

**Special Address by Honorable Joseph N. Boakai, Sr.
Vice President of the Republic of Liberia
at the Mercy Corps Event
on “Youth in the Lead: Lessons from Liberia”
The Willard Intercontinental Hotel
Washington, D.C., USA
Monday, August 4, 2014**

(As Delivered)

Madam Allison Huggins, Country Director of Mercy Corps Liberia;
Members of the Mercy Corps Family;
Special Guests;
Members of the Liberian Delegation;
Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is an honor to be here today to represent my President, Her Excellency Madam Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, who was to be your guest of honor at this event highlighting Liberian youth.

President Sirleaf requested that I thank you for the kind invitation, and to express her deep regrets that the urgent situation at home -- this raging battle against the deadly Ebola virus which is tormenting our people -- made it an imperative that she remain on the ground.

You, at Mercy Corps, are among the first responders when conflict or disaster strikes -- working without complaint -- to save lives in the world's toughest places. You therefore can understand the massive challenges that face Liberia -- a country with such limited resources and capacity -- in containing this lethal disease for which no cure is yet known. We welcome any additional support from your organization.

We are here today to talk about lessons learned about Liberia's youth, who make up between 60-70 percent of the country's population of just over 4 million people. The decades of turmoil in our country, and the destructive 14-year civil war, greatly impacted many of our nation's youths as regards family, community, education and cognitive skills, motivation, and self-esteem. Our senseless civil war rattled the foundation of the communal family system which had held us together for centuries.

Children were left to take on adult responsibilities -- fending for themselves, becoming breadwinners; education took a back seat to the naked fight for survival; and our value system was profoundly compromised.

With their hopes for a better life dashed, many young people became part of Liberia's "lost generation", some forced to become child soldiers and to commit heinous acts in order to survive.

Without education or skills, these young people -- now landing in their twenties and thirties -- today face high unemployment, insecure livelihoods, and unpredictable transition to adulthood. They fall into the

category of the vulnerable employed; and exist in the margins, unfit to reintegrate and contribute to their families, communities, and society.

An even greater tragedy is that they are now becoming parents to another emerging generation too -- a sad state of affairs that spells a not so pleasant future for the generation that follows theirs.

Their plight leaves them vulnerable and susceptible to negative influences that could jeopardize our decade-long peace and stability, and threaten our fragile democracy, potentially depriving us of an optimistic future. Symptomatic of the problem is the recent attack by youths on the facilities of one of our largest mining concessions, ArcelorMittal, a major employer in that area in Liberia.

Since coming to office in 2006, our administration has remained committed to implementing various youth development programs aimed at rebuilding the lives of young people, using cross-sectoral, integrated, strength-based approaches that are mutually reinforcing, as well as fostering greater coordination and efficiency.

For the first time in decades, we have a real chance for achieving long-term national peace and security. This is because we are making simultaneous investments to improve education, social welfare, healthcare, infrastructure, and economic and political systems.

We see education and youth development as mutually reinforcing. Our education reform program focuses not only on educational outcomes of enrollment and attainment, but also on the quality of the skills acquired, educational content, mentoring, tutoring, career guidance, and improving college access.

We also focus on Accelerated Learning Programs (ALPs), which have proven to be highly relevant because they cater to former combatants, returnees, and youth who lack schooling alternatives because they are beyond school-age. ALPs provide young people with motivation, self-esteem, hope, and trust in the future. They reduce violence and improve coping mechanisms.

Our teacher education programs are bearing fruits, with strong leadership in schools and increased teacher professionalism. Systems are constructed to gather data to inform and improve teaching and learning.

Additionally, the government is implementing programs to address the skills and employment needs of the nation's youth. For example, the Youth, Employment, Skills (YES) Project offers temporary employment programs and improves employability for poor youths. Its public works activities lead to cultivating community farms that engender short-term employment. Another component works with service providers to place interns trained under the program.

Another program, the Economic Empowerment of Adolescent Girls and Young Women (EPAG), aims at gender equality and parity. Training in life skills and livelihood training increases young women's employment and income-generation opportunities.

The Liberia Youth Empowerment Program (LYEP) is our flagship youth employment project. This is a project in which I chair its Steering Committee Board. Its four areas of focus are: job creation, leadership development, vocational skills and training, and entrepreneurship and life skills training. Participants earn

a little over US\$80 a month for performing public works duties, and many now boast of being able to own small businesses or construct modest homes as a result of their year in the program.

LYEP includes pre-employment social support, aimed at increasing the employment readiness of youth by supporting the development of non-cognitive skills and positive sense of self and good attitudes toward work. In addition, the government and its partners are developing a new program to help strengthen LYEP.

Many institutions provide Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET), which is directly targeted at work and employability of returnees, former combatants, and vulnerable local youth.

Such programs have significantly improved the livelihood and employment opportunities for many of our young people, positively influencing their self-esteem, dignity, stature, and standing within the communities. TVET has also repaired some of the imbalances in gender relations; girls graduating from TVET institutions find employment, which helps reduce their dependence on partners and spouses.

The government has developed a National TVET Policy, which has been vetted by stakeholders and is awaiting Cabinet approval. It is based on thorough market analysis that examined local needs and trainers' capabilities in close alliance with industry and the communities.

We are working with local businesses to fund skills training according to their needs, and to provide apprenticeship opportunities and employment at the end of the training.

The policy emphasizes the need to teach "hard" technical and other manual skills, alongside "soft skills" which are equally important for young people to maintain a proper life. It calls for trauma counseling, patriotism, health/sex, citizenship/anti-corruption and tolerance education, flanking the technical and vocational courses. These, we believe, are necessary supports in transforming young people into productive and constructive future citizens.

Despite the recent youth attack I mentioned earlier, I want to assure our partners, supporters and investors that Liberia is not a "nation at risk". Rather, we are a resilient nation that is consolidating a decade of peace, of which we are proud. Liberia is an attractive place with much promise for investment.

It goes without saying that, as elsewhere, our youth are our future. That is why, at the center of our youth development efforts, our key goals include developing the economy, improving infrastructure, investing more in education, and fostering vocational education.

By taking guidance from those goals, we are assured that our youth will be better prepared to contribute to the nation's prosperity.

We thus place our request before you to maintain your deep interest in, and maximum support to, our efforts. We sure count on you as much as we appreciate all that you are already doing.

May your reward find manifestation in the empowerment of this critical segment of our population, on whose shoulders our future lies.

I want to thank you for giving me the opportunity, and God bless you.