

KEYNOTE MESSAGE DELIVERED BY CLLR. TIAWAN S. GONGLOE, PRESIDENT OF THE LIBERIA NATIONAL BAR ASSOCIATION AT THE ARMED FORCES SYMPOSIUM HELD AT THE MINISTERIAL COMPLEX, CONGO TOWN, FEBRUARY 3, 2021 AT 10:00AM

TOPIC: **“Enhancing Military and Legislative Interaction in a Democracy: Liberia in perspective”**

I am greatly honored and elated to be here this morning to speak to the gallant men and women of the Armed Forces of Liberia as a keynote speaker at the beginning of this very important week in the life of the Armed Forces of Liberia which, under normal circumstances, should end on February 11, 2021 with an elaborate national program. Such an elaborate celebration is not possible this year for the insecurity situation created by the COVID 19 pandemic.

As a person who, over the years, has expressed critical views about governance issues, bordering on the respect for human rights and the rule of law, I remain forever grateful to the Chief of Staff and the men and women of the Armed Forces of Liberia, for providing me this unique platform to express my opinion about the way forward for empowering the Armed Forces of Liberia, the mother of the security sector, in order to

adequately perform its role as the protector of our collective security in a more meaningful way.

I want to begin by saying a little bit about my link with the Armed Forces of Liberia. In 1994, I was contracted by the Liberian National Transitional Government headed by Cllr. David D. Kpomakpor to prosecute a group of military men led by the late General Charles Julu who attempted to overthrow the transitional government on September 15, 1994. I was appointed as the trial counsel and commissioned with the rank of colonel of the Armed Forces of Liberia, by a special order issued by the Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces of Liberia. Let me quickly say that at the end of the trial, which lasted for six months, I was very happy to be decommissioned.

Before speaking on the topic of the day, permit me to briefly reflect on the past of the Liberian military. Military activities started in Liberia as a small militia force to defend the colonies of black settlers from the United States of America established along the coasts of Liberia, especially the one that was established on the Providence Island and later moved to Cape Mesurado. The settler who is historically given credit for the beginning of the Liberian state, Elijah Johnson and Joseph Jenkins Roberts were all militia generals. After the colonies collectively declared themselves an independent state called Liberia, with the exception of Maryland, which later joined the

republic, the boundaries of Liberia were constantly encroached upon by the bordering French and British colonies of what is known today as Ivory Coast, Guinea and Sierra Leone, respectively. Also, the authority of the Government of the newly declared independent Republic was not accepted by some kings and chiefs of many rural parts of the country. In order to deal with these issues, the Legislature created the first military force of Liberia in 1908 and named it the Liberian Frontier Force (LFF). The Frontier Force was also used to collect taxes and to recruit, mostly young men from the interior parts for forced labor on the farms of officials of government, carry out public works, such as road-building and to work on commercial farms at home and abroad.

In the performance of these duties, the Frontier Force, most often, used excessive force, sometimes leading to the deaths of those who rebelled against the central government. Opponents of the government who were not killed were captured and detained in military prisons, the notorious of which were post stockade at the Barclay Training Center in Monrovia and Camp Belleh Yallah, deep in the Belleh Forest, in the part of the country known today as Gbarpolo County. Certainly, this made the military an enemy of a majority of the people of Liberia.

Following the 1980 coup, there were summary trials of civilians by a military tribunal set up by the military junta. Many of those

who were tried by the tribunal were executed. Those who were not executed were imprisoned either at the post stockade in Monrovia or at Camp Belleh Yallah. Also brought before the military tribunal, for trial, were six student leaders of the Liberian National Student Union (LINSU), who challenged the Peoples' Redemption Council (PRC) Decree 2A, which banned among other things, students' political activities. They included Ezekial Pajibo, Alaric Tokpa, Kpede Woiwor, Siapha Blackie, Nyomo K. Brownell and Mayonga Wilson. The trial ended with the conviction of the student leaders and a sentence of death by firing squad. The entire Liberia became tense as a result of the sentence and the junta backed down and released the student leaders.

In 1984, the military junta had two notable engagements with the students. The first was when Ezekial Pajibo, Alaric Tokpa, Christian Herbert, James Fromayan, Dempster Yallah and his wife Lucia Massallay (now Yallah) were arrested and detained at the post stockade and later transferred to Camp Belleh Yallah on the suspicion that there were the authors of an underground leaflet titled "REACT" on the ground the under publication violate PRC Decree 88A which prohibited any criticism of officials of the three branches of the Liberian Government. The second encounter of the students with the military was following an order by the Commander-in- Chief, then Master Sergeant Samuel K. Doe, to the Minister of

Defense, then Gray D. Allison to “ move or be removed”. Upon the issuance of this order by the Commander-in-chief, the military invaded the campus of the University of Liberia on August 22, 1984, when students were protesting on the campus against the illegal detention of Prof. Amos C. Sawyer at the post stockade, without any charge. The military indiscriminately assaulted students and teachers, including your humble servant and raped many females in broad day light. The misuse of the army in the ways that I have briefly catalogued made the army a bitter enemy of a majority of the people of Liberia.

Today, the situation has changed considerably with the 1986 Constitution of Liberia coming into full force, which makes it unconstitutional to detain civilians in military prisons or to try civilians before court-martial boards or any form of military tribunal. Also, the reformed Armed Forces of Liberia has demonstrated a high degree of professionalism, national consciousness and has, largely, not engaged in the reckless use of force as was done by the military in the past.

Today, we are all proud of the performance of the men and women of the Armed Forces as part of the United Nations Peace-keeping Force in Mali.

Having given a brief narrative of my temporary, but, quite interesting time with the Armed Forces of Liberia and made some observations about its past and present history, let me

now focus on the topic that the chief of Staff humbly requested me to speak on today. General Johnson, you in your letter to me you asked me to speak on the topic: **“Enhancing Military and Legislative Interaction in a Democracy: Liberia in perspective”**

This topic requires that I first deal with the interactions between the military and the legislature in a democracy, before I can speak about whether or not it should be enhanced in Liberia. In order to understand the interactions between the military and the legislature, one has to find out the nature of the relationship between the two. The military in any democratic country is a critical agent of the Executive Branch of Government. However, its creation is not possible without an act of the legislature. Also, while the military is controlled by the executive branch and obeys only lawful order of the executive branch, whose head is the commander-in-chief of the Armed Forces, its survival and personnel as well as logistical strength depends on budgetary appropriations made by the Legislature. Further, the military cannot participate in any war or peace-keeping duty unless the legislature approves such a mission.

The general nature of the relationship between the military and the legislature in a democracy is universal. Hence, it is not different from what obtains in Liberia. The existence of the Liberian military is traced to the legislative Act of 1908 which

created the Frontier Force, as the first organized military arm of the Liberian Government. This act was amended in 1956 and further amended more recently in 2008. The command structure of the military cannot be constituted without the approval of the legislature. Article 54(e) of the Constitution of Liberia provides for the consent of the Legislature for the appointment of “members of the military from the rank of lieutenant or its equivalent and above” meaning up to the ranks of generals and the chief of staff.

Further, it cannot be over-emphasized or over-stated that the existence, maintenance and functioning of the military depend on the National Legislature, as mandated by the Constitution of Liberia. Article 34 b) and c) of the Constitution of Liberia provide , “The Legislature shall have the power: b) to provide for the security of the Republic; and c) to provide for the common defense, to declare war and authorize the Executive to conclude peace; to raise and support the Armed Forces of the Republic, and to make appropriations therefor provided that no appropriation of money for that use shall be for a longer term than one year; and to make rules for the governance of the Armed Forces of the Republic”. This, men and women of the Armed Forces of Liberia, is the nature of the relationship that exists between the military and the Legislature in Liberia.

Given the relationship between the military and the legislature as defined by the Constitution of Liberia, it is obvious that there has to be frequent interactions between the military and the legislature in order to give life to the mandate of the

Constitution of Liberia on the functions of the legislature regarding the existence and effectiveness of the military. The Constitution has mandated this interaction as it has guaranteed that funding for the military has to be provided for by the legislature.

In light of what I have said, thus far, about the relationship between the legislature and the military, it appears to me that the answer to the question whether or not the interaction between the military and the legislature should be enhanced is in the affirmative.

What remains for me to do at this juncture is to explore how the interactions between the military and the legislature can be enhanced for our collective security, for a better Liberia, the Liberia in which the security, peaceful existence and the welfare of all Liberians on an equitable basis will become the paramount concerns of both, the military and the legislature, in their interactions.

In order for the military to play a key role in the building of a better Liberia, there are two cardinal points that I urge the military to take into consideration in the performance of its national duties:

The first is that the military must be a force for our collective security by remaining unrelenting and unreservedly committed to protecting our evolving democracy. Towards this end, I plead with the military to stay out of politics and let the politicians make whatever mistake they can make. In other words, political

mistakes, no matter how terrible they may be, must be corrected by political actions and not military interventions. We have been down that road and we must all say forward ever to political solutions and backward never to military interventions. The Liberian people will never, again, accept any justification for the military take-over of their government.

I can say without any fear of contradiction that the national difficulties that we are experiencing today are traceable to the military's, widely publicized intervention to redeem the people of Liberia from "rampant corruption and one party rule." It is true that Liberia was governed by one group of people for a very long time under the banner of the Ground Old True Whig Party. Yes, there was rampant corruption. Yes a few people were enjoying a disproportionate share of the incomes generated from the resources of Liberia. These problems were political problems, in nature, that required only political solutions.

There is no record to show that any Liberian or group of Liberians requested the intervention of the military to solve these problems on April 12, 1980. The progressive politicians were aware that a majority of the men and women of the Armed Forces of Liberia in 1980 did not have sufficient education or experience, or any political or ideological training and therefore, they were even more dangerous than those that

were in power. As Thomas Sankara, the Late Revolutionary leader of Burkina Faso once said, “A soldier without any political or ideological training is a potential criminal”.

The seizure of homes, farms and properties of former government officials, the looting of properties, the frequent raping of wives and daughters of former government officials and other forms of abuse of human rights that occurred, immediately after the military takeover are examples of what Sankara was warning the world about.

The worst of all the negative effects of the coup was the total breakdown of the chain of command in the army and the paramilitary forces. Enlisted men became captains, majors, colonels and even generals on the morning of the coup d'état, without any ability to command a squad. This was the beginning of the indiscipline in the military and para-military forces of Liberia, which until this day our country is still struggling to curtail.

Having made this observation, let me quickly say that my general observation and the observations of many critical Liberian thinkers that I have spoken to is that the armed forces, for more than a decade, has been incrementally disciplined and more professional that it is now trusted by the public more

than the para-military forces. I call upon the paramilitary forces to follow the good example of the Armed Forces of Liberia and to become more professional and disciplined in the performance of their functions.

We need not emphasize that the so called rescue mission orchestrated by some non-commissioned officers and enlisted men of the Armed Forces of Liberia in 1980, was unjustifiably chaotic and bloody and took us far away from finding solutions to Liberia's problems because these problems were political in nature and required only political solutions.

In fact the intervention of the military on April 12, 1980 prevented the attempts by the politicians to solve these problems. It began with the mayoral election of 1979, which was postponed to 1980, in which Prof. Amos C. Sawyer of the Movement for Justice in Africa was an independent candidate supported by the progressive politicians and Mr. Chuchu Horton was the candidate of the ruling political party, the True Whig Party.

In 1980, it was clear to the True Whig Party that its hold on to power could not last anymore without the democratic approval of the Liberian people through a free and fair election. Hence, in that year, the TWP began preparation for competition with

the progressive politicians in an election that President Tolbert had said would be held in 1983.

The Progressive Alliance of Liberia (PAL) formed a political party at the beginning of 1980 called the Progressive People's Party (PPP) and MOJA held its first National Congress at the Monrovia City Hall in March 1980, which ended with a resolution for MOJA to form a political party to compete with the TWP in 1983. The True Whig Party at the beginning of 1980 held its first quadrennial congress in Buchanan, Grand Bassa County, in preparation for the expected election in 1983.

While all the political teams were preparing and rehearsing for a competition, in the political arena, scheduled to take place in 1983, the military, wrongly reading the hot political atmosphere that was developing in Liberia, intervened and violently overthrew the TWP Government and arrogated unto itself the title of a redeemer by naming its collective membership as the People's Redemption Council. And so, the Armed Forces of Liberia, stole the show on the early morning of April 12, 1980.

The 1980 military coup has delayed, up to this day, the change that the Liberian people struggled for and expected. This is a clear indication that violence does not necessarily solve any political problem, but only gives a temporary emotional relief. What violence clearly does is to delay solution to any political

problem. Liberia is a clear example. Therefore, let me appeal to the military to never again intervene in the politics of Liberia. Keep to your military duties and leave governance with the politicians, no matter how bad governance may be. Again I say let political mistakes be corrected by politicians not soldiers.

The second suggestion is about how the military can play a leading role to reverse the increasing level of food insecurity in our country. The military with the support of the legislature should expand the scope of the military's role of providing for our collective security, beyond protecting us from invasions from across our borders to our collective security from hunger. Death by hunger and death from the use of force amounts to the same thing, death. Liberians are dying slowly from the lack of food because we are not producing enough food as a nation to feed ourselves.

Most of our hard-to-earn foreign exchange is spent to import food, especially our staple food, rice. Countries less endowed with good climate and soil compared to Liberia grow rice, not only for local consumption, but also for export. It will interest you to know, for an example, that Egypt, a desert country, until recently, was the largest producer and exporter of rice in the Middle East region.¹ It is shameful for Liberia, to say the least. What explanation do we have, as Liberians, for importing rice from China and India, countries with more than a billion people each, to feed?

I suggest that the military forms a robust agricultural battalion, in order, to find ways to solve our collective food insecurity problem. The level of discipline that exists in the military makes ideal for leading our national effort to overcome our food insecurity problem. I call on the legislature to make adequate budgetary appropriation for strengthening the Armed Forces of Liberia, as a redeemer of the Liberian people, in the unending cycle of hunger. The Liberian government must also provide more incentives for entrepreneurs that want to venture into food production.

As a nation, we cannot make progress, if we cannot produce most of the food that we eat. Through the process of eminent domain, the Government of Liberia should identify huge parcels of farmland in each county and make them available to the military to produce food for Liberia. This is the best way for the army to protect our collective security, for now. These activities will also provide opportunities for civilian jobs for agricultural school students, graduates and graduates from T-Vet programs in the operation and repairs of farming machines, and other logistical and administrative services. It can be done, once there is a political will.

My suggestion, which some may classify as extraordinary is based on the fact that the government and people of Liberia cannot reverse the high level of poverty in Liberia

without taking extraordinary steps for the increase in rice production. Without an increase in rice production in Liberia, the price of rice will continue to rise and a rise in the price of rice will lead to an increase in poverty. Studies have shown that there is a direct link between rice production and poverty in Liberia.

These studies have shown that if more rice is produced in Liberia, the price of rice will drop and this will lead to a reduction in poverty level in Liberia. For example, based on earlier studies by researchers on the link between rice and other cereal production and poverty, Clarence Tsimpo and Quentin Wodo, two World Bank , in their paper entitled, **Rice Prices and Poverty in Liberia(2008)** reached the following conclusion:

“In Liberia however, at least under the current conditions, the impact of a change in the price of rice is not ambiguous. This is because a large share of the rice that is consumed is imported, while the rice that is locally produced is used mostly for auto-consumption rather than for sale on the market. In such circumstances, an increase in the price of rice, whether imported or locally produced, will tend to result in higher poverty in the country as a whole (even if some local producers will gain from this increase), while a reduction in price will lead to a reduction in poverty. Furthermore, because rice represents such a large share of the food consumption of households, any change in the price of rice is likely to have a rather large

*effect on poverty measures.”*² According to an FAO report dated May 20, 2019, rice for human consumption accounted for over 80 percent of imports³. This means that 80 percent of the money that we spent in Liberia to import from other countries was spent on rice in 2019. The situation remains the same today. It also means that if we produce more rice in Liberia, we will save that money and invest it in ways that could develop our country.

Based on the foregoing, my advice to President George M. Weah is that his policy titled the **“Pro-Poor Agenda for Prosperity and Development (PAPD)”** which is meant to reduce poverty and promote prosperity and national development in Liberia cannot and will not succeed until and unless more rice is produced in Liberia, than is imported. If he does not promulgate programs for the radicle increase in food production, then at the end of his six years in power Liberians will become poorer than they were on the day that he was inaugurated as President of Liberia. Therefore, I urge the President, as Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Liberia, to amend his legislative agenda for this year and going forward, to include an increase in the budget of the Armed Forces of Liberia for the use of the men and women of the Armed Forces to lead the country in the production of more rice in Liberia. The security threat to the survival of our nation is not external threat from the borders of Liberia; rather, it is internal threat based on our high dependency on the importation of rice. The military must be used to deal with this

² https://www.researchgate.net/publication/23723583_Rice_prices_and_poverty_in_Liberia

³ https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/LBR_10.pdf

threat to our survival as a sovereign nation. I urge the Legislature to fully cooperate with the President, if and when he decides to focus on the use of the military for increase rice production in Liberia.

Distinguished Officers, men and women of the Armed Forces of Liberia, other distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, this is my little input on the use of the military with the support of the legislature to make Liberia a better place for all Liberians.

I wish the men and women of the Armed Forces of Liberia a blissful celebration of Armed Forces Day, 2021.

I thank you.