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4 LIBERIA TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSION
DIASPORA PROJECT
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7 PUBLIC HEARING
June 13, 2008
8 St. Paul, Minnesota
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10 TESTIMONY OF
U.S. CONGRESSWOMAN BETTY MCCOLLUM
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14 TRC Commissioners: Chairman Jerome Verdier
Vice Chairperson Dede Dolopei
Oumu Syllah
Bishop Arthur Kulah
Sheikh Kafumba Konneh
Pearl Brown Bull
Rev. Gerald Coleman
John H.T. Stewart
Massa Washington
Prof. Henrietta Joy Abena Mensa Bonsu
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Court Reporter: JoAnn Wahl
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1 MS. PHILLIPS: Good afternoon, everyone. My
2 name is Robin Phillips. I'm the executive director at the
3 Advocates for Human Rights. And it's my great pleasure to
4 introduce you to Representative Betty McCollum representing
5 District 4 in St. Paul. And Betty McCollum is also on the
6 African subcommittee of the international relations
7 committee, and we are thrilled to have her here to address
8 us. Welcome, Representative McCollum.

9 MS. MCCOLLUM: Good afternoon. Good afternoon to
10 the distinguished members of this panel, and good afternoon
11 to the very important people who will be witnessing for you
12 later on.

13 I want to thank you for inviting me to be part of
14 this remarkable event. We're making history in St. Paul this
15 week. This is the first public hearing any Truth and
16 Reconciliation Commission has held in the United States, and
17 it is the only hearing that the Liberian TRC will hold
18 outside of Liberia. This is the first TR -- This is the
19 first TRC to give the diaspora community a prominent role in
20 this process, and you are to be commended for that.

21 I want to recognize those who made this event
22 possible. First off, we're very grateful to Hamline
23 University for hosting the hearings. And I'd like us to also
24 extend our thanks to the staff from Hamline University who
25 are helping as well. A very special thanks to the Advocates

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1 of Human Rights who helped bring the Commission to Minnesota:
2 Robin, Cheryl, Michele, Jennifer and, of course, one of the
3 very distinguished board members: Marlene Kaiser. Thank
4 you. A very special thank you to the U.S. State Department
5 for sending a Liberian specialist from Washington. That
6 truly reflects a commitment that this event is important.
7 It's important to our government, and it's important to the
8 people of the United States. And we use the people on the
9 desk, and in -- in these special areas in our office all the
10 time when trying to help constituencies here when I travel
11 alone, so we mean it very sincerely from my office when we
12 thank you for your work.

13 And a very special thank you to the members of the
14 Liberian Truth Commission who have traveled a great distance
15 to do very important work in a climate that should have been
16 warmer than it is today. I want to thank you so much for
17 allowing St. Paul to be part of this very, very historic and
18 important process. I want to be sure that, as I said, we
19 recognize the witnesses who are testifying before the
20 Commission this week. We must recognize their courage, their
21 strength, because they are sending a message to America, and
22 to people all over the world, about the strong and good
23 character of the Liberian people. I commend the TRC for
24 giving Liberians abroad a voice in this process and a stake
25 in the future of Liberia. The people of Liberia and America

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1 share a very special relationship that goes back over a
2 hundred years, and that is why many of us here in the United
3 States felt deeply saddened by the years of conflict that we
4 saw Liberia undergo.

5 We regret and mourn the suffering that forced
6 survivors to leave their country, their homeland. But we're
7 so glad that they came here to the United States to be part
8 of our communities. Liberian-Americans make our collective
9 culture here in the United States more vibrant and our
10 economy more prosperous. And they follow a tradition of many
11 who have left countries to come to America, whether it was
12 political, economic, or personal reasons why people left. We
13 have welcomed them into our homeland here, and we are truly
14 grateful for their contributions.

15 Those who arrived to Minnesota, as I said, are
16 adjoined by many other people from around other corners of
17 the world: Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea, southeast Asia, are
18 more recent visitors, guests, neighbors, friends, and many
19 now countrymen. But I could also include countries of
20 Ireland, Norway, Russia, on and on, from all parts of the
21 world.

22 Today we are here as brothers and sisters from
23 Liberia and Minnesota. I know that the transition for many
24 who travel here is not easy. Thankfully, we are able to
25 extend the Liberian temporary protection status, in the 110th

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1 congress, to make the transition here a little easier while
2 Liberia, as a country, becomes more stable and more
3 prosperous to welcome its citizens home when the time is
4 right. But we do welcome you here right now to be with us.
5 We realize this is temporary, protective status; it's not a
6 permanent solution. But it does offer families temporary
7 relief, and for that we are happy to work with you. We will
8 continue to work to ensure that Liberians have the
9 opportunity to create a stable and prosperous future here in
10 the United States as well as in Liberia.

11 I have not yet been to Liberia, but I have
12 traveled to Africa eight times in the past five years, and I
13 have been to places: Ethiopia, Darfur, southern Sudan,
14 northern Uganda, and the Republic -- Democratic Republic of
15 Congo, places with much trouble, places with much sadness.
16 But in Africa, I have to tell you, I fell in love with the
17 warmth and the friendship of the people. Through them I saw
18 the natural beauty of their country and the endless beauty of
19 human potential when given a chance to live with dignity.

20 But I cannot forget the sight of needless
21 suffering due to political conflict, extreme poverty,
22 HIV/AIDS, and now food shortages that we're reading and
23 hearing about in Africa. In many places, there is too little
24 political leadership to help people through in these times of
25 great turmoil. And millions of people can't see a future

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1 without violence, hunger or disease. And that's why these
2 hearings are so important. It's the work of this Commission,
3 in offering a better future for the people of Liberia, and
4 showing a better way forward for all countries in conflict.
5 This is transforming victims into survivors, pain into hope,
6 strength and weakness to turn into something that is very
7 precious: A chance for a better life.

8 The TRC is a sacred act honoring those who have
9 suffered. It is a political act. It is choosing the hard
10 road of reconciliation in order to reach a lasting peace. We
11 should all recognize that the TRC is bigger than Liberia;
12 that the work of the Commission is a model for all nations in
13 this new century, and we must make the 21st century the age
14 of reconciliation. We need to reconcile ourselves to our
15 planet to find sustainability. We need to reconcile our
16 religions so that we can find peace with one another, and we
17 need to reconcile disparate poverty with obscene wealth to
18 find justice for all. The work of the TRC is showing us the
19 way forward. I thank you so much for your commitment to this
20 process, and for allowing my community to share in. And I
21 look forward to listening to some of the work of the
22 Commission before I leave. Thank you so much for allowing me
23 to share a meal with you and to share a way forward with you.

24 (Clapping.)

25 CHAIRMAN JEROME VERDIER: We want to thank

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1 Congresswoman Betty McCollum for the warm sentiments
2 expressed. We are encouraged by your understanding of the
3 situation in Liberia, and you share in your vision of the
4 TROC with all of us. We do believe that the support the TRC
5 has received from this state, and the good people of
6 Minnesota, would be more realized in the relationship of the
7 United States and Liberia. We know that the TPS is not a
8 permanent solution. We do agree with you, but has provided
9 temporary relief, essential relief, necessary relief, to
10 thousands of Liberians who had to flee a conflict and reside
11 in this part of the world. So on behalf of the people of
12 Liberia, I'm convinced I can speak for all Liberians on this,
13 we are immensely grateful and look forward to your continued
14 support and a continued reception and hospitality of the
15 people of Minnesota and the United States. Thank you very
16 much.

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2 REPORTER'S CERTIFICATE
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4 I, JoAnn Wahl, Official Court Reporter, do hereby
5 certify that the foregoing pages of typewritten material
6 constitute an accurate verbatim stenographic record taken by
7 me of the proceedings aforementioned before the Truth and
8 Reconciliation Commission of Liberia, on the 13th day of
9 June, 2008, at the time and place specified.

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13 DATED: July 30, 2008.
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