

Preventive medicine - a nice idea, but not practical today?  
A live webcast from the Economist Intelligence Unit

Thursday April 23rd, 4.00pm BST

**REGISTER NOW**

Commissioned by Philips

**PHILIPS**

**Economist.com**

**BOOKS & ARTS**

**Ellen Johnson Sirleaf**

## An African first

Apr 8th 2009

From The Economist print edition

MA ELLEN, as she is known in her homeland, Liberia, was inaugurated as Africa's first female president on Monday January 16th 2006. Eight African heads of state flew in for the ceremony, as well as Laura Bush and Condoleezza Rice.

The odds against Ellen Johnson Sirleaf ever leading her country were huge. Her enemies associated her with the Americo-Liberians, descendants of the freed slaves who founded the small west African state in 1847. This elite ruled the country until 1980, when a group of soldiers killed the president and 13 ministers and party officials. The leader of the coup, Master Sergeant Samuel Doe, summoned Mrs Johnson Sirleaf to the executive mansion. Fearing for her life, she had no alternative but to go. She was the finance minister and Doe wanted her particularly to explain the country's budget to the soldiers.

Mrs Johnson Sirleaf inherited her light skin colour from her maternal grandfather, a German trader. But she maintains her family was impeccably native. Married at 17, she had four sons, then went with her family to America, where she studied business at Madison Business College, Wisconsin, and worked in a chemist. On her return, she got a job at the Treasury. Her husband was abusive and she divorced him. As she rose in government, she became increasingly critical of the ruling class and its reluctance to share power, which may have saved her life when the government was overthrown.

Doe constantly sought Mrs Johnson Sirleaf's advice and appointed her president of the Liberian Bank for Development and Investment. But when she began speaking out against some of the people who surrounded him she was imprisoned and threatened with rape and death. Freed, she left the country, working first in America, for Citibank as well as the World Bank and the United Nations, and then as a financial consultant in nearby Côte d'Ivoire. But she was always involved with events at home.

After Doe's assassination she stood unsuccessfully in the 1997 election against Charles Taylor, a charismatic warlord with a well-organised campaign. By 2005 Mr Taylor was exiled in Nigeria and the popular candidate in the presidential election was an international football star named George Weah. This time Mrs Johnson Sirleaf swept tirelessly through the country, speaking directly to the masses. She says that the women of Liberia helped to get out the vote. "Ellen", they said, "knows book." She trailed Mr Weah in the first round. But her persistence—and Mr Weah's complacency—gave her a majority in the run-off.

At the end of her book, President Johnson Sirleaf lists some of the problems her new government faced. A wrecked infrastructure. Scarcely

This Child Will Be Great: Memoir of a Remarkable Life by Africa's First Woman President  
By Ellen Johnson Sirleaf



HarperCollins; 368 pages; \$26.99. To be published in Britain by Harper in May

Buy it at  
[Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com)  
[Amazon.co.uk](http://Amazon.co.uk)

Reuters

any electricity or water. Schools without books, equipment and teachers. Hospitals with no doctors, nurses or supplies. Half of the citizens of Liberia struggling to exist on \$0.50 a day. Now, three years into her presidency, the capital, Monrovia, has streetlights in the centre, a first symbolic promise fulfilled. The UN mission that provides security throughout the country is beginning to withdraw. But the president admitted in an end-of-year press conference that times are still hard, that the numbers of women dying in childbirth increased in 2008 and that corruption remains a big problem. The odds are still stacked against her.

*This Child Will Be Great: Memoir of a Remarkable Life by Africa's First Woman President.*

By Ellen Johnson Sirleaf.

*HarperCollins; 368 pages; \$26.99. To be published in Britain by Harper in May*



**Ma Ellen knows book**

Copyright © 2009 The Economist Newspaper and The Economist Group. All rights reserved.