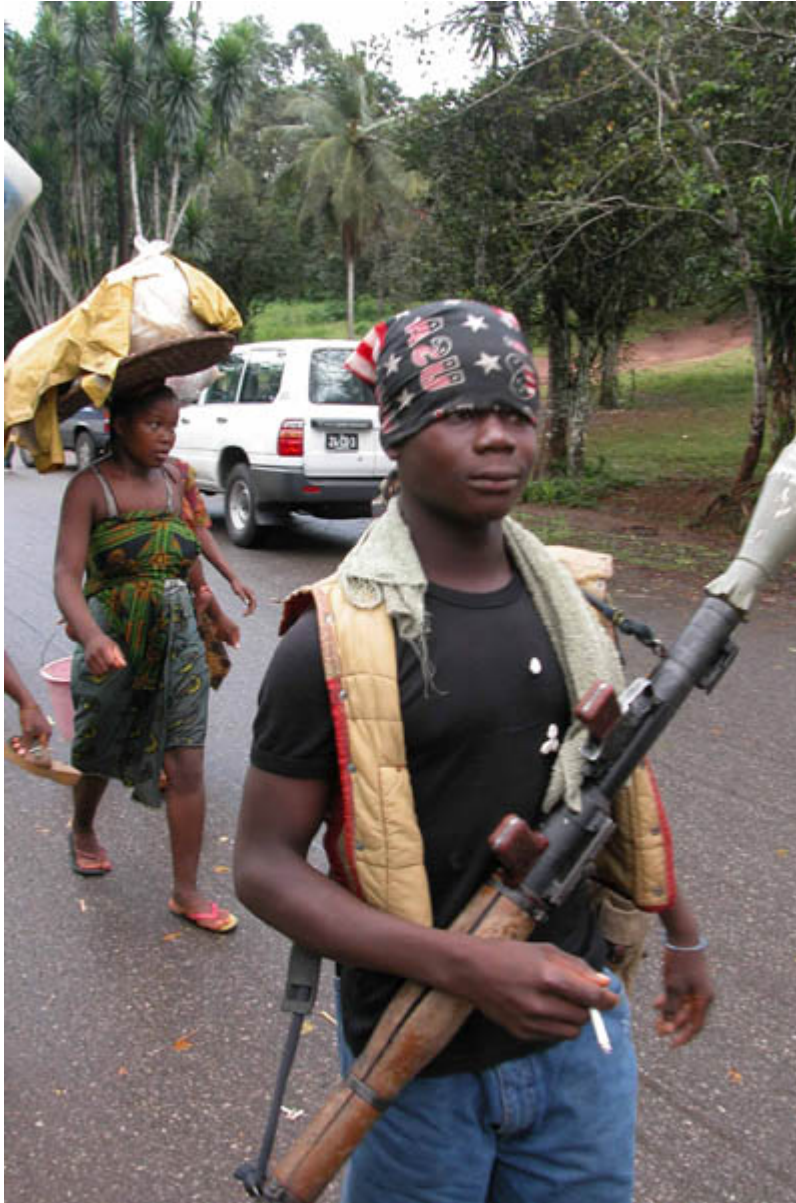


Addressing the Needs of Former Liberian Combatants and Child Soldiers

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Introduction

Today, we live in a troubled and very difficult world. Life changes so fast on us that we can no longer afford what we used to own in abundance years ago. For instance, there are so many symbolic wars going on around us today other than the physical war we just had, such as: political, social, and economic wars. Thus, even though we may think that the war is over in Liberia and that everything is excellent; nevertheless, there are a lot of post-war issues we have not adequately tackled. One of them includes addressing the needs of former Liberian combatants and child soldiers who have practically been neglected after Liberian warlords used and dashed them by the way side when they achieved their political ends. Hence, one of the reasons why I have taken the task to bring this matter to international light is because, if you can recall, most of those in this particular population for whom I advocate at this time lost their parents when they were two, three, four, five, six, seven, and eight years old. And, you might ask what was the reasons the rebels or ‘government’ soldiers gave for killing the parents and relatives of most of Liberia’s former combatants and child soldiers: “Because their parents were Gio, Mano, Krahn, Mandingo, Congor, or, because their parents worked in government as ministers, directors, police officers, Armed Forces of Liberia personnel,” and so forth. Hence, as a result of the massacre of their parents, most former Liberian combatants and child soldiers were orphaned and recruited at very tender ages by Liberian warlords, some vicious Liberian politicians, and supporters of the rebellion led by Charles Taylor and Mrs. Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, respectively.



(Orphaned and abandoned Liberian children fending for themselves during the Liberian Civil War.)

In view of the circumstances above, most of our subjects had no parental guidance or nobody to advocate their cause except UNICEF and other concerned Liberians, including the Liberia Women Initiatives and myself who were not rebel supporters. What I personally did during the heat of the Liberian Civil War (including members of my theatre company, Dehkontee Artists Theatre, Inc.—abbreviated as DATI) was to collaborate with UNICEF (including Dr. Esther Guluma, Francisco Pellucio, John Sumo, and local UNICEF staff in Liberia) and the Liberia Women Initiatives headed by Ms. Myrtle Gibson, Ms. Mary Brownell, and Ms. Voilate Tate. Together, we organized a children’s peace theatre along with peace education and conflict resolution workshops throughout accessible regions of Liberia to preach the word of peace, disarmament and demobilization of Liberia’s former combatants and child

soldiers through the UNICEF/DATI Kukatonon Conflict Resolution Project, the “Mardea” Radio Drama Series that advocated the cause of women empowerment and gender equity; as well as a public information campaign traveling theatre production entitled, “Wheh-gba” that was focused on HIV/AIDS prevention from 1992 up to my departure in 1997 when those whose “mas and pas Charles Taylor killed” decided to vote him in office.



(Photo of a Liberian child doing a traditional Liberian dance most probably from the Kpelle, Gola, or Vai ethnic groups of Liberia. During the war UNICEF and DATI used culture to promote peace, disarmament, and demobilization of Liberia’s former combatants and child soldiers.)

Consequently, you will agree with me that former Liberian combatants and child soldiers were overlooked in the peace process because they did not have a strong advocacy group to

pursue their cause during the various peace treaties that were carved to end the war in Liberia. Also, the initiative taken by UNICEF, myself, and other patriotic Liberians to advocate on behalf of Liberia's child soldiers was a drop in the bucket at that time since most of the international community's resources were being pumped into finding ways to stop the carnage and sponsoring peace conferences to bring belligerent parties to the negotiation table. Accordingly, this may be one of the reasons why the issue of properly rehabilitating former Liberian combatants and child soldiers has not been adequately addressed as it should at this time in Liberia.



(Above are some orphaned and abandoned Liberian children during the civil war)

The other issue along side the concern for the well-being of former combatants and child soldiers is that the death toll of Liberians is on the rise each day as a result of the aftermath of the war—the massive destruction of properties at the behest of those who ordered Liberia to be “destroyed and be rebuilt in three days,” as well as the inability of those presently in power to instantly “rebuild” Liberia as they promised, indeed gave the Liberian people “broken hearts.” As a result of that, Liberians die from curable and incurable illnesses and diseases, as well as from economic, social, and political stress in Liberia and in the diaspora—for instance, here in the United States and in other parts of the world—Australia, Europe, Asia, North and South America—wherever Liberians sought refuge during the civil unrest. Besides, part of the increase in the death toll of Liberians abroad is due to the nostalgia of Liberian refugees wanting to return home since fighting officially stopped in 2003; but they are unable to return home at this time because the present government comprises former warlords and combatants who terrorized and caused Liberians to seek refuge in other countries around the world. Hence, Liberian refugees and asylum seekers have suspended their return home for fear of reprisals from Liberian warlords and former combatants. In addition, most Liberian refugees and those who sought asylum in other countries (like me) do not have confidence in Mrs. Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf as their leader because of her alleged involvement and support of rebel activities from the beginning of the Liberian civil crisis. As a result, most Liberian refugees also have concerns regarding personal and national security issues that have not been adequately addressed by the Sirleaf government and the international negotiation team in Liberia.

Thus, the main purpose of this text is to provide some insights regarding how the current Liberian peace process can be improved by providing much needed mental health and rehabilitation services for former combatants and warlords, as well as for the civilian population

that was harassed during the Liberian conflict. In addition, this text suggests that genuine national healing and reconciliation may take place on a speedier and more guaranteed pace when the government of Liberia and international humanitarian and donor agencies provide former warlords, combatants, and child soldiers, and the general civilian population appropriate intervention services to address the mental health, medical, and physical needs of post-war Liberians . Hence, regardless of the fact that fourteen years of civil violence have typically destroyed the fabrics of our history, politics, and mutually beneficial relationships over those years, Liberians nevertheless still need one another to survive. In other words, we have to watch one another's backs because this is part of our Liberian culture—our Liberian way of life that we knew when we were growing up.

Also, long ago, neighbors and family friends thrived on one another's good will by watching one another's backs—by being our brother's or sister's keepers. As a result, people had more love and respect for one another then, than they do now. In addition, people also trusted one another more than they also do today because back in the day everyone somehow respected the inalienable rights of the *others* around them even though the elites frequently breached this practice by segregating among Liberians through the “Who know you” social and political system. However, due to mutual respect and shared trust among ordinary Liberians, your mother could send you to her neighbor to have a loan of some salt and no one in the neighborhood would know that the salt your mother used to season her Thanksgiving meal was borrowed from a neighbor. Against this backdrop, people were more cultured then and they were also additionally considerate of one another's needs. Further, neighbors also shared their meager resources for the common good of society, such as advocating for the rights of women and children, and the elderly, who were most victimized during the Liberian civil crisis.



A Local Sign in Monrovia, the capital of Liberia, advocating the rights of women during the Liberian Civil War.

In view of the foregoing, it is my ardent hope that the message contained in this text will not be misconstrued as a negative political campaign against the present government in Liberia. Instead, I hope my efforts to provide a divergent and analytical perspective regarding the plight of former Liberian combatants and child soldiers and the present political arrangements in Liberia may be viewed as a patriotic gesture on my part to help find more lasting and genuine solutions regarding the security of all Liberians, and not security for just only a few Liberians.

Furthermore, let me also make it categorically clear that as a Liberian citizen I am not only speaking out of emotions but more so from a professional perspective; even though I must confess I lost many of my beloved compatriots, brothers, and sisters, as a result of the rebel activities that were launched by former Liberian warlords and some prominent politicians to oust the Doe government. Some of these individuals are still roaming the corridor of power in Liberia after committing or abetting mayhem in Liberia. Hence, my message is also particularly directed to the population that comprises the perpetrators of human carnage in Liberia.

In this light, I am appealing to former Liberian warlords and their supporters to see reason in resigning their various political posts before the next presidential and general elections are held in 2011. Also, by that time, it is hoped that most of the issues discussed in this text may be addressed in order to pave the way for free and fair presidential and general elections, as well as to assure a more secured Liberian society that may facilitate the safe return of Liberian refugees and asylees who are presently afraid to return home because former combatants and warlords are serving in strategic governmental posts in the Sirleaf government. Notwithstanding, it would be unfair on my part not to at least acknowledge the great strides the Sirleaf government is now making to revitalize a broken state apparatus they themselves helped to destroy. Thus, it somehow gives all Liberians hope that there is some sense of civility on the ground despite most Liberians' lack of confidence in the Sirleaf government for reasons already stated a zillion times in this text.

Fellow Liberians and friends of Liberia, please remember that as the children of Israel of the Black Race, Liberians cannot continue to sing the Lord's song in a strange land. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the Sirleaf government to make amends with the Liberian people—to extend an olive branch to all Liberians from every ethnic group and all walks of life, instead of

just only favoring a select few. However, whenever this kind gesture is lacking as it is in the present, we will continue to express our concerns vividly in a public manner to make sure all Liberians are aware of our efforts and personal desire to contribute toward the reconstruction of post-conflict Liberia. In addition, I will as well draw the attention of the public and international community to the arrogant and unforgiving attitudes of those who are bent on derailing the Liberian peace process by not recognizing our competence and contributions. Thank you for your continued moral and financial supports over the years and hope you join me in this worthy national and international campaign to address the needs of former Liberian combatants and child soldiers, and Liberian civilians inclusive. This responsibility is immense and so it needs the active participation of those in government as well as those in the private sector. However, those who run the government must learn to recognize competent Liberian citizens at home and abroad who can help to make a difference irrespective of gender, ethnicity, political affiliation, religion, creed, or personal persuasions.

Statement of the Problem

Today, one finds that there are too much violence and hatred and jealousy; too much chaos and distrust; too many shootings and killings and raping; too many angry and frustrated traumatized Liberian war victims whose behavioral and mental health needs have not been adequately attended to by the Liberian government on the ground; too many loud-mouthed and unforgiving former warlords who still abuse the freedoms of Liberians without remorse due to the high illiteracy rate in Liberia and the covert support they receive from international negotiators on the ground and elsewhere; too many unemployed former combatants and child soldiers roaming our streets and various communities without jobs, thus posing security threat to the general citizenry; and, there are too many ignorant people (some in high places) who do not

value education or the sanctity of human life. As a consequence, the educational activities of many Liberian youth were disrupted for more than a decade and a half! At the time of recruitment, most of the former combatants were children between the ages seven, eight, and nine years old. After more than fourteen years of actively engaging in blood bath as child combatants, these fighters gradually transformed into adults between the ages of twenty-one, twenty-two, and twenty-three years old, respectively. Their ages and body structures matured and changed; but one thing that did not change were the grades child soldiers were in prior to their being recruited as combatants. Hence, today we have a huge portion of Liberia's post-war population consisting of young adults between the ages twenty-one, twenty-two, and twenty-three with second grade education in Liberia and elsewhere in the diaspora.

In essence, most of those who held guns were robbed of their precious childhood, and they were simultaneously deprived access to free and efficient public education over the years. Instead, former combatants and child soldiers were used as scapegoats by former Liberian warlords and some politicians to regain political and economic power in Liberia. Therefore, are we saying that because the guns are silent so the war against ignorance, disease, and poverty is also over? Not by sight because this is where Liberians are in the peace process: they are at the junction at which they have laid down their arms, and now they must use their human arms or hands to embrace one another and begin the battle against ignorance, disease, and poverty by doing the following things: (1) to put the culture of violence and mayhem or human carnage away for good by bringing perpetrators of violence and atrocities to justice; (2) to make sure that we no longer glamorize violence and atrocities in Liberia by entrusting the security of the state and the precious lives of Liberians in the hands of treasonous men and women who betrayed us and rained terror on Liberians; (3) to ensure that the UNICEF Convention on the Rights of the

Child established in 1989 is ratified by the government of Liberia and is religiously observed in Liberia so that our children will no longer be dragged into committing heinous crimes against humanity under duress and under the guidance of misdirected adults and wrong doers . The Convention provides, among many other things, the following for all children: (a) the right to survival; (b) to develop to the fullest; (c) to protection from harmful influences, abuse and exploitation; and (d) to participate fully in family, cultural and social life. The four core principles of the Convention are non-discrimination; devotion to the best interests of the child; the right to life, survival and development; and respect for the views of the child. Thus, by agreeing to undertake the obligations of the Convention (by ratifying or acceding to it), the Liberian government has committed itself to protecting and ensuring children's rights and it has agreed to hold itself accountable for this commitment before the international community. Hence, states parties to the Convention are obliged to develop and undertake all actions and policies in the light of the best interests of the child (UNICEF Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989). Against this backdrop, it is my ardent expectation that the Liberian government will heed my plea and provide much needed intervention services for those whose lives have been wasted over the years, as well as to make sure that Liberian children no longer be used as war machines in any future political upheaval.

The Disruption of Educational Activities for African/Liberian Children



(Above, Liberian children get their first opportunity to attend a make-shift school in the village after more than fourteen years of civil blood bath. Children were victims and they were targeted as combatants and child soldiers)

Based on the effect of the Liberian civil war, the drop out rate in Liberian schools and elsewhere in Africa has quadrupled and illiteracy rate has sky rocketed. This high drop out rate principally stems from the recruitment of African children in armed conflicts throughout Africa, as well as the lack of adequate educational facilities in Liberia. Also, due to the present post-war economic crisis in Liberia, most of the young people struggle to earn their daily bread by brushing their aging parents' farms in order to produce food to eat and survive. Against this light,

many of the young school age children do not register to attend classes in their villages and towns because they spend a lot of time struggling to have their daily basic needs met by themselves. In addition, most of the teaching and learning conditions in Liberia are also substandard; as a result, most children in Liberian villages and towns are not motivated to return to school because they have overgrown their school and grade ages.



(Above is a village school classroom of first and second graders. Would a grown men and women who are twenty-one or twenty-two be willing to sit in this classroom with these kids as their classmates?)

For instance, a child who was eight years old and in the second grade when he or she was recruited turned twenty-two by the time a permanent ceasefire was put in place. Hence, how could you put a twenty-two year old man or woman with seven and eight year olds in the same classroom? Definitely, there are obvious moral issues involved. Therefore, this is a matter the Liberian government, as well as UNICEF and other specialized UN agencies and international humanitarian organizations need to revisit in order to find suitable ways in which post-war Liberian combatants and child soldiers may have the opportunity to catch up on the education

they missed out on during the civil upheaval in Liberia. However, whether or not UNICEF and other UN agencies have provided much needed assistance in this direction so far but it was squandered by government officials on the ground for personal gains is yet another credibility issue that the Sirleaf government has to handle.



(A young “CO” takes charge of the streets of Monrovia so warlords and rebel supporters can become “Presidents” of Liberia.)

However, what I wish to say here is that at the present time the future of many Liberian youth is uninviting, especially as they lack basic education to earn an honest living for themselves now and in the future. In view of that, former combatants and child soldiers may not want to attend school after the cessation of hostilities because they are ashamed to sit in the same classroom with their younger brothers and sisters in the second and third grades where they stopped before they were forced into becoming rebels and killing machines. Further, former Liberian rebels may feel embarrassed sitting with a little eight year old boy or girl whose wet

diapers they changed when the child was born, but who is now their classmate due to the disruption of their educational activities during the war. In view of the foregoing, many former combatants and child soldiers on the continent of Africa and Liberia wind up hanging around liquor booths in their neighborhoods, or hanging out in the streets of Monrovia doing nothing but going from one “Atahyea” shop to another. Also, Liberian refugees who presently live in other big cities in Africa and around the world where they may find themselves as refugees struggle hard to earn their daily bread, to buy something to eat and survive, and at the same time to support their suffering families back home on the continent of Africa and in Liberia, respectively. Notwithstanding, Liberia abounds with rich mineral and natural resources that are ravished by a handful of opportunists. Against this background, Africans and Liberians generally need counsels or advice as to how to make good use of their rich and diversified cultural heritage; they need to utilize the human resources they have at their disposal in order to improve Africa’s and Liberia’s post-war infrastructures.

Using Children to Promote Selfish Political Agendas



(Above, Liberian child soldiers set up road block and go on the rampage.)

The next concern I want to raise in this text has to do with Liberian politicians and former warlords using children to promote their selfish political agendas. As a result, many Liberian children died in the war and many were made orphans; others sustained lifetime injuries that have disabled their cognitive, emotional, and behavioral capacities to make informed decisions on their own and to be able to fend for themselves and their surviving family members. Also, former child soldiers were denied access to education, a safe environment, and good medical facilities; and above all, a productive childhood experience. Instead, Liberian warlords and some politicians took advantage of the youthfulness of Liberian children by influencing them to engage in wanton killings and destruction of properties. Against this backdrop, our children's lives were completely wasted over the past two decades, so to speak, because they spent most of their precious youthful days fighting battles for their warlords when they could have been

studying to become medical doctors, engineers, economists, or classroom teachers. Instead, they spent the most vital and most precious moments of their lives trying to keep alive other than to prepare themselves for the future. Under these adverse circumstances, some Liberian children were given guns to shoot and kill their own mothers and fathers.

However, now that the fighting and killing is supposedly over, we are left with majority of our youthful adults between the ages of 18-29 who barely have a second grade education to their sleeves. Yet, we expect these individuals who comprise a little over fifty percent of our total population to contribute toward the reconstruction of Liberia when they were not prepared to do so. In this light, the question that immediately comes to my mind and the minds of other good intentioned Liberians is, how functional can a second grader be in the reconstruction of a nation he or she was taught to destroy? What interventions have been put in place to help reverse the thinking of former Liberian combatants and child soldiers from being trained to kill human beings and destroy properties, to learning how to become peaceful and productive citizens? Below, I explore these questions a little further to give us a hint of the huge responsibility that lies ahead of the Liberian government to provide rehabilitative services for this particular post-war population.

How Functional Can Second Graders Be?

How functional can second graders who were former combatants and child soldiers be in the reconstruction process of post-conflict Liberia after their guns were taken away and their rebel check points dismantled? In addition, we might also want to ask a battery of questions such as: what other knowledge base or technical skills might a seven to eight year old have as prior knowledge before being thrust into more than fourteen years of committing murder without

vocational and technical or academic training? Have we as a nation ever thought seriously about the psychiatric and psychological impact such dreary circumstances might have had on the bulk of present day Liberian youthful adults (18-29) who most likely comprise about 60% of the Liberian population? How are the plights of former combatants and warlords being addressed within the context of the Liberian peace process to ensure that we do not have a repetition of the civil strife we recently had? Who will be held accountable for the loss of lives of our youth and the sheer waste of their precious childhood days? What effective short and long range plans are in place to address the rehabilitative needs of former combatants and child soldiers so that they may successfully reintegrate into mainstream Liberian society? Have we ourselves who were adults but who did not carry guns thought about the psychological and psychiatric impacts that the war has had on us? How can we get some mental and physical healing when those who inflicted the pains and wounds in our hearts, minds, and physical bodies are the ones ruling us today?

Accordingly, what this analysis boils down to is that more than 50% of post-war Liberians have no more than a second grade education, with no vocational training or technical skills to earn an honest livelihood for themselves; that the bulk of our present youthful adults were at one time or the other active combatants or victims of heinous crimes. In this light, can anyone else sense the potential danger that hangs over Liberia if the Sirleaf government does not begin to address the issues I am raising in this text right away? Or, is it just me—Uncle Joe Gbaba? Moreover, if the concerns I am raising are genuine and pertinent to our national security and success, then why have these issues been brushed aside by the Sirleaf government? Why has the Sirleaf government not indicted former Liberian warlords for the atrocities they committed

against the Liberian government and people? In other words, what is Mrs. Sirleaf's motif for not indicting former Liberian warlords? Is it because she herself needs to be indicted?

Ladies and gentlemen, if you have followed my argument very closely from the beginning to this point, you will agree with me that the paramount problems that gave rise to this text have not been put on center stage so that we can address our national security problems and put our nightmare behind us. Instead, these concerns have been brushed aside because Liberian warlords used Liberian children to regain political and economic power and so they might feel guilty to address head on issues related to the rehabilitation and demobilization of former combatants and child soldiers. They might also feel embarrassed to discuss their specific or individual roles in the perpetration of violence against the Liberian people. Accordingly, there is a likelihood that violence may erupt again if remedies are not put in place to properly rehabilitate and demobilize former warlords, former combatants and child soldiers, as well as the Liberian civilian population. In this light, former combatants and child soldiers and former warlords may continually be seen as threat in post-conflict Liberia, especially when they have not been appropriately rehabilitated. Consequently, it is about time to reassess the impact of conflict resolution deals in the Liberian peace process and most possibly revert to the Constitution of Liberia to provide answers to some of the social, political, and economic problems we now face in post-conflict Liberia.

The Impact of Conflict Resolution Deals in the Liberian Peace Process



(The United Nations General Assembly in session)

The impact of conflict resolution deals in Liberia cannot be overly emphasized because conflict resolution policies affect the way how post-conflict citizens govern themselves after a protracted period of war and self-destruction. For instance, in the Liberian peace deal, it was agreed that rebel leaders would participate in the electoral process and hold prominent posts in government. This portion of the agreement reflects that negotiators succumbed to the caprices of Liberian warlords who purposely insisted that they participate in the electoral process in order to secure their lives after destroying the lives of their fellow compatriots. Subsequently, peace negotiators, as well as those who ‘represented’ civilians’ interest at peace conferences conceded to the whims and caprices of rebel leaders and gave them the ‘green light’ to think their actions were justified. In effect, it gave perpetrators of injustice and mayhem reason to have no remorse of conscience for what they did to the Liberian people because they were entrusted not only with the security and safety of those whose massacre they orchestrated during the war; but also, rebel leaders now have been entrusted with the economic and natural resources of Liberia so that they

may ravish our meager economic and natural resources the more and purchase more weapons to finish off the rest of us who are still alive!

Furthermore, the decision to allow rebel leaders to roam freely in our midst and participate in the electoral process and hold government posts without an investigation into their wrong doings through the due process of law, also gave former combatants the notion that if their bosses were not found guilty of the crimes their former warlords instructed them to carry out, then they too should not be held accountable for the atrocities they (former combatants and child soldiers) committed. Unfortunately, unarmed civilians like you and me did not have guns or weapons of any kind; therefore we did not have a “say so” in the conflict resolution of the Liberian peace process. Hence, in effect, we are stuck with the infamous decision to allow former warlords to hold public office and to go unpunished for the crimes they committed without the due process of the law. This was supposedly done by peace negotiators as a good will gesture to “Let bygones be bygones” without clearly defining how these ‘bygones’ occurred and upon what premise was the decision “Let bygones be bygones” based. In addition, if former warlords and combatants were to be let loose as they are right now, then what precautionary measures were enshrined in the peace documents to ensure former warlords and their combatants would be properly rehabilitated in order to secure the civilian population and ensure the successful reintegration of former warlords and combatants into civil society? Further, what plans were included in the peace deal to ensure that civilians received the appropriate orientation so that they may be willing to admit former warlords and combatants in their midst? Also, if some of these guidelines were included in the conflict resolution package, then it is likely that they might have not been religiously followed up to the letter. In other words there may have been a lot of backsliding over the years that consequently affected the portions of the peace

process regarding the rehabilitation of former Liberian combatants and child soldiers, as well as the indictment of Liberian warlords. Hence, I am smelling smoke in the Liberian peace process at this time; and, where there is smoke there might subsequently be fire if nothing is done to address the concerns in this text.

Revert to the Constitution of Liberia to Resolve Liberia's Political Crisis

In view of the abovementioned, Liberians need to revert to the Constitution of Liberia to resolve Liberia's political crisis. This is very significant because the Constitution is the organic law of the land and it may provide us guidance as to how we might determine how 'bygones can be bygones' and how criminal charges can be pressed on perpetrators of violence and injustice because there are provisions therein that address matters concerning criminal and treasonous activities against the government and people of Liberia. I suggest this because we have passed the peace accords stage: we have elected a government therefore we expect the leaders in government this time around to respect the Constitution of the Republic of Liberia under which they took their respective oaths of office after they 'abandoned' their rebellious activities. In this light, the present leadership in Liberia under the gavel of Mrs. Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf needs to use the Constitution as their guide to follow through with portions of the Liberian peace process that has to do with complete disarmament, demobilization of warlords, former combatants, and civilians. Besides, we also need to scrutinize the role of international peace brokers in arranging and implementing guidelines for the swift return to a safe civilian society where the inalienable rights of all Liberians will be evermore protected and guaranteed under the Constitution of Liberia. In this light, international peace negotiators need to seriously weigh the negative component of their decision to have Liberian warlords participate in the electoral process even against the will of the majority. In my opinion this particular decision negates and derails the

Liberian peace process in that it contravenes provisions of the Constitution of Liberia that address consequences regarding treasonous and subversive acts against the State.

Contrary to the views expressed in conflict resolution guidelines that were made for the implementation of the Liberian peace process, I continue to contend that Liberian rebel leaders are not supposed to vote or hold high positions of public interest during the forthcoming 2011 presidential and general elections because they committed crimes against humanity. They committed treasonous acts that warrant their being indicted and tried at war crime tribunals. Therefore, it is my opinion that the right to vote for public office should be reserved for patriotic Liberian citizens with impeccable human rights records, including cleared criminal and child abuse background checks. Consequently, the decision taken by the international community to resolve the Liberian peace process by succumbing to the whims and caprices of Liberian warlords may be summed up as: “Victory and rewards for those who rained terror on the Liberian people; and defeat and punishment for law-abiding citizens who respected the rule of law and did not take up arms against the state!” Thus, such a ‘peace deal’ is a way of glamorizing violence and mayhem and disregarding respect for the rule of law in Liberia. Would international negotiators have made the same decision in Kosovo or here in the United States where anyone who steals a candy from a toffee shop cannot run for public office?

In addition, Liberians need to sober up and challenge the government of the United States of America for the covert role it played in the destruction of human lives in Liberia by virtue of the fact that Charles Taylor ‘broke’ maximum prison jail in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and was never rearrested even though there were many occasions on which he could have been arrested. Additionally, Charles Taylor was never arrested or charged for ‘breaking jail’ by the the federal government of the United States of America until the damage was totally done to us: (1)

more than two hundred thousand Liberians killed; (2) millions of Liberians dispersed around the world in refugee camps, some suffering and others dying at the writing of this text; (3) millions of dollars worth of properties destroyed; (4) all of Liberia's infrastructure damaged; and (5) the youth population introduced to mayhem and human carnage at tender ages: seven, eight, and nine, respectively. Yet, Liberians sit and make believe that the United States is Liberia's 'traditional friend.' How 'traditional' is such a 'friend' or 'neighbor' who connives with your enemies to backstab you! Definitely, Liberia truly needs to redefine its 'friendship' with the United States of America; and the United States of America needs to play a more genuine and active role in making sure that perpetrators of mayhem and violence are brought to justice in The Hague as was done to former rebel leader Charles Taylor. In essence, ordinary Liberians are tired of having criminals undemocratically shoved down our throats by international peace negotiators and elections observers who see our plight as a money-making venture rather than seeing our predicament as a humanitarian venture. In this light, I strongly believe international negotiators have diverted exceedingly from enforcing the different components of the peace agreements that might ensure the fair treatment of former Liberian warlords, combatants and child soldiers in order to end the war in Liberia. Instead, they are playing a cat and mouse game in order to kill more time.

Time to Clean up the Mess



(Some post-war Liberian children in their school uniform in a school setting after the Liberian Civil War. Don't you think this is what children deserve in Liberia today?)

In view of the above, I strongly believe that it is time to clean up the mess former warlords and rebel supporters made in Liberia. For instance, imagine the amount of valuable days, months, and years that should have been devoted to training children how to read and write and acquire vocational and technical skills but that were spent teaching children how to become hardened criminals over night—how to shoot different weapons and kill innocent civilians, or get killed in the process if they were unfortunate. Additionally, most children lost the opportunity to attend school; and their daily basic needs as children were not provided or met because most times these children were orphaned with no adult supervision. However, if there were ‘adults’ around to supervise such African/Liberian children under extremely difficult circumstances,

most of the adults who were available to provide our children with supervision molested, abused, and ill-advised African and Liberian children to commit crimes and abuse drugs. In other words, children were used as scapegoats to accomplish their warlords' impulsive tendencies.



(A Liberian rebel child soldier in action)

As a consequence, children who were recruited to join Liberian rebel factions at the tender age of eight years (to cite an example) became young adults (men or women) at age twenty-two by the time a cease fire agreement was brokered fourteen years later. Hence, while Liberian warlords dragged their feet negotiating for better political and economic deals to benefit themselves and their immediate families who are usually in the heart and safe havens of Western nations, poor Liberian child soldiers died day and night on battle fronts. Thus, most former combatants and child soldiers ended up being orphans and adults before they reached the age of

adulthood during the period of conflict. Hence, majority of the new generation of Liberia's young adults (18-29) have no more than a second grade education in their sleeves.

Steps We Need to Take

At this juncture, it is important to note that even though these days former warlords, combatants, or child soldiers might no longer stick their victims up in broad open day light as they did during the period of fighting; yet, there is the likelihood they may resort to violence if their needs are not met in terms of: (1) providing former warlords, combatants and child soldiers behavior modification and applied behavior analysis programs that may help them recognize the wrongs they have committed and give them an opportunity to express remorse for the violence they spearheaded; (2) providing much needed vocational and adult education projects that will help those who lagged behind in their studies during the conflict period to catch up where they left out in school; (3) neutralizing the already existing aggressive atmosphere between former combatants and child soldiers and their victimized civilian population through peace education and conflict resolution projects so that former combatants and child soldiers and victimized civilians may reconcile; (4) addressing the behavioral health and medical needs of former combatants and child soldiers and civilians to help them overcome their post traumatic stress disorder; (5) providing appropriate civic and public education programs for post-conflict Liberians on national peace and reconciliation; hygiene and disease prevention programs; teaching post-conflict Liberians to appreciate cultural diversity, as well as teaching them about democratic principles and self-governance; (6) setting up peace education and conflict resolution teams in various communities, towns, and villages to help opponents (warlords, combatants, and civilians, as well as all parties to the conflict) start a brand new slate in their relationships, and

most likely inspire civilians to welcome former combatants back into mainstream society without much difficulty if it is at all possible at this time.

Let Justice Be Done to All Men and Women



(Former Liberian rebel leader Charles Taylor
Being tried at the International Court of Justice
in The Hague.)

In my own view as a student of behavior modification and applied behavior analysis, Africa in general, and Liberia in particular, can regain her credibility as a law-abiding society by bringing all former African and Liberian warlords to justice under the dictates of the

constitutions of their respective nations. In addition, there is also a need to address the needs of former combatants and child soldiers so that they may properly reintegrate into mainstream post-conflict African/Liberian societies without resistance from civilians whom former combatants and child soldiers harassed over the years. In the case of Liberia, it should not only mean incarcerating former rebel leader Charles Taylor and letting other Liberian warlords loose to create more havoc among peace-loving Liberian citizens; but rather, let justice be done to all men and women without prejudice to none and without regards to: “Who know you,” “Who born you,” or one’s ethnicity. Therefore, the rest of the gang should be tried at the International Court of Justice in The Hague just as Charles Taylor has been compelled to do. Those who might be found guilty should be banned from holding high positions of public trust in Liberia as recommended by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. In this light, I strongly believe the responsibility of running a nation should not be entrusted into the hands of crooks, rogues, killers, and perpetrators of injustice. Instead, the operation of a state apparatus should be carried out by Liberians or Africans with impeccable reputation and credentials.

Also, the troubles of former combatants should be seriously considered and addressed in a more calculative and professional manner because most former combatants in Liberia and other parts of Africa were put under duress when they were eight or nine years old. They were mere babies suckling their mothers’ breasts when African/Liberian warlords and politicians recruited them from African/Liberian villages and towns and communities to hold guns and become the killing machines of warlords and some politicians. Hence, for an example, most former combatants and child soldiers in Liberia were deprived of their childhood experiences as well as the opportunity to attain adequate education that would have prepared them for a very bright future. In this regard, the future of former combatants and child soldiers now stands

unwelcoming in Liberia because many civilians consider former combatants and child soldiers to be of bad repute as killers, and also because the public no longer has trust in former warlords and combatants given the kind of murder they committed over the past fifteen or sixteen years of national conflict.

The Johnson-Sirleaf Government Must Act Now!



(Mrs. Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, incumbent President of Liberia)

In reaction to the socio-cultural and political concerns narrated above, the Liberian government must act immediately to indict former Liberian warlords or rebel leaders for the dreadful crimes they committed. In addition, the Sirleaf government should also seek to address the mental health and learning needs of former combatants so that they may receive psychiatric and psychological treatments; learn new trades, and successfully reintegrate into mainstream society without hardships. However as things stand, former combatants and child soldiers now experience great anxiety to get reaccepted into mainstream society by the very people they tormented with their guns as rebel fighters. In this light, it may be safe to note that no aggressive

or aggrieved person can return to normal life over night. In contrast, it takes prolonged exposure and engagement with intensified behavior modification activities in order for former combatants and child soldiers and traumatized citizens to heal from their post traumatic stress disorder. Therefore, there should be real rehabilitation programs instituted in the various communities for warlords, combatants, and non-combatants to help them overcome their behavioral health problems and the grievances and grudges they hold against one another. In this regard, both the general public, former warlords, and combatants need psychiatric and psychological evaluations to determine the appropriate level of care for them. This may particularly help members of the civilian population to regain confidence in themselves and relearn how to live with and accept former combatants and child soldiers in their midst. In the final analysis, this may begin a fresh new start of a better relationship between former combatants and Liberian civilians who did not carry guns during the civil war.



(A busy and congested market site on Bushrod Island, Monrovia)

However, as the situation exists on the ground today, most post-conflict Liberians are generally living under duress because of the conflict resolution arrangements that were made by the international community and Liberian warlords to resolve the Liberian conflict. In view of the abovementioned, the process of rehabilitation for former combatants and Liberian civilians is a must, because Liberians in general have their apprehensions first of all about the current President of Liberia and her involvement in abetting rebellious and treasonous acts against the government and people of Liberia. Liberian civilians also fear the unpredictable moods of children (now adults in their mid and late twenties) who shot and killed their loved ones. In this light, Liberian civilians need to be assured that the so-called 'disarmed' former combatants and child soldiers might not snap at them and resume their killing spree once again. And, if they snapped, it is likely that they may not be punished because their former warlords are still holding

influential positions in the present government in Liberia. Hence, it is most likely that former warlords or rebel leaders may bill out their former fighters as part of the “koo-koo-jumu-koo” phenomenon. “Koo-koo-jumu-koo” is a Kpelle expression that literally means, “You not inside, you not know” in Liberian colloquial English. Also, Liberians need to be assured that those who sneaked their way into positions of trust when the general populace was under duress during the combat period, and during the past election that brought Mrs. Sirleaf to power, that they will meet our expectations and resign before the forthcoming presidential and general elections in 2011, as recommended by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Also, I am advising all Liberians through this text to put the interest of Liberia first before their own selfish interests so that Liberians may elect qualified and trustworthy public servants in the near future. Against this backdrop, genuine reconciliation first must occur whereby former warlords and combatants should express remorse for the bad acts they committed so that the citizens may forgive their transgressions. In this way both the transgressors and the transgressed may live in peace and harmony.

Stop Nepotism

Nepotism or favoritism, or “Who know you?” to put it in local Liberian terms, is an age old political and social problem in Liberia, as well as in other African societies. In Liberia in particular, nepotism may basically be one of the root causes of Liberia’s underdevelopment because many square pegs are placed in round holes. As a result, we get nothing accomplished in the end because those placed in positions of trust were not qualified to assume such responsibilities other than the fact that they have a social or political connection with higher ups. Of course, nepotism is carried out basically to marginalize competent Liberian citizens who are qualified in their respective fields of specialty but who are not connected to the “cro-cro-gee”

(rascality) of the Status Quo. Hence, even though a competent Liberian might most probably make a difference if he or she were given the opportunity to exhibit his or her innate talents and contribute meaningfully toward the reconstruction of Liberia; yet such individuals are unfairly treated on the basis of gender, creed, ethnicity, personal life style, and sometimes religion. In view of the foregoing, this unwholesome political and social practice is not in our best interest. In other words, I am suggesting that the Liberian government must stop nepotism and make wise use of Liberia's human resources, irrespective of ethnicity, personal persuasions, religion, creed, gender, and so forth. In essence, I contend that it is unfair to lots of talented Liberians for the current Liberian government to continue to mete out disparate treatment against its citizens based on favoritism and by continuously appointing one set of people over and over again without inviting new talents and individuals whose points of view might differ from the perspectives of the Status Quo. Further, it is even more frustrating when those who are the favorites of the Status Quo are unproductive and cannot yield fruitful results. Therefore, the question is: why should one set of people keep circulating in government as if there were human or manpower shortage in Liberia? This uncalled-for political tactic is what I would term *preferential treatment*. Accordingly, people who presently run the Liberian government were the ones who just yesterday waved red flags about partiality, about ethnicity, and about injustice, and so forth. As a result, some of them took up arms against their own kind and destroyed the little we and our ancestors built over the past one hundred years plus or more.

Hence, nowadays, those in power no longer see nepotism as an obstacle to national reconciliation and reconstruction because life is in their favor! They also seem not to remember those they gave guns to do the dirty deeds so that they may regain political and economic control of Liberia's wealth. In addition, they have also forgotten those who ran through the streets of

Monrovia shouting: **“You killed my ma, you killed my pa; I will vote for you!”** In other words, the powers-that-be today may be blinded by greed and power that they no longer care about the safety and well-being of their citizens—those who elected them. Thus, yesterday’s ‘critics’ and the ‘oppressed’ have become today’s oppressors. In view of the foregoing, members of the Status Quo today seem to no longer have complaints to file any more about injustice and partiality.

Nevertheless, we the ordinary Africans and Liberians have many reasons to complain because our people are suffering; our children Liberian warlords used to fight their political wars were deprived of their childhood experiences and they were denied the right to adequate and efficient public education that should have been provided Liberian children by Liberian leaders. Yet, despite the poor performances of certain individuals on the ground, Liberians are expected to believe that everything is supposed to be ‘okay’ and we are supposed to ‘reelect’ our oppressors tomorrow so they can oppress us even more. This is why we need to caution Liberian citizens who hail from counties that provided ‘swing votes’ to the current president to be very mindful that before they put their votes behind a candidate, they should make sure that person is cleared as law-abiding citizen and has the best interest of all Liberians at heart. I also want ‘swing vote’ counties to recognize that the Liberian problem is every patriotic Liberian’s problem; therefore, we should work together to solve it nationally but not ethnically or regionally by ourselves. We must remember that no county or ethnic group in Liberia is independent off itself. We all need one another to survive. In addition, please be aware that the so-called ‘interest’ that Liberian politicians are showing in you is not from the depths of their hearts; but rather, it is a pretense to steal your votes at the polls since they can no longer use guns to get back in power. Therefore, I urge all Liberians, especially those who come from the ‘swing votes’

counties, not to be selfish because a member of your ethnic group was appointed by the incumbent as a member of the cabinet. Consequently, this does not give anyone the right to jeopardize the security of other citizens of Liberia simply because your ethnic group or county is favored by perpetrators of violence and injustice. In other words, please do not forget about the mayhem that was lashed upon us by the individuals to whom you are giving your 'swing' votes. Remember we all suffered because we did not have one word. As a result, Liberian warlords and some politicians played 'divide and rule' tactics and used us as 'guinea pigs!' In view of this, I hope we can all say, "Gone are the days when we shouted "You killed my ma, you kill my pa: I will vote for you!" and went right ahead voting for people who killed our mas and pas. On the contrary, it is now time for Liberians to say: **"You killed our mas; you kill our pas, so we will not vote for you!"** I mean Liberians should do what they say at the elections polls by not re-electing people who supported armed conflict in Liberia in order to set the precedent that good must always prevail over evil in our African and Liberian culture.

Indict Former Liberian Warlords and Address the Needs of Former Combatants

Therefore, in order to secure genuine peace and security in post-war Liberia the Sirleaf government must indict all Liberian rebel leaders and their close supporters for the atrocities they committed against humanity. We should not sit down supinely and let them get away with mayhem for it misguides African/Liberian youth to think that to do evil in society is a great achievement, especially when such an impression is created by Africa's oldest Republic. Hence, by 'electing' or appointing former rebel warlords, combatants, or child soldiers to high government posts after they have committed heinous crimes against society and mankind without the due process of law, it definitely implies that we glamorize brutality and mayhem as the acceptable norm of our Liberian society. Consequently, this decision to give in to the whims and

caprices of rebel leaders and their supporters has caused rebel leaders and their followers to harden their hearts and to continually ill-treat peaceful Liberian citizens who are struggling to survive amidst all these difficult circumstances that were created by those who are leading us today. Indeed, in no way does giving in to rebel leaders and their supporters address the hurt they created, neither does it heal the wounds their heinous crimes inflicted on the innocent civilians who were bombarded by various acts of violence.

Therefore, Liberians should be very vocal against the culture of violence that has engulfed our nation. For, if we continue to remain silent then we will certainly be held accountable because silence means consent in a free world where people are liberated to exercise their democratic rights without hindrance. Accordingly, Africans/Liberians should stop being complacent but should be actively engaged in fighting evil with all our might because if we continue to allow perpetrators of violence and crime to roam about in air-conditioned SUVs, it may provide a guarantee for former warlords, combatants, and child soldiers to continue their killing spree; or to continue the harassment of innocent and unarmed Liberian civilians. Further, former combatants and their warlords may become more hardened and continue to have no remorse for the atrocities they committed. In addition, there have been numerous complaints in present day Liberia when former rebels and their warlords threatened the fragile peace process that was instituted without their being brought to justice. As a result, Liberian youth may regard these out-laws as their heroes and perhaps become outlaws themselves. Also, it has been learned that former combatants who end up getting caught for arm-robbing unarmed Liberian civilians are later discharged or released from detention at the order of their former warlords.

Unfortunately, and sadly enough, former combatants and child soldiers turn around and commit

the same crimes over and over again without any serious consequences from ‘authorities’ because of the “Koo-koo-jumu-koo” political syndrome.

Therefore, whether “you inside and you know; or you not inside so you do not know,” it all now boils down to the saying, ENOUGH IS ENOUGH! Because former warlords, combatants, and child soldiers may still pose security threat to all of us, as well as incite fear in the hearts and minds of civilians whom they harassed when they carried guns. Their presence in the community may constantly remind civilians of those dreadful moments when their loved ones were murdered in cold blood in their presence by the same warlords and child soldiers who might be craving for mercy if at all that is the case. In other instances, civilians might feel uneasy to interact with people who harassed them during the period of national conflict and unrest because of the bad experiences they might have had with former warlords, combatants, or child soldiers. In this regard, civilians might want to avoid such persons whenever they come across them in public or in the community. Against this backdrop, there is a dire need for intervention programs that will rehabilitate both civilians and former warlords and their fighters so that peace and mutual understandings may flourish. However, without such a much needed intervention program, I find as potentially dangerous to the safety and security of the Liberian nation and people, such a political and conflict resolution arrangement wherein someone who ill-treats or victimizes his or her fellow citizen may get away with such molestation or murder without the due process of law. In my opinion, it derails the people’s confidence in their government because the government is also headed by some people who themselves committed atrocities but who were not tried and persecuted for the crimes they committed.

In view of the foreground, does that mean that Peter Paul or Moses Yarkpawolo can wake up one morning and massacre hundreds of Liberians and then he gets appointed the following

day as Minister without Portfolio? What message will we be transmitting to the outside world? What example will we be setting for our youth, our future leaders when we continue to reward criminals with rights and privileges that legally belong to law-abiding, competent, and productive citizens? Accordingly, the part of the conflict resolution policies that Liberians adopted need to be revisited because of the negative impact they have on the minds and hearts of post-conflict Liberians and Africans regarding the observance of the rule of law on the continent of Africa in general and in Liberia in particular.

As an outcome, African/Liberian youth might no longer have respect for the rule of law because they have witnessed their warlords break the law and get rewarded for breaking the law and then become 'law makers' on top of it all! Hence, it is very difficult right now to convince any Liberian youth in particular to become a law abiding citizen because in present day Liberia it appears that those who obey the law get *punished* and those who disobey the law, such as culprits and perpetrators of human carnage, they get elected or appointed in high positions of public trust. Thus, the one million dollar question is: how can we reverse this tight spot so that Liberians may once again recognize the significance of the rule of law and live by it in relative peace?

Conclusion

In this text, I discussed at reasonable length with you the issue of addressing the needs of former Liberian combatants and child soldiers so that they too may be prepared to live viable lives in post-conflict Liberian society. I also stated some problems that I felt were the root cause for the slow pace of the Liberian peace process and how we all could tackle these problems so that our society may be a better place to live. Key among the problems are the following facts

but that are not limited to: (1) the disruption of educational activities for African/Liberian children. Here, African children are recruited daily to join rebel factions in order to help African politicians and warlords gain political and economic wealth at the expense of their young lives. In addition, the educational activities of African children are disrupted and then it is no telling when learning for this strategic age group may resume. In the case of Liberia, it took more than fourteen round years before a major and more lasting ceasefire could be brokered. In this regard, former child soldiers who were in the second grade when they joined rebel activities found themselves as young adults fourteen years later. However, their academic grade level remained the same second grade they were in prior to the start of the Liberian civil war. Therefore, the child soldiers now turned adults never really achieved any durable benefits from their active participation in rebel activities. Some died and some wound up with lifetime injuries that rendered them disabled and unproductive in society, except perhaps to carry on armed robberies or other illegal acts of aggression.

Thus, this is the result of African/Liberian warlords using children to promote their own selfish political agendas. In view of the foregone circumstances, it was safe for me to ask how functional could a twenty-two year old be in the reconstruction process of post-war Liberia. Subsequently, my query necessitated the examination of the impact of conflict resolution deals in the Liberian peace process. Here, I found out that part of the negotiations did not go very well with me and other patriotic Liberians who saw the concession made by peace negotiators to allow former Liberian warlords to vote or run for public office as a way of glamorizing violence and adopting a culture of violence in Liberia. In addition, it brings to the fore the issue of whether or not international and national negotiators have been sincere to themselves, the Liberian people, and the entire peace process based on the decisions they reached and in terms of

how effective these decisions have been. In what ways have guidelines outlined in the peace agreement been implemented in order to advance the peace process and end civil unrest in Liberia? In view of the foregoing, I suggested that Liberians needed to clean up their own house not through the dictates of peace accords but through the recognition and use of the Constitution of the Republic of Liberia that guarantees the rights and privileges of all Liberians, whereas peace accords are not binding on the nation and its people as does the Constitution of any given land. Apart, I also provided some steps I felt we should take as a nation and people in order to clean up our national mess as a nation and people instead of continually depending on outsiders to resolve the Liberian crisis for us. In essence, the true resolution of the Liberian crisis lies in the Constitution of Liberia that guarantees equal protection under the law. In this light, I contended that justice should be meted out to all former warlords and combatants and perpetrators of violence, irrespective of race, creed, color, gender, or ethnicity. I also called on the Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf government to act in the best interest of the Liberian people by indicting former Liberian warlords for the crimes they committed against humanity. Finally, I focused for a moment on the need for Liberians to do away with nepotism and embrace cultural diversity—the appreciation of the *others* around us.

In view of the foregoing, it is my ardent hope that I have presented a very strong argument and case for the consideration of my fellow compatriots, including those in power, as well as former warlords, combatants and child soldiers for and about whom this manuscript was prepared. I also hope that the concerns expressed herein are not seen as an affront to anyone but rather as a genuine democratic move to make Liberia a better place to live. As a parent and grandparent, as well as an artist/scholar and cultural expert of national and international repute, I felt it my binding duty to put forth this discussion in a very clear and intellectual manner for the

consumption of the reading public so that Liberians may be empowered from the message of this manuscript to make informed decisions regarding how we might address the needs of former Liberian combatants and child soldiers, and indict the respective warlords for the crimes they committed against the Liberian people and mankind. In view of the foreground, it is our joint responsibility as Liberians to find ways how we might deal with problems of former rebel leaders and former combatants who are in our midst to avoid the recurrence of another civil war in Liberia. Also, we should be asking, what types of conflict resolution intervention strategies might we put in place to ensure that former combatants and warlords successfully reintegrate into civilian communities without non-combatants being intimidated by their presence? Also, we need to consider the harm that was done to our children and grandchildren during the war and provide appropriate interventions that may help them relive their lost childhood experiences by providing them access to sufficient and efficient specialized education and vocational programs that may prepare them for the future that lies ahead.

Your humble servant,

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