

Annual Message
By
His Excellency Joseph Nyuma Boakai, Sr.
President of the Republic of Liberia
The Capitol Building, Monrovia
January 29 2024

The Rescue Mission: Rebuilding Public Trust

MR. VICE PRESIDENT,
MR. SPEAKER,
MADAM PRESIDENT PRO TEMPORE,
MEMBERS OF THE LEGISLATURE,
MADAM CHIEF JUSTICE AND JUSTICES OF THE SUPREME COURT,
THE DOYEN AND MEMBERS OF THE DIPLOMATIC CORPS,
HEADS AND OFFICIALS OF POLITICAL PARTIES,
REPRESENTATIVES OF OUR INTERNATIONAL AND DEVELOPMENT PARTNERS,
PRELATES AND IMAMS,
OUR TRADITIONAL LEADERS,
MEMBERS OF THE FOURTH ESTATE,
MY FELLOW LIBERIANS, DISTINGUISHED LADIES, AND GENTLEMEN.

We are thankful to the Lord Almighty, the Preserver of our State for His abundant blessings upon us. As the world confronts various crises – wars, pandemics, climate change, and migration – we pray for a better, more peaceful, sustainable, and inclusive global order.

Exactly one week ago, Vice President Jeremiah Koung and I took the oath of office as an array of world leaders, friends, and citizens of Liberia at home and in the Diaspora looked on. That solemn occasion marked yet another historical moment in our democracy as we carried out a transfer of power.

In obedience of my constitutional duty, it is an honor to come before this august Body, the people's representatives, to report on the national situation as we met it and present our agenda for development in the coming year.

We must acknowledge the harsh realities that face us, as we report that the state of our nation is not what we desire. It is important to note the problems that confront us: Poverty, drug epidemic, corruption, poor infrastructure, and an underperforming economy. The current challenges present us with a unique opportunity to embark on a new journey of hope. This is our commitment to rescue the nation!

Our Vision

Our vision, as revealed in ARREST (meaning, Agriculture, Roads, Rule of Law, Education, Sanitation, Tourism) shall guide the preparation of the new Medium-term National Development Plan for the welfare of our people. We must harness opportunities in agriculture, roads, and other infrastructure development; improve the rule of law, rethink the education sector, improve sanitation, and unlock the potential of tourism.

We believe that creating economic linkages between these development facets and reinforcing them will help reverse years of economic downturns.

The State of the Economy

The state of the economy is a cause for concern, with many of our citizens facing perennial unemployment and economic instability. We must not just recognize the pain and frustration that permeate our society, but also work together to introduce and pass legislations that will prioritize economic reforms that foster sustainable economic growth and job creation.

Distinguished Legislators, economic growth slowed between 2022 and 2023, from 4.8 percent to 4.6 percent. The rate of growth averaged about 1.5 percent, compared with 3.1 percent between 2012 and 2017 due in part to an underperforming economy and the existing geo-political global environment. During the past six years, the economy faced challenges in terms of growth, job creation, and poverty reduction.

Inflation during the period 2023 rose to 10.1 percent at the end of December, from 7.6 percent in 2022. Revenue collection as reported for 2023 stood at US\$710.23 million while expenditure totaled US\$796.32 million; hence, a large budget deficit of over US\$80 million.

We intend to change this state of the economy by thinking “outside the box”; a paradigm shift away from reliance on primary commodity export to focusing on value addition with the private sector as the engine to drive the economy. Under my Administration, the empowerment of Liberian entrepreneurship through more support will help bring back **THE MADE IN LIBERIA** quest for inclusive and sustainable growth and jobs. In our quest to expand the economy, we will leverage Information Communication Technology (ICT) in creating jobs, especially for our youth. To achieve this, my Administration will train up to 10,000 young people in various digital skills in the first half of 2024. The Liberian middle-class goal must be a reality in the next 6 years.

The net international reserves position reported at the end of December 2023 was US\$220 million. The report of US \$40 million as the GoL’s consolidated account balance as at January 19, 2024 is not supported by the fact. The balance reported by the CBL as of the same date was US\$20.5 million, highly encumbered, NOT US\$40 million. To this end, we re-emphasize our earlier commitment to audit and ensure that regular audits will be a culture across all branches of government, not only the Executive.

The stock of public debt at End-December 2023 stood at US\$2.21 billion, an increase of 8.67 percent compared to end-December 2022 stock of US\$2.08 billion. This represents a sharp

increase of US\$1.33 billion compared to the end of December 2017 stock of US\$878.17 million (representing 601.8 percent rise). Our debt burden has clearly grown astronomically. Certainly, the rescue mission was a necessity for Liberia's transformation.

As I am speaking, Liberia is under sanction for lack of payment of dues to the African Union and the African Development Bank. Also, a default in payment of about US\$650,000 to the European Investment Bank is preventing a disbursement of over US\$13 million for the Sanniquellie-Loguato road.

We will reintroduce the **Fiscal Rules and Travel Ordinance** in addition to other measures to help address waste and abuse and ensure the return of prudent fiscal management. We will ensure that the executive leads by example.

Agriculture

Liberia is endowed with abundant natural resources. With over 40% of West Africa's rainforest, our country is home to a diverse array of flora and fauna that should help provide economic and agricultural growth opportunities. Liberia is also a leader in the discussion on climate change mitigation, further emphasizing the importance of international partnerships for sustainable agricultural production and development.

However, it is important to recognize that our available arable land is underutilized. My government is committed to harnessing the right resources and strengthening collaboration with international partners and local farmers to improve production.

Legislative Agenda

Our legislative agenda is aimed at working with you in doing the business of the people for which proposed legislation will be submitted in the coming months. We will focus on shaping the outcomes we desire from our development agenda. The following constitute our agenda:

The Presidential Transition Act

A Presidential Transition Act was drafted in 2017 to provide the appropriate legal framework for the seamless transition from one democratically elected president to the other. The draft bill has since been lingering with little or no action to move it to legislation. Given the difficulty in establishing the appropriate framework to guide the recent presidential transition, my government will immediately review the draft bill for submission to the legislature for passage. When passed, the Presidential Transition Act will provide the legal basis for smooth transfer of political power.

Bill for the Establishment of the Ministry of Local Government.

This bill is aimed at advancing modalities to operationalize the Local Government Act passed in 2018 to fast-track the transitioning of the Ministry of Internal Affairs to the new Ministry of Local Government. The Ministry of Local Government will have the authority to drive the Government's decentralization program.

Operationalizing the Revenue Sharing Law

The Revenue Sharing Law needs to be synchronized with existing laws including the Project Financial Management Act (PFMA), and the current Revenue Code. The Revenue Sharing Law (passed in 2022) and these two other instruments were designed for different systems of Government.

While the new Revenue Sharing Act is designed to facilitate fiscal decentralization in a decentralized system of governance, the other two cater to a centralized system where the sub-national bodies do not have any authority to use a portion of locally generated revenue. This has left County Service Centers that should be functioning and raising revenue, often stranded to raise operational costs. We will work with the relevant institutions of Government to align the new Law with the existing Law; popularize the Law and ensure adherence and enforcement across the Country.

Passage of the National Tourism Bill

One of the major recommendations that came out of the mandate and functional review of the Ministry of Information, Cultural Affairs, and Tourism was the need to divest culture and tourism from the Ministry of Information. A National Tourism bill has since been sent to the Legislature with a first public hearing. Improving tourism is one of the pillars of the ARREST agenda. We will work with the Legislature on the status of this bill pending necessary actions to complete this process. Once passed, Liberia will have a National Tourism Authority mandated to draw up regulations and the appropriate governing framework for the tourism sector.

Establishment of the Office of the Ombudsman

Passage of the Code of Conduct for public officials has not had the full effect of the Law. A major hurdle is a lack of ‘implementation infrastructure’. To this end, there is a need to establish the Office of the Ombudsman. When established, this office will supervise the enforcement of all provisions of the Code of Conduct and will also impose sanctions for infractions. We must begin looking at appointing an individual with the requisite moral standing to head and run the office.

Amendment to the New Financial Institution Act

As part of the CBL’s financial sector reform in 2023, the Bank submitted to the Office of the President a new Banking Law to replace the existing New Financial Institution Act of 1999. This Act was submitted to the National Legislature for enactment but is still pending passage. In the coming days, my Administration will work with the leadership of the Legislature to ensure the New Banking Act is passed into Law.

Amended and Restated Payments System Act

An Amended and Restated Payments System Act is currently being reviewed by my Administration. The Act, when passed into Law, will help strengthen the means of mobile payment across platforms and enhance a drive towards a cashless society.

Liberia Insurance Regulatory Commission Act

The Central Bank of Liberia is working on a draft Liberia Insurance Regulatory Commission Act which is currently being shared with stakeholders for their input following which, it will be submitted for passage into law. We are also working on a draft Bill for a National Health Insurance Scheme for Liberia. The Scheme is intended to reduce out-of-pocket costs for citizens and enhance access to affordable and quality healthcare.

2015 Paris Agreement

The threat of climate change to our environment and way of life is becoming obvious by the day, which is why we must join the rest of the world to address the causes of this phenomenon. I call on the legislature to work with us to begin looking at the Paris Agreement including the carbon market to ensure our national interest is protected.

A list of protocols, conventions, and other instruments will be forwarded to you for consideration and appropriate action.

Road Infrastructure Development

Expanding and improving the road network in our country remains a top priority for my Administration. While there has been some progress in the road and transport sector during the reviewed period, there remain considerable challenges in road development.

Mr. Vice President, Mr. Speaker, Honorable Legislators, Ladies and Gentlemen: The total paved roads in our national road network amount to only **1,131.1km**, representing **8.7%** percent of the **13,000 km** road network we need. This fact underscores considerable challenges in road infrastructure and the urgent need to fund road development in the country.

With assistance from friendly partners, the country made notable progress in paving some primary roads, including the corridors: the Gbarnga to Salayea, the Ganta to Saclepea, the Ganta to Yekepa, and the Sanniquellie to Loguato. In addition, as of now, 37.7 percent of work on the ELWA to RIA Road Project has been accomplished.

To access all county capitals, my government will work to alleviate the problems faced by commuters using our primary roads, especially during the rainy season. This situation also causes major impediments to the economic development of our people, as these primary routes are major economic corridors to all parts of our country. The restoration of the County Road Maintenance Stations will be a key deliverable.

This is why we have commissioned a **“NO CAR STUCK IN THE MUD” 100-DAY DELIVERABLE** to make all major primary corridors pliable.

Our flagship road delivery program will include the Freeport to St. Paul Bridge Road. Having received funding through the Government of Japan, we will begin construction of a **4-lane** road from the **Gabriel Tucker Bridge to the Freeport of Monrovia**. Additionally, the Government of Japan is expected to provide funds to expand the **Gabriel Tucker Bridge to 4-lanes**. The Government has also secured additional support from Japan for the conduct of feasibility studies for the expansion of the **Freeport to St. Paul Bridge** corridor. My government will allocate funds to complete the **6.5 km Freeport to St. Paul Bridge Road**.

Mr. Vice President, Mr. Speaker, Madam Pro-Tempore, and Honorable Legislators:

My government will ensure that funding from the **National Road Fund** is utilized to maintain and rehabilitate roads for the good of the public. Through the contribution of Liberians who pay their fuel levies from every gallon of gasoline or fuel oil they purchase; we will continue to expand our maintenance program in maintaining our existing network and the construction of new community roads.

Honorable Legislators, I would like you to join me in extending sincere gratitude to our development partners, which include the **European Union, the European Investment Bank, the World Bank, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), UK Aid, the German Government, KFW, and GIZ**. I would also like to thank our Arab partners, including the **Saudi Fund, the Kuwaiti Fund, and BADEA** as well as the **Japanese Government and JICA, the Swedish Government, the Chinese Government and its China Aid program, the Norwegian Government, the Indian Government, the African Development Bank (AfDb), and ECOWAS** for their many contributions to our infrastructure development.

FOREIGN POLICY

Mr. Vice President, Mr. Speaker, Madam President Pro-Tempore, and Members of the Legislature:

As a founding member of most continental and multilateral institutions, we will continue to honor our obligations. Liberia continues to foster cordial relationships with other countries in the community of nations and maintains its current membership with multilateral organizations like the United Nations, ECOWAS, Mano River Union, and the African Union.

We will continue to pursue a policy of good neighborliness as we remain in peaceful coexistence with our immediate neighbors.

Mr. Vice President, Mr. Speaker, Madam Pro-Temp, Honorable Legislators:

As a nation with a proud history of regional leadership, our standing among the comity of nations is undermined when we fail to meet our obligations as a sovereign state. Therefore, it is imperative to reclaim our standing in the comity of nations. My government will work with the legislature to ensure arrears are settled.

The Civil Service

There are an estimated 70,000 employees, including appointed officials, in the Government of Liberia. These command a total wage of over US\$300 million annually. This growth in the size of the government has not been proportional to the growth in revenue and the efficiency and effectiveness of the government. This means that wage continues to consume a sizeable portion of the total budget, strangulating service delivery and all initiatives and obligations of the government. So, the government faces a situation of stunted growth and non-investment in the lives of the people.

To make the government more effective and efficient, we must focus on public service deliveries. The people, not the government, must come first.

Health

Health and sanitation remain a major priority of our government.

In the health sector, my government will prioritize the following:

- the availability of needed medical supplies and logistics in all public health institutions throughout the length and breadth of the nation.
- regular, efficient, and robust monitoring and evaluation of health services in the country to accelerate the reduction of Maternal and Newborn Mortality
- establishment of regional diagnostic centers
- regulation of Health Care and pharmaceutical institutions in the country to meet international standards.

Our recent experience with Ebola and COVID-19 requires our full support in treating national public health with utmost importance in Liberia as it relates to emergency preparedness and response. This requires a more coordinated way of building a more resilient health infrastructure to address current health challenges and future health shocks.

Honorable Legislators:

The drug epidemic, especially the use of “KUSH”, in our country is an existential threat eating away at the future of our children and the country. We must stand up and face this national security risk together. Given the need for immediate action to make good my pledge to the thousands of families burdened by this crisis, I am hereby declaring Drugs and Substance abuse as a Public Health Emergency. In this direction, I am establishing a multisectoral steering committee comprising the following agencies:

- Ministry of Health – Chair
- Ministry of Justice – Co-Chair
- Ministry of Youth and Sports- Member
- Ministry of Gender, Children, and Social Protection - Member
- Liberia Drug Enforcement Agency (LDEA) – Member
- Ministry of Finance and Development Planning (MFDP) – Member

In this fight, me and my Vice President, we will be the first to take a drug test and I urge all others to follow.

Education

Education remains a beacon of hope, but our educational system has seen a downward spiral over the years, leaving countless Liberian children without the tools they need to build a better tomorrow. It is a problem we must confront head-on. Education is not a privilege; it is a fundamental right. We cannot turn a blind eye to the fact that a significant portion of our population is struggling with a lack of access to quality education. And there is no other way that we can genuinely seek to successfully fight poverty without the provision of quality education for our people.

Starting now, my Administration is making a steadfast commitment to revitalize our educational system. We will invest in education infrastructure and provide adequate resources. In this, we crave your support.

Good Governance:

Honorable Legislators, our commitment to good governance is unwavering. Transparency, accountability, and the rule of law will guide our actions. We will fight corruption and build institutions that serve the people's interests. A government that is accountable to its citizens is a government that can truly serve the needs of its people.

Mr. Vice President and President of the Senate, Mr. Speaker, and members of the Legislature, our justice system which is meant to protect the innocent and punish the guilty, has been marred by inefficiency, corruption, and lack of public trust. I am counting on this honorable Body to pass effective legislation and support financial appropriations that will help us win the fight against corruption. Anyone caught in the act of corruption will face the full weight of the law, with swift and non-discriminatory enforcement.

Democratic Elections

Mr. Vice President, Mr. Speaker, Madam President Pro-Tempore, and Honorable Legislators:

We have had a successive peaceful transfer of power, establishing our credentials as an emerging democracy following a civil war. But while we proudly celebrate this achievement, we are not oblivious to the bottlenecks that regularly attend our elections and mar the electoral process.

One of the vexing problems we noted during our past elections is voter registration and the associated logistical problems, which tend to frustrate and anger voters and political parties. My government will strengthen the National Identification Registry (NIR) to build the needed capacity to be able to capture the comprehensive biometric data needed to feed all agencies including the National Elections Commission. In addition, my government will begin to review and implement electoral reform laws.

The Diaspora

Mr. President of the Senate, Mr. Speaker, and members of the legislature, our Liberian brothers and sisters in the Diaspora are an integral part of our nation – they are an extension of our national pride. They share in our nation’s happiness and sadness. They are readily responsive to the needs of family members and friends in times of difficulty. Liberians in the Diaspora have a stake in the future of Liberia and my Administration will be intentional about ensuring that their stake in Liberia is fully harnessed. I have therefore proposed an annual Diaspora Conference on National Development.

I commend the actions of the 54th Legislature and the past administration for their actions to remove the unfair burden of citizenship against Liberians who have chosen to explore opportunities in other parts of the world. I am glad that the slogan, “once a Liberian, always a Liberian” now has true meaning. We will establish clear and predictable policies and links where Diaspora Liberians can play more meaningful roles in Liberia’s future.

Necrology

The nation lost some of its prominent citizens during the year in review. Special condolences go to the families of the victims of the tanker explosion in Totota, Bong County. Among those who have joined our ancestors are: Former Asst. Minister, Mr. Victor Daniel Krakue – 90 years; Ambassador Hannah Abeodu Bowen-Jones – 89 years; Commissioner James Joway McGill, Sr – 86 years; Deputy Minister, Cllr. Edward Kpingbah Goba – 78 years old, Senator Daniel Naathen of Gbarpulo County, and former Deputy Speaker Hans Barchue of Grand Bassa County.

We also mourn all those who lost their lives during the just-ended Legislative and Presidential elections.

A fuller list will be published.

Conclusion

Mr. Vice President, Mr. Speaker, Madam Pro Tempore, and Honorable Members of the Legislature:

The state of our nation is in distress, but the hope of our people is alive. We have all it takes to overcome the burden we have imposed on ourselves through greed and corruption. When we work together, there is nothing we cannot overcome as a people. This is why, I ask you the representatives of our people to join me to do the business of the Liberian people by not doing business as usual.

The time for a mindset shift is now. We must be selfless in our service to bring about the change the Liberian People are yearning for. Again, I challenge you to join me to Think Liberia, Love Liberia, and Build Liberia.

Thank you. May God bless the works of our hands and save our state.