



**REPUBLIC OF LIBERIA
MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS
MONROVIA, LIBERIA**

***PRESS STATEMENT ON THE RISING TREND OF STIGMATIZATION AGAINST
LIBERIANS***

READ BY H.E. AUGUSTINE KPEHE NGAFUAN, MINISTER OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS

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Since Liberia recorded its first case of the Ebola Virus Disease (EVD) in March 2014, many governmental, non-governmental and multilateral partners have in varying degrees rendered assistance, in cash and in kind, to support the efforts of the Liberian Government and people to disrupt the transmission of the disease and put the country back on the path of socio-economic development. Over the past month or two, we have seen more countries and institutions ramp up support in the form of increased financial commitment and the deployment of critically needed medical and other personnel to help in the fight against the disease. The convergence of factors including strong and courageous leadership from President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and the Government of Liberia coupled with the cooperation and positive initiatives on the part of Liberians both at home and abroad, undergirded by support from our international partners, has thankfully occasioned the start of the decline in the rate of Ebola infections across the country. The Liberian Government and people are and will remain eternally grateful to all who have thus far extended hands of support and empathy to us in these trying times in our nation's history. We are confident that sustaining these laudable efforts by every stakeholder in the fight will translate into much more comforting outcomes in the next few weeks.

However, in the midst of what has generally been a remarkable show of solidarity from the global community as Liberia and other Ebola affected countries struggle to eradicate the virus, we have noted with deep concern a rising counter-trend of measures and reactions on the part of some members of the global community that can only be described as disproportionate and panic-driven. Of late some countries have chosen to impose draconian travel and other restrictions including the suspension of visa issuance to Liberians and citizens of other countries worst hit by the Ebola Virus Disease. As a consequence, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is getting increasingly inundated with complaints from Liberians across the globe, reporting very depressing stories that include outright revocation of admission to academic or other training programs abroad after previously being issued admission or acceptance letters; the denial of entry into some countries even after producing evidence of not being in Liberia for over a month or so; very inhumane and callous treatment from immigration and other personnel at airports; and subtle and outright stigmatization at the work place, in public transport, in hospitals, etc.

The story of A. Boffah Kollie, a young Liberian lady who was rejected entry at the airport of a country (name withheld) in which she was headed to begin graduate studies in Medicine is just one of many heart-rending stories that we receive daily. In a complaint to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs dated October 28, Ms. Kollie writes, "When I submitted my Liberian passport to Immigration and Security authorities at the airport, they picked me up and placed me in an isolated room. When I asked why I was denied entry, they said to me that I was from an Ebola affected country. I asked that they conduct the necessary medical examination as may be required, but they refused. I was humiliated and dehumanized in the terminal. I was put on a plane (name withheld) and was given a mask to cover my nose and mouth and placed in the very back seat of the plane. I was under tight escort by the Immigration and other security personnel in every country I had to transit till I reached Roberts International Airport in Liberia."

The ordeal of Ms. Kollie is typical of the many other cases of maltreatment of Liberians that springs from blanket stigmatization. In many of these situations, those perpetrating

the harsh measures do not accommodate such particularities as 1) whether or not the Liberian passport holder had in fact been in Liberia over the past one month or so or 2) whether or not the passport holder had come in close contact with any infected person. These actions are instead premised on the shaky assumption that one's "Liberian-ness" is a problem in and of itself. To treat every person who constitutes a part of the 4 million Liberian population as if he or she is an Ebola carrier because over 6,000 persons have been infected with Ebola in Liberia since March 2014, is the height of unfairness and blanket stigmatization. In short and as it has been aptly put by some Liberians on social media, "we are all affected, but we are not all infected."

Over the past months, the Government of Liberia has protested against unnecessary restrictions and stigmatization through a variety of channels including direct diplomatic contacts to the countries involved and advocacy at multilateral fora including the African Union (AU) and the United Nations. It is in this spirit that Liberia hailed the outcomes of the Extraordinary Meeting of the Executive Council of the AU held on September 8, 2014 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia which, among other forward-looking decisions called upon **"Member States to urgently lift all travel bans and restrictions" and to ensure that "any travel related measures be in line with WHO and ICAO recommendations, in particular proper screening."** At the level of the United Nations, we also took comfort in **Security Council Resolution 2177** of September 18, 2014 adopted during the Presidency of the United States and co-sponsored by over 130 countries. Resolution 2177, while **"expressing concern about the detrimental effect of the isolation of the affected countries as a result of trade and travel restrictions imposed on and to the affected countries"**, called on **"Member States, including of the region, to lift general travel and border restrictions, imposed as a result of the Ebola outbreak, and that contribute to the further isolation of the affected countries and undermine their efforts to respond to the Ebola outbreak and also calls on airlines and shipping companies to maintain trade and transport links with the affected countries and the wider region."** Accordingly, in order to improve the safety of travel and enhance confidence

internationally, the Government of Liberia with capacity support from partners including the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has been implementing robust and strict exit and entry screening procedures at all our air, land and sea ports.

We do not contest the right of any Government to protect, first and foremost, the interest and well-being of its own citizens and residents. However, in the interest of our common humanity, we strongly urge leaders of the world – heads of state and government, parliamentarians, ministers, etc. - to take measures that achieve the double objective of protecting their own citizens and at the same time assisting countries battling with Ebola to quickly contain the disease. We also call on ordinary citizens and non-governmental actors across the world not to put their respective governments under undue pressure to institute measures that fly in the face of UN Security Council Resolution 2177 and run contrary to advice from WHO, ICAO, and other experts. Blanket visa suspensions and other extremely harsh actions do not necessarily isolate Ebola; they only isolate countries affected by Ebola; and by so doing, they do not only undermine the ability of affected countries to effectively and expeditiously fight the disease but also compound the long-term socio-economic impacts of the Ebola crisis. All we ask is that governments institute measures that deal with the facts or science of how Ebola is transmitted rather than succumb to paranoia and stigmatizing measures.

Let it be noted that citizens and residents of Ebola affected countries have already been victimized by the deadly virus. So it is unfair and unconscionable for us to be doubly victimized by actions that are not necessarily aimed at attacking the disease but rather attacking the fact that we hold a particular type of passport. This current Ebola Outbreak is not only a problem for Liberia and other worst-hit countries; it is also a test of human solidarity amidst human adversity. Ultimately, and as it has been repeatedly stated by the World Health Organization (WHO) and other experts, the most effective way for governments across the world to deal with the Ebola menace is to stop the transmission at source by assisting Liberia and other Ebola affected countries to quickly eradicate the disease.

To reiterate, we hail the many countries, big or small, that have rendered exemplary assistance and empathy to Liberia since the outset of the Ebola epidemic in March of this year. These countries deserve tremendous credit for the progress we are beginning to register in our fight against Ebola. At this advance stage in the fight, it will be extremely sad were they to allow the solid moral high ground on which they have stood, and for which they have won commendation and appreciation from Liberians and people of good conscience from across the globe, to cave in to an unfortunate undercurrent of hysteria and paranoia that could lead to their joining the league of countries that have instituted measures that border on stigmatization and contradict international commitments. **While we appreciate the numerous assistance from governments and other partners from across the world in our fight against Ebola, it should be noted that no amount of external assistance can be more appreciated by the Liberian people in these trying times than to be treated with respect and dignity.**

It is against this backdrop that we lift immense thanks and appreciation to the Government and people of Cote d'Ivoire for the resumption of flights by its national carrier, *Air Cote d'Ivoire*, to Liberia and other Ebola affected countries. We hope that others will soon follow suit in line with commitments made over a month ago.

As a way of addressing the complications and dehumanizing situations that Liberians are being increasingly exposed to when they travel due to stigmatization, and in furtherance of efforts to represent the interest of Liberians around the world through our diplomatic representatives, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs hereby announces the following contact information:

Direct Contact to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Monrovia:

CELL NO: **+231 770 262 756 and + 231 886 002 728**

Email: foreignaffairslib1847@yahoo.com

Facebook: **Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Liberia**

Liberians may choose to also contact the following hotlines at the following Liberian missions abroad:

United States of America:

Hotlines: **+1 646-287-9755 and +1240-396-7246**

United Kingdom (UK):

Hotlines: **+44-7448465517 and +44-7438516153**

Belgium:

Hotline: **+32-499815149**

Japan:

Hotlines: **+81-8047951989 and +81-334799882**

Ghana:

Hotlines: **+233-546908050 and +233-2316003;**

Morocco:

Hotlines: **+212-643-555926; +212-662-665851, and +212-638-602876;**

South Africa:

Hotline: **+27-710-674576.**

These dedicated hotlines and contact details are meant to provide Liberians facing complications with immigration, airport and other authorities when travelling, for reasons connected to Ebola, the platform to directly contact the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the specifics of their case. While we cannot guarantee that acceptable redress will be found in every case, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs assures the general Liberian

public that it will exhaust all available diplomatic options to bring relief to Liberians or group of Liberians facing such embarrassment.

In order to forestall such difficulties, the Ministry advises officials of government and ordinary Liberian citizens, to the extent they feel comfortable to do so, to apprise the Ministry via email with their travel itineraries at least two (2) days before their date of travel out of Liberia. This will enable us contact the Liberian mission(s) accredited to the country (ies) of travel to take proactive actions and be on the alert to assist whenever travel complications arise.

This year 2014 is, without doubt, a very difficult year for Liberia and Liberians. Our resilience has been tested but in the midst of our diversity, we have united to wage war against the deadly and insidious Ebola Virus Disease. Indeed with "our country's cause defending", we are meeting the Ebola foe "with valor unpretending". Let's stay the course as day will soon break on this long, dark Ebola night.