

Statement by
H.E. President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf
On the Occasion of World Malaria Day
At the S.K. Doe Complex
Monday, April 25, 2011

Ministers and Other Officials of Government;
Distinguished Guests;
Ladies and Gentlemen;
Fellow Liberians:

My message, on this fourth World Malaria Day, is that malaria kills. That's the awful news. The good news, however, is that malaria is preventable – through the widespread use of insecticide-treated bed-nets, effective anti-malaria medicines, spraying and good sanitation.

Because malaria is preventable, our focus, at all levels, must be to roll back this dreaded disease that is endemic to tropical and subtropical regions. We must fulfill our commitments to protect all of Africa from malaria, and to end malaria deaths by 2015.

We, in Liberia and Africa, cannot change our geography – this is where we come from! – but we can, and must continue the fight to control and, one day, eradicate this terrible disease that debilitates so many of us throughout our lives, sometimes ending in death.

Just think about the number of times that you, your children, your friends and others have come down with the dreaded malaria. It's almost a given, if you live in our part of the world! The mosquito that transmits malaria does not discriminate; it attacks adults and children alike, leaving its victims prone to a potentially fatal blood disease.

As the epicenter of the world's malaria deaths, Africa accounts for 85 percent of malaria cases and 90 percent of malaria deaths. Its victims are mostly children under five years of age and vulnerable women. Despite these haunting statistics, it is heartening to note that more than 90 percent of Africa's population is expected to be protected by mosquito nets or indoor spraying by the middle of this year. Now that's tremendous progress!

Today, we join the rest of the world in commemorating World Malaria Day, seizing this opportunity to renew our global commitment and solidarity in the fight against malaria. We are aware of the measures, both internationally and regionally, to fight this disease:

- In 1998, the World Health Organization launched the "Roll Back Malaria" campaign, proclaiming 2001-2010 as the Decade to Roll Back Malaria – the disease that causes the single largest number of illnesses and deaths.
- In 2000, world leaders at the United Nations Millennium Summit pledged to combat malaria, among other major diseases. Under Goal 6 of the Millennium Development Goals, countries would, by 2015, have halted and begun to reverse the incidence of malaria through the use of bed-nets, treatment and additional external funding.
- Regionally, African Heads of State renewed their unwavering commitment against malaria in the AU's Abuja Declaration and Plan of Action.
- Additionally, 39 countries have united against the disease, forming the African Leaders Malaria Alliance (ALMA), where I was recently elected as Vice Chair. ALMA is committed to reducing malaria deaths by 2015. We have determined that the only way to defeat malaria is through working together, because mosquitoes respect no borders. I strongly believe that by forging ahead between now and the end of 2015, we can end malaria deaths in Africa.

In response to the unacceptable burden of malaria on human survival, many countries have implemented sound strategies and action plans. Here, in Liberia, malaria prevention and control is a major priority of our National Health Plan and Poverty Reduction Strategy. We have prioritized ending deaths from malaria above many other pressing needs, for both health and economic reasons, which is why we are on track to protect our entire population by year's end.

We are, indeed, “achieving progress and impact,” and can report tangible results in reducing the prevalence of malaria, from 66 percent since 2005 to 32 percent in 2009 (the most recent year for which data are available). This progress has been achieved through a massive increase in delivering life-saving anti-malaria medicines in health facilities and communities; the distribution of insecticide-treated mosquito nets; the spraying of homes; and delivering intermittent preventive treatment to pregnant women. The number of women receiving such treatment increased from 4.31 percent in 2005 to 79.3 percent in 2009. That, again, is progress.

Bed-nets ownership is another major achievement in Liberia. We distributed enough nets to quantitatively achieve universal coverage by the end of 2010, with the number of households owning at least one bed-net increasing from 18 percent in 2005 to 62.6 percent in 2009. The number of children under five using mosquito nets increased from 2.60 percent in 2005 to 73.30 percent in 2009. The gaps in bed-nets distribution are being addressed this year through door-to-door campaigns preceded by careful mapping of needs in affected communities. We must also remember that mosquito bed-nets last about three years, and a failure to replace them could lead to resurgent malaria illness and deaths.

Government’s National Malaria Strategic Plan for 2010-2015 addresses the need to scale-up malaria control and prevention activities to achieve the Roll Back Malaria target, as well as the MDG target by 2015. The Plan also addresses the gaps observed when implementing previous initiatives, and presents a more detailed and well-assessed strategy for dealing with malaria in Liberia.

As we commemorate World Malaria Day, let me reiterate our Government’s resolve to fight this disease and reverse its trend by 2015. The battle against malaria is long, but success is attainable to eliminate malaria in our country. However, as I always point out, Government alone cannot solve the problem. We need the participation of communities, local leaders and partners to sustain our gains and strengthen the partnership for the elimination of malaria.

At the regional level, I call upon African communities to assume leadership in the fight against malaria, by contributing at home, in the village, neighborhood, school or workplace. All stakeholders must engage to support community-based interventions. We must also engage champions from all walks of life, including the arts, culture and sports, to disseminate positive messages to combat malaria.

The countdown has started! Together we can roll back malaria in Africa! With the disease in retreat, we are on the verge of one of the greatest humanitarian achievements, and reversal is not an option. We will continue this fight, and victory is certain.

I thank you.