

Word of welcome by Mr. Fred de Graaf, President of the Senate of the Netherlands, at the occasion of the visit of the President of Liberia, Ms Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, 9 November 2012

Your Excellency, Madam President, I warmly welcome you here in our democratic heart, in the States-General of the Netherlands. I do so also on behalf of my colleague, the President of the House of Representatives, Ms Van Miltenburg, and of course on behalf of the other members of parliament present here today.

President, we are honoured to have you in our midst. Not only because you are the President of Liberia, but also because you are a winner of the Nobel Peace Prize. We rarely receive a person in our parliament who has gained this extraordinary distinction.

Although.... as you can imagine there is some pride at our side that we will share the Nobel Peace Prize 2012 with 350 million fellow EU-citizens. In fact the European integration which has brought peace and prosperity to our continent started right here in the Hague, the city which is known now as the international city of peace and justice, in May 1948 in the Knights Hall of our parliament.

As I have understood, as of this afternoon, you will be an honorary doctor of one of our main universities. We are very pleased that you will accept this doctorate.

I am also happy to know that the University of Liberia and Tilburg University are about to sign a partnership. I am hoping that this will be translated into many fruitful forms of cooperation. In our Senate, we have actively encouraged our government to sharpen its vision on West Africa and to endow it with concrete projects and collaborations.

Education is central to this vision.

Your Excellency, when I look at your personal track record, I am humbled. Incontestably, you have done a lot for your country. You dedicate yourself to the reduction of corruption and to the promotion of democracy. You stand up for human rights and for gender equality in particular.

You seem to do so without forgetting to invest in the fundamental motor for constructive change: the Liberian economy.

In those efforts, I admire especially the way you are trying to give the youth, the next generation, better access to training and to jobs.

Your devotion can only be called impressive, President. But of course, we are aware of the fact that the situation remains highly complex.

The foundations on which your country is building up a healthy democracy are greatly challenging. They form a challenge not only with regard to domestic issues such as reconciliation and transitional justice. I can just as well imagine that your country feels spill-over effects from regional instability, be it in Cote d'Ivoire, or a bit further away, in Mali. I can imagine that you are wishing for fair, free and peaceful elections in Sierra Leone next week. And that, perhaps, the gradual scaling back of the U.N. mission raises several old and new questions.

I am glad that we have some time now to discuss these issues. I am looking forward to an open, honest and constructive debate.

Your Excellency, once more, I warmly welcome you.

Before I will ask my colleagues to do what they do best - ask questions - I would like to offer the floor to you, Madam President.

Thank you.