedicated, on behalf of the President, a junior high school in Cape Mount County in a town called Lattia. How can one argue that there is no progress when Liberia has jumped significantly on Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index from 137 in 2005 to 75 in 2012, ranking better than most West African countries except for Ghana.

How can we say that we have made no progress when the culture of democracy, which was conspicuously absent in the governance of the country for over a century, has now gained solid roots in Liberia as evidenced by the holding of two consecutive free, fair and transparent presidential and legislative elections; and as a result, Liberians have more faith in the ballot today than they have ever had in all our nation's 166-year history? How can we say that there is no progress when freedom of speech and of the press in the Liberia of today is better than it has been during any other period of our nation's 166 year history? To satisfy the doubting Thomases who can only believe that Jesus resurrected by putting their fingers in his palm, I could go on delineating many other concrete examples of progress, but that could amount to an unnecessary employment of our time.

So while it is fair to advocate for four-lane highways that will connect every county and every town in Liberia, it is unfair to project the picture that no two-lane highway has been constructed. While it is perfectly normal to request for the construction of major hospitals all over the country, it is unfair to refuse to see the many health facilities including Tappita Hospital that have already been constructed by the present government. While it is perfectly normal to demand that many more things be done, it is unfair to espouse the view that nothing has been done thus far; and while we may not be at the mountain top of prosperity, we are certainly not in the valley of human misery and penury.



Mr. President, Fellow Compatriots, Friends,

The American psychologist, Abraham Maslow's in his famous postulation of the human "hierarchy of needs", has argued that once a typical person achieves something that is basic, he/she craves for something better. As basic as the attainment of peace is, if its attainment is not followed by socio-economic and political progress, that "peace" itself becomes overly fragile and may be lost sooner than later. My diagnosis of the present-day situation in Liberia is that tremendous progress is being achieved by the Government in many areas; but for a host of reasons, *the reality of progress and the perception of progress, if not in inverse relation, are certainly not moving in lockstep.* And this apparent public perception of little or no progress has naturally led to the scanty or virtual lack of appreciation of the progress that has indeed been made.

As important as progress is to the sustenance and consolidation of peace, if the generality of the populace does not perceive and appreciate that indeed progress is being made, peace will again become fragile because the non-appreciation of progress will make the citizens to be carefree about the peace and therefore not jealously guard it as one would guard a prized possession. In such an environment, citizens may be easily susceptible to the devious machinations of individuals who may want to subvert the peace, not so much to achieve a better reality than the present, but to achieve their selfish agendas. I will therefore put it thus: *peace is good; peace followed by*

*progress is better; but peace followed by progress undergirded by a positive perception or appreciation of progress is best.*

Mr. President and fellow compatriots,

The past ten years in Liberia has been peaceful and progressive. The critical question now is, how do we maintain many more decades of peace and progress? What bulwarks or foundations of peace and progress should we erect? What are the roles of significant players in the erection of these bulwarks? Specifically, what should be the roles and responsibilities of Liberians in the Diaspora?

It is in this connection, Mr. President, distinguished ladies and gentlemen, that I request that you indulge me as I expand on the theme, *"Erecting the Bulwarks of Many More Decades of Peace and Progress: the Role of Liberians in the Diaspora."*

First and foremost, in order to contribute more effectively to peace and development in Liberia, Liberians in the Diaspora must endeavor to utilize every opportunity that their presence in the Diaspora brings to develop themselves academically and professionally. If being in the Diaspora offers you the opportunity to acquire the best education and skills, do not shortchange yourself and your nation by settling for mediocrity and a tenuous livelihood where you can barely afford to feed yourself. In this regard, the key question to Liberians in the Diaspora is, "Are you considered an asset in your host nation or a liability, a scum, flotsam and jetsam that your host county can easily afford

to offload to remain on an even keel? By developing yourselves into solid professionals in the Diaspora, if the and when you return home, you will be better positioned to contribute more significantly to the forward march of your motherland in the public or the private sector.

Better prepared Liberians in the Diaspora are able to assist their families and friends in Liberia more significant ways; and by so doing, help a good number of our people to cope with the many challenges of living in a post-conflict fragile state. Failure on the part of Liberians in the Diaspora more often not makes them to sink into social deviancy and other forms of unwholesome behaviors that may land them in jail. The most depressing spectacle for many of us back home is to see a relative or a friend who went abroad to seek greener pastures climbing down the stairs of a plane at the Roberts International Airport (RIA) in handcuffs, having being deported from the host country for being involved in some unwholesome act. A good number of these deportees come back home terribly frustrated and extremely desperate. Sadly enough, they dump their frustration on the country by replicating in Liberia some of the very bad behaviors that occasioned their deportation. This further helps to undermine the peace and progress of the country. To avert this depressing phenomenon, Liberian organizations in the Diaspora must initiate programs and policies that assist or encourage the capacity building efforts of their constituents and discourage deviancy and crime.

Mr. President, Distinguished Compatriots, Friends,

Another way Liberians in the Diaspora can help erect the bulwarks of many more decades of peace and progress in Liberia is for them to work for peace among Liberians in the Diaspora, especially peace within Liberian organizations in the Diaspora. Liberians in the Diaspora have a tendency, oftentimes justifiably so, of being critical about developments back home. However, they must endeavor to be good exemplars. Rift and rancor in Liberian organizations in the Diaspora is clearly not a good example for Liberia because, if not managed well, such division and bad blood may eventually be exported to Liberia, thereby undermining the bulwarks of peace and progress.

As I said earlier, though we Liberians do not seem to appreciate and value it fully, one of the greatest achievements of this epoch is the consolidation of the culture of democracy in Liberia. All political disagreements must be submitted regularly to the high court of free, fair and transparent elections where the supreme judges are the electorates. It is in this connection that I am happy to note that the age-old leadership crisis that bedeviled ULAA and undermined its unity some few years ago seems to have finally been resolved and that, as a further affirmation of stability and progress in ULAA, this 39<sup>th</sup> Assembly will empty into a free, fair, democratic elections of a new slate of leaders of ULAA for the next two years.

Mr. President, Distinguished Compatriots,

The conversation among Liberians in the Diaspora is often dominated by issues relating to corruption back home. Bad news tends to run faster than good news. The good

news of many patriotic Liberians burning their life's candles at both ends in the service of their beloved nation without medical insurance, pension benefits, and job security does not sprint as fast to the front pages of the newspapers as the bad news of a public official accused of committing an act of corruption. And what is also troubling is the naïve and disgusting practice by some critics of labeling everyone in government as corrupt. Such blanket indictment has actually undermined the war against corruption because it makes it difficult to separate the fox from the lamb. My caution therefore to every one of us in public office is that we should never allow the public torture that public office brings to make us to veer from the path of integrity and patriotism. Given the practice of collective damnation now prevailing in our country, the fall of one public official for acts of corruption affects the good image of all public officials. Recognizing this challenge, the Government must continue, as it has already begun, to take robust steps to prevent corruption or the perception of corruption and punish anyone proven to have violated the public trust. Corruption has had deleterious impact on the peace and stability of the nation as it has dominated the rhetoric of all of those who spearheaded the torpedoing of the status quo. From Samuel Doe to Charles Taylor to Damate Konneh, nearly all the front-liners in the quest for undemocratic political change in Liberia justified their actions by putting anti-corruption façades on their missions.

Similarly, when one hears about disquiet and disunity in Liberian organizations, be it in Liberia or in the Diaspora, oftentimes the trigger of the crisis revolves around issues

related to lack of accountability and transparency in the management of the affairs of the organization. Therefore, I urge you my brothers and sisters in the Diaspora to contribute to the peace and progress of our nation by practicing the culture of transparency and accountability in Liberian organizations. Historically, ascending to leadership in Liberian organizations in the Diaspora has helped catapult many Liberians in the Diaspora to positions of influence in the Liberian public or private sector. It is not out of order for the members and leaders of Liberian organizations in the Diaspora to harbor intentions of returning home and offering leadership in government or the private sector. However, if such a person had a tendency of engaging in financial mismanagement while in the Diaspora, the probability is high that he/she will export and replicate such bad tendency if given a position of consequence in Liberia, for as it is usually said in Liberia " a leopard cannot change its spots". In essence, to wage a frontal assault on the cancer of corruption in Liberia, a disease that has been cited or scape-goated as a causal factor in the destabilization of our country, we have to also wage a frontal assault on corruption in every organization representing the interest of Liberians everywhere in the world. Lest I be mistaken, I am not in any way implying that corruption or mismanagement is an issue in present-day ULAA, but I am only putting out a general caution to all Liberian organizations in the Diaspora so that issues of transparency and accountability will be on the front-burner of their concerns.

Furthermore, Liberians in the Diaspora can contribute more meaningfully to the peace and progress of the country by taking deliberate steps to avoid reaching hasty

conclusions and generalizations on issues and characters of individuals from back home. Liberians in the Diaspora must be encouraged to learn the facts and reality on the ground in Liberia. Oftentimes what they know about what is happening in Liberia is mere perception and over-generalization peddled by people with vested interest. Thanks to the openness we now enjoy, Liberia now has more than 15 FM radio stations and scores of community radio stations across the country, more than 20 newspapers, 4 TV stations, and countless independent new websites. These news outlets are in fierce competition; consequently, some of them may be more inclined to using headlines that attracts the most readership and sales than headlines that do not. So whenever you read a story that involves two or more persons, check whether the story did justice to all the parties to the issue by giving their respective and contrasting perspectives in the story. To arrive at conclusions that mirror the reality on the ground, it may be prudent to rely on multiple news outlets and other independent sources.

Obviously, the government itself needs to do more to assist Liberians in the Diaspora to get a fuller and balanced appreciation of what is obtaining on the ground. Sometimes we get so busy doing and doing and forget to spend time propagating and marketing what we do. What results therefore is a situation where the public-sphere is suffused with news slanted more to the perspectives of anti-government critics. But it is heartening to note that the situation is improving for the better as many government ministries and agencies have developed websites that are helping to tell the story from the perspective of the respective ministries and agencies.

Mr. President, Distinguished Compatriots, Friends,

Ultimately Liberians in the Diaspora can only help build firmer bulwarks of peace and progress in Liberia if they do not sever their umbilical cord with the motherland. It is often said, "East or west, home is best." You may today live in Manhattan, but never forget that you come from West Point; you may today be that big executive in a Fortune 500 company in the United States, but never forget that yesterday you played 'Freetown ball" in the village in Grand Kru. You may now be that physician in the hospital in London, but never forget that you yesterday played "nafo" with other girls in Ganta. No matter who or what you are today, remember that someone in Liberia calls you son, daughter, mother, father, sister, brother, uncle, aunt, relative or friend. Remember that someone in Liberia is wishing that you succeed in the Diaspora so that you can extend a helping hand to them as they navigate life's difficult journey. Looking back to your family, your friends, your village, your community in Liberia is not a political obligation but a moral one. And fulfilling this moral obligation does not have to depend on who is in the Executive Mansion or what you feel about the quality of their leadership.

In the Liberia of today and tomorrow, more and more job opportunities both in the public and private sectors are opening and will open. Through various capacity building programs such as the Senior Executive Service (SES), the Transfer of Knowledge through Expatriate Nationals (TOKTEN) or through direct appointment by the President,



an increasing number of Liberians in the Diaspora have already returned home and are contributing to the forward march of their country. In fact, the Government has been deliberate in inserting in almost every concession agreement concluded under this regime explicit clauses obligating concessionaires to hire a given a percentage of Liberians in top managerial, middle level and technical positions over a certain period of time. Many government ministries and agencies as well as international organizations have been recruiting and will continue to recruit top-notch Liberian professionals to provide valuable consultancy services in various fields.

And for those of you Liberians in the Diaspora who are Certified Public Accountants (CPAs), I encourage you to return home, join the Liberia Institute of Certified Public Accountants (LICPA) in order to seize some of the many tantalizing opportunities that are opening up as a result of the repeal of the Act of the LICPA in 2011 restricting the practice of public accounting to only individuals and firms licensed by the LICPA. Essentially, this means no profit or not-for-profit entity operating in Liberia can directly hire the services of a foreign-owned auditing firm to perform audit in Liberia. This has tremendously brought lots of business to Liberian CPAs and their firms. This positive development coupled with the fact that there is an acute shortage of CPAs in Liberia, works immensely in the favor of any one of you Liberian CPAs in the Diaspora. I urge you to consider returning home now and setting up your firms and begin winning some big money contracts.

But I can already hear some Liberian in this crowd saying, “Minister, well said. But how can I maintain my umbilical cord with the motherland or leverage the many opportunities that are opening up in Liberia when, according to the many harsh provisions of the *Alien and Nationality Law of Liberia*, I lost my Liberian citizenship immediately when I assumed American citizenship, because the law does not countenance dual citizenship?

Therefore, Mr. President and Fellow Compatriots, for the remaining few minutes of this address, I will endeavor to proffer my candid views on this hot-button issue that is among the top concerns of many Liberians in the Diaspora. The dual citizenship debate both in Liberia and in the Diaspora has been heavily charged as both the proponents and the opponents of dual citizenship advance their various perspectives with deep passion and sentiments. Trying not to swing to either end of this emotional pendulum, I shall set forth my views as honestly and as frankly as I can and take full responsibility for what I say.

It is well known fact that before the Liberian civil war, Liberians did not have a huge appetite for leaving their homeland and settling permanently abroad. However, the 14 years of war uprooted the whole society and triggered the massive exodus of Liberians to foreign parts including the United States and Europe. At the time, the overarching pre-occupation of Liberians in the Diaspora was to seek better opportunities for themselves so that they could assist their struggling relations scattered in displaced

and refugee camps in Liberia and other parts of West Africa. Climbing to the height of the professional ladder was seen by many Liberians as a way of empowering themselves so that they could stabilize their own livelihoods in the Diaspora, while continuing to remit higher sums of money to relatives in Liberia or in a refugee camps. Additionally, as the Liberian civil war protracted, many Liberians who were holed up in refugee camps in West Africa did not view returning to Liberia as a wise option; they instead longed to be resettled abroad, more preferably in America or Europe. Accordingly, Liberians in the US, for example, viewed the acquisition of American citizenship as one effective means of accessing equal opportunities in America , and also filing for a family member to relocate to the US and to taste the American dream. Those who graduated from the refugee camp at Buduburam in Ghana can bear us witness. We concede that there were many and various motivations behind the acquisition by Liberians of the citizenship of a foreign country, but the predominant motivation has arguably been the intrinsic desire to be of better help to oneself, one's family, friends, and country.

I still remember vividly the sight of Liberians during our Civil War in long queues waiting their turn to enter Western Union or Money Gram branches across Monrovia for the much needed remittances that helped in procuring food, settling rental expenses and paying the tuition of their children. The individuals who sent their hard-earned resources back home to provide succor for their families were then considered true Liberian heroes and heroines. But as our brothers and sisters abroad became consumed

with leveraging all the opportunities citizenship of a host nation could bring including the much desired possibility of filing for the relocation of a family member, many of them did not stop to research whether there was something called “The Alien and Nationality Law of Liberia,” that stipulate that they automatically lose Liberian citizenship when they become citizens of another country or Article 28 of the Liberian Constitution which effectively shuts the door to dual citizenship.

Some could argue that innocence of the law is no excuse and these Liberians should have known better. But be that as it may, the reality is that the strict interpretation and application of the Law would mean that many persons who call themselves Liberians are in reality aliens, or to put it more crudely, impostors. In fact, if we were to do an honest accounting for the number of persons in this room who call themselves Liberians but have assumed American citizenship, I will not be surprised that the number of “aliens or impostors” is very huge. However, as legal as it may be, it is terribly unfair to look somebody in the eye, someone born and bred in Buzzi Quarters but once upon a time traveled to the US and assumed American citizenship; it is unfair to call such a person a non-Liberian, a foreigner. What has compounded this problem is that many of these “Liberians by identity and non-Liberians by law” have parented thousands of children in foreign land, children who, flowing from the premise that their parents are considered “non-Liberians”, have themselves lost any claim to Liberian citizenship. Unfortunately, this group of persons in the Diaspora is getting increasingly large. Many of these persons possess valuable skills that could be harnessed in reducing the huge

skills deficit in post-conflict Liberia, but Liberia may not have the opportunity of benefitting from their skills merely because they are considered foreigners. Tons of other illustrations could be proffered to demonstrate the unfairness of our mono-citizenship legal regime. No wonder why Liberians in the Diaspora have combined forces in pushing for the repeal of our laws in order to provide for dual citizenship.

But as uncomfortable as it may sound, the number of Liberians both at home and abroad who vehemently oppose dual citizenship is also very huge. They too cling passionately to an interesting strand of the debate. As naively as it may sound, some Liberians who did not flee the country during the height of the Civil War espouse the view that those who fled did not fully pay their dues in terms of experiencing first-hand the agonizing pain that Liberians at home were subjected to. Now that the War is over and job opportunities are opening in Government, the opponents of dual citizenship opine that it is unfair to “give our jobs to the very people who chickened out in search of greener pastures when we remained on the ground during hell or high water.”

In fact, the present Government headed by Madam Ellen Johnson Sirleaf has come under tremendous criticism for giving government jobs to Liberians from the Diaspora who some critics have disparagingly labeled as “repatriated bureaucrats”. The performance of these relocated Liberians has been a mixed bag of good news and bad news. While some have brought home much needed expertise and contacts and have diligently and honestly worked for the forward movement of our dear country, others

have behaved arrogantly and engaged in unsavory and unwholesome practices that have only compounded the local antipathy towards dual citizenship.

Sadly, the number of Liberians recruited from the Diaspora who are entangled in corruption accusations is not insignificant. Some Liberians back home put it in these simple terms, "They learned their book abroad to come to steal our money." Various reasons have been cited to explain why some Liberians recruited from the Diaspora engage in graft, but one of the most prominent causal factors what I will call *"the dual family challenge"*. Many Liberians in the Diaspora who take up positions back home leave their spouses and children behind, who they must continue to support financially through regular remittances from Liberia to the Diaspora. But being away from ones family too long opens the door to a host of temptations. With the passage of time, some of these relocated professionals and officials find themselves in social relationships back home that also put tremendous financial pressure on their pockets. In their quest to find resources to cater to the new realities of two families – the dejure family abroad and the defacto family in Liberia – some relocated Liberians have unfortunately yielded to the temptation of cutting corners, which eventually land them into trouble and disgrace, and as a result, give fuel to the argument against dual citizenship. Furthermore, the complications that may arise in prosecuting an official/professional who allegedly embezzles government money and flees to the sanctuary of the country where he/she has citizenship, has been cited by opponents of

dual citizenship as another solid reason why Liberia should not recognize dual citizenship.

Another argument cited by opponents of dual citizenship is the issue of conflict of interest. On whose side will an official of the Liberian government, who is a citizen of another country, lean when the strategic national interest of Liberia and Liberians clash with that of the other country? Indeed, whether we agree or not, the opponents of dual citizenship could produce many arguments that cannot easily be dismissed as shallow and unrealistic.

For instance, in spite of our sympathy for dual citizenship, the conflict of interest concern and the concern about the difficulty that may arise in the prosecution of a government official who is a dual citizen are two concerns that cannot easily be dismissed. However, these concerns are relevant mainly in situations involving top level political appointees and elected officials. But let's face the fact: How many top levels appointed or elected positions do we have as compared to the thousands of persons whose Liberian citizenship have been taken away or will be taken away as a result of what evidently is our anachronistic and draconian *Alien and Nationality Law*? The top level positions are just a handful.

Therefore, in light of the current state of hostility against dual citizenship back home, I propose that we move in a stepwise, pragmatic manner in our approach? ***Let us pass***

*what is palatable and passable now* and, if in the future resistance reduces and appetite improves, take on the most difficult provisions in the dual citizenship package and pass them. This approach will entail doing as was done in Ghana and many other African countries that have dual citizenship regimes: *provide for dual citizenship in the statutes but explicitly state that, for certain positions, no one with dual citizenship is eligible*. In Ghana, for instance, positions such as Chief Justice and Justices of the Supreme Court, Ambassadors, Chief of Defense Staff of the Armed Forces, Inspector General of Police, Director of Immigration, Chief Director of a Ministry, etc cannot be occupied by anyone who possesses dual citizenship.

Given my experience in the public sector from serving as Budget Director to Minister of Finance and now Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Liberia, I too espouse the view that people in certain top government positions should not have divided loyalties and should be primarily pre-occupied with the strategic national interest of Liberia and Liberians in any and all situations. Persons occupying certain top level positions should not have to worry about the potential negative consequences that may befall them personally if, while pushing the interest of Liberia, they undermine the interest of another country whose citizenship they also possess.

Secondly, I do believe that top level officials should bear the full consequences of their actions and/or inactions. If the actions and/or inactions of any official will lead to a situation where our people will have to go to the American compound at Greystone for



refuge, I think it is grossly unfair for the woman from Clara Town to be directed to an open square while the official is ushered onto a helicopter sent in by the American Government to repatriate American citizens back to the comfort and safety of the United States. In such a situation, the dual citizenship status of the official actually works as an insurance policy against his/her bad behavior in Liberia.

As to which specific positions to set aside in such an "except for" clause, extensive consultations involving all relevant stakeholders in this debate can sort that out. In the meanwhile, the prudent course of action is for Liberians in the Diaspora to continue to relate to the country in positive ways so as to gain the increasing goodwill of their brothers and sisters at home for the repeal of our Alien and Nationality Law. Continuing to contribute to the country by constructing houses back home or remitting money regularly to pay school fees of a brother or cater to the health needs of a mother or ensure that a family eats three meals a day only helps, in no small measure, to consolidate the positive image of Liberians in the Diaspora. Given the depth and breadth of the destruction visited upon our country during our civil conflict, it is an incontestable fact that no government would have had the resources to adequately cater to the multifarious needs and wants of the citizenry. You, my brothers and sisters in the Diaspora, have helped to fill the void, and do not back pedal from doing so, especially at a time when you intend to up the tempo in the advocacy for dual citizenship.

Additionally, ULAA and other Diaspora organizations need to adopt a policy of sponsoring vacation trips to Liberia of some of their members with expertise in areas critical to our growth and development. These vacationing Diasporans can render pro-bono services for a month or so at the University of Liberia or at a local health facility or perform some other valuable services in their areas of expertise. In this regard, we need to laud many Liberians in the Diaspora who have been visiting Liberia regularly to contribute their quota to the forward march of the country. Mention is worthy of Doctor James Adama Sirleaf, a Liberian Physician based in the US and son of President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf who comes regularly to Liberia with his professional colleagues mobilized by his HEARTT Foundation to render pro-bono health services at John F. Kennedy Medical Center and other health centers across the country. Mention is also worthy of a young Liberian lady, Saya Doe Sio of North Carolina, who through the Annie T. Doe Memorial Foundation, a foundation she set up in honor of her late mother, is currently constructing a school and a health center in Buchanan, Grand Bassa County, the place where she grew up as a little kid. To the many other Liberians in the Diaspora that are making similar contributions, I salute you for your patriotism and urge you to continue.

Mr. President, Fellow Compatriots,

Let me conclude by again expressing thanks to you for the opportunity to share my humble thoughts with you at this august Assembly. We at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs

look forward to working closely with ULAA and its constituent organizations in advancing the cause of Liberians in the Americas. As we commemorate a decade of unbroken peace, let us all, Liberians at home and Liberians abroad, Liberians in high places and Liberians in low places, renew our love for and dedication to our country by executing individual covenants with Mama Liberia, committing that our actions and inactions will always solidify, not weaken, the bulwark of peace and progress in our nation for many more decades.

I THANK YOU.