

**98<sup>th</sup> Session of the Council of the International Organization  
for Migration (IOM)  
Geneva, 23 to 26 November 2009  
Keynote Address  
*Migration, Human Rights and the Economic Crisis***

Director General,  
Excellencies,  
Distinguished delegates,  
Dear colleagues:

We live in an age of mobility! Although, for this occasion, I did not manage to traverse the distance of sea and continents that separate Liberia and Switzerland, yet, thanks to the marvels of technology, I am able to be with you “virtually”.

I extend the heartfelt greetings of my Government and the people of Liberia. We are most grateful for the support we continue to receive from the IOM office here, whose programs fall under Pillars I and II – peace and security, and economic revitalization, respectively – of our Poverty Reduction Strategy. As such, we are benefiting from IOM help with border control management, family reunification and assisted voluntary returns, a network against human trafficking, and livelihood assistance to vulnerable women and girls.

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is a great honor for me to address this 98<sup>th</sup> Session of the Council of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) on the issue of “Migration, Human Rights and the Economic Crisis”. I want to speak, not first and foremost as the President of Liberia, but from the point of view of someone who has been a migrant, and whose story might be considered a “migrant success story.”

A migrant is defined as a person who leaves his or her country voluntarily to make a new life in a new land. I left my country, at various times, in order to stay alive. When I left Liberia in December 1980, eight months after a military coup with its attendant horrors and devastation, it was for that very reason. I had the good fortune, nevertheless, of being able to leave home and to return, depending on the prevailing political winds. Each time I left my homeland with a heavy heart, not knowing when I would be able to return, or what I might find when I did.

The United States, and then Kenya, became my home away from home, places where job opportunities beckoned. Yet, even as I climbed the corporate ladder, my thoughts were always of this tiny piece of God’s earth that I call my home, Liberia, and I kept abreast of developments there. I visited occasionally, and sometimes got into trouble with the regime.

In the ensuing years, there was never a point where I did not want to return home, and I knew, deep down, that someday I would. This phase of my life, as a migrant in America, took me to jobs in Connecticut, then Washington, D.C., and, in 1992, to a position at the United Nations. For the next five years, as an international civil servant, I took a break from Liberian politics.

But I had been bitten by the political bug. Thus, in 1997, I resigned my UN job and returned home to contest the elections. My party fought a valiant and vigorous campaign, but lost simply because the voters feared what would happen if my main opponent did not win. I left home again – for a “self-imposed exile” – but ventured only as far as Abidjan, wanting very much to be close to home, and to monitor events on the ground, including the smouldering rebellion against the existing regime.

Dear Friends,

When I decided, in early 2005, to stand in elections to become President of my country, I knew that my days as a migrant were over. Things would be different this time around. And when, on November 23, 2005, Liberia’s National Elections Commission declared me the twenty-third President of Liberia, I knew that my wandering days were done. Home was home once more, where my heart had always remained.

In sharing my “migrant success story,” Ladies and Gentlemen, it is my fervent hope that we will all intensify our efforts to bring about other success stories. It is true, however, that many migrants around the world – including from my own country – who go out in search of a better life for their families and themselves, face obstacles, discrimination, outright hostility and violations of their human rights.

Migrants live in trying times: we are in the midst of the most dramatic economic crisis since the 1930s. Across the world, vulnerable and marginalized populations have been hit first, and hit the hardest. Migrants, who often work under precarious conditions and in sectors with low job security to start with, were the first to slide into unemployment. Moreover, especially in times of recession, migrants are often perceived as a burden to societies and become easy scapegoats for economic troubles. It is with concern that I observe the rise in racism and xenophobia in societies around the world, a development that we must not tolerate, if we are serious about ensuring dignity and safety for all.

Let us not forget that each and every migrant is at the centre of an often extensive network of family and community members who rely on the migrant’s hard labour for their daily livelihoods. Liberia, for example, gets one-fifth of its income from remittances. However, remittance inflows have declined in recent years as a result of the global recession. Total inward workers’ remittances at the end of September 2009 were US\$138.4 million, reflecting a drop of \$7.4 million compared with the same period last year. This drop is felt sharply, by children who stay home from school because they can’t pay school fees, by



patients who can no longer afford much-needed medication, and by heads of household who can't make ends meet.

We tend to evaluate migrants in purely economic terms – their manpower, their productivity, their financial assets – and being an economist myself, I recognize this. Their essential humanity sometimes risks being overlooked. It is important to remember that, in big and small ways, migrants make invaluable contributions to their families, to their communities and countries of origin and destination. They do so economically, yes, but also in the political, social and cultural realm.

An economic downturn implies some painful transformations; but instead of being perceived as a problem, migrants can become part of the solution to social changes – through their knowledge, their life experience, their agency, their networks, and other resources they may have. Migrants' role in changing a society for the better, at critical points in its history, also holds true in countries recovering from conflict and crisis. In Liberia, we know this from bitter experience. We have lost and continue to lose too many of our best and brightest. They were escaping from war then, they are escaping from poverty now. But we are actively forging links and partnerships with the Liberian diaspora. Earlier this year, we launched the Liberian Diaspora Advisory Board, whose mission it is to mobilize our country's men and women abroad in support of "Lift Liberia", our official Poverty Reduction Strategy which articulates our vision for moving toward rapid, inclusive and sustainable growth and development by 2011.

Here I would like to highlight one issue particularly close to my heart – the role of women, and migrant women in particular. As women's economic and social roles change, they, too, increasingly look abroad for sources of livelihood. Many women around the world make remarkable efforts as migrant mothers or as heads of household who stay behind. In Liberia, women like these have been the backbone of the society and they deserve our respect and admiration. At the same time, we must recognize that female migrants are often among the most vulnerable, and become victims of abuse, trafficking and exploitation.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Respect for migrants and appreciation of their many contributions calls for putting human rights at the center of our thinking and action about migration. Respect for the human rights of migrants is a non-negotiable tenet of migration governance. Protecting the human rights of migrants is also not an "option", a luxury we afford during the good times. Particularly during periods of economic difficulty, migrants' needs and rights must find specific consideration in our responses and actions.

But how do we make human rights a reality for migrants around the world? First, we need to change our perception of migrants: from being a problem at worst, a factor of production at best, to a human being with rights, needs and

agency. Second, we as governments need to take responsibility for protecting the migrants coming to our countries and our nationals abroad. We can no longer make economic and social policies without considering migrants and their human rights. And as with most complex challenges, it is usually joint efforts that yield the best solutions, and I wish this distinguished gathering fruitful days of discussion and full success in its endeavour.

Thank you for your attention.