

**Written Testimony of Dr. Aurelia L. Curtis
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Before the House Subcommittee for
Africa, Global Human Rights, Global Health & International Organizations**

SUBJECT: The Future of Democracy and Governance in Liberia

Wednesday, September 13, 2017, 2:00 pm

Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Bass, Congressman Donovan and Members of the Subcommittee, I thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today about the future of democracy and governance in Liberia. The military coup in 1980, followed by the horrific civil war in 1989 which lasted almost 15 years, claimed hundreds of thousands of lives and significantly destroyed much of the infrastructure of Liberia. A notable consequence of the war was the mass exodus of Liberians seeking refuge wherever doors were open. The United States of America opened its doors and the Borough of Staten Island in New York City became home to the largest concentration of Liberians outside of West Africa. The Staten Island Diaspora remains the center of culture and connections for Liberians across the United States, optimistic that we will be an integral part of the rebuilding of Liberia, ensuring that it is indeed a "Land of Liberty." The past 12 years of peaceful governance is a foundation that all Liberians must build upon.

My name is Dr. Aurelia TdeKontee Louise Curtis, and I serve as the Executive Director of the Weeks Educational and Social Advocacy Project, Inc. (WESAP), a nonprofit founded in 2010 with the mission of increasing access to better education opportunities, expanding youth development and improving healthcare in needy communities. I began my professional career in the New York City public schools in 1984 as a Teacher of Mathematics and Computer Science and retired in 2015 as Principal of Curtis High School on Staten Island. I was the first African-American to be named principal of a high school on Staten Island and the first female principal of Curtis High School in its more than one hundred year history. As principal of Curtis High School, I served a diverse immigrant community that included a large number of Liberian families in the Diaspora.

I have worked for many nonprofit causes, but WESAP, with offices in the United States and Liberia, now claims most of my time and attention. WESAP has connected amputee children in Liberia with resources in the US, offering them prosthetic limbs. When the children return to Liberia, WESAP ensures that they are enrolled in school, providing all tuition fees, books and uniforms. A local social worker is a liaison between WESAP, students and families, supporting youth development and other family needs. WESAP has launched a campaign to put water wells near schools in Liberia that have no freshwater supply and is in partnership with two US-based nonprofits to establish an all-girl boarding school in Liberia. With the support of the Staten Island community, we assist families, especially immigrants and refugees from population groups that are not commonly represented in our area. We provide multi-ethnic and culturally-sensitive services that address their needs with respect and dignity. Recently, WESAP advocated for and assisted a family to return the mortal remains of their daughter to the United States for burial. Princess Yates, a US citizen born to Liberian parents on Staten Island, went

to Liberia on July 4th to celebrate her grandmother's 90th birthday. She was involved in a tragic automobile accident and, according to published reports, the local hospital REFUSED to give her needed medical assistance because money was not readily available to pay for treatment. Her mother cried, "Princess sat in an abandoned wheelchair begging for help until she took her last breath!" This incident highlights the critical need for timely access to good healthcare, especially in a country like Liberia with a high level of poverty, whose infrastructure was decimated by the civil war. Following the forthcoming elections, all Liberians must play a role indispensable to ensuring geometric growth in access to healthcare and other urgent facets of sustainable development in Liberia.

Dual Citizenship

Liberians in the Diaspora often wonder if they are in fact welcome to participate in the rebuilding of Liberia. Primary doubt stems from lack of clarity regarding dual citizenship. The Supreme Court of Liberia recently heard a case brought by Alvin Jalloh, a United States citizen born in Liberia to Liberian parents, who fled Liberia as a direct result of the civil war. He immigrated to the United States and subsequently acquired US citizenship in accordance with the naturalization laws of this country. When he applied for a Liberian passport, he was denied the travel document because he is an American citizen. Chapter 22 of the Alien and Nationality Law of Liberia "prohibits Liberian citizens from taking other nationalities or engaging in [certain acts] in foreign countries," including armed forces enlistment and participation in elections. Liberians in the Diaspora are watching this case closely because the wrong decision will have dire implications for the talent pool that is ready to return and assist in nation building. A decision in this case has not been rendered. But wait! The Supreme Court may have already ruled in this matter when it failed to prevent several candidates in the forthcoming elections from contesting when evidence was presented to prove that said candidates had naturalized citizenship in other countries. I call on this subcommittee to use its influence to assist the people that you represent, Liberians in the United States of America, to attain dual citizenship, an initial hurdle that can be an impediment to tapping into the valuable human resource pool that resides outside of Liberia, a country in great need. Liberians in the Diaspora stand willing and ready to assist, but many are not prepared to abandon the countries that gave them refuge in their time of need; nor should they be forced to make such decision.

DACA and TPS

Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for Liberia, Guinea and Sierra Leone was terminated effective May 21, 2017. Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) is being dismantled by the current administration. Many immigrants, Liberians included are adversely affected by the decision to end legal status, especially children who have known no other home than the United States of America. You have heard the appeals and protests to reinstate TPS and DACA. I add my voice to the chorus of immigrants, highlighting the plight of thousands of law-abiding Liberians who have contributed to the economy of this country and call the USA home. Please find a path to legal residence that will keep families united and offer students the opportunity to continue their education in the schools in which they are currently enrolled.

A House with Two Rooms

The final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Liberia Diaspora Project documents the experience of human rights abuses and violations of international humanitarian law that forced Liberians to leave the country. The Staten Island Liberian Community Association (SILCA) and Staten Island based African Refuge supported the work of The Advocates for Human Rights to document this dark time in Liberian history.

Based on analyses of more than 1600 statements, interviews and witness testimonies, the TRC report tells the stories of trauma experienced by members of the Diaspora during their flight through Liberia and across international borders and in resettlement in the United States and United Kingdom. My father was among those who walked for days, sometimes sleeping under open skies to escape warring factions. His home was taken over by rebel forces. Even after he found his way out of Liberia and into the United States, he continued to suffer the recollection of atrocities. The awful ramifications of Alzheimer's disease did not curb his desire to return to his home that he was forced to leave by rebel combatants.

While many in the Diaspora will attribute the beginning of Liberia's civil crises to the 1979 rice riots, I believe that there were many telling signs before April 1979. Poverty, political dominance, corruption, tribalism and low literacy were significant contributors. Those political landmines did not begin in 1979. The same themes were present in interviews and witness testimonies from members of the Diaspora. The themes persist today and reared their ugly heads when I spoke informally to members of the community as I prepared for this testimony. The civil war has left entrenched resentments and divisions along tribal and political lines, evident in the Diaspora and ever-present in current campaign rhetoric.

There is no quick solution to problems resulting from more than one hundred years of dysfunction in government and social practices. The TRC report was a necessary start. Ignoring the TRC report adds fuel to the fire and buffers the rhetoric of many who believe there is no room at the table for them; so for many, it's time to turn the table upside-down! We cannot and must not allow stagnation to steer us backwards. Liberians on Staten Island and across the Diaspora recognize the need for reconciliation and healing the wounds of the Liberian nation.

When President Johnson-Sirleaf inaugurated the TRC she said, "Our country cannot continue to evade justice and the protection of human rights throughout our land, especially of the kind that restores our historical place among civilized nations. Our Government will ensure that those culpable of the commission of crimes against humanity will face up to their crimes no matter when, where, or how." The current government has not dealt decisively with the TRC Report; so, the next government elected in October or November 2017 must chart a transparent course of action. The TRC report will not fade away into oblivion. No one disputes the findings even though two commissioners did not sign the report because of undocumented dissenting views. The Liberian government must determine if it will implement all or some of the recommendations. A new commission must be inaugurated to provide a timetable for implementation. The new TRC must have the benefit of using the investigative body that prepared the report as a resource. The mandate to develop a plausible plan for dealing with the

recommendations made almost eight years ago must be front and center in the first 100 days of the next government.

Rethinking Governance with Heart and Mind

Liberians in the Diaspora agree that rebuilding the physical and human capital must be top priorities for the next government. The close links between infrastructure development, education, agriculture and healthcare are indisputable. There is no substitute for establishing desired goals and planning for how one will achieve those goals. Simplistic as it may sound, planning works! We call on the next government to share the one-year, three year, five-year and ten-year plans for four key areas: infrastructure development, education, agriculture and healthcare. Integrated in the plans must be measures of accountability and quality control. If it is not working, the government must be prepared to revise the plan to ensure that the established goals are achieved.

The socio-economic schisms in Liberia are more pronounced today than they were 12 years ago. How do we know that? Follow the money. Money transfer companies are sending large sums of money from the Diaspora to support families in Liberia. But, transfers are also going in the other direction - from Liberia to banking institutions overseas. Please explain to me how it is possible for anyone employed by the world's third poorest nation to legally amass enough wealth to build homes locally, buy homes overseas and still have change to spare! I call on this committee to ensure that pressure is brought to bear on the Government of Liberia to institute systems that prevent and prosecute corruption at all levels. In my other life I would tell exam proctors, "Your job is to prevent cheating, not to catch cheaters!" Similarly so, the Government of Liberia must make it difficult for corruption to persist and when corruption is uncovered, effective prosecution must send the strong message that a government for, of and by the people will not stand by idly while the people are disenfranchised.

How do we reduce poverty when the disparity in salary compensation is so evident? Why are members of the Liberian legislature, in a poor country with limited budgetary resources, given such high monthly salaries and benefits, competitive with those of members of the U.S. Congress, when their constituents can barely afford daily sustenance? (Annual Salary of a Member of the House of Representatives in Liberia: \$172,104 plus expenses; Annual Salary of a Member of the US Congress: \$174,000 plus benefits) How will education and healthcare improve when these professionals are among the lowest paid in the country? (Average annual salary of a teacher: \$3,840; average annual salary of a nurse: \$4,200; Average annual salary of a medical doctor: \$24,000) Why can a government-run medical facility refuse care to a patient because there are no funds for registration and there is no legal recourse? These are but a few of the questions that must tug at the heart of those called to lead Liberia.

Summary

The literal translation of my name, TdeKontee, in Bassa (my mother's Liberian language), is "everything has its time." When I was born, it was time for my parents to have their first girl and the promises to be fulfilled in her coming. TdeKontee! It is time for the crawling democracy in Liberia to dare to walk.

The consolidated final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission is dedicated to the “evergreen memory of all those who lost their lives during the Liberian conflict, the Children of Tomorrow and ALL who dare to HOPE for a better Liberia!” Liberians residing on the mother soil dare to hope for a better Liberia. Liberians in the Diaspora dare to hope for a better Liberia. Ladies and gentlemen of the subcommittee on Africa, Global Human Rights, Global Health & International Organizations, I believe that you dare to hope for a better Liberia. So, I call on you to act decisively to ensure that dual citizenship for Liberians in the Diaspora becomes a reality; chart a course to legal residence for law-abiding undocumented immigrants; demand with conviction that the four years of work of the TRC is not placed on the back burner and ignored, thus assuring that the collective expressions and recommendations contained in that document are translated into actionable steps in the next Liberian administration to continue the healing process; continue to assist Liberians to improve systems of governance and accountability for sustainable progress in infrastructure and economic development, agriculture, education and healthcare reform.

Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Bass, Congressman Donovan and Members of the Subcommittee, I thank you again for the opportunity to provide testimony today. I will be happy to answer your questions.

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