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Press Release

For Immediate Release

US DEPARTMENT OF STATE TO ATTEND ULAA 2016-GENERAL ASSEMBLY

WASHINGTON, August 30, 2016 – With nearly 26 days to ULAA General Assembly (GA) in Buffalo, New York, the Desk of Mali and Liberia at the Bureau of African Affairs of the United States Department of State confirmed full participation at ULAA GA-2016. In an email sent to ULAA National General Secretary, Arthur Weah Doe, dated August 25, 2016, West African Desk Officer, Deniece Yeboah said, “Good Morning Mr. Doe, Many thanks for your letter of invitation. I’d like to inform you that I will be more than happy to attend the ULAA's 42nd General Assembly on behalf of the U.S. Department of State. Please feel free to contact me directly if you have any specific details regarding my participation.” Secretary Doe earlier sent an invitation to the head of the Malian and Liberian Desk at the State Department, Mr. David Reimer, to attend ULAA 2016 GA. Read Full Text of ULAA Talking Points after hashtag below.

It can be recalled that on Wednesday, August 17, 2016, the President of the Union of Liberian Associations in the Americas, H. E. Wilmot W. Kunney led a high power delegation to the US

Department of State to discuss issues relevant to Liberians here in the US Diaspora and the Republic of Liberia. The delegation met with Mr. David Reimer, Director of the Desk of Mali and Liberia and discussed several issues, some of which included, IMMIGRATION RELIEF/TEMPORARY PROTECTIVE STATUS for Liberians on pre-post EBOLA TPS, OUT-OF-COUNTRY VOTING (OCV), and Liberia's #1 enemy, CORRUPTIONS. Members of President Kunney delegation were Hon. Alexander Arku Bazzie, National Treasurer; Hon. Y. Wloti Hne, Chairman, External Affairs Committee; and Mr. Barte C. Togba, Executive Director, ULAA Diaspora Development Fund.

Prior to President Kunney and delegation meeting with Director David Reimer on Wednesday, several group of Liberian organizations on Tuesday, August 16, 2016, met with Desk Officer Deniece Yeboah. The Liberian organizations were: Association of Liberian Journalists in the Americas (ALJA), Grand Gedeh Association in the Americas (GGAA), ULAA, etc. The Tuesday meeting of the various Liberian organizations paved the way for good conversations between ULAA and the State Department, a result which triggered an invitation for the State Department to attend ULAA GA - 2016, for the first time in ULAA 42 year's history.

Meanwhile, ULAA began sending invites to Special Guests and organizations, and calling on all Liberians to turn out in Buffalo, New York from September 23 – September 25, 2016 to participate in the biggest and most important General Assembly in ULAA history. Several non-Liberian organizations and prominent citizens from West Africa are expected to turn out.

The Union of Liberian Associations in the Americas was founded on July 4, 1974, and it is the umbrella organization representing Liberians and their various community and social organizations in the United States. The Union promotes unity, cultural awareness, and advocates for immigration and other services for Liberians in their various communities in the U.S. and engages in the promotion of good governance, democracy, social justice, and peace in Liberia.

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Wednesday, August 17, 2016

RE: ULAA DISCUSSION POINTS WITH US DEPARTMENT OF STATE

Mr. Director David Reimer:

We bring you greetings from the officers and membership of the Union of Liberian Associations in the Americas (ULAA), and also express thanks to you for granting us this audience.

The Union is the umbrella organization representing Liberians and their various community and social organizations in the United States. The Union promotes unity, cultural awareness, and advocates for immigration and other services for Liberians in their various communities in the U.S. and engages in the promotion of good governance, democracy, social justice, and peace in Liberia.

We, firstly, extend thanks and appreciation to the United States Government for their support and assistance to the Government and people of Liberia over the years. We are particularly thankful for the leadership role played by the United States in eradicating the scourge of the deadly Ebola virus from Liberia and the over \$250 million dollars assistance to Liberia under the MCC. It is our view that these gestures exemplify the historical and traditional relationship that exist between U.S and Liberia.

Director Reimer, the primary reasons for our visit here is to convey to the United States Government the views and sentiments of ordinary Liberians in the U.S Diaspora, in view of the fact that Liberia is at a crossroad. After more than 14 years of civil war, followed by 11 years of democratic governance and peace, our country will be facing yet another critical test for its survival in 2017, when Liberians go to the polls to elect a new president. This challenge, in addition to many others, warrants the attention of Liberians in the Diaspora and other stakeholders and important friends of Liberia, such as the United States.

Accordingly, our visit is to consult with the U. S. State Department on issues of concerns facing Liberians in the Diaspora, as well as issues that are critical to the consolidation and advancement of peace in Liberia.

IMMIGRATION RELIEF / TEMPORARY PROTECTIVE STATUS

One of the issues of concern for our community here in the U.S. is the atmosphere of uncertainty that hangs over many Liberians who are on the Temporary Protective Status (TPS). Since 1990, Liberians living in the United States and those fled the civil war that settled in the United States have benefited from the TPS granted by the various US Presidents and allowed to settle and work in this Country. While a considerable number of these Liberians have adjusted their status from TPS to other forms of permanent residences or returned home, a significant number approximately over three thousands (3000) are still on TPS. In addition to this, hundreds of other Liberians were granted another temporary protective status as a result of the Ebola crisis in Liberia. These various forms of TPS are set to expire soon. In fact, one will be expiring next month (September).

Given that most of these people have been residing in the United States for many years now, and have adapted to the American way of life, including some already living the American dream, owning their own homes, having American born children, law abiding, and contributing their fair share to the growth and development

of this country, etc., it will be disrupting and disheartening to tear them away from their homes, children, and communities they have come to know and love for so long. Also, economically, if these hard working and law abiding Liberians are to lose their TPS status and turned into unlawful residents, they will not be able to work and fend for their families, including many American born children, and could lead to losing their homes, and other possessions. Our request, therefore, is to firstly, extend these benefits for two years, and work towards a more permanent solution (path) that grants permanent immigration relief to Liberians in this category.

DUAL CITIZENSHIP/OUT OF COUNTRY VOTING (OCV)

Another issue Diaspora Liberians are confronting is Dual citizenship. It is an established fact that as a consequence of the Liberian civil wars, thousands of Liberians fled the country to seek refuge in other parts of the world. Some of these Liberians acquired citizenship of their countries of refuge. However, by doing so, they automatically lost their Liberian citizenship in line with Laws of the Republic of Liberia. The Union has been in the frontline advocating with Liberian Legislature to change or amend these laws so that natural born Liberian citizens do not lose their citizenship when they acquire citizenship of other nations.

In addition to ensuring unbreakable links between natural born Liberians and their country, we believe that Liberia will greatly benefit from transfer of knowledge and investment by dual nationality. We are therefore appealing to the United States Government to add their input to this issue.

Similarly, the building of a sustainable democracy must have the full participation of all eligible citizens no matter their locations. In recognition of this, we have advocated and continue to advocate for out of country voting (OCV) for Liberians living outside of Liberia. The National Elections Commission and others have alluded to the cost and logistical requirements as impediment to the implementation of this proposition. We believe that the full participation of all Liberian citizens in the electoral process is essential to strengthening our democracy, peace, and national reconciliation, like other countries do, including the United States of America. We are therefore, and again, appealing to the U.S. Government for support on this issue.

HOME FRONT /LIBERIA

Over the past 11 years, Liberia has made some stride towards peace and democracy. However, it is important to note that along the way, serious challenges remain the outmost concerns. The provision of basic services, such as health, education, sanitation, water, and electricity to the general population have been dismal, despite the infusion of large international assistance and domestic resources into these efforts. Health is approaching a crisis level, with Liberians dying of preventable diseases, while the government officials fly to foreign countries for their own health care needs. The educational system is in shambles, and described by President Johnson Sirleaf as a “MESS”. Students, especially those in public school settings, struggle to pass the regional high school examination and university entrance exams. In most of the part of the country, all weather roads appear non-existent, cutting off an entire region from the rest of the country during the raining season.

Also, the security situations in the country continue to worsen with armed robberies and related crimes on the increase, while high profile crimes such as the murder of the Late Harry Greaves remain unsolved. Again, this comes after massive international assistance to the security sector over the years. With the withdrawal of the UN Peace Keeping Troops, ordinary Liberians including even members of the government have expressed serious reservations with regards to the ability of local law enforcement agencies to maintain the peace and protect all Liberians.

Similarly, in this volatile security environment, the Criminal Justice system is under severe strains and also performing poorly. The prison population is dominated by individuals held for pre-trial detention, some of whom have not appeared before a judge for several months in clear

violations of their constitutional rights. Moreover, individuals who have appealed their convictions continue to languish in jail with no movement on their appeal process. The famous Grand Gedeh 13, comprising individuals from Grand Gedeh County who were convicted of mercenaries is a good example of some of the challenges facing the criminal justice system.

CORRUPTION

In addition to all of this, corruption is pervasive in Liberia. In our view, one of the serious impediments to durable peace and security in Liberia is the issue of corruption. This cancer has infected every fabric of the Liberian society. Corruption has undermined investments in education, health, and infrastructure development. As a result, the quality of life for the Liberian people continues to decrease on a daily basis. In our country, impunity reigns supreme, and institutions set up to fight corruption are very weak. As a matter of fact, after more than 10 years since the civil war effectively ended, most of the institutions of state and government continue to remain weak and ineffective to a large extent.

Director Reimer, it is in this environment that our country will be heading to the polls next year in general and presidential elections to elect a President and members of the National legislature. With political parties well over 20 and many presidential candidates, the potential for conflicts and violence cannot be minimized.

It is against this background that we come here today to present the following recommendations to the United States Government through the State Department:

1. That the United States use whatever leverage at its disposal to ensure that major actors in the Liberian political process uphold the rule of law and commit to a free and fair electoral process devoid of violence.
2. That the United States Government work with regional bodies such as The Economic Community of West African States ECOWAS and the African Union to create a robust election monitoring team that will monitor all aspect of the elections.
3. That to assist Liberia fight corruption, the U.S. Government treats money from corruption the same way drug money is treated. We request the U.S government to take the following specific actions:
 - a. monitor the off shore accounts of key government officials and other individuals in the public sector;
 - b. impose travel ban and assets freeze, and seizure of all monies, and properties of any public official found guilty of corruption in Liberia;
 - c. Assist in improving the investigative and prosecutorial skills of the Liberia Anti-Corruption Bureau and other anti-graft institutions.
4. That the United States Government, along with independent civil society organizations, including ULAA conducted a thorough review of all its assistance programs to Liberia including projects undertaken by USAID, to determine their full impact and benefits to the people of Liberia. We make this call against the background of reported massive assistance made in the name of Liberia with little or no improvement in the lives of ordinary Liberians.

5. We also call on the United States to assist in the improvement of the criminal justice system, especially in the areas of pre-trial and juvenile detentions, as well as the appeal process to ensure conformity with the rights of the individual.
6. Finally, we suggest that the United States Department through your office hold regular consultation with the Union of Liberian Associations in the Americas (ULAA) in order to exchange views, especially those from ordinary Liberians that may be helpful in the understanding of issues and formulation of policies and other actions that pertain to Liberia and Liberians.

Director Reimer, it is our belief that if these steps are taken, Liberia will be placed on a solid and irreversible path to peace, national security, democracy, and development. We also want to assure you that the Union of Liberian Associations in the Americas (ULAA) is available to work with the U.S. Government in pursuit of these ideals.

Thank You.