

Interview

Liberia: The Transformation Is On

An Interview with Her Excellency Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf,
President, Republic of Liberia



Her Excellency Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf

EDITORS' NOTE After graduating from the College of West Africa (Monrovia), a United Methodist high school, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf received a B.B.A. in accounting from Madison Business College (Wisconsin), an economics diploma from the University of Colorado, and a Master of Public Administration degree from Harvard University. Returning to Liberia after Harvard, Johnson-Sirleaf became Assistant Minister of Finance and then Finance Minister in President William Tolbert's administration. Within this period, she served as Senior Loan Officer of the World Bank. When Tolbert was overthrown and killed in 1980, Johnson-Sirleaf went into exile in Kenya, where she served as Vice President of Citibank's Africa Regional Office. She returned to Liberia to run for Senate in 1985, but when she spoke out against the military regime, she was sentenced to 10 years in prison. Released after a short period, she moved to Washington, DC, where she worked as Vice President and Member of the Executive Board of Equator Bank and as Director of the UN Development Program Regional Bureau for Africa. Johnson-Sirleaf returned to Liberia again in 1997 and unsuccessfully ran against Charles Taylor in the 1997 presidential elections. After Taylor was deposed in 2003, she played an active role in the transitional government, and was elected President in November 2005.

The first elected female leader in Africa, Johnson-Sirleaf is the recipient of the 1988 Franklin Delano Roosevelt Freedom of Speech

Award, the Ralph Bunche International Leadership Award, the Grand Commander Star of Africa Redemption of Liberia Award, and the 2006 Africa Prize for Leadership for the Sustainable End of Hunger; among numerous additional honors.

Liberia has just been through a period of considerable turmoil. Is it safe to invest in Liberia now, and if so, what are the best investment opportunities?

We think Liberia is increasingly safe. Clearly, it's a fragile peace, because we have to respond to the high expectations of our people – and particularly our young people who have been disarmed. We also have to be concerned about the region. But, as we begin to implement our development agenda, we think peace will become more secure. We are in the process of restructuring our security sector. We have a new army and trained police, so we think investors can now start to plan on going to Liberia. We are creating a good policy environment and repairing our infrastructure to make it cost effective to invest there.

What can they invest in? First of all, we're an agricultural nation. We'd like to see value added to our primary commodities. Rubber is a long-term traditional product. We'd like to see value added to our rubber, so we can produce things like gloves, condoms, and so forth. We have vast mineral resources, over which we're already negotiating with some companies. We have gold. We have diamonds. The sanctions on our forestry sector have now been lifted by the United Nations Security Council, so forestry operations will start soon. We want to see value added there too – we want to produce veneer, plywood, and all of those things. There's also the potential to fish in our waters. Ultimately, we are looking forward to bringing back our traditional investors and exploring the possibilities for new ones.

Do you have any specific investment priorities?

We do. Our mineral sector and the potential for agro-industries are key priorities. We have a National Investment Commission headed by a Liberian who has been working on Wall Street with Paine Webber and Merrill Lynch for the past 20 years. He is now home, heading our National Investment Commission, and reviewing investment proposals. They are currently looking at several major investment proposals. We would like to ask potential investors to come

to the country, so they can really see the potential on the ground and talk to our people at the Investment Commission. In addition, we are going to have a partnership conference sometime before mid-February in Washington, DC, and a portion of that event will be dedicated to a session on the investment potential in the country. We plan to get as many businesspeople together as possible at that event.

You seem to be enjoying your post.

Oh, I am having fun. It's exciting, moving a country from war to peace, from indiscipline and lawlessness to openness and democracy; from a place where the economy was criminalized to a place where we're now attracting bona fide investors who are entering into strategic partnerships with us for the long term. Our country is going through a transformation, a necessary but difficult process. We have the potential to make this small country a complete success, and that's very exciting. I am emboldened by the possibilities.

One of your predecessors was deposed and two had their throats slit. Are you worried?

No. I take everything in stride. I've been doing this for a long time, so I have already earned my stripes. I have served my time and I am not worried. Yes, there's always risk, we don't operate in a 100 percent secured environment. There's no guarantee. But I'm fairly confident that if I do the right thing, formulate the right policies, and respond to the needs of our people, I'll continue to enjoy grassroots support, and that's my best protection.

What frustrates you the most?

How long it takes to get programs implemented. We've got great partnership alliances, and our partners have made great commitments, but oh, the process, the procedures, the bureaucracies!

Overseas or within Liberia?

It's a little bit of both. On our side, we have limitations in our national capacity. We just don't have the experience we need at a working level – we lack the talent and the ability we need to move the programs along fast. On the external side, there's a long road between commitment and cash, because of all the procedures one has to go through. I'm talking about the situation within the context of the expectations that have been raised by our people. They had a lot of confidence that once I was there, things would just turn around. And things are happening, believe me. I mean, we didn't have any lights for 14 years,

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and when we turned on the lights for the first time – a few streetlights and lights in a few hospitals and schools – you should have seen the dancing in the streets. We turned on the water – taps in a few places in the city – and the surprise was remarkable. Some children never knew that water came out of a tap. They always thought it came from a bucket. So the transformation is on. We keep telling people that processes sometimes take longer than we would like, but it is working.

It seems that you might need help from some of the larger foundations, like the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation or the Ford Foundation. Have they been showing an interest in helping Liberia?

Yes, indeed, and we've been working with some of them. For example, our Vice President met with Bill Gates at a meeting in South Africa and followed through with some of the foundation's officials here. They are going to set up 10 communication centers throughout the country, to train people how to train our young people, and our old people as well. In addition, I just met with the head of the Ford Foundation, and we're exploring things they can do to improve our university systems, and train some of our young people. So we're now beginning to work with the foundations and to go beyond our bilateral and multilateral relationships.

Given your country's historical context, emerging from years of civil war, how are you going to make it work? Are you worried about revolution?

No, not at all. Revolution comes from the grassroots, and we have grassroots support. We're more worried about individual actions, like assassination attempts by small groups of people, but not revolution. If there's going to be a revolution, it's going to be a positive one – a revolution of the mind and spirit by the people who want to embrace a new future, who see hope in what we're doing.

You're very brave to do what you're doing, in view of all that has happened in the past.

I keep reminding people that I've been doing this for a while. I have committed to this process for 30 years. I've earned my stripes. I've paid the price.

As you say, you've been working at this for 30 years. You always have to look glamorous when you meet influential people. How do you stay beautiful?

It's a Venus trap that comes from many years of staying with it. I've had many years of staying

the course, beating the odds, and seeing one success after another.

Does Liberia have appropriate places to stay for visiting business leaders? One impressive place, an InterContinental with the world's greatest Gordon's Gin tomato soup, is no longer there.

No, that fell into hard times, unfortunately. We are looking for an investor to try to rebuild it. We do have some smaller hotels that provide a certain level of comfort, but not on the grand scale of that hotel. But again, we've been lucky. One of the Saudi Arabian princes visited us and expressed interest in developing a hotel. We've encouraged him and we hope we're going to be signing our memorandum of understanding before too long. We hope we will see the start of that hotel during our dry season. So we can accommodate you now, and in a year, we'll be able to accommodate you even better.

You have a very positive outlook and you still have a twinkle in your eye. Is this because you know you can make it happen?

Yes. I remain excited by the potential of turning Liberia around. I remain an optimist, and I am trying to get this across to all of our people. This is the first opportunity we have as a country to get on the right track. We have had 25 years of decline in discipline, and increased lawlessness and criminalization of our economy. We have a great opportunity now, and we must all remain engaged. Despite the difficulties and obstacles, we must all see the glass as half full – it's not half empty – and now we are moving forward to fill it. I continue to be captivated by the potential, and by the ability to push back the frontiers of possibilities.

Will you eventually have an airline flying directly to Monrovia?

We're working on that, because we think it's very important. Right now, people have to fly through Europe. At the moment, one airline flies to Accra, in Ghana, and we're talking with its officials to see if they can make Liberia the next port of call. We've also been talking with South African Airways. Ultimately, we want to see a direct flight to Monrovia from the United States, like the one Pan American Airways used to operate in years past. We still have to upgrade our airport to international status, and that is something we're working on. Once we've done that, in the next six months or so, then we think we'll become more attractive to international airlines.

Of all the heads of state you've met as

President of Liberia, which ones stand out as the most impressive and cooperative, in your opinion?

President George W. Bush is certainly one. We couldn't ask for a better partner than the United States. Secretary Condoleezza Rice has been very cooperative too, particularly with regard to some of the things we need to accelerate as a joint effort, to make sure of success. Mrs. Bush has also been very supportive, encouraging President Bush and others to take an interest.

Do they understand the problems of Liberia?

I think they do. Certainly Secretary Rice does, and President Bush does also. They know our vulnerability. They know the fragile nature of our peace and the fact that we have 100,000 young people who are former combatants, who have never been to school, and who don't have jobs. They know that if we don't respond to their needs, and respond to them quickly, much of what we're talking about will not come to pass. They also understand the need for increasing the mobility of our people – bringing our internally displaced people back from refugee camps and getting them back in their homes. We're not going to be able to keep them in productive endeavors unless we give them the means to go back to their farms; unless we fix the roads, so their mobility is assured; and repair the schools and clinics to enable them to go back to their communities. We need to move their goods from farm to market. They are aware of these challenges. It just takes some time to plan the interventions and get the priorities right.

But you need help quickly?

We do need help quickly. That has been my message in my meetings with overseas partners: We know you're committed, we know you've allocated the resources, but please let's have a sense of urgency – let's do it now. We're at a critical stage. If we do not respond to the needs of the young people and society within the next three to six months, patience will run out. And then our vulnerabilities will be exposed. I think I have got that message across to people. We were able to buy some time during our rainy season, but once the dry season started in the fall, everybody wanted to see a big jump in our development efforts. The World Bank has been good to us. We're in serious arrears to them, but they've got a pre-arrears grant facility, and they're going to be helping us repair the roads and what not. It's extraordinary, the kind of support we're getting. We just need to move it along a little bit faster. ●