

## Africa's first female president praises the spirit and determination of Liberians on UK visit

01 June 2006

**By Deborah Gabriel**



On her first official visit to the UK since her inauguration as Africa's first female president, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf spelt out her development agenda for Liberia with zeal and conviction.

Addressing a packed audience she explained that her government has spent the last few months trying to get "its house in order" and setting out a detailed plan for what action needs to be taken to re-build the country after 14 years of conflict. The Harvard-educated economist who was finance minister in President Tolbert's 1970s government has selected "four pillars" which make up the short-term development agenda for the next few months.

Understandably security is at the top of the agenda for a country which effectively has no army and is still under the protection of a UN peacekeeping force. President Johnson-Sirleaf said: "Creating an environment of stability" is a priority which will involve the "total mobilisation of the army, police force and other security sector institutions," who need to undergo professional training. This will take about two years.

But peace in Liberia is very fragile as conflict continues in neighbouring countries, but President Johnson-Sirleaf said that current interventions are "trying to find peaceful solutions" and she "hopes rationality will prevail," so that the region "does not slip back into chaos, but finds a way to move forward."

Given the current fate of her predecessor Charles Taylor who is to be tried for crimes against humanity, good governance is the next priority. President Johnson-Sirleaf told the audience that she had endeavoured to include the political parties who took part in the elections as representatives of the new government.

The civil service is being re-structured and measures of accountability and transparency are also being introduced: "to involve the public in decision-making through a robust programme of decentralisation," said the President. She acknowledged that corruption is "a major issue...that we found to be more systemic than we had anticipated," which the new government plans to tackle through a code of conduct for public officials which will shortly be made law and by ensuring that those found to be corrupt do not escape punishment.

Regular audits as well as a review of the "ridiculously low" pay levels for civil service are

aimed at reducing temptation and acting as a deterrent. But it is a tough job when so much of Liberia's talented and educated individuals have long since left because of the years of war. The problem is so bad, the President admitted: "Because of the loss of much of our talent the capacity is low to even carry out our own development agenda." But plans for the future involve Liberia's war-affected youths by "getting them back in school and into skills training programmes."

### **Liberians keen to move away from 'ugly past'**

Given President Johnson-Sirleaf's economic credentials there is renewed optimism that despite Liberia's \$3.5 billion worth of debt, that she will be able to formulate the policies to facilitate growth, through her economic revitalisation programme.

She has already identified qualifying programmes for debt relief and is working out a deal with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) over Liberia's debt. Sensing a sea change, some banks have already re-opened and the Royal Bank is funding grant programmes and assisting with the development of strong economic policies.

The years of war have left Liberia without a proper infrastructure – there are no proper roads, a lack of electricity and water, even in the capital- Monrovia; bridges are destroyed, ports, airfields and "everything you can think of," requires massive investment to restore and repair a devastated country.

President Johnson-Sirleaf said that the government plans to open the economy to the private sector for investment and acknowledged that it "will be very important to be able to get the confidence of the private sector." Restoring the image of Liberia will also be a major focus of the new government, but the President said that there is a "new order" and that relationships with other African countries are good and there is a consensus towards co-operation and integration.

Having looked at the issue of sexual exploitation in Liberia earlier this month (see [feature link below](#)), Black Britain asked the President what action her government is taking to deal with the problem. She said: "Clearly we are dealing with a situation where our social infrastructure needs to be addressed. We have too many young people that have not been in school for too many years, too many people without jobs, an 85 per cent unemployment rate and that's the reason for their vulnerability that has led to this, but we need to do more and we will."

Black Britain finally asked the President what she had to say about the positive aspects of Liberia in enduring years of suffering and violence. She replied by saying that after "twenty years of death and destruction... they were able to survive on their wits and still come through it to embrace change." She spoke optimistically of "a whole renaissance in Liberia... and desire to...move away from the ugliness of the past." She praised the way the country conducted the elections and the willingness of the people to effect change in their lives:

"The challenges are great – there is no quick fix. We are very realistic in that regard to know that it will take us several years to get this agenda implemented and to achieve our goals. But we do think that we now have the opportunity after so many years of destruction and despair to be able to start the long road back toward making Liberia a good economic performer and a good partner in the international community."

**Article published by Colourful Network**