

## An Enduring Legacy for President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf

*By Shirley N. Brownell*

The word “legacy” gets bandied about in political circles, almost ad nauseam. With reference to President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, comments abound – even with five full years to go in her second and final term – that “it’s time for Ellen to think about her legacy, the legacy she will leave Liberia.” Everything that this President does, or says, is examined, nay dissected, through the prism of how that action will affect her legacy.



*U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton welcomes Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf to the State Department*

Never mind that she inherited, in 2006, a country in shambles – a collapsed economy, dysfunctional institutions, damaged infrastructure, very low basic services for a people who had lost all hope – and that in the space of seven years, she has turned what was a poster child for a failed state into a country that is courted among, and has regained its standing in, the comity of nations.

Never mind that during these seven years, her administration has put all of the fundamentals in place, and under the four pillars of the country’s development agenda – the Poverty Reduction Strategy – has made significant progress in reforming the country in the areas of peace and security, economic revitalization, governance and the rule of law, and infrastructure and basic services.

Such reforms have included: building a professional Army; improving the performance of the security forces; having UN sanctions lifted; getting the mining sector operating again; diversifying Liberia’s partners in agriculture; rebuilding bilateral partnerships and attracting international investors to the tune of US\$16 billion and counting; growing the country’s national budget from a mere US\$80 million to \$672 million today; and settling an external debt of US\$4.9 billion.

They have also included declaring corruption as public enemy number one and doing everything to tackle the scourge through prevention and punishment, leading to Liberia’s improved ranking in

corruption perception indexes; creating an open society where freedom of the press, of expression, of association and of religion thrive, and all other rights are fully respected.

Under restoring infrastructure and basic services, she brought lights to the country for the first time in 14 years, and is working tirelessly to expand electricity by reconstructing the destroyed Mt. Coffee Hydro Plant and building mini-hydros in various parts of the country. Reconstruction of a destroyed road network system, essential for commerce and development, is advanced, with more than 400 kilometers of paved roads, as is the restoration of water and sanitation systems. The list goes on, also in the health, education and virtually every other sector of this country's activities.

Never mind that she has received some of the world's highest accolades: the Nobel Prize for Peace (2011); France's highest honor, the Grand Croix of the Legion d'Honneur (2012); and the Indira Gandhi Prize for Peace, Disarmament and Development (2012) – all of which she humbly accepted in the name of the people of Liberia. And never mind that she was selected by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon as one of three co-chairs of the High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons, representing the voice of Africa and of women, to craft a new global development agenda as the successor regime to the Millennium Development Goals after 2015.

All of these achievements are there to behold, yet in the minds of the people she governs, they demand to know, what have you done for me lately? I will answer that.

The word "legacy" is defined as something handed down by a predecessor. To my mind, a legacy is an action carried out, a deed performed, that is so outside of the norm that it transcends the individual or individuals to whom it was originally attributed. A legacy can be enduring in a positive sense; a legacy can also be so negative that it leaves a reputation, a career, a name in tatters.

Every once in a while, something special happens, and the word "legacy" takes on its true and nobler meaning. Such a singular event occurred on Tuesday, January 15, 2013, in Washington, D.C., when President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf put pen to a document that elevated Liberia-U.S. bilateral relations to a higher level.

By the simple act of launching a Partnership Dialogue between the Governments of the Republic of Liberia and the United States of America, President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf cemented a special relationship that will go down in the annals as part of her own legacy. Generations of Liberians, many yet unborn, will know that on this date, the President of Liberia signed an agreement with the United States of America which sealed their relationship for all time. This will be a keystone of her enduring legacy!

### The Journey to Partnership

How did we get here? It was back in June 2012, when she visited the United States, and met with congressional and U.S. Government officials, that President Sirleaf first raised the idea of institutionalizing U.S.-Liberia relations so that what was established would survive any one individual and would, instead, endure as an institution – as a legacy.

In the long-ago days before Liberia descended into anarchy, there had existed a Liberia-U.S. Joint Commission, which carried out activities in the fields of agriculture and education. That Commission became moribund as it was overtaken by the establishment of other bilateral arrangements between the two countries. President Sirleaf sought to revive such a mechanism, and initially proposed the establishment of a Bi-National Partnership Commission, such as that which exists between the U.S. and Nigeria.

In meetings with Members of Congress, the idea of institutionalizing the partnership gained favor. When she spoke with Vice President Joe Biden about it, while supportive of the idea, he also called for Liberia to establish transparent institutions, but then added, “You, President Sirleaf, understand that your country’s fate does not depend on you, which is what I admire about you. That’s why we love you.”

President Sirleaf then made the case to Secretary Clinton, who immediately embraced the idea, with assurances that she would figure out how to embed such a relationship in the two governments and countries.

Thus, what had been only a kernel of an idea, back in June 2012, bore fruit that would lead to the signing of a Statement of Intent, by President Sirleaf and U.S. Secretary of State Clinton, to cement more than a century and a half of bilateral and fraternal relations between their two nations.

To sign this Partnership Dialogue with the sitting U.S. Secretary of State is something that Madame Sirleaf was determined to do, in spite of the challenges that loomed. First was Secretary Clinton’s imminent departure from the State Department, at the end of President Barack Obama’s first term, to follow other pursuits. For that reason, signing the document before the Obama inauguration, on January 21<sup>st</sup>, became paramount. The question was, which date would work for all concerned?

And then came word that Secretary Clinton had fallen ill and was hospitalized in New York. That put the signing ceremony on hold. When word reached Monrovia, several days later, that Mrs. Clinton had been released from hospital and would be returning to work, the Office of the President breathed a sigh of relief, and planning for the visit moved into high gear. Despite her heavy schedule, the Secretary directed that the ceremony be held, and which was scheduled for Tuesday, January 15, 2013, at the precise hour of 11:30 a.m.

The next challenge would be, how to get President Sirleaf from Monrovia, Liberia, some 14,160 miles away, via commercial airliners, to Washington, for the signing ceremony, and then get her home again to prepare to deliver her eighth Annual Message, as President, to the National Legislature, as is constitutionally required, on the fourth working Monday in the month of January.

Following on the heels of the Annual Message, the Liberian President was also set to host the Monrovia Meeting of the 27-member High-Level Panel, which she co-chairs along with Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and British Prime Minister David Cameron. With Liberia poised to welcome several hundred international visitors – over 100 from Indonesia alone – and

with the global spotlight on her country, needless to say, every moment of Madam Sirleaf's time was precious.



*President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton hold up signed documents establishing a Partnership Dialogue between the United States and Liberia.*

With the program agreed, President Sirleaf embarked upon what can only be described as a lightning visit to Washington and back. Her itinerary called for her to depart Liberia on a Sunday evening, journey over 14,000 miles in both directions, and be back

Madam Sirleaf headed for Washington on Sunday, January 13, with a small team of advisors. She reached her destination the following afternoon; held bilateral talks with Secretary Clinton and her Africa team on Tuesday; and then two of the most powerful women in the world proceeded to the Treaty Room of the State Department, where they addressed the world, and then jointly signed the Statement of Intent launching the U.S.-Liberia Partnership Dialogue – one for the history books!

#### Statements Made

Secretary of State Clinton, in one of her last official acts before stepping down as U.S. Secretary of State, said at the ceremony: “Today, we are taking another important step to deepen the partnership between our nations and to support Liberia as it continues down the path of democratic and economic reform. The Partnership Dialogue we are about to sign will expand the cooperation between our countries and ensure high-level engagement for years to come. This agreement establishes Working Groups in three key areas; first,

agriculture and food security. Helping Liberia’s farmers use their land more effectively and get their crops to market more efficiently will be critical to improving the health and prosperity of Liberians under the Feed the Future Initiative; look for new opportunities to attract private investment in the agriculture sector; and recommend policies to promote food security and better nutrition.”

In the second area, energy and power infrastructure, Secretary Clinton said, “We know that access to affordable, reliable energy is essential to creating jobs and sparking growth that helps to build a strong economy. So, we will take stock of all outstanding needs for the generation, transmission and distribution of energy; promoting a regulatory environment that’s friendly to new investments

in energy; and look for ways to accelerate development of a well-governed and inclusive energy sector.”

Regarding the third area, Secretary Clinton said that the Partnership will look at human development with a real emphasis on creating more economic opportunities for the people of Liberia, to expand access to education and employment so that many more Liberians have a chance to not only better themselves and their families, but make a contribution to their nation.

“It is more than fair to say,” said Secretary of State Clinton, “that this last decade has been a success story for Liberia. The people of Liberia have emerged from a time of violence and lawlessness, and have made tremendous commitments toward economic and political reform.”

The United States has stood by Liberia during this challenging process, Secretary Clinton said, and added: “But I think it is also more than fair to say that it was aided considerably by the leadership, the determination of a woman who understood, with every fiber of her being, what was at stake.” On behalf of the United States, she thanked President Sirleaf for the great work under her leadership, and pledged the continuing support and friendship of the United States to her and to the people of Liberia.



*Members of the Liberian and U.S. delegations pose with President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. L-R: Cllr. Seward Cooper, Legal Advisor to President Sirleaf; H.E. Jeremiah Sulunteh, Liberia's Ambassador to the United States; Ms. Shirley Brownell, Communications Director to the President; Hon. Lenn Eugene Nagbe, Minister of Transportation; CEO Daniel Johannes, the Millennium Challenge Corporation; Assistant U.S. Secretary for African Affairs, Johnnie Carson; U.S. Ambassador to Liberia, H.E. Deborah Malac; and an unidentified State Department senior official.*

“I have always seen Liberia’s progress as underpinned by its special relationship with the United States,” responded an elated President Sirleaf, adding, “The launching of the U.S.-Liberia Partnership Dialogue is an historic achievement, one that will cement the strategic cooperation between our two countries for generations to come, regardless of the occupants of the White House or the Executive Mansion.”

The establishment of the U.S.-Liberia Partnership Dialogue was the fulfillment of a wish, first articulated last June, for the institutionalization of the long-standing bilateral relationship between Liberia and the United States, the President recalled. “Just seven months ago, as we made the rounds among congressional and U.S. Government officials, we put forward proposals on how the United States could work with Liberia, as a partner, to consolidate its gains. One proposal called for the establishment of a Joint United States-Liberia Bi-National Commission, as that which

pertained in the 1960s, which aimed to ensure that the partnership would endure for fifty years and more.”

President Sirleaf remembered that when she had made the case to Secretary Clinton, her support had been instantaneous, as she assured that she would figure out how to embed such a relationship in the two governments and countries. “And here we are today,” Madam Sirleaf observed, stressing that “with the signing of this Statement of Intent, Liberia stands with the United States as a reliable partner in the region.”

The President said she looked forward to carrying out the first meeting of the U.S.-Liberia Partnership Dialogue under the leadership of Secretary of State-designate, Senator John Kerry, who had been an essential supporter of Liberia during his long service on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, including his time as Chairman. The President recognized that this would not be just a job for the two governments, but also for the business communities of both countries and other stakeholders in Liberia.

President Sirleaf said she remained convinced that in this era of economic challenge, history will show that the investment of the U.S. Government and the American people in Liberia will return significant dividends. She concluded: “We will continue to guard the peace, promote reconciliation, build strong democratic institutions, ensure good governance and transparency, and encourage broad-based economic development. We will continue to strive to be a post-conflict success story because that is, Madam Secretary, America’s success also.”

#### **An Enduring Legacy**

President Sirleaf came to Washington for the sole purpose of launching the U.S.-Liberia Partnership Dialogue. Mission accomplished, she boarded a plane Tuesday afternoon for the return trip home. By this single act, the Liberian leader added another notch to her legacy, securing her place in the history of U.S.-Liberia relations!

***Shirley N. Brownell is Communications Director in the Office of President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, and accompanied Her Excellency on recent trips to the United States of America.***

## Statement of Intent

*This document attests to our shared desire to establish a Partnership Dialogue between the United States of America and the Republic of Liberia.*

**PURPOSE:** *The Partnership Dialogue is intended to promote diplomatic and economic cooperation between our two countries by providing a flexible, non-binding mechanism to ensure sustained, high-level, bilateral engagement on issues of mutual interest. We do not intend for these discussions to affect our governments' other bilateral or multilateral commitments or obligations.*

**PARTICIPATION:** *While the Dialogue is primarily intended as a forum for government-to-government discussion, the countries may, in consultation with one another, deem it appropriate to invite participation from the private sector, academia, civil society and/or other multilateral organizations.*

**FORMAT AND TOPICS:** *We envision that the format of future sessions of the Partnership Dialogue will evolve in response to emerging needs. The Dialogue is currently expected to constitute three primary working groups to address the following areas: Agriculture and Food Security; Energy and Power Infrastructure; and Human Development.*

**FREQUENCY/LOCATION/CONTENT:** *The inaugural Partnership Dialogue is to take place on January 15, 2013, in Washington, DC. The Dialogue may meet semi-annually, alternately in the United States of America and in the Republic of Liberia. We expect that the host country for each meeting of the Partnership Dialogue would be responsible for providing an appropriate meeting venue and covering all related incidental expenses. Likewise, each of our governments expects to bear the costs for its Partnership Dialogue delegation's related travel, room, board and other miscellaneous expenses. However, we recognize that the frequency, location, and content of subsequent Dialogues is to be determined by our governments via appropriate diplomatic channels.*

**WORKING GROUPS:** *A portion of each meeting is expected to be spent in working groups. Currently, three working groups are envisioned as follows:*

*The Agriculture and Food Security Working Group would focus on the overall importance of agriculture to Liberia's development strategy; Liberia's progress under the Feed the Future initiative; ways to promote private sector investment in Liberia's agriculture sector; and ways to improve Liberia's policy enabling environment for food and nutrition security.*

*The Energy and Power Infrastructure Working Group would advance the groundwork for a well-governed, inclusive and successful oil and gas sector in Liberia, and encourage investment in the energy sector by improving regulatory policies.*

*The Human Development Working Group would strategize on how to expand access to economic and professional opportunities; advance health and wellbeing by strengthening formal education institutions; promote technical/career development training; and build capacity in social service delivery systems.*

*The inclusion of particular working groups in any particular meeting is to be by mutual decision; working groups may be established or abolished by mutual decision.*

**Signed at** *Washington on the 15th day of January, 2013.*

*Hillary Clinton*

*Secretary of State  
United States of America*

*Ellen Johnson Sirleaf*

*President  
Republic of Liberia*