



U.S. Embassy in Liberia

A Press Statement by U.S. Ambassador to Liberia Michael A. McCarthy

In the past three weeks I visited Bomi, Gbarpolu, and four counties in the Southeast, and I have now been to every county in Liberia. This fulfills my promise to the U.S. Congress to be an Ambassador to all Liberia, not just Monrovia. I am happy to report that each capital city has its own unique bundle of trade and cultural ties, and that Liberians throughout the country share a warm, welcoming spirit!

Unfortunately, on the trip I was startled and deeply troubled to encounter multiple county hospitals that received not one penny of what they were promised in the 2022 budget. Hospitals on which lives depend, where outbreaks are prevented and suffering is alleviated, did not receive any portion of the US\$100,000 or more appropriated by the legislature for them to operate. As reported in the press last week with Tellowoyan Memorial Hospital in Lofa County, these facilities currently survive on the backs of incredibly dedicated health professionals, making do with whatever they can scrape together. Lest you think this is the work of one political party, that notion was quickly dispelled by Liberians I talked to. The blocking of resources is so complete that it must be institutional: and the lack of any alarm being raised indicates a syndicate involving players at the legislature, the Ministry of Health, and the Ministry of Internal Affairs. In one town, administrators look with anticipation mixed with fear at the brand-new, modern hospital that sits vacant, knowing that they can barely keep the existing makeshift facility going, and running the new one will require ten times the resources. The United States Government is about to spend a total of over US\$40 million constructing Liberia's state-of-the-art National Reference Laboratory (NRL) that, when completed, will require US\$3 million to US\$4 million a year from the Government of Liberia to operate. If the Government is failing to deliver statutory appropriations of only US\$100,000 to existing hospitals, why would we ever trust annual pledges of US\$3 million for the future NRL?

I also visited most of the County Service Centers, and in 2022, NONE had received any of their budget allocation (usually around US\$13,333). One Center has not printed marriage certificates for four years because the printer broke, and their last allocation was received five years ago. Virtually all of them, beautifully electrified over the past two years with UNDP-supplied solar power systems (costing around \$35,000 – \$40,000 each), and amply staffed by (mostly) salaried employees in tidy buildings, are reduced to the job of middlemen. Limited to forwarding paperwork to Monrovia periodically for time-consuming processing, their plight makes a mockery of decentralization efforts. The one functioning office in every center, the Liberia Revenue Authority (LRA), has representatives who collect duties and regularly forward funds to Monrovia – apparently a one-way street.

It was striking that the further I went from Monrovia, the more elaborate and explicit were the reasons given for the lack of funding from the central government. “Oh, it is challenging for the government these days.” “Oh, Putin’s war has made everything more difficult.” “Prices have dried up the budgets.” “You donor partners must fill the gaps.” I wonder if these people are aware that, much to their credit, the LRA has surpassed projections and increased revenues for the past four years, climbing from US\$435,682 million in 2019 to US\$605,005 million in 2022? I suspect the country folk don’t know that the Liberian economy grew by 3.7% in 2022. And I am quite sure they have not been told that the legislature has spent more every year for the past three years buttering their own bread, allocating over US\$65 million in 2022 for salaries and operations. That’s correct – while hospitals went without, and service centers withered on the vine, the 30 senators and the 73 representatives spent sixty-five million U.S. dollars feathering their own nests.

We withhold 25% of the salaries of our Liberian employees at the Residence and at the Embassy to pay their legally mandated income tax to the LRA. Why are the much better-paid representatives and senators not paying a full 25% of their salaries? Why are legislators and ministers, those living on the top of the heap, given annual duty-free imports that deny the LRA much-needed additional revenue? Is there any reason other than the perverted version of the Golden Rule – “those that have the gold, make the rules”?

U.S. taxpayers spend around US\$60 million a year on health care in Liberia, and another US\$23 million on education. The same legislature that spent US\$65 million on itself in 2022 appropriated around US\$7.1 million for grants and subsidies to county health facilities and US\$2.76 million for operations at basic and secondary education (although, as we saw, that doesn’t mean the funds reached their intended destinations). But if the legislature could just appropriate an additional US\$10 million a year to primary education (for a country that is tied in last place for average days of school attendance), and an additional US\$10 million a year for county hospitals, even the greatest cynics concede that it would make a big difference. Just US\$500,000 each per year of actual maintenance (not make-believe budgeted funds) on four unpaved roads (Zorzor – Voinjama; Zwedru – Fishtown; Greenville – Barclayville City; and Greenville – Buchanan) would dramatically improve the lives of more than a million of Liberia’s poorest citizens, lowering food costs, revolutionizing farm to market access, and eliminating seasonal shortages of life-saving medicines and equipment. The legislature would still have US\$43 million a year to somehow get by. Anyone interested in a pro-poor agenda?

As for me, should the U.S. Congress ask how the elite in Monrovia are treating destitute citizens in the leeward counties, my honest response would have to be, “those citizens are treated with a neglect that borders on contempt.” Is this the best that Liberia can do?

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