

**STATEMENT BY H.E. MS. OLUBANKE KING-AKERELE
MINISTER FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS, REPUBLIC OF LIBERIA**

**WTO PUBLIC FORUM 2007
4-5 OCTOBER 2007**

Mr Pascal Lamy, Director-General of the WTO,
Your Excellency, Madame Tarja Halonen, President of the Republic of Finland,
The Dean, the National University of Singapore,
Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am honoured to be here representing Her Excellency, President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf of the Republic of Liberia, who is not able to be here but who sends her regards to you all.

I am especially pleased to speak in this important forum on a topic of vital importance to Liberia, to developing nations around the globe, and indeed to all countries for whom enhancing economic opportunities is essential to fulfilling the aspirations of the people.

Ladies and Gentlemen, although I'm here as Foreign Minister, until just last week I was the Minister of Trade and Industry of the Republic of Liberia, and deeply engaged and concerned with the very issues which we are tackling today. So for me this is of particular significance. You could almost call it a passion.

I would also like to say that a founding principle of the WTO is that trade is the driver of growth, that it has a positive impact on incomes and does contribute to economic development and poverty reduction. However, despite all the talk of equitable trade, it is an understatement to say that the benefits of trade do not reach everyone equally.

I want to begin my remarks by posing a challenge to all of us. That challenge is to make the WTO and global trade writ large: meaningful to the large segments of the world's population that have not seen or enjoyed the benefits of WTO rules and regulations or from free trade. I'm talking about the market women, the small farmers, all those who scrape by on a dollar a day or less, the small struggling businessmen in developing countries around the world, the majority of the world's population. I challenge us to make international trade meaningful to these individuals by leveraging trade to service sustainable and equitable development. I challenge us to put our rhetoric of equality into practice. If the WTO and the global trade regime are to have broad credibility, these stakeholders must be brought into the equation; they must be given tangible benefits. And indeed, I believe this is the cry from civil society.

It was in this spirit, with high hopes, that the Doha Development Agenda negotiations began six years ago. We all know the principal goals set out at Doha have proved difficult to achieve, causing many to say, as we've heard, that it is stalled, it is dead. Indeed, it would appear to some that we are no closer to readdressing the existing imbalances of the multilateral trading system in favour of the global poor now, than we were at the start of Doha. However we know there has been progress. We know there's a lot of work to be done. We've heard it; we experience it every day. It is my sincere hope that this seminar will contribute to the dialogue on ways to move the Doha Round forward, deliver tangible trade benefits to the global poor, and use trade as a catalyst for sustainable development. Recasting the debate and making real progress will be particularly difficult with respect to the full and fair integration of the 50 least developed countries into the multilateral trading system. We must provide the conditions for meaningful market access, support product and export-based diversification, especially away from primary commodities, such as agriculture, to more process higher-value added.

Ladies and Gentlemen, my own country, Liberia, a country of a mere 3.5 million people, is one of the LDCs, and stands to benefit greatly from increased equitable trade, strengthening peace and building security, regional and internal, through economic revitalization, which is essential. If not the most vital task for Liberia, our integration into the world economy, linking farmers, small businesses and entrepreneurs, with external markets, will play a central role in the economic revitalization of Liberia. After fourteen years of war 80 per cent of our population lives on less than a dollar per day; 20 per cent are literate. Through trade we can give our people an income. We can give them hope. So they may become strong stakeholders in the peace-building process.

Increased trade has an equally important role to play in solidifying peace in post-conflict situations. In our case, in Liberia, the entire Mano River Union Subregion of Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Côte d'Ivoire, are very interconnected. All the efforts at peace building in Liberia will mean nothing, ladies and gentlemen, if it doesn't take place within the regional context of the Mano River Union Basin. The Mano River Union consists of Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea. Today Côte d'Ivoire is asking to be a part of the Mano River Union. The significance of this is that we have cross-border realities. We have the same people and instability in Guinea, or Côte d'Ivoire, flowing right into Liberia and Sierra Leone. We may have achieved the democratic process in Sierra Leone and Liberia but if we have instability on the border region we are going nowhere. Hence the significance of what happens in our country to be seen within the context of the Mano River Union Basin.

Here I want to refer to the situation in South East Asia where, as you know, you have situations in terms of economic zones, like the emerald triangle, like the IMTGT, Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand growth triangle, Indonesia-Malaysia-Singapore growth triangle, the growth circles. These are the kinds of essential approaches that we need in our subregion. We are talking about hard core infrastructural development to underpin peace and security. We have had the privilege to spend four months in South East Asia looking at these experiences.

You are not talking about small community-level type developments. We want serious development, we want trade, we want export promotion, we want infrastructure development, we want to see the electricity grade that is coming from Nigeria into Côte d'Ivoire, into Guinea, into Liberia. We want to see these hard core infrastructural developments. We're talking trade, we're talking investment promotion. This is what is going to sustain peace and security in Liberia, and hence it is important that this discussion, that the efforts in terms of the enhanced integrated trade framework, takes into account that context and that reality with which we are faced. This is what you're talking about: expanding trade.

Again, we are in the process in Liberia right now of developing our poverty reduction strategy. As part of the poverty reduction strategy, there is a trade export investment working group. The Minister of Commerce chairs that particular group. In the course of the development of the poverty reduction strategy, there is the need to involve the private sector. In short, what you're talking about is an extraordinary opportunity that the poverty reduction process be finished at IPRs, Interim Poverty Reduction, and that by March 2008 we'll have our poverty reduction strategy. We are starting at the same time the involvement, the engagement, with the enhanced Integrated Trade Framework. This means that by the time we get to our PRSP, ladies and gentlemen, we would have mainstream trade and export promotion into PRSP. We would have taken ownership, because ownership is the issue. And so the enhanced Integrated Trade Framework does not stand on its own. It becomes an integral part of Liberia's processes in terms of development. We hope to launch the enhanced integrated trade framework strategy at the end of October. The World Bank will lead that and the UNDP will be financing it. We'll start the diagnostic and we look forward then to some practical activities there.

I want to take the opportunity to give high commendation to the International Trade Centre, Geneva, which has recently helped Liberia in developing a trade road map. And that trade road map consists of many of the things we've just heard from the President of Finland just now, but very practical. I'll highlight some of those in a minute.

But we do believe that, in cooperation with the international partners, we can indeed move forwards.

With this background how do countries like Liberia, indeed all developing countries, move forward? How can the WTO, with the international trade regime, assist in development? We suggest four key areas of focus. Foremost, reduce unequal market access by removing subsidies, tariffs and quotas, so as to maximize competitive advantage. Secondly, work through the enhanced integrated trade framework.

Thirdly, empower entities like the International Trade Centre, and similar initiatives, in strengthening the technical capacity of our countries, especially in value added exports. I'll give you some concrete examples that are taking place on the ground right now.

Consider trade preferences and special incentives for developing countries. Let us look at one or two concrete examples. We have the case of the Mango industry in Mali. Through the Integrated Framework, Mali has developed a significant mango export industry based on its comparative advantage. This is key. At the same time, Sierra Leone. We have a success story there with the ginger experience, where small-scale farmers were taught new approaches in terms of growing ginger, the net result of which is that they are into the export market today. In my own country, with the assistance of the International Trade Centre, who mounted a mission last year, we were able to visit Sierra Leone and see what they were doing there. In June this year the International Trade Centre assisted us with a series of supply-chain analysis: coffee, cocoa, rubber, wood products, crafts, and spices. We came to the conclusion that we had an opportunity to grow spices. They even brought with them some buyers. We had a training workshop for small-scale entrepreneurs. Today, ITC International Trade Centre has been in Liberia for one month, training our small farmers, training our extension workers from the Agriculture Ministry, with a new technology in terms of growing chillies for exports. They have brought with them trainers, people who are doing similar things from Kenya, and from other parts of the world. One month of full-scale training. The net result is that by the first half of next year Liberia will be exporting chillies into the international market.

Now, here is what is significant about what I've just said. We are bringing to the small people, to our small farmers, what this business of trade is all about. Liberia was just admitted into AGOA in January – the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act. I've just come a few days ago from Washington DC, where we had the bilateral consultations with the US government. What does AGOA mean? What did we decide to do? We decided to go for what we call some quick wins: approaches so that you bring it down to the small people so that it means something. Now, by these small farmers learning this new technology of chilli production – and we have a buyer; we have a buyer – we have a buyer for this new development, so that what you're doing essentially, is that the small people begin to know what this Doha Round, what the opportunity to export Liberian products, what the advantages of AGOA means. This is what we're talking about. With the assistance of the West Africa trade hub, the US aid technical assistance group operating out of Accra, Ghana, our people are now benefiting from the potential of rubber wood processing. Pilot rubber wood activities are about to start. We'll be looking into wood products. Basically you're talking about expanding value added Manufacturing. We are in the wake of reconstruction after the war and this is what we need. At the same time we are benefiting from the experiences in China with the economic zones. About 30 officials from the private sector will be going to China soon to see what kinds of experiences we can benefit from there. This is where we're going. This will be the nature of our foreign policy: development diplomacy, economic diplomacy, tapping the experience of other regions, in particular the experience of South East Asia, which of course we happen to be personally acquainted with, and we intend to move that agenda. We want to grow our way out of poverty. That is where we are going. We're doing it at the level of the foreign policy of the Government of Liberia and also at the level of our trade and industry, benefiting from the experience that we can have. We need to strengthen capacity, establish institutional framework, empower trade support institutions and, by the way, we're doing this with the private sector. We have a private/public dialogue process. We want to thank our colleagues in the national community, the IFC, the International Finance Corporation. And within the context of the public/private dialogue process we have a working group on trade and export and investment promotion. That working group will include the Government and the private sector so that again from the word go the private sector is an integral part of what we are about.

Practically, the net result of all of this is mainstreaming trade with our PRSP. We have just recently submitted our application for accession to the WTO. We know it's a long process, but we appreciate the fact that technical assistance is available, Mr Director-General. I was here in May and we submitted our

application for accession by June, and by late this month we are having a sensitization workshop to Liberia to begin acquainting our people with what this is all about.

I want to express my appreciation, Mr Director-General, for the speed, the efficiency, with which you have responded to our reality.

Last item. You raised the question of the challenges of global governance and the contributions of the WTO to the construction of a system of global governance. I'd just like to say a few words and then we will conclude.

The WTO is indeed a major player in the global governance arena. Its trade rules and regulatory structure affects the lives of all nations and peoples around the world. Naturally, therefore, you have been subject to attacks, but these challenges to the WTO focus a great deal on the need for a more balanced decision-making power between rich and poor, and a more egalitarian trade regime. The fact that this public forum is happening speaks of the responsiveness of the WTO administration to this.

It is important for the WTO to indeed listen to these voices that speak for a stronger global development agenda, and increased focus on poverty reduction. You heard the Director-General himself talk about this. The WTO's efforts towards building a more balanced global governance may look into the following questions. First, how to address competing interests between advanced industrialized countries and developing countries, and the least developed countries? Second, how to help the multilateral trading system gain legitimacy and respond to what the world expects from it? Thirdly, how can the WTO contribute in making the global economy respond to human rights commitments, health and equity in trade? How does the WTO resolve propositions to address trade and environment, and gender and trade, in the global trade regime? How to ensure that citizens' voices and public participation have a space in the WTO? You are here: it is clear that they are already ahead. And this is highly commendable. I am so amazed at this room. I had no idea that I would be addressing such a group. I am just overwhelmed!

If Doha fails, then the international community will have failed the global poor. The achievable goal is to create a synergy where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Let us work to dispel any notion of a zero sum game in which rich countries or poor countries win at the expense of the other. Instead, let us create a fair trade framework, one that emphasizes equitable development, that will expand the pie and extend maximum benefits to all.

The WTO has the authority, the credibility, and the broad based membership to change the structural impediments to equitable growth. WTO is a forum. Now is the time. We must come together to reshape the international trade regime so that rules and regulations are fair while being sensitive to the unique needs of the developing countries. By joining together, by not thinking in terms of narrow self-interest, we can lift each other up. We also want to see the gender dimension provided for in WTO trade matters. Here I would like to reference the fact that Ellen Johnson-Sileaf and the President of Finland are in fact hosting, in 2009, an international colloquium, on women, leadership, development, international peace and security. In 2008, as a precursor, we will be having a series of training workshops covering differing aspects of women's empowerment. Mr Director-General, I'd like to invite the WTO to be a part of this, in January 2008 in Liberia, I'd like to ask you to participate in a workshop focussed on ... the issue of women in export promotion and trade. So that is a challenge that I'm posing to you, and I hope you will take it up as we work towards the February 2009 international colloquium.

Mr Chairman, Madame President of Finland, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, all of this is especially urgent for those that Paul Collier calls "the bottom billion". Are you with me? The bottom billion. That is the latest, most provocative book that has come out, referring to the bottom billion. The bottom billion are all of these – many of our countries – who need particular support, particular emphasis,

because indeed he argues that all developing countries are not the same, that in fact as we try to tackle the issues which we are faced with, some of the reality of that, and the major ones, involve around, among other things, trade. So my country and many Liberians are among the bottom billion. And with them are citizens from almost every country from around the world including those many countries represented in this room. Our common challenge is to provide a framework so that these long-suffering people, our long-suffering people, can emerge from this category with productive livelihoods, pride and dignity. This challenge is properly addressed through trade. And it is our duty, as soon as possible, to do something about it. Time is no longer on our side. But to those of us from conflict countries, like mine, trade and export promotion facilities the transformation of the lives of our people, and is critical to sustain our still fragile peace, and this again, as I said, within a regional context.

I want to express my appreciation, and I thank you very much, Mr Director-General, for this opportunity.

I thank you.

H.E. MS. Olubanke King-Akerele
Minister for Foreign Affairs,
Republic of Liberia