



## UN Endorses Johnson Sirleaf's Liberia Turnaround Effort

By Peter Heinlein  
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AP Photo

The U.N. Security Council has given a vote of confidence to Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's battle to bring stability to a nation long considered a failed state. Africa's first elected female leader is changing perceptions in a traditionally male-dominated society.

Trainers from the U.N. peacekeeping mission in Liberia known as UNMIL staged a mock hostage exercise this week for visiting Security Council ambassadors. The purpose was to show how Liberia's security forces are being trained to keep order in a country that had been ruled by violence for a generation.

**Liberia's President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, 16 Apr 2009**

Liberia has nominally been at peace since a 14-year civil war ended in 2003, but officials worry it could explode at any moment.

When former World Bank economist Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was elected in 2006, the country was in ruins. Three years later there is still no army, and a staggering 80-percent unemployment rate. The problem is compounded by tens of thousands of ex-combatants roaming the countryside with no hope of finding jobs, and a taste for mass rape developed during the war.

The U.N. Secretary General's special envoy to Liberia, Ellen Margrethe Loj, says the greatest threat to stability is not an organized rebel force, but the potential for some unexpected event that could overwhelm the fragile state authority.

"Every so often they take the law in their own hands, and we have incidents of mob violence and arguments that turn into riots, and that is where UNMIL is needed to calm the situation down," said Ellen Margrethe Loj.

As the senior U.N. official in Liberia, Loj, has teamed with President Johnson Sirleaf to create a new atmosphere in a traditionally male-dominated society. It may not be by design, but Liberia is becoming the first African country where women take the lead role in overcoming the challenges of lawlessness and corruption.

Loj has brought with her an all-female U.N. police unit, made up entirely of Indian women. The 130-woman unit is not only training female officers, but is also giving Liberian women hope they can break the impression formed during the war that women are helpless against sexual violence.

Indian Police Commander Annie Abraham says Liberian women are seizing the opportunity to assert their rights.

"They are just coming out of a conflict situation and their confidence is totally shattered, but the presence of Indian women in uniform and with arms has affected their morale, we have changed their perceptions, and not just the perceptions of the Liberian women," said Annie Abraham. "We have also been able to change the perception of the Liberian men. They feel their women can do

much more."

Signs scattered around Monrovia show the first signs of a new spirit. They read, "Time to rebuild mama Liberia, not time to destroy her."

One of the Security Council's objectives on its Africa tour has been looking at ways of cutting back on peacekeeping missions that have outlived their usefulness. Peacekeeping is consuming more than three-quarters of the U.N. operating budget.

The head of the U.N. Security Council delegation, U.S. Ambassador Susan Rice, confirms that plans are being made to reduce UNMIL's size. But she told VOA the force will remain roughly at present strength until the next election in 2011.

"The Council has been very supportive of efforts of President Johnson Sirleaf to tackle the extraordinary challenges of the failed state she inherited," said Susan Rice. "She has made real progress in tackling development, corruption, improving the competence of local authorities, and a number of areas, such as sexual violence and rape."

President Johnson Sirleaf has not revealed whether she will run for re-election two years from now. But after meeting the visiting U.N. delegation, she said she is hopeful that the drawdown of UNMIL will only be completed when Liberia can stand on its own.

"We have worked with UNMIL on the exit strategy and the drawdown proposal and we hope the Security Council will endorse it," said President Johnson Sirleaf. "We would like to see continued and enhanced support to the security sector, and implementation of our security sector reform."

U.N. envoy Loj calls President Johnson Sirleaf the kind of role model Liberia needs to raise a new generation that believes it can rid the country of its legacy of war, corruption and sexual violence. She says she finds hope in the children.

"If I visit a school with kids 14 to 15-years-old and ask them what they want to be, the boys say 'I want to be a businessman', but the girls say, 'I want to be president,'" said Loj.

Loj says a year and a half after her arrival in Liberia, she no longer considers it a failed state. The challenges are huge, but not insurmountable.

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