



Seventh (special) sitting

Wednesday, 7 June 2006, 12 noon

President: Mr. Sajda

ADDRESS BY HER EXCELLENCY MS. ELLEN JOHNSON SIRLEAF, PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF LIBERIA

The PRESIDENT

Welcome to this special sitting of the International Labour Conference. I would like, on behalf of the Conference, to welcome Her Excellency, Ms. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, President of the Republic of Liberia.

I shall now give the floor to the Secretary-General of the Conference, Mr. Somavia, to welcome our distinguished guest.

The SECRETARY-GENERAL

Your Excellency, Madam President, what an honour and a privilege for all of us. In welcoming you, we welcome history. History in the making. There is an African proverb that reminds us that no matter how dark the night, the day is sure to come, and a new day for Liberia began quite literally in one of its darkest hours.

In the small hours of the night, late last year, the people of Liberia started gathering outside polling stations. They took their stand before dawn and then for hours under the blazing sun for their chance to cast the vote – the vote for change, for hope and for history.

In the end, the country emerged with a legitimate president, and the continent emerged with the first woman elected to lead an African nation. Madam President, as you have just seen, you can be assured that the tripartite constituents are with you in your quest, very much with you!

President Johnson Sirleaf, your victory was a tremendous personal accomplishment, but it was also a signal event for all the women of Africa, whose enormous contribution so often goes unheard, unseen and unsung.

I passionately believe that when you empower women, you empower Africa. And when you empower Africa, you enrich the world, and you have done that.

You have captured the international imagination with your unique blend of personal strength, good humour and iron conviction. And you carry an outstanding wealth of leadership and experience – as Liberia's first female Minister of Finance and President of the Liberia Bank for Development and Investment, as a World Bank economist, as Africa Director of the United Nations Development Programme, as a senior private sector executive, as a founder and supporter of NGOs involved in community development, and, of course, as a longstand-

ing voice for gender equality, women's political leadership and women in peace building.

Madam President, having fought myself for democracy in Chile, my own country, I feel a deep personal bond with your own struggle. You understand what it means to suffer under a dictatorship, to live in exile, to fight for freedom. You were imprisoned. And when the nightmare finally ended, you said that you were determined "to get to the place where I can change things" – and you certainly did.

Today, Liberia faces an urgent development challenge which calls for stepped up international action, and not "business as usual" responses. Action which takes into account the special conditions in which the country finds itself and the urgency of the situation.

Acknowledgement of your political success is important, but what you need today is immediate and concrete support from all corners to address the most urgent needs of your people.

Liberia is facing a jobs crisis that is virtually unprecedented anywhere in the world today. More than four out of five of its citizens are unemployed.

Your presence here sends the strongest possible signal to the world community and development cooperation partners to give urgent focus to the priority of immediate job creation in Liberia.

Madam President, the ILO itself was born from the ashes of war and based on the notion that dignity at work is the foundation stone for renewal and reconciliation.

We stand with you in developing a comprehensive decent work country programme for Liberia.

We stand with you in taking immediate and concrete action to advance LEEP – the Liberian Emergency Employment Programme: in investing in labour-intensive reconstruction, in striving for jobs for young people and former soldiers, in expanding real opportunities for women, in strengthening tripartism and social dialogue as a key contribution to stability and peace. And, given the importance of Liberia in the shipping sector, we stand with you in your strong support of the Maritime Labour Convention, 2006. Liberia leads the way in showing how a fair globalization for seafarers is possible in this vital sector, through your participation and the negotiations that led to this Convention.

Madam President, the story of your life and your country reminds us that indeed, no matter how dark the night, the day is sure to come. And now, the international community, particularly those with the means to do so, must act urgently to ensure that the new-found light also shines with new opportunities

for a new life for the people of Liberia. And we are honoured that you have joined us to share your vision and hope for Liberia's new dawn. Thank you so much for being here.

The PRESIDENT

Thank you, Mr. Somavia. It is now my honour to give the floor to President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. Your Excellency, you have the floor.

Ms. JOHNSON SIRLEAF (*President of the Republic of Liberia*)

I am honoured and I am humbled by the invitation extended to me to join you at this 95th Session of the International Labour Conference. It is an honour equally bestowed on my country, Liberia, and on Africa. Mr. Somavia and Ms. Amadi Njoku, thank you particularly for giving me this opportunity.

This is a critical period for my country as it desperately strives to recover from the legacy of a civil war which decimated its institutions and undermined its socio-economic fabric.

As a woman, a mother and a worker, I represent the millions of women in Africa, particularly post-conflict Africa, whose strength and determination to influence national decisions is propelled by their tears, blood and sweat. The barbarity of civil conflict, as we have experienced in our country, leaves in its trail human sufferings of immense proportions, yet those of us who survive can pay tribute to the world, including this Organization, for the courage, strength and determination to accompany us on our journey to peace and national renewal.

In this hall today, I see representatives of many nations of the world whose political will and enormous support accompanied Liberia on its path to peace and stability. Ours is a journey which cannot end with elections and the inauguration of a new government. It must be nurtured continuously by our commitment to national renewal, an agenda to reconcile, a vision to rebuild and a determination to study war no more. Equally significant will be the international goodwill and partnership that will sustain stability and the dividends of democracy.

In this important interaction with the ILO, and by my presence today, meeting with you, I come to renew Liberia's commitment as one of the founding members of this important international body. We acknowledge the unparalleled capacity of this Organization in achieving the goals set by the international agenda for the eradication of poverty, goals inherent in the ILO Decent Work Agenda, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), as well as the various development initiatives advanced over the years. Poverty alleviation, sustained economic growth and development, and employment under favourable and humane conditions, will constitute key indicators upon which stability will anchor.

At this forum, I wish to offer our share of the practical measures that will lift our people from poverty, while also developing a covenant that reinforces public-private partnership and strengthening the tripartite dialogue required to enhance our development agenda.

Our national agenda encapsulates a vision deeply rooted in our determination to humanize and restore dignity to the Liberian labour force.

We realize that our labour force is the soul of our nation. Our survival unquestionably rests upon its competitiveness and productivity. This expectation requires us to energize and humanize our labour force through a process requiring the formulation of

policies, enabling legislation, legal and constitutional reform, terms of trade improvement and multinational negotiations, which will guarantee proper conditions of work and benefits.

Our civil war was unprecedented, wrecking state institutions and criminalizing our sense of humanity. Our institutions, both public and private, have experienced physical and moral decay. Unemployment has risen to an unbelievable and unbearable 85 per cent. The level of unemployment and the idleness of our youth have a propensity for creating social disenchantment. For us, employment is synonymous with peace.

Our response to the rapid decline of the circumstances of our country incorporates the development of firm programmes in four important areas: institutional capacity development; the rule of law and labour standards; manpower development and the restoration of regional and international cooperation.

These four programme areas will seek to strengthen the capacity of the Government of Liberia to effectively dispense its statutory functions of administration, regulation and supervision of the labour administration of the country. This will require training and resources to cope with our national demands. It will also necessitate the review and scrutiny of our labour laws to ensure those standards which seek to dignify and humanize our people in the working environment. We have already commenced the review of our labour laws and initiated programmes to repeal and amend those found offensive to democratic governance. This will lead to a national labour conference in which all stakeholders will contribute to the ownership of a new national legal framework. Measures to eliminate child labour and human trafficking will also be adopted. Labour relations will receive priority attention. We need to restore confidence by reviewing the standards set by our laws and by the international community, in order to provide an adequate framework for protection and for the fulfilment of our international tripartite commitment and obligations.

At times, history, fate and destiny connive to shape the future. Strong and able citizens are frustrated in their search to become productive. The unemployment rate in our country compels our people to live merely in hope. There is no cause for pride in our recent past, but there is cause for hope because our new political dispensation and our national commitment summon us to respond with greater speed and urgency. We must respond to the understandable expectations of a battered population. Their pains and agony must summon us to act. Our mission is simply to right the wrong and do justice and, most importantly, to serve with humility.

Today, I come to advance a different agenda and partnership with the ILO on behalf of Liberia and other nations. It is an agenda born out of the excruciating poverty and dehumanization I see every day in my country. I believe that the G8, the Millennium Development Goals and several other initiatives aimed at derailing negative development will eventually lead us to the future. We all acknowledge the various conclusions of the World Summit Outcome Document of September 2005, which placed full employment and decent work as global goals at the centre of national development strategies. This year's meeting of the United Nations Economic

and Social Council (ECOSOC) will also focus on productive employment and decent work. The report of the World Commission on the Social Dimension of Globalization in 2004 dealt extensively with issues in the context of a globalized world economy and recognized the significant trends and profound changes that labour markets are undergoing. We must develop policies to deal with opportunities and threats. Our international and national strategies must aim at fighting poverty and secure a firm foundation for sustainable and equitable growth that will bring real dividends to the working class and the poor in our various countries.

My fear is that the global trend towards unfair and unequal markets tends to focus on and reinforce profit motives at the expense of working people. The private sector remains even more focused and competes in ways that could increase poverty. We must work to reverse this trend and bring consciousness and some sense of morality to a world whose sense of humanity has seemingly dissipated.

Our country's reality strikes me daily. It comes to me at my doorstep. Each day I see the face of a woman returning from a camp for refugees and displaced persons, children victimized by war lying hopelessly, desperately in search of a future of promise and nobility. This is a real call to action. I want to challenge you, I want to challenge each and every one of you in this audience, to join us in meeting this call with urgency; join us in providing immediate relief to those who do not really understand the delays associated with our processes. They want action, they want results, they want a change in their environment.

This Conference must build on this renewed opportunity for tripartism to restore hope to our devastated populations, to restore their dignity and build a new partnership.

We cannot do this alone, although we must take primary responsibility and carry out our part. We acknowledge the role that the international community, particularly the ILO, can play in this important endeavour to restore dignity to the workforce. We would like to commend the recent visit to Liberia by an ILO team and applaud the efforts being made to work with our Government to develop an emergency employment programme, which will lead to a longer-term employment action programme. Both programmes will require your support. Our Government will fully support this initiative as a pillar to sustain our democracy and begin to address the employment needs of our country. These labour-intensive initiatives are expected to deploy more than 1,500 people per month in several areas of rehabilitation and reconstruction. They will coordinate skills, training and employment placements, and organize and implement social interventions for vulnerable groups. This is in response to the many things that our people require.

The ILO Decent Work Agenda in diverse circumstances best suits our prevailing conditions. It is strongly characterized by rights at work and social protection, together with employment and enterprise creation and social dialogue, with gender as a cross-cutting theme. It is a rights-based agenda, an agenda for development, and provides a sustainable route out of poverty. It is rooted in the central role of work in the lives and well-being of women and men, their families, their communities and their societies. It is key to human security and social stability.

Decent work, the thing you all extol, is one of the democratic demands of people everywhere. It is connected to the growing recognition of the inadequacy of policies in which employment is residual and not a direct objective of development.

This year, we will focus on substantive issues, such as a promotional framework for occupational safety and health, a review of the employment relationship in today's world, and the role of the ILO in technical cooperation.

In this regard, we call upon the ILO and all of you for a covenant which will work with us in the designing and developing a decent work country programme that will enable us to seek assistance in areas other than those in which ILO has a comparative advantage. We are also planning to design and develop a medium- and long-term employment creation programme, together with a programme to strengthen the tripartite partners.

Our determination is to develop public-private partnership that will be crucial to our success. The Decent Work Agenda should envision the need to develop good corporate citizens. The demand for transparency and accountability on the part of governments must create an equal demand for accountability and transparency from the private sector, trade unions and all those involved in tripartite dialogue. It is a partnership that requires mutual obligations to achieve mutual goals.

My presence here today reaffirms Liberia's commitment to the ideals of the ILO and marks our progressive return to this community. We come to forge a new partnership that will yield dividends to our working people and greatly inspire working people in other countries. We are in the process of making several submissions to our national legislature on various international commitments, including the Equal Remuneration Convention, 1951 (No. 100), which seeks to strike a balance in wages and benefits between men and women. Mr. Director-General, I commend you on the advancement of women in the ILO and on what you have done to enhance the role and the effectiveness of women in this Organization.

We will also be looking at the Minimum Age Convention, 1973 (No. 138), and the Maritime Labour Convention, 2006, which we intend to sign while we are here. These practical commitments mark an important statement of our seriousness to advance the cause of our seafarers and working people. They represent our recognition of the need for Liberia, considered a world maritime nation, to do more for the participation of its workers in this system. We pledge our fullest commitment to ensuring the success of the ILO in this regard.

Finally, let me extend my congratulations to the Director-General, to the Officers of this Conference, and to the members of the secretariat for their support, to the African programme, to the Liberia programme, which is now being developed, for their renewed dedication, not only to our country, but to all of Africa; and to all the workers of the world for their undaunted courage to make change possible and to alter the negative trends of global degradation.

As a woman, and the one who today represents the aspirations and expectations of women in Liberia, in Africa and, dare I say, in the world, we can only say to you that our commitment to implement a reform agenda, one that prioritizes human recourse development and enhances the role of work-

ers, giving them back their importance and their dignity in society, will be one of the landmarks of the success of our administration, as we strive to ensure that women the world over prove their capacity to lead and to make a difference in the lives of humankind.

The PRESIDENT

Thank you, President Sirleaf, for those visionary words. We are deeply honoured to have been able to welcome you to the International Labour Conference and to have had the privilege of listening to your address.

Madam President, you are a member of a very select world club: the club of women Heads of State and Government. Even more than that, you speak from the unique perspective of the first ever woman Head of State of an African nation. In your interventions, since your election as President of the Republic of Liberia at the end of last year you have, of course, spoken of the need to rebuild the economy and infrastructure of your country, but you have also addressed the need to ensure that social equity, equal opportunity and fundamental human rights are extended to your people. You have spoken of the need to increase the access of your people to skills, education and training, and to jobs, so as to allow them to live in peace and dignity. These are themes

that are at the very heart of the values of the International Labour Organization and its Decent Work Agenda.

Madam President, your words today have confirmed all that we have heard from you since your election; your profound sense of responsibility and compassion towards the working people of Liberia and your determination to improve their lot.

Madam President, many thanks.

I now invite Her Excellency, President Johnson Sirleaf, and Mr. Somavia, Director-General of the International Labour Office, to take their seats at the signature table, for the ceremony of deposition of the instruments of ratification of the Maritime Labour Convention, 2006.

(The ceremony takes place.)

On my own behalf and on behalf of my fellow Officers and of all those participating in the International Labour Conference, I should like to express the deepest gratitude to you, Madam President, for having honoured this 95th Session of the International Labour Conference with your presence and your wisdom. Thank you.

(The Conference adjourned at 12.50 p.m.)

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