

Mr. Speaker & Members of the National Legislature

Mr. Chief Justice and Associate Justices of the Supreme Court

Members of the Cabinet

Mr. Doyen & Members of the Diplomatic Corps

Esteemed Representatives from the Liberian Diaspora:

- *Arthur Weah Doe of ULAA (United States)*
- *Kingston W. Wleh of EFLA (Europe)*
- *Emmanuel S. Wettee of the International Conference on Dual Citizenship*

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen

Fellow Liberians:

Greetings and Happy New Year to you all!

I take the distinct honor this morning of this historic day to stand here in the stead, and at the behest, of Her Excellency President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. Her Excellency will have me convey to you her greetings, warm sentiments, and best wishes for productive deliberations that culminate in policy action courses that will go to strengthen the unity and cohesion of our nationhood.

Compatriots,

You will agree that evidence abounds to prove that this Government has, from the outset, adopted and treaded on the principle of inclusion. That has been our guiding principle since. We have stared down the barrels of consternation and scaled the walls of suspicions from partisans and some of our ardent supporters to reach out and bring every sector of the Liberian population on board in the governance and development of our common patrimony.

We are convinced that the turmoil and violence that exploded throughout the country in the last quarter century emanated from years of exclusionary policies, ethnic divisions and historical antagonisms. Successive governments have had to grapple with these problems all through our history but sustainable resolution has proven elusive.

Fellow Liberians,

Those who have lived in the Diaspora know that it is not an easy decision to leave one's homeland and friends and relatives to move abroad. The reason, be it escaping war and carnage or seeking economic freedom, must be compelling.

We also know that no matter how long one stays out and no matter how successful one becomes in the adopted land, one never completely severs links to the ancestral land. We must therefore embrace our brothers and sisters in the Diaspora who seek to contribute to the development and wellbeing of the nation.

When economic activities collapsed during our civil crisis, Diaspora Liberians became an important source for hard currency through their invaluable remittances. They have continued to manifest deep interest in and concern for their native country in countless other ways throughout their stay away from this land. Their sustained advocacy for various Liberian causes in the corridors of power in the capitals of powerful nations has continued to give impetus to efforts on the home front to make Liberia's case.

This generation thus has an obligation to right the historical wrongs and put to rest long simmering resentments. We must put the country on a trajectory to sustained growth and development and bequeath to posterity one nation, finally at peace with itself, indivisible under God.

It was in light of the foregoing that we established—as fundamental to our outreach and inclusive policy—the Diaspora Affairs Unit within the Ministry of State. This Unit is charged with developing a strategy for

forging closer links between Diaspora Liberians and the land of their heritage and to mobilize their skills, expertise and resources to contribute to the national development agenda.

Key to the attainment of this objective is evolving a comprehensive National Diaspora Engagement Policy. We approached the World Bank which agreed to fund the Diaspora Engagement Program to formulate the Comprehensive National Policy.

Various reports indicate that an estimated half a million Liberians live abroad. Diaspora Liberians are among some of the best skilled and professionals with resources the country can tap into for capacity building and for the promotion and expansion of Liberian entrepreneurship.

Sustained engagement with this important community of Liberians requires that we address certain essential issues. We must resolve the question of citizenship and participation in the governance process for Liberians in the Diaspora.

Our experiment with the TOK-TEM and SES programs—recruiting trained manpower from abroad—has revealed to us a deep pool of professionals holding expertise so direly needed in the country.

As noted earlier, many of them did not leave here by choice. However, as they adjusted to life in their respective host countries, they—and especially their offspring—have had to take up citizenship in those countries to be able to make it up the social ladder and secure for themselves decent jobs that are reserved only for citizens of those countries.

Our President and many other leading policy makers are already on record for supporting the proposal for dual citizenship. The Administration has accordingly submitted to the Legislature appropriate recommendation on the matter.

We note that Diaspora Liberians have passionately debated this issue and have even formed an organization to pursue its passage. We commend members of the organization for contributing positively to and elevating this debate.

This historic Homecoming Event and Consultative Dialogue provides yet another opportunity for Diaspora Liberians and their brothers and sisters at home to deliberate important issues to be included in the comprehensive National Diaspora Engagement Policy.

We trust that consideration will be given to the establishment of a Diaspora Trust Fund to provide access to capital for Diaspora returnees and investors desiring of doing business in the country.

Discussion of other areas including incentives for Diaspora returnees, recruitment of Diaspora professionals, scientists and teachers, and business opportunities for investment will certainly inform Government's policies and actions regarding our engagement with the Diaspora.

Above all, we trust that the Event will reinforce mutual support and understanding among Diaspora Liberians and their brothers and sisters back home.

We extend a hearty welcome to all of you and wish you a pleasant stay and successful consultations.

THANK YOU!