

“Mano River Region at Risk?: Post-Conflict Conversations Within and Across Borders”

Monrovia, Liberia: January 13th & 14th, 2009

**A “States at Regional Risk” Conference sponsored by
the Institute of Critical International Studies (ICIS) of Emory University**

TRANSCRIPT OF REMARKS MADE BY HER EXCELLENCY,

ELLEN JOHNSON-SIRLEAF, PRESIDENT OF LIBERIA

Good morning to all of you, and I would like to thank organizers of this event. I’m here for primarily two reasons. One is to welcome you and to say how pleased we are when groups such as yourselves can come to the country and bring issues that are relevant to our own experience.

The fact that you are here is an opportunity to exchange with ourselves information and make a contribution to help our efforts to re-form and transform our country.

The second thing is the Mano River Basin, the countries in the Mano River Union, today are of much importance as we reach the state where we are in each of these countries. In our efforts to move from periods of conflicts to being able to develop in keeping with our agenda, right now, especially given the current events in Guinea.

The importance of this Union and what we can do to insure the stability of this region is of utmost importance to all of us. I know that you’ll be operating under the Chatham House Rules but I do hope that some of your important insights will be captured and shared with us in an appropriate way as we try to develop our own agenda.

If we look at the history of each of the Mano River countries [we are] in many ways are similar, similar in terms of endowments, all of our countries are rich in natural resources, particularly Liberia, Guinea, and Sierra Leone.

I don't have to say that we have enjoyed many years of peace and stability under conditions of the monopolization of power and privilege, most of the time with centralized decision making, under a benevolent dictator. And that, with the exception of Ivory Coast, which took a different path towards openness, many of us have been in closed societies for those periods. And that led to violence and evils in all of our countries; that translated into conflict and the inability and fear to respond to development needs at a time when the evolution of young people in the country of course set the stage for the kinds of tensions in society that led to those conflicts.

Since the conflicts ended, each of our countries has been going through a process that focused on national development. Regional approaches have taken a back seat simply because there is so much work to be done in the countries themselves to move away from this long history of underdevelopment, to move away from this history of closed societies, and to be able to see how we can develop and respond to the needs of – what was pointed out already – a very young population in all of the countries.

As a result today, we are still trying to find regional approaches recognizing that unless we do that, given the recent experience of cross border activity, unless we are able to come up with those regional approaches, some of our own national development agendas may find themselves constrained and not able to reach their goals.

That's where we are right now, and for many of us, it's not a question of – to touch on the last issue raised in the paper that was read – it's not so much a question of reconstructing the past status-quo; it's a question of transformation. Because, indeed, if we do not go through transformation, we simply repeat the mistakes of the past, and we find ourselves sinking back into these old practices.

But transformation is not easy, because what it means is uprooting long-standing vested interests. Making sure that the society does something in a completely different way. And it is very important that we find the means to reach this change.

How do we, then, transform these societies so that we can achieve the development goals that are sustainable? Open societies, democratic principles that are sustainable. Those are the challenges we face on a national basis, each and every one of our four countries that are involved in the Union.

Add to that the regional dimension. How we then assume our national development goals, ensure the stability of each of our countries, by the kinds of devices, by the kinds of arrangements that will keep within our borders tensions that would be transferred to others.

Today we have – among the four countries – an understanding for peace, an understanding to avoid conflict, a commitment by each and every one that none of our countries will ever be used again to foster rebellion in another country.

But how do we translate this into the results that we want, given the circumstances in which we have had movements across borders, rebel groups, warring factions, all of which share the same ethnicity, share the same experience, [and] have been part of the conflict? How do we not only identify them, but ensure that they are part of the national and regional processes that ensure peace and security?

We don't have all the answers. The recent event in Guinea causes another complication. We've just come from a Mano River summit, where we had to look at what do you do. Do we 'go' for the struggle of the nation, and the change of government that was undemocratic? Do we condemn the undemocratic government and stay away and endorse the imposition of sanctions? We found that we agree on that. We said it has to be condemned, and indeed it has. Because the principle of democratic change, of non-violent change, not by military take-over, has to be endorsed by all. We have to stand by the principle, and that's what we did.

Going beyond that, how do you [pause] – What are you supposed to do? How do you ensure that you do not create – by exclusion and by sanctions – conditions by which discontent in a society begins to grow and, as a result, the new rulers feel that they have to be repressive to achieve their own political goals? How we get to the place where they accept the fact that their own tenure must be short if they are going to be accepted by the international community?

Those are the challenges that we now face as we try to engage the new rulers in Guinea. At the same time, [we have] our own commitment to international standards, the ones we cannot forget, we have to adhere to, and had to do so in our relationship with the new leaders.

I hope that as you all discuss these issues that you will, during the day, [consider] some of the experiences and best practices perhaps from other regions that are facing similar conflicts. And that you will be able to give us some of these ideas that we can look at as we try to find the right way to move ahead in our agenda.

Once again, thank you all for being here. Thank you all for the discussion, the focus on the Mano River Union, a regional entity today that is in the midst of searching for sustainability in peace, and at the same time, groping with how to ensure we move in a way in which we will prevent a return to conflict, given the fragility that exists in each of our countries.

Thank you very much.