

The Perspective

ULAA Lobbies for the Participation of Liberians in the Diaspora in the 2005 Elections

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Atlanta, Georgia

January 24, 2005

As Liberia's 2005 elections draw nearer, it seems clear that Liberians in the Diaspora will not be allowed to vote outside Liberia. When asked about the participation of hundreds of thousands of Liberians in the Diaspora in the coming elections, the head of the Elections Commission, Cllr. Frances Johnson-Morris said in an interview published in *The Perspective* (August, 2004) that Liberians will only vote in Liberia in October, 2005. Asked specifically whether Liberians would be allowed to vote outside the country, she said, "No, I do not foresee that. I do not foresee that they will be allowed to vote outside of Liberia. Liberians have the right to vote, but they have the right to vote in Liberia. The International community is largely sponsoring these elections and the international community has not given us any indications that they are willing to support Liberians voting outside the country. I don't know if they can foot or underwrite the logistical, financial and material support that are required to do that." Dr. Leon Ledlum and Mr. John S. recently highlighted the issue in the *The Perspective*. Though both writers approached the issue from two different angles, they called for ULAA's intervention.

The letters published below were sent to *The Perspective* by ULAA.



UNION OF LIBERIAN ASSOCIATIONS IN THE AMERICAS (ULAA)



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January 22, 2005

Mr. Mark Slezak
IOM Representative to Liberia
Monrovia, Liberia

Dear Mr. Slezak:

I extend to you greetings on behalf of the National Leadership and members of the Union of Liberian Associations in the Americas (ULAA). ULAA is the umbrella organization of all Liberian Communities and their respective associations in the Americas (USA, Canada, South America & Caribbean). ULAA has been in existence for the past three decades and it has consistently been the voice of Liberians in the Diaspora and for the rights of Liberians at home.

Mr. Slezak, as you are aware, too many Liberians were forced to flee Liberia in the midst of the Liberian Civil Crisis. Many of these people have not returned to Liberia since their departure and many now continue to reside as Refugees in many countries around the world. Despite the ongoing effort by the UNCHR to repatriate these people to Liberia, the reality is that many of these Liberians will not return to Liberia in time for the coming 2005 Liberian National Elections. Many of these people in the Diaspora did not leave Liberia by their own choosing. They were forced to leave Liberia because of the prevailing security and humanitarian situation at the time. These Liberians should not be penalized for their absence from Liberia under these circumstances and robbed of their rights to participate in the process of determining the new leaders of Liberia who will determine the future destiny of these people. It should be noted that this is the first time in the history of Liberia that we have such a high population of Liberians outside of Liberia. And many of these people are the Professional and Technical resources of the country.

Because of the high desire of Liberians in the Diaspora to participate in the upcoming 2005 elections in Liberia, ULAA sent a letter to the Chairman of the National Elections Commission (NEC) of Liberia in October of 2004 in which we made a formal request to the commission to make provisions in their planning to allow for the participation of ALL ELIGIBLE LIBERIANS in the 2005 elections irrespective of their current location. The commission responded to our letter in which the commission did not rule out our request but indicated that there are some constraints. We unfortunately did not receive that letter until a few weeks ago.

Considering the high importance of this request to Diaspora Liberians, ULAA has communicated with the NEC for an audience with the commission in Liberia to explore this issue further. We plan to be in Monrovia from February 10, 2005 through February 20, 2005. Because of the role that the IOM plays in ensuring the rights and participation of Refugees and in facilitating Out of Country Voting, we would very much like to meet with you during our visit to Monrovia in order to explore this issue with the IOM as well.

For your information, we have also discussed this issue with officials at the International Republican Institute (IRI), the National Democratic Institute (NDI), and, the International Foundation for Election Systems (IFES). Additionally, we recently met with the UN Secretary General's Special Representative to Liberia, Ambassador Jacques Paul Klien, to discuss this issue with him also. It is our hope that the IOM will equally support this request by Diaspora Liberians as has all these other organizations and individual.

I will very highly appreciate a response from you. You may respond via email to: akw@ieee.org or via fax to: (973) 537-9590. I can also be contacted by telephone at: (973) 223-9378.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Arthur K. Watson', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Arthur K. Watson
National President



Republic of Liberia

NATIONAL ELECTIONS COMMISSION (NEC)



OFFICE OF THE CHAIRMAN

TUBMAN BLVD., SINKOR - P. O. BOX 2044
MONROVIA, LIBERIA

October 12, 2004

Mr. Arthur K. Watson
NATIONAL PRESIDENT
Union of Liberians Association
In The Americas (ULAA)
2 Birch Lane
Wharton, New Jersey 07885

Dear Mr. Watson:

Compliments and best wishes!

The National Elections Commission has received your communication of 30th September 2004, in which you requested the NEC to make allowance in her planning process to allow for the participation of all eligible Liberians presently residing outside of Liberia in the ensuing elections scheduled for October 2005. The NEC wishes to express her delight in the interest that is being exhibited by Liberians both in and out of the country in the 2005 elections. The NEC believes that election is one of the surest ways by which we can end the 14 years of nightmare in our country. The Commission is no less committed to the peaceful and successful conduct of these elections.

With respect to your request, the NEC is fully aware that Liberians who fled the country due to the civil war would like to participate in the elections. To this end, the commission has given careful consideration to those Liberians in her planning process. You may be aware that the NEC has submitted a bill to the NTLA requesting that body to suspend certain clauses in the constitution that we feel do not conform to present realities in our country given that we have just emerged from a devastating civil crisis. One of the items in that bill with direct bearing to your request is Article 52(c) of the Liberian Constitution otherwise known as the "10 Years Residency Clause". That clause requires that for one to vie for the position of President or Vice President, he/she must have resided in the country for 10 years prior to the elections. If the bill is enacted, Liberians who are currently out of the country will now vie for any position without preconditions.

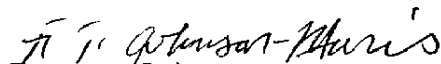
Another item that relates to Liberians outside of the country that was submitted for amendment is Section 5.5 of the New Elections Laws of Liberia. That section provides for casting of Absentee Ballots. The Commission forwarded this section for amendment specifically to avoid potential confusion and irregularities that could ensue as a result of using absentee ballot. As mentioned earlier, the Commission sees these elections as an important step in putting our country back on the path to democracy and is therefore doing everything possible to avoid confusion.

Apart from the bill to the NTLA, the NEC has allotted sufficient time to the commencement of the Voters Registration to allow for the participation of Liberians coming from outside of the country. Tentatively, Voters Registration is scheduled to commence in April 2005. There is hope that a significant number of Liberians in the sub region would be repatriated by then under the ongoing voluntary repatriation which began on 1st October of this year. It is the commission's expectation that those Liberians in the diaspora will take advantage of this time frame to participate in the pending crucial elections. As much as the commission would like to have all eligible Liberians participate in the electoral process, we have serious constraints.

Please feel free to make contact with us regarding any issue(s) that may require clarification.

Kind regards.

Sincerely,


Frances Johnson-Morris
COUNSELLOR-AT-LAW
CHAIRMAN