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Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, halfway through her first term as president, is doing well**Get article background**

IN HER inaugural speech in January 2006, Africa's first female head of state set out the daunting tasks facing Liberia, citing her determination to heal the awful wounds inflicted during the civil wars of 1989 to 2003 by her various appalling predecessors, including Charles Taylor, now on trial for war crimes at The Hague. Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, a former World Banker, also promised to reduce Liberia's dire poverty and to consolidate democracy. On the whole, she has made progress—albeit with a lot of help from friends abroad.

Liberia is more stable these days, thanks in part to a large force of UN peacekeepers, whose numbers are due to fall from 13,000 to just under 10,000 by the end of 2010. Security is gradually to be taken over by a revamped national police force and a new army, both being recruited and trained by an American firm, DynCorp, which is being paid by the United States.

That testifies to the bountiful support Mrs Johnson-Sirleaf gets from the Bush administration and to the historical ties between the two countries; Liberia was founded in 1847 by freed American slaves. Now America is again investing in Liberia as one of Africa's brighter prospects and is following its progress closely: indeed, so closely that it is hard for Liberians to find out what is happening to their own army, since DynCorp reports to the American authorities, not to the Liberians.

Mrs Johnson-Sirleaf has also made headway against what she calls the "debilitating cancer of corruption". Reports of funds embezzled and assets spirited away are still frequent but the government has been setting a fair example. The president famously sacked a particularly corrupt top civil servant

from the finance ministry. Liberia's journalists can now report such issues without fear of being locked up or of newspaper offices being torched, a sure sign of improvement.

The president's most urgent task is to pep up Liberia's economy. Before the civil wars, its mainstays were rubber and rice, mining, forestry and financial services. GDP per head dived from \$800 per year in 1980 to around \$100 towards the end of the wars. Two sectors have been marked down for urgent regeneration: rubber and mining. Firestone, the company that owns the largest rubber plantation in the world just outside Monrovia, the capital, has signed an innovative agreement with the government, agreeing to pay taxes and invest in better housing for its workers. Liberia's government sees this as a model for other large-scale farming enterprises damaged in the war.

In 2006, ArcelorMittal, the world's largest steel company, negotiated a deal with Liberia's government to restart operations in a mine in Nimba County with a new investment of \$1.5 billion. This, says the company, will create some 3,500 jobs. A better regulated forestry industry may, it is hoped, create some 40,000 jobs. The UN has dropped sanctions against Liberian timber and diamonds: Mr Taylor used cash from those commodities to pay for his army and for his destructive armed forays into neighbouring Sierra Leone.

Even tourism is now being touted. Hesta Pearson, a Liberian entrepreneur, says the country's lack of infrastructure is a selling point. "We can sell Liberia as a place that is unspoilt, serene," she insists. "Besides, this country is historically unique; it offers many important references, especially for African-Americans." One such, Robert Johnson, the founder of Black Entertainment Television who is said to be America's first black billionaire, is building an up-market seaside resort just north of Monrovia, due to open next year.

The Chinese are getting involved too. They have resurfaced the decrepit William Tubman Boulevard, Monrovia's main artery, named after the country's longest-serving president, and will take on similar projects throughout Liberia. Aid is also arriving, not just from America. The EU is chipping in. Some 180 foreign charities are said now to be active in Liberia.

So the economy has been picking up and is expected to grow by 10% next year. America may help to reduce Liberia's foreign debt of \$3.7 billion to free up money for schools and hospitals. But living standards are being eroded by fast-rising food prices. The president has had to end import tariffs on rice, Liberia's staple.

Memories of the dreadful recent past still fester. Thousands of former fighters languish in Monrovia's slums, fuelling a wave of crime. The Liberian Truth and Reconciliation Commission is trying to address them. Almost all Liberians were hurt by what they call the "civil crisis" of 1989 to 2003. Far away in The Hague, Mr Taylor's trial trundles on. Yet he still commands a following in Liberia, especially among those who profited from his patronage. But the vast majority wants him safely tucked away for the rest of his life so that they can get on with their lives in peace.